Leveraging Migration:
An analysis of Tunisia's Migration Diplomacy under the EU-Tunisia Mobility Partnership and the Memorandum of Understanding

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List of Abbreviations

CMR: Central Mediterranean Route

EAM: European Agenda on Migration

EU: European Union

EURA: European Union Readmission Agreement

FRONTEX: European Border and Coast Guard Agency

GAMM: Global Approach to Migration and Mobility

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

MoU: Memorandum of Understanding

MP: Mobility Partnership

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VFA: Visa Facilitation Agreement

Introduction

Since the 1990s[1], the European Union (EU) and its Member States[2] have sought to cooperate with third countries to govern migration, in a broader trend towards border *externalisation* (Niemann & Zaun, 2023). Border externalisation refers to the EU's expansion of its rules and policies beyond Europe to manage migration, borders, and asylum, thereby effectively outsourcing migration and border controls to third countries who are expected to act as *gatekeepers* (Lavenex & Schimmelfenning, 2009). This serves to exclude potential refugees and asylum-seekers from entering or settling in Europe; as well as to satisfy the EU's political and economic objectives, by granting limited legal migration opportunities to immigrants with desirable skills and economic status (FitzGerald, 2020).

With the "rise of populist nationalism and the renewed significance of borders" in Europe (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019, p. 116), and the increased focus on governing migration *crises*[3] in European politics, the EU has sought to foster "enhanced cooperation with countries of origin [and] transit[4]" (European Commission, 2016, p. 2) using migration partnerships[5]. These partnerships employ conditionality to ensure third state cooperation,

[1] The diffusion of restrictive immigration policies in the EU migration governance is concomitant to the elimination of internal border controls within the European Economic Community prompted by the 1985 Schengen Agreement. The free movement of people, services, and goods was conditional on the simultaneous fortification of the bloc's external borders to manage the inflow of unwanted "illegal" migration, which was perceived to pose a threat to member states' national security, and the EU's collective identity and economic well-being (Huysmans, 2000).

[2] For practical reasons, the EU and its Member States will also be collectively referred to as Europe or the EU (though, of course, neither Europe nor the EU is a unitary actor), unless a reference is made to a specific Member State.

[3] The use of the term *migration crisis* is contested, as it equates specific migration flows with a crisis for migrant destination countries. This in turn obscures the root causes of displacement, as well as how migration governance perpetuates crisis representations of migration, further reproducing crises. Finally, crisis-framing of migration in political, media and scholarly discourse often does not correspond to empirical realities. For further discussion on the definition of Europe's migration 'crisis' see: Cantat et al., (2023).

[4] A country of *origin* is defined as a migrant's country of nationality; whilst a *country of transit* is the country a migrant transits through to reach a country of destination (Sironi & Emmanuel, 2019). European externalisation aims to stem the arrival of irregular migrants to Europe, which is perceived as their ultimate destination. Migrant transit and origin states can collectively be referred to as migrant *sending states;* whilst a destination state can also be referred to as a migrant *receiving state*.

[5] There are many kinds of EU migration partnerships, such as EU Mobility Partnerships, Common Agendas on Migration and Mobility, Compacts, and MoUs, among others. All these agreements rely on informal (i.e., soft law) instruments to facilitate cooperation and, consequently, externalisation (Cardwell & Dickinson, 2023).

with the EU granting material and political benefits to which partner countries agree to, such as foreign aid, legal migration opportunities, economic assistance, and capacity-building programmes, to migrant transit and origin countries, in exchange for their implementation of European migration, asylum, and border policies (Niemann & Zaun, 2023).

Therefore, the EU's partnership approach[6] highlights the nexus between migration and foreign policy, with migration being an increasingly important feature of interstate relations and diplomacy (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2006). For this reason, migration partnerships have become a central pillar of EU migration governance[7], not to mention, global migration governance (Kunz & Maisenbacher, 2013).

Though cooperation between the EU and third countries to govern migration is not a novel policy development, EU migration partnerships with key transit and origin countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have multiplied in recent years to respond to potential large-scale migration towards Europe, or migration crises. After the 2011 Arab Spring, the EU signed Mobility Partnerships (MPs) with Morocco (June 2013), Tunisia (March 2014) and Jordan (October 2014). The diffusion of EU migration partnerships was further reenforced by the 2015 migration crisis (Geddes, 2021), when over 1.3 million people migrated to Europe to seek asylum across the Mediterranean (Pew Research Centre, 2016). The infamous EU-Turkey Statement was signed in March 2016, and EU cooperation with Libya was enhanced after the Italy-Libya MoU was signed in February 2017. To this extent, the multiplication of EU migration partnerships with MENA countries highlights how EU externalisation efforts have been exacerbated by Europe's crisis-framing of migration flows

[6] The EU's partnership approach was introduced under the 2005 Global Approach to Mobility (GAM), which established EU Mobility Partnerships (European Council, 2009); and has since been a central feature of EU migration governance under subsequent EU migration and asylum policy frameworks, such as the 2012 Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), the 2015 European Agenda on Migration, and the recently adopted new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

[7] The term EU migration governance denotes "the site(s) of action where EU institutions and agencies [such as FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency,] engage with Member States, non-Member States, international organisations, NGOs and private bodies" to govern migration flows (Cardwell & Dickinson, 2023, p. 3121).

of displaced populations from the MENA region; as well as the centrality of migration cooperation in the EU's relations with its Southern neighbourhood (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020; Tsourapas, 2019).

Once again, the rise in irregular arrivals to Europe (FRONTEX, n.d.) has turned national and European policymakers' attention to enhanced cooperation with MENA countries. In 2022, Tunisia surpassed Libya as the main departure point in the Central Mediterranean Route[8] (CMR) for irregular migrants seeking to reach Europe by sea (UNHCR, 2024a). Though Tunisia already engaged in several pre-existing informal bilateral cooperation agreements with EU Member States; as well as an EU MP, on the 16th of July 2023, 'Team Europe'; consisting of the former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, as well as the President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen; travelled to Tunis, where the EU-Tunisia MoU was signed.

Also referred to as the 'migrant deal', the MoU establishes a 'strategic and global partnership' to stem irregular migration towards Europe, which the Commission has argued will serve as a 'blueprint' for further cooperation with third countries (Fox & Vasques, 2023). The deal focuses on enhanced border controls and tackling the root causes of migration; and is based on five pillars: macro-economic stability, economy and trade, green transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration (European Commission, 2023c). The deal further offers Tunisia a €1 billion loan, around 10% of which would be allocated towards immigration and border controls, and the remaining 90% intended towards urgently needed macroeconomic measures to address the country's worsening economic crisis.

Since its signature, however, the MoU's implementation has been put into question by a series of high-level political disagreements. After persistent delays on the EU's side in

[8] The CMR is the route from Algeria, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia to Italy and Malta, and has long been the most active migratory route to Europe, as well as the deadliest in the world (IOM, 2024).

providing the promised financial assistance, the Tunisian government cancelled a working visit by the Commission to implement the MoU and, shortly after, Tunisia's President Kais Saied announced his government had reimbursed almost €67 million to Brussels, a sum he denounced as charity (González & Hierro, 2023). In September, the Tunisian Coast Guard seemingly relaxed its interception operations, when over 7,000 migrants arrived in the Italian island of Lampedusa in just under two days, the highest number in sea arrivals to the island since 2011 (Naradi, 2023). This begged the question: *was Tunisia leveraging its role as Europe's gatekeeper to obtain political and economic concessions from the EU and its Member States?*

Considering cooperation dynamics surrounding the EU-Tunisia MoU, this thesis aims to shed light on how MENA states instrumentalise EU migration partnerships to pursue their own interests. Namely, under conditions of asymmetrical power relations and increasing interdependence with the EU[9], how do MENA states leverage their role as Europe's gatekeepers? To do this, I have chosen to study the evolution of Tunisia's migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU, and the role of Tunisia's domestic politics in defining cooperation in migration governance through an analysis of EU-Tunisia migration partnerships, namely, the 2014 MP and the recent 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This case is particularly interesting, considering Tunisia's democratisation in 2011 and the 2021 presidential coup which has seen the return of an authoritarian regime to Tunisia since (Nord et al., 2024. The study of this evolution uses process-tracing to develop a within-case analysis of Tunisian migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU under both partnerships.

Therefore, the questions this thesis seeks to answer is:

[9] EU-MENA cooperation is often characterised by diverging interests, interdependence, and asymmetrical power relations to the detriment of MENA partners, owing to Europe's history of colonial exploitation of the region, and its attempts to secure its strategic interests thereafter (Del Sarto, 2021).

How has Tunisia's leverage affected its migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU under the EU-Tunisia MP and the MoU?

- *How have domestic political factors and interdependence affected Tunisia's leverage vis-à-vis the EU under the EU-Tunisia MP and the MoU?*

This thesis is divided as follows. Chapter 1 first introduces migration partnerships within the EU's externalisation of its borders, before presenting a literature review on EU-MENA migration cooperation. Then, it presents the theoretical framework, inspired by the Migration Diplomacy framework, as well as the hypotheses I will be testing in my analysis. This section seeks to highlight how a partners' domestic politics and its interdependence in relation to the EU influence its leverage and, consequently, its migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU. Chapter 2 presents the research design I will be using. Chapter 3 then introduces the analysis of Tunisia's migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU under the MP and the MoU. The final chapter summarizes the conclusions of this study, as well as presenting themes for future research.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Externalisation and the role of migration partnerships

According to FitzGerald (2020), fears for the potential of large-scale migration towards Europe (Geddes, 2021) have motivated the policy trend towards externalisation in EU migration governance to obstruct, deter, and prevent the arrival of unwanted irregular migrants. For Arar and FitzGerald (2023), externalisation is the extension and outsourcing of the border and migration controls from migrant destination countries in the Global North, into neighboring migrant sending countries in the Global South[10]. Therefore, externalisation marks a departure from the traditional Westphalian notion of borders as fixed lines delineating the territory where a state exercises its sovereignty[11] (Sachar, 2020). So, because of externalisation, rather than monopolising the legitimate means of movement within a territorially fixed space, cross-border mobility is increasingly controlled by means of *shared coercion* between the migrant destination country, and transit and origin countries, or the gatekeepers (FitzGerald, 2020).

In their book entitled "The Refugee System: A Sociological Approach", FitzGerald and Arar (2023) argue that migration partnerships are drawn up by wealthy Global North countries who engage with Global South countries to ensure the containment of potential asylum-seekers in migrant transit and origin countries before they even embark upon their journeys. Potential asylum seekers and other migrants are prevented from gaining

[10] The Global North/ Global South dichotomy is useful for understanding EU-MENA cooperation in migration governance. First, relations between the two have been largely shaped by Europe's (post-)colonial exploitation of the region (Del Sarto, 2021). Second, externalisation is a central feature of global migration governance. Most of the world's refugee population is hosted in the Global South - the MENA region alone hosted over 16 million forcibly displaced people in 2021 (UNHCR, 2022). In contrast, Global North countries host less than 1% (FitzGerald & Arar, 2023). Hence, externalisation serves as a means for Global North states to maintain this structural imbalance.

[11] Externalisation is eloquently captured by Ayelet Sachar's (2020) conceptualisation of the *shifting border.* Borders are granted flexibility in their capacity to exercise migration control beyond a state's jurisdiction, by a process of *extra-territorialisation*. Paradoxically, however, they shift back to their static, restrictive capacities when it comes to granting access to international rights and protections (such as the non-refoulment norm), whose application is, through the process of *hyper-territorialisation*, of limited and territorialised scope (FitzGerald, 2020; Sachar, 2020).

territorialised access to international protections, namely the principle of non-refoulment[12] which is enshrined in international law under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Sachar, 2020). In sum, through externalisation, states deter and prevent the arrival of irregular migrants to the destination country, whilst also outsourcing the moral and legal responsibility for migrants' safety and well-being to the gatekeeper (FitzGerald, 2020).

Migration partnerships include formal and informal cooperation agreements[13], which aim to facilitate/constrict cross-border mobility by enabling the *forced migration*[14] of potential refugees and asylum-seekers aiming to reach the Global North (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023). They are transactional because cooperating partners are granted material and political benefits, such as foreign aid, economic assistance, and capacity-building programmes, among others, in exchange for implementing migration, asylum, and border policies promoted by destination countries (Niemann & Zaun, 2023). As Kunz and Maisenbacher (2013), though the term 'partnership' may indicate fair and balanced cooperation between its signatories, it obscures the asymmetrical power relation inherent to externalisation between destination countries in the Global North and transit and origin countries in the Global South. Indeed, migration partnerships are developed by destination countries to sustain their border externalisation, by involving transit and origin and encouraging them to be proactive and align themselves with their objectives (). To this extent, third state cooperation through EU migration partnerships both implicitly and explicitly serves as a means for the EU Member States to facilitate the externalisation of its borders

[12] The principle of non-refoulment, which constitutes the basic principle of the 1950 Refugee Convention asserts that "a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom" (UNHCR, n.d.)

