

Fortress Europe is the “Root Cause” for Strains in EU-Africa Relations

By Shada Islam & Yasmine Akrimi – [Brussels International Center](#)

(Brussels-Tunis) – The search for an elusive “partnership of equals” between African states and the European Union remains a slow, unsteady and increasingly challenging work in progress.

Relations have been soured by disagreements over the unequal distribution of Covid-19 vaccines and the EU’s shock at African states’ hands-off policy towards Russia’s war in Ukraine. EU hopes of engaging in connectivity diplomacy through the rolling out of Global Gateway projects in Africa are also being challenged by the fact that initiatives come with little or no fresh funding.

The European Union’s “Fortress Europe” migration policies, which are seen by many African countries as a reminder of Europe’s colonial past and involvement in the slave trade, have become one of the biggest obstacles to creating a new EU-Africa policy due to their racist and discriminatory nature.

Recent troubling developments in Tunisia provide a cautionary tale on how the EU’s approach to migration from African states has added to strains in EU-Africa relations. It also illustrates how Europe’s migration panic and the free pass this gives to certain “transit” African countries is empowering populist leaders who are, in turn, unashamedly and deliberately provoking societal and political disruption.

Once viewed as the only “success story” of the “Arab Spring”, Tunisia is currently on a perilous political course under President Kais Saied. Tunisian leaders engaged in several democratic reforms between 2011 and 2019 – accumulating anger as well as economic and political mismanagement – which opened up a window for the election of the independent candidate Saied as president. The new president went on to assume all powers through a “constitutional coup”, immediately freezing the unpopular parliament and then voting in a new constitution which consecrated extensive prerogatives for the head of the executive, a limited role of the parliament and an in-existent independence for the judiciary.

Since then, the regime has been targeting counterpowers, such as harassing and imprisoning the president’s main political opponents. The most recent arrest was that of Rached Ghannouchi, prominent opposition leader and head of the Islamist party Ennahdha, which played a significant role in the country’s mismanagement post-2011. Yet, in the absence of an independent judiciary and considering Ghannouchi was arrested for mere commentary, even those who were asking to hold him accountable for years do not consider this good news.

The president has also alienated Tunisia diplomatically and economically, notably through repetitive sabotaging commentaries towards traditional partner countries, international financial institutions and humanitarian organisations. The latest was Saied once again denouncing “foreign diktats” imposed by the IMF – a legitimate concern if the government he formed hadn’t been negotiating a deal with the same institution for months.

He has also consistently used inflammatory and unverified narratives on migration, which have ongoing consequences for both the EU and Africa. For instance, in late February this year, the presidency published a communiqué denouncing what it deemed as a “criminal plot aiming to demographically modify the Tunisian society’s composition” through the mass immigration of sub-Saharan Africans. Directly inspired by the microscopic Tunisian nationalist party’s work, the claim is that there is a Western conspiracy to incite sub-Saharan Africans to remain in the country, notably through the work of humanitarian NGOs.

Unsurprisingly, this state-sanctioned racism sparked a wave of citizen and police violence against said migrants. Many lost their homes, their jobs, and were physically and verbally assaulted. A number of migrants also protested for weeks in front of UNHCR’s office in Tunis, before being violently evacuated by the police.

Some are choosing to repatriate voluntarily, while others have been attempting to cross the Mediterranean in a rush, leaving Italy to deal with a record-high number of irregular migrants seeking shelter in the country. But migrants are unlikely to find a safe home on the other side of the Mediterranean: “Fortress Europe” has been building steel walls and razor-wire fences.

This month, the European Parliament voted on an amendment endorsing the use of EU funds to help build “border barriers”. Some lawmakers from the S&D group even broke ranks to support the initiative. Italy also declared a state of emergency on immigration.

“Fortress Europe” is also accelerating the transition of neighbouring southern countries from “transit” to “destination,” with neither their consent, nor that of migrants themselves. For example, Tunisia’s economy is fragile: it is extremely complicated for low-skilled migrants to obtain work permits, and its own youth is attempting to leave by any means.

The crisis in Tunisia is “very dangerous” according to Josep Borrell, the EU’s Foreign Policy Chief. “If it collapses economically or socially, then we will be in a situation where [new flows of migrants](#) will come to Europe. We have to avoid this situation.”

Meanwhile, Italy has called on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to release a \$1.9 billion loan to Tunisia because of fears that the lack of liquidity could further destabilise the country, potentially leading to even greater numbers of migrants departing towards Italy.

President Saied has manipulated a strong anticolonial and anti-European nationalism fueled by a mounting economic crisis. Tunisia’s political turmoil is also indicative of the African Union’s limits in halting authoritarianism in Africa. In February 2022, the Union’s Political Affairs Commissioner stressed its “zero tolerance” towards undemocratic regime changes in Africa during the EU-AU summit in Brussels.

The AU was quick to condemn the Tunisian leader’s “great replacement” speech, especially following a number of African countries’ emergency repatriations of nationals. Yet, there has been no temporary suspension and certainly no expulsion of Tunisia, since there is neither a legal precedent for such a move, nor a mechanism to truly sanction a member state on grounds of racism.

As it seeks to re-engage with African states in a more modern and inclusive manner, the EU must take a clear-eyed view of how its mismanaged and messy approach to migration from Africa is causing societal and political disruption across the continent – particularly in its southern neighbourhood.

Of course, the EU is not ready to stop enforcing coercive measures to slow down migration, which means it is unlikely to stop supporting authoritarian leaders. Tunisia is no exception, especially considering how important the country is for Italy, a member state whose far-right leadership has been Kais Saied’s main supporter in the past months. However, some measures could be taken immediately.

First, improving regular pathways for migration, starting with not using visas as leverage for pressuring Tunisia to take back its irregular migrants. Tunisians have to wait for months and pay exorbitant fees to secure a Schengen visa appointment, and they are increasingly and unjustly being denied. This not only reinforces resentment against Europe, but equally pushes people to resort to unsafe and irregular ways to migrate.

Secondly, the EU should refrain from supporting austerity policies in Tunisia – such as the ones prescribed by the IMF – which will tremendously impact the middle and lower classes and, in turn, boost irregular migration. If working classes across Europe are protesting neoliberal policies and calling out their governments for eroding their standard of living – as we have seen recently in France– imagine the impact austerity has on poorer, more economically volatile countries.

Tunisia is no longer the poster boy of the “Arab Spring”. Instead, it has become a tragic example of the collateral damage caused by the EU’s restrictive migration policies. “Fortress Europe” is the real reason why Europe and Africa are finding it so difficult to talk to each other as equal partners.

About the BIC

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Authors



Shada Islam | Senior Commentator on Geopolitics

Yasmine Akrimi | North Africa Research Analyst

**BRUSSELS
INTERNATIONAL
CENTER**

 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466