

Reframing EU–Tunisia Relations: Democracy, Governance, Migration

by Miriam Zenobio

ABSTRACT

This report summarises the key results of the closed-door roundtable “Reframing EU–Tunisia Relations: Democracy, Governance, Migration” held in Rome on 8 June 2023 and organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Joined by a diverse group of experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society representatives from Europe and the MENA region, the workshop provided an opportunity to reframe the nature and objectives of the EU–Tunisia relationship, moving from a short-term emergency focus to a more comprehensive appreciation of the multiple political, economic and governance challenges facing Tunisia in the short and medium term.

Tunisia | Domestic policy | Democracy | Economy | Migration | European Union

keywords

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by Miriam Zenobio*

Introduction

Bearing competing priorities and interests, the European Union finds itself at a crossroads in its policy towards Tunisia. Balancing the outsourcing of migration management with a commitment to democratic transitions, human rights and good governance poses significant challenges. Moreover, while external financial support may be needed to provide a lifeline to Tunisia and prevent a default, such assistance cannot ignore the consolidation of authoritarianism or the need for substantial socio-economic and political reforms in the country.

In this context, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) convened in Rome on 8 June 2023 a closed-door roundtable to address current and future trends shaping EU–Tunisia relations.¹ The event brought together a diverse group of experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society representatives from Europe and the MENA region intending to discuss and propose more effective ways to reframe such relations against the backdrop of the economic crisis, the authoritarianism and the erosion of democratic institutions in Tunisia, and going beyond short-term security-centred approaches and instrumentalised narratives overfocused on migration.

The roundtable was held under Chatham House rule and was structured around two consecutive sessions of debate kicked off by input remarks by experts and practitioners. The first session dealt with Tunisia’s present political and economic situation, while the second examined the interconnections between migration, governance and political challenges affecting the country.

¹ See Akram Ezzamouri and Miriam Zenobio, “EU–Tunisia Relations: Unpacking the Conundrum”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 23|11 (June 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17173>.

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Report of the closed-door roundtable “Reframing EU–Tunisia Relations: Democracy, Governance, Migration”, organised in Rome on 8 June 2023 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

Session I: Governance, the economy and democratic consolidation

The initial session focused on the current political and economic situation in Tunisia, exacerbated by President Kais Saied's erratic and authoritarian rule, as well as by the lack of economic and institutional reforms. Taking stock of the different viewpoints on Tunisia's backsliding on democratic norms and the 1.9 billion US dollars loan negotiated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the roundtable explored avenues to reframe the EU–Tunisia relationship in a more comprehensive framework linked to a more significant commitment by Tunisia to encourage an inclusive and participatory process of political transformation and stabilisation in the country.

After examining the causes that contributed to Tunisia's critical present, the governance failures of the past decade laid on top of the list. These include the absence of agreement in establishing a Constitutional Court after the 2014 Constitution and the inability and unwillingness of decision-makers to reform institutions and the economy, thus paving the way for a socio-economic crisis and the rise to power of an ineffective populist ruler. A sentiment of resentment among those Tunisians who did not benefit from the 2010–2021 revolution, alongside the widespread aspirations for future wealth among the masses, fed a general discontent that has then been capitalised by President Kais Saied before and after his power grab in July 2021.

Participants noted that the current situation is far from resulting in stability for Tunisia, as well as for Europe, as it poses strategic threats to the Mediterranean region. In order to contrast this incumbent risk, the EU can and should provide long-term value-based support, assistance to civil society and media, and financial aid while also leveraging the security sector's influence on the current President. More broadly, it is essential that the EU keeps prioritising long-sighted support for its Southern Neighbourhood countries by addressing shared pressing challenges such as climate change, water scarcity and food security.

Participants voiced the urgent need for a conducive political climate and economic atmosphere in Tunisia, where human rights are respected and guaranteed, and political stability can foster business growth. However, the current Tunisian trajectory goes in the opposite direction as the impact of Saied's authoritarian regime on security, legal issues, and the treatment of migrants and opponents heavily exacerbates the situation on all fronts, worsening the already dire socio-economic situation.

As risks of radicalisation in the Tunisian society are real and around the corner, speakers highlight the importance of organising and promoting international efforts to ensure civil peace in the country. To safeguard against a future coup, Tunisia's partners should focus on promoting social and civil stability rather than solely engaging in the democracy-authoritarianism debate.

