

EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding

On 16 July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) based on five pillars – macroeconomic stability, trade and investment, green energy transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration and mobility – the last being the most important. The MoU complements the EU–Tunisia Association Agreement and Member States' bilateral initiatives, and prioritises measures against irregular migration, with a view to avoiding loss of human life and developing legal pathways for migration. The MoU defined a common approach based on upholding human rights and with action to combat criminal networks of migrant smugglers and human traffickers. Immediate aid of €105 million was released to support the Tunisian coastguard and border management. The MoU also proposed €900 million in macroeconomic support and €150 million in direct budgetary support.

Current situation

Background: Analysts are not impressed with the [implementation](#) of the [EU-Tunisia MoU](#). On 31 August 2023, the Italian Interior Ministry [published](#) data showing that 6 weeks after the MoU was signed, irregular migrant arrivals in Italy were 68.6 % higher than 6 weeks previously (29 676 compared with 17 596 migrants). Between 1 January 2023 and 31 August 2023, more than 114 000 irregular migrants arrived in Italy by sea, mainly from Tunisia, and Tunisia this year became the biggest illegal traffic hub in the southern Mediterranean, ahead of Libya. A total of 58 000 migrants arrived in Italy by sea in 2022, and 39 400 in 2021. Between 1 January and 31 August 2023, the Tunisian authorities reported having [prevented](#) the departure of 40 000 irregular migrants wishing to reach Italy. In 2023, the main countries of origin of irregular migrants arriving in Italy from Tunisia were Guinea, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Tunisia, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Internal tensions: The presence of sub-Saharan migrants creates tensions within the Tunisian population and has political repercussions. Tunisian President Kais Saied tends to [scapegoat](#) sub-Saharan migrants for the current economic situation and uses xenophobic rhetoric, reportedly describing them as 'hordes' (the word *jahafil* in Arabic is used to refer to locusts) who are threatening to 'replace' Tunisian Arabic and Islamic identity. His discourse also manifests a deeper division within the Tunisian population. Some – like the president – have light skin, as they descend from Ottoman janissaries of Balkan or Greek origin. People from the Tunisian interior with darker skin often face *hogra* or social discrimination.

Irregular migrants in Tunisia: According to the UNHCR, there are some 9 000 refugees and asylum-seekers [registered](#) in Tunisia, originating mainly from the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Horn of Africa. Most reach Tunisia by land or air from neighbouring countries. There are also movements by sea and land to and from Libya and Algeria. To [stop migration inflows](#) to Europe, it would be essential to reinforce border controls with neighbouring countries, not just coastguard presence. In June and July 2023, the most critical situation was in the town of Sfax, from where migrants leave for Italy (a distance of around 160 km to Lampedusa). In June and July 2023, the Tunisian military and police evacuated migrants from Sfax towards [Ras el-Jedir](#), at the Libyan border, an area that is effectively a no-access military zone. Some 69 cases of tuberculosis, and also cases of HIV/AIDS, have been reported among migrants. The local population have called on the Tunisian authorities to increase social support for both locals and migrants, to improve border controls, to reintroduce the visa regime for citizens from sub-Saharan Africa (as was the case before 2011) and to provide for mandatory medical checks for migrants.

Values versus realpolitik: Observers [note](#) that implementation of the MoU demonstrates a certain disconnect between EU values and principles, such as respect for the human rights and dignity of all humans, and European realpolitik. Individual EU Member States and other actors, such as China or Saudi Arabia, may well provide Tunisia with other forms of financial aid, outside a normative approach. This division also risks undermining the efficiency of the MoU's implementation and the incremental political changes called for by the EU. During his visit to Tunisia last December, Chinese President Xi Jinping [stressed](#)



that 'China firmly supports Tunisia in pursuing a development path suited to its national conditions, and opposes external interference in Tunisia's internal affairs'. In July, Saudi Arabia [announced](#) a package combining a soft loan and aid of US\$500 to Tunisia.

