

# European Union and Tunisia agree dirty deal to keep refugees out of Europe

Martin Kreickenbaum  
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The European Union is willing to use any means to keep refugees beyond its borders. Last week, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Tunisian President Kais Saied signed a memorandum of understanding in Tunis that promises the country €900 million in financial aid for preventing refugees from crossing to Europe.

What this means was shown by the simultaneous ruthless expulsion of refugees from the Tunisian port city of Sfax into the desert. The coincidence of the two events reveals in all its brutality the true face of the EU: an ugly grimace that condones, incites, finances and organises racist and inhuman atrocities committed by autocratic regimes against refugees.

At the centre of the memorandum of understanding is the tightening of Europe's borders to all refugees. A total of €105 million are earmarked for the upgrading of the Tunisian border police and the deportation of refugees alone.

The EU wanted a partnership to combat people smuggling, von der Leyen said afterwards. "We will also strengthen our coordination in search and rescue operations. And we have agreed to work together on border management, on returns and on tackling root causes, in full respect of international law."

These words make a mockery of the refugees who are being subjected to arbitrary persecution, ill-treatment and deadly risks in Tunisia at the behest of the EU. Even as von der Leyen, Rutte and Meloni were shaking hands with the authoritarian Saied, Tunisian security authorities had already begun to put the agreement into practice.

For days, migrants from sub-Saharan countries, but also from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Syria, have been transported out of Sfax by bus. This was preceded by a fight between local youths and migrants in which a 41-year-old Tunisian died. Since then, refugees have been systematically persecuted, driven from their homes, chased, beaten and finally transported away.

The Libyan border police picked up about 700 refugees near the Ras Jadir border crossing. They had been exposed to the scorching sun without water or food and were completely exhausted. The Libyan border police provided the refugees with water and food, but then sent them back to the Tunisian side of the border.

A border police officer told the *taz* newspaper, "Tunisia wants to solve its social problems on the backs of migrants and neighbouring countries. This is a dangerous precedent." In this way, refugees become victims of the EU, which pays autocratic

regimes to act as Europe's gatekeepers.

At least 80 more refugees were apprehended by Libyan border guards further south near the town of Al-Assah. Two men from Nigeria reported being beaten with iron bars by Tunisian security forces and forcibly driven across the border into Libya.

According to the *Guardian*, around 165 refugees have been rescued in western Tunisia near the border with Algeria. However, there is still no trace of 250 refugees who were abandoned in the desert near Tozeur. The refugee aid organisation Alarm Phone, which was in contact with the group during their transport from Sfax to the desert, fears that their mobile phones have been destroyed and that they have been abandoned without water and food. Aid agencies report they have discovered several bodies in the desert.

"Dumping people in the middle of the desert without access to roads, shelter, shade, food or water is a form of state-authorised violence that flies in the face of basic human rights," Monica Marks, assistant professor of Middle East politics at New York University, told broadcaster ARD's *Tagesschau* news programme.

In a statement published on Facebook, Tunisian president Saied cynically dismissed concerns over the mistreatment and deportation of the refugees to the desert by saying that "the migrants receive humane treatment ... in accordance with Tunisia's values" and that the Tunisian security forces protect them.

The European Union's commissioner for home affairs, Ylva Johansson, defended the agreement between the EU and Tunisia in similar words. It was very important, she said, "that our main objective is always to save lives, to stop people from [making] these journeys that too often end in death, that is a priority."

In fact, the agreement provides for the exact opposite. Migration is one of five pillars that the agreement covers. Literally, it is about "combating irregular migration," strengthening the "operational partnership against smuggling and trafficking in human beings," "improving the coordination of search and rescue operations at sea," "effective border management" and "developing a system for the identification and return of irregular migrants" from Tunisia to their countries of origin.

The European Union is shamelessly exploiting the fact that Tunisia is on the verge of economic collapse and is in urgent need of financial aid. However, this aid is only granted if the country allows itself to become Europe's guard dog, preventing refugees from reaching the Mediterranean, intercepting and returning boats and organising the deportation of the refugees who are stopped.

