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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Implementing the Pact – strengthening migration partnerships with selected priority countries in North Africa: Tunisia – discussion paper

1. TUNISIA: A COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, TRANSIT AND DESTINATION

Tunisia is a major country of origin, transit and destination for migrants; the number of Tunisian nationals arriving irregularly in the EU has increased significantly since 2020.

In 2020, 14 665 irregular migrants who arrived in the EU (Italy) departed from Tunisia, of whom 12 883 were Tunisian nationals (88%). Departures from Tunisia multiplied by almost 4 in 2020 compared to 2019. Nonetheless, the recognition rate of Tunisian nationals is very low (3.5% in 2020)¹.

The sea route from Tunisia remains one of the most dangerous in the world. Shipwrecks and drownings are common occurrences. The latest notable event took place on 24 December 2020, when 20 people drowned off the coast of Sidi Mansour, Sfax, and a further 20 people were reported missing by IOM.

¹https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYDCFSTA_custom_498787/default/table?lang=en

By the end of December 2020, there were more than 6 000 refugees and asylum seekers in Tunisia², among whom the top nationalities were Ivorian (35%), Syrian (32%), Sudanese (5%), Eritrean (4%) and Guinean (4%).

Migrants in Tunisia, sub-Saharan nationals in particular, face difficulties in accessing the labour market, and in obtaining work/residence permits. Tunisia does not yet have a specific asylum law, and UNHCR carries out refugee status determination in the country. The protection environment in Tunisia is assessed by UNHCR as favourable, despite long-term pressure on hosting capacities³.

The majority of Tunisians depart because of a lack of economic prospects. The unemployment rate was at 16.15% in 2020 (36.5% aged between 15 to 24). **Remittances** are an essential source of income, accounting for 5.30 % of GDP^{4, 5}.

2. EU COOPERATION WITH TUNISIA

EU cooperation with the Southern Neighbourhood takes place within the framework of the **European Neighbourhood Policy**⁶ for ten partner countries, including Tunisia. After the 2011 revolution, a Privileged Partnership was signed in 2012 between the EU and Tunisia, and in 2016 the EU reinforced its support to the country with the 2016 Joint Communication 'Strengthening EU Support for Tunisia'⁷. The EU High Representative/Vice President and the Commission will shortly adopt a Joint Communication on a renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood.

Since 2011, the EU has doubled its financial assistance to Tunisia: over EUR 1.9 billion in grants; EUR 800 million in assistance for the period 2014-2020; EUR 305 million (2018) and 300 million (2019) for new bilateral EU commitments; EUR 70 million from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), to help mobilise Tunisians abroad for investment in Tunisia, and to provide economic assistance to Tunisian returnees, as well as to young Tunisians prone to migration (EUR 9.3 million); and an additional EUR 10 million for border management (on top of existing EUR 19 million) will be signed.

² UNHCR: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/tun>

³ <https://reporting.unhcr.org/tunisia>

⁴ https://diasporafordevelopment.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CF_Tunisia-v.2.pdf

⁵ <https://www.afd.fr/en/actualites/covids-consequences-global-remittances>

⁶ https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_17_1263

EU support to Tunisia is expected to continue under the new multiannual financial framework 2021-2027.

Integrated Border Management (IBM)

With a view to helping Tunisia to honour its commitments/responsibility towards its citizens and European partners, the EU has been focusing on supporting Tunisia in: **i) border management ii) managing the mobility of people iii) irregular migration**. Tunisian border agencies are constantly being urged to respond to the multiple threats associated with terrorist or criminal groups, and the prevention of irregular movements into Europe. A very significant EU-funded support programme, benefiting the Tunisian Coast Guard, is currently being implemented.

Several Member States have bilateral projects with Tunisia **on integrated border management and counter-smuggling**. In contrast, the Tunisian authorities have not yet engaged in structured cooperation with Frontex.

Mobility Partnerships / bilateral agreements

Tunisia signed a Mobility Partnership in 2014 with the EU and 10 Member States: Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Italy, France, Poland, Portugal, UK and Sweden.

There are currently two ongoing EU-funded pilot projects on legal migration that include Tunisia: HOMER (High Opportunity for Mediterranean Executive Recruitment) and THAMM (Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa). There is a further project, MENTOR 2 (Mediterranean Network for Training Orientation to Regular Migration), with a possible launch in February 2021.

