



Tunisia in Context: Local, Regional and International Dynamics under Kais Saied



edited by Akram Ezzamouri



Cover photos

- Visit of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, to Tunisia. Tunis, 11 June 2023

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- The President of Tunisia, Kais Saied at the press conference with new Libyan Presidential Council head, Mohamed Menfi. Tripoli, 17 March 2021

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- Tunisian National Guard intercept boats of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea before returning the migrants to the shore of southern city of Sfax on 9 June 2023

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Introduction

More than a decade since Tunisians began mobilising against Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's nepotistic and repressive regime, the country's political transition has ground to an abrupt halt. Moves to dismantle democratic structures and the recent wave of arrests targeting opposition figures, journalists and sub-Saharan migrants stand as a testament to the dire state of Tunisia's politics and society since President Kais Saied's constitutional power grab in July 2021. Such actions have tarnished Tunisia's image as the singular success story of the so called "Arab uprisings" and complicated the Tunisian government's bid to secure financial assistance.

Amidst increased migrant departures from Tunisia since early 2023, the Italian government embarked on a fast-paced diplomatic effort to support the mobilisation of support packages for Tunisia's economy, with backing also coming from the European Commission. In July 2023, the European Union signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a strategic and global partnership with Tunisia providing around 1 billion euro for macroeconomic stability, investments and trade, energy transition, people-to-people contacts and especially migration management.

Caught between the longstanding policy of externalising migration management to third states and the promise of supporting political transitions, democracy, human rights and good governance in Europe's neighbourhood, the EU's policy towards Tunisia has recently faced difficult choices. While the renewed European urgency approach to Tunisia may be justified given the looming risk of economic collapse facing the North African country, little or no consideration has been given to the country's political and institutional trajectory, where mounting authoritarianism and an increasingly dysfunctional management of the economy risk further undermining the potential of an EU-Tunisia engagement for a comprehensive partnership. It would be an error to blame Tunisia's current economic predicament merely on external shocks

and crisis. Developments at the domestic and regional level are equally if not more important to understand the erosion of Tunisia's coping capacities and economic structures. At the same time, it would be a mistake to believe that emergency assistance without reforms in the economic, political and security sectors would be sufficient to mitigate the current multicrisis facing Tunisia or effective in addressing sustainably, humanely and responsibly key structural causes allowing the recent uptake in migrant departures towards Europe.

Given this context, and with a focus on examining the local, regional and international dynamics shaping Tunisia's recent challenges and opportunities, the volume seeks to enhance comprehension of the country's numerous social, political, economic and governance obstacles in the near to medium future and to cultivate a greater understanding within Europe of the complexities inherent in Tunisia's turbulent transition, encompassing issues such as migration. In conclusion, building on the layered contextualisation of Tunisia the volume concludes with policy recommendations to fine tune Europe's narrative and policy toolkit to address the multiple limits in EU-Tunisia relations while at the same time working to establish greater unity of intent among EU member states and institutions that display varying degrees of interest and urgency vis-à-vis Tunisia's current predicament.

1. Seeing Tunisia's Civil Society During Un-civil Times

by Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh*

Tunisia's dramatic democratic reversals since July 2021 warrant an in-depth reflection on how and where its once-promising democratisation momentum went wrong. After the exhilarating upheaval of the 2010–11 revolution that set off the Arab Spring, the degeneration of the regional pioneer's democratisation pathway has been a complex phenomenon. Much attention is given to the top-down demolition of democratic institutions by the country's (democratically) elected President Kais Saied.¹ However, just as the popular revolution that ousted the dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali² and the subsequent democratic transition was to a great extent a bottom-up process, so civil society too is an important piece of the de-democratisation puzzle.

Hence, this chapter seeks to parse the role and implications for Tunisian civil society as the North African state reaches an apex of its downward de-democratisation spiral. It seeks to ascertain whether civil society has morphed from a democratically consequential actor to exactly the opposite. One salient question regards the extent to which the seemingly inhibited renewal of democratic potential and a flagging moral drive of civil society are the function of democratic degeneration only at the level of the state. That is, how are bottom-up civic and political actors implicated in the undoing of what was only a few years ago the most successful case of the Arab Spring uprisings?

The chapter commences by elaborating the country's crisis of democratisation, starting with the admittedly rocky stage of democratic institution-building and

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¹ Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh, "Tunisia's Presidential Power-grab Is a Test for Its Democracy", in *openDemocracy*, 28 July 2021, <https://bit.ly/2WuVS21>.

² See Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh, *Revolution and Democracy in Tunisia. A Century of Protestscapes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024.

civic habituation between 2011 and 2021. Here civil society played a prominent role alongside the formal political institutions and legal apparatus taking shape in the post-2011 “democratisation bargain”. Next, the chapter explicates the abrupt turnaround of this democratisation orbit with the president’s coup and his overhaul of the entire political system since mid-2021. The final section looks at Tunisia’s civil society in this miasma of democratic degeneration, mapping out the set of civic forces and voices within a new regime that perilously constricts their space and scope of operation. It considers how civil society is situated within this tenuous new “bargain” taking shape in the “bottom-up structure”³ that is only now materialising, although Kais Saied began speaking of it as far back as his 2019 presidential campaign. The conclusion takes a brief look ahead at the prospects for democratic regeneration from the vantage point of civil society.

1.1 Democratisation takes off: 2011–2021

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Tunisian protestors who stormed the country’s streets and public squares beginning in December 2010, forcing Ben Ali to flee on 14 January 2011, have become legendary at home, in the region and even internationally. Consecutive parliamentary, presidential and municipal elections (2011, 2014, 2018, 2019) and a new constitution (2014), in addition to hallmark legislation such as the Association Law (2011) and Electoral Law (2014) have all been formal indicators of the monumental political change delivered by people power, emblematised by cries of “the people want” (*al-sha’b yurid*). This is not to say that the institutional materialisation of Tunisia’s democratisation trajectory has been without difficulty. Certainly by its ten-year mark, the nascent democratiser – its governing structures and its policymakers – had far from fulfilled the popular demands for freedom *and* dignity (i.e., distributional claims) that reverberated throughout the Arab world in 2011.⁴ Still, the emerging political system was a vibrant one, replete with popular inputs through both protest and more structured non-governmental organisations (NGOs) within an expanding civic and media space.

³ Chiraz Arbi, “Tunisia’s 2023 Local Elections: How the ‘Bottom-Up Structure’ Will Strengthen Kais Saied’s One-Man Rule”, in *MEI Articles*, 14 November 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/node/86098>.

⁴ Larbi Sadiki, “Tunisia’s Peripheral Cities: Marginalization and Protest Politics in a Democratizing Country”, in *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Spring 2021), p. 77-98, DOI 10.3751/75.1.14.

Hence, the longstanding authoritarian bargain that combined state patronage with various degrees of repression in return for popular deference was replaced by a new “democratic bargain”. This involved a mutuality or interplay between civil society and political society. In other words, the (potential for) robustness and sustainability of democratisation of Tunisian state institutions entailed a “civic parallelism”. In this post-2011 bargain, civil society created a parallel space for enacting and deepening democratisation without exclusive recourse to state institutions, formal political parties, etc. Where one stalled, the other stepped in, generating a kind of feedback between the two and a synergy between state and society.⁵ For instance, when the ruling troika that governed after the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections faced intense public and partisan opposition in summer 2013, driving the country to political paralysis, the “Nobel Quartet” comprising the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (ONAT) and the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), took the lead in a National Dialogue. To extricate itself and the polity from an impasse, the Islamist Ennahda party (which held the most seats in the National Constituent Assembly and the premiership under Ali Laarayedh) agreed to resign in 2014, allowing a technocratic government to take its place. Protests against the so-called “complementarity” clause describing the relationship between men and women in Article 28 of the draft of the 2014 constitution⁶ were another example. Such public pressure generated intense political and public debate on the issue, leading to the term “complementarity” being ultimately dropped. Civil society voices seeking to defend women’s rights, codified under the 1956 Code of Personal Status, entered the formal political fray, in this case the hammering out of a new democratic constitution for the country.

This civic parallelism, in which both major associations with historical pedigree such as trade unions *and* unaffiliated citizens mobilising in the streets to add pressure through protest participate, was arguably a notable feature of

⁵ Larbi Sadiki, “Tunisia’s ‘Civic Parallelism’: Lessons for Arab Democratization”, in Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani (eds), *The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and North African State and States System*, London, Routledge, 2019, p. 191-208.

⁶ Mounira M. Charrad and Amina Zarrugh, “The Arab Spring and Women’s Rights in Tunisia”, in *E-International Relations*, 4 September 2013, <https://www.e-ir.info/?p=42622>.

Tunisia's democratic momentum in the years after 2011. Up until July 2021, this brand of a democratisation bargain was more or less the state of play, although parliamentary politics in particular was growing increasingly sclerotic. Undoubtedly, the constitutional-electoral-legal underpinnings of Tunisia's post-2011 political system facilitated the creation of this kind of space where multiple and diverse forces, discourses, activisms and ideologies dialogued and clashed, not always harmoniously. State and society were syncretically indispensable to launch and maintain the advancements in the fledgling democratisation process.

1.2 Entering the post-25 July

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It behoves us to ask, then, whether the 25 July self-coup of 2021 spelled the end of this democratisation bargain. A global climate of democratic setbacks has been widely observed and debated in recent years, prompting reflection on the difficulties of defining and measuring this complicated, cross-regional phenomenon.⁷ Against this backdrop and within the context of multiple democratic retrenchments in the region, Tunisia itself has become mired in what we have elsewhere called “degenerations of democratisation” in the Arab region.⁸ Understanding this development and its country-specific permutations necessitates attention to top-down, bottom-up, regional and international factors. Importantly, degenerations in Tunisia and elsewhere are not simply teleological “reverse democratisation” but an implosion from within the state and/or society that experience shortcomings in achieving Arab Spring objectives of freedom, dignity and popular sovereignty. Sidestepping the *demos* itself, whether represented or mediated by civil society or more loosely organised collectives of (often marginalised and excluded) citizenry, has been a key defect in Tunisia's democratisation. Such neglect of most of “the people” has been an obstacle to the sustainability of democratisation in Tunisia. Some problems that have fed into issues of degeneration, such as regional inequalities and social injustice, can be traced back to pathologies endemic to postcolonial

⁷ Carl Henrik Knutsen et al., “Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding”, in *V-Dem Working Papers*, No. 140 (May 2023), https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/wp_140.pdf.

⁸ Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh, “Degeneration and the Demos in North Africa: Towards a ‘Critical’ Study of Democratisation?”, in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (2023), p. 1444-1472, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2023.2207227>.

authoritarianism, long before 2011. Issues of dependency vis-à-vis the Western centre, for instance, or recruitment of ruling elites into an American security agenda, are political-economic afflictions that remained largely undisturbed even during nascent democratisation in Tunisia.

The degeneration of Tunisian democratisation, gradually manifesting since the 2019 elections and perhaps earlier, was realised most sharply in the “self-coup” undertaken by President Kais Saied. On 25 July 2021, as the country was reeling from the badly mishandled Covid-19 pandemic, Saied made a memorable set of night-time proclamations. With a nod to the popular rage against a hugely dysfunctional parliament, ruling political parties (especially Ennahda) and the inept government of Hichem Mechichi, the president announced the activation of Article 80 of the 2014 Constitution. He suspended parliament and lifted immunity from members of Parliament and former government officials. Since then, Saied has overhauled the entire political system.⁹ A largely boycotted popular referendum, with an official turnout rate of about 30 per cent,¹⁰ installed a new constitution in July 2022. By the end of 2022, parliamentary elections (boycotted again, with only 8.8 per cent voting in the first round and 11 per cent in the runoff)¹¹ instated a “rubber-stamp” legislature with very few powers and no opposition. Decree Law 54, Tunisia’s version of a “fake news” law, has provided the pretext to arrest voices critical of the government. Dozens of politicians have been jailed. Political parties have been more or less frozen, part of Saied’s rampage against “intermediaries”. Independent constitutional bodies, such as the anti-corruption agency, have been shut down or co-opted. Judicial independence may be relegated to a pre-July 2021 past, as indicated by the sacking of 57 judges in 2022.¹² The entire political scene has been overhauled, with local elections of redrawn municipalities held on 24 December 2023. In this contest, 7,200 candidates vied for 2,155 electoral districts. Painstaking vigilance by the revamped election commission (ISIE) over campaign transgressions

⁹ Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh, “The End of Tunisia’s Spring?”, in *Eurozine*, 20 June 2023, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-end-of-tunisia-s-spring>.

¹⁰ Elizia Volkmann, “Yes’ Vote Wins Tunisia Landslide, But Critics Question Support”, in *Al Jazeera*, 27 July 2022, <https://aje.io/3vqe8z>.

¹¹ “Tunisian Election Records 11% Turnout in Rejection of President’s Reforms”, in *The Guardian*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/n8f7c>.

¹² “Under Kais Saied’s Shadow: The Vanishing Independence of the Judiciary”, in *Inkyfada*, 26 July 2023, <https://inkyfada.com/?p=79679>.

(e.g., tearing down rival candidate's posters)¹³ drowned out whatever larger questions Tunisians might have about the credibility of such elections in a post-25 July political scene. Voter turnout, an important measure of how much trust Tunisians exhibit in the revamped political system, was low once again. The (no longer so independent) election commission reported that only 11.66 per cent of registered voters casted their ballot.¹⁴ A new association law is also in the works, viewed with trepidation by civil society activists who note that it will set the country back through numerous constraints.¹⁵ Tunisia is no exception to the shrinking of civic space¹⁶ seen in other countries.

It is as if Tunisia is witnessing the building of a new political society and a new civil society based on the vision of one person, with the tacit support of the army. Saied has cobbled together a new "horizontal structure" whose hallmarks are direct representation from the local level, through the regional and up to the national level. Rather than serving as a radical form of direct democracy from below, however, this system is full of contradictions.¹⁷ The most glaring problem is that it has been forcefully put in place by a single person at the helm of power in a system where checks and balances are a thing of the past. In Tunisia's degeneration of democratisation, "the people" whose will Saied claims to embody have in fact been reduced to the blustering talk points of a populist president becoming the region's latest dictator. Weakened supervision of power, weakened power of intermediaries and weakened contestation over power characterise the North African country's degeneration. The consequence is an emasculation of the old powers. It is as though Saied has refashioned the system without reference to or reliance on old ideologues, cadres, parties or even institutions and procedures. This new regime supplants the post-2011 order

¹³ "Talili Al-Mansri to 'Al-Sabah News': 20 Electoral Crimes...and Positive Signs for Participation Rates in the Local Elections" (in Arabic), in *Al-Sabah News*, 19 December 2023, <https://bit.ly/48p61wF>.

¹⁴ Kwabena Adu-Gyamfi, "Tunisia Records Low Turnout for Election of 2nd Chamber of Parliament", in *AfricaNews*, 25 December 2023, <https://bit.ly/48d50CC>.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Tunisia: Reject Bill Dismantling Civil Society*, 7 November 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/node/386432>.

¹⁶ Janjira Sombatpoonsiri and Thammachat Kri-aksorn, "Taking Back Civic Space: Nonviolent Protests and Pushbacks against Autocratic Restrictions in Thailand", in *Protest*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 2021), p. 80-108, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2667372X-bja10006>.

