

# SITUATION UPDATE

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## Security over People: Tunisia's Immigration Crisis

Anca Munteanu

### KEY FINDINGS

- The economic and political crises that Tunisia has faced since 2011, most recently exacerbated by President Kaïs Saïed's consolidation of political power and the resultant political instability, aggravate migration dynamics. Not only are Tunisians involved in smuggling sub-Saharan migrants across the Mediterranean, but they now also represent a significant group of migrants to Europe themselves.
- Migrants have become political pawns in Tunisia, with considerations of domestic political advantage, economic subsidies, and President Saïed's consolidation of power taking precedence over their well-being.
- Competition between Tunisian and sub-Saharan smuggling networks increased tensions in Sfax in 2023. The backlash against non-Tunisians has led to more restrictive laws for foreign nationals, intensified border controls, and an uptick in racist attacks, in turn fuelling increased departures by sea.
- As a strategic partner in managing Mediterranean migration, Tunisia is a recipient of European Union (EU) financial aid and has focused on border control and managing irregular migration flows. While financial aid is crucial, the prioritization of a securitized approach to migration over humanitarian aspects raises concerns that migrants may be pushed back at the border or at sea.
- Given Tunisia's current position as a key partner, there is a distinct possibility that it will play a role in the EU's migration and asylum pact and its 'screening procedures', which may further externalize EU borders into third countries. Without concrete protection measures, there is a real risk that migrants' rights, social and legal integration, and humanitarian needs will further degrade in Tunisia.

## Overview

On 25 July 2021, Tunisia took an unexpected turn as President Saïed—first elected in 2019—declared a state of emergency. This was the first step in what became an autocratic centralization of power, culminating in the dissolution of parliament and the dismissal of the government on 30 March 2022. Though his stated aim was to end political deadlock and fight corruption (Speakman Cordall, 2022), he has instead presided over an escalating economic and political crisis (Carbonaro, 2023). And while the poor economy and political repression pose significant challenges for many Tunisians, President Saïed's shift towards autocracy has had an even more profound impact on migrants in Tunisia.

Tunisia's economy is in shambles. While the country experienced a modest gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 0.6 per cent in 2023, high external debt and a 7.10 per cent budget deficit remain critical issues (INS, 2023; Trading Economics, 2023). In comparison, in July 2024, Tunisia reported a GDP growth of 1 per cent, but the economy is still troubled by an inflation rate of 7 per cent and an unemployment rate of 16 per cent (INS, n.d.). The potential lifeline offered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has thus far not materialized in the face of potential political backlash to the implementation of reforms required for funding. In addition, external factors such as the war in Ukraine have caused food shortages and spikes in energy prices (Saleh, 2022).

Against this dire economic background, President Saïed has turned to demonizing migrants within and transiting through the country in an attempt to shift the focus from the economy and cast himself as a populist hero. This was evidenced most clearly in February 2023, when he accused irregular migrants, particularly sub-Saharan Africans, of causing 'violence, crime, and unacceptable acts' (Middle East Eye, 2023). The president stressed the need to enforce strict laws on foreign nationals and border control, and framed migrants as a threat to Tunisia's Arab-Muslim identity (Middle East Eye, 2023).

Subsequent police actions led to a surge in racist attacks and xenophobic behaviour.

Migrants have been a regular presence in Tunisia since around 2011, when they arrived in the country after fleeing instability in Libya. It is only in recent years, however, that they have become a political issue. President Saïed has used Tunisia's position as the second largest transit point for migrants en route to Europe as a negotiation point with the EU. He successfully secured financial aid to support his administration's strained finances as part of a package that also included capacity building and border control.

The aim of these packages from the EU is to help stem the flow of migrants. Though cooperation between the EU and Tunisia began in 2015, the current relationship is built on the 'strategic partnership' agreement signed in July 2023 (Amara, 2023a). In a visit to Tunisia in April 2024—a few months before European elections, in which migration was a crucial issue—Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni focused on the necessity of reinforcing this cooperation, repatriating migrants, and regulating migratory flows (France 24, 2024).<sup>1</sup>

Even as the EU increases its commitment to preventing sub-Saharan migrants from taking to boats, however, there is increasing evidence that its actions are not without risk to the migrants themselves. Civil society organizations have noted that the increased resources deployed by the EU are contributing to pushbacks and mistreatment of migrants. For example, one recent investigation revealed that Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia have pushed migrants into desert areas, despite having received more than EUR 400 million from the EU for the management of their borders through the Emergency Trust Fund (*Le Monde*, 2024).