The EU also makes no secret of the fact that the dirty deal on preventing refugees reaching Europe is based on blackmail. EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson stated freely that it was “clear that Tunisia is under pressure. I think this is a reason to strengthen and deepen cooperation and increase support to Tunisia.”

Of the €900 million the EU plans to pay Tunisia, €105 million is earmarked for “border management.” Johansson claimed that this money will mainly flow through international organisations working on the ground and helping refugees, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). She claimed that the EU was “not involved in the repatriation of third-country nationals to their country of origin.” It only “funds the voluntary return and reintegration of third-country nationals through the IOM.”

But this is a pathetic attempt by the EU to whitewash itself. Formally, the IOM is a UN agency, but it will organise the deportation of refugees, funded by and at the behest of the EU. To date, the IOM has not said a word about the expulsions of refugees into the Sahara Desert.

The agreement signed also states that the EU will not only finance the IOM, but will primarily provide patrol boats, jeeps, thermal imaging cameras, radar equipment and drones and thus massively arm the Tunisian border guards.

The consequences of this criminal anti-refugee policy are starkly demonstrated by the evictions in Tunisia. Lauren Seibert of the human rights organisation Human Rights Watch said, “By funding security forces that commit abuses in migration control, the EU is complicit in the suffering of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Tunisia.”

The hollow words about human rights and democratic values that supposedly guide EU and German foreign policy are not worth the paper they are printed on. Last Monday, the German government declared “full support” for the agreement. It was hoped that together with Tunisia, irregular migration will be reduced, said Christiane Hoffmann, deputy government spokesperson. There was quiet criticism of the agreement from the Green Party’s parliamentary group in the Bundestag, but Green Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock also declared her approval of the dirty deal.

The German government is even pushing for a more far-reaching agreement, as the current declaration excludes the establishment of internment camps for refugees as well as the readmission of non-Tunisian refugees from the EU. While it states that Tunisia is not a country that “agrees to the settlement of migrants with irregular status,” the migration commissioner of the German government, Joachim Stamp, named European “asylum procedures in North Africa” as a priority political goal.

The agreement between the EU and Tunisia is also intended to serve as a blueprint for further deals with the autocratic regimes in Egypt and Morocco. There are already agreements with both countries, but the measures to restrict refugees in these countries, and especially the deportation of refugees, are to be further tightened. The Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who rules with extreme brutality, already received €80 million from the EU last year for upgrading anti-migration defences to keep refugees

from Sudan out of Europe and to prevent refugee boats from leaving Egypt.

The consequences of these agreements can be observed in Niger and Algeria. In 2015, destitute Niger criminalised the accommodation and transport of refugees in return for European development aid. Germany equipped the Nigerien army with vehicles and radar equipment with €1 billion of EU money. EU border agency Frontex sent liaison officers to Niger.

Since then, the smugglers, and with them the refugees, of necessity, have taken more dangerous routes off the main roads, with the result that the number of refugees who have died has risen enormously. Four years ago, Albert Chaibou, a journalist from Niger and founder of a migrant emergency hotline, had already complained: “Our country has degenerated into a graveyard in the service of Europe.”

Apprehended refugees are put in camps run by the IOM but funded by the EU. There is neither enough water nor food there, the IOM is only interested in deporting the desperate people to their countries of origin, as is now planned in Tunisia. “We are being treated like cattle,” a refugee shouted in despair to journalists from the AFP news agency recently.

Many of the refugees stranded in Niger have in turn been driven out of Algeria and abandoned in the Sahara in the border region with Niger. The number of refugees who have died of thirst and starvation while fleeing in the Sahara is unknown, but aid organisations fear that it exceeds the number of people who have drowned in the Mediterranean. According to this estimate, far more than 20,000 refugees would have died in North Africa since 2016 simply because they fled war, civil war and economic hardship and dreamed of a decent life in Europe.

With the extortionate, dirty deals it makes with North Africa’s autocratic regimes, the EU is complicit in the state-organised persecution and displacement of refugees and the killing of thousands of people.



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