¹⁷ See Mahdi Elleuch, "Saied Completes 'Bottom-Up Construction' on the Rubble of Democracy and Decentralization", in *Legal Agenda*, 26 April 2023, <https://english.legal-agenda.com/?p=24447>; Mahdi Elleuch and Mohammad Al-Khalfawi, "Bottom-up Construction: A Project or a Prophecy?" (in Arabic), in *Legal Agenda*, 6 December 2022, <https://legal-agenda.com/?p=41325>.

which did not root out the *ancien régime* forces (e.g., corrupt businessmen, Ben Ali's Democratic Constitutional Rally party rebranded as the Free Destourian Party). By contrast, this time the political scene has been emptied of those who had been ascendant after the revolution: Ennahda, Abir Moussi of the Free Destourian Party, even the UGTT which has a very tense relationship with the state. The system now is one without any opposition. As before 2011 and as is the case in other Arab states, it revolves around one person, the president, and his supporters appeal to him almost as the people's saviour who will rescue them where previous political elites of the "Black Decade" (2011–2021) have failed to.

1.3 Civil society under the new regime

Democratisation's degeneration has touched more than just the three branches of government. Saied's political project has been as concerned with structures, procedures and actors from the bottom of society as it has with those from the top echelons of the state. With political parties effectively sidelined, it is now the turn of civil society, which is next in the president's refashioning of the Tunisian political system. As a form of intermediary with clear connections to foreign funders, states and experts, Saied has cast civil society as a corrupt set of organisations that draw extensive funding and meet at leisure in five-star hotels under the vacuous guise of "training".¹⁸ The president has levelled accusations against illicit financial activities of NGOs since at least early 2022, when he darkly suggested their foreign funding renders them affiliates or even fronts of political parties and suspicious external powers.¹⁹ The solution, he has since declared, could only be a ban on such funding through which other states or international organisations have sought to infiltrate Tunisia from within.

Since then, Tunisian civil society groups have vociferously criticised the direction of the crackdown on all forms of organisation or dissent that fall outside the remit of Saied's new institutions. It is worth recalling that Tunisia

¹⁸ "Tunisia-Saied: There Is a Tunisian Association Abroad Which Receives Money to Finance Political Parties in Tunisia", in *Tunisia News*, 25 November 2023, <https://news-tunisia.tunisienumerique.com/?p=112588>.

¹⁹ Iman Zayat, "Tunisia to Ban Foreign Funding for Civil Society Groups", in *The Arab Weekly*, 25 February 2022, <https://theArabweekly.com/node/55608>.

boasts over 24,000 NGOs after the 2011 Decree Law 88 opened up civic space as part of the country's democratisation. Emna Chebaane of the well-known NGO Al-Bawsala recalls how organisations such as hers succeeded in widening "debate out of the closed circles of politicians and turn it into something that belongs to everyone".²⁰ This and other achievements are in peril should the president's threats materialise. Of late, a draft law to replace Decree Law 88 is being debated in the parliament. The debate has resumed over civil society and its place in Saied's self-styled "true democracy" that has upturned the post-2011 order. Again, civil society activists warn against the proposed reform.²¹ The new law would be a step backwards from a major milestone of the country's democratic transition. Tunisia's Law 2011-88 was among the most liberal in the world, and certainly the best association law in the region from a democratic and freedoms standpoint, according to the head of the Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center.²² It is not just that revision of the law is taking place without consulting the civil society that it intends to reform. By restricting the space in which Tunisian NGOs operate, the proposed legislation is a form of blanket and pre-emptive punishment for the thousands of civil society organisations that operate in accordance with the law. In addition to more stringent requirements for the formation and registration of NGOs, this new version will enact punitive measures against associations accused of violating the law. No longer gradual, consequences for (alleged) illegal activity or non-adherence to codified procedures will become sudden and dramatic instead. These might entail immediate dissolution of organisations, which must then appeal to the courts – and whose independence has already been compromised since July 2021.

The clearest culpability for the degeneration of democratisation when it comes to civil society rests with the state. During his 2019 campaign, Saied's political vision sounded whimsical and naïve. Now that he has been implementing it step-by-step and it has reached civil society, the legal changes on the horizon will leave little room for activity that overtly critiques the president or his programme. Yet it would be simplistic to lay the blame entirely on Saied. More precisely, few individuals or groups raised the alarm on 25 July 2021, other than

²⁰ See Haïfa Mzalouat, Noujoud Rejbi and Mathilde Warda, "Civil Society, in the Crosshairs of Kaïs Saïed", in *Inkyfada*, 15 March 2022, <https://inkyfada.com/?p=64175>.

²¹ "Ghali: The State Criticises Civil Society and Funds an Association with 60 Million" (in Arabic), in *Mosaique FM*, 13 December 2023, https://youtu.be/GhKW_yRkULg.

²² *Ibid.*

Ennahda and its close allies which were targeted directly at the time. Instead, influential civil society organisations gave Saied a chance rather than denounce his actions as an illegitimate power grab. Several of them – for example the UGTT, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts and the Association of Tunisian Democratic Women – were granted an audience by Saied the next day. These organisations called for a “roadmap”, insisting that they would be on guard in case the president transgressed the margin allotted to him by the emergency powers he had invoked, based on the then-operative 2014 Constitution. Now these groups themselves must either toe a very delicate line by “demobilising” themselves, more or less – or risk being shut down by the bureaucratic arms of Saied’s new regime. Perhaps it was the populist tenor of 25 July – anti-establishment, anti-Islamism – that some NGOs found palatable at the time. Whatever the reasoning, civil society has unwittingly brought harm on itself. Outside the relatively elite environment of internationally connected NGOs, an overall scepticism about everything foreign may allow Saied to proceed without much popular discomfort. This is especially the case in the wake of the Gaza war. The United States’ unflagging support for Israel has raised the ire of Tunisians alongside other Arabs and citizens of the Global South. Thus, Saied alongside other Arab leaders can capitalise on anti-Western sentiment to mobilise popular support when they choose, or to cast further suspicion on civil society organisations and activists who benefit from foreign funding. The paradox is that despite Saied’s quasi-isolationism and his return of 60 million euros to the European Union in October, cooperation with the EU continues. Specifically, Tunisia works with the European institutions and member states to curb migration across the Mediterranean, recently worth nearly 277 million euros in aid to the country.²³ This package may say more about (waning) European investments in democracy and preference for dealing with problems of security, of which migration is apparently one, than it says about the future of civil society in the country. The aid package’s support for “law enforcement” may simply strengthen Saied’s authoritarian hand. Immobilisation of civil society may proceed irrespective of the ups and downs in the President’s relationship with the EU.

²³ European Commission, *Commission Announces Almost €127 Million in Support of the Implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia and in Line with the 10-Point Plan for Lampedusa*, 22 September 2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/4577_en; European Commission, *L’Union européenne et la Tunisie conviennent d’un programme de 150 millions d’euros*, 20 December 2023 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/4774_en.

Conclusions

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Civil society in Tunisia is the latest victim-participant in the country's crisis of democratisation, most acute since the 25 July coup. The country's democratisation bargain launched after the 2011 revolution is in the throes of degeneration, as this chapter has demonstrated. The promise of the Arab Spring transitional model is now on hold, placed on the back burner until further notice. Some implications emerge from the foregoing discussion of civil society.

First, the platform for a democratisation is still available for those who seek to resist and counteract this degeneration. Doing so will take much skill, local and international, to renew and regenerate the momentum. The post-2011 recipe of civic parallelism, the synergy between political and civic bodies and processes, can still work but not under the president's current system. Exiting from Saïed's orbit will require abundant creativity and will, but is not impossible.

Second, there is admittedly widespread disgust with politics or overall apathy, as Tunisians are caught up with the needs of daily subsistence and survival in the face of food shortages. It is not just political opponents or journalists but even business owners who are constantly afraid of being arrested. The president is so overpowering that he interferes with the kind and price of baguettes sold in bakeries.²⁴ The glue of the democratisation bargain has come unstuck, and many leaders of the pre-2021 establishment languish in jail or have been sidelined to near-silence.

Third, however, protests and ceaseless media coverage of the war in Gaza have shown that when given the chance, civil society and Tunisian society at large remains, vibrant, aware and engaged when it comes to a core issue such as Palestine. Tunisians still display a moral impetus and the skills to take on reigning powers. These values and this know-how have not dimmed, whether

²⁴ "Tunisia-President Saïed: "Bread Is a Red Line for Tunisians", in *Tunisia News*, 27 July 2023, <https://news-tunisia.tunisienumerique.com/?p=105654>; "Kais Saïed: Bread Is a Red Line for Tunisians" (in Arabic), in *Tunisia News*, 27 July 2023, <https://youtu.be/ab4FSJIVETI>.

on the part of demonstrators in the streets²⁵ or football ultras expressing solidarity with Palestine in their celebrated “tifos”.²⁶ Degeneration need not be an end-point of Tunisia’s democratisation experiment. The people may yet have the last word, learning from Saied’s onslaught on the country’s nascent democratisation – and paving the way for renewal.

²⁵ See for instance, “Live from Tunisia: A Demonstration by Several Movements and Unions in Support of Palestine” (in Arabic), in *Diwan FM Live*, 21 October 2023, <https://youtu.be/wayinNjRa1I>.

²⁶ For example, by Club Africain supporters. See “Tifo’ of the Club Africain Fans” (in Arabic), in *Diwan Sport*, 22 October 2023, <https://youtu.be/7Bj3yatrWtg>.

2. Tunisia in Its African Neighbourhood: Economic Opportunities and Political Challenges

by Zine Labidine Ghebouli*

In 2011, Tunisia gained significant regional and international focus when former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country amid weeks of popular protests.¹ This was the first episode of a series of similar high-level resignations across West Asia and North Africa as Tunisia's Jasmine revolution inspired the region to topple long-time authoritarian systems. Since then, the North African country continued to serve as a model for regional political transition and constituted the hope for political liberalisation and economic empowerment.² Several partners, including the European Union which invested over 1.9 billion euros between 2014 and 2020 in this potential, considered Tunis to be a catalyser of an unprecedented success story on the political, economic and social levels.³

Ten years into Tunisia's process of political transition and democratic consolidation, the country experienced a severe political, economic and financial crisis. In July 2021, current President Kais Saied, who came to power in 2019, announced extraordinary measures including the dismissal of government and suspension of parliament.⁴ These measures intervened at a time of major global and regional challenges characterised by the Covid-19 pandemic and resulted not only in deep political polarisation and divisions amongst Tunisian political actors, but also in grave concerns by neighbouring actors such as the EU and international creditors about Tunisia's short-term

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¹ Samia Fitouri, "Remembering the Day Tunisia's President Ben Ali Fleed", in *Al Jazeera*, 14 January 2021, <https://aje.io/mdt29>.

² Sarah Yerkes, "The Tunisia Model", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 6 (November/December 2019), p. 67-72.

³ Loes Debuysere, "Tunisia: Should the EU Do More?", in *CEPS Expert Opinions*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.ceps.eu/?p=25946>.

⁴ Pauline Rouquette, "Du coup de force de Kaïs Saïed aux législatives, comment la Tunisie s'est enlisée dans la crise", in *France 24*, 15 December 2022, <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20221215-du-coup-de-force-de-kaïs-saïed-aux-législatives-comment-la-tunisie-s-est-enlisée-dans-la-crise>.

stability and economic future.⁵

Beyond political dynamics, the most urgent component of the domestic turmoil remains the risk of a full economic collapse. In that sense, Saied's refusal to accept the terms of potential financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), because of his self-proclaimed sovereigntist approach and fear of social upheaval, has been associated with timid plans to seek different alternatives.⁶ For instance, the Saied administration expressed its intention to retrieve stolen funds by offering amnesty deals to businessmen⁷ or to establish so-called "communitarian companies" allegedly for an equal distribution of wealth. Still, such vague promises remain insufficient.⁸ In the long term, investments and regional cooperation with African states may stand as possible policy tools to strengthen the local economy. However, seizing such opportunities requires an understanding of Tunisia's domestic economic situation, the reality of its African dynamics and the role that international partners including Europe could play in facilitating intra-African integration.

2.1 Tunisia's financial and economic woes

When the Ben Ali regime fell in 2011, Tunisia faced the daunting mission of political transition and economic development. While some progress was made on the political level as Tunis became a hub for civil society and open debate, authorities fell behind on their economic promises especially for the young unemployed segment of the population.⁹ Ultimately, Tunisia's divided political class could not propose serious and long-term reforms that the country desperately needed to secure its democratic achievements and

⁵ Haythem Guesmi, "Kais Saied's Tunisia Is Becoming a Failed State", in *Al Jazeera*, 5 May 2023, <https://aje.io/ufnbjq>.

⁶ Tarek Amara, "Tunisia President Rejects IMF 'Diktats', Casting Doubt on Bailout", in *Reuters*, 6 April 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-president-rejects-imf-diktats-says-public-peace-not-game-2023-04-06>.

⁷ Tarek Amara, "Tunisian President Issues Amnesty Decree to Recoup Funds from Corruption Cases", in *Reuters*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-president-issues-amnesty-decree-recoup-funds-corruption-cases-2022-03-21>.

⁸ Mahdi Elleuch and Yassine Nabli, "Tunisia's Communitarian Companies: Justice or Domination?", in *Legal Agenda*, 2 June 2022, <https://english.legal-agenda.com/?p=24271>.

⁹ Francis Ghilès, "Tunisian Economy in Free Fall", in *CIDOB Opinions*, No. 738 (October 2022), https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/opinion_cidob/2022/tunisian_economy_in_free_fall.

offer hope for the future. Despite the significant investment of international partners, particularly the EU, Tunisian public finances assumed the heavy cost of hasty political decisions and attempts to buy social peace. Today, Tunis must manage an increasingly explosive social front while seeking funding sources for its depleting treasury.

In February 2024, Tunisia's foreign exchange reserves fell to approximately 7 billion dollars after repaying a 915 million dollar Eurobond.¹⁰ This obligation is part of a larger 2.6 billion dollar external debt that is scheduled in 2024, following the payment of 2 billion dollars last year.¹¹ Tunis has a long story of external debt which has piled up in recent years due to the budget deficit and the loans acquired to finance it.¹² In that context, Tunisian debt is the natural result of public policies that aimed at addressing issues like youth unemployment through politically motivated strategies such as massive campaigns of appointments across the public sector.¹³ Moreover, social welfare policies including energy subsidies and wage hikes, reaching in some sectors 45 per cent since 2011, put more pressure on the public treasury.¹⁴ For example, civil service salaries now represent almost 18 per cent of Tunisia's gross domestic product.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Tunisian authorities cannot account for the cost of their policies partially because of the slow economic growth and inability to attract and maintain sustainable investments.¹⁶ In March 2023, protests erupted over deteriorating living conditions, repressive police practices and authorities' incapacity to provide immediate solutions for a population suffering from

¹⁰ Souhail Karam, "Tunisia's Foreign-Exchange Reserves Slump as Eurobond Matures", in *Bloomberg*, 19 February 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-19/tunisia-s-foreign-exchange-reserves-slump-as-eurobond-matures>.

¹¹ Melissa Hancock, "Tunisia Teeters on the Edge Over Mounting Debt", in *Arabian Gulf Business Insights*, 8 September 2023, <https://www.agbi.com/?p=194371>.

¹² "Tunisia, Economist at Nova: 2024 Will Be a Difficult Year, Concern About Budget Choices", in *Nova News*, 25 December 2023, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/?p=274981>.

¹³ International Crisis Group, "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace", in *Middle East and North Africa Reports*, No. 243 (22 December 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/22324>.

¹⁴ "Tunisie : Pourquoi la masse salariale a explosé", in *Leaders*, 13 May 2017, <https://www.leaders.com.tn/article/22283>.

¹⁵ International Monetary Fund, "Tunisia: 2021 Article IV Consultation-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Tunisia", in *IMF Country Reports*, No. 21/44 (February 2021), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2021/02/26/Tunisia-2020-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-Staff-Report-and-Statement-by-the-50128>.