[13] These include population transfers, exchanges, repatriations, readmission agreements, deportation arrangements, among other policy arrangements. For more, see Adamson & Greenhill (2023).

[14] According to the OHCHR (2021) forced migration occurs because of state policies which deny migrants' agency, by facilitating pushbacks and/or pullbacks. Pushbacks refer to the forced return of migrants to the country where they attempted to cross or have crossed an international border without access to international protection or asylum procedures. Pullbacks are the physical prevention of migrants' departure from their origin state or a transit state from leaving the territory of their State, or their forcible return them to that territory before they can reach the jurisdiction of their destination state.

(Stutz, 2023). Hence, this thesis explores the cooperation dynamics that arise from, and shape Europe's externalisation towards its MENA partners via migration partnerships.

State of the Art: EU-MENA migration cooperation

Initially, many authors studied third state cooperation in EU migration governance as a process of 'Europeanisation' beyond the EU, where the implementation of EU migration policy by cooperating partners is conceived as an instance of EU-led policy and norm diffusion (Lavenex & Uçarer, 2004). Theoretically, the existence of unequal power relations to the detriment of MENA states would translate into the imposition of EU policies on cooperating states (Del Sarto, 2021). In this sense, previous studies highlighted third states as passive recipients of EU policies (Del Sarto, 2021).

Nonetheless, Okyay et al. (2020) highlights that no MENA state has consistently adopted European policy preferences and prescriptions. Instead, EU migration governance is characterised by a high degree of external differentiation[15], meaning MENA countries cooperate with the EU to varying degrees, due to the selective transfer and implementation of EU policies by its partners.

Recent studies on EU MPs show that cooperating third states are policy agents who affect the outcomes of EU migration governance. Reslow (2012) analyses why third countries would choose to (not) cooperate with the EU by signing a MP, looking at the role of domestic policy preferences; and the extent to which they converge with EU policies; its administrative capacity, domestic costs of implementation, and the credibility of the EU's promises.

Conditionality has been highlighted as the main mechanism employed by the EU in its external migration governance (Schimmelfenning & Sedelmeier, 2004). In EU migration

[15] External differentiation describes the degree to which non-Member States adhere to and implement EU rules and policies (Schimmelfennig et al., 2015). For more on external differentiation in the EU migration governance, see: Okyay et al., (2020).

governance, cooperation through migration partnerships relies on *issue-linkage*, by linking cooperation in multiple policy areas to sustain border externalisation and reach destination countries' goal of stemming irregular migration (Koch et al., 2018).

Limam and Del Sarto (2015) show how the EU co-opted Morocco and Tunisia to sign their MPs after the Arab Spring. They argue that the EU used its role as a 'normative power' and exploited the unstable political and economic conditions of the countries, using interest-based conditionality to establish a triangular link between migration cooperation, EU support and democratisation. According to the authors, in the case of MENA countries with whom strategic cooperation is needed, and who have no prospects for membership[16], the EU has used a positive, or '*more-for-more' conditionality* approach to encourage cooperation. This means that the EU would reward its MENA partners' cooperation efforts if they met the EU's expectations regarding the implementation of reforms in line with the common goals expressed in the partnerships. This approach was established under the GAMM when the EU signed MPs with Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan. This contrasts with previous MPs[17], which had also previously employed negative, or '*less-for-less' conditionality* to sanction cooperating partners if they were to backtrack on their commitments, for example, by withholding development aid from recipient countries (Koch et al., 2018). However, the use of negative conditionality was limited regarding MENA partners, as it discouraged proactive cooperation from partner states like Tunisia and Morocco (Limam & Del Sarto, 2015). Furthermore, the EU's security interests in the region, and the need for strategic cooperation

[16] Scholarly research on cooperation under EU Mobility Partnerships highlights different cooperation dynamics regarding the likelihood of EU accession. The EU's impact on partners' domestic migration policies, as well as its leverage in negotiations, is weaker for countries where EU accession is unlikely, and even weaker for countries with no enlargement prospects. In all cases, Mobility Partnerships have legal and policy relevance for third countries (Gökalp Aras, 2019; Tittel-Mosser, 2018).

[17] MPs were first introduced as the GAM's "most innovative and sophisticated tool" (European Council, 2009), with pilot partnerships concluded with Moldova and Cape Verde in 2008, and with Georgia in 2009.

with MENA countries made it difficult for Europe to adopt a strong position towards them (Cassarino, 2007).

Looking at EU security cooperation with Tunisia and Morocco post-Arab Spring, Zardo and Cavatorta (2018) explain the effects of partner states' domestic governance structures (ie. state of democracy) on their leverage vis-à-vis the EU. The authors argue that the political volatility associated with Tunisia's democratisation explains its loss of leverage over the EU since the fall of Ben Ali's regime. In contrast, Morocco maintained a high degree of leverage, due to its successful authoritarian renewal, which reenforced its coercive leverage, since authoritarian regimes' threats are perceived as more credible.

Tittel-Mosser (2018) further argues that third states employ *reversed conditionality* vis-à-vis the EU, using migration cooperation to put forth their own interests and pursue their own domestic policy preferences *via* issue-linkage. Therefore, despite engaging in unequal power relations, MENA states can use their cooperation in EU migration governance to "negotiate with the EU on a more equal level, (…) and present their own conditions in their cooperation with the EU" (p. 354). The author notes that a lack of implementation of EU policies is not to be understood as the product of lacking incentives, but instead also as an instance of strategic cooperation from partner states within EU migration partnerships. For example, once states enter a MP, negotiating a Readmission Agreement with the EU (EURA), even if it isn't agreed upon, provides a strong bargaining chip for MENA states to pursue their domestic policy preferences, as illustrated by the cases of Morocco and Turkey (Wolff, 2014). Hence, signalling a willingness to cooperate, even when there is little commitment to live up to the promises made, is also an important feature of migration cooperation (Tittel-Mosser, 2018), showcasing symbolic politics as an important feature of migration cooperation (Natter, 2023).

Greenhill (2016) identifies the coercive use of migration by refugee host states, by analysing the use of *capacity-swamping* by Libya vis-à-vis Italy in the early 2000s in

exchange for economic concessions. This strategy entails a relaxation of border and migration controls to facilitate irregular migration towards a destination country, or at least threatening to do so (Del Sarto, 2021), to coerce it into submission regarding a specific political or economic demand (Tsourapas, 2019). Similarly, Laube (2021) argues that transit states have been leveraging their role as transit states against the EU, by enhancing the international visibility of their migrant and refugee populations.

Tsourapas (2019) introduces a framework for understanding how Global South states employ migration as a foreign policy tool i.e., *migration diplomacy*, vis-à-vis Global North states, by focusing on Libya under Gaddafi's rule. The author argues that "in the absence of other forms of leverage typically at the disposal of stronger, developed countries, Global South states are able to use migration diplomacy as issue-linkage" (p. 2370), both by cooperative and coercive means. Through issue-linkage, Global South states can leverage their cooperation in EU migration governance to gain an "articulated political or economic demand" (pp. 1370-2371). This highlights how migration cooperation is a source of soft power for migrant transit and origin states, as it allows them to leverage their role as gatekeeper in EU migration governance (Lavenex & Schimmelfenning, 2009; Nye, 2004). So, states engage in migration diplomacy *via* issue-linkage, instrumentalising cooperation to pursue their own interests.

Additionally, the co-optation of MENA states into the European border has exposed the EU and its Member States to considerable blackmail power from migrant sending states, also known as the *leverage of the gatekeeper* (Okyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2016). These new dynamics of cooperation highlight shifting power dynamics at the center of EU-MENA migration cooperation (Del Sarto, 2021; Laube, 2021), as the EU's attempts to exploit its unequal power relations with its MENA partners may instead contribute to cooperation that is more reciprocal and fairer in the future (Laube, 2021). As Del Sarto (2021) argues, this is

explained by a growing interdependence between the EU and MENA states, which has increased over the course of cooperation, and provides MENA states with leverage in its negotiations with the EU (Del Sarto, 2021). Notably, the EU's dependence on third state cooperation has been exacerbated by the crisis management agenda (Laube, 2021). Stutz (2023) also notes that cooperation in EU migration governance involves on capacity-building in border and migration controls, as well as other policy areas linked to cooperation. This, in turn, allows partner states to develop their own interests and pursue them, rather than simply following EU preferences.

Finally, the focus on crisis governance has also enhanced the EU's reliance on informal, or 'soft law' instruments to foster cooperation with partner states and to facilitate externalisation (Cardwell & Dickinson, 2023; Natter, 2023). Okyay et al., (2020) highlight that in the aftermath of the 2015 peak in refugee arrivals to Europe, the EU and its Member States turned to enhance third country cooperation through more informal arrangements, such as the EU-Turkey Statement and the Italy-Libya MoU. Relying on more informal means of cooperation has allowed the Member States to forego constraints of the EU legal and institutional framework, such as the effective oversight of national parliaments and the European Parliament, to facilitate cooperation (Cardwell & Dickinson, 2023). This is because informal arrangements provide flexibility to cooperation, particularly with countries lacking international and domestic legal safeguards against human rights violations (Okyay et al., 2020). As argued by Koch et al., (2018, p.18): "the implementation of restrictive migration policies in partner countries goes hand in hand with a preference for legally non-binding political agreements".

In conclusion, this literature review highlights the role of state interests, power asymmetries, interdependence, and leverage in defining EU-MENA migration cooperation in migration partnerships, as well as states' migration diplomacy strategies. As follows, despite

engaging in unequal power relations, the willingness of MENA states to cooperate with the EU is linked to other interests in relations of interdependence, in ways that can inhibit the EU from simply imposing its will (FitzGerald, 2020).

Literature gap

Though other studies have highlighted the importance of decentring studies on externalisation and migration diplomacy away from the state (Niemann & Zaun, 2023; Tolay, 2022), in this thesis I have chosen to focus on third state cooperation in EU migration governance. Echoing Hollifield's (2004) conceptualisation of the *migration state*, migration governance is a central feature of state interests and functions, and hence plays an important role in determining how states interact diplomatically with each other in the international system (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Tsourapas, 2019). Furthermore, "the state is still the main actor in the regulation of cross-border population mobility and is likely to continue to be so, especially with the recent rise in populist nationalism and the renewed significance of borders" (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019, p. 116).

Additionally, few studies have investigated the evolution of migration diplomacy over the course of institutionalised migration cooperation (Tolay, 2021) through process-tracing (Stutz, 2023). For this reason, I have chosen to interrogate the evolution of Tunisia's migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU, focusing on migration partnerships. Especially considering recent developments following the MoU's signature, as well as the fact that the MoU is expected to serve as a blueprint for future EU migration partnerships with third countries, understanding how Tunisia engages in migration diplomacy in relation to the EU may shed light on EU-MENA migration cooperation dynamics, given the recent rise in displacement (MMC, 2023).

The rest of this chapter is divided into two parts, the first of which seeks to explain how states pursue migration diplomacy. The second part focuses on EU-MENA cooperation and seeks to explain which factors influence a states' leverage, and how this, in turn, is expected to affect its migration diplomacy vis-à-vis another state.

The Migration Diplomacy Framework: Between Coercion and Cooperation

The *Migration Diplomacy framework*, developed by Fiona B. Adamson and Gersamino Tsourapas (2019) seeks to understand how states employ "diplomatic tools, processes, and procedures [vis-à-vis other states] to manage cross-border mobility" (pp. 115-116). Hence, the framework "refers to state actions and investigates how cross-border population mobility is linked to state diplomatic aims" (p. 116). This can encompass a state's use of diplomatic methods to achieve migration-related objectives, as well as the strategic manipulation of migration flows to obtain other goals.

The migration diplomacy framework conceives of two types of strategies, coercive and cooperative migration diplomacy, both of which are pursued *via* issue-linkage (Tsourapas, 2019). First, coercive migration diplomacy, also known as *blackmailing (*Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021), entails strategies where one actor acts "with little regard to the other party's behavior and interests, thereby limiting prospects for cooperation" (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019, pp.121-122). Hence, the success of a strategy is determined by the weakened position of one actor in relation to the other. Since non-cooperation would put the EU's externalisation strategy at risk (Laube, 2021), coercive migration diplomacy is deployed by migrant sending states to blackmail destination states into accepting an articulated political or economic demand (Tsourapas, 2019). This can include the use of symbolic politics, like threatening to forfeit on cooperation through political declarations

(Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021); as well as the non-implementation of border and migration controls, which may lead to capacity-swamping (Greenhill, 2014).

Second, cooperative migration diplomacy, or *backscratching* (Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021), refers to strategies in which both sides to the agreement are expected to reap mutual gains, though to different degrees (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). This is because destination states who externalise their borders to sending states design these policies to benefit their own interests, since sending states have little interest in stemming irregular migration to destination states unless, of course, it benefits them to some extent. Additionally, externalisation entails negative consequences for migrant sending states, as these policies often go against their interests (Del Sarto, 2021).