The situation is potentially even more worrisome after EU heads of states validated the migration and asylum pact in May 2024. This agreement introduced 'filtering' procedures at EU borders, intended to distinguish those migrants eligible for asylum claims from those deemed ineligible who may be repatriated

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Meloni's focus on migration worked politically: her party received the most votes in Italy's EU parliamentary elections. As a result, she is widely considered to be a new kingmaker in the European Parliament (Preve, 2024).

(L'Express, 2024). This effort requires agreements with countries of origin and transit, part of a long line of attempts to further externalize the EU borders into third countries. Civil society organizations have raised the alarm over the potential detention of families and the 'criminalization' of migrants (L'Express, 2024).

## Irregular migration flows and Tunisia

Tunisia, situated at the crossroads of Africa and Europe, has become a critical transit zone for irregular migrants seeking passage to Europe. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that, as of July 2024, around 18,323 registered refugees and asylum seekers reside in Tunisia, primarily from the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Horn of Africa (UNHCR, 2024). Unlike Algeria and Morocco, Tunisia has maintained a relatively welcoming approach to migrants, particularly after the 2011 Arab Spring, which positioned Tunisia as a more favourable destination than its neighbours.

The reasons for this are threefold. First, the EU-backed agreement between Italy and Libya aimed at stemming migrant flows, signed in 2017, resulted in the creation of detention centres on Libyan territory, as well as the transformation of some non-state armed groups into 'coast guard' units (Martini and Megerisi, 2023, p. 13). The civil war in Libya in 2019 pushed migrants in those detention centres, or otherwise transiting through Libya, into Tunisia in search of safer havens and routes (pp. 14–15).<sup>2</sup>

Second, since 2017, the Algerian government has instituted a policy of pushing back migrants from its borders, forcing them back into the desert regions of Niger and Mali (Dockery, 2018). In contrast, Morocco has cooperated with Spain under the terms of a 1992 bilateral agreement, allowing for the readmission of irregular migrants to Moroccan territory (Carrera et al., 2016; Smith, 2022). For example, in 2022, incidents at the border fence separating Morocco from Spain's North African exclave of Melilla saw

Moroccan security forces respond to an attempted mass crossing by firing tear gas and using batons (Smith, 2022).

Third, though most sub-Saharan migrants live in precarious conditions in Tunisia, the country offered better conditions for migrants than other North African states, despite their irregular status—even after some legalization efforts. The combination of Algeria's pushback policy, Morocco's closed borders, and the unrest in Libya meant that Tunisia saw the number of irregular migrants increase given the country's relative calm. This was counterbalanced, in part, by Tunisia's limited ability to absorb and help these new migrants due to constrained resources.

The situation for migrants is not easy. A system of restrictive laws in Tunisia makes it difficult for sub-Saharan migrants to regularize their status and obtain residence permits for legal employment. Furthermore, the Ministry of Interior is opaque in its handling of immigrant detention and expulsion, making it difficult to monitor their actions (Roman and Pastore, 2018, pp. 12–13). Even Libyan citizens with financial means residing in Tunisia since the conflicts of 2011 and 2013–14 are not acknowledged as migrants or asylum seekers. Consequently, they lack any formal legal status and do not meet the criteria for UNHCR refugee status (p. 11).

## EU's engagement on migration

The EU's engagement with Tunisia on migration is multifaceted. Italy has been a leader in pushing for EU engagement, given its location, as most migrants have been arriving by sea from North Africa. Italy became more vocal in 2020. That year, nearly 80 per cent of all migrants who reached Europe departed from either Tunisia or Libya; of the migrants landing on Italian shores, about 6,500 were Tunisians (Arab Weekly, 2020). As a consequence, Italian authorities began to put increasing pressure on Tunisia to adopt a stricter security approach, including seizing boats before departure (Arab Weekly, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesman for the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économiques et Sociaux (FTDES), Tunis, Tunisia, July 2023.

