

Tunisia's Influence in Europe

The European Union relies heavily on Tunisia to stem migration, giving its increasingly authoritarian president leverage in negotiations with the bloc.

April 5, 2023



President Kais Saied, seen here on a poster in Kairouan, has derailed Tunisia's infant democracy. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

You're reading The Interpreter newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Original analysis on the week's biggest global stories, from columnist Amanda Taub.

The last time major unrest overtook Tunisia, an entire region convulsed.

Tunisia's revolution in 2011 spread to neighboring countries in what became the Arab Spring, variously toppling authoritarian leaders, prompting crackdowns and starting wars. For years afterward, Europe and the United States heralded Tunisia as a lone success as it shifted from dictatorship to democracy. Eager to have a reliable neighbor in North Africa, the E.U. poured [billions of dollars](#) into Tunisia's transitional governments.

But then the governments kept transitioning. A succession of presidents have led Tunisia since the revolution, [and the latest, Kais Saied](#), has derailed its infant democracy, [instituting one-man rule](#). Now Tunisia's political crisis is colliding with an economic crisis, threatening the country's stability.

While European countries want to condemn Saied's rising authoritarianism, they also want to limit migration from Tunisia. And Tunisia's escalating crises could send more migrants across the Mediterranean, an outcome that E.U. nations, especially Italy, hope to avoid.

"The E.U.'s primary interest is stability. And that means keeping the migrants out," said Vivian Yee, the Times Cairo bureau chief.

Tunisia maintains powerful influence in Europe, an example of the diplomatic leverage of transit countries — specifically countries that are the last point of departure for migrants seeking asylum. (The phenomenon can also be seen in Mexico's relationship with the U.S., which we [covered in part a few weeks ago](#).) Let me explain.

What is happening in Tunisia?

Tunisia's democratic experiment [has largely unraveled](#).

In the years after the Arab Spring, Tunisian presidents struggled to establish new governments and stabilize the country's economy. Tunisians' freedoms expanded, but the cost of living soared out of reach. In 2019, [Tunisians in despair](#) elected Saied, a leader whose severity and formality earned him the nickname "RoboCop."

Harnessing citizens' [disillusionment with democracy](#), he [rewrote](#) Tunisia's Constitution, overhauled elections, stripped Parliament of its power and gave himself sweeping authority.

"Saied has been on a steady march towards dictatorial consolidation," said Monica Marks, a professor at N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi who studies Tunisia. "And in February, he commenced his hard repression phase."

Earlier this year, Saied jailed [more than 20 prominent politicians](#), journalists, activists and others who have failed to bow to his wishes. He also vilified migrants, threatening their safety. Migrants and some Black Tunisians have [been attacked](#), fired and thrown out of their homes, and some [camped](#) outside the U.N. migration office in Tunis, the capital, seeking assistance.

Saied has also done little to abate a spiraling economic crisis. The country is deeply in debt, a problem exacerbated by the pandemic and the rising cost of grain. Inflation and unemployment [are rising fast](#). Tunisia's bond market is [at risk of defaulting](#). "It's an economic time bomb," said Tarek Megerisi, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

How does the E.U. rely on Tunisia?

Tunisia's political and economic crises aren't [unique in the region](#). But European countries are particularly interested in Tunisian stability.

"The E.U.'s policy pivots on a single fulcrum, and that fulcrum is migration," Marks said.

Tunisia's coast juts out of North Africa into the Mediterranean, making it Italy's closest neighbor in Africa — and a primary point of departure for many migrants from elsewhere in Africa hoping to reach Europe.

The E.U. relies on Tunisia to limit the number of people who reach Europe. Migration control "is almost completely externalized to Tunisia," Megerisi said.

The Tunisian Coast Guard patrols the sea and [intercepted tens of thousands](#) of migrants last year, according to the Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights, a nongovernmental organization. But the coast guard is overwhelmed, and more people have been reaching Italy. So far this year, [around 16,000 migrants](#) have arrived in Italy after leaving Tunisia, according to the United Nations. That's roughly 10 times the number [in the same period last year](#).

Italy elected a hard-right government last year, led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, which [appears to have taken a harsher line](#) on [migration](#), and officials have suggested the country could see many more migrants arrive if Tunisia's economy collapses.

So Italy is working to avoid a wholesale economic collapse in Tunisia. Meloni's government is [pressuring the I.M.F.](#) to release a \$1.9 billion loan to Tunisia, one that has been stalled for months. Saied has been reluctant to accept the loan's far-reaching stipulations, including strict austerity measures that would cut into Tunisian wages and raise the prices of basic goods — a formula that could lead to unrest.

The political leverage of transit countries

The case of Tunisia represents an example of [migration diplomacy](#), experts say: when a country's position in the global migration system becomes a strategic asset in international politics, helping its government reach its economic or political aims.

"Migration diplomacy is a phenomenon that we see occurring more and more in recent years," said Gerasimos Tsourapas, an international relations expert at the University of Glasgow. "And it's increasingly become a pressing issue for Europe, but also for other parts of the world."

In 2016, during the Mediterranean migration crisis, Turkey and the E.U. [reached a deal](#): Turkey would take in people sent back from Europe in exchange for \$6.6 billion in aid. Other countries, Tsourapas said, saw this as a blueprint to leverage migration for money.

In 2021, Morocco allowed migrants to enter Spanish territory. Hours later, Spain approved [\\$37 million in aid](#) to Morocco for border policing. And later that year, the E.U. accused President Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus of trying to manufacture a migrant crisis on [Belarus's border with Poland](#) in the hopes of getting sanctions lifted.

But in the case of Tunisia, the threat of increased migration may pay off in legitimacy as well as cash.

[European officials](#), including Italy's foreign minister, have recently visited Tunis to discuss migration, conferring credibility on Saied in the weeks after his comments denigrating migrants and arresting dissidents. And in a sign of the issue's growing importance to both Italy and its allies, Antony Blinken, the U.S. secretary of state, recently [called his Italian counterpart](#) to discuss it specifically.

While experts say there does not appear to be any grand plan behind

Saied's decisions, the specter of a migrant surge has still become a strategic asset for his government: Tunisia's Western partners are eager to prop up its economy however they can, even if that means supporting an I.M.F. bailout that would help an increasingly authoritarian president stay in power.

That could give Saied some leverage in negotiations — and it could help suggest to him that the West is willing to overlook any abuses under his rule.

Thank you for being a subscriber

Read past editions of the newsletter [here](#).

If you're enjoying what you're reading, please consider recommending it to others. They can sign up [here](#). Browse all of our subscriber-only newsletters [here](#).

I'd love your feedback on this newsletter. Please email thoughts and suggestions to interpreter@nytimes.com. You can also follow me [on Twitter](#).