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European Union-Tunisia Relationship

European Union-Tunisia Relationship: "Stop People but Let Goods Through"

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In the aftermath of what has often been referred to as the "Arab Spring", the European Union (EU) gave much more attention to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region, especially to Tunisia, where the democratic transition was more likely to bring about hope, as its peaceful political advances stand in contrast to most of the Arab Region's tragic chaos. Taking into consideration its unique experience and geopolitical position, the EU has had a strong belief that Tunisia needs assistance to overcome its critical economic problems and social unrest.

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In establishing the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU seemed, since 2011, to grasp the importance of fostering stability, security and prosperity with its southern neighbours, particularly with Tunisia. However, with increasing flows of migrants and social and economic problems in Europe, priorities seem to have changed. Two main issues have lately dominated the relationship: the main negotiations are held on the readmission of migrants and conditions of signing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA).

"High fences do not make good neighbors" [1]

For decades, Tunisia has been both a transit country for thousands of undocumented migrants and refugees from the region and a source for thousands of desperate Tunisian youths, seeking a better future in Europe. Established in March 2014, the EU-Tunisia Mobility Partnership (MP) gave Tunisians a lure of false hope that European gates would be more open. Through the past five years more and more restrictions have been put on obtaining visas, pushing young people, who are driven by high unemployment and lack of economic prospects, to take dangerous sea routes increasing death tolls. Lately, with the rise of nationalist and radical rightwing parties that benefited from the "threats" of immigration and multiculturalism, the number of migrants decreased, but the death toll has increased especially after the criminalization of search and rescue operations led by non-governmental organizations in the Mediterranean Sea. For the last two years, more pressure is being exerted on Tunisia from European countries not only to arrest Tunisian migrants but also to host intercepted migrants in the sea. Rather than helping the country to overcome its inherent economic and social problems, the EU is more interested in other priorities, mainly pushing Tunisia to sign agreements on both criminalizing Tunisian youths who take to the sea and readmitting migrants who pass through the country, often linking "effective migration management to financial assistance." [2]

Unbalanced relationship

Perversely when negotiating the DCFTA, the EU has been pushing Tunisia to sign a treaty to expand market access for goods, services and investments. While the EU seems to be in a hurry to sign such accord, Tunisian civil society and trade unions have had objections to the DCFTA, and for good reasons. First, the Association Agreement (AA),

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that was signed in 1995 and that initiated a free trade zone on industrial products, has never been evaluated. That's why Tunisian civil society has always asked for "an independent and transparent" evaluation. Moreover, credible experts agree that the free trade zone established after the agreement has benefited the European side as it has increased imports without having any positive impact on Tunisian exports, contributing to more deficit in the balance of trade. Also, reducing customs duties have led to the fall of state income, a fall that's been compensated through more middle and lower middle classes taxation.

With DCFTA, the EU wants more. It aims to remove all remaining restrictions, mainly in agriculture, food and services, investment and public procurement. Instead of helping Tunisian ailing economy, such extended liberalization would strike it with full force.

The main concern is agriculture, the precarious agriculture sector can never be able to compete with the heavily subsidized European agro-food counterparts.

Civil society and trade unions are also worried about the unbalanced power between both sides, how could a small country with a precarious economy compete with a leading trading power?

Another problem is the unbalanced mobility. While European citizens are automatically granted a three- month visa when entering Tunisia, Tunisians find it more and more difficult to get into the Schengen space. For instance, the EU facilitates (and often encourages) the immigration of Tunisian elite, causing a real brain drain from the country, while it puts more and more restrictions on granting visas to unskilled workers and unemployed youths, including university graduate students.

Neither civil society nor trade unions would refuse a win-win trade agreement with the EU, but such agreement should be clear and transparent and take into consideration interests of both parties. Tunisians also think that they should have equal unrestricted access to Europe, on the basis of reciprocity.

The EU has promised to support the Tunisian political transition, that could not happen without helping the country resolve its economic and social difficulties. That's the Sine qua non condition for the survival of democracy and stability around the Mediterranean basin. Imposing an accord without sufficient safeguards and support would merely worsen the situation and ultimately question the relevance of declared good intentions.

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[1] See my article "High Fences do not make good neighbours" International Journal for Human Rights, July 2016

[2] See "Tunisia's Role in the EU External Migration Policy: Crimmigration Law, Illegal Practices, and Their Impact on Human Rights", Journal of international migration and integration, February 2019, by Vasja Badali?