

# Tunisian fishermen await trial after 'saving hundreds of migrants'

Wednesday 12 September 2018, by [TONDO Lorenzo](#) (Date first published: 5 September 2018).

## Six men arrested at sea say they saw migrant vessel in distress and towed it to safety

Friends and colleagues have rallied to the defence of six Tunisian men awaiting trial in [Italy](#) on people smuggling charges, saying they are fishermen who have saved hundreds of migrants and refugees over the years who risked drowning in the Mediterranean.

The men were arrested at sea at the weekend after their trawler released a small vessel it had been towing with 14 migrants onboard, 24 miles from the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Italian authorities said an aeroplane crew from the European border agency Frontex had first located the trawler almost 80 nautical miles from Lampedusa and decided to monitor the situation. They alerted the Italian police after the migrant vessel was released, who then arrested all crew members at sea.

According to their lawyers, the Tunisians maintain that they saw a migrant vessel in distress and a common decision was made to tow it to safety in Italian waters. They claim they called the Italian coastguard so it could intervene and take them to shore.

Prosecutors have accused the men of illegally escorting the boat into Italian waters and say they have no evidence of an SOS sent by either the migrant boat or by the fishermen's vessel.

Among those arrested were 45-year-old Chamseddine Ben Ali Bourassine, who is known in his native city, Zarzis, which lies close to the Libyan border, for [saving migrants](#) and bringing human remains caught in his nets back to shore to give the often anonymous dead a [dignified burial](#).

Immediately following the arrests, hundreds of Tunisians gathered in Zarzis to protest and the Tunisian Fishermen Association of Zarzissent a letter to the Italian embassy in Tunis in support of the men.

"Captain Bourassine and his crew are hardworking fishermen whose human values exceed the risks they face every day," it said. "When we meet boats in distress at sea, we do not think about their colour or their religion."

According to his colleagues in Zarzis, Bourassine is an advocate for dissuading young Tunisians from illegal migration. In 2015 he participated in a sea rescue drill organised by Médecins Sans Frontières (Msf) in Zarzis.

Giulia Bertoluzzi, an Italian filmmaker and journalist who directed the documentary [Strange Fish](#), about Bourassine, said the men were well known in their home town.

"In Zarzis, Bourassine and his crew are known as anonymous heroes", Bertoluzzi told the Guardian.

“Some time ago a petition was circulated to nominate him for the Nobel peace prize. He saved thousands of lives since.”

The six Tunisians who are now being held in prison in the Sicilian town of Agrigento pending their trial. If convicted, they could face up to 15 years in prison.

The Italian police said in a statement: “We acted according to our protocol. After the fishing boat released the vessel, it returned south of the Pelagie Islands where other fishing boats were active in an attempt to shield itself.”

It is not the first time that Italian authorities have arrested fishermen and charged them with aiding illegal immigration. On 8 August 2007, police arrested two Tunisian fishermen for having guided into Italian waters 44 migrants. The trial lasted four years and both men were acquitted of all criminal charges.

Leonardo Marino, a lawyer in Agrigento who had defended dozens of Tunisian fishermen accused of enabling smuggling, told the Guardian: “The truth is that migrants are perceived as enemies and instead of welcoming them we have decided to fight with repressive laws anyone who is trying to help them.”

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## **Lorenzo Tondo**

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## **P.S.**

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/05/tunisian-fishermen-await-trial-after-saving-hundreds-of-migrants>