¹⁶ Michaël Ayari and Riccardo Fabiani, "To Deal or Not to Deal: How to Support Tunisia out of Its Predicament", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 23|63 (December 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17884>.

continuous food shortages and high inflation.¹⁷

Another element that hinders Tunisia's economic model is its weak integration with neighbouring African states. To be sure, different former presidents including Habib Bourguiba, Moncef Marzouki and Beji Caid Essebsi have all pledged for stronger political, diplomatic and economic links with African states, beyond North African partners, especially Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁸ Such stances stemmed primarily from the shared anti-colonial struggle and aimed to leverage common history for more African unity. Still, Tunis's pledges remained largely rhetorical despite some ceremonial efforts throughout the past few years to bring Tunisian and African business actors closer and consolidate a deeper trade relationship, in line with a general trend across North Africa.¹⁹ In that sense, the securitised nature of relations between Tunisia – seen as Europe's partner in controlling migration flows – and African states still weighs heavily on Tunis's reputation and manoeuvres in the continent. Furthermore, the level of Tunisia's diplomatic representation and engagement on the African level does not fully reflect presidential pledges about developing ties.²⁰

2.2 Tunisia's "African turn"

Tunisia's complex economic and social crises will not be solved overnight, but a first step towards a new vision is critical. Similarly, the financial burden of old policies will only be addressed over time, but authorities will at least need new sources of revenues that could generate cashflow and initiate sustainably lucrative economic activities. Therefore, the current government will have to seek a new strategy to appease the streets, especially as Kais Saied's popularity remains at stake ahead of presidential elections. For the current

¹⁷ Lilia Blaise, "Down with the Police State, Chant Thousands of Protesters in Tunisia", in *France 24*, 4 March 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230304-down-with-the-police-state-chant-thousands-of-protesters-in-tunisia>.

¹⁸ Frida Dahmani, "La Tunisie et l'Afrique, une si longue histoire", in *Jeune Afrique*, 11 March 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1426087/>.

¹⁹ Anthony Dworkin, "A Return to Africa: Why North African States Are Looking South", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 3 July 2020, https://ecfr.eu/publication/a_return_to_africa_why_north_african_states_are_looking_south.

²⁰ Benjamin Auge, "La politique africaine de la Tunisie : entre opportunisme et opportunités non exploitées", in *L'Afrique en questions*, No. 49 (24 July 2019), <https://www.ifri.org/fr/node/16195>.

leadership in Tunisia, a new vision must encompass tools to alleviate the severe socioeconomic struggles of the population and serve a foreign policy agenda. This has been clear throughout the tense negotiations on the IMF package and Saied's utilisation of a populist discourse without offering a viable financial and economic alternative beyond talks on imposing a tax on wealth.²¹ For now, intra-African cooperation has emerged as a measure to boost partnerships, strengthen regional integration and exit the country's crisis through the so-called "Africa turn". The Saied administration, like its predecessors, views trade with African markets as a potential strategy to decrease the dependence on Europe. Tunis, through organising international trade conferences,²² has also attempted to portray itself as the gateway for investments across Africa. However, the reality of Tunisia's current trade relations with African countries is still limited as Tunis continues to struggle in diversifying its partners and attracting investments.

While all types of economic partnerships, particularly with African countries, could prove a vital lifeline for Tunisia, there are multiple barriers for the Tunisian leadership. First, commercial operations with the African continent besides Arab neighbours does not exceed 2 per cent according to the former governor of the central bank, Marouane Abassi.²³ Even for Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania and Morocco trade also does not go above 10 per cent of Tunisia's overall import and export activities.²⁴ By contrast, trade with European partners nears 70 per cent of Tunisia's external commerce, which highlights the poor integration of Tunis with African markets.²⁵ On a more technical level, Tunisia's economic model is largely based on tourism and services that include projects of small and medium enterprises. Moreover, Tunis has long favoured cooperation with western partners, especially France and Italy whose products represent 25

²¹ Angus McDowall, "Tunisian President Suggests Taxing Rich as Solution to Fiscal Problem", in *Reuters*, 3 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-president-suggests-taxing-rich-solution-fiscal-problem-2023-06-03>.

²² "FITA 2023: La Tunisie veut être le hub économique de l'Afrique", in *Réalités*, 20 September 2023, <https://realites.com.tn/fr/fita-2023-la-tunisie-veut-etre-le-hub-economique-de-lafrique>.

²³ Adel Bin Ibrahim Bin Elhady Elthabti, "Tunisie : la BCT déplore la faiblesse du volume des échanges commerciaux avec les pays africains", in *Anadolu Agency*, 25 June 2021, <http://v.aa.com.tr/2284648>.

²⁴ "Zone de libre-échange continentale : la Tunisie étudie les opportunités", in *Le Point*, 13 June 2022, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/zone-de-libre-echange-continentale-la-tunisie-etudie-les-opportunit-es-13-06-2022-2479339_3826.php.

²⁵ European Commission DG Trade website: *Tunisia*, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/node/524_en.

per cent of Tunisian imports.²⁶ Therefore, while the Saied administration may entertain the thought of exploring African markets in partnership with China, this regional pivot will require more than a political desire.²⁷

Beyond economic realities, there are other political barriers for Tunisia's "Africa turn". First, the reputation of the current leadership as a "racist" and "anti-black" administration is still alive following the migration scandals since last summer.²⁸ President Saied's recourse to a rebranded version of the "Great Replacement" theory that targets African migrants as a scapegoat for his administration's shortcomings will undermine efforts to build trust with African leaders and nations.²⁹ For example, the hostile treatment of sub-Saharan migrants throughout the summer of 2023 provoked calls to boycott Tunisian companies that operate in the Sahel region.³⁰ Furthermore, the incidents occurred throughout the negotiations with European partners, including Tunisia's rejection of a 60 million euro assistance package after initial acceptance, highlight the difficulty of maintaining relations with Kais Saied even beyond the sensitivities on migration.³¹ These considerations will have an impact on Tunisia's foreign policy especially on the economic level and limit the success of any conference or policy initiative to attract continental foreign investments.

2.3 Regional considerations

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Considering the previous factors, relations with regional actors like Algeria and the EU seem like almost the only option in the short-term for Tunisia to manage its economic and financial situation. For various foreign policy and

²⁶ Lloyds Bank, *Foreign Trade Figures of Tunisia*, latest update on March 2024, <https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/tunisia/trade-profile>.

²⁷ Kate Bartlett, "Why Chinese Foreign Minister's Visit Focuses on North and West Africa", in *VOA News*, 16 January 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/7442466.html>.

²⁸ Nissim Gasteli, "En Tunisie, le désespoir des migrants subsahariens expulsés dans le désert", in *Le Monde*, 26 July 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/07/26/ils-veulent-nous-tuer-en-tunisie-le-desespoir-des-migrants-subsahariens-expulses-dans-le-desert_6183516_3212.html.

²⁹ Benoît Delmas, "Le grand remplacement, version Tunisie", in *Le Point*, 26 February 2023, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/le-grand-remplacement-version-tunisie-26-02-2023-2510054_3826.php.

³⁰ Maher Hajbi, "Côte d'Ivoire, Guinée, Mali... Les entreprises tunisiennes face au risque de boycott", in *Jeune Afrique*, 17 August 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1473610/>.

³¹ Sunniva Rose, "Tunisia Returns €60 Million to the EU as Tensions over Migration Deal Persist", in *The National*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2023/10/12/tunisia-returns-60-million-euros-to-the-eu-as-tensions-over-migration-deal-persist>.

security considerations related to ongoing regional shifts, cold war across North Africa and risks of instability, Algiers has been a solid supporter of Kais Saïed's legitimacy.³² Current Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has even developed a strong working relationship with his Tunisian counterpart who shows a willingness to support the Tebboune administration's regional agenda and interests. This was made clear when Kais Saïed received the head of the Polisario Front at an economic conference in Tunis, triggering an ongoing diplomatic dispute with Rabat.³³

Moreover, the stability of Tunisia at a time of regional turmoil across the Sahel, ambiguity in Libya and serious tensions with Morocco is a non-negotiable priority for Algeria's security apparatus. To prevent any potential upheaval, Algeria continues to provide financial assistance and diplomatic coverage for the Tunisian leadership. Algeria provided a loan of 200 million dollars and a grant of 100 million dollars to Tunisia in 2022, only one year after a similar 300-million-dollar loan.³⁴ These transfers aimed at stabilising Tunis's budget and supporting its loan requests from international organisations. Throughout the negotiations with the IMF, Algeria has also reiterated its unwillingness to pressure the Saïed leadership into removing subsidies out of rejection of the IMF doctrine and fear of social protests.³⁵

Meanwhile, the EU has proven more reluctant to pour significant aid into Tunisia's economy without securing a deal with the IMF. Indeed, certain Italian-led emergency initiatives have been approved especially in the context of fighting irregular migration. For example, Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni joined a European delegation consisting of the head of European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte to Tunis to discuss, and then sign, a memorandum of understanding on a strategic and global partnership.³⁶ However, any additional support or funds from other

³² "Kaïs Saïed représente la légitimité en Tunisie et l'Algérie traite avec la légitimité", in *Algérie Presse Service*, 1 August 2022, <https://www.aps.dz/monde/143413>.

³³ Khalid Mejdou, "L'accueil par la Tunisie du chef du Polisario, un acte 'dangereux et injustifié' selon Rabat", in *Anadolu Agency*, 1 September 2022, <http://v.aa.com.tr/2674727>.

³⁴ Malik Ben Salem, "Crise économique. L'Algérie vole une nouvelle fois au secours de la Tunisie", in *Courrier International*, 30 December 2022.

³⁵ "Algeria-Italy, Not Just Gas: Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf Speaks to Nova", in *Nova News*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/?p=220842>.

³⁶ "L'Union européenne propose à la Tunisie une aide à long terme de 900 millions d'euros et 150

partners such as France and Gulf states have been linked to Tunis's ability to reach an agreement with the IMF or at least propose an alternative vision that can facilitate economic and financial reforms.³⁷

2.4 The potential for an intra-African integration

Tunisia has long considered foreign investments and trade relations as a major driver of its economic development plans. The current momentum between Northern and sub-Saharan Africa highlighted by the appetite and dire need of the local populations for economic integration could offer a rare opportunity for Tunis to join development initiatives and consolidate its regional economic partnerships. For instance, Morocco launched its Sahel initiative which focuses on infrastructure projects and a trade access to the Atlantic.³⁸ Additionally, Algeria is planning to establish free trade zones with neighbouring countries including Tunisia.³⁹ These developments, while underscoring the Algiers-Rabat rivalry, highlight the potential for regional integration that could benefit Tunisia's long-term economic plans. At the same time, risk of political instability and Tunisian authorities' mishandling of critical files remain alarming factors that can jeopardise regional dynamics. In that sense, Europe can assist Tunisia in addressing its economic woes and benefit from the current circumstances by leveraging the European experience and frank dialogue, engaging different stakeholders, and imagining a different version for South-North cooperation schemes.

Considering the overall regional context, designing a policy framework to engage with Tunisia on its dynamics with African neighbours cannot be separated from a holistic approach to address regional shifts and challenges. The wake of the Ukraine war has imposed a new reality of geopolitical

millions 'immédiatement', in *Franceinfo*, 11 June 2023, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/europe/union-europeenne/l-union-europeenne-propose-a-la-tunisie-une-aide-a-long-terme-de-900-millions-euros-et-150-millions-immEDIATEMENT_5881829.html.

³⁷ Majdi Ismail, "Paris apportera un appui budgétaire à Tunis en cas de réalisation 'effective' des réformes (Ambassadeur)", in *Anadolu Agency*, 26 March 2023, <http://v.aa.com.tr/285766>.

³⁸ Alexandre Aublanc, "Le Maroc veut donner aux Etats du Sahel un accès à l'Atlantique", in *Le Monde*, 16 January 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/01/16/le-maroc-veut-donner-aux-etats-du-sahel-un-acces-a-l-atlantique_6211058_3212.html.

³⁹ Ahmed O., "L'Algérie va créer 5 zones franches en 2024. Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire ?", in *ObservAlgérie*, 15 February 2024, <https://observalgerie.com/?p=222936>.

competition at a time of deep socioeconomic and political shifts across North Africa and the Sahel like, among others, the rise of anti-European sentiments.⁴⁰ Tunisia's "African Turn" is therefore another facet of a broader trend of looking south to focus on intra-African commerce rather than solely maintaining the partnership with Europe which is perceived as unequal. Admittedly, there is little that Europe could do to stop this shift, but the EU and its member states could instead adapt to these changes and make sure African development needs are met by engaging European institutional actors and private sector in these efforts. In fact, the EU already has at its disposal tools like the Global Gateway which could be used to promote infrastructure projects that would facilitate intra-African trade and benefit Tunisia's integration with its neighbours. Countries like Italy and France, with their historic links and geographic proximity, can support this approach within the EU and push for a new vision of North-South cooperation.

Furthermore, barriers facing Tunisia's regional integration and its intra-African dynamics include poor engagement on the African level. Besides political speeches, efforts to coordinate investment plans and initiatives between North Africa, including Tunisia, and sub-Saharan Africa and beyond remain limited as the whole region is politically, economically and diplomatically fragmented. In that sense, existing investment forums and conferences constitute an asset to strengthen this intra-African integration if projects receive financial and logistical support and concrete follow-up. Tunisia's diaspora abroad, especially in Europe, can also play a vital role in encouraging an economic rapprochement with North African and sub-Saharan economic actors. European institutions and private sector can further support these dynamics by engaging stakeholders such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and investing in these coordination venues both diplomatically and financially.

Simultaneously, encouraging Tunisia's economic regional integration with African countries should focus on Tunis's immediate neighbourhood. Europe can work with Tunisia to capitalise on its potential and address its economic shortcomings first by sharing the European experience on trade and providing support for local authorities. The progress registered on some

⁴⁰ Paul Stronski, "Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa's Sahel Region", in *Carnegie Articles*, 28 February 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/89135>.

plans, including the Tunisia-Libya endeavour to create a commercial corridor through the Ras Jedir border, alongside the vision for a greater cooperation with African neighbours could potentially serve as a starting point.⁴¹ Since 2011, European partners have cultivated and invested in a large network of local economic actors who can drive this dynamic. Additionally, regional blocs and agreements such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the African Continental Free Trade Area, which Tunisia adheres to, are good bases to strengthen economic ties across the continent.⁴² Europe should work with Tunisia and other African states to address the structural limitations, including the lack of digitalisation and bureaucratic impediments, to unlock the continent's economic potential.

However, all attempts to reinvigorate intra-African economic integration and empower Tunisia's role could be futile without mitigating the political and security risks both domestically and regionally. First, Europe's support for Tunisia's regional economic agenda must be associated with an open and unambiguous dialogue at the European level and with Tunisian officials on the domestic political crisis to avoid hindering investment opportunities. Such discussions may not necessarily have to infringe upon Tunisia's sovereignty over its domestic affairs, but they should not disregard authorities' practices that would hamper relations with African states. These actions include the mismanagement of sensitive dossiers such as migration and the lack of a clear pathway for economic reforms. Europeans can offer guidance within the scope of what local authorities are willing to accept but must not opt for silence over any violations that could make Europe complicit, all while deploying different instruments such as the European Parliament's resolutions or suspension of visas to Tunisian security officials who are proven guilty of human rights violations. Regionally, Europe must also consider the fallout of the ongoing Algiers-Rabat heated rivalry on Tunisia's foreign policy to avoid a regional spillover that would undermine not only momentary stability but the prospects of a future regional integration.

⁴¹ "La Tunisie et la Libye annoncent la mise en place d'un corridor commercial vers les pays subsahariens", in *Business News*, 11 August 2023, <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/la-tunisie-et-la-libye-annoncent-la-mise-en-place-dun-corridor-commercial-vers-les-pays-subsahariens,520,131164,3>.