Cooperative migration diplomacy includes the implementation of EU policies, as well as a promise to refrain from coercive migration diplomacy (Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021). Furthermore, cooperative migration diplomacy doesn't translate into the complete acceptance of EU policies and practices. As argued by Rafaella del Sarto (2021), MENA states contest EU policies they are opposed to, seek renegotiation, and *accommodate* EU policies according to their interests. These practices are tactically tolerated by Europe as the best possible deal that will allow it to influence its MENA partners. Moreover, accommodation is tolerated to the extent that political elites on both sides continue to benefit from cooperation.

Understanding EU-MENA cooperation: power, leverage and interdependence

Keohane (1984) defines cooperation as a process of policy coordination between two states, where one states' policies are considered to facilitate the realisation of its partners' objectives, thus inducing policy changes for both actors. During this process, there are also attempts between partners to adjust their policies to make them compatible, and to avoid,

reduce, or counterbalance negative externalities which may result from cooperation (Laube, 2021).

As follows, EU-MENA cooperation occurs against the backdrop of *asymmetrical power relations* and *complex interdependence* (Del Sarto, 2021; Keohane & Nye, 2009). In her book 'Borderlands', Rafaella del Sarto (2021) argues that EU-MENA relations are emblematic of "imperial core-periphery relations" (p.33), because cooperation across a variety of policy areas; trade, security and migration, among others; is characterised by unequal power relations. The author argues that European colonialism has "substantially shaped and partially defined the political and socio-economic development of [the MENA region] by laying the foundations of politics and typically unequal (…) relations" (p.11).

To this extent, a state's interests and behaviour are conditioned by systemic factors, such as the balance of material power within the international system and states' relative position within this hierarchical system (Wohlforth, 2009). Power asymmetries are operationalised as an unequal distribution of capabilities, resources, and influence among states in international politics. To this extent, power asymmetries play a crucial role in shaping states' behaviour, decision-making processes, and the outcomes of interstate cooperation, as well as its state's diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis another state (Del Sarto, 2021).

Power, however, is not exercised unidirectionally in a way that solely favors the stronger partner. Instead, drawing on the concept of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 2009), Del Sarto (2021) argues that over the course of cooperation, the EU and MENA states' have become increasingly interdependent on each other across a variety of policy areas. Whilst MENA states are typically more economically dependent on the EU[18], the EU is

[18] There are a few reasons for MENA states' economic dependence on the EU and its Member States: MENA states' dependence on European trade and aid; the partial integration of MENA states into the EU's internal market; the lack of significant economic integration among MENA states; as well as a lack of cooperation among MENA states in their relations with EU. For more on EU-MENA interdependence see: Del Sarto (2021, p.33).

dependent on MENA states to govern migration. In other words, Europe and the MENA region are engaged in relations of asymmetric interdependence (FitzGerald, 2020), since cooperation is founded on reciprocal but different commitments by each side (Womack, 2015), owing to differences in kinds and degrees of power, as well as the extent to which both sides exert different levels of influence on each other (Sandnes, 2023).

According to Del Sarto (2021), complex interdependence has specific implications on the implementation of EU migration and asylum policies in third countries. On the one hand, completely rejecting European rules and practices may be politically and economically undesirable, or altogether unviable, because of complex interdependence. On the other hand, their complete acceptance would incur costs, as it would entail extreme political and socioeconomic transformation which could go against MENA states' own policy preferences and interests. Thus, MENA states' selective implementation of EU policies explains why EU migration governance is characterised by a high degree of external differentiation (Okyay et al., 2020). In sum, partner states employ migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU, directly or indirectly affecting EU migration governance (Del Sarto, 2021; Laube, 2021).

As Del Sarto (2021) argues, as the EU and its Member States integrate MENA states into its borders through externalisation, they become increasingly dependent on their MENA partners to govern migration. This in turn facilitates a transactional relationship where MENA states can obtain significant concessions in other policy areas where they would have otherwise had little room to manoeuvre. So, rather than simply implementing EU migration policies, transit and origin states also define these policies, by using migration as a foreign policy tool. To this extent, EU-MENA cooperation is not solely defined by Europe's export of rules and practices, but also comprises "the actions, responses and strategies of MENA states vis-à-vis the EU" (Del Sarto, 2021, p. 126).

In the absence of other forms of leverage available to 'stronger' states, in migration cooperation, transit and origin states can leverage their role as Europe's *gatekeepers* to pursue their own domestic policy preferences (Tittel-Mosser, 2018, Okyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2016). Furthermore, leverage translates into a states' ability to withstand EU pressures on policies they disagree with (Zardo & Cavatorta, 2018) and, as Del Sarto (2021) argues, migration is often the only, or at least the most significant, source of leverage for MENA states when cooperating with the EU.

Additionally, MENA states are expected to engage in migration diplomacy to counterbalance the negative externalities[19] of EU migration governance (Laube, 2021). Therefore, cooperation must be mutually beneficial at some level and to some extent, even when it occurs under broader conditions of structural inequality, or even coercion (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). So, rather than completely rejecting or accepting Europe's attempts to export its rules and practices, states have at their disposal different strategies to engage in migration diplomacy with other states to pursue their own interests.

Since leverage and migration diplomacy still occur within a wider context of unequal power relations and complex interdependence between migrant destination and migrant transit and origin countries (Del Sarto, 2021), "any state's ability to effectively use diplomatic tools and processes in relation to migration processes will [depend] on other factors, such as its overall power and available resources" (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019, p.116).

To understand how a country engages in migration diplomacy, it is first important to define its aims, or interests, as a countries' migration diplomacy is "embedded in an interest-driven approach" (Limam, 2020, p. 3). It must be noted that states' interests are not fixed, as

[19] For example, for MENA states, adopting restrictive EU migration policies, such as criminalising irregular migration, can disrupt well-established labour migration dynamics in the region (Tittel-Mosser, 2018).

actors define their interests "in the process of defining a situation" (Wendt, 1992, p.398), so interests are expected to shift over time depending on the broader political context.

Theoretical expectations

Since this thesis seeks to understand the evolution of Tunisia's migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU under the 2014 MP and the 2023 MoU, it is important to understand both parties' interests at both points in time, as well as their ability to pursue them *via* coercive or cooperative migration diplomacy, i.e., their leverage. To this extent, if Tunisia is unable to withstand EU pressures to adopt a policy it is strongly opposed to, this indicates a loss of leverage. However, if it is able to withstand pressure, this represents a loss of leverage for the EU.

In this degree, a MENA partner's leverage in relation to the EU will determine to which extent the EU can exercise its leverage on Tunisia through conditionality. Leverage, in turn, will depend on a variety of domestic (internal) and systemic (external) factors, which interact with one another. Domestic factors refer to a state's domestic politics and include the state of its economy (Tsourapas, 2019; Lavenex, 2011), its state of democracy (Stutz, 2023; Zardo & Cavatorta, 2018), as well as its interests (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Tittel-Mosser, 2018). Systemic factors refer to a state's complex interdependence in relation to Europe, and include the incentives offered by the EU (Cassarino, 2021), its economic dependence on Europe (Stutz, 2023; Del Sarto, 2021), as well as a partners' geopolitical importance for the EU (Stutz, 2023; Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021).

First, the state of the economy determines the degree of economic dependency on the EU. Unfavourable economic conditions are expected to reduce a state's leverage vis-à-vis a partner state, by increasing its economic dependency. Furthermore, unfavourable economic

conditions enhance popular opposition against the government, further threatening political stability.

Second, the state of democracy is also expected to influence leverage. According to Zardo and Cavatorta (2018), democratisation involves a rupture with the previous regime, disrupting old patterns of cooperation, and is a politically volatile and makes government's more susceptible to external pressures. More stable democracies, on the other hand, are expected to have more leverage, since patterns of cooperation are well-established. In both cases, the likelihood of employing coercive migration diplomacy is unlikely, as the openness associated with democracy decreases its blackmail potential. For authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, the threat of blackmail is perceived as credible by cooperating partners. However, a state's ability to exercise leverage may be limited if its regime stability is not ensured.

Third, Tittel-Mosser (2018) explains how a state's interests will determine the degree to which they converge with EU interests as well as the degree to which cooperation can be induced through incentives. If interests converge, cooperation is likely to occur. However, if interests differ, cooperating partners are expected to resist policy changes through reversed conditionality.

Fourth, the incentives offered by the EU and the degree to which they converge with partner state's interests is expected to influence their leverage (Cassarino, 2021). MENA states' cooperation in EU migration governance can result from their weaker bargaining position vis-à-vis the EU, or because their policy interests converge (Tittel-Mosser, 2018). Therefore, a state's interests will determine which incentives a partner state will offer and to which extent they will motivate cooperation.

Fifth, a state's economic dependence on Europe is expected to affect its leverage, since a high degree of economic dependence will translate into a loss in its ability to withstand external pressures (Stutz, 2023; Del Sarto, 2021).

Sixth, if a partner is perceived as geopolitically important for the EU, this is expected to increase its leverage, as it increases the EU's dependence on it for cooperation (Stutz, 2023; Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021).

The theoretical expectations which will be analysed in this thesis are as follows. First, regarding the EU MP, the Tunisian Revolution (2011-2012) and subsequently the Arab Spring are events which triggered mass inflows of irregular migration to Europe. At this time, Tunisia's leverage is expected to be low, since democratisation is a politically volatile process (Zardo & Cavatorta, 2018), and the post-revolution Tunisian government would still be recovering from the economic difficulties inherited from the previous regime. Thus, as migration flows from Tunisia to Europe increase, the EU will pursue enhanced cooperation with Tunisia to govern migration, using economic and political incentives to support Tunisia's democratic transition, as well as its economic recovery (Limam & Del Sarto, 2015). Despite Tunisia's interests diverging from many the EU's aims, the EU's incentives would outweigh the costs of non-cooperation, owing to its political and economic stability, thereby inducing cooperation. Hence, Tunisia is expected to establish a MP with the EU owing to its lack of leverage, deriving from its domestic politics, and its dependence on the EU. However, over the course of cooperation, interdependence between the EU and Tunisia is expected to increase, as well as Tunisia's geostrategic importance for the EU, owing to its enhanced border control capacities, thereby increasing its leverage over the EU. This would, in turn, allow Tunisia to safeguard its policy preferences where disagreements with the EU arise. In sum, under the MP, Tunisia is expected to adopt cooperative migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU, whilst safeguarding its own domestic policy preferences.

Second, regarding the MoU, the increase in irregular migration from Tunisia to Europe, which place it as the main transit point to Europe in the CMR, is expected to lead the EU to pursue increased migration cooperation with Tunisia. Additionally, these factors are expected to enhance the Tunisian government's perception of its geostrategic importance for Europe (Stutz, 2023), coupled with its ability to stem irregular migration towards Europe (Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021) resulting from cooperation under the MP. However, Tunisia's political and economic conditions are expected to condition its leverage in its cooperation with the EU. Tunisia is facing an economic crisis which threatens social unrest and the political stability of President Saied's leadership (The Economist, 2023). Moreover, since President Kais Saied's autocratic turn since July 2021 would mean that the threat of blackmail is perceived as more credible by the EU, and to increase the unpredictability of EU-Tunisia cooperation (Zardo & Cavatorta, 2018). Hence, under unfavourable political and economic conditions, Tunisia is expected to leverage its position as Europe's gatekeeper to secure political and economic payoffs *via* coercive migration diplomacy. However, despite Tunisia's attempts to employ coercive migration diplomacy to achieve its domestic policy goals, unfavourable domestic political and economic conditions will provide Tunisia little room to manoeuvre, owing to its weak leverage in relation to Europe. Since non-cooperation is not an option and continuing to pursue a coercive strategy could further threaten Tunisia's interests, due to its interdependent relationship with Europe, Tunisia is expected to revert to cooperative migration diplomacy.

Theoretical Expectation 1: Under unfavourable economic and political conditions, Tunisia is expected to employ cooperative migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU, whilst safeguarding its domestic policy preferences under the EU-Tunisia MP.

Theoretical Expectation 2: As migration flows increase, Tunisia will seek to leverage its position as Europe's gatekeeper under the EU-Tunisia MoU to secure political and economic payoffs via coercive migration diplomacy. However, under unfavourable domestic political and economic conditions to make its demands, Tunisia will shift back to cooperative migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU.

Chapter 2: Research Design

Research Design

The aim of this research is to analyse how Tunisia's leverage has affected its migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU over the course of its cooperation via migration partnerships, namely the MP and the MoU. Furthermore, as highlighted in the theoretical framework, a state's leverage will depend on domestic political (i.e., state of economy, political stability, state of democracy, state interests) and systemic (i.e., economic dependence, EU incentives, geopolitical importance) factors.

