

**Department of Political Science, Graduate School
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Chair of Monde arabe contemporaine: approches socio-politiques

**Italy as a facilitator?
Rome and Tunis between domestic and
international challenges**

Prof. Pasquale Ferrara

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Giuseppe Scognamiglio

CO-SUPERVISOR

Alessia Improta (651592)

CANDIDATE

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABP	Balance of Payments Aid Programme
AFDB	African Development Bank
AFET	Committee on Foreign Affairs
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AICS	Italian Agency for Development Cooperation
AMF	Arab Monetary Fund
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
APR	Asylum Procedures Regulation
BCT	Tunisian Central Bank
BSA	Bilateral Swap Agreements
CBC	Cross-Border Cooperation
COSPE	Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries
CSF	Civil Society Facility
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EASTMED	Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline
EED	European Endowment for Democracy
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EFSD+	European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus
EFF	Extended Fund Facility
EIP	Economic and Investment Plan
EIB	European Investment Bank
EMASoH	European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz
EMP	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
EU NAVFOR	European Union Naval Force
EUNAVFOR MED IRINI	European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Irini
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
FEMIP	Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership
FIC	Italian Climate Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GSN	Government of National Salvation
GUN	Government of National Unity
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISPI	Institute for International Policy Studies
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MACAM	National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art

MED	Mediterranean
MEP	Member of European Parliament
MIASIT	Mission of Assistance and Support in Libya
MIBIL	Italian Bilateral Military Mission in Lebanon
MINUSMA	Integrated Multilateral Stabilisation Mission
MISIN	Mission in Niger
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NMI	NATO Mission Iraq
NOC	National Oil Corporation
PCAM	Programme for Business Competitiveness and Market Access
PNRR	National Recovery and Resilience Plan
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OTE	Tunisian Economic Observatory
PRIMA	Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area
PROSOL	Tunisian Solar Programme
RFA	Regional Financial Arrangements
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SAR	Search and Rescue
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
SPRING	Strengthening Partnership and Inclusive Growth
STEG	Tunisian Company of Electricity and Gas
TSP	Tunisian Solar Plan
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
UGTT	Tunisian General Labour Union
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
URSS	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
US	United States

Introduction

Italy as a facilitator in Tunisia?

The question that opens this thesis encompasses a universe of complexity and ambiguity. Can Italy effectively position itself between Tunisia's internal dynamics and international pressures? Or, behind its apparent neutrality, do Italy's national interests and strategic considerations blur the line between genuine diplomatic assistance and the protection of its own interests?

This thesis intends to explore Italy's role in a context that represents both a challenge and a diplomatic opportunity. The aim is to examine the complexity of the relationships between Italy and Tunisia, influenced by historical factors, contemporary political pressures, and an increasingly unstable Mediterranean. The region, in fact, is not just a physical space, but an area of extraordinary complexity and richness, a crossroads of civilizations, cultures, and political power that has always exerted a strong influence on the nations that border it. Today, this sea represents a geopolitical paradox: it is simultaneously an area of deep crises and a zone of essential connectivity. Climate change, migration crises, energy dynamics, and geopolitical realignments are just some of the challenges that define the present and future of the region.

In this complex geopolitical landscape, Italy stands out for its strategic position and its historical role as a bridge between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Its geographical location in the heart of the Mediterranean has constantly influenced the power dynamics in the region, giving Italy a unique and complex responsibility in contributing to stability and cooperation among the nations that border this sea. From the Roman era of "Mare Nostrum" to the imperial ambitions of fascism, and through the post-war policies and the Cold War, Italy has sought to assert its influence in the Mediterranean, evolving from passive diplomacy to a more active engagement, especially in the 21st century. Today, Italy must balance its multilateral commitments within the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) with intra-regional relations in the Mediterranean, particularly with Tunisia, as its foreign policy is characterised by the need to address security concerns while simultaneously promoting economic development and regional stability. The recent recalibration of Italy's foreign policy strategy, through initiatives such as the Mattei Plan and the Rome Process, reflects this kind of comprehensive approach to Mediterranean diplomacy, because it integrates security, economic cooperation, and social development.

Tunisia, which represents a kind of mirror of the contradictions of the contemporary Mediterranean, occupies a unique position in Italy's Mediterranean strategy, not only due to the historical ties that bind the two countries but also because of contemporary challenges that require close cooperation. Since the 2011 revolution, which sparked the Arab Spring, Tunisia has undergone a turbulent transition, with initial successes in the democratisation process followed by increasing political, economic, and social instability. The recent authoritarian drift under President Kais Saied, persistent economic difficulties, and the transformation of the country into a primary migration hub pose significant challenges for Italy, but also for the entire EU. Strategic relations between Italy and Tunisia are shaped by several factors. Firstly, Tunisia's geographical proximity to Europe makes Italy a crucial partner in managing migration flows from Africa to Europe, putting the European country in a leading role in coordinating European efforts to address this challenge. Secondly, Tunisia's economic stability is of fundamental importance, as an economic collapse in Tunisia could have serious repercussions for the region, increasing migration pressures and potentially further destabilising North Africa. Finally, Tunisia's political trajectory, particularly under Saied's presidency, poses a delicate challenge for diplomacy. While Italy and the European institutions have an interest in promoting democratic governance in Tunisia, they must also confront the reality of authoritarian regression and the implications for regional security.

Thus, Italy's engagement with Tunisia in the contemporary context tests the country's ability to act as a facilitator in relations between the EU, international organisations, and Tunisia in the Mediterranean. The efforts put in place to navigate the challenges of migration, security, and economic development in the north African country are driven both by national interests and a commitment to regional stability. However, the tension between these two objectives raises important questions about the sustainability and ethical implications of Italian foreign policy. In light of this, this thesis aims to answer three main research questions:

1. To what extent is Italy's advocacy for Tunisia in international fora based on objective criteria, rather than on ongoing bilateral negotiations aimed at reducing irregular migration flows? The idea is to explore the motivation behind Italy's commitment to Tunisia, analysing whether the influence exerted in international contexts is driven by a genuine interest in Tunisia's stability and well-being or if considerations related to managing migration flows to Europe, particularly to Italy, prevail.
2. To what extent is Italy neglecting Tunisia's democratic regression in favour of predominant national interests? The purpose is to investigate whether Italy, in its attempt to maintain Tunisia's stability and reduce the influx of migrants, is tacitly or explicitly accepting the

authoritarian drift of the Tunisian government, sacrificing democratic principles in the name of national strategic priorities.

3. How can a balance be found between liberal principles and the need to avoid Tunisia's economic and social collapse? This question addresses the central dilemma that Italy must resolve: how to reconcile the commitment to promoting democracy and human rights with the urgent need to stabilise Tunisia to prevent a collapse that would have negative consequences for the entire Mediterranean region.

Considering the Italian approach to Tunisia as an interesting case study for analysing the dynamics of facilitative activities in international relations in light of the broad framework of academic and scholarly literature on the subject, the thesis is structured into three main chapters, which aim at highlighting the challenges and opportunities that define Italy's position as a facilitator in a region crucial for European stability.

In the first chapter, "Italy and Tunisia in the Mediterranean Context," the historical roots of Italy's strategic position in the Mediterranean will be explored, tracing a path from the Roman era, when the Mediterranean was "mare nostrum," to the imperial ambitions of fascism and the post-war policies that saw Italy transform from a passive spectator to an active protagonist in Mediterranean dynamics. This historical trajectory offers a lens through which to understand current Italian strategies, characterised by a balance between multilateralism and bilateralism, with the goal of asserting leadership in the region amid growing instability.

In the second chapter, "Italy's Diplomatic Initiatives: The Rome Process and the Mattei Plan," the focus will shift to Italian diplomatic initiatives in Tunisia. Through a detailed analysis of the historical and contemporary relations between the two countries, the cultural and economic ties that have shaped their interactions will be explored. Italy's role in security cooperation, efforts to strengthen economic ties, and initiatives to promote sustainable development and social stability in Tunisia will be examined. The Rome Process and the Mattei Plan will also be analysed as concrete examples of how Italy is seeking to implement a multifaceted approach to bilateral relations.

The third chapter, "Italy as a Facilitator: The EU, International Organizations, and Tunisia," will explore Italy's role as a facilitator within the European Union and international organisations. The EU's perspective on Tunisia's importance in the Mediterranean context will be analysed, with a focus on policies of political dialogue, development assistance, security cooperation, and migration. Italy's influence within the European Union on issues related to Tunisia, through diplomatic advocacy, policy coordination, and technical assistance, will be examined. Tunisia's relations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the challenges

associated with economic reforms and financial support will also be analysed. Finally, potential areas of collaboration for future EU-Tunisia relations under Italian leadership will be explored. Through the analysis of diplomatic, economic, and security strategies implemented by Italy, this thesis seeks to offer a critical framework that can contribute to the definition of future policies capable of balancing liberal principles with the pragmatic needs of regional stabilisation. Tunisia's revival, if adequately supported, could have significant implications for regional security, and Italy, with its historical role as a mediator and its deep connection to the Mediterranean, is uniquely positioned to guide this process, but it must do so with a critical awareness of the challenges and necessary compromises.

1. Italy and Tunisia in the Mediterranean Context

“Italy lives with an underlying schizophrenia that exalts and depresses the country at the same time. We enjoy and suffer from a decisive geographical position in the Mediterranean, the sea where everything began and where everything continues to unfold. We are both exalted and frustrated by a political fantasy that would like to put that heritage to good use and, when it finds a way to do so, then has to account for major powers and inescapable constraints”¹.

Thinking of Italy as a historical-geographical entity means thinking of an entity that overlooks that historic millenary presence in the Mediterranean Sea². Geographically positioned at the centre of Mediterranean reality, the country shapes its national interests in the agitated waters of the Great Sea, a crossroads of appetites, opportunities, and wide-ranging issues, but at the same time a projection of the country onto the world³. Well aware of this complexity and driven by a desire to stand out, it has always approached the issues characterising the region with great respect, as demonstrated by the content of the activities and policies it has implemented and is continuing to implement in multiple sectors⁴. Looking back historically at the evolution of Italian foreign policy plans and strategies helps to understand that Italy's commitment to the enlarged Mediterranean⁵ — an area that embraces not only the coasts of the *mare nostrum*, but

¹ Muratore, Andrea. 2021. “Il Mediterraneo, destino d'Italia. Strategie geopolitiche, economia, interesse nazionale: la necessità di un'agenda per il "grande mare.”” Osservatorio Globalizzazione Policy Note 3, pag. 9. https://osservatorioglobalizzazione.it/dossier/interesse-nazionale/mediterraneo-italia-interesse-nazionale-marina-militare/#_ftnref8.

² Sapelli, Giulio. 2023. “L’Africa Mediterranea: presente e futuro d’Europa.” In *Comprendere*, pag. 6. Vol. 1. Roma, Italia: Comin & Partners. <https://flore.unifi.it/retrieve/db03094b-9e31-4308-a0e8-5eb59dc513cb/Comprendere.pdf>.

³ Muratore, Andrea. 2021. “Il Mediterraneo, destino d'Italia. Strategie geopolitiche, economia, interesse nazionale: la necessità di un'agenda per il "grande mare.”” Osservatorio Globalizzazione Policy Note 3, pag. 10. https://osservatorioglobalizzazione.it/dossier/interesse-nazionale/mediterraneo-italia-interesse-nazionale-marina-militare/#_ftnref8.

⁴ Farnesina. 2017. *The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean*. Roma, Italia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

⁵ The concept of the enlarged Mediterranean is linked to the strategic conception of Italy's posture - political, diplomatic and military - in the international scenario and, specifically, in what is identified as its zone of projection and competence, i.e. the vast area between Gibraltar and the Gulf of Aden, which also includes the Middle East and Central Africa.

also its African and Middle Eastern hinterland — is an intuitive and pragmatic choice⁶. This region, in fact, is so close to Italy's shores, so intersected with ancient and modern Italian history, and still so relevant in the contemporary choices of Italy and the whole of Europe, starting with immigration issues and energy dependence on the new geographies of gas⁷.

1.1 Italy's strategic location in the Mediterranean throughout history

Historically understanding the development of Italian foreign policy towards the Mediterranean allows to come to the conclusion that Italy has always looked to the Mediterranean above all as the main source of opportunities and challenges for its domestic and foreign policy actions, and not only as a determining factor of its geographical position⁸.

The region has been Italy's geographical backyard, encapsulating an idea, a dream of an African empire, an arena and a set of policies in which ambitious appetites could be manifested. Recently, far from being a natural place for status-seeking, the Mediterranean has become the playground for Italy's political and diplomatic efforts to seize power⁹. Despite the adverse combination of international and domestic changes, Italy has remained and even more so today remains deeply engaged in the region, exploiting and seeking to strengthen the multilateral and bilateral political frameworks in which it is embedded¹⁰.

1.1.1 From the roman mare nostrum to the fascist Mediterranean imperial ambitions

As a place of encounters and clashes, of exchanges and battles, of royal and epic journeys, in antiquity, the Mediterranean was the main communication route, with the Italian peninsula transformed into the ideal landing and stopover point since it was located in the middle. It is no coincidence that the Roman Empire made Italy the centre of the 'sea between lands', the so-

⁶ Fantappiè, Maria L. 2023. "I rapporti con il Medio Oriente e il Nord Africa." In *Il governo Meloni alla prova*, pag. 38. Roma, Italia: Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).
<https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/il-governo-meloni-alla-prova>.

⁷ Sapelli, Giulio. 2023. "L'Africa Mediterranea: presente e futuro d'Europa." In *Comprendere*, pag. 7. Vol. 1. Roma, Italy: Comin & Partners.
<https://flore.unifi.it/retrieve/db03094b-9e31-4308-a0e8-5eb59dc513cb/Comprendere.pdf>.

⁸ Colombo, Silvia, and Anja Palm. 2019. "Italy in the Mediterranean: priorities and perspectives of a European middle-power." FEPS - Foundation for European Progressive Studies.
<https://feeps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Italy-in-the-Mediterranean-Priorities-and-Perspectives-of-a-EU-Middle-Power.pdf>.

⁹ Santini, Ruth H. 2020. "Italian post-2011 foreign policy in the Mediterranean caught between status and fear: the case of Libya." *Italian Political Science* 15 (1).
file:///Users/ALESSIA/Downloads/ojsadmin,+PDF_Issue_15_1_HanauSantini_132-143.pdf.

¹⁰ Aliboni, Roberto. "Italy and the Mediterranean in the Nineties." Istituto Affari Internazionali.
<https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai9638.pdf>.

called “mare nostrum”¹¹. A continental power but also a maritime one, the Rome of the ancient world was a crossroads of political, economic, and cultural activity, so much so that it earned the appellation “caput mundi”¹².

This vision continued throughout the Middle Ages and intensified even further during the Renaissance. Investing in their own development, the maritime republics¹³ introduced their own currencies, accepted them throughout the basin, and equipped themselves with their own fleets and diplomatic corps in the major cities and ports of the Mediterranean Sea. It was only with the unification and constitution of the Kingdom of Italy that this projection began to be loosened: the first Piedmontese ruling class preferred to steer the country's development paths towards a more continental policy, favouring the northern regions and setting aside the maritime vocation of the south¹⁴. The idea was to focus on consolidating unity and maintaining the status quo, in order to help restore the public finances.

Several factors, however, led the Renaissance political elite to rethink its strategy. Firstly, the desire to make the nascent Italy a 'great power' in the international system leads the government to start embracing the idea of establishing the nation beyond its natural borders. A fundamental contribution to this change was provided by the climate that filled the European chancelleries of the time, namely expansionist imperialism¹⁵, characterised by the need to build formal empires and develop a new policy of conquest with civilizing intentions. Economic interests also played an important role, given the imperative to expand the trade following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869¹⁶. Thus, influenced by the model of the great European powers involved in the 'scramble for Africa' and driven by the desire to restore the economic weakness in which Italy found itself, Crispi and Giolitti's governments began to dream of an African empire, advancing the first attempts at colonial expansion towards Tunisia, Libya, and the Horn

¹¹ Abulafia, David, and Silvio Farina. 2023. “Quando il Mediterraneo era il motore del mondo.” Focus.it. <https://www.focus.it/cultura/storia/mediterraneo-motore-mondo>.

¹² The Latin poet Marco Anneo Lucano used the expression “caput mundi” for the first time, referring to the city of Rome.

¹³ This expression refers to a number of Italian cities that, during the Middle Ages, enjoyed political autonomy and economic prosperity thanks to their maritime activities. In particular, reference is made to four Italian cities: Amalfi, Genoa, Pisa and Venice. However, Ancona, Gaeta, Noli and, in Dalmatia, Ragusa are also considered maritime republics.

¹⁴ Scala, Raffaele. 2024. “L'Italia nel mediterraneo e nell'Europa -.” IARI. <https://iari.site/2024/01/27/litalia-nel-mediterraneo-e-nelleuropa/>.

¹⁵ This expression refers to the period of colonial expansion in Africa and Asia by the European powers, the United States and Japan in the late 19th and early 20th century. The new wave of imperialism reflected the continuing rivalries between the great powers, the economic desire to conquer new resources and markets, but also the ethos of the civilising mission.

¹⁶ Pes, Alessandro. 2010. *La costruzione dell'impero fascista*. I ed., pag. 38-39. Roma, Italia: ARACNE editrice S.r.l. <https://iris.unica.it/bitstream/11584/68434/1/La%20costruzione%20dell%27impero%20fascista.pdf>.

of Africa¹⁷. These attempts, however, were based on a logic that lacked a precise ideological and spatial frame of reference and were more based on contingent motivations, like the idea of occupying strategic junctions where the migration of Italian labour could be channeled.

The ethnic sensibility becomes intertwined with the spatial dimension of expansion only with the advent of fascism¹⁸. The regime recovers the idea of building an imperial civilization, moved by the failure of the Crispi government¹⁹ and the frustration of a fledgling nation that has not yet built itself great. “Sometimes I have the proud thought that if for five or ten years they let us work in peace, Italy would be able to lead the civilisation of the world”. These were the words uttered by Benito Mussolini in the hall of the Busto Arsizio City Council on October 25, 1924 to better clarify the fundamental concepts underlying the fascist foreign policy²⁰. His personal vision was perfectly manifested in the development strategy of the project of imperial expansion in Africa: beyond demographic and economic considerations that made the African continent a suitable space for exporting raw materials and welcoming European emigration, Africa was considered to be inserted 'on the precise axis of Europe, from which it is united — rather than separated — by the Mediterranean'²¹. On the basis of this perpendicularity, therefore, the Fascist regime explained how crucial it was to follow the Euro-African axis in order to achieve a fusion between the two continents and a single geographical-terrestrial-maritime continuity. Moreover, overlooking the peninsular belt, territories such as Tunisia and Libya were considered as part of the unified strategic concept of the Mediterranean, as they could serve as bridges not only to Euro-Africa but also potentially to the Indo-Pacific and the large space of the Indian Ocean²².

Thus, recognising the Mediterranean as a geographically unified and culturally coherent space, given its common history and traditions of trade, the regime's vision focused on a civilizing

¹⁷ Varsori, Antonio. 2016. “Italy and the Mediterranean: between tradition and new challenges.” ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/italy-and-mediterranean-between-tradition-and-new-challenges-15154>.

¹⁸ Boria, Edoardo, and Edoardo U. Gaudino. 2019. “Mare Nostrum. Il "grande spazio" del fascismo. Un esercizio di metodo geopolitico.” In *Italy on the Rimland*, pp. 79-92. Roma, Italia: Società Italiana di Storia Militare - Nadir media. <https://iris.uniroma1.it/handle/11573/1260475?mode=complete>.

¹⁹ The end of the Crispi government's political story was the failure of its colonial policies, decreed by the defeat at Adua in 1896.

²⁰ Susmel, Duilio, and Edoardo Susmel. 1956. *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*. Vol. XXI, pag. 122 Firenze, Italia: La Fenice. <https://archive.org/details/susmel-e.-e.-eds.-opera-omnia-di-benito-mussolini.-vol.-i-ocr-fs-1951/page/n5/mode/2up>.

²¹ Antonsich, Marco. 1997. “Eurafrica, Dottrina Monroe del Fascismo.” *Africa!*, no. 3. <https://www.limesonline.com/rivista/eurafrika-dottrina-monroe-del-fascismo-14565380/>.

²² Boria, Edoardo, and Edoardo U. Gaudino. 2019. “Mare Nostrum. Il "grande spazio" del fascismo. Un esercizio di metodo geopolitico.” In *Italy on the Rimland*, pp. 79-92. Roma, Italia: Società Italiana di Storia Militare - Nadir media. <https://iris.uniroma1.it/handle/11573/1260475?mode=complete>.

mission, that resulted in reality in a practice of power policy, paternalistic racism, and a sense of historical and cultural superiority that led to the separation of races²³. In other words, fascism tried to paint an idyllic picture, where the regime reigned uncontrasted as a provider of peace and civilization²⁴.

1.1.2 Post-war Italian foreign policy: a realist Mediterranean engagement

The fascist myth was short-lived, swept away by the collapse of the regime and the delusional design to fascistise even the natives while considering them an inferior race²⁵. The period immediately following the end of World War II was characterised by the tendency of the Italian political class to consider more important for the country's external action to obtain a seat in international fora, rather than to develop an effective capacity to pursue its interests in the world. This phase, therefore, saw the alternation of moments of sub-regional velleitarism, which nevertheless ended up revealing the country's fragility, and phases of passivity²⁶.

In light of the failure of the exaggerations of fascist policy, the period from the end of World War II to the 1980s represented precisely the return to a more realistic middle power foreign policy²⁷: the idea was to support the decolonization process and define a foreign policy capable of making the country a bridge between Europe and the southern shore of the Mediterranean, as well as towards the Middle East. This prospect had important implications, especially from an economic point of view, so much so that Enrico Mattei, CEO of the state oil company ENI, became its symbol as a result of his considerable commitment and praiseworthy success in concluding agreements with a number of North African countries, including Nasser's Egypt. Despite the internal turmoil, political instability, and economic crisis generated by the 1973 oil shock, the Italian political class continued to favour this strategy throughout the 1960s and

²³ Francolini, Bruno. 1940. *L'evoluzione della vita indigena nella politica coloniale italiana*. 1st ed. Vol. XVIII. Geopolitica. pp. 75-76.

²⁴ Pes, Alessandro. 2010. *La costruzione dell'impero fascista*. I ed., pag. 38-39. Roma, Italia: ARACNE editrice S.r.l. <https://iris.unica.it/bitstream/11584/68434/1/La%20costruzione%20dell%27impero%20fascista.pdf>.

²⁵ Dau Novelli, Cecilia, and Charles Burdett. 2010. "Prefazione." In *La costruzione dell'impero fascista*. I ed. Roma, Italia: ARACNE editrice S.r.l. <https://iris.unica.it/bitstream/11584/68434/1/La%20costruzione%20dell%27impero%20fascista.pdf>.

²⁶ Santoro, Carlo M. 1991. *La politica estera di una media potenza: l'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*. Il Mulino. p. 75.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 76.

1970s, further deepening its bilateral ties with Arab countries²⁸ and showing an increasingly sympathetic attitude, especially with regard to the Palestinian question²⁹.

It was in the second half of the 1970s that the Mediterranean began to take on considerable importance again for Italy's foreign and security policy. The geographically central position that the country occupies in the area and its economic, commercial, and energy interests make the Italian peninsula particularly vulnerable to the instability of the bipolar context³⁰. This was the reason why, during the Cold War, the Italian political class focused on strengthening its Mediterranean foreign policy in full line with the Western bloc's strategy, obtaining from the Alliance and 'consuming' for its own national security far more than it could ever 'produce' and provide for the good of the Alliance itself. In other words, Italy defined its own foreign policy guidelines, embarking on a process of convergence between bilateralism and multilateralism: it adopted a multilateral approach — making a notable effort to respond to the needs and objectives emerging in the various international forums — to which it simultaneously associated a tendency to maintain a margin of independence in bilateral relations, especially towards neighboring areas such as the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. In this sense, the country contributed to international peacekeeping operations by providing military forces in a more systematic manner, strengthening bilateral policies, and substantially increasing bilateral development aid for countries on the Mediterranean shore. The apex of this process was personified in the figure of Gianni De Michelis³¹. As Foreign Minister during the Andreotti government (1989–1992), De Michelis revised the security-consuming country status that Italy had maintained in previous decades, gradually transforming it into a security-producing country approach³². Under his leadership, Italy became the promoter of two main initiatives in the Mediterranean: the Western Mediterranean Group, set up in Rome in October 1990, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean, born of a joint project by Italy and Spain and presented in Palma de Mallorca in September 1990. It also took charge of strengthening the European Union's new Common Foreign and Security Policy in order to

²⁸ Especially with Egypt and Libya.

²⁹ Varsori, Antonio. 2016. "Italy and the Mediterranean: between tradition and new challenges." ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/italy-and-mediterranean-between-tradition-and-new-challenges-15154>.

³⁰ Croci, Osvaldo, Paolo Foradori, and Paolo Rosa. 2011. "Italy as a development actor: a tale of bipartisan failure." In *Italy in the Post-Cold War Order: Adaptation, Bipartisanship, Visibility*, edited by Maurizio Carbone. Lexington Books. p. 86.

³¹ Aliboni, Roberto. n.d. "Italy and the Mediterranean in the Nineties." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai9638.pdf>.

³² Croci, Osvaldo. 2003. "Italian Security Policy after the Cold War." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8 (2): p. 267. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233636890_Italian_Security_Policy_after_the_Cold_War

promote a sub-regional understanding in Central and South-Eastern Europe. However, the consequences of the Cold War revealed the inherently weak character of this policy, triggering its rapid decline. In fact, at the end of the 1980s, Italy's Mediterranean policy collapsed exactly at the moment when it seemed to have achieved a correct and coherent combination of multilateralism and national interest, due to the increased instability in the Mediterranean region³³. The disappearance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) meant that the United States (US) had no incentive to take responsibility for the security of the allies and to maintain direct control over distant areas, triggering a process of delegation of responsibility to the allies in the Mediterranean³⁴. The instability of the international context further aggravated the internal situation of the Italian peninsula, which was already particularly difficult due to financial mismanagement. In this sense, the need to prioritise internal stabilisation did not facilitate the orientation of foreign policy, which very often ended up not being at the forefront of the political scene³⁵. Therefore, the end of bipolarity represented for Italy a moment of urgent and inevitable need to assume greater responsibility for maintaining its own and its region's security³⁶.

Faced with the challenges posed by the end of the bipolar conflict, Italy's foreign policy had as its imminent reaction to resume the trend of repressing renationalization, restoring and strengthening multilateralism as the only strategy to satisfy national interests and maintain or regain international prestige and status³⁷. This objective pushed the country to assume increasing commitments of a military nature through the participation in and promotion of various international missions in its geostrategic area of interest (including the Sahel, the Gulf, and the Horn of Africa), to which our country is still strongly attached. To this end, Italy associated the idea of pursuing a number of policies aimed at reinforcing and functionally linking the main multilateral organisations³⁸ dealing with security issues and of which the country was a member, so as to strengthen its position within these institutions, in the

³³ Aliboni, Roberto. n.d. "Italy and the Mediterranean in the Nineties." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai9638.pdf>.

³⁴ Brembilla, Leonardo. 2018. "Il Mediterraneo nella politica estera italiana dopo il bipolarismo." Università degli Studi di Milano. p. 19. https://www.academia.edu/41423033/Il_Mediterraneo_nella_politica_estera_italiana_dopo_il_bipolarismo.

³⁵ Aliboni, Roberto. n.d. "Italy and the Mediterranean in the Nineties." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai9638.pdf>.

³⁶ Brembilla, Leonardo. 2018. "Il Mediterraneo nella politica estera italiana dopo il bipolarismo." Università degli Studi di Milano. https://www.academia.edu/41423033/Il_Mediterraneo_nella_politica_estera_italiana_dopo_il_bipolarismo.

³⁷ Aliboni, Roberto. n.d. "Italy and the Mediterranean in the Nineties." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai9638.pdf>.

³⁸ NATO, the EU and the UN.

conviction that the response to ever greater and more complex threats must necessarily be based on effective cooperation between different states and that any action of a military nature undertaken could disregard the legitimacy and credibility that only inclusion in a supranational legal framework could guarantee³⁹. In this sense, the launching of the Barcelona Process in 1995 provided Italy with a multilateral framework in which it could conduct a more significant Mediterranean policy than it would otherwise have been able to carry out bilaterally⁴⁰, since it was based on three main objectives: to develop cooperation on political and security issues; to foster the economic development of the area; and to stimulate cultural dialogue and human, scientific, and technological exchange between the various societies⁴¹. At the same time, the development of a Mediterranean dimension in NATO represented a sort of reassurance for Italy against the risks of becoming marginalised on the EU political scene⁴². At the end of the 1990s, therefore, once the internal situation had stabilised and the debate on foreign policy choices had evolved, Italy finally reached a situation of sufficient strength to position itself as an 'initiator of foreign policy initiatives rather than a follower'⁴³.

1.1.3 The 21st century foreign policy: balancing multilateralism and bilateralism

The 21st century opened with Italy's priority to give its foreign policy an imprint based on the balance between multilateralism and bilateralism, so as to allow the country to take a leading role within the EU while cultivating fruitful relations with the United States.

Inaugurating the new millennium, the Berlusconi government elected in 2001 molded Italy's foreign policy interests more closely to Washington's positions, to the extent of supporting military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan and shifting the country's traditional focus from the Mediterranean basin to the Middle East. The turnaround occurred in the spring of 2006, with the election of the centre-left government headed by Romano Prodi, who brought the focus

³⁹ Hill, Christopher, and Filippo Andreatta. 2001. "Struggling to change: the Italian state and the new order." In *Rethinking European Order: West European Responses 1989-97*, edited by Robin Niblett and William Wallace, p. 252. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

⁴⁰ Aliboni, Roberto. n.d. "Italy and the Mediterranean in the Nineties." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai9638.pdf>.

⁴¹ Brembilla, Leonardo. 2018. "Il Mediterraneo nella politica estera italiana dopo il bipolarismo." Università degli Studi di Milano. p. 51. https://www.academia.edu/41423033/Il_Mediterraneo_nella_politica_estera_italiana_dopo_il_bipolarismo.

⁴² Aliboni, Roberto. n.d. "Italy and the Mediterranean in the Nineties." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai9638.pdf>.