Italy's push to curb migration in 2020 came well after the EU began engaging with Tunisia on migration issues. In 2015, Brussels implemented programmes to train and enhance the capacities of the Tunisian Coast Guard (Garde Nationale Maritime, GNM), particularly in collecting personal data of migrants. One such example was the 'Maghreb Border Management' programme, launched in July 2018, with a budget of EUR 24.5 million—most of which went to the GNM (FTDES, 2021).

In 2018, the European Commission designated Tunisia as a strategic partner for establishing 'disembarkation platforms' (FTDES, 2021). These platforms served as outsourced sorting camps intended to accommodate—outside of Europe—migrants either rescued or intercepted at sea. Additionally, the European agency Frontex monitors Tunisian waters using satellite images, radar, and drones, and shares this information with the GNM—a cooperation agreement similar to the one the EU has with the Libyan coast guard. The efforts are primarily focused on early detection of vessels carrying migrants that are departing from Tunisian waters, giving the GNM time to effect a maritime interception (FTDES, 2021).

The focus on interdiction (rather than on addressing the root causes of migration) has not led to reduced numbers of migrants transiting Tunisia on their way to Europe. In fact, regional conflicts, as well as political and economic crises in Tunisia, have resulted in increased numbers of attempted sea crossings towards Europe from Tunisia or by Tunisians (Refugees International, 2023, p. 13). According to Refugees International, between January and September 2023, the number of migrants crossing to Italy from Tunisia was four times higher than in 2022, reaching 90,601 (p. 13). This could be explained by the security-focused agreement between Italy and Libya in 2017, since Tunisia became the main exit point for sub-Saharan migrants towards the EU from this point onwards. In 2023, 62 per cent of arrivals to Italy originated from Tunisia, while only 33 per

cent originated from Libya—compared with 91 per cent in 2017 (Meddeb and Louati, 2024, p. 7; UNHCR, 2023). According to UNHCR, '[n]early 100,000 migrants and refugees, primarily from West Africa, reached Italy via the sea route from Tunisia in 2023. More than half (62% of all sea arrivals) arrived during the July-September quarter' (UNHCR, 2023, p. 3).

## The migration landscape in Sfax

The situation in Sfax, Tunisia's economic capital, offers a good illustration of the country's relationship with migrants and the drivers of attitudes towards them. Located on the Gulf of Gabès, south-east of Tunis, Sfax is one of the closest departure points to the Italian island of Lampedusa, some 130 km away. Given this proximity, in the years before 2021, Sfax was a transit point for migrants travelling onwards to Europe. By 2021, however, migrants had begun to settle in Sfax, and the regional economy had begun to depend on migrant labour and spending.<sup>3</sup>

At first, the Sfax region thrived due to the abundance of migrant labour in the informal economy. Migrants were employed in construction, agriculture, restaurants, and other similar jobs. The presence of migrants also led to the development of Tunisian smuggling networks that moved migrants from the Algerian border, through Sfax, and on to Italy.<sup>4</sup> To enable these networks, locals started to supply boats and engines for the crossings and helped to produce local food, shelter, and clothing.<sup>5</sup> The increased economic activity raised the standard of living for those involved in smuggling and other migrant-related enterprises.<sup>6</sup>

Amid an economic crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the growing migrant population in the region, however, several challenges emerged. First, the smuggling economy was upended as

3 Online interview with Hanène Zbiss, journalist and president of the Tunisia section of the Union of Francophone Press (UPF), April 2024, and interview with Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesman for FTDES, Tunis, Tunisia, July 2023.

