

Charting the Course: European Perspectives on EU–Tunisia Relations

Over the past year, a surge in migrant people arriving from Tunisia to Europe has thrust the North African country into the heart of European political agendas, sparking concerns across the continent's capitals about its hardships and risk of economic and social collapse.

The immediate policy response involved a frenzy of Euro-Tunisian diplomatic activity guided by the Italian government – itself needing to demonstrate some kind of answer to increased migratory arrivals to its shores – and culminated in the signing of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in July 2023.¹ The MoU, structured around five key areas of collaboration – macroeconomic stability, trade cooperation, green energy transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration and mobility – is said by so-called “Team Europe” to aim fostering a strategic and comprehensive partnership between the European Union and Tunisia.

¹ 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.

However, observers highlighted its detrimental shortsightedness, the flaws in its legal nature, as well as the necessity to allocate political and financial resources beyond migration management to truly diversify the agreement.²

Against this backdrop, three European experts offer here considerations on challenges and prospects in EU–Tunisia relations and propose alternative avenues where cooperation can evolve, emphasising the creation of a stable and equitable political environment in both Europe and Tunisia.

Putting Tunisia into context and empowering local voices

by Akram Ezzamouri³

Tunisia's path through political transition and democratic consolidation after the 2010–2011

² Luca Barana and Asly 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>.

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uprisings earned it for years the label of “regional model” for advancements in public freedoms. However, in the current Tunisian context – marked by a continuous decline in rule of law and rights following the power grab by President Kais Saied in July 2021, a shrinking social space and an increasingly numbed political alternative – this standing is seriously compromised.

This change in the Tunisian trajectory has come hand in hand with Europe pivoting away from policies initially supporting reforms and the establishment of democratic spaces in Tunisia. Instead, the focus has shifted towards short-term securitisation measures addressing mainly European priorities in the fields of migration and counterterrorism, while overlooking the country’s urgent socio-economic needs.

The signature of the EU–Tunisia MoU in July 2023 has proved yet another step confirming this trend and marking the establishment of an uncoordinated, transactional and unbalanced European approach to Tunisia. Presented by Italy and the European Commission as a blueprint for the establishment of new or rebranded relations with African countries,⁴ both the focus of the MoU and the process underlying its design and implementation are reminiscent of past bilateral initiatives with Libya, Morocco and Turkey.

⁴ Benjamin Fox and Eleonora Vasques, “Tunisia Pact a ‘Blueprint’ for New ‘Cash for Migrant’ Deals, Says EU Chief”, in *Euractiv*, 27 June 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1946104>.

European measures externalising and informalising migration management,⁵ coupled with more comprehensive dossiers spanning from energy cooperation, development and economic support have rarely produced the intended improvements in the Southern neighbourhood. On the contrary, they often proved to be self-defeating as they intertwined European interests with the illusion of authoritarian stability.

The recent abuses of migrant people’s rights in Tunisia and the constant clampdown on voices opposing Kais Saied, highlight how ill-fated funnelling funds into the Tunisian government without concurrently supporting reforms in the country’s security sector is. To forge a sustainable partnership, shared challenges between the EU and Tunisia should not be addressed in isolation; they should rather be linked to the broader Tunisian context of centralised power and social fragmentation.

In line with this, the so-called “Rome process”, designed on the initiative of the Italian government to address irregular migration to Europe through the promotion of development in origin or transit countries,⁶ must not overlook the underlying factors of instability related to the deterioration of governance. The Tunisian case is evidence of how strictly

⁵ Catherine Woollard, “The EU’s Dodgy Deal with Tunisia Is a Classic of the Genre: Undemocratic, Unlawful and Unlikely to Work”, in *ECRE Weekly Bulletin*, 26 July 2023, <https://ecre.org/?p=15766>.

⁶ *International Conference on Development and Migration Conclusions*, 23 July 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/23251>.

interconnected these issues are. The persistent socio-economic challenges drive people to leave the country, opting for perilous journeys across the Mediterranean.⁷ This is exacerbated by the flourishing smuggling industry, a direct consequence of inadequate state control and documented collusions with elements within the Tunisian security forces.⁸

To improve the Tunisian situation and address the real root causes of instability, the EU should contribute to reinstating a safe and pluralist political landscape in Tunisia, particularly with an eye on the 2024 presidential elections, if maintained.