The goal of this research is to identify causal mechanisms and paths to contextualise EU-Tunisia migration cooperation by considering domestic and systemic factors that explain Tunisia's migration diplomacy towards the EU. Hence, this study employs single within-case research using process–tracing, since small-N design allows a retrospective account for the outcomes of a specific case (i.e., theory-testing), and within-case research allows for the analysis of many factors within a single case (Toshkov, 2016). Therefore, this research relies on theory-testing process-tracing, as this allows for the analysis of the hypothesised factors presented in the theoretical framework and their effect on the outcomes within a particular case (i.e., Tunisia's migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU). In turn, conclusions can be made regarding how these factors operate over time, as well as their significance in determining the outcomes.

Case Selection

I have chosen to analyse Tunisia's migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU under the EU-Tunisia MP and the recent MoU. Tunisia presents an interesting case, especially considering that it was a democracy when the MP was established, and has since suffered an autocratic turn under President Kais Saied's leadership, thereby representing a significant

rupture in terms of its governance which is expected to impact its migration cooperation with the EU. Not to mention, the shift from a MP to an MoU emphasizes the trend towards informalisation in EU migration partnerships to facilitate cooperation with third countries. Furthermore, though Tunisia's status as a democracy under the MP is unique when compared to other MENA countries, this research can shed light on the effects of regime change on cooperation in EU migration partnerships and, more generally, to shed light on how leverage affects cooperation dynamics in EU-MENA migration partnerships.

The analysis will begin with the Tunisian Revolution in December 2011 and end in the end of March 2024, when Tunisia announced its plans to sign readmission agreements with African countries (InfoMigrants, 2024). I decided to cap the analysis at this point, since cooperation under the MoU is ongoing. Additionally, since cooperation under the MP covers a larger timespan (2011-2022) than that of the MoU (2023–March 2024), I have chosen to cover cooperation under the MoU in more depth, describing in detail key events surrounding the agreement. For the cooperation under the MP, I will focus on key events and features of cooperation. Moreover, whilst the variables selected have been investigated (often individually) in cross-case quantitative and qualitative research, this study compiles these factors in a single-case qualitative analysis to see how they have featured since the Tunisian Revolution to 2023, offering a novel analysis of Tunisia's migration diplomacy in relation to the EU.

Analysis

Process-tracing is a qualitative research method used in within-case analyses, to highlight the causal mechanisms that link causes to outcomes, whereby explaining causality. In this sense, process-tracing is 'y-oriented', by focusing on the multiple complex causes of an outcome (Collier, 2011). Furthermore process-tracing is adequate for theory-testing, and

allows for policy-relevant research, to assess the potential impacts of policy interventions in future scenarios for which no data exist (Collier, 2011).

Causal mechanisms are "delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations" (Tilly 2001, pp. 25–26). Therefore, process-tracing allows us to uncover sequences of events and processes through which causal relationships unfold, i.e., causal chains (Collier, 2011).

Collier (2011) outlines the different steps to conduct process-tracing. The first step in process-tracing is to identify the causal chain that links the initial cause to the outcome of interest. This involves mapping out the key events and processes that are hypothesized to be part of the causal mechanism, which has been in the previous chapter. Second, evidence must be collected to produce a sequence of events to analyse the presence of the causal chain. Third, using the developed narrative, I will examine how the identified mechanisms operate over time, by moving incrementally through the sequence of events, thus establishing how each step in the causal chain leads to the next.

Operationalisation

As previously stated, this research investigates factors that affect Tunisia's leverage in its migration cooperation with the EU and, consequently, how this affects its migration diplomacy towards the EU.

1. Migration diplomacy

A state's migration diplomacy can either be cooperative or coercive (Tsourapas, 2019). Tunisia's cooperative migration diplomacy will be reflected by its implementation of EU policies, as well as promises to refrain from coercive migration diplomacy. In this sense, both the EU and Tunisia are expected to reap mutual gains in pursuing their interests through

cooperation, albeit to different degrees (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). However, even in a cooperative setting, Tunisia is expected to resist policy changes, for example, through accommodation (Del Sarto, 2021). On the other hand, Tunisia's coercive migration diplomacy will feature as an attempt to demand incentives from the EU, as well as threatening to or forfeiting cooperation to some degree. Hence, Tunisia's coercive migration diplomacy is determined by the weakened position of the EU.

2. Leverage

2.1. Domestic politics

State of the economy

The state of the economy is measured through economic indicators such as inflation, unemployment, and government debt.

State of democracy

The state of democracy can be understood in terms of whether government structures are democratic or authoritarian.

State interests

A state's interests are considered as "articulated political or economic [demands]" (Tsourapas, 2019, pp.1370-1371).

2.2. Complex interdependence

Complex interdependence affects a state's leverage in the degree that it determines to which extent it is dependent on its partner, and vice-versa. More dependency will translate

into less leverage, as they will need to cooperate to obtain incentives. Furthermore, cooperation over time is expected to lead to increased interdependence (Del Sarto, 2021).

Economic dependence on Europe

Economic dependence can be understood in terms of economic indicators related to trade and the export of labour, for example, and will rely on official EU data.

Incentives offered by the EU

Material incentives include technical equipment and financial support; and immaterial incentives refer to the political support of a partner country in international politics (Cassarino, 2021).

Partner's geopolitical importance

A partners' geopolitical importance can be understood in terms of the degree of volatility at Europe's borders, or so to say, the number of migrants and asylum-seekers travelling from a partner state towards Europe (Stutz, 2023; Zardo & Cavatorta, 2018). This will be defined using data provided by FRONTEX on illegal sea crossings from Tunisia to Italy. Additionally, a partner's geopolitical importance is determined by its ability to stem irregular migration towards Europe (Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2021). This will be determined by the rate of interceptions of the Tunisian Coast Guard.

Data Collection and Analysis

In process-tracing, strong causal inferences can be examined if the proposed causal mechanisms are present within individual cases (Goertz and Mahoney, 2013). This is determined considering evidence, which is defined as any observation that has inferential

value for understanding the causal mechanism (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Though causal mechanisms are difficult to observe directly, they often leave empirical traces in the form of scattered and unsystematic data (Collier, 2011). Thus, research can rely on different types of evidence to form a narrative to analyse the presence of causal chains and mechanisms, thereby revealing the complexities and nuances of causation (Collier, 2011).

This thesis relies on primary data, such as official EU policy documents and reports, policy reports independent from and financed by the EU, as well as official statements and speeches on behalf of EU institutions and the Tunisian government. Secondary data, such news reports and academic sources will also be used. This may have some limitations on the quality of research, as it lacks the nuance provided by a combination of other methods, such as interviews (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). However, I have been selective in choosing evidence with inferential value, by using triangulation, collecting "multiple independent observations" (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 128) from different sources. Moreover, limitations may arise from a lack of public access primary data provided by the Tunisian government, hence, the over-reliance on data provided by or funded by the EU, as well as European news sources, is expected to make the analysis more biased.

Chapter 3: Analysis of Tunisian migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU: From a Mobility Partnership to a Memorandum of Understanding

The analysis will proceed as follows. First, I will describe in general terms the interdependent relationship between Tunisia and the EU. Second, I will provide the context in which both partnerships were established, focusing on Tunisia's domestic politics, to reasonably derive the Tunisian government's leverage vis-à-vis the EU under both time frames, as well as both parties' interests. Third, I will describe how cooperation proceeded regarding key elements under both agreements, focusing on key EU interests (returns and readmissions, outsourcing asylum management, capacity-building in border controls) and EU incentives (political and economic support). The reasoning behind this is that by focusing on these key elements, I will be able to identify differences and continuities over the course of cooperation.

EU-Tunisia cooperation: Interdependence and interests

EU-Tunisia cooperation is characterised by asymmetrical interdependence (FitzGerald, 2020). Migration cooperation has long been a central feature of EU-Tunisia relations, having been first formalised under the 1995 Association Agreement, which foresaw the correct return of nationals who were residing irregularly on each other's territories (European Commission, 1998). Furthermore, the EU's aspirations to externalise border controls to Tunisia and manage migration crises have driven enhanced cooperation between the two, as highlighted by the EU-Tunisia MP (Del Sarto, 2021), and the most recent EU-Tunisia MoU. Thus, the EU and its Member States are dependent on Tunisia to govern migration and externalise its borders, and therefore seeks to ensure Tunisia's cooperation on this front using EU migration partnerships.

Tunisia, on the other hand, is dependent on Europe for economic and political support. First, Tunisia is highly economically dependent on the EU, which is its largest trading partner[20], and is also a recipient of macro-financial assistance from the EU particularly since the 2011 revolution (European Commission, n.d.b). Second, European political support has been pivotal in securing the legitimacy of successive Tunisian governments, a factor which is especially important when we consider the EU's support for Tunisia's democratisation (Limam & Del Sarto, 2015), not to mention, President Kais Saied's authoritarian government. To this extent, these benefits have been to a large extent contingent on Tunisia's cooperation in EU migration governance. Thus, the EU exploits Tunisia's dependence by linking migration cooperation with other policy areas where Europe's cooperation is crucial for Tunisia, thereby providing incentives for cooperation; and Tunisia is expected to leverage its role as Europe's gatekeeper to obtain concessions (Limam, 2020).

EU-Tunisia Mobility Partnership

Tunisia's domestic politics

Frustrated by corruption, growing socio-economic inequality, high unemployment, inflation, and democratic aspirations, popular uprisings broke out in Tunisia on the 17th of December 2010. What became known as the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia marks a 28-day period of civil unrest which ousted its authoritarian leader Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled the country since 1987. The Tunisian Revolution not only altered the political landscape in Tunisia, eventually leading to the country's democratisation; it also inspired anti-government movements across the MENA region in what became known as the Arab Spring, with Tunisia emerging as the only electoral democracy in the region as a result (Papada et al., 2023).

[20] In 2023, Tunisia conducted 56% of its trade with the EU, accounting for 72% of Tunisia's imports and 43.8% of its imports (European Commission, n.d.a)

Tunisia's democratisation was marked by a politically volatile and economically unstable context. After the end of Ben Ali's repressive regime, followed an ensuing political crisis owing to multiple government rotations[21], political assassinations and terrorist attacks which threatened the country's democratisation (Limam & Del Sarto, 2015). IMF (2012) data shows that in 2011, Tunisia's public debt represented 44.4% of its GDP, and the country's unemployment rate stood at 18.9%.

According to FRONTEX's (2011) quarterly risk analysis report, between January and March, over 20,000 Tunisians travelled irregularly to Italy by sea. The report states that economic turmoil and regime change in Tunisia, as well as the breakdown of Tunisia's border controls and repressive security apparatus in the immediate post-Revolutionary period led to a surge of irregular immigration from Tunisia to Europe (FRONTEX, 2011). Additionally, over one million people fled from Libya to Tunisia during the Libyan war, and Tunisia was used as a transit point for Libyans and sub-Saharan Africans fleeing from Libya to Europe.

Given the context of Tunisia's volatile democratisation, migration wasn't a priority for Tunisian policymakers, nor a politically salient issue (Natter, 2021). However, in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution, Tunisia became the main point of departure for irregular border crossings to Europe (FRONTEX, 2011) and, as irregular migration from Tunisia and Libya spiked in February 2011, European diplomatic activity became particularly active around issues of migration and mobility[22].

Several diplomatic visits were conducted to Tunis, where EU officials offered support to Tunisia's democratisation in exchange for its cooperation to govern migration (Limam & Del Sarto, 2015). This reflected the EU's strategy to manage the spill-over effects of the Arab

[21] Between January and December 2011 alone, Tunisia had four governments, three presidents and three prime ministers.
[22]

Spring, particularly the increase in irregular migration towards Europe, represented by the publication of the GAMM in November 2011.

Before the GAMM was communicated the European Commission published multiple documents communicating the EU's intentions to support democratic consolidation in the MENA region, as well as outlining its strategy to enhance cooperation with MENA states on matters of migration and mobility (for more on this see: Limam & Del Sarto, 2015, pp. 5-6). Under the GAMM, the EU's partnership approach shifted its focus towards enhancing EU cooperation with countries in the MENA region, using 'more-for-more' conditionality and linking partner countries' migration cooperation with EU financial support, as well as support for democratisation (European Commission, 2011).

An EU-Tunisia Privileged Partnership was signed in 2012, which translated into an Action Plan covering the period between 2013 and 2017, and established broad cooperation in trade, economy, migration, mobility and security (European Commission, 2012). The Plan further proposed a Dialogue on Migration, Mobility and Security, with the aim of concluding and implementing a MP.

As Limam and Del Sarto (2015) argue, Tunisia had rejected several EU attempts to establish a MP since its Revolution. However, the EU continued to exert pressure on Tunisia to sign a MP, by offering extensive support for its democratisation. Between 2011 and 2013, the EU doubled its financial assistance to Tunisia to €445 million, half of which was earmarked for democratic consolidation and economic stabilisation and integration, security, civil society, and mobility (Narbone, 2020).

Furthermore, given the large flows of irregular migration from Tunisia after the revolution, Tunisia's significance as the only democracy in the region, and the rise in terrorism in the post-Revolutionary period, the EU had exerted significant diplomatic pressure on Tunisia to sign a MP (Limam & Del Sarto, 2015).

