

# GHORABA

## ATTENDING TO A POLITICS OF NEGLECT AND EXTRACTIVISM THROUGH A MIGRATION DRAMA IN ZARZIS

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**ABSTRACT** On the night of September 21<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, 17 men, women and children from the southern Tunisian harbor town of Zarzis boarded a boat in the hope of reaching Europe. Their family soon lost contact with them. Although the relatives of the missing raised the alarm, the local government did not attempt to search for their bodies. Later it turned out that a number of bodies were found but had been quickly buried without forensic examination. The question »where are our children« became louder. The protesters were asking the government for responsibility for the socio-economic situation of the country and the moral responsibility to bring the dead home. In absence of any response, they decided to occupy the port of Zarzis. As if to say, if the movement of our children is stopped, the movements of goods that Europe covets, and which enter the EU so easily, will also be stopped here. In this paper, we take this drama of what in Tunisia had come to be called 18/18 as the starting point to explore based on ethnographic research the movements and stops of humans and things. We introduce the concept of *neglect* to understand the chronicity of the problems that the people of Zarzis faced and to relate these to a state that is not response-able and to ongoing colonial extractivist relations.

**KEYWORDS** 18/18 Drama, Tunisian Migrants, Colonialism and Migration, Phosphate Extraction, Salt Extraction

On the night of September 21<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, 17 men, women and children from the southern Tunisian harbor town of Zarzis boarded a boat in the hope of reaching Europe. Their families soon lost contact with them. Speculations abounded. One persistent speculation was that they had been intercepted by the Libyan coast guard and that they were in Libya. The reality soon turned out to be much worse. The body of a woman, who had left with her 8-month-old daughter, was found on a beach on the island of Djerba, near Zarzis. This woman, later identified as Mona, had repeatedly tried to get a visa to join her husband who lives legally

in Italy, but without success. Although the parents of the missing had raised the alarm, the local government did nothing. Even after the found of Mona's body, no search was initiated. Later it turned out that several bodies had been collected by the local authorities, and were quickly buried in the cemetery for unknown migrants without any forensic investigation.<sup>1</sup>

The question »where are our children« soon became louder. The name 18/18 was chosen to demand that all bodies are returned, 18 have left and 18 should be retrieved.<sup>2</sup> The protests in Zarzis swelled in October, with large demonstrations raising the issue of ›forced migration‹. People voiced that they would prefer to keep their loved ones in Tunisia, but that due to a lack of prospects their children would take the risk of dying on their journey for granted. The protesters demanded that the government assumes responsibility and brings the dead home, and that it would commit itself to improving the sour socio-economic situation of the country that made their children leave in the first place. When neither local nor national politics seemed to care, parents, helped by the unions and the fishermen's organization, occupied the port of Zarzis.<sup>3</sup> As if to say, if the movement of our children has been violently stopped, the movements of goods that Europe covets, and which enter the EU so much more easily, will also be stopped here.

In this paper, we take this drama of what in Tunisia had come to be called 18/18 as the starting point to explore, based on ethnographic research, the movements and stops of humans and things. As authors, we were independently present on different instances of the process. KT studied the events as part of his research for an article for the online magazine Migration Control Info (Tabbabi 2023). AAM has been conducting research on the care for migrant death in Zarzis since 2016, more recently also as part of her team-based European Research Council (ERC) project »Vital Elements«. She had been following the 18/18 events closely, first from Amsterdam, via Facebook and on the phone,

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<sup>1</sup> This cemetery inaugurated on June 9, 2021, is called *Jardin d'Afrique*.

<sup>2</sup> The 18/18 movement was called so because locals initially thought that the number of irregular migrants on the night of September 21, 2022, was 18 migrants and that they had left Zarzis on the night of September 18. However, the boat contained only 17 migrants, and they migrated on the night of September 21. Despite these discrepancies, the popular name remained »The 18/18 Movement in Zarzis«.

<sup>3</sup> The Tunisian General Labour Union: Local union of labor in Zarzis and the *Association de Pêcheur pour le Développement et l'Environnement*.

before going to Zarzis in early November 2022. The research of both KT and AAM is ethnographic, consisting of interviews, casual conversations, hanging out with relatives of the deceased and participating in protests, taking pictures and short films. In addition, the research conducted in the Vital Elements project also focuses on phosphate in the cities of Gafsa and Gabès as well as on the extraction of salt in Zarzis. With respect to these »vital elements« (see below), here, given the focus of this article, we rely on published material, rather than ethnographic accounts<sup>4</sup>.

In what follows, we will situate our contribution in the literature and proceed by detailing the drama of 18/18 in an ethnographic vignette, amongst other things. Rather than relating dead bodies to (militarized) borders that kill, we juxtapose them to life and livelihood. We attend to extractivist economies that make things, such as salt, phosphate, fish, and olive oil, move out of the country while leaving pollution and misery behind. We will detail the search for the lost bodies of the 18/18 migrants by fishermen and activists and how this became the focal point for the people of Zarzis to address 1) forensic misconduct; 2) ongoing colonialism and extractivist economies; and 3) the absence of the state, or rather, a state that is not taking responsibility vis a vis its citizens. We introduce the concept of *neglect* to grasp a chronic absence of »response-ability« (Haraway 2008) by the state. In fact, we want to propose neglect as a relevant concept to think with more broadly.