Advancing EU–Tunisia relations in this direction is surely an uphill battle, given Saied’s rejection of any external or internal pressure challenging his agenda, as well as the credibility crisis faced by European countries and institutions among the regional population, stemming from their stance and divisions on Israel’s war on Gaza.⁹

However, empowering local voices and giving them space when discussing the way forward in EU–Tunisia relations

could constitute a first step towards a more positive dynamic. It could also contribute to “ensure a safe and enabling environment for civil society, as well as freedom of expression, of the press, of peaceful assembly and of association”, in line with what Italy recommended during Tunisia’s fourth Universal Periodic Review in November 2022.¹⁰

Folly of cynicism and naivete: Europe’s failures to advance a Tunisia strategy

by Colin Powers¹¹

On 16 July, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi and Mounir Ben Rjiba, Tunisian Secretary of State to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Migration and Tunisians Abroad, signed a MoU defining “a strategic and global partnership between the EU and Tunisia”. In substance, the EU offered a package comprising financial assistance, support to Tunisia’s border control capacity and to projects in the energy sector, and facilitation of legal mobility between the two parties. In exchange, they expected the autocratic regime in Tunisia to dutifully (and quietly) accept its role as a deputised patrolman for Europe’s southern border.

⁷ World Bank, *Tunisia Economic Monitor, Fall 2023: Migration Amid a Challenging Economic Context*, December 2023, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/40676>.

⁸ 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>.

⁹ Nathalie Tocci, “Europe’s Stance on Gaza Has Undermined Its Credibility”, in *Politico*, 5 January 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=4076316>.

¹⁰ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Tunisia (A/HRC/52/6)*, 14 December 2022, para. 145.73, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/52/6>. See also the OHCHR website: *Universal Periodic Review – Tunisia*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/tn-index>.

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Visibly ill-conceived as the MoU was – particularly in light of the Tunisian President’s sovereigntist pretensions – it swiftly proved ill-fated too. A few months after pen was put to paper, Tunis would take the extraordinary step of returning a 60 million euro grant which had been designated as part of a previous European Covid-19 recovery programme.¹² Signalling a wider diplomatic breakdown, the reverse transfer also marked a *de facto* pause on the implementation of the MoU. Beyond the uncertainty that has come to prevail as a result, the EU suffered significant institutional and reputational damage from the entire venture. Team Europe’s freestyling and sidestepping of treaty-making procedures not only pushed the bounds of legality. These actions also caused fissures amongst EU member states while introducing confusion both in Brussels and foreign capitals over who has the right to act in the Union’s name abroad.¹³ The Commission’s attempts at paying off an autocrat whose record of repression, cruelty to immigrants and racialised human rights abuses grows with each day, meanwhile, has eaten away at Europe’s moral standing and degraded the EU’s status as a defender of international law.

To chart a better path in Tunisia and further afield, it is essential that

¹² Jorge Liboreiro, “In Stunning Move, Tunisia Snubs Brussels and Refunds €60 Million in EU Aid”, in *Euronews*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/12/in-stunning-move-tunisia-snubs-brussels-and-refunds-60-million-in-eu-aid>.

¹³ Lisa O’Carroll, “EU States Expressed ‘Incomprehension’ at Tunisia Migration Pact, Says Borrell”, in *The Guardian*, 18 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/pv3qp>.

Europe move beyond the superficial engagements it has favoured in addressing complex issues like immigration. There is, at this stage, little ambiguity about what drives Tunisians (and those transiting through the country) to brave a sea-crossing: it is the desire for a better life. Similarly, there is little ambiguity as to why such desires cannot be realised where those people currently reside. The Tunisian economy is structurally compromised, beleaguered by a domineering oligarchy, poor policy design and a subordinate position in global systems of production, trade and finance. Just as distressingly, the spectre of state violence haunts citizens and non-citizens alike at all times, with civil and political liberties won by way of the uprisings of 2010–2011 having been almost entirely wound back.

In view of all this, it should be obvious why an MoU like the one agreed to in July last year, even if honoured to the letter, would fail to deliver what its European signatories seek. Economically, the agreement lacks the scale, comprehensiveness and discernment needed to alter Tunisia’s structural condition. Politically, it subsidises some of the institutions most responsible for popular repression and helps underwrite the Saied autocracy. In other words, the MoU helps reproduce the grievances compelling people to flee. If equipping a repressive government to intercept more boats off the Tunisian coast, then, an agreement of this type will never stop those boats from departing in the first instance. A wiser policy would attempt to address causality at its source. Materially, it might combine some measure of debt

relief conditional on political and security sector reform with fair-minded revisions to trade and investment treaties and concessionary capital deployments for developmentally and ecologically useful projects, for starters.