On the 3rd of March 2014 a Joint Declaration establishing an EU-Tunisia MP was signed. MPs are legally non-binding bilateral cooperation agreements between the EU, interested Member States and a third country willing to commit to preventing illegal migration. These partnerships constitute a "long-term framework based on political dialogue and operational cooperation" with non-Member States to govern migration and are based on four pillars: tackling irregular migration, facilitating and organising legal migration, border management, and strengthening the development outcomes of migration (European Commission, 2011).

MPs are established by the EU to pursue two main objectives. First, the EU seeks to ensure the readmission[23] and return[24] of nationals from partner countries who travelled irregularly to Europe, as well as that of third-country nationals who transited through partner countries to arrive in Europe (European Commission, 2016). This goal is materialised through the simultaneous negotiation of a EURA and a VFA once a partner agrees to a MP (Koch et al., 2018). EURAs "focus on organising and expediting the process of deporting undocumented migrants from the EU by securing the country's commitment on swift identification of its citizens and speedy delivery of consular *laissez-passer*" (Abderrahim, 2019, p.16).

Second, a European Commission (2016) strategic Communication on Tunisia highlights that "taking relations with Tunisia to the next level must include a comprehensive and effective national migration policy" (p. 14). The EU aims to involve partner countries in managing asylum, which "presupposes a legal framework in accordance with international standards" (Limam, 2020, p. 2). Regarding the EU's objectives, there is a notable

[23] By *return*, it is meant the the act or process of going back or being taken back to the point of departure (Sironi & Emmanuel, 2019).

[24] *Readmission* refers to an act by a State accepting the re-entry of an individual (own national, national of another State – most commonly a person who had previously transited through the country or a permanent resident – or a stateless person) (Sironi & Emmanuel, 2019).

misalignment of interests with Tunisia and, more generally, MENA partners, as will be described below.

Readmission and returns

Regarding EU readmission and return policies, there is significant opposition from the Tunisian government. Tunisia had long been opposed to and had resisted signing a EURA to negotiate one under Ben Ali's regime, despite significant EU pressure (Dimitriadi, 2022), and only after signing its MP did it reluctantly agree to enter negotiations on to establish a EURA (Abderrahim, 2019).

Natter (2021) argues that policies that facilitate the readmission of Tunisian nationals face strong popular opposition among civil society, especially the Tunisian diaspora. She adds that regime change in Tunisia has fostered stronger relations between the government and civil society, increasing its relevance for policymaking. Readmitting Tunisians is also economically undesirable. Labour emigration to Europe[25] has been an important feature of Tunisia's economy since its independence from former colonial power France in 1956. Currently, Tunisia's emigrant population acconuts for 11% its total population, 80% of which resides in Europe (Carthage Magazine, 2023). Not to mention, remittances are structurally significant to Tunisia's economy, contributing to 4.8% of Tunisia's GDP in 2012, and 6.3% in 2022 (World Bank, 2024).

Moreover, though cooperation on readmissions is rewarded with legal migration opportunities from Member States, these are often regarded as inconsequential for partner countries. Whereas MENA partners seek economic emigration opportunities through the acquiescence of long-stay visas for their citizens, as this reduces youth unemployment and generates remittances (Limam, 2020), the conditions offered by Member States under VFAs

[25] For a comprehensive analysis of Tunisian migration dynamics, see: Natter (2015).

usually amount to a simplification of visa application procedures and very limited migration opportunities for skilled professionals (Abderrahim, 2019).

Rather, Tunisia, like other MENA countries, prefers bilateral cooperation with Member States when it comes to readmissions and visa facilitation[26]. EU Member States can leverage their close ties and mobilise more resources, in a more discreet way (Collet & Ahad, 2017), thereby providing MENA states with more leverage (Raach et al., 2022).

According to a report published by FRONTEX (2011), irregular migration was curbed by 75% with the implementation of an accelerated readmission agreement[27] with Italy in April 2011 (FRONTEX, 2011). The Italian government offered €200 million to Tunisia and temporary residence permits to irregular migrants who had arrived before the agreement's signature, as well as establishing weekly quotas to readmit new irregular migrants to Tunisia. Enhanced border control capacities of the Tunisian authorities were also facilitated by the Italian government, which provided patrol boats to the Tunisian Coast Guard. Migration cooperation between Tunisia and Italy is longstanding, having been the first country to sign a migration agreement with Tunisia in 1998, which covered the return and readmission of Tunisians and third country nationals, though the latter provision was never implemented[28] (Raach et al., 2022).

Though Tunisia cooperates on the readmission of its own nationals, mostly on a bilateral basis with individual Member States, these agreements have not been fully implemented

[26] Tunisia has many bilateral cooperation agreements with Italy, Germany, Belgium, and France to govern migration, among other EU Member States. However, many of these agreements are not publicly available. For more information on Tunisia's bilateral migration cooperation with EU Member States, see: Raach et al. (2022).
[27] The EU's long-pursued goal of establishing EURAs with key migrant transit and origin countries in the MENA region is motivated by the assumption that readmissions will act as a deterrent for irregular migration towards Europe, as well as the need to deliver quick and visible results regarding the reduction of irregular migration to European electorates, particularly in times of crises (Castillejo, 2017). This claim, however, is not supported by evidence. For more see: Stutz & Trauner (2021).
[28] Four other bilateral agreements between Tunisia and Italy have been signed. The first agreement facilitated the readmission of illegal migrants in exchange for a quota of work visas and banning collective expulsions. The terms of this agreement were further reenforced in 2003 and 2009, with bilateral agreements strengthening police cooperation and facilitating the issuing of consular passes, respectively (for more, see: Raach et al., 2022).

(Abderrahim, 2019). Between 2014 and 2018, Tunisia has registered a low average return rate of 24%, as well as reporting inefficient consular processes to this effect (European Union, 2020).

Concerning the readmission of third country nationals, transit states have little appetite for returning foreigners to their countries of origin. First, it is hard to determine which country a migrant transited through, as there are different transit points along migration routes. Most irregular migrants transiting through Tunisia to Italy first travel through Libya; similarly, for Morocco, migrants first transit through Algeria on their way to Spain (Limam, 2020). Second, returning third-country nationals may complicate states' diplomatic and financial relations with origin countries, as well as sabotaging their regional interests (Abderrahim, 2019). Third, there are logistical and legal problems that arise from readmitting third country nationals, such as their legal status in host countries, the duration of their stay, and how to proceed with returns to origin countries (Abderrahim, 2019). Therefore, the readmission of third-country nationals may simply lead to their containment in partner countries. In Tunisia, racism towards sub-Saharan African migrants has also posed problems for integration, making the question of readmission all the more problematic (FTDES, 2019).

Though Tunisia signed its MP in 2014, negotiations on a EURA and a VFA began only in October 2016. During this time, as a response to the increasing death toll of people crossing the central Mediterranean to seek safety in Europe, the European Agenda on Migration (EAM) was adopted in 2015. The EAM reiterated the goals outlined under the GAMM, however with a crisis-oriented approach to respond to the overwhelming burden on Italy and Greece, which were migration hotspots, and reinforced the role of financial incentives in facilitating cooperation under the EU migration partnerships (Koch et al., 2018).

The EU's financial support for Tunisia's democratisation has been incredibly significant for the country. Approximately €3.5 billion were allocated towards Tunisia between 2011 and

2016, to rewards its progress in the field of democracy and human rights (Faleg, 2017). Despite these financial contributions, however, the joint readmission-visa policy tool continued to show lacking progress when it came to Tunisia.

As previously mentioned, though the MP was signed in 2014, marking the date that the European Commission received its mandate from the Council to negotiate a EURA with Tunisia, negotiations on a EURA and a VFA only began in October 2016. This delay has been attributed to a lack of political will to do so from Tunisian authorities (European Court of Auditors, 2021).

During negotiations, further delays were encountered. Negotiations were hampered by a lack of flexibility from Member States regarding the exclusion of the clause regarding third-country nationals (European Court of Auditors, 2021), which Tunisian authorities had been vehemently opposed to, as highlighted by the fact that this clause has always been excluded from Tunisia's bilateral agreements with EU Member States (Limam, 2020). Additionally, Tunisia's political rotativity jeopardised progress in negotiations, which according to the Commission had been achieved on a "technical level" (European Court of Auditors, 2021, p. 23).

Regarding Tunisia's VFA negotiations, the then-Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Migration Dimitris Avramopoulos declaring that the country "could be the first (…) in North Africa to benefit from an ambitious [VFA]" (European Commission, 2016). However, the efficacy of the EU's conditionality approach under the MP, offering legal migration opportunities in exchange for establishing a EURA, would face resistance from Tunisian authorities.

First, the VFA provisions were considered as elitist, as legal migration opportunities were largely limited to high-skilled professionals, researchers and students; with few opportunities on offer for low-skilled workers (Limam, 2020). Since visa-facilitations would be contingent

on cooperation on readmissions, this would prove detrimental for the Tunisian economy, as there would be an expected reduction in remittances which, as previously highlighted, are pivotal for the Tunisian economy. Not to mention, the visa facilitations offered by EU Member States would further contribute to the Tunisian brain drain.

EU-Tunisia VFA negotiations have been characterised by the use of delay tactics. First, Tunisian authorities abstained from suggesting who should benefit from short-stay visas, shifting the responsibility of who should make these proposals to the EU (Cohen-Hadria et al., 2018).

Second, the Tunisian government, with the support of civil-society organisations, insisted that negotiations on visa facilitations should be linked with negotiations on trade cooperation, to include talks on a visa-free regime under the services liberalization chapter in its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (Abderrahim, 2019). Despite EU proposals to discuss establishing a visa-free regime under the VFA, Tunisia refused to do so, on the ground that it would be unfair for European service providers to enter Tunisia without a visa when Tunisians can't do the same in Europe (Limam, 2020). This highlights the symbolic meaning of visas – whereas EU citizens benefit from free travel to Tunisia, travel restrictions for Tunisians to enter European soil showcase their unequal treatment by the EU (Abderrahim, 2019; El Qadim, 2017).

EURA and VFA negotiations have stalled since 2019, when Tunisia asked for a pause owing to the presidential and legislative elections that would take place in October of that year (European Council, 2022), despite the EU providing political and financial support to Tunisia to revive negotiations (European Court of Auditors, 2021).

Asylum management

Though Tunisia has been de facto involved in asylum management since the Revolution, it has done so outside the realms of a legal asylum framework, nor an official migration policy[29] (Ensari et al., 2023), despite being a signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and the 1969 African Union Refugee Convention. This means that the right to asylum in Tunisia has yet to be legalised. Advances in establishing a legal asylum framework to manage asylum and a migration policy have arisen from cooperation with the EU, such as Organic Law 2004-6[30] on the prevention of irregular migration and human trafficking which was adopted under Ben Ali's regime.

Developing a legal framework to manage asylum has been one of the EU's goals in its cooperation with Tunisia, both under the 2012-2017 Action Plan and the MP, and was also mentioned as a strategic priority in a 2022 draft Action Plan (Council of the European Union, 2022). Although Tunisia has also resisted European attempts at encouraging legal and institutional reforms in asylum management (Lehmann & Dimitriadi, 2023), the EU's support for Tunisia's democratisation under the MP supported significant changes in Tunisia's asylum and migration policy (Council of the European Union, 2022).

Tunisia's 2014 constitutional reform "included guarantees for political asylum and non-refoulement, and coincided with reforms to human rights law, strengthening civil society, and a draft [asylum law and National Migration Strategy (NSM)]" in 2013, with the EU's support (Dimitriadi, 2022, p. 11). The NSM was revised in 2015 and 2017, and is based on five pillars: i) strengthening governance in migration management; ii) protecting the rights and interests of Tunisian migrants and reinforcing their links to Tunisia; iii) enhancing the

[29] For more information on Tunisia's migration-relevant policies and their implementation, see: Ensari et al. (2023).
[30] The Organic Law 2004-06 was adopted to comply with EU demands regarding the prevention of irregular migration, as well as incorporating efforts against human trafficking according to the United Nations Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants. The law "not only criminalizes human smuggling but punishes all forms of assistance to a person entering or exiting the Tunisian territory irregularly" (Ensari et al. 2023, p.19).

contribution of migration to socioeconomic development locally, regionally and nationally; iv) promoting regular migration of Tunisians and preventing irregular migration; and v) protecting the rights of migrants in Tunisia, including asylum seekers and refugees (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2017). However, government rotativity and inter-institutional conflict have prevented the official adoption and implementation of the draft legislation (Natter, 2021).

Besides these factors, the Tunisian government has also been resistant to adopting legal reforms in the field of migration. In a policy report on the EU-Tunisia strategic partnership, Lehmann and Dimitriadi (2023) argue that Tunisia's resistance to reform has been perceived as a response to European pressure to introduce legal reforms, as European funding allocated towards asylum is linked with attempts to contain asylum-seekers in Tunisia yet is unaccompanied by sufficient political and economic support from the EU to host displaced populations. Instead, asylum management is largely outsourced to civil-society organisations and to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), reflecting the Tunisian government's reluctance to take responsibility for managing asylum on behalf of the EU.