In the past decades, care has become a prominent and helpful concept in the social science and the humanities. Care has also proved to be productive in research about migration and migrant death (Ticktin 2011; Musarò 2019; Morgan 2020; Koepke 2022; M'charek/Casartelli 2019, see Sarah Spasiano in this issue). By contrast to the concept of care or its absence, the concept of neglect invites us to interrogate the chronicity of disregard and the chronic absence of response-ability. Neglect, to be sure, is not the other of care; it is not carelessness. Neglect, as we demonstrate below, turns citizens into strangers, and contributes to the chronicity of death. Analyzing the case of 18/18, we argue that by not being response-able and not attending to a relation of dependence, the state

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<sup>4</sup> Within the Vital Elements Project Laetitia van den Bergen is conducting an in-depth ethnography in the mining basin of Gafsa as part of her PhD-research.

had turned citizens into unseen and unrecognized strangers (*ghoraba*). More in general and related to the concerns of this special issue, the paper provides a case that makes the local and historical conditions of the departures and their consequences in Tunisia (for both citizens and the state) tangible. Also, and in line with the contribution of Mareike Gebhardt in this issue, the paper foregrounds the entwinement of colonial relations with migration and migrant death (see also Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018).

## SHIFTING ATTENTION

Within critical border studies death in the Mediterranean has been conceptualized as »border death«, signifying the inherent violence of a border politics which exposes migrants and refugees to deadly journeys (see Last/Spijkerboer 2014; Cuttitta/Last 2020; Kovras/Robins 2016; M'charek 2018). Departing from the spectacles of humanitarian crises and the securitization of borders in Lampedusa, Ceuta and Melilla, along the Greek-Turkish land border and the Mediterranean Sea (Anderson 2016), scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of critical border and migration studies has studied the European-African border as a series of practices (Parker/Vaughan Williams 2009), as border struggles (Hess/Kasperek 2017), and as a continuation of colonial relations (De Genova 2016). These approaches have shed light on the externalization of the European Union's borders, most prominently to African countries: the border emerges in the configuration of regions through European policies (Celata/Coletti 2015), the facilitation and control of illegalized migration/human mobility by state and non-state actors (Schapendonk 2018; Cuttitta 2020), and the interweaving of investments and extraction rights, opportunities for mobility and deterrence (Dani/Moser 2008). However, research on how the border is (re-)produced in African countries and border towns (Gaibazzi et al. 2017; Dünwald 2017; Hallaire 2017), has also privileged European imaginaries in the past decades. Taking stock of this literature, its conceptualization of migration as a European problem (De Genova 2016), and its sensitivities to questions of proximity and distance, extraction and investment, here we attend to death and dying in the Mediterranean in relation to modes of life and sources of livelihood. Doing so we

attempt to decenter Europe and its borders and to turn to places where we can study life and death in relation to one another.

Moving from Europe and its borders to attend to life and death in specific places, invites another shift in focus from ideas and ideals to the materialities of life and death. For example, as indicated above, we have connected migrant death to the border and border management regimes, captured in the notion »border death«. A notion that many (including ourselves) have embraced and worked with, as it underlines the fact that borders, not migration are the cause of death (Last/Spijkerboer 2014), and it has also helped to scrutinize the militarization of borders (Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Tazzioli 2020). But what if we would attend to dead bodies while moving away from the border, as we suggested above? What if we would carefully connect death, not to borders that kill, but to life and livelihood? What if we would connect dead bodies, to water, salt, or phosphate? All life and livelihood are fostering elements, or spur on death upon their absence. These are materialities that M'charek (2023b) calls »vital elements«. Vital elements is a concept that helps us to attend to the complexities in the relation between death and life-fostering-elements. It connects materialities, their semiotics and relations, to life. As a *concept*, vital elements captures both an object of study (a materiality, such as, salt, water, or phosphate) and a theoretical orientation. The *vital* part of the concept underlines the productive qualities of objects, suggesting a form of agency that is not located in the object itself but in the network of relations in which the object is entangled. Crucially, the concept points to the fostering-of-life aspect of such material objects (as well as to death in their absence). The *element* part of the concept is inspired by chemistry, where elements are characterized by their *affinity* and tendency to *connect* to other compounds (Stengers 2021). Such elementary thinking (Papadopoulos/de la Bellacasa/Myers 2021) allows us to attend to the ways different vital elements interfere with one another. For example, water and phosphate are both critical to human life, our bodies depend on them. And while phosphate has proven important in agriculture, its production (as we show below) depletes the water resources (on which local farmers are dependent) and pollutes the soil in various ways. And as the phosphate leaves the country for export, it leaves pollution, water scarcity and misery behind.

By relating migration to vital elements, our aim is to shift the focus from crisis thinking (Europe's ›migration crisis‹) that is so prevalent nowadays, to chronicity. Rather than a temporary phenomenon, this shift aims to underline the constant production of ›forced migration‹ due to colonial extractions, climate change effects, food- and livelihood-insecurities. Here, we zoom in on the chronic production of migration and therewith the chronic production of death, and relate this to the depletion of vital elements. In this paper, we connect the 18/18 and the search for the bodies of family members to extractivism, ongoing colonialisms and the chronic depletion of livelihood.