Moreover, in this first session of discussion, concerns over the risk of relying on a “strongman” rule, as well as the importance of the rule of law, free speech and civil society took centre stage.

The impact of Tunisia’s political situation on migration and the importance of addressing the actual root causes of this phenomenon were highlighted by participants who pointed out the increasing number of minors and women among people migrating from Tunisia. The impact of economic factors on migration was also raised, particularly the lack of economic opportunities, job shortages and the reestablishment of a police state in the country.

The role of the security sector in Tunisia and its influence on President Saied’s power consolidation emerged as another pivotal aspect that needs to be carefully monitored. On this regard, a speaker stressed the need for engaging with the security, judicial and military sectors in Tunisia while also expressing concern about the lack of judicial independence as well as the shrinking space for civil society and the media.

The question of whether Saied can provide stability and his stance on the IMF deal was brought up by other speakers, who pondered whether Saied’s actions aligned with the Tunisian government’s negotiation efforts. Moreover, Saied’s erratic behaviour and unpredictability have also been criticised, suggesting that his actions undermined security and stability.

Concerning the influence and interests of external state actors on Tunisia, participants discussed the potential shift in the country’s relations with Russia and China, with references to increasing pro-Russian sentiment and Chinese involvement in various sectors. The prospective consequences of such shifts were questioned, especially considering the implications for Tunisia’s relationship with “the West”. Another speaker, however, dismissed this concern, doubting the real potential engagement of Russia or China in Tunisia. The EU’s role in Tunisia was also debated, with some doubting its ability to bring significant change and others suggesting increased costs for authoritarian behaviour and strengthened bonds with political parties and European enterprises. Against this backdrop, participants also called for inclusive discussions involving Algeria, Egypt and the Gulf countries on addressing the crises in Tunisia.

The limitations of the Italian government’s approach and its bet on Saied were also tackled, noting the absence of alternatives and long-term strategic thinking. The issue of migration and the short-term focus on addressing it were identified as drivers for Italy’s proactive engagement with Tunisia since early 2023. Concerns were also raised about the lack of imaginative thinking and the reliance on familiar approaches or models.

In summary, the discussion shed light on various perspectives regarding Tunisia’s challenges and the responses from different actors. The risks to democracy, the role of the security sector, the impact on migration, and the dynamics of

international engagement were all key points of discussion. The need for inclusive dialogue, economic reforms, and long-term planning emerged as critical factors for Tunisia's future.

Session II: Migration and socio-economic resilience

The second session of the closed-door roundtable dealt with the socio-economic crises facing Tunisia against the backdrop of the current prioritisation of migration management in Europe and mounting concern about a possible economic collapse in the country. Going beyond the discussion of short-term emergency measures, the session addressed the interconnections between migration, governance and political challenges in Tunisia, examining how these can be tackled in the context of EU policies and how individual EU member states can support human security and societal resilience while opposing further trends of authoritarian consolidation in Tunisia.

After delving into how migration from Tunisia has been represented and addressed, participants highlighted the need to shift from emergency-focused approaches to long-term solutions, challenging the perception that migration burdens host countries' economies, whereas they are actually in need of migratory flows. As a result of the debate, migration has been dubbed an "arm of mass distraction" in use by states to divert attention to short-term fixes and speakers highlighted the shared responsibility of political parties, civil society and the media in addressing the toxic politics and policies surrounding migration.

Participants raised concerns about the replication of the problematic "Libyan model" in Tunisia's migration control efforts and the potential risk of migration being used as a bargaining chip in diplomatic engagements. Therefore, the need to shift the discourse from migration to human rights, socio-economic issues and to open legal migration pathways has also been emphasised.

Discussants addressed the significant increase in arrivals from Tunisia and the attention paid by Europe to the migration issue. They highlighted the variations in the central Mediterranean route and the need to cope with the critical situation in Tunisia, and emphasised the importance of addressing irregular departures, reducing deaths at sea, and encouraging Tunisian authorities to protect migrant people. They also mentioned the brain drain issue in Tunisia and the importance of interventions in legal migration and skill development.

