# SPOTLIGHTS ON EUROPEAN AND FRENCH FUNDING IN TUNISIA

## MIGRATION COOPERATION AT THE COST OF HUMAN RIGHTS?

CCFD TERRE SOLIDAIRE

### ON 21 FEBRUARY 2023

Kais Saied, the President of the Tunisian Republic, declared in a xenophobic statement that «*there is a criminal plan to change the composition of the demographic landscape of Tunisia*», speaking of «*hordes of illegal migrants*» responsible for unacceptable crimes and acts in Tunisia. This was followed by a surge of attacks on an unprecedented scale against people of sub-Saharan origin, living in the country.

### ON 16 JULY 2023

The President of the European Commission, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, and the President of the Italian Council clasped hands with Kais Saied during the signing of a historic agreement between the European Union and Tunisia. The «*Memorandum of Understanding*» announced substantial funding for the country, specifically aimed at addressing migration to Europe.

Four months apart, these two events illustrate the appalling cynicism demonstrated over several years by the European Union (EU) and its Member States towards Tunisia. The EU, in its efforts to restrict migration to Europe, is increasingly supporting Tunisia's authoritarian regime in reinforcing border controls, with no clear regard for the resulting human rights violations.

# THE DETERIORATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN TUNISIA OVER TWO YEARS

## JULY 2021

President Kais Saied took full powers, suspended parliament, and obtained extensive authority through a new constitution. Opposition was repressed and arbitrarily prosecuted[1].

The repression quickly extended to members of social organisations (associations, unions) and the media.

## FEBRUARY 2022

Kais Saied announced his intention to exert greater control over associations present in Tunisia and ban all their foreign funding[2].

At the same time, the country was experiencing a severe economic, social, and environmental crisis: inflation, high unemployment, and shortages of basic necessities. Tunisia, which is heavily indebted, is closely monitored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but negotiations over a new loan of $1.9 billion are currently at an impasse.

## FEBRUARY 2023

The president accused «enemies of the state», political opponents, of favouring this context and pointed the finger at exiled people of sub-Saharan origin. This hate speech was denounced by the African Union and United Nations experts[3]. No European leader publicly condemned these remarks.

Living conditions for foreigners in Tunisia deteriorated, with organisations denouncing the widespread use of arbitrary detention, violence, and «*roundups*» aimed at organising the removal of dozens of people from the country[4].

## JUNE 2023

Associations warned of the growing rise in collective deportations to the desert border areas of Algeria and Libya. Deprived of water and food, over 1200 people were stranded in the desert[5].

## JULY 2023

The Libyan Human Rights Committee reported 35 bodies found by Libyan border guards. Among them, images of a 6-year-old girl named Marie and her mother, Fati Dosso, were captured and circulated on social media, subsequently gaining attention from the international press[6].

## OCTOBER 2023

*Le Monde* revealed that nearly 3700 individuals of sub-Saharan origin had been deported to Libya by the Tunisian authorities since June, and listed among them about 30 confirmed deaths and over 80 people missing[7].

## MAY 2024

A dozen lawyers, journalists, and NGO leaders, accused of showing their support for the exiles, were arrested within days. At the same time, 400 migrants who were living in a camp in Tunis were evacuated and taken to the Libyan border against their will[8].

Since then, the situation has persisted: President Kais Saied's grip on both the political space and civil society has tightened. The situation of migrants, particularly those of sub-Saharan origin, continues to worsen. Neither the leaders of the European Union, nor those of its Member States, including France, have publicly denounced the situation.

# EUROPEAN FUNDING TO TUNISIA SINCE 2015

The partnership between the European Union and Tunisia is long-standing, taking different forms and covering various sectors. The cooperation including a migration component, was formalised in 2014 and has intensified over the past three years.

European States have increasingly allocated substantial funds to Tunisia, in the hope that the country will secure its borders and limit the migrant arrivals in Europe. This cooperation, or outsourcing financing, involves various financial mechanisms.

