

Meloni's Visit to DC: Beware of Europe's Smokescreen on Tunisia

by Andrea Dessì and Akram Ezzamouri

On 27–28 July, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni will be in Washington DC for her inaugural visit to the United States.

A golden opportunity to further polish Meloni's credentials as an avid backer of the transatlantic alliance, support for Ukraine, Italy's 2024 G7 presidency and the burning issue of Rome's membership in China's Belt and Road Initiative are set to take centre stage.

North Africa will also figure onto the agenda. Meloni will certainly want to talk about Tunisia, as her goal is to receive US support for Rome's recent diplomatic drive to refocus attention (and funding) towards the Mediterranean.

A well-choreographed endeavour

Since taking office, Italy's far right-wing government has been particularly concerned about Tunisia. Still reeling from the impact of Covid-19 and hit

hard by the price hikes caused by the Russian war on Ukraine, Tunisia risks defaulting on its debt. Since January, more than 51,000 migrants have landed on Italian shores from Tunisia,¹ making the Italian government particularly concerned due to the absence of policy options to present to the public.

Fearing increased migrant flows or the prospect of leaving Tunisia to the Muslim Brotherhood, as Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani put it,² the Meloni government went on the offensive, promoting an emergency narrative to rally support for Tunisia.

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Italy Weekly Snapshot (17 Jul-23 Jul 2023)*, 24 July 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/102180>.

² "Tunisia Needs Help, Crisis Fuels Migrant Departures Says Tajani", in *Ansa*, 27 March 2023, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2023/03/27/tunisia-needs-help-crisis-fuels-migrant-departures-tajani_994d13b6-dced-4397-aae9-18168251d419.html.

Andrea Dessì is Head of the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Akram Ezzamouri is Junior Research Fellow in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa Programme at IAI.

Meloni invoked a “pragmatic” approach, essentially turning a blind eye to the Tunisian presidency’s dismantling of nascent democratic institutions. Elected in 2019, Tunisia’s populist and increasingly authoritarian President owes much to the failures of previous governments. Yet, after promising swift solutions, Kais Saied has himself failed to deliver. Instead, since 2021, he has steadily returned Tunisia to one-man rule, closing parliament, arresting opposition figures and journalists, while scapegoating black migrants all in the name of “the people’s will”.

Yet, President Saied’s options are limited. No creditor will assist Tunisia without the structural reforms outlined by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), whose own loan of 1.9 billion US dollars negotiated back in October 2022 is ready to be disbursed. Saied is refusing to sign, railing against the Fund’s “diktats” and conditionality:³ subsidy reforms and restructuring of public owned enterprises.

The president thus required an escape hatch. This he found in the Italian government’s fixation on migration. Meloni willingly accepted the invitation, embracing the Tunisian President’s crisis narrative while remaining mute on the wider crackdown on civil liberties and freedoms underway in the country.

What has this approach yielded?

³ 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>.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed on 16 July by the European Union and Tunisia, setting the ground for a partnership on the economy, trade, macroeconomic stability, green transition and migration.⁴

Despite some confusion as to what exactly has been promised, the memorandum provides immediate benefits to all. Saied gains from the normalisation of his authoritarian rule, some emergency funding from Europe and a general impression of action to address Tunisia’s crises, elements that can help with creditors. Meloni has polished her leadership role within Europe on key Mediterranean dossiers, thereby projecting an image of effectiveness to her own electorate given the continued uptake in migrant arrivals.

The MoU provides the European Commission with a practical response to calls for a focus on the south amidst the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Commission President von der Leyen can reassure other member states about not having compromised on all fronts. Indeed, while 105 million euro for migration management are to be immediately disbursed to Tunisia, the remaining funds for macroeconomic stability are contingent on Tunisia’s

⁴ *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; *European Union and Tunisia, Mémorandum d’entente sur un partenariat stratégique et global entre l’Union européenne et la Tunisie*, 16 July 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887.

acceptance of the IMF loan and its associated conditionality.

When considered in this light, US interlocutors should have no illusions as to what the MoU is all about: a well-choreographed endeavour essentially aimed at buying time, modifying prevailing narratives surrounding Kais Saied, while providing a quick domestic boost for all leaders involved.

Indeed, no one truly believes the MoU will deliver something substantial. Even fewer predict these migration funds to improve Tunisia's capabilities (or willingness) to more effectively and humanely manage migration. President Saied's refusal to act as Europe's "coast guard" and, more importantly, the recent expulsions of black Africans – with many left in the desert with no food or water – are an indication of what to expect in terms of cooperation with Tunisia.

Looking through the smokescreen

At a minimum, these signs should be taken as a warning that President Saied is not a trustworthy partner. While Italy may press Washington to find "pragmatic" compromises to get funds flowing to Tunisia without reforms, US President Joe Biden should avoid buying into this crisis narrative.

Contrary to what is outlined in the MoU and then discussed on 23 July in Rome during the International Conference on Development and Migration⁵ –

⁵ Italian Government, *International Conference on Development and Migration in Rome. Commitments and Shared Solutions for the Mediterranean and Africa*, 23 July 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/23251>. See also, Italian Government, *International Conference on Development and Migration Conclusions*, 23 July 2023, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Conclusioni_230723_0.pdf.

attended by Saied, von der Leyen and many other leaders – Tunisia's (and Africa's) challenges extend well beyond the economic or migratory domains. They encompass the full spectrum of governance and freedoms, the rule of law, transparency and transitional justice, as well as security. What Tunisia truly needs is a genuine and inclusive process of national dialogue.

The United States and Europe can help this process and arguably have an interest in doing so. Yet, by embracing the rhetoric of crisis, Italy and the European Commission have taken pragmatism to the extreme, ignoring President Saied's mounting authoritarianism, racist rhetoric and dysfunctional decision-making style for the sake of a weak and ineffective MoU.

In this regard, one hope for the Biden–Meloni meeting is that Washington can see through Europe's smokescreen and take a more comprehensive look at Tunisia. The US should resist the temptation of cherry-picking certain dossiers while ignoring the wider political and institutional context that has allowed these crises to spread.

While the US should recognise Meloni's achievements and even acknowledge Italy's valuable role in revitalising Euro-Mediterranean integration, it should remain clear-eyed and direct when it comes to President Kais Saied.

www.governo.it/en/node/23251. See also, Italian Government, *International Conference on Development and Migration Conclusions*, 23 July 2023, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Conclusioni_230723_0.pdf.

In pushing back against the excessively permissive approach adopted by Italy and the European Commission, Biden should insist that human rights, inclusivity and the independence of the judiciary and parliament are indispensable to promote long-term stability and growth in Tunisia.

Should Biden succeed in influencing "Team Europe's" so-called "Tunisian model" approach in the Mediterranean, transatlantic interests would benefit profusely, as would the credibility of EU and US policies in the wider Middle East and North Africa.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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