## **AS THE DRAMA OF 18/18 UNFOLDS**

*It is Saturday October 8<sup>th</sup> 2022, as the phone of AAM rings. It is her friend, ›Margo‹ calling from Zarzis.<sup>5</sup> AAM had already heard about a boat that had left on September 21<sup>st</sup>, with mostly youngsters on it and that they had probably drowned. ›Margo‹ tells her that most of them came from her neighborhood and that she needed AAM's help. One body of a young woman, Malek, was found on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October on the Aghir beach on the Island of Djerba. Did she fell off the boat while the others sailed on, or did all of them drown? On this Saturday, October 8<sup>th</sup>, two bodies have washed up on the shores of Lampedusa. Margo asked AAM if she could use her network to make sure that the bodies do not get buried without autopsy and examination. The families, she says, are ready to provide DNA samples for a comparison. It is Saturday, AAM thought... ›how are we gonna stop the burial?‹ But AAM started by trying to reach out to the forensic anthropologist in Milan, calling and sending WhatsApp messages, indicating the urgency. The forensic anthropologist responded but indicated that it is hard to do anything on a Saturday. Meanwhile AAM was in contact with another colleague who is doing a PhD in the US and who had worked on migrant death in Sicily. As AAM was hypothesizing to her on the phone about the possibility of excavating these two bodies even after burial for DNA analysis, her colleague tells her: ›to be honest with you, the cemetery in Lampedusa is technically a mass-grave. If the bodies get buried before taking DNA, there is no way to find out who those*

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<sup>5</sup> Margo is not the name of this friend, but is pseudonymized for privacy reasons.

persons were. So apparently, the municipality often buries without examination. The colleague of AAM had put her in contact with an activist and a lawyer working on Lampedusa, who in fact did manage to have the prosecutor interfere on a Saturday afternoon and to keep the bodies in the morgue until Monday. They also found out that these bodies belonged to victims of another boat that had left on the same day from Tunisia but a bit up north.

This vignette does not only exemplify how one of us got implicated in the drama but especially shows the drama and despair of relatives as well as the international connections that are emerging in pursuit of relatives to collect information about their beloved ones. But let us focus on the case. As indicated, on the night of September 21<sup>st</sup> 2022, 17 men, women and children from Zarzis, a southern Tunisian harbor town, organized themselves, took a rubber boat at night, in the hope of reaching Europe. A day later, their families lost contact with them. Speculations abounded. On September 23<sup>rd</sup> relatives protested in front of the maritime guard in Zarzis, demanding search and rescue operations. Two days later, families of the missing, and fishermen carried out a search mission organized by the association of the fishermen, the *Association de Pêcheur pour le Développement et l'Environnement*. During one of these search missions, they found two bodies and informed the coast guard as to pick these up. Meanwhile a rumor had spread that the 17 missing persons had been intercepted by the Libyan coast guard and that they were alive in Libya. However, it soon became clear that they had lost their lives. Photos started to circulate on Facebook, including photos that were taken by fishermen who had found bodies at sea or on beaches. When one of the bodies found on a beach on October 5<sup>th</sup>, was identified as belonging to the young woman Malek, her sister recognized her bracelet and clothes, it started to dawn that the missing might have drowned after all. Relatives started to look more closely at pictures of bodies found that were circulating online. Although the families of the missing had raised alarm, it was surprising that the local authorities did nothing. Even after the found of Malek's body, no search was initiated. Protest swelled, calling for local and regional authorities to solve the crisis. The search was mostly done by the local fisherman with the help of other citizens. Fishermen had found all bodies at sea and attentive citizens found and reported the bodies on the beaches. Ten bodies were eventually retrieved. Seven are to date missing.

Alongside the reluctance of the authorities to go out and look for the missing, rumors started to spread about possible complicity of governmental actors. The phone of Malek, apparently visible on the picture that was taken of her body on the beach (by the founder), was collected by the authorities, but the phone disappeared. Might it contain compromising photos of a confrontation with the Tunisian coastguard? The bodies that were found on the high seas were quickly buried in the cemetery for unknown migrants, without autopsy or DNA samples taken. These quick burials happened despite the fact that the authorities knew that relatives from Zarzis were looking for their children. And later on, twenty-five days after the event, as the protests had taken massive forms and the missing of the youngsters become a focal point, the body of Amin M'charek was found near the port of Zarzis. A strange location, because the current of the sea does not take bodies there. Bodies and anything that the sea brings typically wash up in other places. But also, Amin's body looked fairly fresh given the number of days that had passed, should it have been in the sea. After almost one month in salt water, it should have been in a much more decomposed state. Was the found staged? It was speculated. Has his body been in a morgue for the past weeks and now that things got hot, been thrown in sea? Also, his body was disfigured, showing physical traumas on his back and other parts of his body and many of his teeth were missing, his family recounted. The lack of transparency, communication and the assumed ›hush hush‹ burial of the bodies was a slap in the face of the relatives. A humiliation by the state authorities that soon moved the people of Zarzis and beyond, who took the streets and protested days, weeks and months. The question »where are our children?« was soon connected to »what happened to them?« A question that demanded answers from the state.

The protest expanded beyond Zarzis, as this mobilization received national support from non-governmental organizations, most notably the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES). For example, the FTDES, along with a number of organizations and networks of activists, organized a protest in front of the Municipal Theatre in Tunis on October 14, 2022, to demand the truth to be revealed and in solidarity with the families of the missing (Le Temps 2022). On the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, a general strike in the form of a demonstration in Zarzis took unprecedented proportions: more than 10.000 people participated in a peaceful march.



Figure 1: Protests in Zarzis: general strike in October [Source Internet, Facebook]



Figure 2: Protest in November in Zarzis [© A.A. M'charek]

The protests became a broader articulation of the problem beyond a personal tragedy. The issue was framed as ›forced migration‹:<sup>6</sup> people made it clear that they would prefer to keep their loved ones in Tunisia, but that due to a lack of prospects they would all take death for granted. Not only did they demand that the state should take its moral responsibility to care for the dead and bring them home. The protesters also addressed the deteriorating socio-economic situation and the extractivist colonial relations with Europe. They demanded that the state mend the unlivable situation as to prevent the youth from leaving. Despite the constantly swelling protest, the local government was not responding. During these long months, the mayor of Zarzis was in Paris for personal reasons and did not come back.<sup>7</sup> The Tunisian president, Kais Saied, addressed the issue<sup>8</sup> on national TV in a speech in which he promised »we will look into it«, but also he did not visit Zarzis nor did he send any representatives. When neither local nor national politics seemed to care, the families, helped by the unions and the fishermen's organization, occupied the port of Zarzis, they blocked the entrances. As if to say, if the movement of our children is repeatedly violently stopped, the movements of goods that Europe desires, will be stopped here.