Furthermore, the Tunisian government has outspokenly been opposed to EU attempts art making it a formal host state for refugees. In 2017, Tunisia rejected the German Chancellor Angela Merkel's proposal of establishing disembarkation centres in the country, where asylum requests would be processed (Abderrahim & Knoll, 2017). This proposal was rejected by then-Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, owing to the country's young democracy (DW, 2017).

Limam (2020) argues that establishing a legal and institutional framework according to international law to manage asylum would allow EU Member States to classify Tunisia as a safe third country, thereby facilitating readmission. This would also represent a loss of leverage for Tunisia in accessing EU financial support, since the absence of such a

framework means that the EU offers financial incentives to ensure readmissions. However, it is worth noting that whilst Tunisia lacks a legal framework to manage asylum in accordance with international law, compared to other MENA partners, it hasn't been particularly important for the EU as a host country for refugees, until recently[31]. According to the UNHCR (2024c), Tunisia is currently hosting 28,200 registered refugees and asylum-seekers, whilst in 2022 this figure stood at 8,952, and in 2014 at a mere 1,118. In comparison, though Morocco is currently hosting 24,500 registered refugees and asylum-seekers, having hosted 18,066 in 2022 and 3,033 in 2014 (UNHCR, 2024d). This highlights how Tunisia's relative importance as a refugee hosting country has increased. Furthermore, Tunisia's status as a democracy after the Arab Spring provided it with leverage in its negotiations with the EU, since some EU Member States, such as Italy, classified Tunisia as a safe third country on these grounds, thus making it eligible for refugee reception and asylum management (Limam, 2020).

Capacity-building in border management

The EU has mobilised significant resources towards the enhancing the capacities of Tunisian authorities to manage its borders. Under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Stability and the Fight against the Root Causes of Displacement in Africa (EUTF), introduced under the EAM to support the implementation of the MPs, and which is dedicated to financing migration cooperation projects, Tunisia received €87 million between 2016 and 2021 (European Commission, 2023g). According to the European Commission (2023g), of this sum, capacity-building in border management received the largest share of funding (44%), with approximately €38.2 million dedicated towards integrated border management and the fight against smuggling and human trafficking. In comparison, €16 million were dedicated

[31] This highlights how Tunisia's relative importance as a refugee hosting country has increased.

towards asylum protections & human rights. In addition, under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), Tunisia received, €334 million between 2021 and 2022. Of this sum, €35 million were dedicated towards strengthening border controls and search and rescue capabilities, whilst €13 million were allocated towards protection and socio-economic integration.

Furthermore, the EU has dedicated an additional €63 million towards Tunisia's enhanced border management capabilities since 2015, through its participation in the Border Management Programme for the Maghreb Region, and the Integrated Border Management programmes (I, II, and III) (CFFD-Terre Solitaire, 2024). This support has translated into the increased capacities of Tunisian authorities in controlling sea, land and air borders, increased technical equipment and surveillance and data-collection capacities, as well as the establishment of two training centres[32] (CFFD-Terre Solitaire, 2024). All in all, increased EU funding towards enhancing Tunisia's border control capabilities have translated into an increase of interceptions of sea departures to Italy by the Tunisian Coast Guard since 2019 (Martini & Megerisi, 2023).

Despite increased cooperation with the EU regarding border management, it is interesting to note that Tunisia does not engage in formal cooperation with FRONTEX, (Council of the European Union, 2022; Lehmann & Dimitriadi, 2023). In spite of several attempts by the EU and FRONTEX to establish a working-arrangement with Tunisia, Tunisian authorities have been reluctant to allow the country to operate on its territory (Statewatch, 2022).

[32] For mor details on Tunisia's involvement in European border management programmes, see: CFFC-Terre Solitaire (2024, pp. 12-14).

Outcomes

All things considered, Tunisia's migration diplomacy under the MP can be classified as cooperative, as well as highlighting Tunisia's leverage in relation to the EU, as it successfully safeguarded many of its interests and policy preferences and obtained significant concessions despite pressure from the EU.

First, Tunisia reluctantly established a MP with the EU in 2014 because of its weak bargaining power in relation to the EU, on the one hand, and because it needed to secure political and economic support from the EU to recover economically, as well as to support its democratic transition. Through the MP, Tunisia received extensive financial and political support from the EU.

Second, having entered cooperation with the EU under the MP, Tunisia successfully managed to safeguard its policy preferences against EU policies that went against its interests. Tunisia formally rejected to cooperate with the EU in areas that were against its own interests, namely, setting up disembarkation platforms to outsource the processing of asylum applications, as well as formal cooperation with FRONTEX. Moreover, regarding Tunisia's EURA and VFA negotiations, Tunisian authorities consistently deployed delay tactics, until negotiations stalled in 2019, due to legislative and presidential elections set to take place that year. Additionally, the use of deploy tactics was also observed in the development of Tunisia's asylum policy. However, Tunisia's political rotativity was also established as an additional factor which hampered cooperation in these areas.

Third, Tunisia's cooperation with the EU under the MP is expected to increase its geostrategic importance for Europe, which has provided extensive financial support to enhance Tunisia's border management capabilities. This is expected to increase Tunisia's leverage under the MoU.

In sum, Theoretical Expectation 1 is confirmed through the analysis of the EU-Tunisia MP, as well as all steps of the delineated causal process (pp. 23-24).

The EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding

Tunisia's domestic politics

Whilst the EU-Tunisia MP was signed with a democratic government in the post-Arab Spring context, the MoU was signed in the context of President Kais Saied's self-coup, which reversed Tunisia's democratisation. President Kais Saied was democratically elected in 2019 in a landslide victory, having run on an anti-establishment and anti-corruption platform (Al Jazeera, 2019). When the President assumed power, Tunisia was facing several challenges, namely, security challenges posed by armed groups in the country[33], social unrest and economic challenges which had persisted since before the country's democratisation (Al Jazeera, 2019). In July 2021, he suspended the Tunisian parliament and the Prime Minister, eventually centralising all state powers under his control (Reuters, 2021). Saied has since been ruling by executive decree. In 2022, Saied promulged a new constitution, overhauled Tunisia's democratic institutions and began a crackdown on Tunisia's political class, thereby ensuring a rupture with the country's short-lived democracy (TIMEP, 2024), which has been hailed as the 'success' story of the Arab Spring (Nord et al., 2024).

According to UNHCR (2024a) data, in the beginning of 2023, Tunisia was at the centre of shifting migratory dynamics in the CMR which have made it an important priority country

[33] For a more detailed account of the security challenges faced by Tunisia in 2019, as well as its counter-terrorism operations, see: U.S. Department of State (2019).

for the EU. In 2023, 62% of sea arrivals to Italy departed from Tunisia (97,667 migrants)[34], thus surpassing Libya as the main departure point for irregular migrants seeking to reach Europe. Whilst sea arrivals to Italy had steadily been rising since 2019, the 50% increase registered between 2022-23[35] is largely attributed to the uptick in departures from Tunisia. Between July and September alone, over half of all sea arrivals to Italy registered that year departed from Tunisia. This shift has been attributed, on the one hand, to rising migration from West to North Africa, owing to chronic instability in the Sahel region (International Rescue Committee, 2023). On the other hand, the Italy-Libya MoU, signed in 2017, and supported by the EU, has resulted in widespread arbitrary detention, mass expulsions and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Europe-funded Libyan Coast Guard against refugees and migrants (Meddeb & Louati, 2024), hence inadvertently shifting migratory flows from Libya to Tunisia (MMC, 2023).

Whilst Tunisia has always been a notable country of origin, with Tunisians consistently ranking highest in detected nationalities across the CMR (FRONTEX, n.d.), Tunisia also became a transit hub for sub-Saharan African migrants and asylum seekers[36], who exceeded Tunisians as the largest group departing from the country in the latter half of 2023 (MMC, 2023). Whilst this can again be explained by shifting migratory flows favouring Tunisia over Libya, Tunisia has also hosted large numbers of foreigners especially since 2015, when Tunisia and many sub-Saharan African states scrapped mutual visa agreements (El Ghali & Chamlali, 2022). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic left many sub-Saharan Africans

[34] In 2022, 31% of all sea arrivals to Italy departed from Tunisia, whilst 51% departed from Libya. By 2023, 33% of all sea arrivals had departed from Libya. Between 2022-23, the number of sea arrivals departing from Tunisia increased by 202% (UNHCR, 2024b).
[35] In 2022, 105,131 sea arrivals to Italy were registered. In contrast, this figure had increased to 157,651 in 2023 (UNHCR, 2024b).
[36] The main nationalities transiting through Tunisia to Italy in 2023 were from Sudan, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and elsewhere (MMC, 2023).

unemployed, leading to labour shortages in key sectors of Tunisia's informal economy, as many fled to Europe (Meddeb & Louati, 2024).

However, the main contributing factors to the recent surge in outflows of Tunisians and sub-Saharans towards Europe lie in Tunisia's economy and its domestic politics. The country has suffered a persistent economic crisis since at least 2015, left unresolved by the government's inability to reform the Tunisian economy after the Arab Spring[37], and further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Meddeb & Louati, 2024). In 2023, the inflation rate stood at 9.3%; whilst Tunisia has also registered on average an annual unemployment rate of over 15% since 2015, reaching 16.4% in 2023 (IMF, 2024). Additionally, in December 2021, the country's national debt represented approximately 80% of its GDP (CEIC Data, 2024).

Though Tunisia had agreed to a preliminary agreement with the IMF in October 2022 for a much-needed $1.9 million loan, President Saied later openly rejected the implementation of unpopular austerity reforms which were conditional upon the loan's acceptance, calling them "foreign diktakts" (The Economist, 2023). The President had previously stated fears over the civil unrest which would result from the IMF's proposed austerity measures, such as cuts to subsidies on bread and food, with the powerful UGTT labour union threatening to paralyse the country's economy in protest of the IMF agreement (Reuters, 2023c). Moreover, reaching an agreement requires Saied's approval and active endorsement, since donors need a guarantee that once money is disbursed, that Tunisia will implement the agreed-upon reforms (Reuters, 2023c). Negotiations have been protracted since 2021, though reportedly Tunisian authorities have been preparing an alternative IMF proposal (Reuters, 2023b).

As economic conditions worsened, popular opposition against President Saied's rolling power grab continued to wane his popularity. On the one-year anniversary of his power-grab,

[37] For more on Tunisia's economy, see: Yerkes & Mbarek (2021).

the President held a constitutional referendum which would solidify his authoritarian drift. Whilst the 2022 Constitution was approved overwhelmingly with 94% voting 'yes', turnout stood at a mere 30%, which was in part due to a boycott by opposition groups (Bouseen & Lakhal, 2022). The low turnout in the President's latest step in the process to "correct the course of the Revolution" has undoubtedly put his popular legitimacy into question (Bouseen & Lakhal, 2022). The EU also took note of the low turnout, stating that a "broad consensus among the various political forces, including political parties and civil society, is both essential for the success of a process that preserves the democratic acquis and necessary for all the major political and economic reforms Tunisia will undertake" (Council of the European Union, 2022).

As the President clamped down on opposition politicians and dissent, he turned to scapegoating black sub-Saharan migrants for the country's woes (Al Jazeera, 2023; Cordall, 2023). On the 21st of February 2023, in a meeting with the National Security Council, President Saied called for the curbing of undocumented immigration of sub-Saharan Africans to Tunisia. Denouncing migration flows of black Africans as a conspiracy to change Tunisia's demographic composition and turn Tunisia into "another African country that doesn't belong to the Arab and Islamic nations anymore", the President's racist speech immediately sparked a surge in violent hate crimes against sub-Saharan migrants across Tunisia (Amnesty International, 2023). The African Union expressed "deep shock and concern at the form and substance of the statement" and urged the President to avoid "racialised hate speech" (Reuters, 2023a). This sentiment was echoed by the World Bank, which cut ties with Tunisia at the time (Shalal & Mcdowall, 2023), and the EU, which denounced the President's use of hate speech (European Commission, 2023).

In his speech, the President also ordered officials to take "urgent measures" to tackle sub-Saharan immigration, marking the commencement of anti-migrant crackdowns which have

since become routine in Tunisia (Amnesty International, 2023). Across Tunisia, and particularly in the Sfax region, which has become a main point of departure for migrants attempting to arrive at Lampedusa, since it's located only 188 km away, black African migrants have been subject to racial profiling, targeted in mass arrest campaigns and endangered by arbitrary and illegal collective deportations to desert areas near the borders with Libya and Algeria (Amnesty International, 2023). Hence, on par with Tunisia's deteriorating political and economic conditions, Tunisia's violent anti-migrant crackdown further motivated sub-Saharan Africans to travel irregularly towards Europe (Bathke, 2023; The Economist, 2023).