⁴³ Walston, James. 2011. "Italy as a Foreign Policy Actor: The Interplay of Domestic and International Factors." In *Italy in the Post-Cold War Order. Adaptation, Bipartisanship, Visibility*, p. 66. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780739137116/Italy-in-the-Post-Cold-War-Order-Adaptation-Bipartisanship-Visibility>.

back to the European partnership while making the relationship with the United States somewhat ambiguous. Driven by the twofold need to ensure Italy's participation in major international forums and provide an external justification for internal political cohesion, his new foreign policy lines were based on a renewed centrality of multilateralism and the strengthening of the role of the United Nations and other international organisations, especially in the area of conflict resolution⁴⁴. Acknowledging that 'the Mediterranean should become the Eurasian platform'⁴⁵ in the global geo-economic order and limited by structural weaknesses and scarcity of resources, the Prodi government strongly linked the framework for the development of new Mediterranean policies to the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); while at the bilateral level, it developed a dense network of relations with multiple countries and began to address various dossiers, such as security issues, energy, illegal migration flows, social cooperation, economic development, and regional stability⁴⁶.

What has been said so far makes it easy to understand that the combination of bilateralism and multilateralism constitutes the most characteristic legacy of Italian foreign policy, resolved in participation in major multilateral contexts and corrected by bilateral relations. This takes on even more weight in the face of the evident crisis in international architecture, both in the economic and security fields, experienced between the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21th. The fluidity of the situation, in fact, has pushed Italy to commit itself simultaneously on two fronts, by adopting an 'integrated approach' to the Mediterranean region. The aim has been to link the area's various crises and many challenges; to emphasise the growing geopolitical interactions between the Maghreb, the Levant, the Persian Gulf, and the Sahel; to enhance the great potential of the entire Mediterranean basin; and to place every choice on its future within the framework of a sustainable development strategy. Of course, putting an end to the condemnation of the Mediterranean area to a state of permanent conflict means counting on a constant and long-term investment by the international community⁴⁷. In this sense, on the one hand, it has been imperative for the Italian political class to strive to participate in the

⁴⁴ As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Italy will seek to place a renewed emphasis on multilateralism as a guiding framework for addressing the crises in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

⁴⁵ Prodi, Romano. 2002. "Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission Europe and the Mediterranean: time for action UCL." European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_02_589.

⁴⁶ Balfour, Rosa, and Battistina Cugusi. 2021. "The Return of Italy to the Mediterranean." IEMed. <https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-Return-of-Italy-to-the-Mediterranean.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Farnesina. 2017. The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean. Roma, Italia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

rewriting of multilateral ties⁴⁸. In this multilateral perspective, Italy has looked above all to the EU: as a founding state, the country has always seen and continues to see Europe as an active political subject capable of supporting and accompanying the action of states, making political and strategic decisions on the basis of solidarity in view of working for the common good. In this sense, Italy's vision for the EU has always been based on the request to act as one in whatever area it serves⁴⁹. On the other hand, the uncertainty over the resilience and future shape of the multilateral fabric suggests that it should develop more intense bilateral activity in order to safeguard its economic and security interests and promote its status. Indeed, the continuous development of bilateral relations with countries in the Mediterranean basin, such as Israel, Libya, Turkey, Egypt, and Algeria, has been not accompanied by effective coverage by the EU, paralysed by the near failure of the Union for the Mediterranean and the European Partnership⁵⁰.

In light of the current geopolitical context, the current Italian political class also finds itself trying to balance the country's foreign policy stance between bilateralism and multilateralism, attempting to confirm the government's positioning on the Atlanticist line and to adopt a decidedly Euro-realist line. The Meloni government's aspiration is to make Italy a leader at European level in proposing an innovative approach to the enlarged Mediterranean basin. This new strategy revolves, in particular, around two nodes: mitigating migratory flows that, passing through the central Mediterranean route, make Italy the country of first port of call; and increasing partnerships in the energy sphere to cope with the drastic reduction in imports of fossil fuels from Russia, transforming Italy into an energy export corridor from the Mediterranean to European countries. These needs have been also reiterated in multilateral forums. In her speech at the 78th UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni stressed the imminence of taking action on the issue of migration, calling on the UN to “declare a global war without discounts on human traffickers” and to address the underlying causes of migration, proposing as a model for this approach the so-called Rome Process, i.e., a “strategic, global, inclusive, and multi-year platform for collective action”⁵¹. Furthermore, she has

⁴⁸ Istituto Affari Internazionali. 2011. “La politica estera italiana a 150 anni dall'Unità: continuità, riforme e nuove sfide.” Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1106.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Frattini, Franco. 2020. “Gli assi principali della politica estera italiana”. Osorin. https://www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/.files/2_item_2.pdf.

⁵⁰ Istituto Affari Internazionali. 2011. “La politica estera italiana a 150 anni dall'Unità: continuità, riforme e nuove sfide.” Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1106.pdf>.

⁵¹ Meloni, Giorgia. 2023. “President Meloni’s speech at the 78th United Nations General Assembly.” Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-speech-78th-united-nations-general-assembly/23621>.

reiterated Italy's willingness to contribute, with the Mattei Plan for Africa⁵², to create a model of peer-to-peer cooperation, neither predatory nor paternalistic with African states. Both topics are, in fact, priorities of the G7 under the Italian presidency this year⁵³.

1.2 The Mediterranean basin: a geopolitical paradox

Geopolitical paradox.

Today, this expression is often used to clearly describe the status of the Mediterranean basin. An increasingly fragmented yet interconnected area. A region ravaged by virulent crises, hegemonic competition, and ideological and sectarian clashes, but also a platform for economic, energy, and infrastructure connectivity between Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Going through this process of profound transformation that has led it to enlarge and divide at the same time, the Mediterranean region has acquired a new global centrality during the 21st century. Indeed, there are many issues and dynamics affecting the area: the nexus between security in the Mediterranean and security in Europe, the terrorist attacks that Daesh has inspired in many cities around the world, the impact that migratory flows crossing the Mediterranean have on the European continent, the devastating Syrian conflict, the humanitarian tragedy caused by state crises in the Sahel, the stabilisation of Libya, the difficulties in promoting reconciliation in Iraq, the serious risks lurking in the stalemate of both the oldest crisis - the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - and the most recent one - the confrontation between Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain on the other. In addition to security issues, the enlarged Mediterranean has acquired new relevance if it is also understood as a platform for global connectivity and economic development and a crucial area for the creation of energy infrastructure. Finally, the strategic centrality of the Mediterranean also lies in its being a microcosm of global challenges. It is the place where all the dilemmas of the contemporary world, such as the relationship between state and society, individual and community, politics and religion, inclusion and exclusion, identity

⁵² Named after Eni's founder Enrico Mattei, the Mattei Plan was ratified by the Italian Chamber of Deputies in January 2023. The Mattei Plan has a four-year horizon and seems to be aimed to encourage a holistic approach to dealing with African countries of interest to Italy. It envisages significant investments to enable African countries to develop and improve their energy infrastructure, turning Italy into an energy hub between North Africa and Europe; but also support from Italy - and presumably the EU - for initiatives to promote exports, food security and the sustainable exploitation of natural resources in Africa. Finally, its true nature is linked to the goal of curbing irregular migration to Italy.

⁵³ Greco, Ettore, Federica Marconi, and Irene Paviotti. 2024. "La cooperazione globale e il multilateralismo." *Il governo Meloni alla prova*. 2023 ed. Roma, Italia: Istituto Affari Internazionali. p. 72
<https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/il-governo-meloni-alla-prova>.

and modernity, reason and faith, security, and democracy, are concentrated and reached. It is also the region where cross-cutting issues requiring a global approach overlap, with important geopolitical implications: demographic pressures, sustainable development, water scarcity, desertification, urbanisation, and food insecurity⁵⁴.

Therefore, at least four specific issues need to be considered when looking at the Mediterranean region: climate change, the migration crisis, energy development projects, and regional stability⁵⁵.

1.2.1 Climate change as a catalyst for conflict and migration

Widely recognised as a “risk multiplier”⁵⁶, climate change is significantly impacting the Mediterranean region, affecting its political, economic, social, and security dynamics and making it one of the areas most vulnerable to the associated risks⁵⁷.

According to data published in a recent United Nations (UN)-African Union report, the Mediterranean region is warming at a faster rate than the rest of the planet⁵⁸ and is experiencing more severe extreme weather phenomena, such as droughts and floods. In 2022, the African continent recorded 80 extreme weather and climate phenomena, including the worst drought in the Horn of Africa in 40 years and fires in Algeria. In particular, it is North Africa that ranks as the area with the fastest warming⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ Farnesina. 2017. The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean. Rome, Italia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Lerman, Eran. 2016. “The Mediterranean as a Strategic Environment: Learning a New Geopolitical Language.” Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep04762.4>.

⁵⁶ Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica. 2024. “Relazione annuale 2023 sulla politica dell’informazione per la sicurezza.” Sicurezza nazionale. <https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/contenuti/relazione-2023>.

⁵⁷ Scheffran, Jürgen. 2020. “The Geopolitical Impact of Climate Change in the Mediterranean Region: Climate Change as a Trigger of Conflict and Migration.” IEMed. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-geopolitical-impact-of-climate-change-in-the-mediterranean-region-climate-change-as-a-trigger-of-conflict-and-migration/>.

⁵⁸ The report said the average rate of warming in Africa was 0.3 degrees Celsius per decade over the period 1991-2022, compared to 0.2 degrees globally.

⁵⁹ Ragazzi, Lucia. 2023. “L’Africa e il clima.” ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/lafrica-e-il-clima-139673>.

The risk, of course, is that the effects of climate change will trigger new conflicts over resources, fueling instability. In fact, food security suffers most from the effects of climate change⁶⁰. As in a kind of domino effect, increasing water scarcity, desertification, and the devastating effects of extreme weather events are affecting food production capacity⁶¹. In the Sahel, the rise in temperature and the change in the rainy season are producing a very intense phenomenon of desertification: fertile land is degrading, while water resources are increasingly diminishing. For example, the surface area of Lake Chad has shrunk 17-fold since the 1960s, due to the combined action of climate change and unsustainable water abstraction. Two phenomena seem, thus, to be reinforced in this context: an increase in the probability of crop failure, resulting in higher prices for agricultural raw materials, but also conflict between populations over resources such as water and foodstuffs. Amplifying each other in a vicious circle, these phenomena are obviously entering a spiral from which it seems difficult to escape⁶². Relevant in this respect is the tendency to associate the outbreak of the Arab Spring precisely with food insecurity and rising food prices. This is why food security is no longer confined to the fight against hunger but is increasingly the subject of debate and discussion on policies aimed at ensuring the resilience of the most vulnerable populations, the acquisition of livelihoods, and the implementation of food security strategies in developing countries⁶³. If one adds to these phenomena poverty, misery, isolation, and social marginalisation, the conclusion is that climate change is disproportionately amplifying crises in already fragile countries⁶⁴. Crises are increasingly manifesting themselves in conflicts and migrations, to the extent that they are pushing population groups to set out and undertake the so-called rural exodus. This, of course, has negative consequences in economic and social terms, but also in terms of culture and security, as it can contribute to creating a sense of uprooting among the newly urbanised, who may end up adhering to ideologies of social opposition with the risk of increasing the phenomena of organised crime, generic violence, and ideological terrorism. In the western Mediterranean area, for example, the Saharan territory is strongly characterised by “grey areas”, i.e., parts of national territories that escape partial or total state control, which appear as abandoned territories where social deregulation prevails or may be more or less strong. Recently, several grey areas have also emerged in the Sahelian area and in the Maghreb, as an effect of exacerbating aridification and rural exodus. Thus, one of the ways in which human populations adapt to climate change is through migration. Contextualising the phenomenon to the area of the Mediterranean basin and the African continent, the relationship between migration and climate change is complex: although the phenomenon is predominantly intra-continental, recent years have seen an overall increase in migration flows along the south-

north direction, i.e., moving along the Mediterranean routes. Europe is the second continent of destination for migrants from West, East, South, and Central Africa, and the rate of migrants from North Africa is also historically high. The reason lies in the fact that, impacting more sub-Saharan countries, climate change is causing a migration of populations towards the north, particularly towards those in the Maghreb area. However, the deteriorating economic situation in states such as Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, combined with weak border management and control systems, is turning North African countries into transit and destination countries.

As mentioned, a link also exists between climate change, the weakening of the economic and social fabric, and the development of terrorism and organised crime. The latter, in fact, feed on unease and conflict or any other dysfunction of the objective conditions found within groups or societies, such as scarcity of resources, poverty, economic instability, massive youth unemployment, and a lack of future prospects for young people. All these factors inevitably contribute to a move towards alternative models of power and ideologies, which are often associated with religious indoctrination and radicalization through the work of terrorist movements and organisations.

Finally, the links between climate, access to water and energy resources, and inter-state conflicts are complex. The consequences of climate change on changing needs and availability in terms of access to water and energy sources, combined with other social and political dynamics, could lead to the emergence of multiple forms of competition and conflict between states in the long run. In the case of water resources, for instance, in North Africa, 70% of them are located in shared groundwater basins. Access to the technology needed to reach the aquifer once the water level decreases due to overuse and climate change could be a possible source of conflict between states. Therefore, many of them have entered into management agreements to ensure the sustainability of exploitation. As for the impact of climate change on the energy sector, in the Mediterranean region, the challenges for oil and gas and renewable energy producers include declining water supplies and competition for access to water resources. Obviously, one cannot speak of an interstate conflict scenario in the latter two cases, but there are certain conflict and competition dynamics that could have crucial effects on future regional economic and political relations in the long run⁶⁵.

⁶⁵ Bertolotti, Claudio. 2023. "L'impatto del cambiamento climatico sulla sicurezza e la difesa dell'area mediterranea." In *Le sfide multidimensionali ed emergenti del Mediterraneo allargato: quale ruolo per l'Italia.*, pp. 73-89. Rivista Trimestrale Quaderno 26. Napoli, Italia: Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SIOI_LE-SFIDE-MULTIDIMENSIONALI-ED-EMERGENTI-DEL-MEDITERRANEO-ALLARGATO.pdf.

1.2.2 The Mediterranean migration crisis: a persistent and complex challenge

Among the phenomena affecting the Mediterranean basin, the most debated and thorny one is certainly the migration crisis⁶⁶.

Driven by the hope of building a better life in Europe, more than 2.5 million people have crossed the Mediterranean since 2015, fleeing war, violence, and poverty. Only in 2023, there were over 270,100 arrivals, fleeing from the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Italy ranks as the first country of arrival of refugees and migrants in Europe: over 157,600 arrivals in 2023 from the Mediterranean, compared to 105,100 in 2022 and 67,400 in 2021, already the highest number since 2017⁶⁷.

Historically speaking, in the European continent, migration has started to be one of the hottest issues in recent years. Until the first decade of the new millennium, migration flows to Europe were particularly intense only on specific occasions, such as after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or during the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Not only from the East. In the past century, also North African regimes have contributed in part to the migration exodus, curbing and sometimes encouraging the flows from sub-Saharan Africa. Exemplary of this situation has been the case of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, which used to open its ports for convenience to allow migrants to leave, closing them only when they got what they wanted.

December 2010 marked a turning point for the migration crisis, influenced by the internal situation of some North African countries. The outbreak of the crisis in Tunisia triggered the Jasmine Revolution, which soon influenced neighboring countries as well. It is in this context that the refugee crisis begins to be spoken of in Europe: thousands of people from Africa and the Middle East decide to flee their countries of origin due to the emergence of new conflicts and the escalation of old ones to find refuge elsewhere on the European continent⁶⁸.

Thus, migration flows across the Mediterranean basin are mainly generated by local and regional conflicts, which produce internal displacements and forced migrations. Already burdened by the continuing Russian-Ukrainian conflict that has given rise to more than 6.3 million refugees, the Old Continent has seen the push factors for migratory flows evolve as a result of the consequences of armed conflicts in Africa and the Middle East. These include the

⁶⁶ Valigi, Marco. 2023. "L'Italia nel "connettore geopolitico" mediterraneo – Aspenia Online." Aspenia Online. <https://aspeniaonline.it/litalia-nel-connettore-geopolitico-mediterraneo/>.

⁶⁷ UNICEF. 2024. "Rifugiati e Migranti in Europa." UNICEF Italia. <https://www.unicef.it/emergenze/rifugiati-migranti-europa/>.

⁶⁸ Sartor, Ilenia. 2023. "Movimenti migratori attraverso il Mar Mediterraneo nel triennio 2014 - 2016: Il ruolo delle ONG nelle attività di SAR e rapporti tra attori locali, comunitari e internazionali." Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. <http://dspace.unive.it/bitstream/handle/10579/24099/868401-1274339.pdf?sequence=2>.

war that broke out in Sudan in April⁶⁹ and the resumption of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in October, which, although it did not lead to an exodus towards neighboring countries, nevertheless represents a significant element of destabilisation for the area⁷⁰.

Demographic trends and climate change are also significantly influencing the migration crisis. Contrary to what is happening in the countries of the EU, which are experiencing a significant decrease in population, Africa is not only the continent with the fastest population growth rate of 3.9% (with a population that is expected to triple by 2050, reaching 330 million), but also the youngest continent (with 60% of the population under 25 years of age). This demographic boom, generated by high fertility rates and increased life expectancy, is having major socioeconomic repercussions, given the increasing pressure on already scarce resources. As for climate change challenges, climatic hazards such as floods and droughts will not only be the most important drivers of migration but also add layers of complexity to the fragility of countries that are already subject to mass displacements and violent conflicts⁷¹. In this context, intra- and trans-regional mobility is a resilience strategy to overcome climate and economic challenges in the Mediterranean basin.

Of course, the lack of economic resources provides fertile ground for the prominent role of criminal economies, such as human trafficking and irregular migration. In fact, illegal migration has become a real source of large-scale business⁷². And it is precisely the uncontrolled flows across the Mediterranean that represent a tough challenge for Europe and the landing countries, first and foremost Italy. Among the routes that have emerged over the past few years, the main route for the sea transfer of irregular migrants to Italy is the central Mediterranean route, characterised by flows mainly originating from the Libyan and Tunisian coasts. In Libya, the presence of structured criminal networks with transnational projections represents one of the main factors facilitating irregular migration to the Italian coasts and is one of the causes of the strong increase in migratory pressure by sea detected during 2022, with

⁶⁹ On 15 April 2023, during Ramadan, a civil war began between two rival factions of Sudan's military government, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) of Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) of the Janjaweed leader, Hemedti.

⁷⁰ Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica. 2024. "Relazione annuale 2023 sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza." Sicurezza nazionale. <https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/contenuti/relazione-2023>.

⁷¹ Colombo, Silvia, and Anja Palm. 2019. "Italy in the Mediterranean: priorities and perspectives of a European middle-power." FEPS - Foundation for European Progressive Studies. <https://feeps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Italy-in-the-Mediterranean-Priorities-and-Perspectives-of-a-EU-Middle-Power.pdf>.

⁷² Marrone, Alessandro, and Michele Nones. 2015. "La sicurezza nel Mediterraneo e l'Italia." Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai_q_15.pdf.

an extremely flexible offer of services for irregular migrants able to adapt quickly to both the political-securitarian framework and the seasonality of weather and sea conditions. The illegal management of the migratory phenomenon ensures, on the other hand, an economic return, often for the less well-off strata of society, making its eradication extremely complex. From Tunisia, the first country of departure of flows by sea to Italy⁷³, the migratory thrust is on the rise compared to 2021 (+ 60%), mainly due to the continuing economic and social crisis and the geographical proximity to the Italian coasts. This flow remains characterised by a predominantly autochthonous nature, although there is a growing presence of sub-Saharan, often present for some time in the country; while the incoming flows to Tunisia from neighboring countries are confirmed from the West (Algeria), in coexistence with trafficking in mineral oils, drugs, and other goods, and from the South-East (Libya).

As for the second migratory option by sea in terms of flow consistency after the central Mediterranean route, i.e., the eastern Mediterranean route departures occur mainly from Turkey, a country that, together with Libya, ranks as one of the largest reservoirs of migrants and refugees, as well as more recently from Lebanon. The latter has emerged as the new country of departure due to the serious national economic and financial situation. Also in this case, the migratory phenomenon finds an important backing in the activism of criminal organisations dedicated to aiding and abetting irregular immigration, mainly Kurdish and Pakistani, with logistical support bases in the main countries of origin and transit of migrants, whose transnational nature makes law enforcement activities complex, as well as in the use, which has become a practice, of the web and social networks by the same associations to advertise their journeys and related services⁷⁴.

Data and statistics show, therefore, how migration flows are increasing in the Mediterranean basin, driven by the evolving regional context. One factor seems, in fact, to have become consolidated: the phenomenon of migratory flows across the Mediterranean is no longer presented as transitory and momentary but as structural and potentially growing⁷⁵.

⁷³ In 2023, 62% of sea crossings departed from Tunisia (97,667 persons; 2,796 disembarkations), followed by 33% from Libya (51,986 persons; 652 disembarkations), 5% from Turkey (7,153 persons; 92 disembarkations), and less than 1% from Algeria (620 persons, 50 disembarkations), Lebanon (214 persons, 1 disembarkation) and Cyprus, respectively (11 persons, one disembarkation).

UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency. 2023. "ITALY Sea arrivals dashboard." UNHCR. file:///Users/ALESSIA/Downloads/2023_12_Sea_Arrivals_Dashboard_December.pdf.

⁷⁴ Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica. 2023. "Relazione annuale 2022 sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza." Sicurezza nazionale. <https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/contenuti/relazione-al-parlamento-2022>.

⁷⁵ Marrone, Alessandro, and Michele Nones. 2015. "La sicurezza nel Mediterraneo e l'Italia." Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai_q_15.pdf.

1.2.3 Energy dynamics: a nexus of geopolitics and sustainability

In the complex picture of the Mediterranean basin, energy dossiers also stand out in terms of importance. In fact, energy is an essential key to understanding the dynamics that characterise the Mediterranean area, since it constitutes a physical, economic, and political bridge between the countries of the region⁷⁶. In other words, energy availability and trade in energy resources are of untold importance as factors capable of redrawing territories, changing political and security balances, and guaranteeing or not the prosperity of entire states⁷⁷.

It is mainly oil and gas that dominate the Mediterranean energy picture, marked by a unidirectional south-north relationship⁷⁸. Indeed, the Mediterranean is a key hub for the transit of volumes of crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Persian Gulf, Russia, and the Caspian Sea to European ports or American and Asian markets. In addition, it constitutes a strategic area for intra-regional hydrocarbon trade between North African producer countries and southern European consumers⁷⁹.

Almost abandoned as an energy option in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for hydrocarbon supplies led to oil and gas being immediately put back on the European priority list following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. This event has allowed Mediterranean energy resources to return to centre stage for the European Union, given the imperative to reconcile ambitious decarbonisation plans and the rapid implementation of the so-called Green Deal with the need for energy security⁸⁰.

Historically, it is North Africa that has been the main area of hydrocarbon production and export, contributing with its supplies to the energy security of European countries. Ensuring the continuity of energy flows between the two shores of the Mediterranean is the dense network of pipelines that cross the basin longitudinally and connect the northern flank to three key countries: Algeria, Egypt, and Libya. Among them, the leading role in the global oil sector

⁷⁶ Sartori, Nicolò, and Margherita Bianchi. 2019. "Energia nel Mediterraneo e il ruolo del settore privato." IAI - Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip1921.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Masi, Chiara. 2023. "Mediterraneo ed energia. Le strategie tra sicurezza, sviluppo e transizione." Formiche. <https://formiche.net/2023/03/mediterraneo-energia-sicurezza-strategie/#content>.

⁷⁸ Tagliapietra, Simone. 2019. "The Euro-Mediterranean energy relationship: a fresh perspective." In *Towards EU-MENA Shared Prosperity*. 3rd ed. Brussels/Rabat: Bruegel - Policy Center for the New South. p. 68. <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/euro-mediterranean-energy-relationship-fresh-perspective>.

⁷⁹ Marrone, Alessandro, and Michele Nones. 2015. "La sicurezza nel Mediterraneo e l'Italia." Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiq_15.pdf.

⁸⁰ Tzogopoulos, George N. 2023. "Energy Cooperation in the Mediterranean and the Ukraine crisis: Can Differences be Bridged?" In *Le sfide multidimensionali ed emergenti del Mediterraneo allargato: quale ruolo per l'Italia*, 89-101. Rivista Trimestrale ed. Vol. Quaderno 26. Napoli, Italia: Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale.

https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SIOI_LE-SFIDE-MULTIDIMENSIONALI-ED-EMERGENTI-DEL-MEDITERRANEO-ALLARGATO.pdf.

is attributed to Libya, which possesses reserves of 48,000 million barrels of crude oil. Before the outbreak of the internal conflict, the country contributed about 10% of European imports, with a significant impact on supplies to Italy, Germany, and France. As far as the natural gas sector is concerned, Algeria is the world's leading player. With approximately 4.5 trillion cubic metres of gas located underground, it is the ninth largest country in the world in terms of proven reserves. Natural gas from the country thus contributes about 15% of the European Union's total imports⁸¹. Algeria is connected with Spain by two different gas pipelines (the Medgaz and the Maghreb-Europe Pipeline), but also with Italy thanks to the Transmed pipeline, or 'Enrico Mattei pipeline', which connects the Algerian gas fields to the Sicilian coast near Mazara del Vallo via Tunisia. Also passing through the Sicilian Channel is the Greenstream, the longest submarine pipeline in the Mediterranean, which transports about 9 billion cubic metres of gas for 520 km destined for the Italian market. It is evident, therefore, how the security of this extensive infrastructure network represents one of the main vulnerabilities of the Mediterranean energy scenario⁸².

In addition to the traditional energy dynamics that have characterised activity in the Mediterranean for decades, there are new ones currently underway. These include the dynamics related to a substantial increase in energy demand on the southern shore of the Mediterranean; the need to meet this demand in a sustainable manner and in line with climate commitments, starting with the Paris Agreements; while the complementarity of energy interests between the two shores of the Mediterranean makes energy the ideal sector to redefine collaboration in a win-win sense in the area, promoting political dialogue and stability. Moreover, in view of the decarbonisation targets set by the EU for 2050, what is expected is a progressive change in the nature and dynamics of energy trade. In this sense, the infrastructure used by EU member states to import their natural gas from North Africa could be used to foster electricity trade from renewable energies and transport increasing shares of biogas and green hydrogen⁸³.

In general, the Mediterranean area has vast potential for the development of the renewable energy market. There are many factors contributing to the development of the region's

⁸¹ Sartori, Nicolò. 2015. "Il Mediterraneo e la sicurezza energetica." In *La sicurezza nel Mediterraneo e l'Italia*, 53-72. Istituto Affari Internazionali - IAI. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai_q_15.pdf.

⁸² Tzogopoulos, George N. 2023. "Energy Cooperation in the Mediterranean and the Ukraine crisis: Can Differences be Bridged?" In *Le sfide multidimensionali ed emergenti del Mediterraneo allargato: quale ruolo per l'Italia*, 89-101. Rivista Trimestrale ed. Vol. Quaderno 26. Napoli, Italia: Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SIOI_LE-SFIDE-MULTIDIMENSIONALI-ED-EMERGENTI-DEL-MEDITERRANEO-ALLARGATO.pdf.

⁸³ Marrone, Alessandro, and Michele Nones. 2015. "La sicurezza nel Mediterraneo e l'Italia." Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai_q_15.pdf.

enormous clean energy potential, including solar exposure, abundant wind, rapidly falling technology costs, and strong growth in energy demand. Despite this, the Mediterranean basin is very slow to adopt ambitious renewable energy strategies. Although many countries have clearly expressed their intention to make the most of the vast potential available to meet growing electricity consumption, to date, solar and wind contribute negligibly to the energy mixes of the southern shore. The reason is that the major political, economic, and social transformations currently taking place on the southern shore of the Mediterranean undoubtedly also have repercussions on the energy dynamics of the entire region. In other words, the instability dictated by the combination of old and new crises is not beneficial to the development of the energy sector. From Algeria to Libya via Egypt, low-carbon and sustainable conversion by the energy industry is hampered by political uncertainty and low investment. While persistent geopolitical tensions and inter- and intra-state territorial disputes across the region have direct consequences for resource exploitation. One need only think of the tensions between Israel and Lebanon on the one hand and Gaza on the other, or the complex relationship between Turkey and Cyprus that does not facilitate cooperation in the exploitation of natural gas reserves in the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean. Significant tensions also exist in Morocco, with obvious consequences for the development of the wind energy sector in Western Sahara⁸⁴.

Thus, from an energy point of view, the strategic nature of the Mediterranean basin seems destined to be confirmed. Indeed, in this sector, the Mediterranean is increasingly becoming an integrated, interconnected, and interdependent area, which is therefore strategic for the countries bordering it. Therefore, in light of the strong interdependence between the producers of the southern shore and the consumer countries of the EU, the traditional dynamics dictated by the complementarity existing between the two sides are giving way to common challenges to be tackled through the creation of regional cooperation mechanisms that take into account and capitalise on the convergence of interests between the different actors in the Mediterranean area⁸⁵.

1.2.4 Geopolitical realignments and emerging conflicts in the wider Mediterranean

As already mentioned in the past paragraph, the Mediterranean region is affected by complex

⁸⁴ Sartori, Nicolò, and Margherita Bianchi. 2019. "Energia nel Mediterraneo e il ruolo del settore privato." IAI - Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip1921.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Marrone, Alessandro, and Michele Nones. 2015. "La sicurezza nel Mediterraneo e l'Italia." Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiq_15.pdf.

dynamics of realignment and competition between local, regional, and international actors⁸⁶. As centre of virulent crises, hegemonic competition, and ideological and sectarian clashes, the Mediterranean area continues to split along old and new confessional fault lines, areas of political influence, and theatres of civil war⁸⁷.

It is precisely the outbreak of the Gaza crisis following Hamas's attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, that has rekindled the spotlight on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, rewriting the case in international political agendas, halting the processes of détente initiated in the quadrant, and bringing the Middle East once again to the centre of polarisation and conflict dynamics that risk further degenerating the already precarious regional stability.

Until the October 7 incident, important realignment processes had been initiated by various regional actors. The continuation of the strengthening of normalisation processes through the Abrahamic Agreements⁸⁸, for example, was seeing Israel and part of the Community of Arab Countries⁸⁹ at the centre and also involving, in perspective, Saudi Arabia, a reference point for the Arab and Muslim world. Similar rapprochement policies had also been initiated by actors such as Iran, Syria, and Turkey in order to steer the quadrant towards a gradual reduction of tensions. In this context, therefore, the outbreak of the Gaza crisis has led to significant security-related repercussions throughout the region, and the fear is that these effects may continue to perpetuate, especially considering the numerous local actors involved and the high risk that the crisis may spread to other contexts. This is because the open crisis has already been a trigger for the start of potentially destabilising activities carried out by local actors that can be traced back to the so-called “Axis of Resistance”, an informal alliance that strategically unites different realities in the quadrant — Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemenite Houthi, Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria, Palestinian Sunni groups — in an anti-Israeli and anti-Western connotation.

