

Young Generation Policy Brief

EU-Tunesia Migration Deal

A Threat to Core European Values

By Paul-Hendrik Himmel, Charlotte Hölscher, Alaa Khal

A publication by the Jean Monnet Policy Network "ValEUs"

No. 3 | 30 April 2025

EU-Tunisia Migration Deal: A Threat to Core European Values

BY PAUL-HENDRIK HIMMEL, CHARLOTTE HÖLSCHER, ALAA KHAL

Executive Summary

The EU-Tunisia migration agreement exposes a contradiction between the EU's migration policy and its core values of human rights and the rule of law. While aiming to curb irregular migration, EU cooperation enables human rights violations and supports a repressive security apparatus. This policy brief evaluates three options: EU withdrawal, which would weaken its credibility, a comprehensive migration policy reform, currently unfeasible, and a targeted revision of the agreement. The latter is the most viable, requiring strict human rights conditions, independent monitoring, and safe migration routes to align EU policy with its values and political interests.

This policy brief is published as part of the EU-funded Jean Monnet Policy Network "ValEUs".

Find out about ValEUs on our website → <https://valeus.eu/>

Follow us on Social Media



The contribution for this issue was provided by:



This issue is published in cooperation with:



THE PROBLEM

Human mobility is not a new phenomenon but has been happening for thousands of years. The European Union has recently become the destination of many people in search of safety or better living conditions. For various reasons, both the European Union and the Member States are trying to reduce the number of people arriving. Among other things, the EU uses so-called 'externalisation strategies' to do so. These include treaties with third countries that are the starting point or transit country for migrants or refugees. The subject of this policy brief is the EU's migration agreement with Tunisia. This agreement raises credibility issues in the context of the rule of law. Tunisia is a transit country for migrants and refugees on their way to Europe and at the same time a country of departure itself. It is a destination country for migration, too.¹ In the following, the term 'people on the move' is used, which includes both categories. The country plays a central role on the so-called 'Mediterranean Route'; more than half of all the people on the move arriving in Italy by boat began crossing the Mediterranean from Tunisia in 2022.² The EU supports Tunisia financially and politically in order to control irregular migration, but in practice these measures often lead to human rights violations, discrimination and a worsening of the living conditions of people on the move.

DESCRIPTION OF CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The EU emphasises the protection of human rights and the dignity of the individual, particularly in the context of migration and integration. These values are incorporated into the EU Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which bind the institutions of the European Union, among others.

On 16 July 2023, a joint memorandum of understanding³ was announced between the European Commission and the Tunisian government. Among other things, this is intended for

an increased cooperation around migration control, whereby the European Union "will endeavour to provide sufficient additional financial support, in particular for the provision of equipment, training and technical assistance necessary to further improve the management of Tunisia's borders." The EU's motivation for such an agreement is to reduce the number of people arriving on the move at the borders of the Schengen area. It is also argued that by cooperating with transit countries such as Tunisia, the number of people who die crossing the Mediterranean could be reduced. However, there are credible reports of various human rights violations by Tunisian security forces. From the beginning of 2024, i.e. after the enhanced cooperation agreement came into force, border guards from the neighbouring state of Libya apprehended more than 8,600 people in the border area who had fallen victim to collective expulsions.⁴

The European Union provides technical and financial support to local authorities without at the same time enforcing compliance with rule of law standards such as the ban on refoulement. For this reason, it can be inferred that EU funds are being used to support a security apparatus that does not comply with minimum rule of law standards. In particular, the EU value of the rule of law is intended to guarantee the protection and preservation of fundamental political and civil rights and civil liberties.

POLICY OPTIONS

The problems of EU migration policy described above and their contradictions with the fundamental values of the Union require concrete solutions. The following section presents three policy options that respond to the specific challenges in different ways.

¹ Chemlali, Ahlam. 2024. "Treading Water in Transit: Understanding Gendered Stuckness and Movement in Tunisia." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50 (20): 5210–27. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2024.2312226, p. 5215

² European Union. 2023. "EU Migration Support in Tunisia." https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5fd60eeb-7748-4f29-bda6-de875be53317_en.

³ European Commission. 2023. "Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership between the European Union and Tunisia." Press release, 16 July.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_23_3887/IP_23_3887_EN.pdf.