⁴² "La Tunisie rejoint le Comesa, le marché commun de l'Afrique orientale et australe", in *Le Point*, 19 July 2018, https://www.lepoint.fr/economie/la-tunisie-rejoint-le-comesa-le-marche-commun-de-l-afrique-orientale-et-australe-19-07-2018-2237623_28.php.

Conclusion

It is safe to say that Tunisia is in a critical situation on multiple levels. A few months ahead of a crucial presidential race, the current Saied administration is enduring mounting pressure from different sides both at home and abroad to manage the multi-layered crisis. Economic and financial hardships are still the top priority for the leadership in Tunis and will likely constitute a major debate topic for the upcoming elections. While reaching sustainable solutions will need a political willingness from local authorities, a long-term plan and popular support for any necessary reforms, the collapse of Tunisia is also a regional preoccupation for several reasons including associated security threats. Hence, Europe can and should support any prospective governmental vision for economic growth while maintaining a wider perception of regional dynamics and pressing dossiers including integration and geopolitical shifts.

Tunisia's "Africa turn" is not a miraculous solution for the country's issues, nor will it represent an easy policy to implement and benefit from. In fact, and given the structural limitations of the local economy and the reality of trade and diplomatic relations with African partners, any outcomes of this policy are hard to envision in the short term. However, the current pro-investment momentum across the continent, especially in the Sahel region, and the apparent desire of Tunisian authorities to open up to the African market are good motives for Europe to focus on ways to assist such economic and trade integration. While success is not necessarily guaranteed, such efforts could serve Europe beyond its relationship with Tunisia and may encourage more opportunities with neighbouring African states. Moreover, an engagement on Tunisia's "African turn" can facilitate multilateral discussions with regional partners and open new doors for Europe's private sector stakeholders. This policy may even safeguard Europe's interests across North Africa where global competitors such as China are gaining economic influence.

3. Tunisia's Populist Diplomatic Agenda under Kais Saied

by Intissar Fakir*

Tunisian President Kais Saied is steadily building a foreign policy for Tunisia that reflects his populism while searching for new sources of economic support. Tunisia's ties with the EU and US have weakened in the aftermath of Kais Saied's authoritarian takeover. The country is not guaranteed the same levels of support and enthusiasm it once garnered from the EU and the US when they were excited about the country's democratic progress. Kais Saied has set Tunisia on an autocratic course that he is not willing to reverse, and a large number of Tunisians still support him in this course. Grasping the impact of lower levels of US and EU support, Saied is trying to diversify Tunisia's partnerships by turning to non-Western actors. While this drive might help Tunisia gain some leverage, it is unlikely to fully replace EU and US support.

Domestically, this is manifesting in a two-track approach. The first track seeks to increase economic self-reliance to limit the country's vulnerability to external shocks in general – and specifically, to move away from the need for additional external borrowing. The second track involves presenting an economy-focused foreign policy for this partnership diversification drive. Tunisia, like other countries, wants to play into and benefit from the increasing geopolitical competition in North Africa, but has a long way ahead to secure economic advantages of the same magnitude as with its established European partners. Tunisia remains a small market that still lacks a clear economic narrative, growth opportunities, and administrative and governance capabilities. These elements have so far not been a hallmark of Kais Saied's presidency.

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3.1 The damage of an authoritarian takeover

Historically viewed as a stable and rational actor, Tunisia's foreign policy has generally matched its size and regional position. Under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunis maintained important ties with Europe and the US, and played an active and positive role in its immediate neighbourhood. In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution the focus of the state-in-transition was on domestic affairs, with less emphasis on foreign policies. As Tunisia adopted a new constitution in 2014, the head of state was granted a more active role in foreign policy per article 77 which decreed that: "The President of the Republic is responsible for representing the state. He/she is responsible for determining the general state orientations in the domains of defence, foreign relations and national security in relation to protecting the state and the national territory from all internal and external threats, after consultation with the Head of Government."¹ President Beji Caid Essebsi, elected in 2014, brought a sense of renewal to Tunisian foreign policy as he was a well-known Tunisian political actor with tenure as foreign minister in the 1980s.

Following President Essebsi's death and the subsequent presidential election, Kais Saied's entrance in the Tunisian presidency surprised international partners. Virtual unknown, Kais Saied had no political experience or background in public office, and his presidential campaign rhetoric raised trepidation abroad.

Once in power, Kais Saied's mission to transform Tunisia's political system based on his conviction – and that of many Tunisians – of the failure of the political class became the first obstacle in many of Tunisia's partnerships. International partners struggled to determine to what extent his power grab constituted a coup d'état and therefore their response. After the president suspended parliament by invoking extraordinary measures in July 2021, European and US partners issued boiler-plate language urging respect for the constitution and rule of law. While the US and the EU, among others, were concerned about preserving Tunisia's hard-won democratic status, they also held a good deal of

¹ Constitute Project website: *Tunisia 2014 Constitution*, translated by UNDP and reviewed by International IDEA, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014.

unspoken sympathy for the president's move as Tunisia's political elite failed to deliver economic solutions after years of post-revolutionary turmoil and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. But as his political project came into focus, Tunisia's relationship with the EU and the US began to fray.

The extraordinary measures morphed into an undemocratic political transformation as Kais Saied proceeded to strip state institutions of their prerogatives. In the span of six months between July and December 2021, Kais Saied began ruling by decree. After suspending the parliament, he suspended the constitution and announced plans for an unorthodox online survey to gather citizen's views (and buy in) for a new constitution and a presidential political system. When the president drafted a new constitution enshrining a presidential system and new electoral laws, he put restrictions on nearly every political institution and actor in the country. He targeted political parties, political opponents, journalists and officials he felt were disloyal; and no figure that criticised his action and discourse was spared.

Within the US and the EU, there was division on how to deal with Saied's authoritarian push. The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell was rumoured to favour stronger messaging and potential measures to safeguard democracy, while member states did not. France's president Macron felt he could get through to President Kais Saied privately. That was not the case. Italy was unwilling to pressure Saied in order to maintain his cooperation on migration management.

After the power grab, US officials from Congress and from the Biden administration went to Tunisia to deliver messages in support of a return to democracy. With President Saied adamant in his plan, the Biden administration as well as Congress grew frustrated with his unwillingness to budge. There was a clear disconnect between what democracy meant to President Kais Saied and how he believed it could be achieved. From Saied's perspective, capturing state institutions in the manner he did was the only way to restore a direct democracy to the people, eliminating "corrupt" intermediaries. It was clear that within the Biden administration, there were concerns that a heavy-handed approach would play into Kais Saied's populism. At the same time, in Washington there was little political interest in Tunisia given competing foreign policy priorities. Gradually, perceptions of Tunisia vacillated between

hopelessness and disappointment.

Initially, some members of the US Congress were in favour of a more punitive approach than the executive branch. Following a congressional visit to Tunisia, Senator Chris Murphy hinted that US aid to Tunisia could be affected if the country continued in its political regression.² The Biden administration resisted these calls and sought to preserve current relationship, but in the end, proposed its own aid cuts. Overall, both the US and the EU settled into a pragmatic approach that favoured continued engagement with Tunisia, albeit cautiously. And financial support has decreased sharply in the two most recent years. US support for Tunisia had grown steadily to underscore not only financial backing but the intellectual investment in its success. Over a period of five years, annual funding ballooned from 61.4 million US dollars to 191.4 million in 2020, increasing to 197.1 million in 2022.³ The funds are channelled through a range of mechanisms and programmes, from economic to counter-terrorism programming to other defence programmes. After 2011, US support to Tunisia stood the test of changing administrations and increased under the Trump administration because it had backing in Congress.⁴ This has changed in the past two years, with financial support reflecting the administration's and Congress's frustration with Kais Saied. In 2023 Tunisia received 90.08 million US dollars in total funding, and State Department's requested funding for 2024 fell further to 68.3 million US dollars.⁵

3.2 Populist foreign policy

Unlike the US, the EU does not have the luxury to ignore or let inertia drive its approach. As president Saied continued his authoritarian drive, populist rhetoric and administrative chaos grew as well. Government reshuffles affected

² Bryant Harris, "US Senators Float Tunisia Aid Cuts and Lebanon Assistance Package" in *The National*, 10 September 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/us-news/2021/09/10/us-senators-float-tunisia-aid-cuts-and-lebanon-assistance-package>.

³ Alexis Arieff, *Statement before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Hearing on "Tunisia: Examining the State of Democracy and Next Steps for U.S. Policy"*, 12 October 2021, p. 8 and 9, <https://www.congress.gov/event/117th-congress/house-event/114124/text>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ US Department of State, *Fiscal Year 2024 Congressional Budget Justification. Foreign Operations*, Appendix 2, p. 515, <https://www.state.gov/fy-2024-international-affairs-budget>.

the Tunisian diplomatic corps in Western capitals (as well as in Tunis) who had not supported Kais Saied's takeover. Domestically he played up criticism of the West for "manufacturing pandemics" and "marginalising Africa".⁶ On several occasions, he spoke against foreign interference. And with Tunisia struggling economically and bereft of solutions, Saied's populist rhetoric targeted African migrants and launched crackdowns throughout 2023. This created a crisis for the country's small sub-Saharan African migrant population, then estimated at 20,000 people. This rhetoric elicited backlash from African heads of state and the African Union but appealed to Europe's hard right as it mirrored their own. This misstep by the president isolated Tunisia on the African stage. The African Union issued a strong condemnation of the President's racist remarks and policies.⁷ The West African countries of Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire repatriated some of their citizens from Tunis.⁸ And still more West African countries boycotted Tunisian products as a show of their dismay.⁹

For most EU actors, pragmatism overrode timid calls to pressure the president. EU budgetary support to a cash-strapped Tunisia continued. The government of Italy's far right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, in power since October 2022, harbours few, if any, concerns about Tunisian democracy and favours a reliable partner on migration. Faced with higher migrant disembarkation numbers on the Italian island of Lampedusa off the Tunisian coast, Meloni was keen to secure greater Tunisian border policing.¹⁰

Prime Minister Meloni, the Netherlands' Mark Rutte and president of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen signed a migration-focused Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in July 2023. The deal included macro-financial assistance for up to 900 million euros contingent upon an agreement with the

⁶ Adel Bin Ibrahim Bin Elhady Elthabti and Fayez Abdulsalam, "Tunisian President Accuses the West of Manufacturing Pandemics and Marginalizing Africa" (in Arabic), in *Anadolu Agency*, 26 June 2023, <http://v.aa.com.tr/2929109>.

⁷ African Union Commission, *The Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Strongly Condemns the Racial Statements on Fellow Africans in Tunisia*, 24 February 2023, <https://au.int/en/node/42630>.

⁸ Boubacar Diallo, "Guinea, Ivory Coast Repatriating Citizens from Tunisia", in *AP News*, 2 March 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/4549231e039ca96e60ce1015328d2c26>.

⁹ Maher Hajbi, "Mali, Guinée, Sénégal... Les appels au boycott des produits tunisiens se multiplient", in *Jeune Afrique*, 7 March 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1424580/>.

¹⁰ Stefania D'Ignotti, "An Island Thrives by Welcoming Migrants", in *Bloomberg*, 1 December 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-12-01/lampedusa-migrant-island-welcomes-the-unwanted-crossing-the-mediterranean>.

International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a 1.9 billion US dollar loan. Tunisia had been negotiating a new loan with the IMF since 2021 in fits and starts. The IMF talks were held up in their final stages by the end of 2022, only to enter limbo when the president of Tunisia announced he would reject “foreign diktats”, in reference to the reform programme requiring subsidy cuts and state-owned enterprise restructuring. Eventually, Italy was reported to lobby the IMF to lower the conditionality requirements.

But Tunis has been able to avoid the IMF deal in part because of continued budgetary support from partner countries. The EU-Tunisia MoU of 2023 also included a disbursement of 150 million euro in budgetary support,¹¹ together with an additional 105 million euro for border management, and funding for renewables, education and training, and Erasmus exchanges.¹² In October 2023 news broke that Tunisia had returned 60 million euro received from Brussels.¹³ Apparently, Brussels was dragging its feet on delivering the full promised funds as criticism of the deal mounted. Tunisia complained that an initial 60 million euro had already been committed as part of Covid support and was not new migration funding as Brussels portrayed it. Upon Saied’s orders Tunis promptly returned the sum, putting pressure on Brussels and causing confusion about the viability of the deal. Since, Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs Nabil Ammar has succeeded in securing budgetary funding and looking to secure higher rates of funding in the future.¹⁴

While Tunisia’s relationship with the US may take some time to patch up, as it would require a gradual rebuilding of trust and potentially some degree of political reform, Italy’s pragmatic approach and the EU’s overall concerns with migration have made isolating Tunisia on the EU level difficult. Rome remains committed to working with Kais Saied as it views him and the stability of his government as important to border security. To achieve that, he is obliged to engage more with both Western and Southern neighbours to gain their

¹¹ European Commission, *The European Union Continues to Implement the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia with the Disbursement of EUR 150 Million in Financial Support*, 4 March 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_24_1301.

¹² European Commission, *EU Comprehensive Partnership Package with Tunisia. Fact Sheet*, 12 June 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/FS_23_3205.

¹³ Gregorio Sorgi, “Tunisia Hands Back €60M of EU Funding as Migrant Deal Tensions Soar”, in *Politico*, 11 October 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=3698370>.

¹⁴ “Nabil Ammar Plays Key Role in Bagging €150m in EU Funds”, in *Africa Intelligence*, 4 January 2024.

cooperation on migration. To that end, Nabil Ammar has been trying to repair the damage done to African partnerships by Kais Saied's racist comments and actions toward sub-Saharan migrants. Beyond securing their cooperation on migration, Kais Saied has realised that while isolated from the US and to some extent from the EU, Tunisia needs to repair ties to its West African neighbours and build stronger ties with non-Western allies, capitalising on the greater power competition to the extent it is playing out in North Africa.

3.3 Tunisia's diversification drive

Repairing ties with the US and the EU would require significant political reforms that Kais Saied would not entertain. However, he has been trying to diversify partnerships toward sources of economic support with no political conditionality to hedge against possible impact of further authoritarianism at home. There is also an ideological element to this. His views, incoherent as they may be at times, seem to align with the anti-imperialist, third worldist views. Ultimately, president Saied is also trying to capitalise on the increasing presence of actors like China and Russia on the North African stage. Some of the speculation around Tunisia's desire to join BRICS is an example of the country's effort to increase its leverage with the EU. In 2023, the president's spokesman plainly blamed the EU for Tunisia's interest in joining BRICS, claiming that "the EU pushed Tunisia" to look to that bloc for financial support.¹⁵

Tunisia's efforts to build stronger non-Western alliances has the added benefit of appealing to domestic audiences because of two elements. The first is the anti-Western populism inherent in his posture which is quite resonant as anger grows among Arab and Muslim populations over Israel's war in Gaza. The second element is Kais Saied's new economy-focused foreign policy framing. To Tunisians, this highlights the prioritisation of the economy. Most Tunisians have continued to struggle as inflation remains. The Arab Barometer's recent Tunisia report shows that two-thirds of Tunisians polled report experiencing frequent food insecurity.¹⁶ Inflation alongside food shortages due to Tunisia's inability to

¹⁵ Ghaya Ben Mbarek, "China Endorses Brics Coalition's 'Spirit of Openness' amid Tunisia's Reported Bid to Join", in *The National*, 11 April 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/04/11/china-endorses-brics-coalitions-spirit-of-openness-amid-tunisia-reported-bid-to-join>.