Not only the outbreak of the Gaza crisis but also the continuing Ukrainian conflict is accelerating the competitive dynamics, making the state structures of the entire basin increasingly fragile. The African scenario, in fact, is also quite articulated: the weakening of institutional structures and the resurgence of conflict between factions and ethnic groups have

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ Farnesina. 2017. The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean. Rome, Italia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

⁸⁸ The Abraham Agreements are a series of agreements to normalise relations between Israel and several Arab states. The agreements, all signed in the second half of 2020, consist of a general declaration and bilateral agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco.

⁸⁹ United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco.

provided space for a more incisive presence of global players, such as Russia and China. In particular, the Kremlin is strongly intent on maintaining its own structured presence in North Africa and the Sahel so as to exert pressure on the southern front of the Atlantic Alliance and undermine European and Western interests. The aim of this attempt is to transform Africa into a field of geopolitical competition with the West, shifting the centre of gravity in the direction of the so-called Global South. Prominent in this context is certainly the Libyan case⁹⁰: the country is still characterised by oppositional and conflictual dynamics, as it continues to maintain a two-tier institutional structure characterised by the co-presence of the Government of National Unity (GUN) in Tripoli and the Government of National Salvation (GSN) in Benghazi-Sirte. Despite these efforts, the situation on the ground continues to show dynamics that are far from a real recomposition of demands, with the various actors focused on strengthening their internal fronts. The Tunisian situation also attracts particular attention: Tunisia, in 2023, ranked as the first country of departure for irregular migrants to Italian and European territories, while registering complex indicators in the economic field. In addition to this, there is the terrorist threat, that is still on the attention of the local authorities due to the risk of permeability of the poor fringes of the population to proselytism and radicalization paths.

As for developments in the Sahelian area, the region is especially important from a security point of view, for the stability of North Africa, West Africa, and the Gulf of Guinea, and as a hub for the passage of clandestine flows towards the central Mediterranean route. However, here too, there are structural and multidimensional criticalities that are helping to facilitate a disengagement from the Euro-western sphere in favour of policies to consolidate the military, trade, and political influence of Russia and China; in other words, a real intolerance is beginning to take shape towards democratic systems and values because they are perceived as colonialist legacies, to the advantage of new authoritarian models that are more effective in responding to crises and local demands. This is happening, for example, in Mali: involutory dynamics both internally and in terms of its international positioning point to risks of further destabilisation following the UN Security Council's decision, at the request of the Malian government, to withdraw the Integrated Multilateral Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA,

⁹⁰ Libya is characterised by a humanitarian crisis and politico-military instability that has been unfolding since the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests in 2011, which led to two civil wars, foreign military intervention and the ouster and death of Muammar Gaddafi. The aftermath of the first civil war and the proliferation of armed groups led to violence and instability throughout the country, which resulted in a new civil war in 2014. The second war lasted until 23 October 2020, when all parties agreed to a permanent ceasefire and negotiations, that are still ongoing.

approximately 15,000 troops)⁹¹, while Colonel Goita's military junta has been consolidating its positions. However, the end of the MINUSMA Mission affected the dynamics between the main ethnic groups and the resumption of violence between Bamako and the Tuareg armed groups in the north, sanctioning the end of the pacification process envisaged by the 2015 Algiers Accords⁹². The coup d'état in Niger at the end of July⁹³ can also be interpreted as a further weakening of the Western architecture of cooperation in the country, identified as an advanced garrison in the sub-Saharan area of the West. It is precisely Niger, together with Mali and Burkina Faso, that is increasingly intensifying its axis of cooperation after the signing of the Alliance of Sahel States⁹⁴, a military agreement that the summits of the three states are filling with political content in order to redesign the system of regional alliances, redesign its channels of cooperation by favouring ties with Russia, and seek diplomatic spaces in the sphere of South-South cooperation. This has cost the three countries their exit from the G5 Sahel Group⁹⁵, the main form of regional security cooperation supported by the West⁹⁶. Finally, looking at the developments in the Horn of Africa's state contexts, of particular concern is Sudan: the hostilities between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) of Sovereign Council President Gen. al Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Vice President Gen. Dagalo Hamidty took on the characteristics of a real war of position in which neither side proved able to prevail, highlighting a dramatic humanitarian crisis and massive movements of displaced people who fled to neighboring countries such as Egypt⁹⁷. The spiraling Sudanese crisis has weighed on the delicate regional balances and, in particular, on

⁹¹ The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established by Security Council Resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013 to support political processes in the country and perform a range of security-related tasks.

⁹² The Algiers Accord, or Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, is a 2015 agreement to end the Malian war. The agreement was signed on 15 May and 20 June 2015 in Bamako, following negotiations in Algiers between the Republic of Mali and the Coordination of Azawad Movements.

⁹³ On 26 July 2023, a coup d'état took place in Niger, when the country's presidential guard arrested President Mohamed Bazoum and the commander of the presidential guard, General Abdourahamane Tchiani, proclaimed himself leader of a new military junta shortly after confirming the success of the coup.

⁹⁴ The Alliance of Sahel States (AES), created on 16 September 2023, brings together Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in a mutual defence agreement.

⁹⁵ The Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) was founded in 2014 and is a regional intergovernmental organisation that provides an institutional framework to promote development and security in its five-member countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

⁹⁶ Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica. 2023. "Relazione annuale 2022 sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza." Sicurezza nazionale.
<https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/contenuti/relazione-al-parlamento-2022>.

⁹⁷ Center for preventing action. 2024. "Civil War in Sudan." Global Conflict Tracker.
<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/power-struggle-sudan>.

the Ethiopian scenario⁹⁸, where the Prime Minister was forced to declare a state of emergency given the violence of the clashes between federal troops and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, a regional militia⁹⁹.

Thus, crises of states, new and acute forms of conflict, the proliferation of security challenges, but also renewed activism at the level of the population, especially the youth, and new attempts at governance clearly indicate that the Mediterranean basin is projected towards a new, uncertain chapter in its development¹⁰⁰.

1.3 Primary drivers behind Italy's foreign policy strategy recalibration

The enlarged Mediterranean is increasingly configuring itself as a complex multidimensional geopolitical system, a hinge between different worlds, an area at the centre of multiple dynamics, on which enduring crises are grafting themselves, whose effects reverberate on Europe and, certainly, on Italy. In other words, a region of priority national strategic interest¹⁰¹. Always linked to the Mediterranean Sea for multiple economic and security aspects, the current situation represents for Italy a key area in which to play and strengthen its leading role, focusing on the instruments that make it a reliable guarantor of security and promoter of regional stability¹⁰². By virtue of its strong roots in the region, Italy focuses on developing a high-profile and forward-looking multidimensional policy based on structured dialogue and joint commitment with the countries of the area, as well as on initiatives to share the material and immaterial resources of the Mediterranean basin, the so-called Mediterranean Common Goods¹⁰³. This line of action is aimed at: promoting political and socio-economic stability; facilitating the gradual and prudent liberalisation of trade; encouraging regional integration processes, interconnectivity, political, economic, and commercial projection towards the

⁹⁸ Reference is made to the Tigray War, an armed conflict that lasted from 3 November 2020 to 3 November 2022. The war was mainly fought in the Tigray region of Ethiopia between the allied forces of the Ethiopian federal government and Eritrea on the one hand, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on the other.

⁹⁹ Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica. 2023. "Relazione annuale 2022 sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza." Sicurezza nazionale.

<https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/contenuti/relazione-al-parlamento-2022>.

¹⁰⁰ Marrone, Alessandro, and Michele Nones. 2015. "La sicurezza nel Mediterraneo e l'Italia." Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiq_15.pdf.

¹⁰¹ Ministero della Difesa. 2022. "Strategia di Sicurezza e Difesa per il Mediterraneo." CiRAM. <https://ciram.unime.it/it/focus/diritto-geopolitica-mare/italia-sicurezza-spazi-marittimi/litalia-e-la-sicurezza-degli-spazi-marittimi/StrategiaMediterraneo2022.pdf>.

¹⁰² Brasioli, Diego. 2023. "Italy's stabilising role in the "wider Mediterranean."" NATO Defense College Foundation. <https://www.natofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/NDCF-Italys-stabilising-role-in-the-wider-Mediterranean-Paper-Brasioli-1.pdf>.

¹⁰³ Such as the green transition, the blue economy, research and digital innovation, scientific and cultural diplomacy, health.

Mediterranean axis; and pursuing a vision that is both strategic and pragmatic for the Euro-Mediterranean area and of the role played by Italy in this sphere¹⁰⁴.

Well aware, therefore, of the importance of stabilising the Mediterranean basin, in recent years, the guidelines of Italian foreign policy have been marked by renewed activism in the area, favouring the launch of multiple initiatives in the military, economic, commercial, and diplomatic fields. In fact, in addition to the publication of a new security strategy for the Mediterranean by the Draghi government in 2022¹⁰⁵ and the launch of the ambitious strategic plan for building a new partnership with Africa — the Mattei plan¹⁰⁶ —, the Italian political class is also focusing on strengthening the military presence in the region through the launch of new missions, intensifying diplomatic activities through the opening of new diplomatic offices, increasing visits by government representatives throughout the basin, and forging important trade and energy agreements with several countries in the area¹⁰⁷.

1.3.1 Navigating security challenges: Italy's strategic imperative

As previously ascertained, the Mediterranean basin has always been a hotspot of geopolitical tensions¹⁰⁸, so much so that it has delineated a series of arcs of instability and insecurity that insist on different areas.

In particular, the Middle East area is lacerated from an ethno-religious point of view and is extremely unstable in light of the increasingly heated clash between the Sunni and Shia souls of the Islamic world, that continues to fuel the Iraqi and Syrian crises and tends to spread by

¹⁰⁴ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2022. “Direttiva generale per l'azione amministrativa e per la gestione dei Centri di Responsabilità del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale - Anno 2022.” Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Direttiva_del_Ministro_2022_4.1.22_firmata.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Reference is made to the Strategia di Sicurezza e Difesa per il Mediterraneo, presented by the Ministry of Defence Lorenzi Guerini in 2022. The Strategy provides political-military guidelines, without setting any specifically military objectives.

¹⁰⁶ Named after Eni's founder Enrico Mattei, the Mattei Plan was ratified by the Italian Chamber of Deputies in January 2023. The Mattei Plan has a four-year horizon and seems to be aimed to encourage a holistic approach to dealing with African countries of interest to Italy. It envisages significant investments to enable African countries to develop and improve their energy infrastructure, turning Italy into an energy hub between North Africa and Europe; but also support from Italy - and presumably the EU - for initiatives to promote exports, food security and the sustainable exploitation of natural resources in Africa. Finally, its true nature is linked to the goal of curbing irregular migration to Italy.

¹⁰⁷ Mazziotti di Celso, Matteo, and Gabriele Natalizia. 2024. “La politica estera italiana tra baricentro euro-mediterraneo e ambizioni indo-pacifiche.” ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378497468_La_politica_estera_italiana_tra_baricentro_euro-mediterraneo_e_ambizioni_indo-pacifiche.

¹⁰⁸ Scheffran, Jürgen. 2020. “The Geopolitical Impact of Climate Change in the Mediterranean Region: Climate Change as a Trigger of Conflict and Migration.” IEMed. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-geopolitical-impact-of-climate-change-in-the-mediterranean-region-climate-change-as-a-trigger-of-conflict-and-migration/>.

proxy into new forms of conflict, such as the clash in Gaza or the civil wars in Yemen and Libya. It is precisely the age-old problem of the stagnating Libyan crisis that continues to linger in North Africa, becoming the terrain for exogenous indirect competitions between states, the resolution of which is proceeding slowly and laboriously, with destabilising reverberations towards Europe linked to crime and illicit trafficking of all kinds. Added to this are the tensions on the border between Morocco and Algeria, the Tunisian political crisis, the unresolved question of the territorial sovereignty of Western Sahara, and the institutional chaos that characterises the entire Sahel strip pervaded by the distributed presence of Daesh, the insecurity of the Gulf of Guinea (the 'world piracy hotspot'¹⁰⁹), and the Horn of Africa. Further factors of instability stem from the tensions surrounding the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf Region, the unknown Iran, and the perennial threat of interrupted maritime flows in the Strait of Hormuz. The activism of some global players, such as Russia and China, also contributes to complicating the picture¹¹⁰.

The overall deterioration of the geo-strategic picture is then aggravated by international terrorism, which continues to constitute a widespread and imminent threat, especially in the Sahel area and in western and equatorial Africa, where multiple jihadist movements are proliferating¹¹¹.

Finally, in recent decades, security issues such as increased migration flows, the revitalization of inter-state competition, energy security, climate change, population growth and development, and the hybrid and cyber threat have posed additional challenges to the region's security, as they are seen as factors capable of escalating and accumulating into serious threats, possibly leading to instability and violent conflict.

In order to contribute to security in the Mediterranean region, the guidelines of Italian foreign policy have been based on an 'integrated approach' to the challenges. The idea is to bring together the many existing issues and place the activities undertaken or to be undertaken in the context of a strategy for the sustainable development of the Mediterranean area. In this sense, Italy's commitment translates into a multiplicity of activities, such as: regional crisis

¹⁰⁹ Security Council Report. 2022. "Gulf of Guinea Piracy, November 2022 Monthly Forecast." Security Council Report. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-11/gulf-of-guinea-piracy.php>.

¹¹⁰ Russia's intention is to liberate African countries from colonialism and neo-colonialism through the military activity of the Wagner group, with Yevgeny Prigozhin's mercenaries at the forefront in supporting governments and coups. On the other hand, China's presence is much quieter and more discreet, with Beijing having invested hundreds of billions of dollars throughout Africa in the construction of infrastructure of all kinds, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

¹¹¹ Ministero della Difesa. 2022. "Documento Programmatico Pluriennale Della Difesa per il triennio 2022-2024." Ministero della Difesa. https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/30714/dpp_2022_2024.pdf.

management; the fight against terrorism and radicalization; actions within the UN, the EU, NATO, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to ensure that their agenda focuses on the Mediterranean; and participation in international stabilisation missions¹¹².

In this sense, it is clear how the military and defence instruments occupy a relevant position in Italy's foreign policy agenda. The identification of the Mediterranean basin as a strategic quadrant requires constant monitoring for the purpose of timely intervention. Therefore, the activities that the Italian Armed Forces conduct range from stabilisation and pacification missions and operations to bilateral and multilateral cooperation activities, identifying themselves as a declination of national policy to guarantee the protection of priority interests. In particular, two substantial dimensions can be identified for the defence contribution to security in the wider Mediterranean: a cooperative dimension and an operational dimension. The cooperative dimension sees the Italian Armed Forces cooperating at an international level on the basis of structured cooperation plans that meet the needs of partner countries. Exemplary in this regard are the Italian Bilateral Military Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL)¹¹³, the Bilateral Assistance and Support Mission in Libya (MIASIT)¹¹⁴, and the Bilateral Support Mission in the Republic of Niger (MISIN)¹¹⁵, bilateral missions functional to carry out capacity-building activities in the countries involved in the cooperation plan. In this perspective, the Italian Defence also participates in operations under the auspices of the UN, NATO, and the EU. In addition to enabling the pursuit of the objectives for which they were launched, these missions are fundamental for the exercise of so-called military diplomacy, through which the national component seeks to increase trust at the bilateral level with the Armed Forces of the host countries.

¹¹² Tagliaferri, Vincenzo. 2017. "The Italian strategy in the Mediterranean: stabilising the crisis and building a positive agenda for the region." Farnesina. <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

¹¹³ In 2015, the Italian Bilateral Military Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL) was established as part of the broader initiatives supported by the "International Support Group" (ISG). The ISG includes not only the member countries of the permanent council of the United Nations but also Germany, Italy, and the EU. The mission, operating within this framework, has been unwavering in its efforts to assist both the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the civilian population.

¹¹⁴ Established in 2018, the Bilateral Assistance and Support Mission in Libya (abbreviated to MIASIT Libya) is an Italian mission to support the government of Libya in training the armed forces and maintaining stability in the region.

¹¹⁵ In 2018, the Italian government authorised the 'Bilateral Support Mission in the Republic of Niger - MISIN' (with the geographical area of intervention also extended to Mauritania, Nigeria and Benin) in order to increase capabilities aimed at combating the phenomenon of illegal trafficking and security threats, as part of a joint European and US effort to stabilise the area and strengthen the territorial control capabilities of the Niger authorities and the G5 Sahel countries.

The operational dimension, on the other hand, is purely based on participation in NATO and EU operations in the Wider Mediterranean in order to ensure presence, surveillance, and therefore deterrence in the areas of most immediate national interest. As a typically multidimensional field, information superiority is in fact a prerequisite for the creation of a decision-making advantage and a rapid and synchronous response¹¹⁶. In 2022, all Italian armed forces participated in international missions. Specifically, the Italian Army was deployed both in critical scenarios such as Somalia, Niger, Libya, Lebanon, and Iraq and to reinforce the units that make up NATO's Rapid Reaction Forces. The Italian Navy has been deployed in both domestic and international operations. As for the former, it is *Mediterraneo Sicuro*, a mission that ensures the security of the area concerned by the operation through surveillance and presence activities, and the *Fondali Sicuri* operation, aimed at protecting internet cables and gas pipelines and cables vital to Italy, such as the Libyan Greenstream. With regard to the latter, at an international level, the Italian Navy has played a leading role in the surveillance and protection of national interests in the European Irini Operation (EUNAVFOR MED Irini)¹¹⁷ in the Mediterranean and in the Atlanta Operation (EU NAVFOR Somalia)¹¹⁸ to combat piracy in the Indian Ocean. The Air Force has been deployed on international missions in crisis scenarios in Kuwait, Lebanon, the Horn of Africa, Niger, Qatar, and Iraq. Carabinieri contingents were frequently deployed in 2022, mainly together with contingents of other Armed Forces in critical areas such as Jordan, Kuwait, and Iraq, as part of the *Inherent Resolve*¹¹⁹ and *Prima Parthica*¹²⁰ missions, where their role was to provide assistance and train local police forces. Italy is currently in command of missions in critical and strategically

¹¹⁶ Ministero della Difesa. 2022. "Strategia di Sicurezza e Difesa per il Mediterraneo." CiRAM. <https://ciram.unimc.it/it/focus/diritto-geopolitica-mare/italia-sicurezza-spazi-marittimi/litalia-e-la-sicurezza-degli-spazi-marittimi/StrategiaMediterraneo2022.pdf>.

¹¹⁷ The European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Irini (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI) was launched on 31 March 2020 with the primary mission to enforce the United Nations arms embargo to Libya due to the Second Libyan Civil War. The primary mission of the operation is to ensure the implementation of the UN arms embargo. Other missions include the training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Libyan Navy, the disruption of human trafficking and halt the illicit exports of Libyan oil.

¹¹⁸ EU NAVFOR Somalia - Operation Atlanta is a diplomatic-military maritime security mission of the European Union to prevent and suppress acts of maritime piracy along the coasts of the Horn of Africa states in support of UN Resolutions 1814, 1816, 1838 and 1846 adopted by the UN Security Council in 2008. The mission began in December 2008 and aims to protect merchant ships transiting between the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, and also to escort UN World Food Programme merchant ships tasked with delivering food aid to Somalia.

¹¹⁹ Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) is the United States military's operational name for the international war against the Islamic State (IS or ISIL), including both a campaign in Iraq and a campaign in Syria, with a closely related campaign in Libya. OIR was launched in 2014.

¹²⁰ Initiated in 2014 and stationed at the Camp Singara base in Erbil, the main objective of the mission is to strengthen the peshmerga forces, particularly in terms of their light infantry capabilities, so that they can contain the Islamic State's remaining pockets of resistance.

important areas: NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) in Iraq¹²¹, European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Somalia¹²², European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH)¹²³, and EUNAVFOR MED Irini in the Mediterranean (which continues to be manned by the Navy in NATO naval groups).

Recognising the security of the Mediterranean region as crucial for Italy, the Ministry of Defence also launched the Security and Defence Strategy for the Mediterranean in 2022, foreseeing the possibility for the country to invest in the quadrant so as to be able to play a leading role there as a medium-sized regional power with a strong maritime connotation, capable of protecting its strategic interests, as well as being a reference point for the main Allies in NATO and the EU. This postulates a genuinely inter-force/multi-domain but also multidimensional approach, in which defence must contribute with a proactive role in the various contexts in which it is called upon to operate. In order to fully realise this strategy, the Italian Armed Forces are expected to: search for and stimulate an active posture of the international organisations towards the Southern Flank, coinciding with the Wider Mediterranean, seizing the opportunity given by the strategic review taking place within NATO and the EU, strengthening and systematising cooperation and assistance activities in the bilateral and multilateral dimensions, and in the international missions aimed at capacity building of the hosting Countries consolidate and further develop the security architecture of the wider Mediterranean through participation in the missions and operations underway; promote the multi-domain approach, presence, and rapid intervention capability in the areas closest to or of greatest interest to Italy, such as the Strait of Sicily, a compulsory and neuralgic passage point for national security; contribute to the control and protection of the national Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)¹²⁴; develop situational awareness as a prerequisite for

¹²¹ NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) is a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission that assists Iraq in building more sustainable, transparent, inclusive and effective armed forces and security institutions, so that Iraqis themselves are better able to stabilise their country, fight terrorism and prevent the return of ISIS/Daesh. The mission was launched at the NATO Summit in Brussels in July 2018, following a request from the government of Iraq, and established in October 2018.

¹²² Established in 2020, EUTM Somalia aims to strengthen the Somali federal defence institutions by providing training, mentoring and advice.

¹²³ The European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) is a French-led maritime monitoring mission with the goal to protect maritime flows through the Strait of Hormuz. The mission has 9 participating countries including Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and, with political support, Germany and Portugal. These are all European countries, however EMASOH is not initiated by the European Union. EMASOH was launched on 20 January 2020.

¹²⁴ Italy has the world's 48th largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The area has long coastlines with the Tyrrhenian Sea to the west, the Ionian Sea to the south and the Adriatic Sea to the east. Its EEZ is limited by maritime boundaries with neighboring countries to the north-west, east and southeast. Italy's western sea territory stretches from the west coast of Italy in the Tyrrhenian Sea including the island Sardinia. The island Sicily is in

decision-making superiority; promote the technological development of the military instrument, also through stronger synergies with the industrial world and research and innovation poles, so that it maintains relevant capabilities and acts as a driving force for the national production sector¹²⁵.

Therefore, defence must make its contribution to Italy's active positioning in the Mediterranean quadrant. Facing the security and defence challenges that confront it in this region in the best way possible means, in effect, possessing and developing strategic vision, rapid decision-making, effectiveness, operational readiness, and technological avant-garde.

In the light of the growing geopolitical complexity of the basin, it will be necessary for the country to continue to invest in the quadrant, all the more so today. While the European Union and NATO are called upon to demonstrate their unity and determination in tackling security threats, Italy can play a leading role in elaborating a strategic review process, so that these organisations could be even more responsive to the challenges and could work to adopt a long-term vision aimed at protecting also the national interests¹²⁶.

1.3.2 Italy's crucial place in the Mediterranean economic landscape

As an important consequence of the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the shortening of European supply chains is gradually shifting the centre of gravity in economic scenarios towards the Mediterranean basin. From a periphery, the region is becoming increasingly strategic in the global economy¹²⁷. Although it only occupies 1% of the world's maritime surface, the Mediterranean Sea is a fundamental crossroads if one considers that: it hosts four of the nine choke points through which 80% of the world's maritime traffic passes and whose free access is an essential condition for the region's economic development¹²⁸; it sees 20% of the world's maritime traffic pass through it, as well as 65% of the energy flows destined for our continent¹²⁹. In this case, extremely strategic for Italy is the Strait of Sicily, an obligatory

the southernmost area. Lampedusa is Italy's southernmost point. It shares treaty-defined maritime boundaries with France, Spain, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Malta, Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia.

¹²⁵ Ministero della Difesa. 2022. "Documento Programmatico Pluriennale Della Difesa per il triennio 2022-2024." Ministero della Difesa. https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/30714/dpp_2022_2024.pdf.

¹²⁶ Ministero della Difesa. 2022. "Direttiva per la Politica Militare Nazionale 2022." Ciram. <https://ciram.unimc.it/it/focus/diritto-geopolitica-mare/italia-sicurezza-spazi-marittimi/litalia-e-la-sicurezza-degli-spazi-marittimi/DirettivaPMN2022.pdf>.

¹²⁷ Ministero della Difesa. 2022. "Documento Programmatico Pluriennale Della Difesa per il triennio 2022-2024." Ministero della Difesa. https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/30714/dpp_2022_2024.pdf.

¹²⁸ Lauriat, George. 2021. "Global maritime choke points." American Journal of Transportation. <https://ajot.com/premium/ajot-global-maritime-choke-points>.

¹²⁹ SIOI Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale. 2023. "Le sfide multidimensionali ed emergenti del Mediterraneo allargato: quale ruolo per l'Italia." Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

passage point (choke point) for maritime movements between the east and west shores of the Mediterranean and a hinge for much of the north-south traffic connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian and Pacific Oceans¹³⁰. At present, a big game is also being played with submarine cables. The Mediterranean Sea is in fact extremely central underwater in the area of submarine cables laid on the seabed, through which 99% of all international voice and data traffic for 7.7 billion people passes¹³¹.

Italy owes much of its prosperity, well-being, and security to the sea and its related activities. As a country with no raw materials, it depends heavily on its maritime vocation, on its central geographic position with respect to the choke points of Gibraltar and Suez, and on the relevance of its national ports, that are important crossroads for commercial traffic directed towards the Atlantic area, the Middle East, and continental Europe. In fact, the Italian port system is the third largest in Europe in terms of volume of goods transported and the European leader in terms of the movement of cruise ships and cruise passengers. In other words, the bulk of the Italian economic system is heavily dependent on freedom of navigation. Therefore, accessing and operating freely and safely in the Mediterranean basin represents for Italy an important opportunity for the development of numerous activities, from shipbuilding to fishing, maritime and cruise tourism, telecommunications, and above all, commercial and energy traffic.

In terms of energy security, Italy's energy policy is strongly tied to the Mediterranean agenda, since more than two-thirds of oil imports and about half of natural gas supplies come from the region. The energy issue is certainly more central than in the past following the war, given the need to reduce dependence on supplies from Russia¹³². Added to this is the global push towards decarbonisation, which leads the more pragmatic players and the large parastatal giants, such as ENI, to bet big on blue gold¹³³. This is why Italian energy cooperation with the countries of the Mediterranean region is becoming increasingly important for different reasons, that are: the interest of diversifying supply routes and sources, the purposes of the energy transition to

https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SIOI_LE-SFIDE-MULTIDIMENSIONALI-ED-EMERGENTI-DEL-MEDITERRANEO-ALLARGATO.pdf.

¹³⁰ Lauriat, George. 2021. "Global maritime choke points." American Journal of Transportation. <https://ajot.com/premium/ajot-global-maritime-choke-points>.

¹³¹ TeleGeography. "Submarine Cable Map." <https://www.submarinecablemap.com/>.

¹³² SIOI Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale. 2023. "Le sfide multidimensionali ed emergenti del Mediterraneo allargato: quale ruolo per l'Italia." Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SIOI_LE-SFIDE-MULTIDIMENSIONALI-ED-EMERGENTI-DEL-MEDITERRANEO-ALLARGATO.pdf.

¹³³ Muratore, Andrea. 2021. "Il Mediterraneo, destino d'Italia - La via marittima dell'interesse nazionale." Osservatorio Globalizzazione. <https://osservatorioglobalizzazione.it/dossier/interesse-nazionale/mediterraneo-italia-interesse-nazionale-marina-militare/>.

natural gas, the enormous potential of offshore deposits in the eastern Mediterranean (Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, and Cyprus), the electricity sector (the Elmed energy interconnection between Italy and Tunisia); and the renewable energy sector, thanks to the potential of the southern shore of the Mediterranean¹³⁴.

At leading Italy's advancement in its role as an active actor in the Mediterranean energy sector is the company ENI¹³⁵. Italy, for its part, has signed agreements with several Mediterranean countries, such as Algeria, Egypt, and Libya. In the case of Algeria, the country supplied Italy with more than 25 billion cubic metres of gas in 2022, an increase of 10% compared to 2021. Moreover, the Italian energy company ENI, the American Occidental, the French Total Energies, and the Algerian Sonatrach signed a \$4 billion contract to share oil and gas production from the Berkine field in south-eastern Algeria. As for Egypt, ENI and the Egyptian company EGAS agreed in April 2022 to increase the amount of Egyptian LNG shipped to Italy last year to 3 bcm. Finally, Italy expanded its economic presence in Libya. ENI and Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) signed an \$8 billion gas production agreement¹³⁶. Meanwhile, drilling continues in several Mediterranean countries. In particular, in August and December 2022, ENI and Total Energies discovered two new gas fields off the coast of Cyprus¹³⁷.

While strengthening relations with traditional energy partners — Algeria, Egypt, and Libya — is the declared objective, there is also an attempt to promptly seize the new opportunities offered by the Mediterranean basin. Even though it must be considered that the proliferation of offshore energy infrastructures and installations near the Mediterranean coasts, as well as the increase in regional energy flows by sea, could contribute in the long term to increasing the vulnerability of the basin and its ecosystem to risks caused by natural phenomena or threats of an intentional nature (e.g., terrorist attacks and sabotage)¹³⁸. In the energy context, economics

¹³⁴ SIOI Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale. 2023. “Le sfide multidimensionali ed emergenti del Mediterraneo allargato: quale ruolo per l'Italia.” Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SIOI_LE-SFIDE-MULTIDIMENSIONALI-ED-EMERGENTI-DEL-MEDITERRANEO-ALLARGATO.pdf.

¹³⁵ Chiaretti, Sara. 2021. “L'area geo-strategica del Mediterraneo allargato: il ruolo dell'Italia nella diversificazione energetica europea.” Piattaforma CASD. <https://www.casd.it/mod/resource/view.php?id=17503&forceview=1>.

¹³⁶ AlJazeera. 2023. “Italy's Eni signs \$8bn gas deal with Libya amid energy crunch.” AlJazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/28/italys-meloni-in-libya-to-conclude-8bn-gas-deal>.

¹³⁷ Gotev, Georgi. 2022. “Gas discovery off Cyprus by Eni and Total gives Europe more options.” Euractiv. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/gas-discovery-off-cyprus-by-eni-and-total-gives-europe-more-options/>.