| | THE 2015-2021 PERIOD | THE 2021-2024 PERIOD |
|---|---|---|
| HOW MUCH ? | At least €63 million has been allocated to Tunisia by the European Union over this period, to strengthen the country's border control capacities (only €38.2 million was initially earmarked for this purpose). | €31 million has been allocated to the management of migration and asylum in Tunisia. |
| HOW ? | • The EU initially allocated €87 million to Tunisia through the *Emergency Trust Fund for Stability and the Fight against the Root Causes of Irregular Migration and Displaced Persons in Africa* (EUTF), of which 44% (€38.2 million) was allocated to border management.<br>• These funds were directed towards two programmes focused on border management: the *Border Management Programme for the Maghreb Region* (BMP Maghreb) and *Integrated Border Management* (IBM Tunisia). These programmes received additional funding over this timeframe and as negotiations progressed. | Through a European external aid mechanism, the NDICI, with 10% of the funds allocated to migration via the Multi-Country Migration Programme for the Southern Neighbourhood (MCMP). |
| WHY ? | These mechanisms involve various programmes: maritime surveillance and the establishment of an integrated maritime border control system; strengthening of the Tunisian Coast Guard[9]; provision of equipment, training in equipment use and maintenance, as well as technical assistance[10]; and the establishment of training centres for security forces[11]. | The MCMP involves similar actions: strengthening the capacities of border and coast guards, including rescue at sea operations; establishing an operational sea surveillance and rescue centre for the Tunisian Coast Guard and the Tunisian Navy[13]; developing a coastal surveillance system; and providing equipment as well as training to secure land borders. |
| WHO ? | The implementation of these programmes was ensured by the *International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD),* an international organisation of 20 States, with the help of various ministries of European countries and the European Commission[12]. | The ICMPD, along with the Ministries of the Interior of France and Italy. |

# WHERE DOES FRANCE STAND IN ALL THIS?

No clear data is available to identify all the projects and funding provided by France to Tunisia in the field of migration. Information published by the French Development Agency (AFD) suggests that Tunisia ranks among the top five priority countries in terms of migration. These data allow us to deduce that around €50 million were allocated to Tunisia in both 2018 and 2019.

Civipol, which operates on behalf of the French Ministry of the Interior, has been involved in numerous projects in Tunisia since 2016, with a significant focus on strengthening border controls. Among its contributions are the establishment of a mobile border brigade, the development of an automated control system[19], as well as the creation of an operational sea surveillance and rescue centre. Additional projects are listed on its website, but lack sufficiently detailed information.

***WHAT IS CIVIPOL?***

Civipol is a private company with a public service mission: it is, by its statutes, the technical operator of international cooperation under the French Ministry of the Interior. 40% of its ownership lies with the State. Civipol engages in security and «flow management» projects worldwide.

*LATEST NEWS AND OUTLOOK*

## THE SUMMER 2023 AGREEMENT

In June 2023, French Interior Minister, Gérald Darmanin, travelled to Tunis to meet with President Kais Saied. He announced that France would allocate €25.8 million in bilateral aid to Tunisia, to support national efforts to fight against illegal emigration[20], and specifically to acquire equipment, provide training for Tunisian police and border guards, and promote the return of irregular migrants.

## WHY IS THIS AGREEMENT PROBLEMATIC?

- Here again, almost no precise and concrete information is available regarding the specific contents of this agreement.
- Members of parliament questioned the government about this funding, but it simply reiterated its support for Tunisia, indicating that €5 million were allocated for Civipol[21]. No official details have been disclosed regarding the remaining €20.8 million.
- The Committee on Access to Administrative Documents (CAAD), referred to by CCFD-Terre Solidaire in January 2024, considered that the Ministry of the Interior should disclose the documents related to this agreement to the public. However, this recommendation did not lead to any action being taken.

**NEARLY**

**200 MILLIONS**

**EURO PROMISED BY THE EU**

**SINCE 2015**

## MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

In July 2023, the European Union and Tunisia ratified a Memorandum of Understanding, amid a scandal over the abandonment of hundreds of individuals in the desert between Tunisia and Libya. In this Memorandum, the EU pledges to provide new aid of €105 million to Tunisia as part of a new migration support programme[15]. The Memorandum establishes «*the fight against illegal immigration*» as a common priority of both parties[16]. While specific details regarding the programme's content are not disclosed, it mentions border management and the effectiveness of return policies among its objectives.

Altogether, since 2015, nearly **€200 million** (€63 million for 2015-2021 and €136 million for 2021-2024) have been promised by the EU to **strengthen the authorities in charge of border controls in Tunisia**. These commitments were made amid a backdrop of deteriorating democracy, human rights, and the government's targeting of exiled people.

## WHY IS THIS AGREEMENT PROBLEMATIC?

- This agreement was signed without all Member States having been able to give their approval, leading to criticism from certain nations, including Germany.
- In March 2024, the Parliament adopted a resolution to hold the European Commission accountable for the actions taken to uphold human rights standards, and said it should have been consulted[17].
- The European Ombudsman has also opened an inquiry to question the European Commission regarding the measures taken to ensure respect for human rights as per the agreement[18].