The second session sparked a detailed and nuanced discussion, exploring multiple perspectives and considerations related to the issues touched above. One of the key areas of focus was coalition building and coordination. In particular, participants recognised the need for closer collaboration at international and EU levels to address migration challenges in Tunisia effectively. The argument was made that a unified approach, gathering the perspectives and interests of Southern and Northern Europe, could alleviate Italy's concerns and encourage cooperation

among member states to achieve a long-term solution. However, some participants raised counterarguments, expressing scepticism about the feasibility of coalition building due to potential resistance from Tunisia against external interference.

The discussion also examined the balance between short-term concerns and the political situation in Tunisia. Participants explored the possibility of addressing Italy's immediate immigration worries linked to Tunisia while simultaneously encouraging Italy to take a more active stance on the political and social developments in Tunisia. This argument aimed at finding a middle ground between immediate priorities and the long-term goal of supporting democracy and stability in Tunisia. However, counterarguments were raised, questioning the effectiveness of such an approach, and highlighting the unpredictability of Tunisia's current political landscape.

The issue of agents of change in Tunisia was another focal point. The participants discussed the challenges of influencing change in the country, given the potential resistance to foreign pressure. The role of the army and its impact on the situation were analysed, with different strategies proposed to bring about desired outcomes, including security sector reform. Participants debated the potential for democratic reforms and the limitations faced by political parties and civil society organisations.

The distinction between arrivals from Tunisia and regional migration was emphasised. Concerns were raised about the high rejection rates of visa applications for Tunisians in Europe, particularly for academic and professional purposes. The participants also drew attention to the poor conditions in migrant detention centres and advocated for a human rights-centred approach to migration policies.

The discussion touched upon the role of economic development as an alternative to address migration. Promoting economic growth and investment in Tunisia was seen by some as a way to address migration pressures by creating opportunities and reducing incentives for people to leave the country. Even on this aspect, the importance of speaking with one voice and enhancing coordination within the EU was highlighted. Participants emphasised the need for consistent messaging and improved collaboration among different EU bodies to effectively address migration challenges.

There was a sense of shock among Western countries regarding the rapid development and acceleration of the situation in Tunisia. Initially, the tragedy surrounding the migrants, arrests, and political figures has disrupted the exploration process and left Western countries uncertain about the future. The dramatic incidents involving sub-Saharan migrants and Tunisia's confrontational path were highlighted, underscoring the urgency of addressing the situation.

The position of France in relation to Tunisia was a topic of discussion. Participants noted that France, much like Italy in the past, might be confused about how to handle the situation. Concerns were raised about the unpredictability of Tunisia as a partner, prompting the need for fresh ideas and potential course corrections that

take into account the political situation.

Participants also emphasised the importance of avoiding the provision of financial support to Tunisia without a clear strategic vision or guarantees of sustainability. The unpredictability of President Saied's regime and the absence of a reliable partner were cited as factors that should be taken into consideration.

Regarding the question on the long-term sustainability of President Saied's regime, his popularity, the upcoming elections, the constitutional reforms, and the potential impact of his crisis-driven approach were discussed. The issue of legitimacy was also raised, with a focus on the role of international support and recognition in conferring legitimacy upon states in the Arab region.

The unpredictability of Tunisia as a partner was also highlighted as a concern. The legitimacy of Tunisian institutions and leaders was discussed. The international community's support was seen as source of political endorsement. However, there were concerns about the erosion of legitimacy and popularity within Tunisia, especially regarding issues of justice, freedom of expression and independence of the judiciary.

The discussion touched on the importance of defining what kind of change is desired. There was a recognition that actors who could bring about the democratic rule of law are currently under attack and face restrictions. The need to empower local authorities and civil society organisations was highlighted as crucial for managing migration and finding sustainable solutions.

The participants emphasised once more the need for European countries to speak with one voice and have a unified approach. However, there was ambiguity about what "speaking with one voice" means and whether regionalising responses or involving international organisations like the EU or the African Union is the best approach.

The discussion explored various long-term solutions, including circular migration and empowering local authorities. The importance of political will, proper management, and the need to address the root causes of migration were emphasised. It was also noted that there is a need to focus on scaling up successful initiatives rather than relying on short-term fixes.

Overall, the participants acknowledged the complexity of the situation and the need for a comprehensive and strategic approach that takes into account human rights, democratic principles, and the interests of all stakeholders involved.

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