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<sup>6</sup> While the local people meant that migration was imposed on them and their relatives by the sour socio-economic situation (Tabbabi 2024), see on an elaboration on the category of forced migrants Faist (2018).

<sup>7</sup> He was assumedly for medical reasons in Paris, but it soon became clear that he was there for private festivities.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. the meeting of Kais Saied with the Minister of Justice regarding the Zarzis case on October 17, 2022: (Link to the official page of the Tunisian Presidency, in Arabic)

لقاء رئيس الجمهورية قيس سعيد مع وزيرة العدل | رئاسة الجمهورية التونسية  
Kais Saied's meeting with the Minister of Justice regarding the Zarzis case on October 20, 2022: (Link to the official page of the Tunisian Presidency, in Arabic)

لقاء رئيس الجمهورية قيس سعيد مع وزيرة العدل | رئاسة الجمهورية التونسية  
Kais Saied's meeting with the Tunisian Prime Minister and Minister of Justice regarding the Zarzis case on November 26, 2022: (Link to the official page of the Tunisian Presidency, in Arabic)

لقاء رئيس الجمهورية قيس سعيد مع رئيسة الحكومة ووزيرة العدل | رئاسة الجمهورية التونسية

Source: Official website of the Tunisian Presidency.



Figure 3: Occupation of the Zarzis harbor [© A.A. M'charek]



Figure 4: Occupation of the Zarzis harbor [© A.A. M'charek]

## MOVEMENTS AND STOPS: EXTRACTIVISM, ENDURING COLONIALISM AND VITAL ELEMENTS

As indicated, a number of bodies that were found were quickly buried in the cemetery for unknown migrants. Standing outside of this cemetery a number of glistening white mountains appear in the distance. These are salt mountains. Salt that is harvested in the Sebkha (saline flats) of Zarzis by the French company Cotusal.<sup>9</sup> The company purchases the salt for rates set during the colonial era in 1943 (Observatoire Tunisien de l'Economie 2018, Tabbabi 2024: 46). Trucks carrying the salt make the trip to the port of Zarzis several times each day. While the bodies found or missing were stopped on their journey to Europe, the salt moves easily into EU territory (M'charek 2020).

Salt, just like water or phosphate, is a vital element. Our bodies are dependent on them, and without them we would die. But such vital elements are entangled in complicated ways with modes of living, livelihoods, and also, as in our case here, with colonial relations and extractions. A brief look at salt explicates that.

»Natural resources are the property of the Tunisian people, and the State exercises sovereignty over them on their behalf«, reads article 13 of the 2022 Tunisian constitution.<sup>10</sup> As said, Cotusal has been extracting salt in Tunisia since colonial times. The company was established on October 3, 1949, and since 1993 it has a plant in Zarzis with exclusive access to the vast saline flats that surrounds the city. It exploits some 13.200 hectares of the land and pays some 13 Tunisian dinars annually (one Tunisian cent per hectares), which is obviously is a symbolic prize. Neither after independence, nor after the revolution by 2011 have the concessions of Cotusal been renegotiated or challenged. The colonial prices for extracting the salt thus still stand (Bisiaux/Jonville 2019). In order to

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<sup>9</sup> Cotusal (Compagnie Générale des Salines de Tunisie) has recently changed its name in Mare Alb.

<sup>10</sup> Art. 16 reads: »The wealth of the country belongs to the Tunisian people. The State must work for the distribution of their revenues on the basis of justice and equity between citizens in all regions of the Republic. [...] Investment agreements and contracts relating to national wealth shall be submitted to the Assembly of People's Representatives and the National Council of Regions and Districts for approval.« (La Constitution de la République tunisienne du 25 juillet 2022)

reassure its colonial concessions, the company has claimed that salt is not a natural resource. A crucial claim that helps it to bypass democratic procedures, as the second part of article 13 says that investment contracts and ratification of agreements related to natural resources »shall be submitted to the Chamber [of the People’s Deputies, Parliament] for approval.« Not only does Cotusal bypass the law and democratic procedures, but it also withholds statistics about the state of the company, e.g. about its revenues, as to evade taxes (Hammani 2014a). The company operates with little oversight, and has changed the Zarzis landscape dramatically: building canals to channel seawater into the saline flats also drains small fish away from their habitat, impacting negatively on the fish populations in the Sebkha and the sea. The company’s extraction practices also lead to fluctuating concentrations of water and salt with negative impact on soil fertility and the dying out of olive trees in the Sebkha area. While Industry Minister Zakaria Mohamed initially sought to end dealings with Cotusal, in May 2014, a few months after the publication of the Tunisian constitution, he extended Cotusal rights to additionally extract and produce salt on 11.200 hectares of land near the Sfax area (Hammani 2014b; Tabbabi 2024: 46).

To elaborate these intricate relations, we move from Zarzis to Gafsa (in the southeast of Tunisia) and back. Doing so, we attend to the histories of phosphate extraction to indicate that these are not histories left behind, but impact current lives of people in the south of Tunisia. Our aim is to explicate how phosphate interferes with other vital elements and how it is both resource of life and of death.