Macroeconomic situation: Tunisia is facing a looming public finance crisis, as the pandemic and climate change have exacerbated years of economic stagnation and political infighting. Tunisia's grain harvest [declined](#) this year by 60 % to 250 000 tonnes owing to drought. The country must now import some 95 % of its cereal for domestic consumption. Following the 8.6 % decline in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020, the IMF is [estimating](#) 1.3 % growth in 2023. The deficit remains high, at 6.7 % of GDP in 2022. Government debt doubled to 82.6 % of GDP in 2022, up from 39.3 % in 2010. The country is discussing a US\$1.9 billion IMF loan. On 9 June 2023, the Fitch credit rating agency [downgraded](#) Tunisia's sovereign debt to CCC- (default).

Political context

Elected President of Tunisia on [13 October 2019](#), Kais Saied, former professor of constitutional law, has been under domestic and international pressure since 25 July 2021, when he [dismissed](#) the country's prime minister, Hichem Mechichi, suspended the Assembly of People's Representatives, and assumed executive authority with the army's help. Saied then suspended most of the Tunisian Constitution, stating that he would rule by decree during an 'exceptional emergency period' with no set end date. He referred to Article 80 of the 2014 [Tunisian constitution](#), which allows sweeping powers when there is 'imminent danger threatening the nation's institutions'.

One year later, following the [constitutional referendum](#) on 25 July 2022, a [new constitution](#) was approved by 94.6 % of voters. However, as the opposition boycotted the vote, the electoral commission estimated turnout at only 27.5 %. The main opposition Islamic party, [Ennahda](#), called for a boycott of both the referendum and parliamentary elections (announced for 2022, first round, and 2023, second round) and assured the Tunisian public of its commitment to the 2014 constitution.

Parliamentary elections 2022-2023: Tunisia held [run-off elections](#) on 29 January 2023 (the first round was held on 17 December 2022) for a parliament stripped of its powers by Saied in 2021. Critics of the president [saw](#) the 11.2 % turnout (of 9.1 million registered voters) as a rejection of his policy orientations. Political opposition, mainly representatives of Ennahda, but also civil society representatives, such as the General Labour Union (UGTT, Tunisia's largest trade union), accused Saied of attempting to silence his opponents. The electoral results were [announced](#) on 4 March 2023. There were 154 members elected (including 25 women) of whom 115 had joined the following six parliamentary blocs: Voice of the Republic: 25; National Independent Bloc: 21; Honesty and Labour: 20; Free Bloc: 19; National Sovereign Line: 15 and People's Triumph: 15. The parliament [elected](#) Brahim Bouderbala, a close ally of Saied, as its new Speaker. The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for 31 December 2027. Regional elections will be held in October 2023; while the presidential election will be held in 2024.

Political prisoners: There are some 20 [political prisoners](#) in Tunisia, among them the Chair of Ennahda, Rached Ghannouchi, former Speaker of the Assembly of People's Representatives. Ghannouchi was [arrested](#) on 16 April 2023 and on 20 April 2023 a judge ordered his imprisonment based on suspicion of 'plotting against internal state security'. Authorities also banned meetings at all offices of the Ennahda party and police closed the headquarters of the Salvation Front main opposition coalition as well.

Position of the European Parliament

The European Parliament's [resolution](#) of 21 October 2021 on the situation in Tunisia reaffirmed its commitment to the privileged partnership between the EU and Tunisia, and to Tunisia's democratic process. It also expressed deep concern that Presidential Decree 2021-117 had established the indefinite concentration of powers in the President's hands. Parliament called on the Tunisian authorities to abide by the constitution and to ensure that the fundamental rights of all citizens were upheld.

Parliament's most recent [resolution](#) of 16 March 2023 reiterated concerns about Saied's authoritarian drift and his instrumentalisation of Tunisia's socio-economic situation to reverse the country's democratic transition. It also called for the immediate release of Noureddine Boutar and all others who have been arbitrarily detained, including journalists, judges, lawyers, political activists and trade unionists.

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