DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 31.07.2023 | Sami Adouani & Robin Frisch

A prison guard for Europe

The EU aims to externalise its borders and repel migrants deemed undesirable — a new deal with Tunisia assigns them a key role

Because the situation in the Mediterranean has become dramatic, the EU and Tunisia are responding with a joint agreement. Nearly 27,000 migrants arrived in Italy from Tunisia this year. That's six times as many people as last year. By April 2023, over 1,000 people died on this route, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This number is twice as high as it was at this point last year.

The migration crisis took on a new dimension in Tunisia in February 2023 after President Kais Saied targeted migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in a xenophobic speech, triggering a massive wave of departures. The continuing deterioration in the economic and social situation is increasing pressure to migrate, which affects not only those passing through from sub-Saharan Africa, but also 20 per cent of Tunisian nationals. And thus, the number of people willing to migrate is increasing, as are the operations at sea and the number of victims. All of this coincides with the long-term misery of a country that, after ten years of democratic transition marked by political crises, is already struggling.

In response to this dramatic situation, the EU and Tunisia agreed on a 'Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and comprehensive partnership' (MoU), signed in Tunis on 16 July 2023. The MoU outlines closer cooperation in five areas: macroeconomic stability, economy and trade, transition to environmentally friendly energy and the promotion of international understanding. However, at the heart of the agreement, whose modalities and implementation are not yet known, is the issue of migration. In total, Tunisia could receive up to one billion euros in financial aid. However, the largest tranche – 900 million euros in macroeconomic aid – will be disbursed only if Tunisia signs a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which it has blocked for over a year.

So far, the agreement between the European Commission and the Tunisian President Kais Saied can be understood as neither a success nor

a defeat, because everything will depend on how this agreement is implemented. But one thing is already certain: it does not provide a sustainable answer to the situation of migrants living in or passing through Tunisia.

A split between the population and civil society

The memorandum should be seen in the context of the ongoing cooperation between the EU and Tunisia. In terms of migration policy, one thing in particular is changing: the underlying logic behind isolation and border security, which will be further strengthened. The EU's strategy aims to externalise its borders and repel migrants deemed undesirable. The EU funds are not intended to guarantee rights or humanitarian aid, but rather are primarily intended to secure funding for border police. According to the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), the result is that the deal promotes Tunisia from European 'border police' to European 'prison guard'.

The reactions of Tunisian civil society organisations have ranged from mild criticism to open confrontation. In Tunis in particular, there are demonstrations in support of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. In the south of the country, where the situation has grown into a humanitarian crisis, the population has repeatedly expressed solidarity. Human rights organisations such as the FTDES are criticising the repressive migration policy and the exploitation of the issue by political parties and radical groups. Nevertheless, it should be noted that civil society, the opposition, and the government agreed on various points in the negotiations with the EU and the IMF.

The racist discourse of migration defence is currently dominant in Tunisia.

The UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail) – not only Tunisia's most influential trade union, but also the most important independent social institution in the country – thinks that Tunisia shouldn't be the border guard for Europe. However, it has not taken a decisive stance on how to deal with migrants. This internal discrepancy was reflected particularly clearly in the statement by the local UGTT branch in the border town of Ben Gardane in the south of the country: it called for the expulsion of the migrants housed in a high school in the town, but nevertheless without the union headquarters condemning

this action.

The majority of Tunisian society resonates with Kais Saied's harsh migration policy. Moreover, the president's statements draw on widespread racist resentment against migrants from West and Central Africa. The racist discourse of migration defence is currently dominant in Tunisia. The anti-racist positions of civil society, on the other hand, are only representative of a very small part of the left 'establishment'. At the moment, there is no representation of the interests of the migrant population, but this is urgently needed.

Neither exemplary nor revolutionary

The Memorandum of Understanding concluded with the EU was viewed as a success by Kais Saied. The stream of official guests of state has made Carthage look like a European capital in the past few weeks, and stands as both diplomatic proof of success and an indication that Tunisia has moved closer to Fortress Europe.

As far as regional alliances are concerned, the Pan-Africanism that Tunisia has developed over time is being put to the test. The country will encounter great difficulty in balancing the interests of Tunisia, Italy and the African continent. At the 'Migration Summit' held in Rome on 23 July, it was reaffirmed once again that the logic of security and the priority given to the return of migrants will be maintained. At this conference, attended by the countries of the southern Mediterranean, Middle East, Sahel and the Horn of Africa, the EU-Tunisia MoU was presented as a model for other countries in the region.

However, the MoU is by no means an exemplary model for negotiations with Morocco or Egypt. It is neither pragmatic in the short term nor visionary in the long term. From a humanitarian perspective, it provides little direct support for migrants in need. Furthermore, it does not begin to address the deep-seated problems for flight as well as the massive inequality between societies. The deal between the EU and Tunisia does nothing to change the reasons why people from African countries choose the life-threatening flight to Europe.

In Tunisia, the scope for free and oppositional action is further restricted by strategic disinformation in social networks and

Why, despite the numerous crises, is civil society not succeeding in triggering a mass movement or making itself heard in the public sphere? The opposition forces' room to manoeuvre has become significantly smaller compared to the times of the revolution. This is not only true for Tunisia. Whether in Europe or Africa, the

police pressure on human rights organisations.

forces of civil society are not getting through, and public opinion is largely subject to the influence of the media and the ruling parties. In Tunisia, the scope for free and oppositional action is further restricted by strategic disinformation in social networks and police pressure on human rights organisations.

Tunisian civil society responded to these abuses with a counter-summit held in Tunis two days before the meeting in Rome. The 'People's Meeting for the Dignity of Migrants' was a clear response from Tunisian, Maghreb, and West African civil society, which denounced both the anti-democratic memorandum and the irresponsible security policies of the European states. In any case, one thing is certain: if solutions are to be developed that help the law to prevail and serve the interests of the people on both sides of the Mediterranean, then the unilateralist attitude of the governments must be put to an end, and a dialogue with the civil forces must be initiated side by side with the migrants.



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