## TALES OF PHOSPHATE

Foreshadowing the French colonization of Tunisia (1881–1956), scientific expeditions began as early as 1879 (Tabbabi 2015: 21). In 1885, Philip Thomas discovered phosphate-rich rocks in the Gafsa and Tamerza Mountains, spanning eighty kilometres from the Thaldja Mountains to Midès (Dougui 1995; Tabbabi 2015). This discovery marked the start of a new era for the region. For the French it held the promise of economic profit and imperial autarky (Jackson 2016). Phosphate had just become a key technological innovation in agriculture in the form of fertilizer. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1896, the Tunisian »Bey«<sup>11</sup> signed an

agreement granting the French authorities free exploitation of the mining basin for sixty years at no cost (Hamed 2021). To do so, mining villages were erected *ex nihilo*<sup>12</sup>, providing for the mining worker as well as the French administrative elites. Initially, the phosphate industry relied on labor migration. Workers were recruited from Algeria and Morocco, Sicily and Tripolitania (a part of current Libya). The reason was that the inhabitants of Gafsa were semi-nomadic and were not easy to seduce for industrial work (Gruskin 2021). That is a mode of living that slowly ended once the national borders between Tunisia and Algeria were formalized under French colonial rule, impacting on the free mobility of the people of Gafsa and making them available for the phosphate industry (Gruskin 2021). In 1897, the *Compagnie des Phosphates et des Chemins de Fer de Gafsa* (CPCFG) was created, and by 1900 Gafsa became the world's largest phosphate exporter and Europe's primary supplier of the key ingredient for industrially produced fertilizers (Dougui 1995; Gruskin 2021).

After independence, the Tunisian state sought to nationalize French institutions, including the then called *Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa* (CPG). Given the vital role of phosphate in the global economy and development, phosphate mining in Gafsa shifted from a tool for colonial control and exploitation to a key resource for socio-economic development, sovereignty and national identity. During the 1970s, Tunisia adopted a liberal economic policy focused on export, which considerably impacted on how the CPG was managed. Outgoing laborers were not replaced and the number of jobs were steadily reduced, leading to a rise of unemployment and reduced socio-economic prosperity in the region (Allal 2010). This indicates that while the contribution of phosphate to Tunisia's national standing and income cannot be overestimated, the Gafsa's population was the least to profit from it. While having become dependent on phosphate as the main source of labor, due to the depletion of water for washing the phosphate and the pollution of the soil by this industry with consequent negative impact on other sectors such as agriculture, the region has found itself between a rock

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<sup>11</sup> The word *bey* (الباي) is of Turkish origin. It congratulates the master or prince. In Tunisia, prior to French colonization in 1881, when it belonged to the Ottoman Empire, the representative of the Ottoman state in Tunisia was called >Bey<.

<sup>12</sup> Villages in the mining basin: Redeyef, Om Al-Arais, Metlaoui, Mdhila. They are located in the Gafsa Province in the south-west of Tunisia.

and a hard place: They were not able to give up on the production of phosphate and, at the same time, marginalized as the profit went elsewhere. The Gafsa mining basin has thus become an example of »internal colonization« (Hamouchene 2019: 6), indicating that colonial extractivist structures have been maintained in the postcolonial situation, causing some dominant groups, in this case in the north of Tunisia, to exploit the labor and wealth of other groups, in this case in the south.

The suffering of the mining community extends beyond unemployment and vulnerability, affecting all aspects of social life, including the environment. Cadmium, sulphur oxide, and fluorine are the main atmospheric pollutants in the mining basin (Salhi 2017: 18). Mining villages are impacted by extractive operations, air emissions, and water discharges, contributing to the destruction of vegetation. Additionally, dynamite blasting (based on ammonium nitrate oil) causes earthquakes and environmental damage in mining villages (ibid.: 21). One could say that extractive industries in these villages »conform to the racialized nature of capitalism and are diametrically opposed to social justice due to their disastrous social and environmental consequences« (Hamouchene 2019: 6), creating what Naomi Klein calls »zones of sacrifice« (ibid.: 7).

To give an indication of the scale of extraction and destruction, the Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG) operates eleven enrichment plants with a total capacity of about 8.5 million tons of commercial phosphate per year under normal conditions (e.g. in the year 2010). However, the production of one ton of crude phosphate requires between 1 and 1.5 m<sup>3</sup> of water. Thus, for 12.5 million tons of crude phosphate, the company uses between 18 and 20 million m<sup>3</sup> of water per year (Rhili 2018: 90). Overall, the agricultural sector in the mining basin consumed about 87.37 million m<sup>3</sup> of groundwater in 2016. The industrial sector, the second-largest consumer, using about 29.66 million m<sup>3</sup>, with 95.23 percent for phosphate processing, while drinking water accounted for 18.30 million m<sup>3</sup>. Due to lack of rain and climate change the groundwater level is alarmingly low. Deep water streams, with resources amounting to approximately 42.3 million m<sup>3</sup> in 2016, are exploited at 80 percent, with phosphate extraction consuming 76 percent. The remaining water is split between agriculture (13 percent) and drinking water (11 percent). To do so, the phosphate company exploits 18 deep wells in the mining basin, with a pumping capacity of 647 liters per second

(Salhi 2017: 280). This over-pumping has significantly dropped aquifer levels and increased water salinity to 7 g/l, rendering it unfit for drinking or agricultural use (Sghari/Chriha 2016: 7). Thus, the extractive industry, which depletes water and pollutes the environment, poses a serious threat to the livelihoods of local citizens, impacting agriculture, the health of mining communities, and access to drinking water. This state of affair combined with unemployment, economic vulnerability and corruption within the CPG led to a huge protest in the mining basin in 2008, starting the longest popular uprising in Tunisia's contemporary history (Allal/Bennafla 2011; Chouika/Gobe 2009). This protest and various others that followed are notably viewed as the start of the Tunisian revolution of 2011.