¹⁶ Arab Barometer, *Tunisia: Public Opinion Report 2023*, 26 February 2024, p. 6, <https://www.>

cover exports at various instances in the past two years have put pressure on economically vulnerable populations. And while Tunisians still identify a poor economy as the country's overwhelming challenge, there is a good deal of optimism about its direction.¹⁷ This could imply a certain buy-in for Kais Saied's economic approach, in addition to trust in the global economic recovery. Trust in the president remains high compared to trust in the government. Despite a decrease from 2021 when his suspension of parliament was met with wide popular support, three-quarters of those polled have "great" or "a lot" of trust in him.¹⁸

In trying to parse out what an economic diplomacy and foreign policy means for Tunisia, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nabil Ammar spoke about the need for a consistent coherence strategy across government institutions.¹⁹ But this requires structural reforms attractive to investors. Instead, Kais Saied's macroeconomic focus is on decreasing external debt, especially from international finance institutes, by increasing the share of domestic debt. This required authorising the Central Bank of Tunis to issue a loan to finance the national budget by a Parliamentary amendment to the law guaranteeing the independence of the Bank.²⁰ Another key aspect of Kais Saied's focus has been an anti-corruption drive which he views as key to economic recovery. His government also talks about purging the public sector and administration of waste and cutting red tape. But these are limited steps. Improving governance overlaps with the IMF reform programme, but Saied is reluctant to cut subsidies which would add to the economic burden that Tunisia's most economically vulnerably are shouldering. Beyond these monetary manoeuvres, Kais Saied has to look to bilateral partnerships which can provide financing without conditionality.

Since 2021, before venturing further, Saied found some of that support in the country's own neighbour, Algeria. Historically, the bilateral relationship has been a positive one since their independence. Tunisia supported the *Front de*

arabbarometer.org/?p=13787.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Wafa Ben Mehammed, "The Minister of Foreign Affairs in a Meeting with the Press: Economic Diplomacy Is Active and Aims to Establish a Unified Strategy Across All State Structures" (in Arabic), in *Assabah News*, 31 January 2024.

²⁰ "La Banque centrale de Tunisie autorisée à financer le budget", in *Jeune Afrique*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1534235/>.

Libération Nationale (FLN) during Algeria's struggle for independence. In the 1970s and 1980s Habib Bourguiba managed to preserve a working relation with Algeria's socialist government, and that has continued after the revolution of 2011 that politically drove Tunisia even further. Today, Tunisia is the closest it has been to the Algerian leadership. Over the past few years Algeria has provided financial and energy transfers that helped Tunis patch up its finances. In 2021, Algeria provided a deposit of 300 million US dollars, followed in 2022 by another 200 million US dollars (100 million grant and 100 million loan).²¹ This moved Tunisia from a neutral actor in the Maghreb to a close Algerian ally on nearly all regional issues, and reflected Tunisia's changing foreign policy focus.

Tunisia is also looking to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to increase its share of Gulf investment. Qatar had supported Tunis through increased investments in the aftermath of the revolution as part of its broader support of Islamist governments in the region following 2011. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have provided financial support to successive Tunisian governments over the years but took a bit of step back when Tunisia remained neutral during the Qatar blockade of 2017. In terms of financial support Saudi Arabia's is small compared to EU institutions, or bilateral partners like Germany, France, the US and Japan. For 2020 and 2021 Saudi development assistance averaged 34 million US dollars, compared to 500 million US dollars in EU support, 407 million US dollars from Germany, 256 million US dollars from France, and 102 million US dollars from the US.²² Saudi Arabia is also a major lender for Tunisia. Although Tunisia's bilateral debt is only 15.7 per cent of its external public debt (multilateral lenders own 48.8 per cent, and international markets 35.6 per cent), Saudi is one of Tunisia's top creditors – its shares of bilateral credit have increased year on year to reach 3.4 per cent, second to France.²³

Kais Saied has been eager to draw more Saudi and Emirati support. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have been supportive of Kais Saied's transformation of the Tunisian

²¹ Ania B., "Prêt et don financiers : l'Algérie aide une nouvelle fois la Tunisie", in *Algérie360*, 28 December 2022, <https://www.algerie360.com/pret-et-don-financiers-lalgerie-aide-une-nouvelle-fois-la-tunisie>.

²² OECD, *ODA Flows for Tunisia, 2020-2021*, <https://www.oecd.org/countries/tunisia/aid-at-a-glance.htm>.

²³ Mohammed Haddad, *Cartographie de la dette publique extérieure tunisienne*, Tunis, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, April 2021, p. 24, <https://tn.boell.org/fr/node/1279>.

system which marginalised Tunisian Islamists. After sidelining the Islamist party Ennahda and jailing their leader, Saied might have cleared a political hurdle to attracting greater Gulf financial support and economic cooperation. With the IMF deal off the table, Tunisia secured a 400 million US dollars Saudi loan and 100 million US dollars grant helping shore up its budget.²⁴ In December 2023, Saudi Arabia signed seven memoranda totalling 1 billion US dollars to boost private investment in Tunisia.²⁵

Kais Saied has also sought more openings and opportunities in Tunisia's bilateral relationships with Russia and China. In the aftermath of the Russian war on Ukraine, Kais Saied like many African countries looked to Russia to secure grain imports to overcome Tunisia's reliance on Ukraine grain which was now difficult to secure. In North Africa Russia's image did not suffer as it did in other parts of the world. A number of African and West Asian countries avoided siding against Russia in what many of them view as a European issue.²⁶ After the sixth Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum in Marrakech, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met Kais Saied in Tunis where he provided assurances on Russia's readiness to supply Tunisia with additional grain.²⁷ Russia is looking to develop stronger economic and security cooperation with the North African country. However Tunisia, given its longer history of cooperation with NATO and the US specifically, would find it a long process to pivot to Russia on security cooperation. But this could well be a card Tunis could play in its relationship with Washington.

Tunisia has also long courted Chinese investment and economic cooperation especially in infrastructure, tapping into Beijing's focus on building ports in Africa. However, Tunisia has struggled to actualise this cooperation and draw more investment. Chinese total investment in Tunisia is 34 million US dollars

²⁴ Al Mongi Al Saidani, "\$400 Mn Saudi Loan Revives Tunisia's Budget", in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2 August 2023, Tunis, <https://english.aawsat.com/node/4466006>.

²⁵ Khaled Hadoui, "Saudi Arabia's Growing Investment in Tunisia Indicates Riyadh's Bet on Tunisia's Regional Role" (in Arabic), in *Al-Arab*, 29 December 2023, <https://alarab.co.uk/node/308067>.

²⁶ Economist, "Why Russia Wins Some Sympathy in Africa and the Middle East", in *The Economist*, 12 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/03/12/why-russia-wins-some-sympathy-in-africa-and-the-middle-east>.

²⁷ "Russia 'Ready' to Send Tunisia More Grain: Lavrov", in *Africa News*, 22 December 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/22/russia-ready-to-send-tunisia-more-grain-lavrov>.

and pales in comparison to European and US investment.²⁸ Tunisia's role in the Belt and Road Initiative is less significant than that of other African or even North African partners like Algeria or Egypt.²⁹

Conclusion

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Kais Saied's political regression drive has sapped excitement and hope in Tunisia as a clear and positive outcome of a revolution in North Africa and West Asia. With that hope also went financial support. At the same time, Tunisians continue to view Kais Saied as a hopeful choice, and this should not be taken as a reflection on the desirability of democracy in Tunisia. Difficult as it might be to make, this is an important distinction. Nonetheless, Tunisia's relationship with its Western partners is at a disjuncture. While the US and the EU – less so – want to continue to prioritise democracy, political rights and support for civil society, there is little indication this will be successful given president Saied's approach. Alternatively, the EU and the US can think about a more practical level that not only prioritises security and migration but also finds ways to engage with issues that will ultimately improve Tunisians' lives and allow for the restoration of sustainable social peace.

In terms of the economy, to the extent that the Tunisian government wants to diversify its credit, limiting reliance on foreign borrowing, this can be supported to help limit the potential pitfalls of increasing domestic borrowing. Support for Tunisia's efforts to draw greater FDI can include supporting administrative reforms to simplify procedural processes and build administrative competence. Supporting Tunisia's governance practices is a positive long-term investment in the country. In terms of the country's politics, external push for democratisation or a return to democracy is not likely to succeed – it rarely does. But the EU and US must still speak out against violations of human rights and support civil society as the president has dangled the potential of crackdown at any

²⁸ OECD, *Examen par l'OCDE des statistiques d'investissement directs internationaux. Tunisie, 2020*, <https://www.oecd.org/investment/Examen-par-l'OCDE-des-statistiques-d'investissement-directs-internationaux-Tunisie.pdf>; US Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Tunisia - International Trade and Investment Country Facts*, <https://apps.bea.gov/international/factsheet/factsheet.html#445>.

²⁹ Louis Dugit-Gros and Sabina Henneberg, "China's Presence in Tunisia: How Far Has It Come, and Where Is It Headed?", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 3728 (6 April 2023), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/18047>.

moment. Furthermore, direct support to vulnerable communities through programming and support in areas including poverty reduction initiatives, economic resilience, and support for marginalised communities and especially those on the frontiers of climate change, are all areas where European partners should continue to engage.

4. Tunisia Seen through Tunnel Vision: Risks and Shortcomings of Europe's Fixation with Short-Term Migration Control

by Asli Selin Okyay*

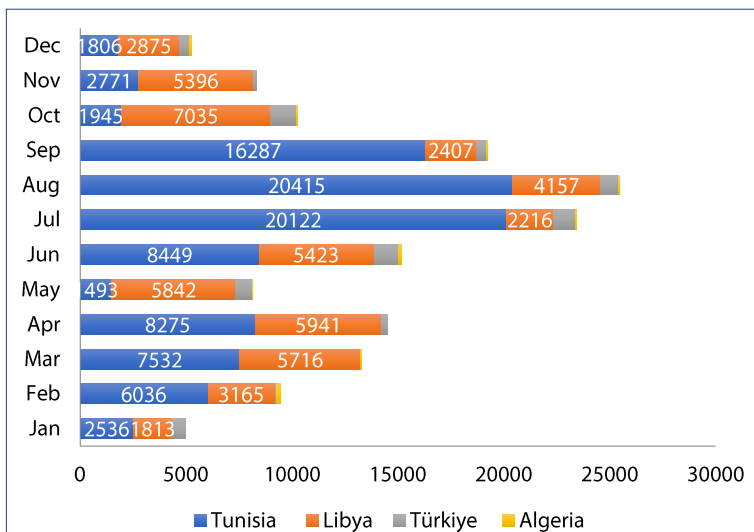
Breaking with a decade-long trend, in 2023 Tunisia has replaced Libya as the main country of departure for more than 157,000 irregular sea arrivals recorded in Italy.¹ Departures from Tunisia followed a rising trend for most of the year and accounted for more than 60 per cent of all sea arrivals by the end of November (see Figure 1). As arrivals in Italy constitute the overwhelming majority of sea crossings on the Central Mediterranean route, which have notably increased, this means that Tunisia, mainly in its role as a country of departure for EU-bound mixed flows, has become the main concern for Italy and the European Union from a migration – and wider foreign – policy perspective.

Even if the spike in mixed flows put Tunisia under the spotlight last year, the number of migrants and asylum-seekers setting off to Europe from the North African country has already been on the rise since 2020, both in absolute terms and relative to all crossings in the Central Mediterranean (see Figure 2). Beyond arrivals in Italy, the upward trend in irregular movement has also been reflected in pre-departure interceptions: in the 2020–21 period, Tunisian security and defence forces reported having intercepted more than 25,000 Tunisian citizens and nearly 10,000 third-country nationals (TCNs) before they irregularly set off to cross the Mediterranean.²

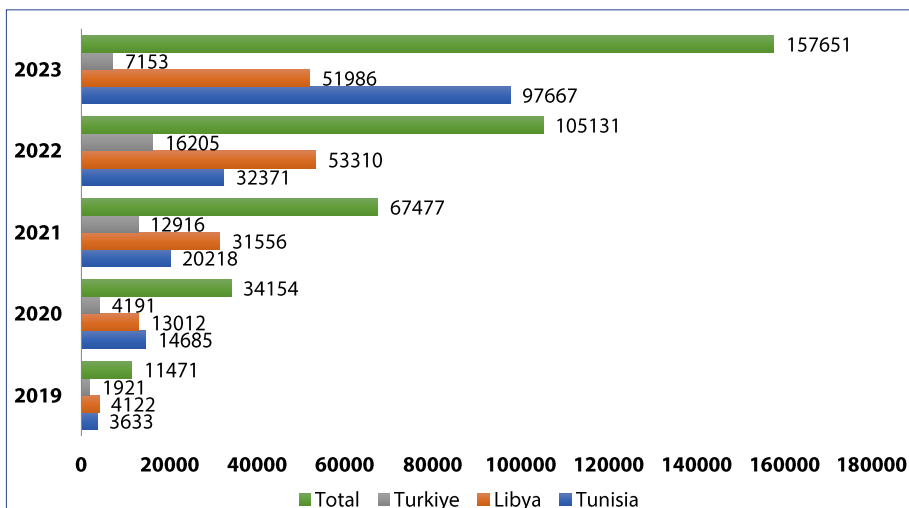
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¹ UNHCR Operational Data Portal: *Mediterranean Situation / Italy*, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>.

² Matt Herbert, "Losing Hope: Why Tunisians Are Leading the Surge in Irregular Migration to Europe", in *Global Initiative Research Reports*, September 2022, p. 5-10, <https://globalinitiative.net/?p=35328>.

Figure 1 | Monthly sea arrivals in Italy by country of embarkation (Jan–Dec 2023)

Source: Author's elaboration based on UNHCR, *Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard December 2023*, 13 March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107239>.

Figure 2 | Sea arrivals in Italy by country of embarkation (2019–2023)

Source: Author's elaboration based on UNHCR, *Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboards* of December 2019 (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/73536>), December 2020 (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/84531>), December 2021 (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90906>), December 2022 (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/98376>) and December 2023, cit.

In line with Tunisia's long-standing profile as a country of origin, the movement of Tunisian nationals initially dominated post-2020 flows. The same period, nevertheless, witnessed an upward trend also in the number of migrants – mainly from sub-Saharan Africa – moving to Europe through the North African country. The year 2023 marked a sharp increase in crossings by people from Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, a notable reduction of those by Tunisian citizens in relative terms, and a general diversification of national groups departing from the North African country (see Table 1). These changes in the composition of mixed flows imply that Tunisia's significance as a point of transit for irregular migration towards Europe has been accentuated, besides its continued relevance as an origin country.

Table 1 | Sea arrivals in Italy departing from Tunisia: Top three nationalities

Nationality	2021		2022		2023	
	Departures from Tunisia	As % of all departures from Tunisia	Departures from Tunisia	As % of all departures from Tunisia	Departures from Tunisia	As % of all departures from Tunisia
Côte d'Ivoire	2,372	11.7%	5,665	17.5%	15,584	15.9%
Guinea	1,286	6.4%	4,390	13.6%	17,979	18.4%
Tunisia	15,555	76.9%	18,381	56.8%	17,489	17.9%
Total departures from Tunisia	20,218		32,371		97,667	

Source: Author's elaboration based on UNHCR, *Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboards* of December 2021, 2022 and 2023, cit.

While the curve has become steeper after 2020, Tunisian migration towards Europe had started to slowly grow in volume already from 2017 on, parallel to the deterioration of the economy. This represented a shift from the previous decade where, except for a momentary surge when over 25,000 Tunisians arrived in Italy immediately after the fall of the Ben-Ali regime,³ irregular crossings had remained at low levels.

³ Angeliki Dimitriadi, "187.6 km to Europe: From Sfax to Lampedusa and the New 'Migration Crisis' in the Central Mediterranean", in *ELIAMEP Policy Briefs*, No. 185 (October 2023), <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/1876>.