¹³⁸ SIOI Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale. 2023. “Le sfide multidimensionali ed emergenti del Mediterraneo allargato: quale ruolo per l'Italia.” Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SIOI_LE-SFIDE-MULTIDIMENSIONALI-ED-EMERGENTI-DEL-MEDITERRANEO-ALLARGATO.pdf.

and geopolitics are deeply interrelated. In fact, the growing overlap of diverging interests mainly related to natural gas makes the Mediterranean basin extremely competitive. One need only think of the strategic importance of the possession of deposits and the discovery of new ones, which reshape the geography of energy availability; or of the dynamic attitude of states such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, which exploit elastic interpretations of international law or power vacuums to actively enter the competition for energy security in the waters of the eastern Mediterranean; but also to the shadows of the cold gas war between the US and Russia projecting themselves into the region, with Washington promoting regional initiatives (such as the Greek Cypriot-Israeli alliance that gave rise to Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline - EASTMED) to torpedo the Kremlin's influence¹³⁹.

Therefore, greater cooperation and regional convergence, not only on purely energy issues but also on the management of the possible geopolitical and security consequences of intensified economic activity in the basin, are a strategic priority for both sides of the Mediterranean. Presiding over gas routes, diversifying sources and suppliers, pushing investments, especially in the private sector with tools such as the EEZ, focusing on the green and digital transition, and developing infrastructure are the guidelines on which to intervene to launch new regional economic strategies. Italy, once again, is central in this design due to its geographical position, logistics, and the role of its manufacturing system.

1.3.3 Italy's distinctive approach to Mediterranean diplomacy and cooperation

The deep political, economic, and security interests that Italy holds in the Mediterranean basin lead this region to be identified as the main theatre in which diplomatic activities and bilateral or multilateral cooperation — including the stabilisation and pacification missions and operations developed in synergy with allies, partners, and international organisations — constitute fundamental tools that the country must wisely exploit in order to strengthen its leading role as a reliable guarantor of security and promoter of stability at the regional and international level and play to protect its national interests¹⁴⁰.

It is precisely the wider Mediterranean area that will represents the main focus of Italy's foreign policy action in the coming months. The Meloni government's conviction is that the issues

¹³⁹ Muratore, Andrea. 2021. "Il Mediterraneo, destino d'Italia - La via marittima dell'interesse nazionale." Osservatorio Globalizzazione. <https://osservatorioglobalizzazione.it/dossier/interesse-nazionale/mediterraneo-italia-interesse-nazionale-marina-militare/>.

¹⁴⁰ Brasioli, Diego. 2023. "Italy's stabilising role in the "wider Mediterranean."" NATO Defense College Foundation. <https://www.natofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/NDCF-Italys-stabilising-role-in-the-wider-Mediterranean-Paper-Brasioli-1.pdf>.

affecting the region should be “solved in Africa”, with the application of a Mattei Plan at the national level¹⁴¹, which promotes a “non-predatory, but collaborative” attitude, and of a more assertive commitment at the European level, in order to find resources for further economic intervention in the basin¹⁴². This is considered as a joint strategy essential to laying the necessary foundations to tackle epoch-making problems such as climate change, poverty, wars and conflicts, terrorism, and all the other root causes of the great migratory pressure¹⁴³. For this reason, the government strategy devised for the protection of national interests in the Mediterranean basin implements a high-profile and forward-looking multidimensional policy based on structured dialogue and joint engagement with the countries in the area, as well as on initiatives to share the Mediterranean basin's tangible and intangible resources (the so-called Mediterranean Common Goods)¹⁴⁴.

In 2023, a dossier emblematically demonstrated the ambitions of the Meloni government's foreign policy towards the enlarged Mediterranean. It's the pact with Kaïs Saïed's Tunisia, concluded by the European Commission under Italy's pressure in July 2023. Faced with the worsening Tunisian economic crisis and the growing number of departures from Tunisia's coasts to Italy, the government in Rome successfully put forward the idea of a European initiative to negotiate an agreement with President Saïed. The agreement is one of the first confirmations of Italian diplomacy's leading role in proposing itself as the initiator of a new European approach towards North Africa, so much so that it has won the support of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and other European states¹⁴⁵ concerned about the growing number of arrivals¹⁴⁶.

Among the priorities of the current Italian government, there is also the completion of the political transition and the desirable political institutional consolidation for the stabilisation of

¹⁴¹ See Chapter 2.

¹⁴² Meloni, Giorgia. 2023. “President Meloni’s speech at the 78th United Nations General Assembly.” Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-speech-78th-united-nations-general-assembly/23621>.

¹⁴³ Brasioli, Diego. 2023. “Italy's stabilising role in the “wider Mediterranean.”” NATO Defense College Foundation. <https://www.natofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/NDCF-Italys-stabilising-role-in-the-wider-Mediterranean-Paper-Brasioli-1.pdf>.

¹⁴⁴ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2022. “Direttiva generale per l'azione amministrativa e per la gestione dei Centri di Responsabilità del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale - Anno 2022.” Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Direttiva_del_Ministro_2022_4.1.22_firmata.pdf.

¹⁴⁵ In particular, the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of the Netherlands Mark Rutte participated to the meeting in Tunis on 16 July 2023, together with President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni, President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and President of the Republic of Tunisia Kais Saïed.

¹⁴⁶ Nelli Feroci, Ferdinando, and Leo Goretti. 2024. “Il governo Meloni alla prova. Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2023.” IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893683128.pdf>.

Libya, with respect to which Italy intends to continue to play a propulsive role vis-à-vis all the actors involved, as well as in the definition of common positions with international partners (UN, Berlin Process, P3+2). Moreover, in view of the strategic importance of the Sahel, destabilised by the growing recourse to coups d'état and the Russian influence in the region, Meloni's government is working to relaunch action to stabilise the area, consolidating the political-diplomatic presence of the country in close coordination with the European Union, the United States and the multilateral missions aimed at increasing the countries' capacities — with growing attention also to the Gulf of Guinea — in terms of effective civil governance. Finally, special attention is paid to the stability, security, and development of the Horn of Africa and East Africa, a region of traditional strategic interest for Italy, which is still exposed to serious factors of political, security, and economic instability and enduring social and ethnic tensions, exacerbated by the impact of the war in Ukraine. This complex regional situation calls for continued and assiduous investment in bilateral relations both with the countries of North Africa and the Middle East — from the Maghreb to the Gulf — and with those of the extended Sahelian strip, as far as the Red Sea and the Great Lakes region, and to play a profiled role in the multilateral contexts of reference. Indeed, in order to foster peace, stabilisation and sustainable development while also helping to contain and prevent phenomena such as terrorism, radicalization, and mass migration flows, it is necessary to implement a strategy for the entire African continent aimed at growth and shared development. For the implementation of these regional priorities, the organisation of multi-stakeholder dialogue initiatives is still confirmed as fundamental. Exemplary, in this case, are the MED Dialogues, the main public diplomacy initiative held annually by the Farnesina in collaboration with the Institute for International Policy Studies (ISPI), which brings together institutional representatives, experts, analysts, and exponents of civil society, the economy, and the media in Rome every year¹⁴⁷. In order for Italy to play a leading role across the board, it is imperative not only to strengthen the political dialogue. The country is also dedicating itself to supporting its economic and commercial presence in the basin, the mobility of researchers and students, and the dissemination of the Italian language and culture¹⁴⁸. In other words, development cooperation is becoming an integral part of Italy's foreign policy. As a matter of facts, the country is

¹⁴⁷ Institute for International Policy Studies (ISPI) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. “MED Dialogues.” ISPI. <https://med.ispionline.it/>.

¹⁴⁸ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2022. “Direttiva generale per l'azione amministrativa e per la gestione dei Centri di Responsabilità del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale - Anno 2022.” Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Direttiva_del_Ministro_2022_4.1.22_firmata.pdf.

committed to promoting sustainable development in the countries in which it operates in various areas: humanitarian aid, agriculture and food security, education, training and culture, health, governance, fight against inequality, migration, and development¹⁴⁹. In fact, for example, rather than a wide-ranging partnership, the Europe-Tunisia 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is an agreement that mainly provides programs to support youth employment, the agricultural sector, and the Tunisian coast guard. This is because all incentives must convince Saïed to sign the agreement with the IMF, in order to avoid the country's economic collapse and impose stricter controls on irregular departures¹⁵⁰. It is precisely the migration crisis to constitute a particularly thorny dossier, as explained in the past paragraph. In this regard, the Farnesina is working to continue to contribute, in necessary liaison with European institutions and other interested administrations, to the strengthening of an integrated approach to the migration phenomenon, aimed at overcoming the emergency logic in favour of a significant and lasting decrease in irregular migration flows. To this end, the need is to promote new agreements for the readmission of irregularly arrived migrants and the better functioning of existing agreements to increase assisted voluntary returns, exploit all available levers to improve cooperation, and allocate new resources to the countries involved.

In the Mediterranean region, culture is also considered a key channel for dialogue, stability, and peace. Italian cultural diplomacy passes first and foremost through the protection of the region's cultural heritage, developing along two main lines: support for archaeological missions in Mediterranean countries and commitment in a multilateral context to achieve ever-closer cooperation in this sector, especially in countries marked by socio-cultural difficulties and political instability. Equally important is the strategy of cultural promotion carried out by an extensive network of embassies, Italian cultural institutes, and consulates, which maintain consolidated relations with the most important cultural institutions in the region. The Mediterranean basin is also one of the priority areas for the promotion of the Italian language. In countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, knowledge of Italian is a useful skill in the workplace, thanks to the widespread presence of Italian companies, especially in the tourism and trade sectors. There is also a strong commitment to policies that encourage the mobility of young students and researchers from the Mediterranean area through exchange programs and inter-university cooperation. Science, technology, and innovation, in fact, play a crucial role in

¹⁴⁹ Farnesina. 2017. *The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean*. Rome, Italia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ Nelli Feroci, Ferdinando, and Leo Goretti. 2024. "Il governo Meloni alla prova. Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2023." IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893683128.pdf>.

contributing to the dialogue and development of Mediterranean economies. In this regard, Italy is the promoter of a number of bilateral initiatives to foster the mobility of researchers and promote scientific development in the region. There are numerous Italian universities and research institutes that have developed close working relations with their counterparts in Mediterranean countries in different areas of excellence for scientific research. Italy is also involved in several multilateral scientific cooperation programs, mainly European, related to the Mediterranean¹⁵¹. In particular, PRIMA (Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area), a joint programme which aims at building research capacities and develop common innovative solutions in two pillars: water resources and food systems¹⁵²; and BLUEMED, an Italian-led project that aims to promote a shared strategy to foster the sustainable growth of the marine and maritime sectors in European Mediterranean countries¹⁵³. As part of the 5+5 Dialogue¹⁵⁴, the Forum on Research, Innovation, and Higher Education is also highlighted¹⁵⁵.

Concluding, Italy seems to have adopted a broader vision of its policy towards the extended Mediterranean, engaging in a wider spectrum of areas in the Sahel and North Africa. Today, the goal of Meloni's government is to make Rome a leader of European action in the quadrant. That is why it is investing, from a political-diplomatic point of view, precisely in strengthening multilateral cooperation in the area, indicating to the European Union possible targets for action and mediation among regional actors. Naturally, it remains a priority for Italy to promote a European policy for the Mediterranean and the Middle East that is coherent and compatible with its own national interests¹⁵⁶.

¹⁵¹ Farnesina. 2017. The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean. Rome, Italia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

¹⁵² European Commission. "Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA)." European Commission. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/research-area/environment/prima_en.

¹⁵³ BLUEMED Initiative. <https://www.bluedmed-initiative.eu/about-the-bluedmed-initiative/>.

¹⁵⁴ The 5+5 Dialogue serves as a sub-regional forum for the ten Western Mediterranean countries that take part since its creation, five from the north of the Mediterranean (Spain, France, Italy, Malta and Portugal) and five from the southern shore (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia). It constituted one of the first prolific initiatives between Mediterranean countries and a prelude of the structures that were built with the Barcelona Process from 1995 onwards. <https://medthink5plus5.org/en/the-dialogue-55/>.

¹⁵⁵ Farnesina. 2017. The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean. Rome, Italia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

¹⁵⁶ European Council on Foreign Relations, Atlantic Council, and Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. 2022. "Crises in the Mediterranean. The Italian pivot: a new strategy for European and US engagement in the MENA region." European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ecfr-1-Crises-in-the-Mediterranean.pdf>.

2. Italy's Diplomatic Initiatives: the Rome Process and the Mattei Plan

2.1 International facilitation: a theoretical framework

Before delving specifically into the analysis of Italy's role as a facilitator, it is important to first explore the theoretical dimensions of facilitation and how these apply to relationships between international actors.

Facilitation can be broadly defined as “the assistance of an accepted third party to ease the management of communication and the process of dialogue, negotiation or other encounters”.¹⁵⁷ As a diplomatic tool, it emphasises process over outcome, aiming to improve relationships and communication dynamics without necessarily seeking a formal resolution. This distinguishes it from other diplomatic practices like mediation and negotiation, which are primarily concerned with resolving disputes or reaching compromises¹⁵⁸. Both facilitation and mediation involve a neutral third-party guiding communication between groups or individuals. However, the key difference lies in their objectives and methods. Facilitators, like mediators, are responsible for managing the communication process without influencing the content of discussions. Their primary role is to help participants communicate more effectively and improve mutual understanding. What sets facilitation apart is the facilitator's capacity to introduce creative elements into the dialogue, enriching discussions in ways that mediators typically do not. Another important distinction is the end goal. While mediation and negotiation generally aim to resolve conflicts or reach formal agreements, facilitation is more open-ended and process-oriented: it seeks to create an environment that enhances communication, strengthens relationships, and builds trust among the parties involved. The achievement of a formal agreement is not the primary goal, though it remains a possibility. Instead, facilitation focuses on laying the groundwork for future collaboration or reconciliation, creating the conditions for more productive and constructive engagement between parties. In this sense, facilitation plays a crucial role in international diplomacy by creating a framework where

¹⁵⁷ Breitmaier, Theresa, and Frans Schram. 2019. “Facilitating Negotiation and Dialogue.” Berghof Foundation. https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/berghof_glossary_2019_facilitation_negotiation_dialogue.pdf.

¹⁵⁸ “Interactive Conflict Resolution” in *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods and Techniques*, by Zartman, I., Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997, pp. 239-272.

dialogue can flourish, helping to de-escalate tensions and paving the way for more formal conflict resolution processes if needed.¹⁵⁹

Facilitation is inherently complex, as it intersects with geopolitical dynamics, economic interests, and social pressures¹⁶⁰. Within this framework, Italy's role as a facilitator in the relationships between Tunisia, the EU, and international organisations such as the IMF provides a significant case study. It demonstrates how a country can balance its internal and external interests in a region vital to European stability.

Italy's facilitation efforts are especially relevant in light of the work of scholars like John Paul Lederach (1997) and Adam Curle (1971), who stress the importance of facilitation in asymmetric interactions — where one party, such as the IMF as powerful multilateral institution, holds significantly more power than weaker, economically and politically fragile counterpart. In these situations, facilitation can play a critical role in rebalancing power dynamics. A facilitator can empower weaker actors, enabling them to engage more effectively in negotiations that might otherwise be dominated by more powerful international players¹⁶¹. In the case of Tunisia, the significant uneven positions between the Tunisian government and influential actors like the IMF or the EU places Tunisia under negotiation pressure. Italy, as a facilitator, can help bridging this asymmetry, offering indirect support to Tunisian institutions while fostering greater mutual understanding between the parties. Italy's facilitation could involve enhancing Tunisia's capacity to negotiate more favorable terms with the IMF or the EU, as well as promoting reforms that consider Tunisia's unique political and social challenges. This approach is particularly relevant in a context like Tunisia, where IMF demands for structural reforms — such as public spending cuts and wage reductions — have sparked protests and political instability. In such a scenario, a facilitator like Italy serves as a moderating

¹⁵⁹ Berghof Foundation. 2012. "Facilitation, Mediation, Negotiation." Berghof Foundation. https://berghoffoundation.org/files/publications/berghof_glossary_2012_08_facilitation_mediation_negotiation.pdf.

¹⁶⁰ Siegfried, Matthias. 2003. "Conflict Prevention: The Use of Mediation and Facilitation in the Post-Agreement Phase." Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, Mediation Support Project MSP.

https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/konfliktpraev_08_conflict_prev_mediation_m_siegfried_10.pdf

¹⁶¹ Dudouet, Véronique, and Mateo Dressler. 2016. "From Power Mediation to Dialogue Facilitation: Assessing the European Union's Approach to Multi-Track Diplomacy." WOSCAP - Whole of Society Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding, Berghof Foundation. https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/48089904/Scoping_Study_-_Multitrack_Diplomacy-libre.pdf?1471348561=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DFrom_Power_Mediation_to_Dialogue_Facilit.pdf&Expires=1726695583&Signature=P8QnIUxDQFDP-woouMshHLHx3.

force, advocating for a more gradual and inclusive approach to economic reforms in order to reduce the risk of further social unrest¹⁶².

Another crucial element, as highlighted in academic literature, is the need for an inclusive approach that involves not only state actors but also civil society and local communities. This is especially pertinent to Italy's relationship with Tunisia, where managing migration and social dynamics requires more than just intergovernmental negotiations. Italy could act as a convenor, creating dialogue forums that include not only government representatives but also voices from Tunisian civil society, such as youth, women, and marginalised minorities who are often excluded from formal decision-making processes¹⁶³. Such inclusiveness is vital to ensuring that any agreements reached have legitimacy both at the institutional level and within society, reducing the risk of long-term instability. Italy's long history of cultural, economic, and political ties with Tunisia gives it a unique advantage in understanding and managing these complexities. Past facilitation efforts underscore the importance of deep knowledge of local contexts and socio-political dynamics in successful facilitation¹⁶⁴. By drawing on its historical connections and its understanding of Tunisia's specific challenges, Italy is well-positioned to play a meaningful role in facilitating dialogue and promoting stability in the region¹⁶⁵.

As it will be explored in the following chapters, Italian initiatives such as the Rome Process, the Mattei Plan, and the MoU between the EU and Tunisia illustrate Italy's approach to balancing demands for economic reform with Tunisia's internal social pressures. These efforts aim to create space for dialogue and foster greater mutual understanding. In the Rome Process, for instance, Italy steps beyond the role of a bilateral actor, assuming the position of facilitator

¹⁶² Siegfried, Matthias. 2003. "Conflict Prevention: The Use of Mediation and Facilitation in the Post-Agreement Phase." Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, Mediation Support Project MSP. https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/konfliktpraev_08_conflict_prev_mediation_m_siegfried_10.pdf

¹⁶³ Dudouet, Véronique, and Mateo Dressler. 2016. "From Power Mediation to Dialogue Facilitation: Assessing the European Union's Approach to Multi-Track Diplomacy." WOSCAP - Whole of Society Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding, Berghof Foundation. https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/48089904/Scoping_Study_-_Multitrack_Diplomacy-libre.pdf?1471348561=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DFrom_Power_Mediation_to_Dialogue_Facilit.pdf&Expires=1726695583&Signature=P8QnUIxDQFDP-woouMshHLHx3.

¹⁶⁴ Such as Mohamed Sahnoun's work in Somalia. Algerian diplomat and Special Representative to Somalia in 1992, he emphasised the missed opportunity for peace and stability in the region. He argued that had the international community, particularly the UN, acted earlier and with more decisive intervention, much of the devastating conflict and humanitarian disaster that followed in Somalia could have been averted. His efforts were focused on promoting peace and reconciliation, stressing the importance of timely and effective global responses to crises like the one in Somalia.

¹⁶⁵ Armengol, Vicenç F. 2013. "The principles of mediation and the role of third parties in peace processes." NOREF - e Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre. https://noref.no/publication-documents/the-principles-of-mediation-and-the-role-of-third-parties-in-peace-processes/Fisas_NOREF_Mediation_May-2013_FINAL.pdf.

within a broader multilateral framework¹⁶⁶. By doing so, it creates a platform for dialogue and promotes a cooperative approach to migration and regional stability. This highlights the facilitator's role in establishing an environment where all parties can actively participate and engage. Similarly, the Mattei Plan for Africa illustrates how Italy can seek to strengthen the economic partnership while ensuring that projects are inclusive and responsive to local socio-economic challenges. Another key example is the 2023 MoU between the EU and Tunisia, which addresses critical issues such as migration management, economic support, and security cooperation. Italy played a pivotal role in both negotiating this agreement and promoting a balanced approach that acknowledged the EU's security concerns while being sensitive to Tunisia's economic and political pressures. However, the Memorandum also underscored the limits and challenges of facilitation. Despite Italy's efforts, there are criticisms regarding the handling of migrants' human rights and the economic reforms demanded by institutions like the IMF, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of the agreement¹⁶⁷.

Thus, the role of a country as a facilitator in unstable contexts is inherently complex, requiring careful navigation of both internal and external pressures that influence its capacity to mediate disputes. A successful facilitator must balance these competing interests while maintaining neutrality, employing a flexible and inclusive approach. This involves addressing power imbalances and seeking solutions aimed at fostering sustainable, long-term cooperation rather than focusing on short-term compromises. As it will be assessed with this thesis, Italy's facilitation efforts exemplify the challenges and potential of this diplomatic role in creating environments conducive to dialogue and collaboration¹⁶⁸.

2.2 Historical ties and contemporary diplomatic relations

Italy's privileged geopolitical position at the centre of the Mediterranean, along with the traditional inclination to dialogue with Africa, has necessitated coherent and articulated foreign policy action plans focused on peace and security, governance and human rights, migration and mobility, cooperation and investments, sustainable economic development, fight against climate change, and cultural and scientific collaboration¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶⁶ See Chapter 2.

¹⁶⁷ See Chapter 3.

¹⁶⁸ Greig, Michael J., and Paul F. Diehl. 2012. *International Mediation*. Polity Press.

https://students.aiu.edu/submissions/profiles/resources/onlineBook/j8d5z3_International_Mediation.pdf.

¹⁶⁹ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2020. "Il partenariato con l'Africa." Esteri.it. https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/12/2020_12_10_partenariato_con_lafrica_-_versione_italiana.pdf.

In the Mediterranean basin, Tunisia has always been considered by Italy a strategic partner, sharing common interests and intervention strategies in these areas. The relationship between the two countries is deeply intertwined, marked by historical, economic, and cultural ties. Historically, Tunisia has been of significant geopolitical interest for Italy, attracting many Italians who migrated there for better economic conditions and influenced by irredentist ideologies. This migration created a large Italian community in Tunisia. Today, this relationship has reversed direction, with a substantial Tunisian diaspora in Italy, which began after Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956, leading to the formation in Italy of the second-largest Tunisian community abroad, after the French¹⁷⁰. Economic relations further solidify this partnership. Italy views Tunisia as a strategic investment hub due to its geographical location and competitive production costs. Indeed, the peninsula is ranked as the North African country's first trading partner, with a value of about 7 billion euros a year¹⁷¹. Moreover, more than 15% of all foreign investment in Tunisia comes from Italy. Over time, Italy has invested in several sectors thanks to the conclusion of bilateral agreements, facilitating the sustainable development and modernization of Tunisia's infrastructure¹⁷². Finally, culturally, the shared Mediterranean heritage has fostered strong links, educational exchanges, and collaboration in the conservation of the heritage, promoting mutual understanding between the two nations.

Thus, Italy has responsibility to fulfil but also opportunities to seize in its relationship with Tunisia¹⁷³.

2.2.1 From colonial aspirations to modern diplomatic cooperation

Among Italy's geopolitical and colonial interests since the founding of the Kingdom of Italy, Tunisia has always played a prominent role¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷⁰ Torelli, Stefano M. 2016. "Tunisia: do not take it for granted." ISPI Online. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/tunisia-do-not-take-it-granted-15196>.

¹⁷¹ Osservatorio Economico. "Homepage (TUNISIA)." infoMercatiEsteri. https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id_paesi=115.

¹⁷² Scalera, Francesco. 2023. "The business climate in Tunisia and the future investment opportunities of Italian operators in the country." *International Journal of Business Management and Economic Research* (14 (3): 2147-2153. <https://www.ijbmer.com/docs/volumes/vol14issue3/ijbmer2023140305.pdf>.

¹⁷³ Torelli, Stefano M. 2016. "Tunisia: do not take it for granted." ISPI Online. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/tunisia-do-not-take-it-granted-15196>.

¹⁷⁴ Montalbano, Gabriele. 1924. "The Italian community of Tunisia: From Libyan Colonial Ambitions to the First World War." OpenEdition Books. <https://books.openedition.org/cfee/1532>.

The Tunisian case constitutes an exceptional link between migration, colonialism, and geographical representations for imperial purposes¹⁷⁵. The latter aspect, in particular, was used as a legitimising factor for Italian claims and human mobility from Italy to North Africa, in light of the geographical proximity of the Sicilian and Sardinian islands to the Tunisian coast. People like Mauro Macchi and Attilio Brunialti, for example, moved by irredentist ideas, framed Tunisia as an extension of Italy, “like a reflection, an extension, or another shred of our Italy”¹⁷⁶.

However, the Italian political class was never able to draw up military plans for the conquest of Tunisia, aiming instead to simply maintain the country's formal independence from other powers by exploiting its industrial and migratory influence¹⁷⁷. Hence, the “Tunisian slap” dealt a significant blow to Italian aspirations. The colonisation of Tunisia by the French in 1881 and the establishment of a protectorate even tested the relationship between Italy and France, so much so that the tension in relations between the two countries knew a phase of détente only in 1896 with the stipulation of a trade treaty, which put an end to the persistent resentment between them through the recognition of Italian institutions and interests in Tunisia: in other words, France granted Italy the status of most preferred nation for trade, while Italy recognised France's control over Tunisian territory¹⁷⁸.

The delicate but enduring balance of power achieved in the Mediterranean reflected the different visions of Tunisia developed by the two countries. For France, Tunisia was configured as a colony of exploitation; for Italy, on the other hand, it was prefigured as a colony of settlement¹⁷⁹. During the colonial period, in fact, a substantial Italian community thrived in

¹⁷⁵ Montalbano, Gabriele. 2021. “The 'Lost Colony': Italian Colonial Irredentism (1864-1912).” From the *European South* 8 (2531-4130): 131-139.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351848591_The_'Lost_Colony'_Italian_Colonial_Irredentism_1864-1912.

¹⁷⁶ Atti del Parlamento Italiano. 1888. Discussioni della Camera dei Deputati, VIII Legislatura – Sessione 1863-1864, Vol. VI. Rome: Tipografia Eredi Botta.
https://storia.camera.it/digital/faccette/leg_regno:8%7Cperiodo_storico:statutario?da=20

¹⁷⁷ Montalbano, Gabriele. 2021. “The 'Lost Colony': Italian Colonial Irredentism (1864-1912).” From the *European South* 8 (2531-4130): 131-139.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351848591_The_'Lost_Colony'_Italian_Colonial_Irredentism_1864-1912.

¹⁷⁸ Choate, Mark I. 2010. “The Tunisia Paradox: Italian Aims, French Imperial Rule, and Migration in the Mediterranean Basin.” *Italy in the Mediterranean* 1.
https://scholar.google.fr/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=9ZrLKRUA AAAAJ&citation_for_view=9ZrLKRUA AAAAJ:Tyk-4Ss8FVUC.

¹⁷⁹ Choate, Mark. 2007. “Identity Politics and Political Perception in the European Settlement of Tunisia: The French Colony versus the Italian Colony.” Researchgate.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236762235_Identity_Politics_and_Political_Perception_in_the_European_Settlement_of_Tunisia_The_French_Colony_versus_the_Italian_Colony.

Tunisia, contributing significantly to its economy and culture, despite competition and tensions with the French authorities and settlers. The first Italian migratory flows to Tunisian shores date back to the first millennium¹⁸⁰; however, it was only in the 17th century, with the diaspora of the Grana community, the Italian Jews of Livorno, that the Italians in Tunisia began to lay the foundations for a vibrant economic and social presence. The favorable socio-economic conditions experienced by Tunisia in the 19th century further favored the growth of the Italian presence in the African country, which reached a peak of around 150,000 members at the beginning of the 20th century. It was from this period, therefore, that the establishment of a flourishing community began to make it compulsory to regulate the presence of Italians through bilateral treaties. In this sense, the first agreement, the Treaty of Goletta¹⁸¹, enshrined the protection of the rights and duties of Italian immigrants, ensuring their protection and recognising Italy as a favored nation¹⁸². Despite these recognitions, however, the Italian community was deprived of political influence and gradually excluded from all public functions in order to assert its French identity. Resisting this imposition therefore became a priority for Italian immigrants, who responded not through the use of military or political power but through cultural institutions: Italian schools, associations, and economic organisations began to be established with the ultimate aim of contributing to the maintenance of a distinct Italian identity in the midst of French domination¹⁸³. The Italian Chamber of Commerce in Tunis, for example, was founded exactly with the intention to protect the interests of the Italian colonial middle class¹⁸⁴ and provide educational and welfare services, thanks to subsidies from the Italian Foreign Ministry. Or the Società Dante Alighieri per la Lingua e la Cultura Italiana (Dante Alighieri Society for Italian Language and Culture), which contributes to the sponsorship of Italian language schools on Tunisian territory. Through the establishment of a special Dante Committee, the association aims in fact to exert strong pressure in favour of the principle of state schools in the Mediterranean, determined “not so much by the number of

¹⁸⁰ Reference is made to the escape from Rome sacked by Alaric's Visigoths in 410 to the flows of the 10th and 11th centuries coming from Sardinia and Sicily.

¹⁸¹ From the name of the place where it was signed.

¹⁸² Locci, Emanuela. 2023. “Migration and Italian associations in Tunisia.” *Revista de Estudios Históricos de la Masonería Latino-americana y Caribeña* 5 (1): 185-197.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378694926_Migration_and_italian_associations_in_Tunisia.

¹⁸³ Choate, Mark. 2007. “Identity Politics and Political Perception in the European Settlement of Tunisia: The French Colony versus the Italian Colony.” Researchgate.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236762235_Identity_Politics_and_Political_Perception_in_the_European_Settlement_of_Tunisia_The_French_Colony_versus_the_Italian_Colony.

¹⁸⁴ Reference is made to the Italian bourgeoisie in Tunis of industrialists, traders, lawyers, doctors, engineers, professors and architects.

local Italians likely to attend the schools as by the stature and importance of Italy's traditional interests in these countries”¹⁸⁵.

Tunisia's independence from France in 1956 marked a crucial change for the Italian community. By prioritising national sovereignty and economic control, the transition to independence undertaken by Tunisia brought about a redefinition of national identity. In this project, the Italian community, despite its historical contribution, found itself increasingly marginalised. Between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the Tunisian government issued a series of legislative measures in order to make the political and social emancipation of the country effective, 'Tunisifying' the public administration and reserving entire professional categories only for Tunisian citizens¹⁸⁶. The Italian community was also dealt a severe blow by the law nationalising foreigners' land of May 12, 1964, which affected Italian economic interests since it tied the right of ownership over land to Tunisian citizenship¹⁸⁷. The economic instability and major political changes that characterised this transitional phase led a substantial portion of the Italian community to emigrate and return to Italy, accompanied also by parts of the Tunisian population, who chose Italy driven to seek better life prospects given the growing inequality and social conflict that their country was beginning to experience. Thus, proximity and historical ties make the country an attractive destination, while new migratory dynamics started to be established between Tunisia and Italy¹⁸⁸.