Phosphate production and its negative impacts have expanded geographically, threatening the livelihoods of other communities, including those of Zarzis. In 1977, the *Groupe Chimique Tunisien* (GCT) was established near at the Gulf of Gabès, not far from Zarzis. The opening of this plant was widely welcomed as opportunity of the coastal region in terms of employment, development and infrastructure. But soon the phosphate production appeared to be a Janus face, with many problems for fishery, farming, tourism and health. At this facility, phosphate is converted into phosphoric acid and fertilizer (Debussy/Cuneo 2023). The GCT-plants were erected on the very coast of the Gulf of Gabès, a gulf that has been famed for its super-biodiversity, a gulf that has also been a source of livelihood for fishermen in Gabès and Zarzis. Nowadays, the gulf is often referred to as »a desert« or »the coast of death«. The phosphoric acid and fertilizers industry (primarily in Gabès and to a lesser degree in two other coastal facilities) produces an average of 6.000 tons of phosphogypsum residues daily. In Gabès, the phosphogypsum is discharged without treatment into the open sea, obviously to a devastating effect for maritime life. A study by the National School of Engineers in Sfax highlighted the environmental impacts of phosphogypsum storage in Sfax, a facility where it is not discharged into the sea. It showed that phosphogypsum contains various toxic substances as well as radiation-emitting elements (Nebli 2016). A European Commission study, published in March 2018, found that the Gabès facility discharges 5 million tons of phosphogypsum annually, loaded with heavy metals, into the Mediterranean Sea at a rate of 40.000 cubic meters per day (Commission Européenne 2018). In this con-

text, a study (Tabbabi 2024: 47) showed that 94.40 percent of coastal fishermen in Zarzis believe the chemical complex has polluted the sea and reduced fish stocks. Fishermen's testimonies indicate that this pollution and phosphogypsum have contributed to the extermination of many marine species. A Zarzis fisherman stated: »the fishing area of Zarzis has become a Sahara, a real desert.«<sup>13</sup>

But the production process of phosphoric acid and fertilizers also causes heavy air pollution, especially during the routine draining, when the plant expels a large quantity of chemicals in order to clean and restart the units, with huge impact on the health of the local population. Air and water pollution has been correlated to the prevalence of diseases such as cancer, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, allergies, and dental fluorosis (Mokadem et al. 2012). According to the study of the European Union, the Tunisian Chemical Group emits 95 percent of the city's air pollution (Commission Européenne 2018). »By breathing this pollution, you're doomed«, said a man who suffers from asthma and is permanently connected to an oxygen device.<sup>14</sup>

As is becoming clear after the revolution of 2011<sup>15</sup>, things did not look better for many Tunisians. Unemployment rates in both Zarzis and the mining basin continued to rise. Water scarcity, pollution, and the degradation of infrastructure have contributed to growing feelings of deprivation and humiliation (*el hogra*),<sup>16</sup> and have pushed people, especially in the south of Tunisia (especially Gafsa and

<sup>13</sup> See: <https://ftdes.net/en/english-fishermens-necks-in-a-noose/> (last accessed 10 August 2025).

<sup>14</sup> See: <https://inkyfada.com/en/2019/11/12/pollution-gabes-lutte-gct-2/> (last accessed 10 August 2025).

<sup>15</sup> In 2008, the mining basin experienced the longest uprising in Tunisia's contemporary history (January–June 2008), and this mobilization was the socio-economic precursor to the Tunisian Revolution, the beginning of social tensions (see Allal 2010; Allal/Bennafla 2011).

Between December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010 and January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011, after Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid, protests spread, and the Tunisian country lived through protest movements involving the unemployed, trade unionists, activists, opposition political elites, especially leftists, and lawyers, leading to bloody events and the death of many martyrs. But this ultimately led to the demise of the autocratic state and the collapse of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime (1987-2011). After that, a new political phase was launched, characterised by representative democracy, which ended with Kais Saied on 25 July 2021 (see Allal 2012; Meddeb 2011; Mizouni 2012 on the early days of the revolution, and Yousfi 2023 on more recent developments).

<sup>16</sup> Humiliation has been a central concept during the revolts in 2010/2011 and after. As a core motto to the ongoing protests, it constitutes »the perfect antithesis of the concept of dignity, respect and equality, and in turn refers to other concepts such as clientelism, tyranny, corruption, bribery and nepotism« (Zine El-Din 2017: 171).

Zarzis), out of the country and into the boats. Let us now slowly move back to Zarzis, to the protests and the tragedy of 18/18.

## A POLITICS OF NEGLECT

As it happens, the occupation of the port of Zarzis coincided with a major event on the island of Djerba, some 30 kilometers away. This was the so-called *Sommet de la Francophonie*, a summit of 57 French speaking nations that is held every second year, in November 2022 in Djerba. The summit brings science, culture, and politics together and does so in a very high-profile way. International political leaders, and important Tunisian politicians were all gathered on the Island of Djerba. To be sure, the tragedy of Zarzis was widely covered in the media in Tunisia, as well as internationally. There was fear that the protests in Zarzis would contaminate the beautiful, shiny and festive event in Djerba. Djerba was cleaned and beautified for the occasion and even annoying speed bumps were removed to make the visit of all those people smooth. In Zarzis, the people who were protesting were calling for Tunisian politicians, including the president to come and listen to their sorrow, *to see them*. They were hopeful, until the very end of the summit. But no one came.