4 Online interview with Hanène Zbiss, journalist and president of the Tunisia section of UPF, April 2024.

5 Online interview with Hanène Zbiss, journalist and president of the Tunisia section of UPF, April 2024.

6 Online interview with Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesman for FTDES, Tunis, Tunisia, July 2023.

sub-Saharan migrants began to organize their own smuggling networks. This led to competition between the existing, Tunisian smugglers and their new migrant-based rivals. The competition also affected businesses that had previously supplied the Tunisian groups. Crucially, it implicated the police and border control authorities, both of whom allegedly had ties to the smuggling networks. As a result, local tensions escalated.<sup>7</sup>

This coincided with President Saïed's shift towards populism, as he tried to shore up support for his autocratic turn amid economic headwinds. His heated rhetoric against migrants, blaming them for a variety of ills and echoing the 'great replacement theory' by suggesting that they are displacing Arab and Muslim Tunisians, appeared to successfully appeal to some elements of the population.<sup>8</sup>

Following the president's directives (whether implicit or explicit) in February 2023, Tunisian military and police forced migrants from Sfax and relocated them to Ras Jedir near the Libyan border and to the border region with Algeria in the west (AFP, 2023; Gasteli, 2023; HRW, 2023). The Ras Jedir area is designated as a no-access military zone and the migrants forced to move there included 'people with both regular and irregular legal status in Tunisia' (HRW, 2023). According to one civil society organization the migrants were 'expelled without due process', and '[m]any reported violence by authorities during arrest or expulsion' (HRW, 2023).

While Tunisian authorities deny these allegations, the UN condemned the expulsion of migrants from Tunisia to Libya (La Presse, 2023). In the face of President Saïed's fiery anti-migrant rhetoric, civil society organizations that attempted to intervene on behalf of migrants were attacked by local groups and labelled as 'traitors', supporters of the EU, and advocates for the 'great replacement'-inspired

narrative.<sup>9</sup> These attacks and the president's role in them sparked a significant controversy between the president's supporters and detractors, with the latter noting that the former were fuelling racism and promoting the stigmatization of sub-Saharan migrants, in particular, and of people of colour in general.<sup>10</sup>

## The EU MoU

In 2023, amid his consolidation of power, President Saïed used the migration crisis both domestically—as a populist way to increase support for his government—and internationally—as a currency to negotiate with the EU (Ben Hamadi, 2024).<sup>11</sup> While the former tactic won some adherents, the latter proved less effective, as the EU stipulated that agreements must first be reached with the IMF.<sup>12</sup> That is not to say that the EU is unconcerned with Tunisia: there are fears in Brussels and other European capitals that, should the Tunisian economy collapse entirely, amplifying internal instability, this could trigger an exodus of people crossing the Mediterranean towards Europe (Liboreiro and Genovese, 2023).

Despite the democratic regression of the past three years, the EU has continued to provide support to Tunisia, including financial assistance. In July 2023, the bloc signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the country (EC, 2023). Under the MoU, the EU agreed to provide EUR 150 million in funding to Tunisia (De La Feld, 2024). The objective of the MoU was to avoid the worst-case scenario and ensure that the Tunisian government has enough liquidity to fund basic services.<sup>13</sup>

The text of the MoU outlines non-binding action plans across five thematic pillars: 1) macro-economic stability; 2) economy and trade; 3) the green energy transition; 4) people-to-people contacts;

7 Online interview with Hanène Zbiss, journalist and president of the Tunisia section of UPF, April 2024.

8 Online interview with Hanène Zbiss, journalist and president of the Tunisia section of UPF, April 2024.

9 Interview with Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesman for FTDES, Tunis, Tunisia, July 2023.

10 Online interview with Hanène Zbiss, journalist and president of the Tunisia section of UPF, April 2024.

11 He is not the first to do so; indeed, migration has been leveraged to apply pressure on the EU to release funds (Martini and Megerisi, 2023).

12 Online interview with Hanène Zbiss, journalist and president of the Tunisia section of UPF, April 2024.

13 This significant agreement involving Tunisian president Saïed, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, Italian prime minister Meloni, and Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte underscores the critical imperative of grappling with migration challenges amid prevailing geopolitical uncertainties (Saleh and Dubois, 2023).

and 5) migration (EC, 2023). Migration is a pivotal focal point of the MoU, with an initial financial commitment of EUR 105 million earmarked to combat anti-smuggling operations, fortify border management capabilities, and streamline the repatriation process for asylum seekers (HRW, 2024). Officially, these funds are intended to bolster Tunisia's capacity to effectively manage irregular migration flows, and include investments in essential equipment as well as logistical support for international organizations such as UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Liboreiro and Genovese, 2023).