Whilst democracy promotion has been a central element of the EU's foreign policy since the Arab Spring, and especially in its relations with Tunisia, which has been the biggest recipient of EU financial assistance (Bobin, 2019), the European Commissions' reaction[38] to the political developments in Tunisia since July 2021 urging the country to reinstate its Parliament and uphold fundamental rights has been criticised for lacking depth or substance (do Céu Pinto Arena, 2024). Rather, the EU has adopted a security-oriented approach, highlighting its preoccupied that the country's deteriorating political and socio-economic conditions will produce waves of irregular migration towards Europe (Bobin et al., 2023).

Notably, the Italian government has been significant in setting the political agenda for EU-Tunisia relations, warning of the increasing migratory pressure from Tunisia in a Foreign Affairs Council meeting in March 2023 (De La Feld, 2023). Indeed, the surge in irregular arrivals from Tunisia to Italy since the beginning of 2023 continued to gain momentum: from January to July, the Tunisian Interior Minister reported at least 900 refugees and migrants had drowned off the coast of Tunisia (Al Jazeera, 2023). The Council set out to discuss priority

[38] In contrast to the European Commissions' reaction to the developments in Tunisia since July 2021, the European Parliament has been vocal against the country's authoritarian drift. For more on the EU's reaction to President Kais Saied's self-coup, see: do Céu Pinto Arena (2024, pp. 9-13).

actions to avert a “new Libya” (Council of the European Union, 2023). Under Italian diplomatic pressure, the European Commission expressed its intentions of establishing a “mutually beneficial” partnership with Tunisia (European Commission, 2023b) to defuse the mounting migratory pressures and to “avoid the economic and social collapse of the country”, as Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Vice-President of the European Commission put it (Bobin et al., 2023).

On the 11th of June, ‘Team Europe’, consisting of the European Commission president Ursula Von der Leyen along with Italy’s prime minister Giorgia Meloni and the Dutch prime minister at the time, Mark Rutte, travelled to Tunis, where they brokered a strategic partnership with Tunisia to get the country’s migration problem under control, which culminated in the publication of a high-level joint declaration. The joint declaration envisions a partnership which would link cooperation in migration management with economic cooperation between Tunisia and the EU (European Commission, 2023b).

Building on the joint declaration, on the 16th of July, during ‘Team Europe’s second visit to Tunis, the EU-Tunisia MoU was signed. The MoU is a declaration of the EU’s and Tunisia’s collective intentions to establish a strategic and global partnership which would adopt a holistic approach to address the root causes of irregular migration (European Commission, 2023c). According to the European Commission (2023c), the agreement is based on five pillars: macro-economic stability, economy and trade, the green transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration. Like the MP, cooperation under the MoU focuses on combating and reducing irregular migration flows and saving human lives, as well as tackling human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

Furthermore, ‘Team Europe’s involvement in brokering the deal highlights the MoU as a part of a wider trend towards the informalisation of EU migration cooperation with third countries (Koch et al., 2018), as the agreement’s signature circumvents procedural rules of

the Treaty of the Functioning of the EU, such as requiring the European Parliament's scrutiny as well as the European Council's approval (TFEU, 2008, Article 218(6)(a)(v)). Not to mention, the lack of clarity surrounding Meloni and Rutte's role in brokering the deal hampers their political accountability (Strik & Robbesom, 2024). Finally, the MoU doesn't comply with democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (TFEU, 2008, Article 21).

Though the MoU is vague on financial figures (Liboreiro & Genovese, 2023), the EU promises Tunisia a loan amounting to €900 million, 10% of which would be allocated towards immigration and border controls, and with the remaining 90% intended towards urgently needed macroeconomic measures (González & Hierro, 2023). Direct budgetary aid of €150 million would also be disbursed as a measure ensure that the Tunisian government has sufficient liquidity to maintain basic services and establish a foundation for economic reforms (Liboreiro & Genovese, 2023). Furthermore, an initial sum of €105 million would be allocated towards reenforced border controls, anti-smuggling operations, as well as swiftly returning asylum-seekers whose applications are rejected (European Commission, 2023c). The money would be provided in the form of search-and-rescue patrolling equipment, as well as to international organisations that work in Tunisia, namely the UNHCR and the IOM, to assist in 'voluntary' return and reintegration programmes (Liboreiro & Genovese, 2023).

Funds offered under the MoU are not conditional upon Tunisia reaching a numerical target in terms of annual readmissions or reducing irregular migration to Europe. There are also no additional human rights provisions regarding the EU's provision of foreign aid, besides those that are already in place.

Unmentioned in the MoU's published text, the €900 million loan offered by the EU would be contingent upon Tunisia's acceptance of an IMF loan of $1.9 billion (Hamadi, 2023a). This link offers many interpretations, as it highlights not only the interdependent relationship between the EU and Tunisia, but also the EU's leverage in its negotiations with

Tunisia. First, the link between the loan offered by the EU and Tunisia's IMF agreement can be seen as an attempt by the EU to promote long-term economic stability in the country as well as support Tunisia's economic reforms, one of the aims which is outlined in the MoU (European Commission, 2023c). A few days before the MoU's signature, Tunisia's credit rating had been indicated as being at a high risk of default (Fitch Ratings, 2023), and an estimated €7 billion in loans or credits would be required to avoid bankruptcy (Mcdowall, 2023). Hence, the link between EU financial and macroeconomic assistance and the IMF agreement is in line with the EU's policy approach to address the root causes of migration through the "migration/development nexus", which both the EU and Tunisia are committed to under the MoU (European Commission, 2023c). Second, this link also reflects the EU's attempts to leverage material incentives in the form of financial and macroeconomic assistance to pressure Tunisia into agreeing to the IMF agreement (Liboreiro & Genovese, 2023). The role of Italian diplomacy regarding Tunisia's IMF negotiations has also been significant, with Prime Minister Meloni acting as an intermediary between the two parties in their negotiations, a strategy which has been welcomed by the Tunisian Presidency (Pascale, 2023).

Moreover, the contents of the MoU highlight some differences and continuities when compared to the preceding MP, particularly when it comes to facilitating the return of third country nationals who transited through Tunisia to Europe, as well as the developing a legal framework to manage asylum.

Returns and readmissions

First, the MoU emphasizes that "Tunisia reiterates its position that it is not a country of settlement for irregular migrants. It also reiterates its position to control its own borders only" (European Commission, 2023c). This means that Tunisia is not expected to become a host

country for refugees and asylum-seekers, nor to readmit and return foreign nationals who transited through to reach Europe to their countries of origin. This reflects Tunisia's policy preferences in this area, as expressed by President Saied on the 14th of June, in a telephone interview with Charles Michel, President of the European Council. Regarding facilitating the return of refugees and irregular migrants who had transited through Tunisia to Europe, President Saied declared: "Tunisia refuses to be a country of transit or a place of establishment [for third country nationals]", and further stated that "Tunisia is only the guarantor of its own borders" (Hamadi, 2023a). Rather, the MoU instead focuses on ensuring the return and readmission of Tunisian nationals who travelled irregularly to Europe, as well as developing a system "for the identification and return of irregular migrants" who are in Tunisia to their countries of origin, in accordance with international law (European Commission, 2023c).

It must be noted that though the EU has expressed its negotiations of relaunching EURA negotiations with Tunisia since 2018, and as recently as 2023 in its assessment of Tunisia's cooperation on readmissions (European Commission, 2023d). The MoU makes no mention of the EURA and VFA negotiations, nor the EU-Tunisia MP (European Commission, 2023c), highlighting the focus on legally non-binding and informal instruments of cooperation under the MoU.

Furthermore, the EU commits itself to enable legal migration opportunities from Tunisia to Europe, by "facilitating the granting of visas by reducing delays, costs and administrative procedures" (European Commission, 2023c), as well as promoting labour migration opportunities, for example, by implementing a Talent Partnership. However, since visa facilitations and readmission procedures proceed at a bilateral level with individual Member States, legal migration opportunities continue to be conditional on the rate at which Tunisia returns and readmits irregular migrants from Europe, according to the 2019 revised

Visa Code Regulation and the New Pact on Asylum and Migration, which have reenforced the EU's use of the joint readmission-visa policy tool (Cassarino, 2020). As it stands, Tunisia's cooperation on return and readmission has been low[39], as well as being characterised by bureaucratic hurdles which make consular procedures slow and inefficient (European Commission, 2023d). Therefore, given previous experiences in cooperating with Tunisia on readmission, including its negotiations on a EURA, there are little expectations that the EU's conditionality approach using promises of visa facilitations and labour migration opportunities will yield the desired results in increasing returns and readmissions to Tunisia (Strik & Robbesom, 2024).

Managing asylum

Second, regarding asylum management, and promoting the development of a legal asylum framework, which was one of the goals of cooperation under the MP, seems to have been put on the backburner under the MoU. As previously mentioned, under the MP, the EU had supported Tunisia in developing a draft NSM as well as asylum legislation compatible with international law and the Tunisian Constitution. However, their political adoption has not taken place, owing to Tunisia's fears that the EU would outsource asylum management to the Tunisian government, making it responsible for processing asylum requests of third-country nationals who had transited through Tunisia to reach Europe (Limam, 2020).

Presumably, owing to lacking advancements in this area, the MoU limits itself to including very vague terminology to indicate that the management of irregular migration will be done so in accordance with international law, and respecting human rights (European Commission, 2023). However, the MoU fails to present any monitoring mechanism to ensure

[39] In 2022, Tunisia registered a return rate of 10% - only 2,270 of the 22,780 Tunisian nationals irregularly residing in Europe were returned following an order to leave. Additionally, only 38% of readmission requests from EU Member States were respected (European Commission, 2023d)

the protection of human rights, nor does it provide concrete safeguards to protect migrants. Instead, the MoU follows the EU's trend of allocating far more money to border controls, returns and readmission when compared to the protection of refugees and migrants which will only receive 5% of the €105 million allocated towards managing migration (EUobserver, 2023). Not to mention, the MoU includes a clause stating Tunisia's refusal to become a destination country for irregular migration also indicates Tunisia's lacking intentions in granting protections or reception to irregular migrants, a condition that the EU signed off on, despite mounting evidence of abuse against migrants by Tunisian authorities (Euronews, 2023a). Again, the fact that the EU has seemed to abandon its aim of developing an asylum system in Tunisia under the MoU reflects the policy preferences of the Tunisian government in this area.

The Lampedusa 'Crisis'

After the MoU was signed, its implementation was put into question by a series of diplomatic controversies between Europe and Tunisia. On the 14th of September, Tunisian authorities refused entry to the delegation of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee which had scheduled a fact-finding mission to Tunisia to address the country's "political backsliding (…) on democratic standards and human rights" (European Parliament, 2023), as well as to assess the MoU's implementation (Jones, 2023b). This occurred after a debate in the European Parliament's plenary session, in which members clashed over the controversial migration pact (Jones, 2023a). Criticisms were directed at the European Commission for brokering deal with Saied's authoritarian government, which was opaque and hampered accountability, as well as accusing the Commission of bankrolling dictators (Jones, 2020a). The Commission was also criticised for ignoring mounting evidence regarding the abusive treatment of sub-Saharan migrants by Tunisian authorities, including

illegal pushbacks and pullbacks after reports of desert dumps of around 1,200 migrants at the Libyan and Algerian borders (Euronews, 2023a). These criticisms further highlighted the European Commission's contradictory claims of supporting democracy and human rights, whilst providing financial and political support to the Tunisian government.

Following the MoU's signature, migration flows from Tunisia to Europe increased dramatically: between mid-July to September, sea arrivals from Tunisia to Italy had risen by 70% (UNHCR, 2024b). This influx of arrivals culminated in September in the Lampedusa *crisis*, where over 7,000 migrants arrived in the Italian island of Lampedusa in just under 48 hours, most of whom had departed from Sfax (Naradi, 2023). Naradi (2023) highlights that this figure outnumbers the island's population of 6,000, and Lampedusa's reception centre was quickly put under pressure, with reports of police using shields against migrants to prevent them from surging its gates as migrants were continuously transferred in the following days to the mainland.

The situation in Lampedusa was quickly treated as a crisis by European officials, with the Italian government holding an extraordinary meeting, where Prime Minister Meloni called for the swift implementation of the MoU (Euronews, 2023b). Responding to these calls, on the 17th of September, Ursula von der Leyen met with Georgia Meloni met in Lampedusa, where she presented a 10-point plan for Lampedusa to assist the island in managing the mass influx of migrants, including the accelerated implementation of priority actions under the MoU (European Commission, 2023g). One of the actions outlined referred to the establishment of formal cooperation between Tunisia and FRONTEX.

Amid the influx of irregular migration to Lampedusa, on the 20th of September, the European Commission (2023e) announced its intentions to disburse a €127 million financial envelope to Tunisia, follow up on the EU's promise to quickly deliver financial assistance to Tunisia, in line with the 10-point plan. This sum would be divided into two strands of

payments. The first strand of €60 million would be directly sent to the Tunisian treasury as budgetary assistance and would be sourced from an EU instrument which had been earmarked for post-COVID recovery, not from the €150 million promised under the MoU. The second strand of €67 million included €24.7 million from a 2022 financial instrument earmarked for voluntary return programmes implemented by the IOM and the UNHCR (Liboreiro & Genovese, 2023). The remaining €42 million came from the €105 million promised under the MoU for migration management and would be allocated towards Tunisia's Coast Guard and its navy to acquire search-and-rescue and border surveillance equipment.