In recent decades, the intensifying wave of migration has significantly shaped bilateral relations, with Italy emerging as a key partner in supporting Tunisia's economic development and stability. In other words, since the country gained independence, Italy and Tunisia have established diplomatic relations characterised by mutual cooperation and shared interests. Starting by addressing migration issues, with both countries working together to manage migrant flows and ensure their rights and integration, this collaboration later extended to

¹⁸⁵ Choate, Mark I. 2010. “The Tunisia Paradox: Italian Aims, French Imperial Rule, and Migration in the Mediterranean Basin.” *Italy in the Mediterranean* 1. https://scholar.google.fr/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=9ZrLKRUA AAAAJ&citation_for_view=9ZrLKRUA AAAAJ:Tyk-4Ss8FVUC.

¹⁸⁶ Kraïem, Mustapha. 2011. *Etat et société dans la Tunisie Bourguibienne*. MIP Livre. p. 187. https://books.google.be/books/about/Etat_et_soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9_dans_la_Tunisie_Bourgu.html?id=w9aPMwEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

¹⁸⁷ Pasotti, Nullo. 1979. *Italiani e Italia in Tunisia dalle origini al 1970*. Finzi editore. p. 170 https://books.google.be/books/about/Italiani_e_Italia_in_Tunisia_dalle_origi.html?id=SjdKGwAACAAJ&redir_esc=y.

¹⁸⁸ Morone, Antonio M. 2015. “Fratture post-coloniali. L'indipendenza della Tunisia e il declino della comunità di origine italiana.” *Contemporanea* 1/2015:33-66. <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1409/79042>.

regional challenges, with Italy supporting Tunisia's political stability, economic development, and social cohesion, especially during critical periods such as the Arab Spring and the country's subsequent democratic transition. Italy's role in this context highlights the importance of regional cooperation in addressing the complex challenges of political transition and economic development for the entire Mediterranean region, aiming to ensure regional stability and promote democratic governance¹⁸⁹.

2.2.2 Evolving economic and trade relations

The economic and trade relations that have developed over time between Italy and Tunisia are a prime example of a fruitful and dynamic cooperation process that has been able to evolve and adapt to the challenges and opportunities of the international context. Alongside diplomatic efforts to support the country's political stability, economic cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean has become a cornerstone, with Italy having invested and continuing to invest in various sectors of the Tunisian economy and trade¹⁹⁰.

For its part, Italy considers Tunisia to be a country with the ideal characteristics for fruitful investments, as geographically it is set to be a natural production platform for companies committed to diversifying their activities and penetrating new markets in the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Gulf. In fact, there are many comparative advantages that the country enjoys and that constitute fertile ground for foreign investors, such as its proximity to important markets in Europe and Africa, the very competitive cost of production factors, local regulations aimed at favouring investment, and the presence of production chains characterized by high added value, particularly for textiles, aeronautics, automotive, renewable energy, and telecommunications¹⁹¹.

The history of economic and trade relations between Italy and Tunisia has its roots in very distant times. Carthage and Rome already established intense and fruitful exchanges. Over time, the two countries have built a shared vision of development and prosperity, marked by periods of intense collaboration and strategic investments. It is no coincidence that, during the

¹⁸⁹ Nelli, Ferdinando, Matteo Bonomi, and Federico Castiglioni. 2024. "Il governo Meloni alla prova. Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2023." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/il-governo-meloni-alla-prova>.

¹⁹⁰ SRM Permanent Observatory on the Economic Relations between Italy and the Mediterranean area. 2014. "Italian Business within the country of the Med Area: the case of Tunisia." *Economic Relations between Italy and the Mediterranean area*, pp. 77-83. Napoli: Giannini Editore.

¹⁹¹ Ambasciata d'Italia - TUNISIA, Agenzia per la promozione all'estero e l'internazionalizzazione delle imprese italiane - ICE, Camere di Commercio italiane all'estero, and ENIT - Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo. 2024. "Tunisia." *InfoMercatiEsteri*. https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id_paesi=115.

1870s, the Italian political class understood “overseas expansion as an eminently economic exercise, of valorisation and settlement of emigrants in search of work along the southern arc of the Mediterranean”¹⁹². This objective of Italian policy to economically integrate Tunisia into its production system was also shared by the Fascist regime: Mussolini, moved by his colonising aims, led Italy to intensify its presence in Tunisia through huge investments in infrastructure, including the construction of roads, railways, and ports. This facilitates the control and exploitation of Tunisian resources while promoting the development of key sectors such as agriculture and mining. In this sense, the foundations were laid for the creation of an interdependence that would mark relations between the two countries for decades to come. In spite of Tunisia's attainment of independence in 1956 and the ensuing socio-political unrest, economic-commercial relations between Italy and Tunisia, in fact, soon stabilised and diversified thanks to the growing exchange of goods and services, leaving Italy to take on the role of major trading partner¹⁹³.

In recent decades, Italian cooperation in the sphere of socio-economic development initiatives has focused primarily on supporting the process of modernization and efficiency of the Tunisian production system, with particular regard to small and medium-sized enterprises, expressing itself along the dual track of financial and technical cooperation¹⁹⁴. In this sense, a series of bilateral agreements have been concluded in order to facilitate Italian investments in Tunisia. In 2019, for example, a strategic partnership agreement was signed, which strengthened cooperation in sectors such as energy and manufacturing through the possibility of significant investments by Italian companies¹⁹⁵. Recognising Tunisia's importance as a bridge to Africa and the Middle East, Italy has also promoted initiatives to support sustainable development and the modernization of Tunisia's infrastructure. In fact, in 2019, an economic

¹⁹² Morone, Antonio M. 2015. “Fratture post-coloniali. L'indipendenza della Tunisia e il declino della comunità di origine italiana.” *Contemporanea* 1/2015:33-66. <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1409/79042>.

¹⁹³ Ambasciata d'Italia - TUNISIA, Agenzia per la promozione all'estero e l'internazionalizzazione delle imprese italiane - ICE, Camere di Commercio italiane all'estero, and ENIT - Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo. 2024. “Tunisia.” *InfoMercatiEsteri*. https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id_paesi=115.

¹⁹⁴ Cooperazione Italiana allo Sviluppo and Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2023. “Impact Evaluation “VIII Credit Line for Small and Medium Enterprises” Tunisia.” *Esteri.it*. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Tunisia-Valutaz.-VIII-Linea-di-Credito_Final-Report_en.pdf.

¹⁹⁵ Agreement between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the Tunisian Republic on the development of an infrastructure for electricity transmission aimed at maximising energy exchanges between Europe and North Africa, made in Tunis on 30 April 2019. https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaArticolo?art.versione=1&art.idGruppo=1&art.flagTipoArticolo=1&art.codiceRedazionale=21G00240&art.idArticolo=1&art.idSottoArticolo=1&art.idSottoArticolo1=10&art.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2021-12-21&art.progressivo=0

and technical cooperation agreement was signed to allocate funds for the implementation of infrastructure¹⁹⁶ and sustainable development projects in the African country¹⁹⁷.

Further consolidating economic and trade relations between Italy and Tunisia has also been made possible thanks to the joint participation in international bodies, such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Indeed, being a member of these bodies facilitates the implementation of regional cooperation projects or programs for economic development, environmental protection, and natural resource management. One of the most significant projects in this sense is the ENI CBC Med Programme, financed by the EU, which saw the collaboration between Italy and Tunisia in initiatives aimed at promoting innovation and the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises, the sustainable management of water resources, and the protection of the marine environment¹⁹⁸.

Italy has benefited and could continue to benefit significantly from Tunisia's economic development, given its geographical location and established trade relations with the North African country¹⁹⁹. The maintenance of adequate security and stability conditions and the improvement of the business climate are therefore the necessary prerequisites on which the country will have to continue working in order to reassure investment and ensure the continuity and consolidation of the significant Italian economic presence in Tunisia²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁶ This is the Memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed with the aim of intensifying industrial cooperation in the field of electricity infrastructure and in particular the Elmed project.

InfoMercatiEsteri Osservatorio Economico. 2019. "Infrastrutture: Tunisia, intesa Steg e Terna su cooperazione interconnessione elettrica con Italia." InfoMercatiEsteri.it.

https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights_dettagli.php?id_highlights=16122.

¹⁹⁷ For example, the Italian-Tunisian cooperation program PRODEC: Support program for decentralisation in Tunisia, financed by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS).

Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2019. "Italia e Tunisia rinnovano la cooperazione in materia di decentralizzazione e sviluppo locale." AICS.gov. <https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/2019/5979/>.

¹⁹⁸ ENI CBC Med is the largest Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) initiative implemented by the EU under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). The Programme brings together the coastal territories of 14 EU and partner countries in view of fostering fair, equitable and sustainable development on both sides of the EU's external borders. Through calls for proposals, ENI CBC Med finances cooperation projects for a more competitive, innovative, inclusive and sustainable Mediterranean area.

<https://www.enicbmed.eu/about-us/the-programme-at-a-glance>.

¹⁹⁹ SRM Permanent Observatory on the Economic Relations between Italy and the Mediterranean area. 2014. "Italian Business within the country of the Med Area: the case of Tunisia." Economic Relations between Italy and the Mediterranean are, pp. 77-83. Napoli: Giannini Editore.

<http://www.sr-m.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/abstract-med-2014-eng.pdf>.

²⁰⁰ Ambasciata d'Italia - TUNISIA, Agenzia per la promozione all'estero e l'internazionalizzazione delle imprese italiane - ICE, Camere di Commercio italiane all'estero, and ENIT - Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo. 2024. "Tunisia." InfoMercatiEsteri. https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id_paesi=115.

2.2.3 A legacy of shared heritage and mutual cultural influence

As with the economic and commercial ties, the network of cultural links between Italy and Tunisia is also deeply rooted in historical relations dating back to antiquity. Indeed, it could be argued that it was precisely the sharing of the rich Mediterranean heritage through the establishment of ties that provided the two shores of the Mediterranean with the basis for a close exchange in terms of culture as well. In other words, the trade routes established between Carthage and Rome since antiquity facilitated the exchange of goods but also of ideas and traditions. From cuisine to architecture, the progressive construction of a shared history laid the foundations for the spread of mutual influences in various aspects, contributing to significantly strengthening the ties between Italy and Tunisia, fostering integration, and enriching the cultural landscape of both nations. To date, the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) counts around 100,000 Tunisians resident in Italy²⁰¹. Although one of the largest North African communities in the country, Tunisian immigrants in Italy have managed to create a multicultural environment, introducing their culinary traditions, music, and festivals, thanks also to the support of cultural associations²⁰², which are actively promoting Tunisian culture in Italy through various events and initiatives. As for the Italian community in Tunisia, the number of resident Italians has decreased dramatically since the II World War. Today, there are a total of 7–8,000 Italians in Tunisia: over 3,000 represent recently settled Italians (many retired²⁰³), while the others variously belong to the historical community²⁰⁴.

A further factor contributing to the strengthening of these ties is the collaboration that has been established between the two countries in the educational and academic sectors, thanks to the proactive role and involvement between Italian and Tunisian institutions. Formally, in this sphere, relations have been institutionalised through the signing of agreements, such as the 1997 Cooperation Agreement, on the basis of which various executive programmes have been put in place to facilitate exchanges between universities and cultural organisations, so as to

²⁰¹ Direzione Generale dell'immigrazione e delle politiche di integrazione. 2022. “2022 - Rapporto Comunità tunisina in Italia.” Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali.
<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/documenti-e-norme/studi-e-statistiche/rapporto-annuale-sulla-presenza-dei-migranti-2022-tunisia>.

²⁰² Such as the Islamic Cultural Association of Sicily.
<http://retedelrifugiatocatanania.it/cis-comunit%C3%A0-islamica-di-sicilia>

²⁰³ Migliorini, Federico. 2024. “Pensionati italiani in Tunisia: tassazione del 20%.” *Fiscomania*, 2024.
<https://fiscomania.com/pensionati-italiani-in-tunisia/>.

²⁰⁴ Pendola, Marinette, and Ferruccio Bensasson. 2024. “L'emigrazione italiana in Tunisia tra italianizzazione, francesizzazione e mantenimento del dialetto – TRANS Nr. 27.” *INST*.
<https://www.inst.at/trans/27/lemigrazione-italiana-in-tunisia/>.

promote joint research projects on Mediterranean studies and student mobility²⁰⁵. From an institutional point of view, it is the Italian Cultural Institute that promotes cultural diplomacy. Part of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Italian Cultural Institute has been committed, since its foundation in 1962, to promoting Italian culture in Tunisia by organising various events, preparing language courses, supporting researchers and students, providing access to a rich library of Italian literature and media, coordinating archaeological missions, and promoting cinema²⁰⁶.

With regard to cultural events and festivals, worth mentioning are: the Mediterranean Cultural Festival, which is held annually in both countries to celebrate the shared cultural identities of Italy and Tunisia through performances, exhibitions, and workshops highlighting the rich traditions of both nations²⁰⁷; and the Italian Week in Tunis, organised by the Italian Embassy, which features film screenings, art exhibitions, and culinary events, fostering deeper cultural understanding and appreciation²⁰⁸.

There are also many initiatives promoted by the Italian government and supported by various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) within the framework of the development cooperation activated in Tunisia and focused on financing cultural conservation and community development projects. Notable among these is the restoration of the Medina of Tunis, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, supported by Italian experts and funding²⁰⁹. Just in the artistic sphere, in 2022, two different agreements, focusing on the training of professionals in museum and cultural heritage management and the restoration of cultural assets, were signed at the City of Culture in Tunis by the Tunisian Minister of Culture, Hayet Ketat Guermazi, and the Italian Ambassador to Tunis, Lorenzo Fanara. In particular, the first agreement between the Fondazione Scuola Beni Attività Culturali, the Italian Cultural Institute, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Tunis (MACAM) aims to foster cooperation in

²⁰⁵ Ambasciata d'Italia Tunisi. "Diplomazia culturale." Ambasciata d'Italia Tunisi. <https://ambtunisi.esteri.it/it/italia-e-tunisia/diplomazia-culturale/>.

²⁰⁶ Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Tunisi. <https://iictunisi.esteri.it/it/chi-siamo/>.

²⁰⁷ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2024. "A Tunisi il Festival della creatività italiana." Esteri.it. https://www.esteri.it/it/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/diplomazia-culturale/2024/07/a-tunisi-il-festival-della-creativita-italiana/.

²⁰⁸ Ambasciata d'Italia Tunisi. 2023. "XXIII Settimana della lingua italiana nel mondo." Ambasciata d'Italia Tunisi. https://ambtunisi.esteri.it/it/news/dall_ambasciata/2023/11/xxiii-settimana-della-lingua-italiana/.

²⁰⁹ Ambasciata d'Italia a Tunisi. 2017. "L'ex Presbiterio «Santa Croce» nella Medina restituito alla città di Tunisi dopo i lavori di restauro finanziati dalla Cooperazione Italiana." Ambasciata d'Italia Tunisi. https://ambtunisi.esteri.it/it/news/dall_ambasciata/2017/10/l-antico-presbiterio-santa-croce/.

terms of museum management between Italian and Tunisian heritage institutions. The second agreement, on the other hand, between MACAM and the University of Urbino focuses on the analysis and digitization of works held at the museum in order to document their state of preservation²¹⁰. As for social development, NGOs such as the Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries (COSPE) work on projects promoting intercultural dialogue and supporting local communities in Tunisia²¹¹.

Historical ties, mutual cultural influences, migration and diaspora communities, educational collaborations, tourism, cultural events, and government and NGO initiatives play a significant role in fostering cultural and people-to-people ties between Italy and Tunisia and strengthening bilateral relations. Continuing to build on common heritage and cultural exchanges would mean for Italy and Tunisia to continue to strengthen their relations, promote cultural understanding, and contribute to the richness and diversity of the Mediterranean region.

2.3 Italy's strategic engagement with Tunisia

'Cooperation with Tunisia is a top priority for Italy from many points of view. It is a very important strategic relationship that sees us comprehensively working together at both bilateral and multilateral level'.²¹²

This sentiment was echoed by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni during her visit to Tunis in April 2024, highlighting Italy's vested interest in maintaining political, economic, and social stability in Tunisia. Despite being the smallest countries in the Maghreb region, Tunisia remains a crucial political and economic partner for the Italian peninsula²¹³. The close geographical proximity in the Mediterranean and the common interests that both sides share

²¹⁰ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2022. "A Tunisi accordi tra MACAM e istituzioni italiane." Esteri.it. https://www.esteri.it/it/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/retediplomatica/2022/01/a-tunisi-due-accordi-tra-macam-istituzioni-italiane/.

²¹¹ COSPE was founded in 1983 and is an international, secular and non-profit cooperation association. We operate in 24 countries (also Tunisia) alongside civil society and local communities, committed like us to social justice and peace, in particular supporting marginalised and discriminated groups in their requests for social inclusion, human rights and democracy. <https://tunisia.cospe.org/>

²¹² Italian Government Presidency of the Council of Ministers. 2024. "President Meloni's press statement during her visit to Tunisia." Governo.it. <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-press-statement-during-her-visit-tunisia/25464>.

²¹³ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. "Rapporto Annuale: Tunisia, Libia, Marocco, Algeria." AICS – Tunisi. https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA2023_AICS-TUNISI.pdf.

lead to the recognition that Tunisian internal instability in any field can have direct effects on Italy's security, particularly by increasing migratory flows to its shores²¹⁴.

Since the democratisation process began in Tunisia following the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, Italy has focused on strengthening Tunisia's democratic institutions. Driven by the need to ensure political stability in the area, Italy has played a key role in supporting the country's political transition, providing technical assistance, and supporting civic participation and good governance at the local level. Economically, the relations between Italy and Tunisia has been bolstered by bilateral agreements encouraging joint investments and strategic partnerships in key sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing. Finally, in terms of social development, Italy's diplomatic efforts have primarily focused on infrastructure, education, and health. In fact, Italy has supported numerous initiatives providing technical and financial aid to launch educational and vocational training initiatives, preparing new generations of Tunisians for an increasingly competitive and global labour market²¹⁵.

Therefore, the long and shared tradition of cultural and commercial relations between Italy and Tunisia has fostered a mutual understanding that today translates into a multifaceted diplomatic commitment and dynamic cooperation. This is evident in a wide range of projects and initiatives, encompassing economic development, migration management, political dialogue, and security²¹⁶.

2.3.1 Post-2011 revolution Tunisia and Italy's role in security cooperation

After the 2011 Revolution, thanks also to the support of the EU, Italy contributed significantly to the consolidation and stability of Tunisian political institutions by implementing financial and technical assistance programs aimed at strengthening governance, human rights, and civil society²¹⁷. However, Tunisian governments that have alternated in power have never managed

²¹⁴ The Independent. 2023. "European leaders hope to restore stability in Tunisia, a major source of migration." June 11, 2023.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/tunisia-ap-giorgia-meloni-italy-european-union-b2355383.html>.

²¹⁵ Italian Government Presidency of the Council of Ministers. 2023. "President Meloni's press statement during her visit to Tunisia." Governo.it.

<https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-press-statement-during-her-visit-tunisia/22848>.

²¹⁶ Italian Government Presidency of the Council of Ministers. 2024. "President Meloni's press statement during her visit to Tunisia." Governo.it.

<https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-press-statement-during-her-visit-tunisia/25464>.

²¹⁷ European Commission. 2023. "Press statement by President von der Leyen with Italian Prime Minister Meloni, Dutch Prime Minister Rutte and Tunisian President Saied." European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).

https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/press-statement-president-von-der-leyen-italian-prime-minister-meloni-dutch-prime-minister-rutte-and-2023-06-11_en.

to implement adequate reforms in crucial areas such as the judiciary, thus allowing for systematic human rights violations²¹⁸.

Particularly worrying is the harsh repression implemented gradually by President Kais Saïed since he took office in 2019, which is contributing to further deteriorating the current precarious stability of the country and accelerating the democratic decline of which Tunisia is becoming the protagonist²¹⁹. The main targets of this "authoritarian"²²⁰ drift are the opponents to the regime²²¹: using unfounded accusations against high-profile opposition representatives and other critical voices, the Tunisian authorities are intensifying their life round on dissent and frequently resorting to the Decree Law 2022/54 on cybercrimes²²². In March and April 2023, for example, the Tunisian Parliament twice banned private and foreign media from participating in parliamentary sessions, while in June, it banned journalists from attending the meetings of parliamentary committees. For his part, President Saïed has continued to accuse civil society organisations of interfering in Tunisia's affairs and of financing corruption. On April 18, the police ordered everyone at Ennahda headquarters in Tunis to leave the building without showing any legal documentation. It therefore closed the offices and forbade anyone to return to them, on instructions from the Ministry of the Interior, which banned meetings and gatherings in the Ennahda and National Salvation Front offices. The 2023 also saw a marked deterioration in the protection of the rights of refugees and migrants in Tunisia. A wave of

²¹⁸ Henneberg, Sabina. 2023. "Neglect for Human Rights Helped Produce the Crisis in Tunisia." The Washington Institute. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/neglect-human-rights-helped-produce-crisis-tunisia>.

²¹⁹ Dentice, Giuseppe. 2022. "Tunisia in trasformazione: il futuro del Paese dopo il colpo di Stato di Kais Saïed." Parlamento Italiano. <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0187.pdf>.

²²⁰ Without effective checks and balances on President Kais Saïed's power, Tunisia saw further declines in the areas of human rights and the rule of law in 2023.

Human Rights Watch. 2024. "Tunisia: Authoritarian Drift Erodes Rights." Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/11/tunisia-authoritarian-drift-erodes-rights>.

International Crisis Group. 2018. "Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift." Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/180-endiguer-la-derive-autoritaire-en-tunisie>.

²²¹ Emblematic in this sense was the arrest of Anouar Maarouf, an Ennahda official, on 7 August 2021.

AlJazeera. 2021. "Tunisia: Senior Ennahdha official placed under house arrest." AlJazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/7/tunisia-interior-places-top-ennahdha-official-under-house-arrest>.

²²² The Decree-law violates international human rights standards, violates Tunisian constitution protections, lacks due process, and violates the principles of necessity and proportionality. Some provisions appear to be based on the Cybercrime Convention.

Article 19. 2023. "Tunisia: Decree Law No 54 of 2022." Article 19.

<https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Analysis-of-decree-law-54-English.pdf>.

Henneberg, Sabina. 2023. "Neglect for Human Rights Helped Produce the Crisis in Tunisia." The Washington Institute. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/neglect-human-rights-helped-produce-crisis-tunisia>.

racist violence against black people by private citizens and the police followed the discriminatory and hateful statements made by President Saïd on February 21²²³. Since July, security authorities have intercepted thousands of migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees, including minors, subjecting them to collective arbitrary expulsions to Libya and Algeria. Campaigns of hatred and insults have also increased dramatically against LGBTQI+ people and their rights defenders²²⁴. Likewise, the achievements obtained in the field of gender equality in the elections to the new Parliament held in January 2023, in which women occupy only 25 of the 161 seats²²⁵, have been wiped off due to the abolition of the gender-related provisions contained in the electoral law²²⁶.

The effects of this neglect of human rights are quite clear in the eyes of Italy as well as of Europe: involvement in alternative survival mechanisms such as terrorism or international trafficking, political apathy, but above all, mass abandonment of the country²²⁷. In fact, Tunisia has always been at the centre of the migratory landscape that characterises the Mediterranean basin. Years of deteriorating political and economic conditions have forced an increasing proportion of Tunisians to migrate. The current instability of the context is further aggravating the phenomenon, turning the country into a real hub for migrations to the old continent²²⁸. As of the second half of 2022, sub-Saharan Africans have been added to the local population, forced to migrate because of the instability of which this region is also becoming a protagonist. In other words, along with Libya, Tunisia is emerging as a key transit point for migrants and asylum seekers coming mainly from Sudan, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire²²⁹. Looking

²²³ Human Rights Watch. 2023. "Tunisia: Racist Violence Targets Black Migrants, Refugees." Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/10/tunisia-racist-violence-targets-black-migrants-refugees>.

²²⁴ Amnesty International. "Tunisia: le violazioni dei diritti umani accertate nel 2023." Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.it/rapporti-annuali/rapporto-2023-2024/medio-oriente-e-africa-del-nord/tunisia/>.

²²⁵ Farouk, Menna. 2023. "Tunisia's male-dominated parliament deals blow to women's gains." Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisias-male-dominated-parliament-deals-blow-womens-gains-2023-02-14/>.

²²⁶ Yerkes, Sarah. 2022. "Tunisia's New Electoral Law Is Another Blow to Its Democratic Progress." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/10/tunisias-new-electoral-law-is-another-blow-to-its-democratic-progress?lang=en>.

²²⁷ Henneberg, Sabina. 2023. "Neglect for Human Rights Helped Produce the Crisis in Tunisia." The Washington Institute. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/neglect-human-rights-helped-produce-crisis-tunisia>.

²²⁸ Meddeb, Hamza. 2024. "Tunisia's Transformation into a Transit Hub: Illegal Migration and Policy Dilemmas." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/tunisias-transformation-into-a-transit-hub-illegal-migration-and-policy-dilemmas?lang=en>.

²²⁹ Boitiaux, Charlotte. 2023. "Tunis annonce 70 000 interceptions en mer, et reste accusée de renvois vers la Libye." InfoMigrants. <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/53791/tunis-annonce-70-000-interceptions-en-mer-et-reste-accusee-de-renvois-vers-la-libye>.

at the data, until last autumn, Tunisia was firmly at the top of the list of countries of departure of the ships, with 97,667 migrants (62% of the 157,652 totals, a record since 2016) arriving on the Italian coast from Tunisia in 2023, against 51,986 from Libya. In recent months, the situation has become more like the past. As of January 25, out of 1,298 foreigners landed, 994 (76.5%) had left Libya (there were 1,477 in the same period in 2023) and 304 from Tunisia, 87% less²³⁰. Therefore, the large-scale trafficking of human beings from Tunisia is not a recent development. The novelty, however, lies in the emergence in Sfax²³¹ and its surroundings of a thriving migratory economy. The 40-kilometre coastline between Sfax and Chebba²³² is responsible for 75% of the boats leaving for Europe. The reason for the emergence of this ecosystem, compared to an industrialization of the migration phenomenon, is due to the economic crisis that the region is suffering, inhabited by farmers and fishermen impoverished by years of drought, increased costs of basic foodstuffs, and an incoherent policy of agricultural prices²³³.

Leaving the country, however, is not the only solution. Many Tunisians, especially at a young age, are driven by a sense of non-appartenance and marginalisation up to the point of finding refuge in an ideal community, that of the Islamic State. Contrary to the general consideration of the Islamism-radicalization link, in Tunisia in fact, what contributes to fueling radicalization and the growth of violent extremism is the combination of social, political, and economic marginalisation²³⁴. The terrorist threat is one of the most destabilising factors for the security of the country, which, especially after the 2011 Revolution, has had to deal with numerous sad events of this nature. Among the most recent and significant, in June 2019, two suicide bombers killed a police officer and were injured in front of the French embassy in Tunis; in March 2020, two suicide bombers killed a police officer and injured five more civilians near the US Embassy

²³⁰ Italian Ministry of Interior. 2023. "Data on migration." [Libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2023.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2023.pdf).

Perrone, Manuela. 2024. "Migranti, netto calo degli arrivi dalla Tunisia. La Libia torna il primo Paese di partenza." *Il Sole 24 ORE*.

<https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/migranti-netto-calo-arrivi-tunisia-libia-torna-primo-paese-partenza-AFO7IKTC>

²³¹ The second largest city by population, located in southern Tunisia.

²³² A city in eastern Tunisia that is located just 130 kilometers from the Italian island of Lampedusa.

²³³ Meddeb, Hamza. 2024. "Tunisia's Transformation into a Transit Hub: Illegal Migration and Policy Dilemmas." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/tunisias-transformation-into-a-transit-hub-illegal-migration-and-policy-dilemmas?lang=en>.

²³⁴ Angus, Chris, and Andrew Silke. 2016. "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: Causes and Responses." NSW Parliament. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/researchpapers/Documents/radicalisation-and-violent-extremism-causes-and-Radicalisation%20eBrief.pdf>.

in Tunis; in September 2020, a National Guard officer was killed and another wounded in a knife attack in the centre of Sousse; and finally, in February 2021, a mine explosion killed four Tunisian soldiers during an anti-terrorist operation on Mount Mghila, near the Algerian border. This shows that, despite the launching of the war on terrorism and the government's repression of religious actors²³⁵, violent extremism has not yet ended in Tunisia, and radical records still pervade the political field²³⁶.

Due to the multifaced threats to Tunisian internal stability, in the security and defence sphere, the Italian interest looks beyond the merely cooperation in the fight against illegal migration and trafficking in human beings. Italy's support for Tunisia also includes training, the exchange of expertise, technical assistance, and the provision of equipment in various operational areas. The bilateral cooperation mission in Tunisia, in fact, established in 2019²³⁷, aims to provide support for the establishment of three regional commands for the management of the activities of control of the territory and for the realisation of an information structure of support to the capability of command and control through the creation of a Tactical Operations Centre. The regional commands deployed on Tunisian territory, in particular, are also responsible for planning and conducting joint counter-terrorism and border control operations. The agreement is part of the broader "Integrated Security Plan", which includes joint military exercises and the sharing of best practices in the field of counter-terrorism²³⁸.

The further destabilisation of the internal scenario in Tunisia has, of course, forced for an extension of this mission also for 2024, as “the training and the development of certain

²³⁵ In a delicate period of political transition for Tunisia, which managed to end 56 years of authoritarianism in 2011, the context of the fight against terrorism has strongly emphasised national identity as a counter-narrative to the rampant and seductive discourse of violent extremist organisations. 'Tunisian moderate Islam' and 'Tunisianity' are specific tools in the battle against terrorism and extremism in the country.

Simoncini, Guendalina. 2024. “The Discourse of the War on Terror in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia.” In *Counterterrorism in Transition: Post-2011 Tunisian Democracy and the War on Terror*. Springer Nature Switzerland, Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan.

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-54184-1_4#Abs1

²³⁶ Borraccetti, Marco, and Susanna Villani, eds. 2022. *Between Integration and Radicalization in North Africa: A Focus on Morocco and Tunisia*. Bologna University Press.
https://cris.unibo.it/retrieve/e8ea53b1-f1fd-4bd8-bedf-3124e0859f53/Borraccetti%20Villani-between-integration-and-radicalization_BUP%202022.pdf.