A blind eye was turned to Zarzis. But the city of Zarzis nevertheless leaked in into the summit. Not simply because some officials participated in it, but through the main tune of the summit. The tune was based on a well-known song called *Nari a'la Zarzis we bnawita* by the famous Tunisian singer Naâma. *Nari a'la Zarzis we bnawita* translates like »my heart burns for Zarzis and its girls«, or »I am in flame«, but also, »I am sorry because of Zarzis and its girls«. Although the issue of Zarzis was not worthy to be taken notice of and was potentially contaminating the pleasant and smooth events on the Island of Djerba, the tune of the summit was a song about Zarzis. The song is commonly understood as celebrating the beauty of the girls from Zarzis. It sings about the olive trees being in blossom, and the bride price being so high. It warns men to either pay the price or hit the road. However, in Zarzis, another, a hidden story about this *Nari a'la Zarzis*, exists. »I am in flame because of Zarzis.« The story goes that the lyrics are related to an event of mass rape committed by the French soldiers during colonial times. A crime that has not been acknowledged but talked about among

elderly generations of women. It is said that children born out of this violence became orphans. Orphans are not a common thing in Zarzis. They don't really exist because when parents would die and leave young children behind, they would automatically become members of another family within the extended family. The children born out these rapes have come to be called the children of Bourguiba, after the first president of Tunisia as is more common for orphans or children born out-of-wedlock (Voorhoeve 2012: 216).

It is somewhat cynical that *Nari a'la Zarzis* was the common tune of an event that is celebrating political friendship, art and science in a postcolonial happy diversity atmosphere, while the participants were disregarding the personal and political cry of the people of Zarzis. The colonial violence mobilized by the story attached to the song indexes the ongoing colonial relation at present. We want to suggest that this relation is perhaps best understood in terms of *neglect*. Neglect might help us to understand both internal and external colonial relations.

Before elaborating on neglect as a concept, let us go back to the protest in Zarzis. The fact that a number of bodies that were collected by the authorities were quickly buried in a cemetery dedicated to unknown migrants is relevant here. In everyday parlance, this cemetery is referred to as *Magbret el Ghoraba*, »Cemetery of Strangers«. The notion of *ghoraba*, plural for *gharib*, as well as the notion of stranger were picked up in the protest as shown on this photo. This leaflet carried during the protest reads: »A mother is searching for her son in the sea, but he turned up to be buried in the cemetery of strangers (*Magb'ret el Ghoraba*)«.



Figure 5: Pamphlet with mother: «A mother is searching for her son in the sea, but he turned up to be buried in the cemetery of strangers». [Source Internet, Facebook]

The notion of the *gharib*, «the stranger», was not discarded but embraced a political category of resistance and an analytics of how citizens in the south were positioned vis a vis the state. For example, the protest came to be labelled *Kharif el Ghoraba*, «the Autumn of Strangers». Other slogans used during the protest mobilize the notion of *gharib* to configure the 18/18 drama as a state crime. This crime is addressed both in terms of its role in the border regime and the complicity of state actors in their death, as well as in terms of political failure of the state to act and assume its role as representative of the people. The notion of *gharib* is particularly interesting in relation to the concept of neglect. Linguistically, it stands for stranger, foreigner, unfamiliar, unknown, and unseen persons or things. In the protests, it indexed the absence of being noticed by the state, a dis-regard, or a failure of recognizing a relation. One could also say a failure of the state and related political actors to act on behalf of the people and to assume responsibility for something that is part of its jurisdiction. This making strangers

of citizens through disregard and not-noticing has led us to think with and elaborate the concept of *neglect*.

Neglect comes from Latin meaning disregard. Etymologically it stems from *neg* (not) *legere* (choose, pick, but also, read, collect, gather). In contrast to the concept of care, neglect is an undertheorized notion. It figures in medical practice, in psychology, and in the law. But not so in the social sciences or the humanities. In medical practice, neglect refers to a disorder due to brain damage that causes not seeing. This so-called »Hemispatial neglect« is often a result of strokes. Patients become unaware of objects in a particular visual field, in most cases of the left-hand side of space (Husain 2008). Neglect is most prominent in law practice (negligence), and in psychology, in particular, in the context of child abuse where it is well studied and defined as a failure to provide for the basic needs or supervision of a person in one's care. In these fields, neglect was developed in the 1800's in relation to child abandonment (Thomas 1971; Rose/Meezan 1993). While we draw on the ways neglect has been conceptualized in these fields, we find it key to flag here that neglect in relation to child abuse has been highly problematic as well. Neglect and negligence have focused specifically on maternal care or lack of care for children. Thus, gendering care and criminalizing mothers while making them responsible for problems that might be of a more structural nature. Neglect has also been highly racist, targeting minoritized populations in societies, not only by assessing care or its absence through one specific (Western) lens, but also overlooking and trivializing structural injustices and conveniently making the parents responsible (Swift 2017). This reminds us that, while we can learn from the specificities developed in practices of psychology and law, we need to also be careful about normativities and politics that the concept of neglect might carry. Yet attending to how it has been developed in these fields teaches us for example that: »Unlike physical or sexual abuse, which is usually *incident-specific*, neglect often involves *chronic situations* that are not as easily identified as specific incidents« (Hildyard/Wolfe 2002: 680, emphases added AM and KT). The »not as easily identified as specific incidents« indicates that neglect is an elusive phenomenon, hard to grasp or to pinpoint directly and that it might require inventive, generous methods (M'charek 2023a)<sup>17</sup> that require slowing down (Law 2004), hovering around matters of concern. Perhaps, the song about the girls of Zarzis and the

children of Bourguiba is a case in point. Yet the song is obviously much more and not only a case of neglect. In the tune of the Francophonie summit, the song became a different case of neglect, one of not noticing, not noticing the colonial violence hidden in the simultaneous proximity and distance between Djerba and Zarzis; a tune that was embraced as ornamentation of a happy diversity ›entre nous‹ while violently excluding the people.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of neglect that we propose takes stock from the work on neglect in the fields of medical practice, law, and psychology. In particular, we want to suggest that neglect points at a failure to *notice* (think of the brain injury), a failure to *respond to a relation* (a relation of need in legal sense) and this not noticing and not responding to a relation is *chronic* (as in psychology). During the 18/18 protest, that came to be termed *Kharif el Ghoraba*, ›the Autumn of Strangers‹, the notion of the *gharib* alerted us to the relevance of the concept of neglect.