The MoU 'only includes very general language on human rights' (CHR, 2023). This is notable given the evidence of Tunisian pushbacks at the country's borders and of acts of violence against sub-Saharan migrants (OHCHR, 2023).<sup>14</sup> The lack of clear references to human rights safeguards, coupled with the EU's silence in the face of reports about Tunisian expulsions and pushbacks at the country's borders, would suggest that the bloc has chosen to adopt a securitized approach to migration. The EU sees migration as a security rather than a humanitarian issue and, in doing so, seeks to treat the symptoms rather than the root causes of migration or its impact on migrants travelling towards Europe.

The practical impact of this decision to seemingly turn a blind eye is clear. The EU has allocated EUR 4.5 million in 2024 and a further EUR 4.5 million for 2025 to support the efforts of Tunisian naval units in countering irregular migration. In addition, the EU is providing Tunisia with EUR 4.8 million to refurbish six vessels for the GNM, to be used in interdiction operations (Kapitalis, 2024). This increased support is proving effective: in the first quarter of 2024, the GNM interdicted 14,562 migrants at sea, returning them to Tunisian territory (Kapitalis, 2024).

## Conclusion

Tunisia's initial, seemingly successful transition to democracy was one of the great surprises of the Arab Spring uprisings. During the last few years,

however, progress has slowed, and even reversed in the economic, political, and human rights arenas. Facing dire economic and political conditions, the Tunisian government has instrumentalized migration to both distract its citizens from the true causes of the country's malaise and negotiate financial aid from the EU (Amara, 2023b). Neither approach has proved successful in 'solving' the migration issue, however.

The EU and its stakeholders continue to see migration as a security issue and are apparently willing to ignore the human rights records of their partners in this fight (OHCHR, 2023). Efforts to address regional conflicts, support economic development, and prevent human rights abuses—all drivers of migration towards the EU—are largely lacking. Without action to address these root causes, ensuring the effective management of the migration issue will likely be impossible.

Furthermore, externalizing the migration problem to the southern border of the EU has not proven to be a winning strategy. The number of migrants continues to be high, often increasing year on year. The dangers they face during the journey to Europe remain many and perilous. Alternative solutions may offer better results. Pushing for legal reforms to integrate migrants into society and offer them access to social care and employment could be helpful, for example.

In Tunisia, the recent backlash against migrants in general and sub-Saharan Africans in particular has highlighted the need for the legal system dealing with migration to be reformed.<sup>15</sup> If migrants remain outside of the country's social fabric, problems are likely to persist. It is, of course, a difficult moment for Tunisia—its citizens and government—to offer aid for, and to open its job market to, migrants in the country. The economy is poor, and the government has turned from democracy towards authoritarianism—neither of which are conducive to such changes. Without change, however, it is difficult to see a positive path forward for Tunisia or the migrants who travel there in the hope of reaching Europe. ●

<sup>14</sup> The MoU emphasizes that Tunisia will only be expected to accept the return of its nationals, not migrants transiting through the country. Returns will be voluntary and facilitated by the IOM and UNHCR (Liboreiro and Genovese, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesman for FTDES, Tunis, Tunisia, July 2023.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUR</b>	Euro
<b>FTDES</b>	Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économiques et Sociaux)
<b>GDP</b>	Gross domestic product
<b>GNM</b>	Tunisian Coast Guard (Garde Nationale Maritime)
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>MoU</b>	Memorandum of understanding
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UPF</b>	Union of Francophone Press

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**Production coordinators:** Olivia Denonville, Lionel Kosirnik, and Katie Lazaro

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**Copy-editor:** Alessandra Allen

**Layout:** Rick Jones

**Proofreader:** Stephanie Huitson



## Contact details

Small Arms Survey, Maison de la Paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777, e [info@smallarmssurvey.org](mailto:info@smallarmssurvey.org)

[www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org)