⁴ UN Secretary-General. 2024. "United Nations Support Mission in Libya: Report of the Secretary-General." S/2024/301, 9 April. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4043972?ln=en&v=pdf>.

Option 1: Withdrawal of the EU from migration deal

One option for action could be for the EU to end its foreign policy cooperation with Tunisia. This would mean that there would no longer be any fear violating the value of the rule of law. Instead, individual EU member states could conclude bilateral agreements with Tunisia to further protect the EU's external borders. However, this would not only reduce the EU's control in global foreign policy but could also lead to other areas of action increasingly covered by bilateral agreements. Overall, this would greatly reduce the EU's cohesion, control, credibility and room for manoeuvre. Furthermore, it would not lead to a solution to the violation of the value of the rule of law, but only to a shift in responsibility.

Option 2: Fundamental reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS)

The current system of migration to Europe is dangerous, inhumane and often leads to breaches of international standards such as the ECHR or the Geneva Convention and violations of the EU's fundamental values. The hurdles created by illegalisation also ensure that it is not those being most in need of protection who can follow this route, but those having the financial means to finance the journey, which often costs tens of thousands of euros, while relatively less privileged and weaker people are left behind.⁵ The EU's current approach with the measures described above does not address this issue, but acts as a symptom treatment, increasingly reacting to migration movements with upgraded and externalised borders. With such a large Schengen area with many different points of entry, the question remains if these measures are suitable for achieving the desired reduction in refugee numbers or mainly lead to a shift towards increasingly dangerous routes. A political reorientation could represent a solution to the problem of values described above: Secure access routes to fast, effective asylum procedures in conjunction with robust repatriation agreements with countries whose citizens have no prospect of asylum could help to reduce irregular migration and at the same time make

⁵ Tomczak, Małgorzata. 2024. "Former head of Amnesty International in Europe on migration: Activists often confuse human rights with their own views." ESI, 5 April. <https://esiweb.org/pdf/1D%20Wyborcza%20article%20English%205%20April%202024.pdf>, p.7.

⁶ Gerald Knaus in the 2024 ARD documentary "Ausgesetzt in der Wüste. Europas tödliche Flüchtlingspolitik," min. 48. BR, 1

migration agreements, such as the EU's with Tunisia, obsolete. The agreements between various Balkan states and the EU are cited as a model for such agreements. They allow regulated migration, e.g. for labour purposes, on the one hand, but also cooperation in area of returning nationals who are obliged to leave the country on the other.⁶ If extended to the current countries of origin, such an approach could have the potential to replace the current system, including the legal and moral challenges already described and insure the preservation of rule of law.

Option 3: Revision of the content of the agreement

The EU-Tunisia agreement, in its current form, violates human rights and worsens conditions for migrants using Tunisia as a transit country. Instead of offering protection, it increases risks of violence, exploitation, and inhumane conditions. A thorough revision is needed to ensure that human rights are upheld. EU financial support must be tied to compliance with non-refoulement and the prevention of abuse by security forces. Funds should be allocated to proper housing, healthcare, and education. Independent monitoring is essential for transparency and accountability. Safe migration routes, such as work visas and education programmes, should be established to reduce reliance on dangerous routes. Joint border management should be developed cooperatively, respecting Tunisia's sovereignty. Engaging Tunisian civil society and supporting local NGOs can enhance migrant protection. A humane and sustainable migration policy requires these principles to be upheld.

CRITERIA FOR JUDGING POLICY CHOICES

To assess and weigh up the proposed options dealing with the EU-Tunisia agreement in a structured manner, clear and comprehensive criteria are required that contribute to protecting the value of the rule of law in the long term.

November. <https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/ausgesetzt-in-der-wueste-europas-toedliche-fluechtlingspolitik/ausgesetzt-in-der-wueste-europas-toedliche-fluechtlingspolitik/br/Y3JpZDovL2JyLmRIL2Jyb2FkY2FzdFNjaGVkdWxlU2xvdC83MzgxZjc4ZS0zMjIjLmRiZWUtdA4OS0xY2FhMTkxMGO4ZTg>.