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<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere AAM has developed the concept of generous methods and described these as follows: ›Generous methods, I want to suggest, embody an ethos of ›going out of our way‹ for our objects of study giving them our time and attention, even, or especially, when those objects are emotionally or politically difficult. While we may not necessarily love these objects, generous methods invite ›care‹ for the practices in which they figure and through which we come to know them.‹ (M'charek 2023a: 830)

<sup>18</sup> Also, a march of the people of Zarzis to Djerba on November 20<sup>th</sup> was violently stopped.



Figure 6: Pamphlet state crime [Source Internet, Facebook]



Figure 7: Pamphlet J'ai vécu étranger [Source Internet, Facebook]

We suggest taking a look at these images of pamphlets, carried during the general strike march in October 2022. The picture above signifies 18/18 as a state crime in French and English while in Arabic it also reads: I lived as a stranger (*gharib*) and was buried as a stranger (*gharib*). The latter also figures in the consequent picture. The notion of the *gharib* can be read as hinting at a person who thought s/he was seen and recognized as a citizen, or a member of the common, but is disillusioned that s/he was not seen by the state, indicating that the relation that was assumed was not answered. But the statement on the leaflet also makes clear that this ›not noticing‹ was not just one singular instance, but a life-long phenomenon that extended even after death. It thus underscores the chronicity of this state of not-noticing, making it into a case of neglect. One could say that the state in this instance was not *response-able* (Haraway 2008). In Haraway's understanding the ability to respond is not simply a morality (a moral call) but a practice, an art that needs to be developed through relations. For example, responding in cases of search and rescues or of death might feed into and help

state actors to develop the ability to respond in other, also unrelated, occasions concerning its citizens.<sup>19</sup> In the case of 18/18 the state did not respond to its duties, it did not respond to the relation it has to the people. Crucially, such relations are the stuff of »subject-making« (Haraway 2008: 68), such as the becoming citizen. They require institutions and institutional connections as well as care and attention to maintain them. By not being response-able and not attending to relations the state had turned citizens into unseen and unrecognized strangers (*ghoraba*).

The coincidence between the occupation of the port of Zarzis and the *Sommet de la Francophonie* in Djerba underscores the chronic aspect of neglect and relates it to colonial relations and endurance thereof in current day society. The occupation and blockade made visible that the harbor is an infrastructure for movements and an infrastructure for colonial extractions. It enacted Zarzis and the South in general as a site that is rich in resources (such as salt, phosphate, water, olive oil etc.) and problematized the way these resources travel out of the south contributing not to prosperity and wellbeing but rather pushing the south and its people into further misery.

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<sup>19</sup> To be sure, by relations we do not mean harmonious, equal and reciprocal love here, but rather relations that are necessarily imply unequal distributions and hierarchies within and outside state institutions.



Figure 8: A boy sitting on top of a mount of salt [© A.A. M'charek]

We end with this image of a boy sitting on a heap of salt in front of the occupied port of Zarzis. There were many youngsters and school kids on and off visiting and participating in the protest. One day youngsters started to use these heaps of salt as a playing ground, sliding from top to bottom for hours and hours. A captivating gesture. The gesture indicates that other relations to the vital elements of Zarzis are possible. It reappropriates the salt while simultaneously shifting the problem by pointing at the lack of facilities and possibilities for life for generations to come.

## CONCLUSION

This paper started out with the of 18/18 drama. Seventeen young people from Zarzis took the boat to Europe but soon went missing. Attending to the search for their bodies and the ways their death and disappearance have mobilized the people of Zarzis and beyond, we have shown how migrant death are not only connected to borders that kill but are also entwined with life and the (im-)possi-

bilities to live a life that is worthwhile. In particular the occupation of the port of Zarzis focused attention on mobility and connected the movement of people to that of things, the resources of the country. It invited us to think about the role of what we call vital elements, such as phosphate, salt or water, and the ways their movement interferes in complex ways with the lives of the people in Tunisia. Although such vital element cannot be simply explained through, or reduced to the colonial era, we have shown the resonance of colonialism and the ongoing colonial relations that make things such as salt move smoothly, while immobilizing people and leaving pollution and misery behind.

The call of the people to help find the bodies of their children has slowly transformed into a call for them to be seen and heard by the authorities. The lack of response by the state underlined a feeling of being treated as a *gharib* (stranger). During the protests, this tantalizing notion was mobilized to capture the way people in the south felt the state was treating both the living and the dead. This in turn incited us to think with *neglect* as a practice of rendering citizens into *ghoraba* (strangers). Developing this concept and its analytic potentials, we suggested that neglect points to 1) a failure to *notice* (a pathological not-seeing), 2) a failure to *respond to a relation* (an institutionalized relation or a relation of commitment), and 3) that this not-noticing and not-responding to a relation is *chronic* (indicating a more structural failure to meet commitments and to be response-able). By contrast to the concept of care or its absence, the concept of neglect invites us to interrogate the chronicity of disregard and the chronic absence of response-ability. Neglect turns citizens into strangers and contributes to the chronicity of death.

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