Looking ahead, it is equally critical that the EU henceforth speaks with a single voice on Tunisia, that it installs mechanisms to restrict improvisational interventions like those led by the European Commission last summer, and that it adopts a people- rather than regime-first approach. Under von der Leyen's direction, Team Europe has been content to support Kais Saied under the premise that he might act as a guardian of stability. Weighing the upheaval Saied has already sown against the contributions he has made to the emigration wave, the misguidedness of this gambit can hardly be overstated. It is past time that Europe reverse course. Relevant parties in Europe need pursue a pact with Tunisia and the rest of Africa based not on the expedience a strongman may promise, but on a recognition of all people's fundamental dignity.

Flipping the leverage script in EU–Tunisia relations

by Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria¹⁴

There was a time when High Representative Josep Borrell's predecessors were hoping to add Tunisia's democratic transition to the list of EU foreign policy success stories, next to the EU-facilitated Serbia–

Kosovo dialogue and the EU-mediated Iran nuclear deal. Tunisia's democratic transition was expected to epitomise the success of a principled and transformative EU foreign policy. Since then, Tunisian domestic developments have forced the EU to fast-track its shift from a principled to a transactional approach. While the former failed to bring about changes in the country, it recently became clear that the latter has not succeeded in promoting the EU's interests.

In the weeks following the signature of the controversial MoU between Tunisia and the EU on 16 July 2023, irregular migrant arrivals in Italy increased.¹⁵ Meanwhile, a poorly engineered plan, including promises of additional financial assistance, created expectations that the EU did not manage to meet. This culminated in the highly symbolic decision from Tunisia to refund 60 million euros of EU Covid-related aid in October 2023,¹⁶ *de facto* freezing the implementation of the MoU.¹⁷

There was a time when Tunisia was seen as a showcase of the EU's

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¹⁵ "Migration Rates from Tunisia to Italy Increase Despite EU Deal", in *Middle East Monitor*, 30 August 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230830-migration-rates-from-tunisia-to-italy-increase-despite-eu-deal>.

¹⁶ Jorge Liboreiro, "In Stunning Move, Tunisia Snubs Brussels and Refunds €60 Million in EU Aid", *cit.*

¹⁷ In December 2023, the EU and Tunisia came to an agreement on a 150 million euro financial programme part of the MoU. See European Commission, *The European Union and Tunisia Come to an Agreement on a EUR 150 Million Programme*, 20 December 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6784.

comprehensive and united approach, with member states and EU institutions playing off the same hymn sheet. The signature of the MoU broke these dynamics, bringing back the EU's old demons of disunity. In a leaked letter to Commissioner Várhelyi, HRVP Borrell wrote that several member states had expressed their "incomprehension regarding the Commission's unilateral action".¹⁸

There are at least three takeaways from this episode.

First, assuming that the shift towards a more transactional foreign policy is most probably unavoidable, transactional moves need nonetheless to be carefully calibrated and negotiated amongst all EU stakeholders, if the EU wants to minimise the risk of backfire.

Second, the EU cannot afford poor coordination with other partners. The 400 million US dollar soft loan Saudi Arabia pledged four days after the signature of the MoU is probably good news for Tunisia in the short term.¹⁹ It will indeed help the country's public finances stay afloat in the upcoming months. Yet, in the absence of any indication that Saudi Arabia's initiative was discussed with the EU, it ended up weakening further the EU's efforts to incentivise reforms in the North African country.

¹⁸ Lisa O'Carroll, "EU States Expressed 'Incomprehension' at Tunisia Migration Pact, Says Borrell", cit.

¹⁹ "Saudi Arabia to Give Tunisia \$500 Million as Soft Loan and Grant", in *Reuters*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-arabia-give-tunisia-500-mln-soft-loan-grant-2023-07-20>.

Third, over-prioritising migration in the bilateral relationship of the EU with its southern partners weakens the former and increases the playing field of the latter.

The bad news is that there is no easy fix. Migration will not disappear anytime soon from the top of the list of European priorities. Tunisia will not be the success story the EU had wished for. The EU should, however, make sure it does not turn into a complete failure story.

25 January 2024

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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