After the European Commission had made this announcement, tensions between the EU and the Tunisian government escalated, putting the MoU's implementation into question. President Kais Saied expressed his refusal to accept the "derisory" sum of around €67 million which didn't respect the terms of their agreement (Africanews, 2023). The President stated in a press release: "Tunisia, which accepts cooperation, does not accept anything resembling charity or favour, because our country and our people do not want sympathy and do not accept it when it is without respect" (Africanews, 2023). Additionally, a few days later, the Tunisian government cancelled a scheduled visit by the European Commission's delegation to discuss the implementation of the MoU (González & Hierro, 2023).

On the 3rd of October, the EU confirmed it had disbursed the first strand of payments and stated that this payment followed a request made by the Tunisian government on the 31st of August (Liboreiro, 2023b). Regarding the second strand of payments, a spokesperson for the European Commission confirmed that €13 million and €8 million had been contracted with the IOM and the UNHCR, respectively, to facilitate voluntary returns (Liboreiro, 2023b). Tensions escalated further when it was announced that Tunisia had returned the €60 million to Brussels, having been the first non-EU member to do so (Sorgi, 2023). The Tunisian

government accused the European Commission of withholding the funds and reneging on the terms of cooperation under the MoU, and instead offering funds which had previously not been disbursed under ongoing programmes and which are not associated with the agreement (Sorgi, 2023).

The European Commission indicated that despite these events, the EU would continue to cooperate with Tunisia to fulfil the MoU (González & Hierro, 2023). Furthermore, the Tunisian government's refusal to accept much-needed EU financial assistance reflects an attempt by President Saied to disassociate EU funds from the IMF loan (Meddeb & Louati, 2024). However, these attempts have been rejected by Europe, which insists that further funding to Tunisia should be conditional on economic reforms, or else it may be encouraged to instrumentalise migration flows to blackmail the EU and its Member States (Meddeb & Louati, 2024).

By October, the Tunisian Coast Guard seemed to have resumed its activities and intercepted 82% of irregular migrants who attempted to irregularly migrate to Italy (González & Hierro, 2023). This coincided with the European Commission's announcement that it would establish an Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership with Tunisia, foreseeing negotiation to establish a working arrangement with Europol, in addition to an €18 million programme to tackle migrant smuggling and human-trafficking (European Commission, 2024b; 2023h).

In March 2024, Tunisia announced its plans to establish repatriation agreements with African countries, as a part of its national strategy to counter irregular migration, in coordination with the EU, its Member States and the IOM (ANSA, 2024). It must be noted, however, that this advancement is not necessarily against Tunisia's interests, since irregular migration, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa has become a politicised issue in the country. That same month, the EU disbursed €150 million in direct budgetary support to Tunisia to

reward its progress in implementing structural economic reforms (European Commission, 2024a). However, the European Parliament has criticised this action, as Tunisia's progress in implementing reforms was not clear, and the amount was disbursed in a single tranche, rather than gradually releasing the funds according to achieved priority actions (De La Feld, 2024).

What is clear though, is the deterioration of the rule of law and human rights conditions in Tunisia, especially for sub-Saharan migrants and refugees in Tunisia. Tunisian authorities have continued to prevent them from reaching Europe, using technical and financial logistical support provided by the EU. Between January and April 2024, around 21,300 migrants were intercepted at sea by the Tunisian National Guard, compared to 13,900 over the same period the previous year (Gastelli, 2024). According to a report entitled 'Desert Dumps' by LightHouse Reports (2024), EU funds allocated towards migration management in Tunisia have been used to carry out at least 13 incidents of "desert dumps" of black migrants between July 2023 and May 2024. Reportedly, in early July 2023, 1,200 black Africans were forcibly removed by Tunisian security forces to land borders with Libya and Algeria in early July 2023 (HRW, 2023).

Outcomes

In sum, Tunisia's cooperation under the MoU can be considered as cooperative leading up to the MoU's signature. Given Tunisia's border control capacities, resulting from cooperation with the EU under the MP, as well as the fact that Tunisia became the main transit point across the CMR in 2023, Tunisia was geopolitically important for the EU. Since President Saied's coup, the EU has become increasingly concerned that declining political and socio-economic conditions will produce develop into economic or social collapse and produce new waves of irregular migration. Furthermore, despite the EU and its Member States mobilising significant resources to provide financial and political support for Tunisia's democratic

transition, the country's recent U-turn[40] (Nord et al., 2024), has reenforced the EU's security approach in its policy towards Tunisia, bringing migration to the forefront of EU external policy towards Tunisia. Moreover, Tunisia's political and economic instability at the time of the MoU's signature made it dependent on EU financial and political incentives.

The MoU seems to have made advancements in terms of reflecting more closely the Tunisian government's policy preferences, by abandoning the EU's goals of facilitating the readmission of third-country nationals to Tunisia, as well as its attempts to outsource asylum management to Tunisia by developing a legal asylum framework, both of which had caused disagreements under the MP. To this extent, these concessions from Europe entail a symbolic dimension, as the MoU respects Tunisia's sovereignty in these areas, and thus reflect Tunisia's leverage over the EU since the MP. Additionally, the MoU reflects the wider trend towards informalisation and conditionality in EU migration partnerships, as means to facilitate cooperation with third countries.

For the Tunisian government, political support and financial assistance from the EU are critical to avoid bankruptcy and social unrest which would threaten the survival of President Saied's government. However, owing to delays in providing much-needed financial assistance, Tunisia adopted a coercive strategy towards the EU. It is difficult to determine whether the Lampedusa crisis was generated by explicitly an attempt by the Tunisian government to employ coercive migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU by capacity-swamping the island of Lampedusa, as a strategy to pressure the EU into delivering more financial assistance. On the one hand, the capacities of the Tunisian Coast Guard may have been overwhelmed by the increase in mass departures registered after the MoU's signature, which was facilitated by the mild weather during this period, as well as the fall in the price of the

[40] Whilst Tunisia had been classified as an electoral democracy since the Arab Spring, in 2021 it was classified as an electoral autocracy (Nord et al., 2024).

crossing owing to the use of metal boats (Hamadi, 2023b). Not to mention, deteriorating living conditions for sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia and anti-migrant crackdowns further drove irregular migration towards Europe (The Economist, 2023).

On the other hand, whilst Tunisian authorities are usually very active in intercepting migrants travelling by sea to Italy, the Tunisian Coast Guard seemingly relaxed its operations in the immediate period after the MoU was signed, and just as departures were increasing (González & Hierro, 2023). Furthermore, Tunisian Security Forces, who have been accused of being involved with smuggling operations (Refugees International, 2023) continued to transport irregular migrants towards coastal cities in the Sfax region, which is the main departure point for Lampedusa, "as if they were pushing them to leave" (Hamadi, 2023b). Moreover, July registered the lowest number of interceptions by the Tunisian Coast Guard in 2023 – only 848 migrants were intercepted, which is incredibly low when compared to the previous month, when interceptions totalled at 3,528 (FTDES, 2023), thus coinciding with the ongoing negotiations with to establish an MoU with the EU. Regardless, these events showcase Tunisia's potential to use coercive migration diplomacy to this effect, a fact which European policymakers and researchers have acknowledged (Gonzálex & Hierro, 2023; Meddeb & Louati, 2023).

All in all, it is plausible that the Tunisian government's frustrations regarding EU delays in providing urgently needed financial aid, whilst disbursing the sum intended to implement Europe's border externalisation measures led it to pursue a coercive strategy to obtain financial concessions, especially since President Saied's autocratic leadership would mean that the threat of blackmail is perceived as more credible by the EU (Zardo & Cavatorta, 2018).

The Tunisian governments' reimbursement of EU aid, and its cancellation of an institutional visit by the European Commission to outline the MoU's implementations are

clear examples of Tunisia's coercive migration diplomacy. The EU remains preoccupied with sustained cooperation with Tunisia, so "even in the absence of concrete outcomes on the ground, as ongoing dialogue is regarded as one of the EU's foremost assets in its foreign policy" (do Céu Pinto Arena, 2024, p. 13). Therefore, refusing EU incentives and putting into question cooperation at a rhetorical level highlights Tunisia's attempts to deploy coercive migration diplomacy to secure financial incentives from the EU.

It seems that Tunisia's attempts to dissociate EU financial support from the IMF agreement didn't succeed. Despite its coercive power, Tunisia's dependence on Europe for financial assistance limits Tunisia's leverage in relation to the EU, as it cannot credibly threaten to forfeit cooperation. Hence, as the European Commission stated this episode would have no consequences on the MoU's implementation (Strik & Robbesom, 2024).

However, contrary to the Theoretical Expectation 2, Tunisia's reversal to a cooperative migration diplomacy doesn't necessarily result from its weaker bargaining power owing to unfavourable domestic politics. First, there is a convergence of interests when it comes to dealing with irregular migration inside of Tunisia, owing to securitisation dynamics. Second, Tunisia did succeed in mobilising the €150 million promised under the MoU after the Lampedusa crisis. Furthermore, Tunisia's willingness to cooperate, highlighted by the Strategic Anti-Smuggling Operational partnership and the beginning of return agreements with other African countries, may also have increased its leverage.

Thus, Tunisia's coercive strategy led to deepened cooperation with the EU, highlighting the increased interdependence between the two because of cooperation. Tunisia's leverage continues to seem limited regarding the EU, however, as it didn't successfully dissociate the IMF deal from EU funding. Therefore, Tunisia's coercive migration diplomacy was somewhat successful.

In sum, Theoretical Expectation 2 is not completely confirmed through the analysis of the EU-Tunisia MoU, according to all steps of the delineated causal process (pp. 24-25). Contrary to expectations, Tunisia's reversal to a coercive stance highlights its leverage (albeit limited), as it managed to blackmail the EU into disbursing the promised €150 million under the MoU.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Following Katharina Natter's reflections (2023), the study of Tunisia's migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU highlights how migration has been used as a "foreign policy asset" in Tunisia's engagement with the EU and its Member States. Furthermore, this study has shed light on cooperation dynamics in EU-MENA migration cooperation, highlighting how domestic political factors and complex interdependence affect interstate cooperation and, consequently, the implementation of EU migration and asylum policies towards third countries, over time.

To answer the research question presented in this thesis, as complex interdependence increases over the course of Tunisia's cooperation with the EU, Tunisia has gained leverage over the EU, as highlighted by the fact it has successfully safeguarded its policy preferences regarding key EU interests, by accommodating EU policies and employing delay tactics. Indeed, as Natter points out, despite deepened cooperation, the MoU is unlikely to alter cooperation on the ground in matters of returns and border controls, as lacking incentives limit Tunisia's implementation of EU policies. However, Tunisia's domestic politics and structural dependence on Europe has also limited its ability to fully achieve its interests. The analysis also highlights how expressing willingness to or entering an agreement increases a country's bargaining power. Hence, the MoU is expected to alter little in terms of the implementation of European policy objectives, but instead strengthen the recourse to informal means of cooperation in migration governance. In sum, Tunisia and other MENA partners as policy agent in the EU's migration governance, and not passive recipients of EU policies.

The theoretical framework developed in this thesis integrated Rafaella del Sarto's (2021) 'borderlands' perspective and Adamson and Tsourapas (2019) Migration Diplomacy framework. I think this framework provides insights into how domestic and systemic factors influence a country's migration diplomacy, as well as the effectiveness of their strategies

which, as Adamson and Tsourapas point out, is a gap in the migration diplomacy literature. Furthermore, looking at how leverage and complex interdependence function provides useful insights for the study of the EU's externalisation towards third countries. Though externalisation is founded on asymmetrical power relationships to the detriment of partner states, the EU's attempts to exploit these power asymmetries have increased complex interdependence, allowing partner states to put forth their own interests, and thus reducing power asymmetries.

This study does also have its limitations, owing to the overreliance on European sources of information, which may produce bias. Furthermore, the complementary use of interviews and process-tracing would allow for a more in-depth and reliable analysis of EU-Tunisia migration cooperation, as there is lacking public information on interstate negotiations, which are often informal, owing to their sensitive nature.

Future research on EU migration partnerships could explore in more depth states' migration diplomacy, by considering how bilateral and post-colonial ties with EU Member States affect leverage, or of other regional actors.

Finally, EU-Tunisia migration cooperation under the MP and the MoU highlights the increasing trend towards informalisation in EU migration partnerships, and how the EU deploy extra legalism to contain irregular migration, at the cost of its proclaimed values of defending democracy and human rights. As Daniel Ghezelbash (2020) puts it, through externalisation, the EU "[pays] lip service to [its] international obligations" whilst coming up with more creative ways of evading them (p.1).

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