²³⁷ The legal basis is the 1991 Convention on cooperation in the military field between the two countries (ratified by law 23 March 1998, n. 105), on which the Note Verbale of the Tunisian Foreign Ministry of 19 February 2019 is based.

²³⁸ Senato della Repubblica Ufficio politica estera e difesa and Camera dei Deputati Dipartimento Difesa. 2024. “Proroga missioni internazionali e interventi di cooperazione per l'anno 2024.” Camera.it.
<http://documenti.camera.it/leg19/dossier/pdf/DI0090.pdf>.

capacities in specific defence sectors are important tools to provide an effective response to the internal security of the country and ultimately of the entire Mediterranean basin”²³⁹.

2.3.2 Strengthening economic ties: a path to sustainable development

Common interests are the basis of the long and dynamic history of economic cooperation between Italy and Tunisia. Among the main elements of this relationship, trade occupies a prominent position. Since 2022, Italy has been Tunisia's first trading partner, with trade exceeding 7 billion euros. It is also the country's second customer and the first supplier, with Italian exports that grew by almost 40%, from 2.85 billion euros in 2021 to 3.96 billion euros in 2022²⁴⁰, mainly including machinery, electronic equipment, and chemical products; while Italy imports especially textiles, raw materials, and, above all, agricultural products from Tunisia, with a particular interest in olive oil and dates²⁴¹.

Italian companies are also among the main investors in Tunisia, with investments exceeding 1.5 billion euros. The Italian economic presence in Tunisia, in fact, is solid and dynamic, including about 900 companies, most of which are totally exporting. They employ about 70 thousand people and represent almost a third of all foreign-invested companies in Tunisia. Among the main sectors, manufacturing sees a strong Italian presence the choice to establish production plants there is dictated by the possibility of being able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the geographical proximity and the competitive labour costs²⁴². The energy sector is also profitable. ENI, as a key player, has undertaken significant projects that include the extraction and production of natural gas, thus contributing to the energy security of Tunisia but also of Italy²⁴³.

In the last period, a growing collaboration in the economic field between Italy and Tunisia has been experimented within the field of renewable energy. North Africa is identified as a potential "green battery" for Europe, offering a seemingly limitless supply of solar and wind

²³⁹ Il Quotidiano del Sud. 2024. “Tunisia-Italia, Crosetto firma l'accordo di cooperazione militare.” Il Quotidiano del Sud.

<https://www.quotidianodelsud.it/laltrovoce-dellitalia/nazionale/politica/2024/04/24/tunisia-italia-crosetto-firma-laccordo-di-cooperazione-militare>.

²⁴⁰ Osservatorio Economico. “Homepage (TUNISIA).” infoMercatiEsteri.

https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id_paesi=115.

²⁴¹ SRM Permanent Observatory on the Economic Relations between Italy and the Mediterranean area. 2014. “Italian Business within the country of the Med Area: the case of Tunisia.” In Economic Relations between Italy and the Mediterranean are, pp. 77-83. Napoli: Giannini Editore.

<http://www.sr-m.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/abstract-med-2014-eng.pdf>.

²⁴² Osservatorio Economico. “Homepage (TUNISIA).” infoMercatiEsteri.

https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id_paesi=115.

²⁴³ Eni. 2024. “Our work in Tunisia.” Eni. <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/actions/global-activities/tunisia.html>.

power on the southern shore of the Mediterranean²⁴⁴. In particular, Tunisia is set to be one of the first North African countries to build an interconnector with Europe²⁴⁵, given its considerable potential to switch to renewable energy sources²⁴⁶. Since 2013, Tunisia's efforts to reduce dependence on fossil fuels have been underpinned by an energy transition strategy that aims to increase the country's share of solar and wind power, while the national energy mix will increase from 2% to 30% by 2030²⁴⁷. However, it was only in December 2021 that concrete proposals have been started to be put in place, especially in order to accelerate the solar plan: the Ministry of Energy and Mines presented a 1,500 MW solar and wind programme in January 2022 and the approval of a decree to unlock five solar concession projects with a total capacity of 500 MW. The global gas crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further boosted the spread of renewable energy in Tunisia, as it has pushed the country to exploit its strategic reserves even more to meet domestic demand, launching a new programme that aims to produce 35% of the country's energy needs through renewable energy from 2022 to 2025²⁴⁸. After a transition that could be described as stagnant, the Tunisian energy sector is therefore now at a turning point. However, strategic and targeted reforms are particularly required. It is precisely in this context that the important technological and financial support that Italy is providing to Tunisia is inserted in order to encourage the development of multiple solar and wind projects with the aim of increasing the share of renewable energy in the Tunisian energy mix and reducing dependence on fossil fuels. Among these, the El Haouaria wind farm, developed in collaboration with the Italian company Enel Green Power and with an installed capacity of 100 MW, is making a significant contribution to the production of clean energy in

²⁴⁴ Chibani, Achref. 2024. "Europe's "Green Battery": Extraction and Dispossession of Energy Infrastructure in Tunisia's South - The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy." The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy -. <https://timep.org/2024/04/04/europes-green-battery-extraction-and-dispossession-of-energy-infrastructure-in-tunisi-as-south/>.

²⁴⁵ Reference is made to the ELMED Interconnector Project is a planned bi-directional power exchange link between Italy and Tunisia. The 600MW capacity project will be the first direct current connection between Europe and Africa.

²⁴⁶ NS Energy. 2023. "The 600MW Tunisia-Italy Interconnector (ELMED) Project." NS Energy. <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/projects/tunisia-italy-elmed-interconnector-project/>.

²⁴⁷ International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). 2021. Renewables Readiness Assessment: the Republic of Tunisia. International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).

<https://www.irena.org/Publications/2021/Jun/Renewables-Readiness-Assessment-The-Republic-of-Tunisia>

²⁴⁸ Amine, Yasmina E. 2023. "Tunisia's Energy Sector: A Just Transition Analysis – Arab Reform Initiative." Arab Reform Initiative. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/tunisi-as-energy-sector-a-just-transition-analysis/>.

Tunisia. Feasibility studies for the construction of solar photovoltaic plants are also underway in other regions of the country²⁴⁹.

It is also in Italy's interest to promote Tunisia's economic growth and stability through the improvement of sustainable development, vocational training, and technological innovation. In this sense, thanks to the work of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), Italy contributes to the Balance of Payments Aid Programme (ABP) and the credit lines to support the Tunisian business system. The ABP aims to support Tunisia's macroeconomic equilibrium through the mobilisation of external resources to finance the Tunisian public investment programme. Since 2008, 18 Tunisian administrations have benefited from credits, financing a total of 23 projects in multiple sectors: agriculture (41%), vocational training (15%), public health (15%), the environmental sector (14%), education (12%), and local development (5%). As for the credit lines aimed at private operators, since 1988, Italy has financed about 1,000 operations, helping to consolidate or create more than 14,000 jobs. The eighth line of credit in favour of Tunisian small and medium-sized enterprises, activated in 2013, carried out 162 operations, mainly in the agri-food (46%), chemical/pharmaceutical (17%), and services (12%) sectors, and mainly in the governorates of Grand Tunis, Sfax, and the Sahel Region (Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia)²⁵⁰.

So far, cooperation between Italy and Tunisia has offered significant opportunities to foster the sustainable development of both countries. Currently, the diversification of areas of economic cooperation, with a focus on innovation and renewable energy, represents a promising path for a future of shared prosperity between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

2.3.3 Promoting stability and development through social cooperation

Bilateral relations between Italy and Tunisia have involved and continue to affect various strategic areas of common interest in the Mediterranean area. Investing in initiatives that promote proximity production, initiate food self-sufficiency processes, and enhance the social and solidarity economy model together with environmental sustainability seems to represent one of the main priorities of Italian development cooperation plans in Tunisia.

²⁴⁹ Ghilès, Francis. 2022. "As North African energy links are redrawn, Italy becomes Europe's southern gas hub." CIDOB. <https://www.cidob.org/en/publication/north-african-energy-links-are-redrawn-italy-becomes-europes-southern-gas-hub>.

²⁵⁰ Cooperazione italiana allo sviluppo and Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2023. "Impact Evaluation "VIII Credit Line for Small and Medium Enterprises" Tunisia." Esteri.it. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Tunisia-Valutaz.-VIII-Linea-di-Credito_Final-Report_en.pdf.

Through close collaboration with the Italian Embassy and Tunisian institutions, the Italian Cooperation has established itself as a key donor, actively participating in major coordination and working tables²⁵¹. In recent years, the continuity of interventions in the field of development cooperation has been guaranteed by the signing of the MoU in Rome on June 16, 2021. Signed between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the Republic of Tunisia, the agreement defined Italy's strategic priorities in the country for the period 2021–2023 and set the share of financial resources to be allocated at 200 million euros. The areas of intervention decided under the MoU were different. They ranged from financing for the benefit of small and medium-sized enterprises to support for the general budget of the Tunisian state, up to the mitigation of the root causes of irregular migration and support for training and job creation. Promoting inclusive partnerships and the involvement of public and private sector actors, both Italian and Tunisian, was one of the main objectives of the actions undertaken. In fact, the interventions were guided by the principles of social, environmental, and economic sustainability and intra-sectoral complementarity, aimed at creating synergies with other technical and financial partners present in Tunisia. The resources allocated to the economic development sector made up about 72%. The share was donated through subsidised loans granted to the Tunisian government through the Tunisian Central Bank (BCT) for investments in the public and private sectors²⁵² carried out mainly through the ABP and credit lines to support Tunisia's entrepreneurial system²⁵³. In 2023, for example, €50 million were financed as an aid credit to support the general state budget and ensure the fulfilment of reform measures aimed at promoting the production, sale, transport, and consumption of renewable energy²⁵⁴. While three initiatives have been launched with the aim of contributing to sustainable economic development in Tunisia and supporting microentrepreneurship: the RESTART initiative, thanks to which activities aimed at the socio-economic empowerment of young people have been implemented through the creation of at least 50 eco-sustainable social enterprises dedicated to the enhancement and territorial redevelopment of 5 regions of Tunisia

²⁵¹ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. “Rapporto Annuale: Tunisia, Libia, Marocco, Algeria.” AICS – Tunisi. https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA2023_AICS-TUNISI.pdf.

²⁵² The amount is around 385.3 million euros in aid credits.

²⁵³ Memorandum d'Intesa tra il Governo della Repubblica Italiana e il Governo della Repubblica Tunisi in materia di cooperazione allo sviluppo per il periodo 2021-2023.” 2021. AICS – Tunisi. <https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/MOU-2021-23-Tunisia-firmato.pdf>.

²⁵⁴ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. “Rapporto Annuale: Tunisia, Libia, Marocco, Algeria.” AICS – Tunisi. https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA2023_AICS-TUNISI.pdf.

(Jendouba, Sidi Bouzid, Gabès, Mahdia and Sousse)²⁵⁵; the SELMA initiative, which carried out the restoration of the agroecology training centre in Chebedda in order to support the innovative business ideas of 480 women and young people²⁵⁶; finally, the ProAgro initiative has become the protagonist of training and coaching activities for young people, in order to strengthen micro-enterprises in the agri-food sector in the target regions²⁵⁷.

The commitment pursued by the Italian Cooperation in the field of rural development has also been constant. In this case, the focus was on the nexus between agriculture, food security, and diversification of the economic activities of rural communities, paying particular attention to supporting the most disadvantaged regions of southern Tunisia, such as Kebili, Tozeur, Gabès, Médenine, and Tataouine. The interventions have specifically implemented actions to ensure a participatory approach, enhancing skills and knowledge, fostering inclusive social and economic development, and promoting sustainable production and consumption systems²⁵⁸. For example, funding of up to 62 million euros have been allocated to promote organic farming and the blue economy. One initiative, "Preliminary actions for the establishment of Tunisian organic territories," conducted a pre-feasibility study to create five organic territories, the first of their kind in Tunisia and on the African continent, in collaboration with the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture.²⁵⁹

Finally, in the social sphere, particular has been given to the educational sector. Working together with various stakeholders, including the Tunisian Ministry of Education and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), efforts aim to improve the quality of the education system and school experience through funding support for public education. In this context, in 2021, the first tranche of 2.5 million was disbursed as part of the "AMIS: improvement of infrastructure and services in primary schools" programme, which is part of the Tunisian government's plan to modernise school infrastructure.

²⁵⁵ Promote sustainable and inclusive economic development for youth entrepreneurship in Tunisia, carried out by COSPE. <https://tunisia.cospe.org/restart/fr/>

²⁵⁶ Support for local agriculture, micro-enterprise and the empowerment of women and young people, created by ARCS – Arci Culture Solidali. <https://tamat.org/Project/selma/>

²⁵⁷ Support for the development of sustainable agri-food microenterprises and creation of job opportunities in disadvantaged areas of Tunisia, carried out by ICU - Istituto per la Cooperazione Universitaria. <https://www.icu.it/progetti/proagro-appoggio-allo-sviluppo-di-microimprese-agroalimentari-sostenibili-e-creazione-di-opportunita-di-impiego-in-zone-svantaggiate-della-tunisia/>

²⁵⁸ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. "Rapporto Annuale: Tunisia, Libia, Marocco, Algeria." AICS – Tunisi. https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA2023_AICS-TUNISI.pdf

²⁵⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. 2022. "A Cooperation Agreement for the creation of bio-districts in Tunisia signed in Tunis." Esteri.it. <https://www.esteri.it/en/sala stampa/archivionotizie/retediplomatica/2022/09/tunisi-firmato-accordo-per-la-realizzazione-di-bio-territori/>

Additionally, the Italian Cooperation has intervened in the migration sector through three synergistic and complementary initiatives benefiting the broader migration population²⁶⁰. Following the success of the first phase of the "Migration as a resource: mobilisation of the Tunisian diaspora and stabilisation of disadvantaged communities in Tunisia—MobiTRE Phase" programme, carried out in partnership with the IOM, which has contributed to the socio-economic development in the North-West (Kef, Jendouba) and South-East (Tataouine, Medenine) regions by facilitating joint ventures and investments between representatives of the Tunisian diaspora in Italy and young people residing in areas at risk of socio-economic marginalisation, the second phase was launched in July 2023²⁶¹. This phase aims to extent the results obtained, involve representatives of the Tunisian diaspora from France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ivory Coast, strengthen the governance of local institutions, provide targeted training for Tunisian partnerships residing abroad and Tunisian entrepreneurship, consolidate existing companies and create new ones, and support products marketing nationally and internationally²⁶².

The "Nebni" program was launched to raise awareness among young Tunisians about the risks of irregular migration and to promote youth entrepreneurship and professional integration as possible alternatives. This program primarily targets young people aged 15 and 29 in the governorates of Kairouan, Monastir, Gafsa, and Tozeur, which are considered priority geographical areas in terms of high migratory trends²⁶³.

Finally, the "Strengthening the value chain of the design craft sector in Tunisia: Creative Tunisia 1.0" project aims to create job opportunities in the craft sector for migration actors in Tunisia, offering them alternatives to irregular migration by utilizing and capitalizing, among other things, on the skills acquired by the Tunisian diaspora abroad²⁶⁴. This initiative is complemented by the "Support for the training and employment of young Tunisians" project,

²⁶⁰ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. "Rapporto Annuale: Tunisia, Libia, Marocco, Algeria." AICS – Tunisi. https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA2023_AICS-TUNISI.pdf.

²⁶¹ OIM ONU Migration and Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. "Projet Entrepreneuriat - Migration MOBI-TRE." iDiaspora. https://www.idiaspora.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1181/files/event/documents/Mobi-TRE%20Factsheet%2022%27_FR.pdf.

²⁶² Hlaoui, Nouredine, Hamma, Hannachi, and Nedim, Ronz. 2023. "Accord de financement de la deuxième phase du projet de l'OIM «Mobi-TRE»: L'Italie mise sur le capital humain tunisien." La Presse de Tunisie. <https://lapresse.tn/2023/07/07/accord-de-financement-de-la-deuxieme-phase-du-projet-de-loim-mobi-tre-litalie-mise-sur-le-capital-humain-tunisien/>.

²⁶³ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. "Rapporto Annuale: Tunisia, Libia, Marocco, Algeria." AICS – Tunisi. https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA2023_AICS-TUNISI.pdf.

²⁶⁴ United Nations Industrial Development Organization. 2023. "Fostering women's prosperity: Creative Tunisia project sparks economic empowerment in Tunisia | UNIDO." United Nations Industrial Development Organization. <https://www.unido.org/news/creative-tunisia>.

which promotes partnerships between Italian organisations and the Tunisian private sector to mitigate the root causes of migration by creating employment and self-employment opportunities in the sectors agri-food, mechanical/renewable energy, textiles, and tourism sectors, and by strengthening the governance and institutional capacity of local entities²⁶⁵.

2.4 The Rome Process and the Mattei Plan: Italy-Tunisia strategic partnerships

Italy's diplomatic initiatives in Tunisia have significantly evolved, culminating in two primary strategies under the current Meloni government: the Rome Process and the Mattei Plan for Africa. These initiatives prioritize promoting economic growth, stability and cooperative relations in the Mediterranean region through migration management and cooperation in six key areas: education, agriculture, health, energy, water and infrastructure. Both strategies are based on a solid and multifaceted approach.

Tunisia plays a central role in this context, with Italy focused on strengthening bilateral cooperation and promoting sustainable development in the country. Key agreements, such as the Memorandum of Understanding on the Management of Migration Flows and support for Tunisia's energy transition, demonstrate Italy's commitment to addressing both immediate and long-term challenges. Investments in renewable energy, digital transition, and infrastructure projects like the ELMED power interconnection highlight the comprehensive approach aimed at promoting stability and prosperity in the region. Additionally, efforts to strengthen educational collaborations and support Tunisian small and medium-sized enterprises further enhance bilateral ties between the two nations.

These diplomatic initiatives are designed to create sustainable and inclusive development, in addressing both migration and economic challenges while promoting mutual benefits for Italy and Tunisia.

2.4.1 The Rome Process

Presented at the first International Conference on Migration and Development in Rome on July 23, 2023, thanks to a joint initiative by the President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic Giorgia Meloni and the President of the Republic of Tunisia Kaïs Saïed, participating

²⁶⁵ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. "Rapporto Annuale: Tunisia, Libia, Marocco, Algeria." AICS – Tunisi. https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA2023_AICS-TUNISI.pdf.

States and organisations of the broader Mediterranean region²⁶⁶, the Middle East and Africa, the Rome Process is a key component of Italy's strategic foreign policy aimed at revitalizing its role in the Mediterranean basin and highlighting its importance in the European context²⁶⁷. The Rome Process represents a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of migration by promoting economic growth in countries of origin and transit and ensuring legal and secure migration while combating human trafficking. In other words, the Rome Process is based on the principle that Italian security can be guaranteed only through a committed, coherent and comprehensive response that supports the political stability and socio-economic development of countries in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa. The strategy emphasizes respect for national sovereignty, shared responsibility, solidarity, partnership among equals, the security and dignity of migrants, and adherence to international law, including human rights, humanitarian law and refugee law²⁶⁸. It combines short- and long-term measures for a holistic and integrated approach.

Short-term measures include establishing new financial instruments to fund development initiatives, strengthening and identification of legal pathways for regular and safe migration, and for circular mobility, adopting specific support and protection measures for refugees and asylum seekers, dismantling criminal networks of migrant smugglers and human traffickers, enhancing broader management capabilities, and cooperating to identify and disrupt vessels and supply chains used for irregular migration. Additionally, it involves supporting UN agencies dealing with migration, providing assistance to migrants on an as-needed basis, enhancing readmission and reintegration efforts, investing in data collection and analysis, supporting migration research centers, conducting information campaigns to raise awareness of the risks of irregular migration, and promoting the positive contributions of safe, orderly and regular migration. It also includes climate mitigation and adaptation efforts, particularly in rural areas.

²⁶⁶ The States participating were: Algeria, Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates.

The institutions participating were: African Development Bank, African Union, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, European Investment Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Monetary Fund, International Organization for Migration, Islamic Development Bank, United Nations Development Programme, World Bank, World Food Programme.

²⁶⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. 2023. "International Conference on Development and Migration." Esteri.it.

https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/2023/07/conferenza-internazionale-su-sviluppo-e-migrazioni/.

²⁶⁸ Deiana, Federico. 2023. "Rome hosts the International Conference on Development and Migration." Med-Or. <https://www.med-or.org/en/news/a-roma-la-conferenza-internazionale-su-sviluppo-e-migrazioni>.

Medium- and long-term measures focus on promoting sustainable development in countries of origin and transit by addressing poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and institutional fragility. This includes updating national legislation to combat migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, implementing adequate visa regimes to stem the flow of irregular migrants, supporting structural and long-term initiatives and projects in key sectors like education and training, agriculture, food security and rural development, energy, infrastructure and transport, health, water and sanitation, and establishing partnerships for education and mobility. It also promoting job creation, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, strengthening energy security, improving access to electricity, increasing energy sustainability and accelerating the transition to green energy to achieve market stability, funding projects to ensure high-quality and accessible medical and sanitation care, and increasing private investment in sustainable infrastructure. Furthermore, it aims to enhance financial support, for climate mitigation and adaptation in vulnerable countries and ensure the funding for socio-economic cooperation projects to improve development prospects in communities of origin²⁶⁹. The success of the Rome Process relies on creating tailored, balanced and mutually beneficial partnerships between the countries of origin, transit, and destination, supported by international organisations, competent financial institutions, civil society, and the public and private sectors. This approach seeks to garner broad consensus, political will, and financial capacity to address migration challenges and their root causes. Strengthening international cooperation and partnership between Italy, the EU, and the Mediterranean and African countries is crucial. For this reason, Italy has been working to "Europeanize" the migration issue, trying to involve the EU and other Member States in a joint effort to manage migration flows. The vision aims to build a bridge between Europe and Africa through equal cooperation, moving away from predatory or charitable approaches²⁷⁰. This was clearly emphasized at the Italy-Africa Summit during Italy's G7 presidency, highlighting Africa's strategic importance for Italy and its commitment to strengthening dialogue and mutual support in crucial areas like education, health, agriculture, water, and energy²⁷¹.

²⁶⁹ Governo. 2023. "International Conference on Development and Migration Conclusions." Governo.it. https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Conclusioni_230723.pdf.

²⁷⁰ Lovotti, Chiara. 2023. "Will Italy's "Rome Process" Change Mediterranean Politics?" ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/will-italys-rome-process-change-mediterranean-politics-137355>

²⁷¹ Simonelli, Filippo, Maria L. Fantappiè, and Leo Goretti. 2024. "The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?" Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/italy-africa-summit-2024-and-mattei-plan-towards-cooperation-between-equals>.

2.4.2 The Mattei Plan

The Rome Process, characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and common advantage, introduces a new paradigm of collaboration reflected in the Mattei Plan for Africa. This ambitious geopolitical project aims to reshape relations between Italy and Africa through six fundamental pillars: education and training, agriculture, health, energy, water, and infrastructure²⁷².

Presented by the government of Giorgia Meloni, the Mattei Plan is named after Enrico Mattei, the founder of ENI, who envisioned Italian foreign policy based on cooperation rather than exploitation. The plan aims to create an "energy hub of the Mediterranean," ensuring energy sources continuity and a favorable strategic position for distribution in European markets²⁷³. This initiative not only focuses on energy security by reducing dependence on Russia but also seeks to stabilise African regions through strategic partnerships and sustainable development projects²⁷⁴. The vision and objectives of the Mattei Plan were presented at the Italy-Africa Summit in January 2024, receiving positive feedback from African leaders and European institutions representatives. Following the launch, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni promoted the plan through official missions in various African countries, including Tunisia, emphasizing the importance of shared stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean²⁷⁵.

Reviewing the six policy areas, the objective in the field of education and training is to improve teachers' skills, adapt school curricula to the needs of the labour market, and promote new vocational and training courses, working closely with companies that follow the Small and Medium sized Enterprise (SME) model. In the agricultural sector, the aim is to reduce malnutrition, develop agri-food chains, and support the production of non-fossil biofuels, with an emphasis on family farming, the protection of forests, and adaptation to climate change through integrated agricultural practices. In the field of health, the strategy aims to strengthen local health systems, improve the accessibility and quality of primary services, strengthen the

²⁷² Mezran, Karim, and Alissa Pavia. 2023. "Giorgia Meloni's Foreign Policy and the Mattei Plan for Africa: Balancing Development and Migration Concerns." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2336.pdf>.

²⁷³ Touazi, Ilas. 2023. "Energy Security and Gas Pipeline Diplomacy: Italy's Mediterranean Foreign Policy Post Russia-Ukraine War between Security Threats and Geostrategic Competition." ITSS Verona Magazine 2, no. 1 (Spring/Summer): 37. https://www.itssverona.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Ilas_Touazi.pdf.

²⁷⁴ Fattibene, Daniele, and Stefano Manservigi. 2024. "The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Development Cooperation Policy?" Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2410.pdf>.

²⁷⁵ Simonelli, Filippo, Maria L. Fantappiè, and Leo Goretti. 2024. "The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?" Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/italy-africa-summit-2024-and-mattei-plan-towards-cooperation-between-equals>.

management and training capacities of healthcare personnel, and develop prevention strategies against pandemics and natural disasters. In the energy sector, the plan aims to transform Italy into an energy hub, acting as a bridge between Europe and Africa and promoting energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy through the creation of innovation centers and support for local start-ups. With regard to water resources, the drilling of wells powered by photovoltaic systems, the maintenance of existing water infrastructure, and investments in distribution networks are planned, accompanied by awareness-raising campaigns on the use of drinking water. Finally, the infrastructure sector, across the board, aims to improve both physical and digital infrastructures, enhancing the connectivity and competitiveness of the regions involved²⁷⁶.

Taking up the model of equal cooperation introduced by the Rome Process, the Mattei Plan seeks to overcome the traditional donor-beneficiary paradigm by promoting equal collaboration based on shared goals. It involves an integrated and participatory approach, engaging African governments, business, civil society, and European and international institutions.

Financing is, of course, crucial for this initiative, with the Italian Climate Fund (FIC), managed by Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, serving as the primary instrument. Additionally, developing innovative financing mechanisms, such as creating multilateral funds within development banks like the African Development Bank (AFDB) and promoting Italian participation in EU instruments such as European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+), will be essential to mitigate private investment. The collaboration between public financial institutions and the various institutions involved will be indispensable for the development of a system of financial matching between supply and demand, productivity and capacity building, at a crossroads of needs, opportunities, and skills²⁷⁷.

2.4.3 Implementing the multifaceted approach

Tunisia has always held a significant position in Italian foreign policy strategies. It is now central to the Mattei Plan, which aims to enhance bilateral cooperation, promote sustainable

²⁷⁶ Governo. 2024. “I sei pilastri del Piano Mattei” Governo.it.
https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Piano_Mattei_seipilastri_1.pdf.

²⁷⁷ Martini, Lorena S. 2024. “Il Focus italiano sull'Africa: opportunità e rischi del Piano Mattei.” ECCO Climate. https://eccoclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Opportunita-e-rischi-del-Piano-Mattei_policy-brief-1.pdf.

and inclusive development, transform the African country into a key partner for Italy and Europe, and contribute to regional stability and prosperity²⁷⁸.

The investment plan focused on identifying areas and sectors for collaboration between the Mediterranean's two shores, involving strategic planning to attract private sector intervention²⁷⁹. For instance, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on March 4, 2024, by Paola Nicastro, President and CEO of Sviluppo Lavoro Italia S.p.A., representing the Italian Ministry of Labour, and the Head of Cabinet of the Tunisian Ministry of Labour and acting Director General of ANETI, Abdelkader Jemmali, witnessed by Tunisian Minister of Labour and Vocational Training, Lotfi Dhiab, and the Ambassador of Italy, Alessandro Prunas. This Memorandum focuses on enhancing cooperation in the management of migration flows²⁸⁰. It aims to bring 12,000 Tunisian workers to Italy over three years, addressing Italy's labour market needs, especially for companies involved in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) implementation. Sviluppo Lavoro Italia will identify Italy's employment needs, while ANETI will research and select qualified Tunisian. This agreement reflects Italy's commitment to meet its labour demand and promote orderly and safe migration flows²⁸¹.

A key aspect of the Mattei Plan is investment in the energy transition, which aligns with a commitment to not support new gas exploration and production, both politically and financially. This requires revising cooperation mechanisms to unlock renewable energy potential, such as providing guarantees for private investment in clean energy. The Italian government aims to develop economic sectors alternative to fossil fuels for sustainable and inclusive economic growth²⁸². On April 17, 2024, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Hon. Edmondo Cirielli, joined a mission in Tunisia led by the President of the Council of Ministers, Hon. Giorgia Meloni, alongside Ministers of the Interior, Prefect Matteo Piantedosi, and the University and Research, Sen. Anna Maria Bernini. Following a meeting between Presidents Saied and Meloni, several agreements were signed,

²⁷⁸ Pavia, Alissa. 2023. "La Tunisia sarà decisiva per il Piano Mattei." *Affari Internazionali*.

<https://www.affarinternazionali.it/la-tunisia-sara-decisiva-per-il-piano-mattei/>.

²⁷⁹ Martini, Lorena S. 2024. "Il Focus italiano sull'Africa: opportunità e rischi del Piano Mattei." *ECCO Climate*. https://eccoclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Opportunita-e-rischi-del-Piano-Mattei_policy-brief-1.pdf.

²⁸⁰ The Memorandum for cooperation in the management of migration flows was signed in Tunis last October 20th by the Italian and Tunisian Foreign Ministers.

²⁸¹ Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali. 2024. "Protocollo Italia-Tunisia sui lavoratori migranti." Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali.

<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/stampa-e-media/comunicati/pagine/protocollo-italia-tunisia-sui-lavoratori-migranti>.

²⁸² Martini, Lorena S. 2024. "Il Focus italiano sull'Africa: opportunità e rischi del Piano Mattei." *ECCO Climate*. https://eccoclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Opportunita-e-rischi-del-Piano-Mattei_policy-brief-1.pdf.

including a 50 million euro aid credit to promote energy efficiency and renewable energy in Tunisia, aligning with the ELMED electricity interconnection project between Italy and Tunisia²⁸³. Another Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Italian Minister Anna Maria Bernini and her Tunisian counterpart Moncef Boukthir to support higher education and research, facilitating student mobility and promoting programs like PRIMA²⁸⁴ to enhance Tunisia's research funding access²⁸⁵. Additionally, a financial agreement was signed to provide €55 million credit line for Tunisian small and medium-sized enterprises, promoting employment and addressing economic migration causes²⁸⁶.