Underpinning growing out-migration of Tunisians has been a widespread sense of “disenchantment and frustration about the change that the 2011 revolution was expected to bring”⁴ and the loss of belief in a better economic future⁵ as a result of persisting political turbulence and an economic landscape characterised by unemployment, lack of decent jobs and career development opportunities – particularly affecting the youth and reflecting long-standing regional inequalities. Significant loss of jobs and purchasing power due to the fallout from Covid-19 and an aggravating political crisis marked by democratic backsliding, erosion of rule of law, worsening economic governance and increasingly fragile state-society relations following President Saïed’s tightening of his grip on power have only exacerbated the drivers informing Tunisian migration.⁶

Growing migration of TCNs through Tunisia has been linked to several factors. While estimates vary, the population of migrants irregularly residing in Tunisia – often through overstaying their short-term permit – has considerably grown since 2011.⁷ From the late 2010s onwards, secondary migration of sub-Saharan African migrants to and through Tunisia has also intensified due to growing risks and changing smuggling dynamics in other destination/transit countries (i.e., Libya, Algeria),⁸ and owing to broader conflict dynamics in Libya.⁹

Moreover, despite hosting a growing number of migrants and asylum-seekers, the continued absence of a national asylum and reception system (see below) and the low priority attributed to immigrant integration in Tunisia has meant that the vast majority of protection-seekers and migrants lack legal status

⁴ REACH and Mercy Corps, *Tunisia, Country of Emigration and Return. Migration Dynamics Since 2011*, December 2018, p. 9, <https://reliefweb.int/node/2946169>.

⁵ The share of Tunisians who believed that the economic situation would improve fell from 78 per cent in 2011 to one third in 2019. See Luigi Narbone, “The EU-Tunisian Relationship After 2011: Resilience, Contestation and the Return of the Neglected Socio-Economic Question”, in *Middle East Directions Research Project Reports*, No. 2020/18 (4 December 2020), p. 8, <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/69264>.

⁶ Matt Herbert, “Losing Hope”, cit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Matt Herbert, “Tunisia: Growing Irregular Migration Flows amid Worsening Political Fragility”, in *Global Initiative Research Reports*, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Human-smuggling-and-trafficking-ecosystems-TUNISIA.pdf>.

⁹ Lorena Stella Martini and Tarek Megerisi, “Road to Nowhere: Why Europe’s Border Externalisation Is a Dead End”, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, December 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/road-to-nowhere-why-europes-border-externalisation-is-a-dead-end>.

and are subjected to precarious living and working conditions.¹⁰ Legal and socio-economic precarity implies that worsening economic conditions and/or an increasingly hostile socio-political context are likely to catalyse onward movement, including towards Europe, for those who manage to put together the needed resources. Loss of livelihoods and jobs caused by the pandemic's devastating effects on the informal sector, which migrants and asylum-seekers in Tunisia predominantly rely on, acted as such a catalyst.¹¹

Besides socio-economic factors, the peak recorded in 2023 in the departures of foreign migrants – an overwhelming majority of them Black Africans – has also been strongly informed by rising xenophobia¹² and the dramatic surge in racist violence after President Kais Saied, in a speech on 21 February 2023, pointed the finger at sub-Saharan African migrants as criminals and scapegoats in his version of the demographic replacement theory, directly borrowed from the white supremacist repertoire and applied to Tunisia.¹³ Institutional crackdown (e.g., arbitrary arrests, collective expulsions, physical abuse by authorities) and attacks perpetrated at the societal level (e.g., hate speech, robberies, mob violence, arbitrary job terminations) followed the President's incendiary speech,¹⁴ and continued over the summer months and beyond.¹⁵

4.1 Yet another crisis response? Short-termism and externalised mobility control as defining characteristics of European migration governance

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The increase in 2023 in the overall volume of crossings has turned the Central Mediterranean into the epicentre of what was once more labelled a "migration

¹⁰ Angeliki Dimitriadi, "Migration and Asylum in Tunisia: Domestic Interests, External Influences, and Policy Outcomes", in *ASILE Project Working Papers*, September 2022, <https://www.asileproject.eu/?p=4556>.

¹¹ Matt Herbert "Losing Hope", cit.

¹² Dale Gavlak, "EU-Tunisia Deal Seeks to Plug Irregular Migration, But Will It Work?", in *VOA News*, 18 July 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/7185583.html>.

¹³ Haythem Guesmi, "It Was Not Saied Who Introduced Anti-Black Racism to Tunisia", in *Al Jazeera*, 17 March 2023, <https://aje.io/8u2gc5>.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Tunisia: Racist Violence Targets Black Migrants, Refugees*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/node/384318>.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, EuroMed Rights and Human Rights Watch, *European Council Should Centre Human Rights Discussion on EU-Tunisia Cooperation*, 26 October 2023, <https://euromedrights.org/?p=38759>.

crisis". Tunisia, as the main country of embarkation, has become the key partner with which Italy and the EU sought to intensify cooperation on migration. After investing considerable political capital at both the member state and the EU level – albeit in a rather poorly coordinated manner¹⁶ – to convince Tunis to cooperate more closely on migration, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on a “comprehensive partnership package” between the Commission and Tunisia was signed on 16 July 2023.

At first instance, it seemed that the partnership package could have had potential to be genuinely comprehensive and multidimensional, migration featuring as one of the five cooperation areas, alongside macro-economic stability, trade and investment, green energy transition and people-to-people contacts,¹⁷ with the European Commission going as far as depicting it as a model for future deals.¹⁸ Shortly after, however, it became clear that what we were witnessing was “business as usual”. Europe interpreted the migration pillar through a narrow, control-oriented lens, with its funding priorities privileging border management, while the main actors behind the cooperation arrangement, such as Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, as well as the media, publicly presented it mainly as a “migration deal”.¹⁹ Among the sources of rising tension between the EU and Tunisia that followed the MoU’s conclusion was the latter’s discontent about – besides the EU’s conditioning of a large part of its financial assistance upon Tunisia’s signing of the deal with the International Monetary Fund for a nearly 2 billion US dollar loan – the narrow implementation focus on migration control, despite the multi-portfolio cooperation framework agreed upon in July.²⁰

¹⁶ Gabriela Baczyńska, “Germany’s Baerbock Joins Chorus Criticizing EU Migration Deal with Tunisia”, in *Reuters*, 22 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/germanys-baerbock-joins-chorus-criticizing-eu-migration-deal-with-tunisia-2023-09-22>.

¹⁷ European Commission, *The European Union and Tunisia: Political Agreement on a Comprehensive Partnership Package*, 16 July 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_3881.

¹⁸ “Tunisia Migration Deal a Model for Others, EU’s von der Leyen Says”, in *Reuters*, 23 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/tunisia-migration-deal-model-others-eus-von-der-leyen-says-2023-07-23>.

¹⁹ Lorena Stella Martini and Tarek Megerisi, 2023, “Road to Nowhere”, cit., p. 27.

²⁰ Tarek Amara, “Tunisia Rejects EU Financial Aid, Casting Doubt on an Immigration Deal”, in *Reuters*, 2 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/tunisia-rejects-eu-financial-aid-casting-doubt-immigration-deal-2023-10-02>.

This is neither new, nor unique to cooperation with Tunisia. Instead, it is emblematic of the “prevention-oriented, largely Eurocentric and short-term-focused approach to migration cooperation”²¹ that the EU and the member states deploy in their relations with third countries relevant from a migration policy perspective: Europe underlines the importance of comprehensive and multidimensional partnerships, vis-à-vis the different faces of migration governance as well as the wider spectrum of policy areas. This then remains largely limited to rhetoric, as the European side puts the accent on reducing northbound departures – and boosting southbound returns – when it comes to defining the objectives, success benchmarks and implementation priorities of cooperation.

Having defined what the MoU was supposed to achieve along these lines, in Europe the deal was considered to be yielding results already in October, as the reduction in departures was associated with improved cooperation with Tunisia.²² Besides celebrating the fall in departures as the result of “reinforced political will to pursue” the agreement, Italian President Meloni also took particular credit for “Italy’s bilateral work with the Tunisian government”.²³ By the end of the year, European migration policy actors largely converged in linking the notable reduction in departures to intensified preventive activity by Tunisian authorities, with Frontex warning against a potential “rebound in the Tunisian migratory flow” should there be any “relaxation of these measures”.²⁴

As cautious observers warn, however, attempting to influence short-term reductions or spikes in mixed flows arriving in Europe through momentarily intensifying or relaxing mobility control measures is a common strategy applied by actors in a similar “buffer” position (e.g., Morocco, Turkey, Libya) seeking to

²¹ Angeliki Dimitriadi and Asli Selin Okyay, “Are Partnerships with Third Countries an Effective Way Forward for EU Migration Management?”, in *ELIAMEP Perspectives*, No. 2/2023 (November 2023), p. 15-23, <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Perspectives-2-Migration.pdf>.

²² Agence Europe, “European Commissioner for Home Affairs Reports Progress in Cooperation with Tunisia”, in *Europe Daily Bulletin*, No. 13276 (21 October 2023) <https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/13276/9>.

²³ Italian Government, *President Meloni’s Address to the Senate Ahead of the European Council Meeting on 26-27 October*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/24067>.

²⁴ Ricard González and Lola Hierro, “Tunisia Reactivates Its Collaboration with the EU in the Fight Against Irregular Migration”, in *El País*, 16 December 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-12-16/tunisia-reactivates-its-collaboration-with-the-eu-in-the-fight-against-irregular-immigration.html>.

extract political or financial favours from the EU.²⁵ And there is no reason for Tunisia to be an exception, particularly considering the current regime's need for external economic assistance and for instruments to boost its legitimacy domestically as well as internationally. Hence, while the dominant narrative in Europe centres on the deal's success illustrated by the drop in departures thanks to Tunisia's reactivation of control measures, past experience shows that this kind of "success" – besides typically coming at the expense of migrants' fundamental rights as was demonstrated by Tunisian authorities' expulsion of hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants to the desert at the Libyan border in July 2023²⁶ – tends to be neither long-lasting, nor politically and economically cost-free.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, it comes as no surprise that the MoU with Tunisia is seen largely in a positive light, as European migration policy has long been driven by the search to "secure quick symbolic gains".²⁷ Demonstrating control through – albeit momentarily – decreasing arrival figures following skilfully crafted migration deals with third countries is certainly among such symbolic gains. This latest episode of EU–third country migration cooperation is thus emblematic of what has come to be the two defining characteristics of European migration governance: short-termism and externalisation aimed at restricting mobility.

Despite the definition of migration as a structural issue to be addressed with a long-term perspective, the tendency in Europe over the past decades has been to approach it as a phenomenon manifesting in episodic surges in irregular arrivals, with the main policy response being "react[ing] to it crisis after crisis".²⁸ At the same time, despite numerous reform efforts over the years, including the latest set of legislative changes under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, only very limited progress has been made in overcoming the responsibility-solidarity conundrum characterising the internal dimension of EU migration and asylum governance. This reproduces a skewed policy dynamic incentivising

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Amnesty International, EuroMed Rights and Human Rights Watch, *European Council Should Centre Human Rights Discussion on EU-Tunisia Cooperation*, cit.

²⁷ Katharina Natter, "Reinventing a Broken Wheel. What the EU-Tunisia Deal Reveals over Europe's Migration Cooperation", in *Verfassung Blog*, 5 September 2023, <https://verfassungsblog.de/?p=74589>.

²⁸ Lorena Stella Martini and Tarek Megerisi, "Road to Nowhere", cit., p. 32.

the so-called frontline states to push even harder on preventing departures, augmenting returns and containing migrants and asylum seekers through short-termist deals with third countries, and the EU to follow suit.²⁹

One needs only look at the past cooperation between Italy and Tunisia to see how this dynamic has been repeating itself time and again. In the 15 years before the 2023 MoU, Italy and Tunisia concluded six bilateral migration deals – including formal agreements and informal arrangements – in 1998, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2017 and 2020. While the concrete details show slight variations, these arrangements repeat a combination of return and readmission of Tunisians (and exceptionally also of TCNs under the 2009 deal) who are in an irregular situation and have no right to international protection, alongside law enforcement cooperation, with Tunisia committing to reinforce border and mobility control (including through enhanced surveillance, interception and detention capacity) and Italy providing funding, equipment and technical assistance to support this endeavour. In some cases, a limited expansion by Italy of legal entry quotas for Tunisian workers complements the “core” focus on externalised border control and return.³⁰

Similar dynamics characterise EU-level policy-making too. Since the 1995 Association Agreement, through the two editions of European Neighbourhood Policy, to the 2012 EU-Tunisia Privileged Partnership, migration featured among the priority issue areas comprising relations between the two sides. The 2014 Mobility Partnership detailing the main contours of migration-specific cooperation, on paper, is built on a multi-pillar understanding of migration and asylum governance, including measures aimed at countering irregular migration, acting upon the migration-development nexus – also through expanding legal migration pathways, and supporting Tunisia in the

²⁹ In fact, the introduction of mandatory border procedures for countries of first arrival without matching assurances and predictable responsibility-sharing mechanisms on the solidarity front is likely to push the so-called frontline states even harder to focus on preventing departures and augmenting returns through deals with third countries in general, and Tunisia in particular. See Luca Barana and Asli Selin Okyay, “Shaking Hands with Saied’s Tunisia: The Paradoxes and Trade-offs Facing the EU”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 23|40 (August 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17362>.

³⁰ EuroMed Rights, “The Policy of Forced Returns Between Italy and Tunisia”, Chapter 4 in *Return Mania. Mapping Policies and Practices in the EuroMed Region*, April 2021, p. 5-7, https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/EN_Chapter-4-Italy-Tunisia-1.pdf.

development of its national migration and asylum policy.³¹

In line with the overall trend of the EU's growing prioritisation of migration in its foreign policy towards countries south of the Mediterranean since the so-called migration crisis and parallel to the increase in arrivals from Tunisia since 2017, greater political and financial investment has also been channelled to the North African country. Despite the multi-pillared approach spelled out in the Mobility Partnership, research shows that funding priorities both under the European Trust Fund for Africa and the EU Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument noticeably privilege measures aimed at migration control and facilitation of return and reintegration (with questionable official development assistance eligibility of some of these actions), compared to those linked to labour migration, protection or integration.³²

4.2 Negative externalities of externalisation

As discussed above, the Italian and European approach towards Tunisia has constituted no exception – either in this last episode of “crisis”, or over the past decades – when it comes to the role attributed to what they consider key third countries along the migratory corridors connecting Asia and Africa to Europe. This not only implies that migration cooperation has been disproportionately geared towards control, surveillance and containment, but also means that an overriding focus on migration has increasingly informed Europe's wider foreign policy approach towards Tunisia. A series of significant implications both for migration and asylum governance and for the broader political and economic context in Tunisia – and hence ultimately for migration drivers – derive from this.

In terms of migration governance, despite divergence on issues such as return (of Tunisians and TCNs in Europe back to Tunisia) and labour migration (of Tunisians to Europe), Tunisian and European positions, in fact, largely converge

³¹ Fatma Raach, Hiba Sha'ath and Thomas Spijkerboer, *Tunisia Country Report*, ASILE Project, August 2022, https://www.asileproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/D5.2_WP5-Tunisia-Country-Report-Final.pdf.

