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European Union

Memorandum of shame: more camps and pogroms

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A “Memorandum of Understanding for a Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership” between the European Union and Tunisia was signed in Carthage on 16 July 2023.

The EU delegation was composed of Giorgia Meloni, Ursula Von der Leyen and the resigned Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte. In fact, the majority currents of European political forces were present, that of reaction and the right represented by the Italian Prime Minister, that of moderate Christians by the President of the European Commission, and that of conservative liberals by Rutte. Seemingly divided among themselves, Europe's main political forces, including those of the centre-left, have in recent years shared the policies of Fortress Europe, which aim to ruthlessly oppose the arrival in Europe of those fleeing hunger, misery, wars, racism and sexism.

What does the memorandum say?

It is based on five pillars: macro-financial assistance, economic relations, energy cooperation, migration and the promotion of people-to-people contacts. [\[1\]](#)

In concrete terms, it already provides for the allocation of €150 million to support the Tunisian budget and €105 million to support its border control. But it also provides for the strengthening of cooperation in the field of energy. Officially, the EU will help Tunisia in its transition to green energy. It will most likely be a question of strengthening projects already underway, involving Italy in particular, through the already planned construction of submarine cables across the Channel of Sicily, the environmental impact of which is very questionable. What is certain is that the energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine is pushing European powers to look for new sources of energy supply. From this point of view, the relationship with Tunisia is becoming increasingly strategic for Italy.

However, the Tunisian president will have to wait to secure the €900 million tranche of funding from the EU. The Commission will not budge until the impasse between the IMF and Saied is resolved, with the former demanding sufficient reforms before disbursing the 1.9 billion loan and the latter protesting against the “diktats” of the International Monetary Fund. It is precisely for these reasons that the Commission will play the role of a trusted intermediary between its government and the IMF, especially since some of the planned reforms will certainly also benefit the major European powers.

Gentiloni's precedent

The recent agreement is the latest initiative in the extension of the outsourcing of funding for the management of migration flows. The memorandum is reminiscent of the one signed in Rome on 2 February 2017 with Libya, between the then Italian Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, and the head of the Libyan government of national reconciliation, already dubbed the “Memorandum of Shame”. According to Amnesty International sources, it led to the interception at sea of 82,000 people who were then forcibly returned to Libya: men, women and children who were arbitrarily detained in veritable concentration camps, subjected to forced labour, torture of all kinds, inhuman and degrading treatment, rapes and murders that still have no official culprit.

In the meantime, the number of casualties in the Mediterranean has not decreased and even seems destined to

increase. It is estimated that at least 26,000 people have died trying to cross what for centuries was a veritable natural bridge linking populations, cultures and trades, but which is now being transformed into a veritable marine graveyard.

Today, as in the past, the aim of European governments is to condition aid on an increased effort by Tunisia to block departures, without any consideration for human rights and respect for political freedoms.

Saied's authoritarian turn

Once elected president, Saied succeeded in having a new constitution adopted on July 25, 2022, which established a real authoritarian regime corresponding to the strengthening of the counter-revolution that followed the “Tunisian Spring” of 2011. For example, the government under his authority no longer needs to obtain a vote of confidence from the legislature. Saied himself can impose certain laws without putting them to a vote in parliament. In fact, the executive and legislative branches of government are increasingly coinciding with his person.

The authoritarian stranglehold is also visible in the strong repression against opponents who are threatened not only by the police, but also by squads very close to the government. The repression affects all political forces, those that have already been in power such as the Islamists of Ennahda, the left-wing opposition forces as well as those nostalgic for the former Ben Ali regime.

Faced with the economic crisis hitting the country, Saied has relied on nationalist and racist themes to reach a consensus. The Tunisian president has indeed claimed Arab and Muslim culture as the only one belonging to the Tunisian people; He exalted national sovereignty in the face of “foreign interference” that would prevent the people from freely expressing their will; he advocated the theory of “ethnic substitution” dear to European fascist and reactionary forces.

His speech delivered on 21 February 2021 in the wake of the violent attacks – veritable pogroms – against migrants in sub-Saharan Africa is emblematic. According to the Tunisian president, “hordes of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa” have arrived in Tunisia and “violence, crimes and unacceptable behaviour have followed”: an “unnatural” situation that is part of a criminal plan to “change the demographic composition” to make Tunisia “another African state that would no longer belong to the Arab and Islamic world.”

It is a question of blaming migrants for the capitalist and neoliberal policies that he has totally accepted. On this point, the nationalisms of all countries are in agreement. It should come as no surprise, then, that Saied is willing to facilitate the repatriation of his own citizens, while refusing to repatriate citizens of other nationalities, which is indeed provided for in international law, although increasingly EU members only take this into account when it serves their interests.

This policy of anti-migration and security cooperation has increasingly dramatic consequences: between January and May 2023, there were 534 deaths and disappearances near the Tunisian coast, more than 3,500 arrests in Tunisia of sub-Saharan migrants for “illegal residence” and 23,093 migrants intercepted by the Tunisian authorities. Despite this, the year was marked by an increase in arrivals to Italy. For many, the situation has become untenable in many parts of Tunisia and Africa: how can we believe that borders, no matter how fortified, can prevent migrants from trying to cross? The only consequence of this escalation of security is the explosion of the number of deaths.

Combining racism, authoritarian impulses and the demands of the bourgeoisie

Governments of all colours in the EU and nationalists of all kinds seek, on the one hand, to feed the security impulses of a petty bourgeoisie that no longer sees a way out of the crisis and, on the other hand, to fuel the war between the poor while seeking to be the most reliable bearer of the interests of the bourgeoisie.

The discourse on closing borders only serves to maintain an increasingly authoritarian and police power, playing on division and racism. At the cost of thousands of deaths and unspeakable suffering. This serves to divide workers at home, to grant them differentiated status in return for miserable wages and living conditions.

It is no coincidence that reactionary and centre-left forces share the policy of quotas for immigrant labour. It seems paradoxical that, on the one hand, they call for a ruthless fight against illegal immigration and, on the other hand, they bow to employers' demands for immigrant labour.

The warning is clear! You can come to Italy, illegally or legally, but only for the least protected jobs. And, if necessary, one is fired. And in any case, the condition is precarious. For these reasons, it is necessary to combat the racist and pro-business logic that unites reactionaries, moderates and social democrats in the defence of Fortress Europe.

The struggle for the opening of borders, for the closure of camps, for the respect of human rights, for the end of neo-colonial relations and of Europe's imperialist domination of Africa must therefore be intertwined with the defence of collective agreements for working conditions and wages (a battle that is developing in the logistics sector), and with the struggle for equal rights for all workers, including the right to a residence permit, housing, health, education.

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[1] Macro-financial assistance (MFA) mainly takes the form of loans granted on very favourable terms and with low interest rates. Loans are released in tranches. To obtain funds, countries must have signed a financing programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), meet human rights and anti-corruption conditions, and carry out democratic, economic and governance reforms. To finance these loans, the European Commission borrows on the capital markets and then on-lends the funds to the recipient country.

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