As regards the creation of infrastructure for the production and distribution of green hydrogen, a first important step was taken on May 15, 2024, when the Ministry of Environment and Energy Security authorised ELMED, the electricity interconnection between Italy and Tunisia to be implemented by Terna and STEG, the Tunisian grid operator. This 850 million euro project involves a 220 km power line, mainly submarine, with a 600 MW direct current connection. It will integrate EU²⁸⁷ and North African markets, develop renewable sources, and improve energy supply security²⁸⁸.

The digital transition is another major focus of the Mattei Plan. On May 27, 2024, Tunisian Minister of Communication Technologies, Nizar Ben Neji, and Italian Minister of Enterprise and Made in Italy, Adolfo Urso, signed a joint declaration to promote economic and industrial

²⁸³ Il Sole 24 ORE. 2024. "Migranti, dall'Italia 100 milioni alla Tunisia per frenare le partenze." Il Sole 24 ORE. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/migranti-dall-italia-100-milioni-tunisia-frenare-partenze-AFx3jTbD>.

²⁸⁴ The Partnership on Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) is a public-public institutionalised Article 185 European Partnership between the European Union and Participating States. The aim of PRIMA is to build research and innovation capacities and develop knowledge and common innovative solutions in the Mediterranean area in the following thematic areas: water management, farming systems and food value chain.

https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/research-area/environment/prima_en.

²⁸⁵ Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of University and Research of the Italian Republic and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of the Republic of Tunisia signed in Tunis on 14 April 2024.

²⁸⁶ The MoU is part of a joint initiative decided by the Joint Committee for Development Cooperation, the Director of European and International Affairs of Cassa Depositi e Prestiti and President of Simest Pasquale Salzano.

Sala Stampa. 2024. "Tunisi: il Vice Ministro degli Esteri Cirielli firma accordo per il sostegno al bilancio della Tunisia – Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale." Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

https://www.esteri.it/it/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2024/04/tunisi-il-vice-ministro-degli-esteri-cirielli-firma-accordo-per-il-sostegno-al-bilancio-della-tunisia/.

²⁸⁷ Of the total investment for the work, 307 million were allocated by the European Commission through the Connecting Europe Facility ("CEF") financing program, intended for the development of key projects aimed at strengthening community energy infrastructure. It is the first time that the European Union finances a project in which one of the countries involved is not part of the Union.

²⁸⁸ Ministero dell'Ambiente e della Sicurezza Energetica. 2024. "Elmed: Il MASE autorizza l'interconnessione elettrica tra Italia e Tunisia | Ministero dell'Ambiente e della Sicurezza Energetica." MASE. <https://www.mase.gov.it/comunicati/elmed-il-mase-autorizza-linterconnessione-elettrica-tra-italia-e-tunisia>.

collaboration in the field of artificial intelligence and digital transition. This agreement aims to foster direct investment and joint initiatives between the companies of the two countries through the exchange of information and knowledge in the field of research and frontier technologies and the formation of new skills. In particular, the idea is to establish a hub for artificial intelligence sustainable development to drive digital development. A "Working Group for the Development of New Technologies" will be set up to focus on intercontinental data transmission infrastructure and Artificial Intelligence (AI) development through the AI Hub²⁸⁹.

2.5 Current challenges and dynamics

Developing a solid and lasting collaboration between Italy and Tunisia hinges on three key factors: investments, infrastructure, and exchanges of skills. For Italy to become an increasingly credible and influential partner, it must effectively respond to Tunisia's need across various areas of action. This involves engaging in industrial diplomacy, development cooperation, and climate finance, while continuously updating and deepening the related instruments and strategies.

Understanding the broader macro-context from different perspectives is crucial, particularly considering Tunisia's complex and heterogeneous landscape²⁹⁰. This awareness is even more critical given the current socio-economic challenges, which stem from a prolonged crisis that has hindered the country's progress. Additionally, Tunisia's political situation is in flux, oscillating between authoritarian tendencies and promises of democratic restoration. Addressing these dynamics thoughtfully is essential for fostering a successful partnership²⁹¹.

2.5.1 The erosion of democracy in Tunisia: Kais Saied's authoritarian shift

For over a decade, Tunisia has been celebrated as the most successful outcome of the Arab Springs, serving as a beacon of hope for millions of inhabitants in the region²⁹². However, the

²⁸⁹ Martini, Lorena S. 2024. "Il Focus italiano sull'Africa: opportunità e rischi del Piano Mattei." ECCO Climate. https://eccoclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Opportunita-e-rischi-del-Piano-Mattei_policy-brief-1.pdf. Ministro delle Imprese e del Made in Italy. 2024. "Piano Mattei: Urso firma a Tunisi protocollo Italia-Tunisia su sviluppo digitale, focus su IA e connettività." Mimit.

<https://www.mimit.gov.it/it/notizie-stampa/piano-mattei-urso-firma-a-tunisi-protocollo-italia-tunisia-su-sviluppo-digitale-focus-su-ia-e-connettivita>.

²⁹⁰ UN Economic and Social Council. 2012. "Highlights on the Tunisian toponymic landscape." Unstats. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/docs/10th-uncsgn-docs/econf/E_CONF.101_61_Highlights%20on%20the%20Tunisian%20toponymic%20landscape.pdf.

²⁹¹ Fruganti, Lorenzo. 2024. "Tunisia: un crocevia di sfide." ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/tunisia-un-crocevia-di-sfide-170563>.

²⁹² Bourguiba, Habib. 2021. "10 Years After, Was Tunisia's Democratisation Successful? Faten Ben Slimane Master in International Studies Supervisor: PhD. G." Repositório do Iscte.

journey since 2011, despite its significant achievements, has left many chronic issues unresolved. Persistent political instability, driven by intense internal party struggles, has stymied economic reforms, leaving the economy inefficiently closed to investment and trade²⁹³. This instability eroded public confidence in political parties and democratic institutions, leading to widespread dissatisfaction with government performance and controversial policies. From 2019 to 2021, the political landscape saw the emergence of many new figures, including Kais Saïed, who became president with support from nearly 90% of young Tunisians. This period of unrest culminated in the coup d'état of July 25, 2021, when Saïed froze parliamentary activities, marking the beginning of a new phase of transition in Tunisian history²⁹⁴. The deep economic and social hardship, coupled with the inability of the political class to address fundamental needs, led to Saïed's centralization of power and a shift towards a more presidential system²⁹⁵.

On July 25, 2021, invoking Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution, President Saïed dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and several Ministers of the Executive, suspended the work of the Parliament, and lifted the immunity of its members²⁹⁶. These drastic measures aimed to bring "peace" to Tunisia and "save the state" from corruption and an ineffective political system amidst economic and health crisis that afflicts the country²⁹⁷. This political maneuver sparked an unprecedented political and institutional crisis within an already vulnerable socio-economic context²⁹⁸.

https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/bitstream/10071/24115/1/master_faten_ben_slimane.pdf.

²⁹³ Dentice, Giuseppe. 2022. "Tunisia in trasformazione: il futuro del Paese dopo il colpo di Stato di Kais Saïed." Parlamento Italiano.

<https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0187.pdf>.

²⁹⁴ Bourguiba, Habib. 2021. "10 Years After, Was Tunisia's Democratisation Successful? Faten Ben Slimane Master's in international studies Supervisor: PhD. G." Repositório do Iscte.

https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/bitstream/10071/24115/1/master_faten_ben_slimane.pdf.

²⁹⁵ Dentice, Giuseppe. 2022. "Tunisia in trasformazione: il futuro del Paese dopo il colpo di Stato di Kais Saïed." Parlamento Italiano.

<https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0187.pdf>.

²⁹⁶ Sadiki, Larbi, and Layla Saleh. 2024. "Seeing Tunisia's Civil Society During Un-civil Times." IAI.

<https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/seeing-tunisia-civil-society-during-un-civil-times>.

²⁹⁷ Bourguiba, Habib. 2021. "10 Years After, Was Tunisia's Democratisation Successful? Faten Ben Slimane Master's in international studies Supervisor: PhD. G." Repositório do Iscte.

https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/bitstream/10071/24115/1/master_faten_ben_slimane.pdf.

²⁹⁸ Dentice, Giuseppe. 2022. "Tunisia in trasformazione: il futuro del Paese dopo il colpo di Stato di Kais Saïed." Parlamento Italiano.

<https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0187.pdf>.

Beyond the legal debate on the possible abuse that Saïed would have made of Art. 80²⁹⁹, it is important to highlight the inability of the Tunisian institutional system to exercise an adequate control function over the President's actions. The Tunisian Constitution designates two bodies to oversee the legitimacy of the actions of the Head of State: the President of Parliament with at least two thirds of parliamentarians, and the Constitutional Court. The former was clearly unable to act, while the latter was never constituted. Although the 2014 Constitution provided for its official institution, since his election in 2019, Kais Saïed has hindered the formation of the Court. This, of course, has allowed Saïed to operate within a legal grey area, unchecked by any authoritative body³⁰⁰.

To legitimize his actions, Saïed nevertheless initiated a national consultation in early 2022, with the aim of listening to the opinion of civil society on a number of key issues, including the economy, health, social issues, and education. According to his statement on January 28, 2022, 82% of Tunisians favored a fully presidential system, while 92% supported restoring powers to Parliament³⁰¹. However, these consultations only partially reflect a society deeply divided and polarised. While Saïed's supporters view the pre-coup political class exhausted, a vocal opposition the restoration of democratic order³⁰².

Tensions have moved online, with traditional media accused of supporting the coup of Saïed. This conflict extends to local, Arab, and international Francophone media³⁰³. Saïed's rise to power has also impacted liberal freedoms, with increased arrests of journalists, government critics, and opposition members, whom he labels as "terrorists" and "traitors"³⁰⁴. Since July 26, 2021, investigations into parties like Ennahda or Qalb Tounes and Ayich Tounes for alleged

²⁹⁹ Article 80 attributes extraordinary measures to the President in the event of an "event of imminent danger that threatens the institutions of the nation, the security or independence of the country".

³⁰⁰ Goldstein, Eric. 2021. "In Tunisia, President's Power Grab and an Absent Constitutional Court." Human Rights Watch.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/27/tunisia-presidents-power-grab-and-absent-constitutional-court>.

³⁰¹ Agenzia Nova. 2022. "Tunisia: Saïed, 82 per cento dei tunisini preferisce il sistema presidenziale." Agenzia Nova. <https://www.agenzianova.com/a/61f41ddf994c54.42005812/3769792/2022-01-28/tunisia-saied-82-per-cento-dei-tunisini-preferisce-il-sistema-presidenziale>.

³⁰² Dentice, Giuseppe. 2022. "Tunisia in trasformazione: il futuro del Paese dopo il colpo di Stato di Kais Saïed." Parlamento Italiano. <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0187.pdf>.

³⁰³ Amnesty International. 2023. "Human rights in Tunisia Amnesty International." Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/report-tunisia/>.

³⁰⁴ Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. 2024. "De-democratising Tunisia: How Tunisia's New Constitution Is Threatening the Country's Young Democracy." Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. https://mcusercontent.com/2bf1f6ef20d1b3b0c50cc149c/files/d85f6113-6fe3-499c-d9b7-7551fb362a0d/Tunisia_Research_Project_Automatisch_wiederhergestellt_.docx.pdf_6_.pdf.

illicit foreign funding have intensified, exacerbating socio-political tensions³⁰⁵. Also, racism surged in 2023 following Saïed's statements, leading to massive violent and discriminatory actions against foreigners, refugees, and asylum seekers from black Africa³⁰⁶.

It is precisely in the preamble to the new Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, adopted on July 25, 2022, that President Saïd crystallises his own populist ideological project³⁰⁷. The stated priority is the redistribution of political power among the "most disadvantaged strata" of society. In other words, with a markedly left-wing imprint, Saïed's rhetoric exploits popular resentment towards the wealthy, foreigners, and post-2011 politicians, advocating for a radical revision of politics and state administration. He has established community societies to achieve equitable wealth distribution, funded mainly by businessmen accused of corruption³⁰⁸. In public addresses, Saïed describes Tunisia as "threatened by external and internal conspiracies"³⁰⁹, blaming socio-economic woes on speculators, former politicians, businessmen, and media figures. He calls for a rejection of Western-imposed paths and a return to national roots³¹⁰.

The new Constitution also curtails democratic freedoms, facilitating discrimination and prosecution³¹¹. There are many changes to the old text with a high potential for abuse³¹². For

³⁰⁵ Amnesty International. 2023. "Human rights in Tunisia Amnesty International." Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/report-tunisia/>.

³⁰⁶ Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. 2024. "De-democratising Tunisia: How Tunisia's New Constitution Is Threatening the Country's Young Democracy." Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. https://mcusercontent.com/2bf1f6ef20d1b3b0c50cc149c/files/d85f6113-6fe3-499c-d9b7-7551fb362a0d/Tunisia_Research_Project_Automatisch_wiederhergestellt_.docx.pdf_6_.pdf.

³⁰⁷ Constitution de la République Tunisienne 2022. https://www.jurisetutunisie.com/tunisie/codes/Constitution_2022/menu.html

³⁰⁸ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

³⁰⁹ Hocine, Mounir. 2020. "Tunisie: 'Traîtres, suppôts du sionisme...', le coup de sang complotiste de Kais Saïed." 24 Hdz. <https://www.24hdz.dz/tunisie-kais-saied-complotiste/>.
La Rédaction. 2023. "Normalisation avec l'entité sioniste: Saïed fait allusion à la peine de mort (Vidéo)." Réalités Online. <https://realites.com.tn/fr/normalisation-avec-lentite-sioniste-saied-fait-allusion-a-la-peine-de-mort-video/>.

³¹⁰ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

³¹¹ Khan, Siraj. 2022. "A Comparative Analysis of the Draft Constitutions of Tunisia 2022: Zero-Sum Games." University of Tübingen. <https://www.kas.de/documents/265308/22468903/A+Comparative+Analysis+of+the+Draft+Constitutions+of+Tunisia+2022+Zero-Sum+Games.pdf/4a68ee42-6ca4-31b2-78f2-4aeccca3e3b4?version=1.0&t=1674463840919>.

³¹² Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. 2024. "De-democratising Tunisia: How Tunisia's New Constitution Is Threatening the Country's Young Democracy." Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. https://mcusercontent.com/2bf1f6ef20d1b3b0c50cc149c/files/d85f6113-6fe3-499c-d9b7-7551fb362a0d/Tunisia_Research_Project_Automatisch_wiederhergestellt_.docx.pdf_6_.pdf.

example, some provisions weaken legislative checks on the executive, granting the President exclusive rights to propose legislative measures concerning treaties and financial laws, thus limiting Parliament's legislative role³¹³. Also, the requirement for honest and transparent elections has been removed³¹⁴; while the eligibility criteria for political participation have been made more restrictive³¹⁵.

The weakening of parliamentary power goes hand in hand with the strengthening of executive power, with the President now determining general policy without consulting the Head of Government³¹⁶. President's emergency powers have also been expanded, removing judicial review possibilities³¹⁷. Unlike the changes made in the new Constitution to the chapters concerning the powers of the Parliament and the President, the provisions concerning the judicial system have remained substantially unchanged, but the shift from judicial power to judicial functions signals increased executive control³¹⁸. The new Constitution eliminates term limits for Constitutional Court judges³¹⁹, ensuring a predominantly older judiciary and excluding younger legal professionals from these roles³²⁰.

Overall, Kais Saied's actions and the new Constitution mark a significant shift towards authoritarianism in Tunisia, undermining democratic principles and centralizing power in the executive.

³¹³ Article 68: "The President of the Republic has the right to present bills. Representative have the right to present suggestions for laws, provided that they are presented by at least ten representatives. The President of the Republic is responsible for presenting draft laws on approving treaties and draft finance laws. The projects of the President of the Republic have priority for consideration".

³¹⁴ Article 55: "No restrictions shall be placed on the rights and freedoms guaranteed by this Constitution except by virtue of a law and for the necessity of a Democratic System, national defense, public security, public health, protection of the rights of others or public morals".

³¹⁵ Article 58, which requires descent from a Tunisian mother or father. This represents a de facto exclusion of Tunisians of immigrant origin from political participation and a policy according to which not all citizens have the same rights.

Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, 25 luglio 2022.

<https://www.kas.de/documents/265308/265357/English+Translation+of+the+2022+Constitution+of+Tunisia.pdf/b5a12daa-b05f-9d94-062e-9e6b228cc746?version=1.0&t=1686846575390>

³¹⁶ Article 100: "The President of the Republic sets the general policy of the state and defines its basic choices and informs the Assembly of the Representatives of the People and the National Council of Regions and Districts. He may address them together, either directly or by way of a statement addressed to them".

³¹⁷ Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, 25 luglio 2022, art. 96

<https://www.kas.de/documents/265308/265357/English+Translation+of+the+2022+Constitution+of+Tunisia.pdf/b5a12daa-b05f-9d94-062e-9e6b228cc746?version=1.0&t=1686846575390>

³¹⁸ Article 117: "The judiciary is an independent function exercised by judges over whom there is no authority other than the law".

³¹⁹ Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, 25 luglio 2022, art. 125.

<https://www.kas.de/documents/265308/265357/English+Translation+of+the+2022+Constitution+of+Tunisia.pdf/b5a12daa-b05f-9d94-062e-9e6b228cc746?version=1.0&t=1686846575390>

³²⁰ Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. 2024. "De-democratising Tunisia: How Tunisia's New Constitution Is Threatening the Country's Young Democracy." Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. https://mcusercontent.com/2bflf6ef20d1b3b0c50cc149c/files/d85f6113-6fe3-499c-d9b7-7551fb362a0d/Tunisia_Research_Project_Automatisch_wiederhergestellt_.docx.pdf_6_.pdf

2.5.2 Tunisia's economy post-2011: the struggle for stability and growth

Since 2011, Tunisia's leaders have grappled with a complex economic and social situation. The fragility of the post-revolution political system has often resulted in prolonged stagnation rather than rapid swift decision-making. The Tunisian's economy has been hampered by a lack of strategic vision, leading to persistent structural issues such as an inefficient internal market, a highly centralised public sector, and significant social and regional inequalities. For decades, Tunisian policymakers have relied on public debt and high public spending to address these challenges. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine have further weakened the economy and exacerbated social difficulties³²¹.

Recent data provides insight into Tunisia's current economic situation. In 2023, the trade deficit fell to 32.4% in 2023 from 69.5% in 2022, driven by a 7.9% increase in exports. The tourism sector, a key economic driver, saw a sharp recovery with 49.3% growth compared to the previous year. Despite these positive developments, GDP growth for 2023 was only 0.4% with an economic growth rate of 0.9%, down from 2.6% in the previous year. This economic environment has also impacted the unemployment rate, which rose to 16.4% in the last quarter of 2023, up from 15.2% the same previous year. Unemployment remains particularly high among young people aged 15–24, peaking at 40.9%³²². The labour market is characterised by low levels of female participation and high rates of unemployment and informality. Only 46.3% of the working-age population participates in the labour market, with women significantly disadvantaged, their participation rate being less than 30%³²³. Despite improvement in education and legal rights of women, their labour market participation remains low due to weak demand for work, traditional gender roles, and a lack of affordable childcare services. A substantial gender pay gap in the private sector results in almost three months of unpaid work per year for women, further discouraging their participation in the labour force³²⁴.

Therefore, Tunisia's economic situation remains challenging, especially in the current context of economic slowdown. Worsening macroeconomic indicators and the increasing risk of debt default have led Western countries to pressure Saied to accept financial assistance from the

³²¹ Molini, Vasco. 2024. "Unemployment and Social Crisis in Tunisia." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2407.pdf>.

³²² Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. "Rapporto Annuale: Tunisia, Libia, Marocco, Algeria." AICS – Tunisi. https://tunisi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA2023_AICS-TUNISI.pdf.

³²³ Institut National de la Statistique (INS). 2023. "Indicateurs de l'emploi et du chômage, Troisième trimestre 2023 | INS." | INS. <https://www.ins.tn/publication/indicateurs-de-lemploi-et-du-chomage-troisieme-trimestre-2023>.

³²⁴ Molini, Vasco. 2024. "Unemployment and Social Crisis in Tunisia." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2407.pdf>.

IMF. However, negotiations for new bailout programme have failed. The 2023 budget planned to borrow around USD 5 billion from international partners to finance the primary deficit and to honor the public debt. But, due to Tunisia's increased risk rating, the country has lost access to the Eurobonds market and to the bilateral and multilateral flows conditioned by an IMF agreement³²⁵. As a result, Tunisia was able to borrow only half of what it needed, increasing pressure on the domestic financial market. To preserve foreign currency reserves, the government implemented administrative controls to compress imports in 2023. In the first half of the year, goods imports fell by 0.6% compared to the same period in 2022, affecting mainly fuels (-20.9%), intermediate products (-3.0%), and foodstuffs (-3.9%)³²⁶. The reduction in intermediate products is slowing factory production, exacerbating the collapse of growth. In addition, poor exports performance reflects increased financial constraints on the private sector, weak demand from Europe for Tunisian products, and a decline in foreign investment. The current democratic setback has caused Tunisia to lose the "democratic rent" that previously allowed access to abundant and cheap financial assistance from Western partners and institutions³²⁷.

Reduce its overall debt will be a significant challenge for Tunisia. Addressing economic issues to improve conditions will certainly have important but uncertain political consequences³²⁸. As presidential elections approach, President Saïed's prospects will depend on the extent to which the social and economic landscape deteriorates. Rapid deterioration could increase the chances of victory for Saïed's opponents, while economic resilience could bolster Saïed's re-election chances. These conditions underscore the need for political coordination and leadership capable of fostering collective action to improve the quality of education, labour productivity,

³²⁵ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

³²⁶ Diwan, Ishac. 2024. "The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/the-buildup-to-a-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

³²⁷ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

³²⁸ Amman Center for Human Rights Studies. 2024. "De-democratising Tunisia: How Tunisia's New Constitution Is Threatening the Country's Young Democracy." Amman Center for Human Rights Studies.

https://mcusercontent.com/2bf1f6ef20d1b3b0c50cc149c/files/d85f6113-6fe3-499c-d9b7-7551fb362a0d/Tunisia_Research_Project_Automatisch_wiederhergestellt_.docx.pdf_6_.pdf.

innovation, research, and development, and, more generally, Tunisia's position in the global value chains³²⁹.

2.5.3 Tunisia's evolution into a migration hub: challenges and inconsistent policies

Combating irregular immigration from Tunisia has become a primary concern for the Italian government, as the country has transformed into a transit hub for migrants, primarily from sub-Saharan Africa³³⁰.

The presence of a large sub-Saharan African population in Tunisia dates back to 2015, when reciprocal visa programs with several sub-Saharan countries were abolished³³¹. Recent coups d'état in the Sahel and Libya, alongside climate crisis and deteriorating living conditions, have forced thousands to flee their homeland³³². In 2017, an agreement on migration was signed between Italy and Libya, supported by the EU, to fund detention centers and transform armed groups into coastguards. However, this led to sub-Saharan migrants viewing Tunisia as a safer entry point than Libya or Algeria, where they faced severe human rights violations. The situation worsened following the widespread mistreatment by the militias and the escalation of conflict in Libya in 2019, prompting even more migrants to enter Tunisia. In 2023, President Saïed conspiracy-laden speech triggered a wave of violent racism against Sub-Saharan Africans³³³. The government's response was marked by inconsistent policies and abusive practices, including illegal expulsions to desert and border areas,³³⁴ resulting in numerous deaths and injuries, and leaving hundreds transported to known human trafficking hotspots³³⁵.

³²⁹ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

³³⁰ Meddeb, Hamza. 2024. "Tunisia's Transformation into a Transit Hub: Illegal Migration and Policy Dilemmas." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/tunisias-transformation-into-a-transit-hub-illegal-migration-and-policy-dilemmas?lang=en>.

³³¹ El Ghali, Adnen, and Ahlam Chemlali. 2022. "Ne rien faire et ne rien laisser faire. Les enjeux de la non-politique migratoire tunisienne." *Revue Tunisienne de Science Politique* 7 (1): 81-105.

https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/468232034/Adnen_El_Ghali_and_Ahlam_%20Chemlali.pdf.

³³² International Crisis Group. 2020. "Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/285-managing-trafficking-northern-niger>.

³³³ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

³³⁴ Human Rights Watch. 2023. "Tunisia: African Migrants Intercepted at Sea, Expelled." Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/10/tunisia-african-migrants-intercepted-sea-expelled>.

³³⁵ Amnesty International. 2023. "Tunisian president's racist speech incites a wave of violence against Black Africans." Amnesty International.

Tunisia's policies have failed to control irregular immigration effectively and to adhere to legal commitments, human rights principles, and a comprehensive migration strategy³³⁶. Several factors contribute to Tunisia's evolution as a transit country and undermine Italy's efforts to discourage irregular immigration: the absence of a global migration policy, outdated legislation, and a security-oriented approach lacking a coherent vision. Since 2011, Tunisian political elites have been reluctant to recognise the country's new status as a regional destination for migration, avoiding modernising the legal framework governing migration. Tunisia has failed to pass a law that guarantees the right to seek asylum, as required by the 2014 Constitution and various treaties³³⁷. Moreover, despite law against human trafficking in 2016 and 2018, policies protecting migrants from exploitation remain unimplemented³³⁸. Sub-Saharan migrants are still in a state of legal vulnerability, often exploited as cheap labour in both the informal and formal sectors, without any legal guarantee of the right of residence³³⁹. Saïed's authoritarian shift after July 2021 has further complicated the situation, with increased reliance on security services repressive measures instead of formal agreements³⁴⁰. Migrants face long delays for residence permits and multiple obstacles hindering their normal life³⁴¹. Unauthorised migrants are even more vulnerable facing heavy penalties for overstaying³⁴² and limited mobility. Despite strict conditions on residence and departure, Tunisia entered agreements between 2014 and 2019

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/>.

³³⁶ Refugees International. 2024. "Le politiche migratorie europee e tunisine: una ricetta per fallimento e sofferenza." *Affari Internazionali*.

<https://www.affarinternazionali.it/le-politiche-migratorie-europee-e-tunisine-una-ricetta-per-fallimento-e-sofferenza/>.

³³⁷ Such as the Convention on African Refugees and the United Nations Convention on Refugees.

Boukhayatia, Rihab. 2021. "Droit D'asile En Tunisie: Gravé Dans La Constitution, Méprisé Par Les Lois." *Nawaat*. <https://nawaat.org/2021/02/19/droit-dasile-en-tunisie-grave-dans-la-constitution-meprise-par-les-lois/>.

³³⁸ Abderrahim, Tasnim, Alia Fakhry, and Victoria Rietig. 2021. "Walking a Tightrope in Tunisia | DGAP." German Council on Foreign Relations. <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/walking-tightrope-tunisia>.

³³⁹ Trabelsi, Salah. 2020. "Politiques du non-accueil en Tunisie." FTDES.

<https://ftdes.net/rapports/ftdes.migreu.pdf>.

³⁴⁰ Refugees International. 2023. "Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability: Time to Reassess EU & U.S. Migration Cooperation with Tunisia." Refugees International.

<https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/abuse-corruption-and-accountability-time-to-reassess-eu-u-s-migration-cooperation-with-tunisia/>.

³⁴¹ This law imposed unusually harsh penalties, ranging from 8,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$2,500–30,000) and imprisonment from three to twenty years, on both illegal migrants and human smugglers. Additionally, the law does not give migrants the ability to appeal judgements or provide vulnerable groups, such as kids, with protection against expulsion.

Natter, Katharina. 2021. "Ad-Hocratic Immigration Governance: How States Secure Their Power over Immigration through Intentional Ambiguity." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11 (4): 677–694.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21622671.2021.1877189>.

³⁴² The Tunisian government imposes a heavy penalty of 3,000 Tunisian dinars (1,000 dollars) on those who exceed three months of stay before leaving Tunisian territory.

exempting many sub-Saharan citizens from visa requirement, influencing their decision to move to Tunisia. However, migrants staying longer than three months find themselves in a precarious situation³⁴³.

Additionally, Tunisia's inability to prevent Algeria from addressing a significant number of migrants towards Tunisia has exacerbated the situation. Algeria's security-oriented approach aims to prevent migrants from settling, often redirecting them towards neighboring countries, in particular Niger to the south and Tunisia to the east³⁴⁴. Tunisia's dependence on Algeria for natural gas and economic assistance has created an asymmetric situation, limiting Tunisia's ability to coordinate on migration flows and forcing it to manage the influx independently³⁴⁵. Inconsistent policies and short-term repressive measures focused on mass expulsions to remote rural or border areas have prevented Tunisian authorities from developing a comprehensive migration strategy. This has fostered a thriving migratory economy, with traffickers adapting to law enforcement constraints. Reports indicate collusion between traffickers and elements of the Tunisian security forces, driven by substantial profit and weak state control³⁴⁶.

Thus, Tunisia's transition to a transit hub underscores the entrenched nature of the migration issue, reflecting the structural challenges, the regional instability, and the wider dynamics of geopolitical destabilisation. The political volatility in the African "coup belt" further undermines state systems in the Sahel and West Africa³⁴⁷. Consequently, Tunisia is likely to remain a migration hotspot for years to come.

³⁴³ Refugees International. 2023. "Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability: Time to Reassess EU & U.S. Migration Cooperation with Tunisia." Refugees International.
<https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/abuse-corruption-and-accountability-time-to-reassess-eu-u-s-migration-cooperation-with-tunisia/>.

³⁴⁴ Dockery, Wesley. 2018. "Hundreds of migrants found abandoned on the Algeria-Niger border." InfoMigrants.
<https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/10646/hundreds-of-migrants-found-abandoned-on-algerianiger-border>.

³⁴⁵ Meddeb, Hamza. 2024. "Tunisia's Transformation into a Transit Hub: Illegal Migration and Policy Dilemmas." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/tunisias-transformation-into-a-transit-hub-illegal-migration-and-policy-dilemmas?lang=en>.

³⁴⁶ Refugees International. 2024. "Le politiche migratorie europee e tunisine: una ricetta per fallimento e sofferenza." Affari Internazionali.
<https://www.affarinternazionali.it/le-politiche-migratorie-europee-e-tunisine-una-ricetta-per-fallimento-e-sofferenza/>.

³⁴⁷ Remene, Nicolas. 2023. "Middle powers, big impact: Africa's 'coup belt,' Russia, and the waning global order." European Council on Foreign Relations.
<https://ecfr.eu/article/middle-powers-big-impact-africas-coup-belt-russia-and-the-waning-global-order/>.