Asylum

The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) is establishing regular contacts with Tunisian authorities to jointly identify where EASO could provide support (within the framework of the EASO regional pilot project for North Africa, under the umbrella of the Regional Development and Protection Programme for North Africa - RDPP NA⁸), focusing on fostering regional peer-to-peer exchanges, capacity development, and the establishment of national asylum legislation and systems.

Cooperation on readmission

Following the signing of the Mobility Partnership, the EU obtained a mandate for the negotiations of agreements on **readmission**. Five negotiations rounds took place with good progress, but were postponed in autumn 2019 due to the elections. The EU is currently discussing the resumption of negotiations as soon as possible.

Operational Mediterranean Initiative

Following the virtual conference on counter-smuggling held on 13 July 2020 with the participation of five African Partners (Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Mauritania), five Member States (Italy, France, Spain, Malta and Germany as the Presidency of the Council of the EU), and the European Commissioners for Internal Affairs, Ylva Johansson, and for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, the **Operational Mediterranean Initiative** was launched, as part of the implementation of the external dimension of the Pact.

On 17 August 2020, Commissioner Johansson and Commissioner Várhelyi visited Tunisia, and Commissioner Johansson is planning a follow-up visit when the situation in Tunisia improves.

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/publications/regional-development-and-protection-programme-north-africa-rdpp-na_en

Global approach to cooperation: ‘win-win’ solutions

Tunisian authorities express interest in a comprehensive approach to migration issues, encompassing not only security aspects, but also the possibility of **developing further legal migration channels** as a response to their young people’s needs, whilst addressing demographic challenges in Europe. They also advocate a global strategy on fighting poverty, promoting employment and supporting the development of the countries of origin.

3. WAY FORWARD: AREAS TO EXPLORE / TOPICS FOR DEBATE

Migratory flows from Tunisia will probably remain high in 2021. Regarding cooperation with Tunisia, an assessment is needed as to whether all interests are being met or whether there is room for improvement. It is also essential to build a shared understanding with Tunisia on the need to address irregular migration and migrant smuggling. Cooperation in the field of integrated border management, with the active involvement of Member States and Frontex, including capacity-building and training as well as operational cooperation, should be further developed and promoted.

It is also necessary to address the **root causes of irregular migration**, including the lack of economic prospects and political instability. Tunisia should adopt its asylum law (drafted in 2017, but pending presentation to the Parliament), and build up a robust national protection system. The EU should improve **legal migration channels** for students/workers in some areas (linking labour needs to available skills) that could help counter the narrative of smugglers. Under the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Commission is developing Talent Partnerships between the EU, its Member States and Tunisia, encouraging mobility for labour/training purposes, drawing on the positive experience of the pilot projects with EU funding.

As regards **the prevention of and fight against irregular migration**, the Commission's objective is strengthened cooperation to prevent dangerous journeys and irregular border crossings. The 2021-2025 EU Action Plan against migrant smuggling (to be adopted in Q2 2021) aims to provide a comprehensive framework for cooperation. A Common Operational Partnership project to combat migrant smuggling titled 'North Africa against Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings' is currently under way, and also includes Tunisia⁹. There is an ongoing awareness campaign on the risks of irregular migration, as well as on legal migration alternatives and available economic opportunities in the country or region of origin¹⁰.

Only partnerships that take the interests and needs of both sides into consideration and benefit all parties involved are likely to succeed. The central interest of the EU and Member States in Tunisia should therefore be to move forward consistently and comprehensively with Tunisia on all aspects of migration, to contribute to the implementation of the Pact.

Guiding questions:

Taking into consideration the need to have a comprehensive approach, as well as the context of Tunisia and its needs and the EU's political priorities on migration management:

- 1. What are the key opportunities for strengthened high-level political engagement with Tunisia on migration?**
- 2. What should the priorities for strengthened cooperation on migration be?**
- 3. What tools can we use to improve cooperation with Tunisia?**
- 4. How can we maximise the effectiveness of the financing instruments?**

⁹ ISF-P funded, AWP 2018, January 2020 – December 2022.

¹⁰ AMIF-2017-AG-INFO, November 2018 – October 2021.