³² Oxfam, “From Development to Deterrence? Migration Spending Under the EU Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)”, in *Oxfam Briefing Papers*, September 2023, p. 35-45, <http://hdl.handle.net/10546/621536>.

on favouring a securitised understanding of managing migration. Despite some initial momentum to move towards a rights-based (im)migration policy, the legacy of a restrictive approach inherited from the Ben Ali era criminalising irregular entry and exit, favouring surveillance and attributing a central role for law enforcement actors and capacities in controlling mobility has remained largely intact in the post-2011 era,³³ which should be seen against a wider lack of reform of the security sector during the transition period. The push from Europe for reinforcing border security and surveillance, matched with the channelling of funding and technical assistance to muscle up Tunisian institutions in charge (mainly under the Ministry of Interior and to a lesser extent also the Ministry of Defence), thus has largely coincided with domestic priorities both before and after 2011.³⁴

Cooperating with the EU on (irregular) migration management also served local elites' interest in reinforcing control and surveillance of the entire population during the Ben Ali era.³⁵ The European approach remaining largely unchanged, this dynamic has, not surprisingly, only reproduced itself under the increasingly autocratic rule of President Saied, backed by the security apparatus that exerts control not only over migrants, but increasingly also over society at large.³⁶ In overall, a relatively clearer convergence of interests (albeit for varying motives) has also informed selective adoption by Tunisian authorities of the securitisation-oriented aspects of the wider cooperation agenda.³⁷

Divergence rather than convergence marks other dimensions of migration and asylum governance, where the European push for reform and closer cooperation has been met with Tunisian resistance. The deliberate stalling by Tunisia of the development of a national asylum and reception system is emblematic of this

³³ Katharina Natter, "Tunisia's Migration Policy: The Ambiguous Consequences of Democratization", in *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Commentaries*, 13 January 2022, <https://eu.boell.org/en/node/9387>.

³⁴ Katharina Natter, "Reinventing a Broken Wheel", cit.

³⁵ Jean-Pierre Cassarino, "Beyond the Criminalisation of Migration: A Non-Western Perspective", in *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2018), p. 397-411, DOI 10.1504/IJMB.2018.096756.

³⁶ Tarek Megerisi, "By Striking a Deal with Tunisia's Saied, Is Europe Signalling It's Open to Extortion?", in *Euronews*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/06/21/by-striking-a-deal-with-tunisia-saied-is-europe-signalling-its-open-to-extortion>.

³⁷ Jean-Pierre Cassarino, "Channelled Policy Transfers: EU-Tunisia Interactions on Migration Matters", in *European Journal of Migration and Law*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (February 2014), p. 97-123, DOI 10.1163/15718166-00002050.

dynamic. Despite being party to the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1969 African Union Refugee Convention, having inscribed the right to asylum in the 2014 Constitution and having drafted a national asylum law in 2014, Tunisia has been delaying the formalisation of the law ever since. Wary of becoming the target of “potential externalisation plans from the EU and member states”, it has been following a policy of no policy, manifesting as the freezing and deprioritisation of the development of a national asylum and reception system and capacities – and continuing instead to delegate these responsibilities to the UNHCR.³⁸

Such resistance should be read against increasing European pressure not only to externalise border security, but also to extra-territorialise asylum governance and contain migrants as well as asylum-seekers and refugees outside Europe, which has become increasingly blunt, as was exemplified by the EU’s 2018 proposal on the establishment of disembarkation platforms and asylum processing centres (mainly) in North Africa.³⁹ Considering European countries’ insistence on extra-territorialising asylum processing (e.g., the 2022 UK-Rwanda deal, the recent Italy-Albania agreement),⁴⁰ one could only expect Tunisia’s reticence about putting in place a national asylum and reception system in line with international standards to continue in the years to come. One could therefore argue that the EU’s and member states’ fixation with externalisation and containment paradoxically impedes the very legal and institutional reforms that they support to expand the protection space and improve asylum and reception standards in their broader neighbourhood. A significant outcome deriving from this is deepening legal and socio-economic precarity for asylum-seekers and refugees, as discussed above, and as witnessed not only in Tunisia, but also in most host and transit countries in the EU’s vicinity.

³⁸ Angeliki Dimitriadi, “Migration and Asylum in Tunisia”, cit., p. 26.

³⁹ Sergio Carrera et al., “Offshoring Asylum and Migration in Australia, Spain, Tunisia and the US: Lessons Learned and Feasibility for the EU”, in *CEPS Reports*, 2018, <https://www.ceps.eu/?p=10709>.

⁴⁰ It should be noted that the kind of extra-territorialisation is different. In the UK-Rwanda case, asylum processing is supposed to take place in Rwanda both physically and legally (i.e., according to Rwandan law, by Rwandan authorities). In the Italy-Albania case, asylum claims are supposed to be processed physically in Albania but legally in Italy (i.e., according to Italian law, by Italian authorities). See “Migration Deal: Physically in Albania, Legally in Italy”, in *The Brussels Times*, 28 November 2023, <https://www.brusselstimes.com/815560/migration-deal-physically-in-albania-legally-in-italy>.

Beyond migration governance, Europe's prioritisation of Tunisia as the sought-after partner for responding to the latest "crisis" in the Central Mediterranean has severe implications for the already fragile situation in the country. To begin with, very much reminiscent of the Ben Ali era,⁴¹ all the image boosting, political courting and economic investment that comes with such prioritisation helps Saied gain international legitimacy, which then comes in rather handy for the President to cash out also domestically. Further, as discussed above, the control-oriented migration partnership Europe demands from Tunisia, and supports through investing in law enforcement and surveillance capacities, helps buttress the security forces without ensuring sufficient oversight and accountability.⁴² This risks being complicit in sustaining the regime and indirectly contributing to the increasing centralisation – and hence potential abuse – of power vis-à-vis not only migrants and asylum-seekers but also wider sections of the population.⁴³

Finally, the fact that European actors kept emphasising how crucial cooperation with Tunis was to prevent departures – not only of Tunisians but also of TCNs – provided Saied with a window of opportunity to politicise immigration, an issue that has traditionally entertained low political salience in Tunisia – as opposed to emigration of Tunisians.⁴⁴ As demonstrated by his incendiary February 2023 speech and what followed afterwards, when provided with an opportunity both to demonstrate his power by intimidating yet another group, and to shift attention away from the regime's responsibility in the gloomy economic and political crisis through "mobilis[ing] anger and economic despair to fracture the country and make public enemies out of Black African immigrants", he has successfully seized it.⁴⁵ Put another way, in a context of widespread economic hardship and societal discontent, the spotlight shed by Europe on migration control has contributed to making the ground even more fertile for Saied to resort to xenophobia and racism and instrumentalise them for his own political gain. As discussed above, the consequences of such instrumentalisation on

⁴¹ Jean-Pierre Cassarino, "Channelled Policy Transfers", cit.

⁴² Refugees International, "European and Tunisian Migration Policies: A Recipe for Failure and Suffering", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|02 (January 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17964>.

⁴³ Ibid.; Tarek Megerisi, "By Striking a Deal with Tunisia's Saied, Is Europe Signalling It's Open to Extortion", cit.

⁴⁴ Katharina Natter, "Reinventing a Broken Wheel", cit.

⁴⁵ Haythem Guesmi, "It Was Not Saied Who Introduced Anti-Black Racism to Tunisia", cit.

Black African migrants as well as on co-habitation dynamics have been direct, real and grim, with further and longer-term adverse effects on Tunisian politics and society to be seen.

Concluding remarks

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For almost three decades now, European migration governance has been trapped in a spiral of short-termism and externalisation of mobility control. This has been increasingly conditioning the EU's and the member states' foreign policy approach particularly towards their neighbours south of the Mediterranean. The European response to the relative increase in mixed flows departing from Tunisia has been emblematic of this: investing in migration cooperation marked by a transactional approach and an overriding focus on prevention and containment, while adopting a reductionist foreign policy line, disproportionately oriented towards migration control.

On the one hand, this has been fostering a skewed dynamic in the migration field: partners are incentivised and supported to record progress in control- and surveillance-oriented aspects of migration governance, while investments and improvement in other equally significant dimensions are being disincentivised, as for example has been the case in the domain of international protection in Tunisia. On the other hand, particularly given the current political and economic crisis in Tunisia, following an overall foreign policy line predominantly geared towards migration control not only contradicts, but also potentially generates adverse consequences for what the EU has regarded as its key priorities vis-à-vis the North African country, namely, support to democratisation, the strengthening of rule of law and good economic governance.

In overall terms, engaging Tunisia through a narrow and short-termist lens focused on externalised migration control would ultimately be counterproductive even from a perspective that largely disregards the wider implications and prioritises keeping mixed flows at bay through alleviating the factors driving migration. When it comes to Tunisia's role as a host and potential transit country, besides the effects of the further deterioration of overall economic conditions, growing political instrumentalisation of xenophobia and racism or the continued absence of an asylum and reception

system is highly likely to deepen the legal and economic precarity of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in Tunisia so as to ultimately act as drivers for their onward movement to Europe. At the same time, the negative side effects of Europe's fixation with migration control contribute – albeit in an indirect and unintended manner – to boosting the power, legitimacy and authority of Saied and sustaining the regime. These effects are likely to deepen economic despair and political oppression, eventually exacerbating drivers underpinning Tunisia's role as a country of origin for migrants and asylum-seekers, who, in the large absence of safe and legal pathways, would attempt crossing the Mediterranean irregularly.

Similar dynamics have been reproduced in the EU's and the member states' relations with other (migration) partners in the wider Mediterranean. This has been mainly caused by the European fixation with demonstrating migration control in the face of what is typically seen as a "crisis". It has also been informed by Europe's over-reliance on external partners to do that – particularly in the absence of political will and any meaningful progress in overcoming the solidarity-responsibility conundrum characterising the internal dimension of EU migration and asylum policies. Yet, the Tunisian case clearly shows that this leads the EU to miss out on the complex, structural and multidimensional nature of the challenges – on and well beyond migration – that these countries and societies face. It also demonstrates that Europe largely disregards the negative implications that today's simplistic and short-sighted policy responses are likely to generate both for the broader set of political and economic conditions and for migration dynamics in the long run.

The latest episode that has Tunisia as the protagonist should therefore act as an eye-opener for Europe to start acknowledging and addressing the wider set of risks and negative implications that looking at the region through such a tunnel vision generates. Narrowing the gap between words and deeds when it comes to promoting comprehensive and balanced partnerships that entail, but go well beyond the migration aspect, and to the need for developing forward-looking, multidimensional and "European" responses to structural and complex policy challenges such as migration would be a good start.

5. Reframing EU-Tunisia Relations: Conclusions and Recommendations

by Akram Ezzamouri*

Amid a global landscape rife with resurging crises, multifaceted challenges and regional fragmentations, the European Union – and notably the European Commission – has taken steps to reinvent its identity and resulting policy measures. Since 2019, the EU has been striving to advance its own “geopolitical” presence on both European and global platforms, with the aim of adopting a more strategic and assertive global stance and affirming a “stronger Europe in the world”.¹ Economic, commercial and technological issues have assumed heightened strategic relevance as they have become intertwined with European security-related considerations. Similarly, environmental and developmental engagements, along with international cooperation, have been reinterpreted within this new framework responding to a growing EU “appetite for power”.²

Against the backdrop of evolving global trends, the EU adjustment of its priorities and policy actions has led to a defensive turn in the realm of its democracy and democracy support,³ resulting in the consolidation of conflicting practices that diverge from professed principles, particularly when addressing immediate interests in migration, security and energy from West Asia and North Africa.⁴ The case of Tunisia, with its democratic regression since 2021 and its developing relations with Italy and the EU, provides a clear lens to examine how the “geopolitical EU” framework is implemented and tested in North Africa. It illustrates the EU’s attempt to establish a new partnership

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¹ Ursula von der Leyen, *Mission Letter to Josep Borrell*, 1 December 2019, https://commissioners.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/mission-letter-josep-borrell-2019_en.pdf.

² Pauline Bock, “EU Must Develop ‘Appetite for Power’ Says Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell”, in *Euronews*, 16 February 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/16/eu-must-develop-appetite-for-power-says-foreign-policy-chief-josep-borrell>.

³ Richard Youngs, “The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support”, in *Carnegie Papers*, March 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/91946>.

⁴ Michelle Pace and Christian Achraïner, “EU Democracy Support in the Southern Neighborhood: How the EU Contradicts its own Practices”, in *PRIF Blog*, 10 October 2023, <https://blog.prif.org/?p=8923>.

model with its Southern neighbours, which, however, appears unpromising and shortsighted as it artificially disconnects more “pragmatic” dossiers from crucial democratic, civil society, governance and rights-related variables.

Following an overview of the latest developments in EU-Tunisia relations in light of respective domestic issues and taking stock of the insights discussed in the previous chapters of this volume, the chapter advances policy recommendations for a more comprehensive, contextualised and sustainable engagement with Tunisia.

5.1 Self-crafting geopolitical Europe

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In recent years, the EU’s newfound ambition to learn to speak the language of power⁵ has been evident on multiple occasions, encompassing both domestic and international initiatives. The European Green Deal – the first flagship initiative under Ursula von der Leyen’s presidency of the European Commission – puts forward the mobilisation of 1 trillion euros to implement reforms aimed at reducing European net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 per cent by 2030, compared to 1990 levels, with the overarching goal of establishing the EU as the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 and of reshaping its economy into a modern, resource-efficient, competitive and globally leading one.⁶ The EU’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic has served as a stage for the further crafting of its geopolitical ambitions, evident in the rhetoric and actions calling for unified European policies, in the role played supporting the UN-backed COVAX facility for a global equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines and in the adoption of a 1.8 trillion euro recovery plan aimed at building a resilient and sustainable Europe. Moreover, with the launch of the 2021–2027 European Global Gateway, the EU sought to assert itself as a viable alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative by mobilising 300 billion euros in investments across climate and energy, transportation, health, digitalisation, education and research sectors worldwide.

⁵ Josep Borrell, “Europe Must Learn Quickly to Speak the Language of Power”, in *EJIL:Talk!*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/?p=19233>.

⁶ Daniela Huber, “The New European Commission’s Green Deal and Geopolitical Language: A Critique from a Decentering Perspective”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|06 (April 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11509>.

However, it was in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, that the European foreign and security policy experienced a significant shift. This event reinforced the EU's ambition and self-depiction as a key player in advancing European (and to some extent Transatlantic) strategic interests. The recognition of a war unfolding at Europe's doorstep, posing a tangible threat to its stability and values, prompted a quasi-total withdrawal of European engagements with Russian counterparts. Instead, there was a concerted effort to provide consistent military, political, financial and infrastructural support to Ukraine and its people. Since the onset of the war in 2022, the EU and its member states have provided support to Ukraine totalling over 88 billion euros: including 43.4 billion directed towards Ukraine's economic, social and financial endeavours, 28 billion allocated for military assistance and 17 billion to address the needs of Ukrainian refugees in the EU.⁷ In response to the Russian invasion, the EU has taken bold steps adopting economic sanctions, imposing individual travel bans and freezing assets. Further efforts have been made to diminish the EU's reliance on Russian fossil fuels through initiatives such as REPowerEU,⁸ resulting, among others, in a significant decline in Russia's pipeline gas share in EU imports plummeting from over 40 per cent in 2021 to approximately 8 per cent by 2023. Furthermore, the crisis has injected new vigour into the EU enlargement process, with the opening of the accession process for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and a renewed momentum for accession among Balkan countries.

Despite the financial and political limits of such EU initiatives on the global stage,⁹ these have reflected a significant proactive stance from Europe to contemporary challenges through actively pursuing European priorities involving a wider range of actors and stakeholders, and thereby revitalising European policymaking on both domestic and international fronts. Nonetheless, the implementation of this European geopolitical approach in the EU's southern neighbourhood has proven to be rather ill-fated and, in certain

⁷ European Commission website: *EU Assistance to Ukraine*, https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/node/38_en.

⁸ European Commission website: *REPowerEU*, https://commission.europa.eu/node/5661_en.

⁹ See for instance, Daniela Huber, "The New European Commission's Green Deal and Geopolitical Language", cit.; Mark Furness, "The Global Gateway in the Southern Neighbourhood: the Dilemma of Investing in Authoritarian MENA Countries", in *EuroMeSCo Policy Briefs*, No. 143 (March 2024), <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/the-global-gateway-in-the-southern-neighbourhood-the-dilemma-of-investing-in-authoritarian-mena-countries>.

aspects, even detrimental to the actual interests of the region.