▪ **EU Credibility:**

This involves examining whether the chosen course of action is in line with the EU's declared values, principles and objectives, particularly regarding the rule of law. An inconsistent or contradictory policy could weaken trust in the EU – both within the Union and vis-à-vis partner states and the international community. This also concerns the question of whether the EU honours its agreements and whether it is perceived as a reliable partner.

▪ **Long term sustainability and efficiency:**

This criterion assesses whether the chosen course of action is sustainable in the long term and does not offer short-term solutions only. Sustainability means that the measure can continue to exist in the future without any new crises or drastic adjustments. Efficiency refers to how well financial and human resources are utilised to achieve the desired goals to bring about structural improvements.

▪ **Impact on EU-Tunisia relations:**

This criterion analyses the impact of each option on the diplomatic, economic and security relations between the EU and Tunisia. The aim is to strike a balance between migration control, economic development and security, support and political relationships.

▪ **Feasibility:**

This section assesses whether the proposed option for action under the current political and institutional conditions both in the EU and in Tunisia is feasible. As the best option for action must not only be sustainable in the long term, credible and diplomatically advantageous, but above all also practically feasible, feasibility should give particularly strong weighting in the decision to recommend a policy option.

Withdrawal of the EU from migration deal:

If the option of the EU withdrawing from foreign policy cooperation with Tunisia is chosen, the long-term sustainability and efficiency of existing measures and the credibility of the EU as a contractual partner must first be considered. In this case, the EU's credibility as a contractual partner would be severely jeopardised. Withdrawing from the agreement would signal to Tunisia, but also to other global players, that the EU does not reliably honour its agreements. In this context, a withdrawal from foreign policy cooperation would have a major impact on relations between the EU and Tunisia. While the EU would no longer play a direct role in supporting and financing the actions and situation in Tunisia, it would lose its role as a reliable and credible partner. In addition to the political consequences, this would also have an impact on economic cooperation between the two trading partners, which plays a particularly important role in Tunisia's economic development. Here, too, the EU's reliability could be questioned. The aspect of long-term sustainability and efficiency in the use of resources such as time, money and people must also be considered. On the one hand, cancelling the cooperation would continue to pose the problem of protecting the European external borders from irregular migration. If bilateral treaties were to be concluded between individual EU states and Tunisia or another country on the Mediterranean coast, this would probably lead to an excessive use of resources. Finally, the question of feasibility must be considered. Although ending cooperation with Tunisia is a relatively straightforward option, it would significantly affect the EU's credibility, foreign policy reach and power. Based on the criteria, a withdrawal of the EU from political cooperation with Tunisia is not the appropriate recommendation for action. This option can therefore be categorised as rather unrealistic and should be rejected.

Fundamental reform of the CEAS:

The above-mentioned approach of a fundamental reorganisation of European migration policy would mean that the current lack of rule of law would probably no longer apply. The EU would no longer be indirectly responsible for violations of international law and human rights, which would contribute to the criterion of credibility. The proposal would therefore fulfil the criterion of coherence. Likely, this approach would also fulfil the criterion of efficiency, as it would allow asylum applications to be submitted indiscriminately and would

EVALUATION OF THE PROPOSALS BASED ON THE CRITERIA

Once the evaluation criteria have been defined, the options for action are analysed in detail using these criteria.

render much of the existing and expensive infrastructure for border protection obsolete. In terms of the EU's relations with Tunisia, it can be assumed that the option would have mainly positive consequences, as the country would be freed from its burdensome role as a "transit country", while the Tunisian population itself could benefit from greater mobility and deeper economic integration. However, the current discourse in the Member States of the EU is strongly focussed on sealing off the EU; disruptive approaches contrary to this prevailing political course would therefore most likely fail due to the resistance of the member states of the Schengen area. The aim of this policy brief is to provide realistic options. This proposal is therefore not realistic at present – even though it might be well suited to eliminating the value problems described above – and should be rejected.