## CONCLUSION

Since 2015, **increasing amounts have been transferred by the EU and its Member States, including France, to Tunisia**, with the aim of strengthening migration control. This support appears to have been granted unconditionally, disregarding the authoritarian practices of the regime and the extensively documented human rights violations.

In 2023, **3041 people died in the Mediterranean Sea**[22], while over **110 people died or went missing in the desert** between Tunisia and Libya.

This funding could contribute to violations of fundamental rights, **thus engaging the responsibility of the EU and France**. This is why it is essential to have full and transparent access to all information related to this financing.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

CCFD-Terre Solidaire therefore recommends that the European Commission and the Member States of the European Union concerned, including France, to:

- Immediately and completely **suspend** all funding and other support aimed at strengthening the authorities involved in border control in Tunisia.
- **Condemn** all xenophobic speeches and statements from the Tunisian government intended to incite racial hatred, or aimed at repressing or criminalising civil society in Tunisia.
- **Stop** considering Tunisia as a «*safe country*» in which people rescued at sea could be disembarked without risk to their dignity and lives.
- **Conduct** an independent and public evaluation of the border control projects they fund and/or carry out in Tunisia, focusing on their human rights repercussions.
- **Develop** public, detailed and comprehensive databases documenting all funded projects on border control in Tunisia.



**VIEW THE FULL REPORT**

CCFD TERRE SOLIDAIRE

[1] Human Rights Watch, Tunisia: President's Repressive Policies Abrogate Rights, 11 September 2021.
[2] RFI, Tunisie : vers une interdiction du financement étranger des associations , 26 February 2022.
[3] United Nations Human Rights Council, Mandats de la Rapporteuse spéciale sur les formes contemporaines de racisme, de discrimination raciale, de xénophobie et de l'intolérance qui y est associée; du Groupe de travail d'experts sur les personnes d'ascendance africaine; du Groupe de travail sur la détention arbitraire; de la Rapporteuse spéciale sur la promotion et la protection du droit à la liberté d'opinion et d'expression et du Rapporteur spécial sur les droits de l'homme des migrants, 28 March 2023.
[4] Amnesty International, Tunisia: President's racist speech incites a wave of violence against Black Africans, 10 March 2023.
[5] Human Rights Watch, Tunisia: No Safe Haven for Black African Migrants, Refugees, 19 July 2023.
[6] Compte Twitter "Refugees in Libya". Tweet dating 20 July 2023.
[7] Le Monde, En Tunisie, les autorités continuent de chasser les migrants à la frontière algérienne, 16 Ictober 2023.
[8] Le Monde, En Tunisie, la répression s'accentue et la peur reprend ses droits, 15 May 2024
[9] ICMPD, IBM Tunisia: Support programme to Integrated Border Management in Tunisia. Page accessed on 19 January 2024.
[10] According to the confidential document published by FragDenStaat, Feasibility study. Briefing dossier on European Union's support to the integrated coastal surveillance system of the Maritime national Guard. BMP Maghreb – Tunisia component, 22 November 2019. Page accessed on 22 January 2024.
[11] FTDES, Decrypting ICMPD: How a Vienna-based organization coordinates and facilitates for the expansion of a restrictive multi-stakeholder border control regime in Tunisia and beyond, 12 June 2021. Page accessed on 23 January 2024.
[12] ICMPD, IBM Tunisia: Support programme to Integrated Border Management in Tunisia. Page accessed on 19 January 2024.
[13] https://www.civipol.fr/
[14] Casajuana, E., Pintus, G.J., Beyond Borders, Beyond Boundaries: A Critical Analysis of EU Financial Support for Border Control in Tunisia and Libya, Amsterdam, novembre 2023.
[15] Euronews, The contentious EU-Tunisia deal is finally here. But what exactly is in it?, 18 July 2023.
[16] European Commission, Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership between the European Union and Tunisia, 16 July 2023.
[17] European Parliament, The adoption of the Special Measure in favour of Tunisia for 2023, 14 March 2024.
[18] European Ombudsman, https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/opening-summary/en/184858, case OI/2/2024/MHZ.
[19] Privacy International, European Commission document, Document initial relatif à l'action pour le Programme d'appui à la réforme et modernisation du secteur de la sécurité de la République tunisienne, 26 June 2015.
[20] Le Monde, A Tunis, ballet diplomatique de l'Europe sur le dossier migratoire, 20 June 2023.
[21] French Senate, Accord entre la France et la Tunisie, question orale n°1074S, 19 Mars 2023
[22] ONU Info, Décès en Méditerranée : l'OIM souligne la nécessité de sécuriser les routes migratoires, 29 January 2024.