

Partnering with Tunisia, the EU persists in its ill-guided politics to keep people out of its territory - and have a highly repressive country do the dirty job

The EU must stop signing agreements with third countries demonstrating human rights violations as it tries to stop migrants from arriving to Europe.

Background

The EU officially announced the past 16th of July the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding for a “comprehensive partnership package” with Tunisia.¹ Organised in three main axes (economic and trade ties; green transition; migration and “people-to-people contacts”), the deal overall aims to strengthen economic ties while combating irregular migration to and from Tunisia. Other priorities include search and rescue, the fight against smugglers and human traffickers, and “strengthening border management, registration and return in full respect of human rights”.² The overall promised funding amounts to over 1 billion euros, with an announced 100 million for the migration component in 2023 only.³

Tunisia, a proven dangerous country for Black migrants

At the time of this political agreement, the occurrence of racially motivated violence against Black people in Tunisia was a well-known fact. The Tunisian President’s speech of the past 21st February was filled with racist arguments as he spoke of the “hordes of irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa”, alleging that they come to Tunisia bringing “violence, crime and unacceptable practices”, and making the argument that this situation is part of a plan to “change the demographic make-up” of the country. These Racist accusations ignited a wave of violence in Tunisia against Black Africans.⁴

The repression against Sub-Saharan migrants in the country did not stop there. More recently, reports have emerged of the Tunisian police putting migrants in buses to be expelled to the desert area between Libya and Tunisia.⁵ Several hundreds of people, including families and children, were left in the desert under scorching hot temperatures, with barely any water or food, and some with injuries they said were inflicted by the Tunisian police. A reported 27 people died.⁶ Similar expulsions have been reported at the border with Algeria. As Human Rights Watch puts it in simple terms: “Tunisia is no safe haven for Black African migrants”.⁷ The Tunisian police, military and national guards, prominent actors in the country's migration operations, are guilty of countless abuses toward Black migrants. Tunisia is not a safe country, it is not suitable for returns, readmission or disembarkation, and is definitely not a suitable country for the EU to cooperate with on migration issues.

EU leaders could not have ignored the clampdown on Black migrants going on in the country. Instead of denouncing it, some of them have chosen to partner with the country in preventing people transiting through Tunisia trying to reach Europe, knowing that it would leave them trapped in a hostile country, or left pushed out with their lives at risk. By signing this agreement despite ample evidence of the violations of rights taking place in Tunisia, the EU not only legitimizes these violations, but it allows them to continue with EU technical support and funding.

A decade-long practice of externalising migration to neighbouring countries, at the cost of human rights

Generally, this agreement is yet another manifestation of the pursuit of a doomed policy aimed at restricting migrants access to Europe, with complete indifference to human rights standards. The deal is not the first of its kind and takes place in a broader context of externalising the management of EU borders. "Partnerships" in view of stemming migration flows to Europe were signed in the past with Tunisia itself, Turkey, Libya and more recently Morocco and Egypt. The walls of Fortress Europe actually extend as far as Senegal or Niger. In total 26 African countries have received some form of EU support to prevent migrants from accessing EU territory.⁸ As the European Network Against Racism explains, border externalisation "has become a standard enforcement tool in the global north", fueled by ethnonationalist, racialised and xenophobic politics aimed at keeping some nationalities or ethnic groups out of certain parts of the world.⁹ The practice of externalisation is not only wrong in its objectives, the very method of outsourcing creates dangerous loopholes in terms of transparency and accountability. As is the case with the EU-Tunisia MoU, there is generally no mechanism to monitor the respect of human rights in the partner country. **Eventually, "the practice of paying third countries to manage flows of irregular migration to Europe does not address the root of the problem – the lack of regular, structural pathways for people to come to Europe safely", says Mikael Leyi, Secretary General of SOLIDAR. "People pay thousands and put their life at risk to be smuggled across a desert or a sea because it is the only option Europe leaves them."**

As of 22nd of September, the first sum of 127million euros was released to Tunisia under the MoU, and the Commission's 10-point-plan-for-Lampedusa¹⁰, indicate no will to back away from the deal. The fact that a Commission delegation was denied entry in the country¹¹ will most likely create more uproar and prove a more effective halting factor of the EU-Tunisia cooperation on migration than any violation of black people's rights could.

In order for the EU to live up to its human rights commitments, it must:

- **Suspend and eventually withdraw from the Memorandum of Understanding.**
- **Monitor the human rights situation in Tunisia, in consultation with civil society, and take the appropriate actions available to protect people on the move there.**
- **Abandon the practice of externalising EU border management and responsibility to EU neighbouring countries.**
- **Expand safe, regular, structural pathways for migration to Europe, including for protection purposes.**

Signatories:

- Movimiento por la Paz – MPDL
- Diáspora
- Migration Consortium



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Endnotes

- ¹ Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership between the European Union and Tunisia, European Commission press corner, 16 July 2023: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887
- ² The European Union and Tunisia agreed to work together on a comprehensive partnership package, European Commission DG Near website, news, 11 June 2023: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-union-and-tunisia-agreed-work-together-comprehensive-partnership-package-2023-06-11_en
- ³ Press statement by President von der Leyen with Italian Prime Minister Meloni, Dutch Prime Minister Rutte and Tunisian President Saied, European Commission press corner, 11 June 2023: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_23_3201
- ⁴ Tunisia: President's racist speech incites a wave of violence against Black Africans, Amnesty International, 10 March 2023: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/>
- ⁵ Simon Speakman Cordall, So thirsty they drank seawater: The refugees Tunisia pushed out, Al-Jazeera news, 10 July 2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/10/suffering-of-refugees-on-tunisia-desert-borders>
- ⁶ At least 27 people found dead in desert after expulsion from Tunisia: Libya, Al-Jazeera news, 9 August 2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/9/at-least-27-people-found-dead-in-desert-after-expulsion-from-tunisia-libya?sf180830596=1>
- ⁷ Tunisia: No Safe Haven for Black African Migrants, Refugees, Human Rights Watch, 19 July 2023: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/19/tunisia-no-safe-haven-black-african-migrants-refugees#:~:text=Though%20international%20human%20rights%20standards,assisting%20illegal%20entry%20or%20exit>
- ⁸ <https://inthesetimes.com/article/europe-militarize-africa-senegal-borders-anti-migration-surveillance>
- ⁹ The new European Pact on Migration: racializing migration to and in Europe, European Network Against Racism, Policy Briefing, 20 June 2023: <https://www.enar-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/The-New-EU-Pact-on-Migration-Racializing-Migration-to-and-in-Europe-Formatted.pdf>
- ¹⁰ 10-points Plan for Lampedusa, European Commission press corner, 17 September 2023: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_4503
- ¹¹ Ugo Realfonzo, Tunisian President denies entry to another EU delegation, The Brussels Times, 26 September 2023: <https://www.brusselstimes.com/709668/tunisian-president-denies-entry-to-another-eu-delegation>