Revision of the content of the agreement:

The proposed revision of the EU-Tunisia agreement strengthens the rule of law. In terms of the EU's credibility, the revision ensures compliance with the principle of non-refoulement and institutionalised human rights protection measures. These measures are in line with international obligations such as the Geneva Convention on Refugees and increase transparency through an independent monitoring system. In terms of efficiency and long-term sustainability, the reform focuses on targeted investments in decent accommodation, healthcare and education instead of short-term isolation measures. This strategy reduces the humanitarian pressure on Tunisia and creates safe migration alternatives with work visas and education programmes. At the same time, the involvement of NGOs and the partnership-based development of border protection measures ensures the effective use of funds and prevents the inefficient utilisation of resources. The impact on EU-Tunisia relations is potentially positive, as the reforms emphasise partnership-based cooperation and respect Tunisia's sovereignty. In the long term, this could strengthen mutual trust and enable more stable cooperation. However, the diplomatic challenge of Tunisia to support these reforms remains. As the Tunisian government so far favoured restrictive migration measures, the success of the reforms heavily depends on political willingness to negotiate. The biggest challenge lies in the feasibility. Although the reforms will ease the burden on Tunisia in the long term, the government may be reluctant to them in the short term. Economic incentives, targeted

diplomatic negotiations, and a gradual implementation of the measures are needed to increase political feasibility.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

The detailed assessment of the options for action shows the need for a balanced approach to reform. The reform of the agreement must combine realistic political incentives with long-term solutions for securing rule of law. Instead of focussing solely on migration control, the EU should take a broader approach that includes Tunisia's economic and social stability. This includes using economic levers to persuade Tunisia to implement human rights-compliant measures. This could be achieved through targeted investments in infrastructure, that both improve the reception conditions for people on the move and benefit the Tunisian population. One concrete approach would be to promote employment programmes that integrate people on the move and locals alike to avoid tensions and create economic prospects. At the same time, the EU must avoid legitimising practices that violate human rights through financial incentives. Another important point is the need to strengthen cooperation at a technical level. Capacity building for human rights-compliant border management, the exchange of best practices and the training of Tunisian security forces are key measures to prevent abuse while considering the security interests of both sides.

Finally, the EU should ensure that it maintains its own credibility. A policy that relies purely on isolation or only selectively applies rule of law standards would not only jeopardise Tunisia's trust in the long term but also support within the EU itself. The reform of the agreement must therefore be designed as a strategic partnership that is both politically and economically viable for both sides and creates a stable basis for a fair migration policy in the long term.

The Author(s)



PAUL-HENDRIK HIMMEL

Paul-Hendrik Himmel recently obtained a bachelor's degree in the Viadrina's "Law and Policy" programme. His interest in migration policy led him to the topic of his thesis, which dealt with the principle of non-refoulement in European law. In Frankfurt (Oder), Paul-Hendrik lives in an international, self-governed community.



CHARLOTTE HÖLSCHER

Charlotte Hölscher is an international master's student at the University of Padova on the Management of Sustainable Firms programme. As part of her studies, she completed an Erasmus semester at the European University Viadrina, where she dealt intensively with international economic and social issues. Having grown up in an international environment and been influenced by numerous experiences abroad, she developed a special interest in globalisation early on. For her, migration is not only a highly topical and socially relevant issue, but also one with far-reaching economic, social and political implications. Her academic background and personal experience enable her to migration and migration agreements from an interdisciplinary perspective.



ALAA KHAL

Alaa Khal is a student at the European University Viadrina and a migrant himself. He has several years of experience in labour market integration and is intensively involved with migration policy at EU level, particularly in Germany. His focus is on the structural analysis of migration policy measures, which are often designed as short-term solutions without addressing the long-term causes. With two master's degrees and over three years of professional experience in labour market integration, he has written numerous academic papers on this topic. He criticises the fact that, despite a considerable shortage of skilled workers, Germany sees migration as a problem rather than a win-win situation, and sustainable integration policy solutions. In addition to his academic and professional activities, he is in close contact with the migrant community and contributes practical insights to political debates on migration and integration policy.

About the Project

ValEUs brings together 20 universities from five continents, combining their strong expertise in EU studies across a wide range of academic disciplines. The Jean Monnet Network will foster joint research capacities, develop innovative teaching collaboration, and engage in societal policy debate to establish impactful policy recommendations. ValEUs is funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission (2024-2026).

Imprint

ValEUs. Research & Education Network on Contestations to EU Foreign Policy



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Project number: [101127800](#)

Email: contact@valeus.eu

Website: <https://valeus.eu/>