This became particularly evident in European policy towards the dire humanitarian situation in Palestine, notably in Gaza, following the events of 7 October 2023, when Hamas's military wing launched attacks on Israeli areas near the Strip and Israel initiated a retaliatory military response resulting in the death of at least 31,000 Palestinians. In yet another test for the Union's foreign and security policy, the EU reacted in an unprecedentedly disharmonious and fragmented manner.¹⁰ Apart from the well-established divisions among member states regarding the Israel-Palestine issue, a more pronounced intra-institutional fragmentation emerged, particularly within the European Commission itself, with regard to the Israeli military operation, the continuation of European humanitarian aid and development assistance to the Palestinians, the financial support for UNRWA and the prospects for post-conflict Palestinian politics and life. Such EU cacophony, coupled with a hesitant policy response to grave breaches of humanitarian and human rights law in occupied Palestinian territories, has led many observers to accuse the EU of complicity in applying double standards and has undermined the EU's efforts (flawed as they may be) to establish itself as a proponent of peace between Israel and Palestine.¹¹

5.2 The EU's flawed strategic engagement with Kais Saied

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Already in July 2023 the EU had displayed similar limitations, contradicting practices and internal fractures when it signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a strategic and global partnership with Tunisia: a package of around 1 billion euros focusing on macroeconomic stability, investments and trade, energy transition, people-to-people contacts and especially migration management.

The inking of the agreement coincided with a period of prolonged internal strife in Tunisia, with the looming threat of political and economic collapse

¹⁰ Anna Khakee and Michelle Pace, "The EU and the Israel-Palestine Test", in *PRIF Blog*, 31 October 2023, <https://blog.prif.org/?p=8973>.

¹¹ European External Action Service, *MEPP: The European Union, Saudi Arabia, the Arab League, in Cooperation with Egypt and Jordan, Launch the Peace Day Effort for Middle East Peace, and Invite the World to Join*, 18 September 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/433416_en.

and a society grappling with the extensive fallout of a multicrisis situation. This predicament has been exacerbated by weak domestic governance inherited from years of incomplete political transition, during which structural reforms in the security sector, economy and institutional architecture were not effectively adopted or implemented. The compounding impacts of climate change, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have further accelerated the deterioration of the country's socio-economic situation, underscoring the challenges faced amidst the signing of the MoU.

In addition to this, Tunisian President Kais Saied's political agenda, which propelled him to victory in the 2019 elections largely thanks to a populist anti-corruption discourse resonating with popular disillusionment with politics, has worsened the situation. Since 2021, President Saied has initiated a drastic process of authoritarian reinstatement in the country, dismantling legislative, judicial and constitutional bodies, and targeting political figures and key intermediaries in Tunisia's political landscape. What was once hailed as a notable example of political transition and a promising case for democratic consolidation has now reached the bottom of its descent into de-democratisation.¹² Despite some weak initiatives, such as calls to tax the wealthy or the enactment of decrees-laws for penal reconciliation to guarantee amnesty to businessmen accused of corruption or embezzlement in exchange for investments in marginalised regions,¹³ not much progress has been made to address Tunisia's structural socio-economic challenges under Saied's governance. On the contrary, migrant people residing in or transiting through Tunisia have been accused by the president and his inner circle of being a source of social instability and a means for implementing ethnic replacement at the expense of Tunisians. This xenophobic discourse led to the resurgence of violent anti-Black racism in Tunisia, which then translated also into actual policy practices during summer 2023, with the expulsion and pushback of 1,200 migrants into the desert at the border with Libya by Tunisian authorities, where many died due to thirst, hunger and lack of assistance.¹⁴

¹² See Chapter 1 in this volume.

¹³ Hakim Fekih, "Kais Saied and Tunisian Capital: Intimidation, Conspiracy and Collaboration", in *Noria Research Articles*, 5 January 2024, <https://noria-research.com/mena/?p=291>.

¹⁴ Houda Mzioudet, "An Italian Connection? Racism and Populism in Kais Saied's Tunisia", in *Noria Research Articles*, 30 January 2024, <https://noria-research.com/mena/?p=393>.

In light of Tunisia's tragic turn, especially since 2021, EU foreign policy has predominantly adopted a "wait and see" attitude. A precautionary approach which may be due to the gradual character of the erosion of the country's democratic structures or the initially strong public support for the measures enacted by president Saïed. Nevertheless, the record levels of migrant arrivals on Italian shores from Tunisia prompted a change in policy response from Brussels, ultimately leading to the aforementioned MoU.

Much credit is owed to Italy's improvised commitment, particularly in its role as an agenda setter, for bringing relations with Tunisia back to the forefront of the Union's priorities at a time when European financial and diplomatic resources were focused towards the east. Directly affected by the increasing migratory flows from Tunisia, Italy embarked on intense diplomatic efforts with Tunisian counterparts in 2023.¹⁵ During international visits and summits, the government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, whose consensus has been built on promises of staunchly combating migration, has adopted an urgency narrative, advocating for swift and unconditional support to Tunisia's finances. Beyond concerns about migratory flows, Italy's commitment to addressing the potential socio-economic collapse of Tunisia can also be attributed to Italian economic interests in the country. In 2023, Italy further strengthened its position as top supplier to Tunisia and as Tunisia's second-largest trading partner, with a trade volume totalling approximately 6.8 billion euros.¹⁶ Moreover, at least 900 Italian companies are operating in Tunisian territory, including wholly Italian-owned, partially Italian-owned or joint venture enterprises. Tunisia is also integral to Italy's aspiration of establishing the peninsula as an energy hub for Europe.¹⁷ The relevance of this connection becomes especially apparent when considering Italy's endeavours to diversify its energy sources following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With the consequent surge in gas supplies from

¹⁵ Italian Embassy to Tunisia, *Visita a Tunisi del Vice Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri e Ministro degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, Antonio Tajani, e del Ministro dell'Interno, Matteo Piantedosi*, 24 January 2023, <https://ambtunisi.esteri.it/it/?p=637>; Italian Ministry of Interior, *Piantedosi in Tunisia è stato ricevuto dal Presidente della Repubblica Saïed e ha incontrato l'omologo tunisino Fekih*, 15 May 2023, <http://www.interno.gov.it/it/node/39464>; Italian Government, *President Meloni on Official Visit to the Republic of Tunisia*, 6 June 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/22808>.

¹⁶ infoMercatiEsteri, "Scheda di sintesi: Tunisia", in *Osservatorio economico*, last updated on 13 March 2024, https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-sintesi/tunisia_115.pdf.

¹⁷ Italian Ministry of Environment and Energy Security, *Italia-Tunisia: Pichetto, Italia sarà hub energetico dell'Europa*, 8 December 2022, <https://www.mase.gov.it/node/15514>.

Algeria – transported to Italy also through Tunisian territory via the TransMed pipeline – Tunisia assumes a crucial role in Italy's strategy.

It is evident that the context shaping Tunisia and the region in the past year has led to calculations prioritising more immediate and predominantly Eurocentric interests in European relations with the country. The policy measures that have followed do not genuinely centre Tunisia's critical political situation, nor the risk of reinforcing undemocratic dynamics. In this context, disparities in European practices emerge, widening the gap between discursive and behavioural practices and highlighting divergences among member states, among European institutions, and even within the same European Commission. The European ambition to advance a partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean,¹⁸ defined in 2011 in a phase of effective and intense political transformation in the region, has now faded away. In the context of Tunisia, it initially waned as Europe gave precedence to issues of counterterrorism or migration since 2015, gradually abandoning crucial support for reforms in the country. Eventually, this normative ambition was downplayed in light of Tunisia's authoritarian drift and the emergence of a narrow European geopolitical approach focusing on what it defines as new strategically relevant interests. Various member states – including Germany – have formally criticised both the procedure and some of the content of the recent commitment with Tunisia. Concerns have been raised about the lack of consultation with all member states before proceeding with the signing of the MoU, as well as about the diminished emphasis on human rights and the rule of law.¹⁹ EU High Representative Josep Borrell conveyed similar concerns in a letter addressed to European Commissioner for Neighbourhood, Olivér Várhelyi,²⁰ while the European Parliament has shown strong criticism for the new initiative with Tunisia, demanding transparency from the Commission

¹⁸ European Commission, *A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean* (COM/2011/200), 8 March 2011, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52011DC0200>.

¹⁹ Gabriela Baczynska, "Germany's Baerbock Joins Chorus Criticizing EU Migration Deal with Tunisia", in *Reuters*, 22 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/germanys-baerbock-joins-chorus-criticizing-eu-migration-deal-with-tunisia-2023-09-22>.

²⁰ Lisa O'Carroll, "EU States Expressed 'Incomprehension' at Tunisia Migration Pact, Says Borrell", in *The Guardian*, 18 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/pv3qq>. See letter sent to President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen: Tineke Strik [@Tineke_Strik], "Breaking: Upon my request, the full letter that @JosepBorrellF sent to @vonderleyen on the Tunisia deal was released", in *Twitter*, 30 November 2023, https://x.com/Tineke_Strik/status/1730150958917660928.

regarding the adoption and implementation of the package.²¹

Fragmentation and contradictions in both procedures and content in European commitments with Tunisia can be attributed to the institutional limits in the EU decision-making and to the emergence of diverse priorities among different European actors in foreign policy matters.²² The close engagements with authoritarian regimes in pre-2011 Tunisia, as well as those with Kais Saied, or the initial European commitment to the Tunisian political transition, can all be considered as driven by a European interest in ensuring stability in the country – often unsustainably – suitable for pursuing short-term objectives primarily in security and trade areas. Lacking a long-term vision for a lasting and mutually beneficial regional partnership, such EU policy leaves room for practices that reflect poorly on Europe’s actions and position. At the local level, European support is increasingly associated with serious violations of migrant people’s rights by Tunisian authorities, securitisation and shrinking of social spaces in the country following the strengthening of security forces, consequently fuelling an entrenched popular anti-European sentiment.

Conclusions and recommendations

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Notwithstanding the discussed limitations and emerging fractures, the EU has endeavoured to assert its geopolitical identity in the region by committing to replicate the “Tunisia model” in other regional contexts considered priorities for Europe. At the time of writing, additional partnerships have been signed with Mauritania²³ and Egypt,²⁴ dealing with various policy issues including migration and externalisation of borders. Considering the complexities and sensitivities of the countries in the region, and Tunisia particularly, Europe truly needs to adopt a new model of partnership with its neighbours, starting

²¹ Simone De La Feld, “EU Parliament Seeking Clarification on the 150 Million in Macroeconomic Assistance to Tunisia”, in *Eunews*, 14 March 2024, <https://www.eunews.it/en/?p=345565>.

²² Anthony Dworkin, “The Maghreb Maze: Harmonising Divergent European Policies in North Africa”, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 30 January 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-maghreb-maze-harmonising-divergent-european-policies-in-north-africa>.

²³ European Commission, *The European Commission Launches New Migration Partnership with Mauritania*, 7 March 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1335.

²⁴ Egypt and EU, *Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union*, 17 March 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/4847_en.

with an honest acknowledgment of the context in which it operates and undertaking a “process of unlearning and relearning”.²⁵ The pitfalls of mirroring Team Europe’s Tunisia model must be avoided, as it fails to achieve even the expected objective of short-term stability, while perpetuating dynamics that hinder good governance, socio-economic progress and Mediterranean integration. Practices of externalisation and othering not only exacerbate perceptions of the EU as disconnected from the Mediterranean region but also fuel authoritarian trends and societal decline.

Against this backdrop, EU member states and institutions should collaborate in a transparent, cohesive and unified manner, capitalising on their existing channels of cooperation with Tunisia. The much-discussed Italian Mattei Plan, if adequately integrated into a broader European framework, has the potential to stimulate discussions within the EU for the establishment of a genuine and enduring equal partnership with Tunisia. Such engagement – if framed to avoid being merely an elitist initiative – would potentially tackle shared challenges and opportunities arising from climate change, demographic shifts, regional integration, governance and economic development in a more comprehensive way.

In a context of increased democratic degeneration – and especially ahead of the Tunisian presidential elections in 2024 – the EU and its member states should support the restoration of a political, social and economic context that could be conducive to the creation and consolidation of political alternatives in Tunisia. In this regard the EU should commit to include all relevant Tunisian political and social actors when discussing strategies to address present or future challenges in EU-Tunisia relations. Enhanced transparency and monitoring mechanisms should not be sidelined out of fear of not reaching an agreement with Tunisian authorities or circumvented through informal non-binding agreements like the MoU. On the contrary, these should be adopted as instruments ensuring democraticness in the design and implementation of EU policies, as well as a way to guarantee accountability in case of illegal practices or violations of the agreed obligations by the Tunisian partners.²⁶

²⁵ Michelle Pace and Christian Achraier, “EU Democracy Support in the Southern Neighborhood”, cit.

²⁶ See Estela Casajuana and Giorgia Jana Pintus, *Beyond Borders, Beyond Boundaries. A Critical Analysis of EU Financial Support for Border Control in Tunisia and Libya*, Research by Profundo, commissioned by the Greens/EFA in the European Parliament, November 2023, <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/study/beyond-borders-beyond-boundaries>.

Regionally, European stakeholders should actively support Tunisia's integration with its neighbouring African countries across various sectors, including trade, infrastructure, mobility and multilateral governance among others. This must also be complemented by a frank assessment of political and security malpractices by Tunisian counterparts – or by European ones – that could jeopardise Tunisia's relations with African partners and the potential for South-South regional integration.

On migration, the EU should adopt a comprehensive approach that considers migration patterns involving Tunisia within both its regional context of growing instability and its local context of authoritarianism, pervasive social divisions and economic struggles. Due to Tunisia's current weak state control and oversight of security forces, a mere focus on counter-smuggling measures proves inadequate, and results in substantial failures and human suffering.²⁷ Unconditional support for Tunisia's unreformed security apparatus must be replaced with measures that incorporate strong accountability and oversight mechanisms. The shifting landscape of migration in Tunisia, together with the country's lack of adequate legal framework governing asylum and refugee issues, has led to a "protection crisis" with individuals abandoned and facing pushbacks from authorities. This calls for reconsideration of the viability of Mediterranean migration policies centred on deterrence and externalisation, along with abandoning European migration policies that have disincentivised Tunisia from establishing a legal asylum framework.

²⁷ Refugees International, "European and Tunisian Migration Policies: A Recipe for Failure and Suffering", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|02 (January 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17964>.

Abbreviations

BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa + Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, UAE
COVAX	Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front, Algeria)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISIE	Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections
LTDH	Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme (Tunisian Human Rights League)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONAT	Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie (Tunisian Order of Lawyers)
TCN	Third-country national
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (Tunisian General Labour Union)
UK	United Kingdom
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
US	United States
UTICA	Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat (Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts)

Tunisia in Context: Local, Regional and International Dynamics under Kais Saied

Caught between the longstanding policy of externalising migration management to third states and the promise of supporting political transitions, democracy, human rights and good governance in Europe's neighbourhood, the EU's policy towards Tunisia has recently faced difficult choices. While the renewed European urgency approach to Tunisia may be justified given the looming risk of economic collapse facing the North African country, little or no consideration has been given to the country's political and institutional trajectory, where mounting authoritarianism and an increasingly dysfunctional management of the economy risk further undermining the few potentials of an EU-Tunisia engagement for a comprehensive partnership. Given this context, and with a focus on examining the local, regional and international dynamics shaping Tunisia's recent challenges and opportunities, the volume seeks to enhance comprehension of the country's numerous social, political, economic and governance obstacles in the near to medium future and to cultivate a greater understanding within Europe of the complexities inherent in Tunisia's turbulent transition.



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