3. Italy as a facilitator: The UE, The IOs and Tunisia

3.1 EU-Tunisia relations: strategic location, democratisation, and economic integration

Since the Barcelona Declaration of 1995³⁴⁸, the EU has pursued the objective of transforming the Mediterranean into an area of dialogue, exchange, and cooperation, recognising the strategic importance of this region for the stability and prosperity of the entire European continent. This commitment has encouraged the development of a series of policies and initiatives, including the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004, aimed at strengthening relations with the Maghreb countries and the Southern Neighbourhood. The European approach is based on the conviction that the geographical proximity, economic complementarity, and long-standing historical and cultural ties between the peoples of the two shores of the Mediterranean constitute a solid foundation for mutually beneficial cooperation³⁴⁹. Three main discourses have shaped European policies in the region: the Mediterranean as a diversified geopolitical space, as a dangerous space, and as a space crucial to European interests. These discourses have not only contributed to constructing the representation of the Mediterranean but have also reinforced the Union's identity, fostering a narrative that contrasts a united, secure, and democratic Europe with a Mediterranean perceived as unstable, problematic, and often a source of threats³⁵⁰. As highlighted, "The projection of 'EU' rope southwards has required the symbolic, territorial and institutional construction of the Mediterranean for region-building initiatives. These constructions facilitate and, crucially, justify the promotion of 'EU' ropean 'solutions' outside of EU territorial space; in effect, the production of the Mediterranean region by European elites mobilises the European project and permits its deployment politically and normatively in this new politico-geographic space. [...]"

³⁴⁸ On April 25, 1995, twelve Mediterranean partners and fifteen-member countries of the European Union signed the Barcelona Declaration, often known as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. It is a political accord that emerged in 1989 between the European Union and a number of nations in the southern and eastern Mediterranean. Its primary goal is to transform the Mediterranean into a shared area of wealth, peace, and stability by political discourse, financial and economic cooperation, and human, social, and cultural collaboration.

³⁴⁹ European External Action Service. 2024. "EU and the Maghreb countries | EEAS." EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-maghreb-countries_en.

³⁵⁰ Cebeci, Munevver, and Tobias Schumacher. 2018. "D1.2 Final report and policy brief - Working Package 1: EU Construction of the Mediterranean." MEDRESET.

The institutional blueprint from ‘EU’rope for Mediterranean regional construction [...] enables the parceling and representation of Mediterranean geopolitical space on ‘EU’ropean terms”³⁵¹. This approach therefore legitimises European intervention in neighboring Tunisia³⁵². Since the Arab Spring, the country has emerged as a strategically important actor, so much so that the EU has strongly supported the Tunisian democratic process, perceiving it as an opportunity to promote democracy and human rights in the Mediterranean. The country is also considered a pillar of stability, capable of contributing to the fight against phenomena such as terrorism, human trafficking, and irregular migratory flows towards Europe. However, the recent erosion of democratic institutions and the advance of authoritarian tendencies have placed European institutions before a delicate dilemma: reconciling support for democratic reforms with realpolitik and the need to ensure regional stability³⁵³. Economic relations between the EU and Tunisia are also under significant strain. Despite Europe being the country’s main trading partner, representing around 56% of its foreign trade³⁵⁴, the increase in competition from other global actors such as China and Turkey, alongside the need to implement structural reforms to modernise its economy, constitute significant challenges³⁵⁵. The crucial importance of the economic link drives Europe to ensure cooperation that is not only continuous but can also adapt to the changing geopolitical and social dynamics within the country.

3.1.1 Strategic location, migration and socio-economic stability

Located in the heart of the Mediterranean, Tunisia acts as a bridge between Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Its strategic position renders the country a key player in the security and foreign policy strategies of the European Union. Precisely on the basis of “geographical proximity,” European institutions have constructed a complex narrative of the Mediterranean, symbolically representing it as a sort of “immediate neighborhood,” a volatile region that, if not adequately managed, could pose a threat to Europe’s economies, security, and liberal

³⁵¹ Jones, Alun. 2006. “Narrative-Based Production of State Spaces for International Region Building: Europeanization and the Mediterranean.” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 96 (2): 415 - 431. 10.1111/j.1467-8306.2006.00484x.

³⁵² Cebeci, Münevver, and Tobias Schumacher. 2017. “The EU’s Constructions of the Mediterranean (2003-2017).” *Medreset* 3 (April). https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_3.pdf.

³⁵³ Zenobio, Miriam. 2023. “Reframing EU–Tunisia Relations: Democracy, Governance, Migration.” *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai2318.pdf>.

³⁵⁴ Directorate-General for Trade. 2024. “EU trade relations with Tunisia.” European Commission. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/tunisia_en.

³⁵⁵ Parks, Robert P. 2019. “An Outlook on Tunisian Elite Stakeholders’ Perspectives on the EU and Its Policy Preferences in Tunisia and the Mediterranean.” *PODEM Public Policy and Democracy Studies*. <http://podem.org.tr/en/researches/an-outlook-on-tunisian-elite-stakeholders-perspectives-on-the-eu-and-its-policy-preferences-in-tunisia-and-the-mediterranean/>.

democratic structures. Leveraging this approach, the EU effectively justifies its presence and intervention in Tunisia, which has recently become particularly robust due to the emergence of multiple sources of potential security risks within the country³⁵⁶.

Foremost among these is Tunisia's transformation into one of the principal migration hubs of the Mediterranean. As already analysed, in recent years, the country has become the main transit point for thousands of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, a phenomenon fueled by regional instability and the difficult internal economic situation³⁵⁷. The stabilisation of Tunisia is therefore a priority for the EU, which sees in this country a natural barrier against irregular migratory flows towards its territories. To effectively manage this phenomenon, the Union has forged a partnership with Tunisia, culminating in the signing of various agreements, such as the 2012 Privileged Partnership and the 2014 Mobility Partnership. These agreements aim to strengthen border management, facilitate returns, and promote local economic development to address the root causes of migration³⁵⁸. However, cooperation between the EU and Tunisia has not been without difficulties. Tunisian concerns regarding national sovereignty and the management of third-country nationals have created tensions, as demonstrated by Tunisia's refusal to establish migrant hot-spots in the country, a proposal advanced by Europe. The Tunisian government, in light of the fragile socio-economic and political context of the country, rejected this proposal, fearing a potential destabilising impact on Tunisian society³⁵⁹. On the security front, the EU has promoted the implementation of stricter security measures and cross-border cooperation through Frontex and other initiatives. Tunisia has been involved in the fight against human trafficking and other forms of transnational crime, with the primary goal of controlling illegal immigration and preventing the country from becoming fertile ground for illegal activities that could further destabilise the region. The integrity of Tunisia's borders is

³⁵⁶ Commission of the European Communities. 2003. "Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbors." EUR-Lex. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52003DC0104>.

Cebeci, Münevver, and Tobias Schumacher. 2017. "The EU's Constructions of the Mediterranean (2003-2017)." *Medreset* 3 (April). https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_3.pdf.

³⁵⁷ Selin Okayay, Asli, Luca Barana, and Colleen E. Boland, eds. 2023. *Moving Towards Europe: Diverse Trajectories and Multidimensional Drivers of Migration Across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic*. Peter Lang. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374087967_Moving_Towards_Europe_Diverse_Trajectories_and_Multidimensional_Drivers_of_Migration_across_the_Mediterranean_and_the_Atlantic

³⁵⁸ Directorate-General for Communication. 2014. "EU and Tunisia establish their Mobility Partnership." European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_208.

³⁵⁹ Rouland, Betty. 2021. "Redistributing EU 'burdens': the Tunisian perspective on the new Pact on Migration and Asylum | Asile." ASILE Project. <https://www.asileproject.eu/redistributing-eu-burdens-the-tunisian-perspective-on-the-new-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/>.

therefore of strategic importance to the EU, which has significantly invested in monitoring and control capabilities³⁶⁰.

Beyond security, European institutions are deeply interested in Tunisia's economic stability. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the country's economic difficulties, impacting key sectors such as tourism, increasing unemployment, and worsening poverty. In this context, the brain drain has become a growing concern for Tunisia, as it deprives the country of valuable talents and contributes to a sense of disillusionment, especially among the youth. To address these challenges, the Union has launched various development programs, including funds aimed at promoting economic growth and creating jobs³⁶¹. However, the effectiveness of these interventions has been limited by the complexity of Tunisia's socio-economic context and the difficulties in reaching the most marginalised areas. The regional disparities between the more developed coastal areas and the marginalised interior regions remain a source of social tension and instability, further fueling migration and requiring a more inclusive and targeted development approach³⁶².

Finally, Tunisia is also going through an important period of uncertainty, as already mentioned in the previous chapter. After the 2011 revolution, the country embarked on an exemplary path towards democracy, but the recent proposed constitutional reforms and upcoming elections are accompanied by concerns regarding the legitimacy of institutions and the concentration of power in the hands of President Saïed. The EU's position is to continue supporting the democratic process and promoting human rights, recognising that a key element of Tunisia's long-term stability will be the country's ability to build strong and inclusive institutions. It is crucial that the EU and civil society organisations act as intermediaries between the population and the government, promoting transparency and accountability³⁶³.

³⁶⁰ Luyten, Katrien. 2023. "Understanding EU action against migrant smuggling." European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/757577/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)757577_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/757577/EPRS_BRI(2023)757577_EN.pdf).

³⁶¹ For instance, in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agreed in 2023, Tunisia and the European Union declare their intention to form a Talent Partnership to advance lawful migration for the benefit of both parties. This would provide a sufficient response to the possibility of a "brain drain," while also taking into consideration the interests of both Tunisia and the EU Member States. It would also benefit mutually selected job sectors and areas of activity.

On a scale from 0 to 10, the latest value registered by the Human flight and brain drain index from 2023 is 5.6 index points, an increase from 5.5 index points in 2022. In comparison, the world average is 5.17 index points, based on data from 177 countries.

TheGlobalEconomy.com. 2024. "Tunisia Human flight and brain drain - data, chart." TheGlobalEconomy.com. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Tunisia/human_flight_brain_drain_index/.

³⁶² Zenobio, Miriam. 2023. "Reframing EU–Tunisia Relations: Democracy, Governance, Migration." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai2318.pdf>.

³⁶³ Ezzamouri, Akram, and Miriam Zenobio. 2023. "EU–Tunisia Relations: Unpacking the Conundrum." Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eu-tunisia-relations-unpacking-conundrum>.

Thus, the stability of Tunisia is of fundamental importance to the EU. Cooperation between the Old Continent and Tunisia must tackle complex challenges, from border management to promoting economic development and building strong democratic institutions. An integrated approach that considers the economic, social, and political dimensions of Tunisian stability will be essential to ensuring a sustainable and beneficial partnership for both parties.

3.1.2 EU's evolving role in Tunisia's democratisation

The EU, often viewed as an “ideal power” capable of overcoming historical obstacles and achieving peaceful regional integration, has played a complex but crucial role in the democratisation process of Tunisia, beginning with the Jasmine Revolution³⁶⁴.

Prior to the Arab Spring, relations between the Union and Tunisia were primarily dominated by economic issues. The EU and its Member States were mainly focused on trade and investments, largely neglecting the human rights violations and political restrictions imposed by the authoritarian regime of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali³⁶⁵. The 2011 Revolution represented an opportunity for the EU to spread its success story and present itself to Tunisian society and all the peoples of the southern Mediterranean as a “community of values,” committed to promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law³⁶⁶.

European involvement in Tunisia's democratisation evolved through various phases, each characterised by different priorities. Immediately after the revolution, the European Union exhibited uncertainties due to the lack of coherence among the responses advanced by Member States. While Southern European countries were more favorable to the democratic transition and called for greater financial support, Germany adopted a more cautious approach, and France took a more pragmatic perspective, seeking to support Ben Ali's regime to contain the revolts³⁶⁷. Faced with these divergences, the European Union had to revise its policy towards Tunisia, adopting a more proactive approach that included increasing financial and technical

³⁶⁴ Ekiz, Seyma. 2022. “Responses of the EU and Member States to the Tunisian Revolution: Discourse vs Action.” *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 40(5): 717–735. <https://doi.org/0.1080/13530194.2020.1847040>.

³⁶⁵ Lisans, Yükek. 2023. “Assessing the normative power of the European Union on Tunisian democracy: Navigating local challenges at major crossroads.” *Avesis İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi*. <https://avesis.iku.edu.tr/yonetilen-tez/126bce83-6276-4781-8f72-44c12ac5b798/assessing-the-normative-power-of-the-european-union-on-tunisian-democracy-navigating-local-challenges-at-major-crossroads>.

³⁶⁶ Ekiz, Seyma. 2022. “Responses of the EU and Member States to the Tunisian Revolution: Discourse vs Action.” *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 40(5): 717–735. <https://doi.org/0.1080/13530194.2020.1847040>.

³⁶⁷ Zengin, Sibel. 2019. “THE EUROPEAN UNION'S NORTH AFRICA POLICY: A DEFENSIVE NEOREALIST PERSPECTIVE.” *Marmara Üniversitesi Avrupa Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi* 27 (2): 371-391. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1276677>.

support to the new Tunisian government and civil society. A concrete example of this new approach has been the “more for more” programme³⁶⁸, which has guaranteed greater assistance to countries committed to advancing democratic reforms. In the specific case of Tunisia, this has translated into a significant increase in funds allocated to the country, with €445 million mobilised between 2011 and 2013 to support democratic transition and economic stabilisation. With the same objective, the Strengthening Partnership and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) programme has been also launched³⁶⁹, representing a concrete attempt to incentivise the political and economic reforms necessary to consolidate the democratic transition³⁷⁰.

However, despite these efforts, the resources and initiatives deployed have been limited. Since 2014, the EU’s attention has progressively shifted towards security issues, in response to concerns over the growing threat of terrorism and radicalisation following the terrorist attacks of 2015. This shift in priorities led to a greater emphasis on strengthening Tunisia’s security capabilities and managing migratory flows, rather than supporting the building of democratic institutions. The EU nonetheless continued to provide significant financial support to the country, investing in the provision of substantial resources allocated to various sectors, including civil society³⁷¹; but the effectiveness of these policies has often been called into question. Many members of the Tunisian elite and international observers, for instance, have criticised the EU for its conditional and often ambiguous approach, expressing dissatisfaction with the priority given to migration and security issues, rather than economic development³⁷². Criticism has also been levelled at the lack of a coherent strategy and the consequent difficulty in maintaining a balance between economic assistance and security needs: despite the numerous civil society empowerment projects, many local actors have perceived the EU’s approach as selective and insufficient to address the country’s deep socio-economic

³⁶⁸ European Commission and High Representative. 2011. “A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean.” EUR-Lex COM (2011) 200, p. 5.
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0200:FIN:en:PDF>.

³⁶⁹ Established on September 27, 2011, in response to the Arab Spring, the Reform and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) program is a financial initiative supported by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). With a total of € 7.956.500, the sector-specific financial support for the empowerment of civil society represented a moderate portion of the overall financial support (1,7%).

³⁷⁰ Bassotti, Giorgio. 2017. “Did the European Union Light a Beacon of Hope in North Africa? Assessing the Effectiveness of EU Democracy Promotion in Tunisia.” College of Europe.
https://www.coleurope.eu/sites/default/files/research-paper/edp-6-2017_bassotti_0.pdf.

³⁷¹ Zenobio, Miriam. 2023. “Reframing EU–Tunisia Relations: Democracy, Governance, Migration.” Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai2318.pdf>.

³⁷² Ben Jennana, Marwene, and Ozan Örmeci. 2024. “The effect of the European Union’s southern neighborhood policy on the Tunisian democratisation process.” UPA Strategic Affairs 5 (1): 45-67.
https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/upa/issue/83406/1446369#article_cite.

problems³⁷³. Moreover, the regional context and geopolitical dynamics have further complicated the situation, with the EU having to contend with the growing influence of external actors such as Russia and China, which also further reinforced the ambivalence in the policies undertaken³⁷⁴.

Thus, on the one hand, the Old Continent has provided significant support in terms of financial and technical resources, contributing to stabilising the country during the transition. On the other hand, the shift in priorities towards security issues and the failure to effectively address the socio-economic causes of discontent have limited the overall impact of European policies. This has raised questions about the long-term sustainability of the democratisation model promoted by the EU and the need for a more balanced and inclusive approach that considers not only security needs but also the democratic and socio-economic aspirations of the Tunisian population. This is particularly relevant in light of the current situation in Tunisia, with growing popular dissatisfaction and economic and political challenges highlighting the need for a more coherent and inclusive approach from the EU, which takes into account not only short-term security issues but also the long-term democratic and development aspirations of the country³⁷⁵.

3.1.3 Economic partnership: trade, energy and sustainable development

The spread of a European neoliberal approach as a tool to achieve regional cohesion has also had repercussions on the economic and commercial relations that have gradually strengthened between the EU and Tunisia. The underlying idea is that “greater stability and prosperity in the region can increase trade and investment opportunities while simultaneously strengthening cooperation in political and economic sectors”³⁷⁶.

In this context, economic and commercial cooperation with Tunisia is seen by the EU as a means of promoting security and stabilising the region. Tunisia, in fact, represents a key partner for several reasons. Its strategic geographical position, which places it as a bridge between Europe and North Africa, facilitates not only trade exchanges but also cooperation in critical

³⁷³ Zenobio, Miriam. 2023. “Reframing EU–Tunisia Relations: Democracy, Governance, Migration.” Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai2318.pdf>.

³⁷⁴ Narbone, Luigi. 2020. “The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question.” CADMUS, EUI Research Repository. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

³⁷⁵ Narbone, Luigi. 2020. “The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question.” CADMUS, EUI Research Repository. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

³⁷⁶ Lisans, Yüsek. 2023. “Assessing the normative power of the European Union on Tunisian democracy: Navigating local challenges at major crossroads.” Avesis İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi. <https://avesis.iku.edu.tr/yonetilen-tez/126bce83-6276-4781-8f72-44c12ac5b798/assessing-the-normative-power-of-the-european-union-on-tunisian-democracy-navigating-local-challenges-at-major-crossroads>.

sectors such as energy security and migration management. From an economic point of view, Tunisia offers investment opportunities, especially in the renewable energy and green technology sectors, which have recently been of growing interest to European companies seeking to expand their operations abroad³⁷⁷. For Tunisia, cooperation with the European Union opens the doors to one of the largest and wealthiest markets in the world, contributing to stimulating economic growth and encouraging local production and exports. At the same time, the technical and financial assistance provided by the Union helps improve the country's economic infrastructure, including energy infrastructure, telecommunications, and transport, as well as implement crucial economic reforms to improve the business environment and attract foreign direct investment³⁷⁸.

The economic and commercial cooperation between the EU and Tunisia has historically been characterised by an intense exchange of goods, services, and investments, as well as by a political dialogue aimed at improving Tunisia's socio-economic conditions and economic integration with Europe. The EU is, in fact, Tunisia's main trading partners³⁷⁹. A crucial moment in this process was the signing of the EU-Tunisia Association Agreement in 1995, which marked the beginning of a free trade area for industrial products. This agreement facilitated the access of Tunisian products to the European market and stimulated the modernisation of Tunisian industry through integration with European value chains³⁸⁰.

In recent decades, economic and commercial relations have seen significant development, particularly in response to the economic and political challenges that Tunisia has faced since the 2011 Revolution. The increased attention and continuous support from Europe have led to an intensification of interdependence and cooperation in various sectors. Among these, the energy sector stands out, where both parties seek to create synergies to address common challenges and seize the opportunities offered by the energy transition. In particular, emphasis

³⁷⁷ Saba, Roberto, and Anna Pireddu. 2024. Energy and environmental synergy: cooperative strategies for the euro-mediterranea transition. Arkadia. <https://crenos.unica.it/crenos/sites/default/files/wp-24-09.pdf>

³⁷⁸ Parks, Robert P. 2019. "An Outlook on Tunisian Elite Stakeholders' Perspectives on the EU and Its Policy Preferences in Tunisia and the Mediterranean." PODEM Public Policy and Democracy Studies. <http://podem.org.tr/en/researches/an-outlook-on-tunisian-elite-stakeholders-perspectives-on-the-eu-and-its-policy-preferences-in-tunisia-and-the-mediterranean/>.

³⁷⁹ 56% of Tunisia's commerce in 2023 will come from the EU, making it its biggest trading partner: 43.8% of Tunisia's imports and 72% of its exports were sourced from the EU. Directorate-General for Trade. 2024. "EU trade relations with Tunisia." European Commission. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/tunisia_en.

³⁸⁰ Lisans, Yükses. 2023. "Assessing the normative power of the European Union on Tunisian democracy: Navigating local challenges at major crossroads." Avesis İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi. <https://avesis.iku.edu.tr/yonetilen-tez/126bce83-6276-4781-8f72-44c12ac5b798/assessing-the-normative-power-of-the-european-union-on-tunisian-democracy-navigating-local-challenges-at-major-crossroads>.

is placed on the need for closer collaboration in the field of renewable energies. Tunisia, facing a growing energy deficit and a significant dependence on gas and oil imports, has begun to promote renewable energy as a sustainable solution, finding in the EU a strategic partner to diversify its energy sources and improve energy efficiency. At the same time, the Union considers the country a key partner in the context of the European Green Deal and the hydrogen strategy³⁸¹. For this reason, it supports Tunisia's efforts by offering technical and financial assistance for the development of infrastructure and the creation of a regulatory framework favorable to private investments in the renewable energy sector. An example of this is the Tunisian Solar Plan (TSP), aimed at achieving 30% renewable energy in the Tunisian energy mix by 2030, with 80% of the investment expected to come from the private sector³⁸². A crucial step towards greater energy integration between the two shores of the Mediterranean and a broader Euro-Mediterranean region could be taken with the realisation of the ELMED-TUNITA electrical interconnection. The project, as already mentioned, involves the construction of an electrical cable between Italy and Tunisia with the support of the governments of Italy, Tunisia, France, and Germany, as well as the European Commission. The prospect is that it could contribute to improving the energy security of both parties while also promoting sustainable development and the decarbonisation of the energy mix, integrating increasing levels of renewable energy³⁸³.

Finally, the EU is also interested in the economic integration of the Mediterranean region, to be achieved through support for initiatives that promote industrialisation, technological innovation, and job creation in the country. In this sense, the Union encourages Tunisia to implement structural reforms and improve governance, crucial aspects for attracting foreign direct investment, or by advancing programs such as the Tunisian Solar Plan PROSOL³⁸⁴ to

³⁸¹ Saba, Roberto, and Anna Pireddu. 2024. Energy and environmental synergy: cooperative strategies for the euro-mediterranea transition. Arkadia. <https://crenos.unica.it/crenos/sites/default/files/wp-24-09.pdf>

³⁸² Moisseron, Jean-Yves, Khaled Guesmi, and Marie Gerin-Jean. 2018. "Assessing EU-Mediterranean Policies in the Fields of Energy from a Bottom-up Perspective: The Case of Tunisia." MEDRESET Working Papers (33 edition), 2018. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_33.pdf.

³⁸³ Saba, Roberto, and Anna Pireddu. 2024. Energy and environmental synergy: cooperative strategies for the euro-mediterranea transition. Arkadia. <https://crenos.unica.it/crenos/sites/default/files/wp-24-09.pdf>

³⁸⁴ The UNEP, the Société Tunisienne de l'Electricité et de Gaz (STEG), and the Tunisian National Agency for Energy Conservation collaborated to launch the Tunisian Solar Programme (PROSOL) in 2005. It has set up a lending program to help with the expense of buying solar water heaters. By providing financial and fiscal support, the program seeks to further the growth of the solar thermal sector.

incentivise the use of solar water heaters, thereby creating a local market for renewable energy and supporting the growth of local SMEs³⁸⁵.

Looking to the future, both parties intend to further deepen their economic cooperation, which, however, is not without challenges. Although the Union has provided various financial and technical assistance tools to support Tunisia in its difficult transition process, the country is still facing the economic consequences of the 2011 Revolution, including a high unemployment rate, political instability, and significant dependence on state subsidies for energy. Addressing the existing structural and political challenges and promoting continuous and constructive dialogue between the two parties will therefore be necessary to fully realise the potential of this partnership, whose mutual benefits are evident both for Tunisia, in terms of economic development and access to markets, and for the EU, in terms of energy security and investment opportunities.

3.2 EU policies and strategies towards Tunisia

The policies and strategies implemented by the EU in Tunisia are part of the broader approach developed towards the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. This specifically refers to the ENP and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), two initiatives launched based on the Barcelona Declaration of 1995 and aimed at encouraging political and economic reforms in each individual country with due respect for their specific characteristics, as well as regional cooperation among the countries of the region themselves and with the EU³⁸⁶.

Within this framework, Tunisia became the first North African country to sign an Association Agreement with the EU in 1995. As previously mentioned, this agreement laid the foundations for promoting sustainable development in the country through strengthened political dialogue and economic and financial cooperation, with a particular emphasis on trade liberalisation and security issues and funded through the MEDA I and II programs³⁸⁷, supplemented by resources

³⁸⁵ Moisseron, Jean-Yves, Khaled Guesmi, and Marie Gerin-Jean. 2018. "Assessing EU–Mediterranean Policies in the Fields of Energy from a Bottom-up Perspective: The Case of Tunisia." MEDRESET Working Papers (33 edition), 2018. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_33.pdf.

³⁸⁶ European External Action Service. 2024. "Middle East and North Africa (MENA) | EEAS." EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena_en.

³⁸⁷ The MEDA Regulation is the primary vehicle of economic and financial cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean alliance. It was introduced in 1996 (MEDA I) and updated in 2000 (MEDA II). It permits the European Union (EU) to offer financial and technical help to the following southern Mediterranean countries: Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey. The MEDA programme replaces the several bilateral funding conventions that exist between Mediterranean countries. A budget heading is formed to fund the programme. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/meda-programme.html>.

provided via the Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP)³⁸⁸. This approach was further strengthened with the launch of the ENP and the UfM in 2004, within which the “more-for-more” principle and the SPRING programme proved particularly effective in the Tunisian context, incentivising democratic progress and expanding bilateral cooperation to include sectors such as justice, home affairs, energy, and the environment³⁸⁹. The progress made was realised in the negotiation of a Privileged Partnership, later formalised in the Action Plan for the period 2013-2017³⁹⁰, within which the focus was placed precisely on the consolidation of democratic institutions, the promotion of economic competitiveness, and the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA)³⁹¹. Following the revision of the ENP by European institutions, stabilisation became the main political priority³⁹². This shift in the European approach to the region translated into a renewed focus on intensifying work with partner countries in the security sector, primarily in the areas of conflict prevention policies, counter-terrorism, and anti-radicalisation. Safe and legal mobility on the one hand and the fight against irregular migration, human trafficking, and smuggling on the other were the priorities; but further efforts were also mobilised to support inclusive economic and social development through job creation for young people and collaboration with partners on energy security and climate action³⁹³.

³⁸⁸ From 1995 to 2006, Tunisia received approximately €1 billion in grants and €2 billion in loans, with significant financial allocations earmarked for macroeconomic support, institutional governance and private sector development.

Policy Department Directorate-General for External Policies. 2016. “EU policies in Tunisia before and after the Revolution.” European Parliament.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578002_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU(2016)578002_EN.pdf).

³⁸⁹ Policy Department Directorate-General for External Policies. 2016. “EU policies in Tunisia before and after the Revolution.” European Parliament.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578002_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU(2016)578002_EN.pdf).

³⁹⁰ European Union and Tunisia. 2012. “Relations Tunisie – Union Européenne: un partenariat privilégié.” EEAS.
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/plan_action_tunisie_ue_2013_2017_fr_0.pdf.

³⁹¹ Negotiations began in 2015. This agreement aims to extend trade liberalisation beyond industrial products, already liberalised in 2008, to include services and agriculture, as well as to improve the investment climate and support ongoing economic reforms.

EU-Tunisia Association Council. 2018. “Decision No 1 / 2018 of the EU-Tunisia Association Council - of 9 November 2018 - adopting the EU-Tunisia strat.” EUR-Lex.
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22018D1792>.

³⁹² “The EU’s own stability is built on democracy, human rights and the rule of law and economic openness and the new ENP will take stabilisation as its main political priority in this mandate.”

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. 2015. “Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy.” European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).

https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/02c6725a-5f26-4d24-a2ab-589c2ec42ece_en?filename=151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf.

³⁹³ European Commission Directorate-General for Communication. 2015. “Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP): stronger partnerships for a stronger neighborhood.” European Commission.
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_15_6121.

Significant progress has certainly been made, although dissatisfaction with the implementation of European policies and strategies perceived as interference in Tunisia's internal affairs has occasionally been reported³⁹⁴. The worsening of the democratic crisis that Tunisia is experiencing is considered, for example, also as a reflection of the weak and fragmented commitment of the EU towards the country. The idea is that, by pursuing “asymmetric/unequal, top-down, Eurocentric, interest-driven, technocratic, and depoliticising policies in the Mediterranean, the EU has prioritised security and stability over democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.”³⁹⁵ In this sense, the signing of the MoU between the EU and Tunisia in July 2023 constitutes a further paradigm shift for European institutions, this time aiming to support the country in establishing a strategic and comprehensive partnership, with particular attention to macroeconomic stability, trade, the green energy transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration and mobility management³⁹⁶. Naturally, the question concerns how to implement these initiatives effectively, balance European priorities with Tunisia’s needs and aspirations, avoid reinforcing the country’s economic dependency, and ensure genuine support for its democratic and socio-economic reforms³⁹⁷. Thus, the long-term success of this partnership will depend on the ability of both parties to navigate political tensions and build truly balanced and mutually beneficial cooperation.

3.2.1 Political dialogue and cooperation for strategic challenges and opportunities

“The participants express their conviction that the peace, stability, and security of the Mediterranean region are a common good that they are committed to promoting and strengthening by all means at their disposal. To this end, they agree to conduct a strengthened political dialogue at regular intervals, based on adherence to the essential principles of

³⁹⁴ Policy Department Directorate-General for External Policies. 2016. “EU policies in Tunisia before and after the Revolution.” European Parliament.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578002_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU(2016)578002_EN.pdf).

³⁹⁵ Huber, Daniela, and Maria Cristina Paciello. 2019. “Towards a More Reflexive EU in the Mediterranean. Final Policy Recommendations.” MEDRESET Policy Papers, no. 10.

https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_pp_10.pdf.

³⁹⁶ Tabbabi, Khaled. 2023. “Le Mémorandum entre la Tunisie et l’Union Européenne: vers un renforcement de la dépendance, de l’autoritarisme et de l’Europe forteresse.” European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) | https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ECRE-Working-Paper-20_Le-Memorandum-entre-la-Tunisie-et-lUnion-europeenne.pdf.

European Union and Tunisia. 2023. “Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Tunisia.” European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887.

³⁹⁷ Policy Department Directorate-General for External Policies. 2016. “EU policies in Tunisia before and after the Revolution.” European Parliament.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578002_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU(2016)578002_EN.pdf).

international law, and reaffirm a set of common objectives regarding internal and external stability.”³⁹⁸

Dialogue, exchange, and cooperation. These are the three elements that prompted the EU and the Maghreb countries to sign the Barcelona Declaration in 1995. The objective, reinforced by the launch of the ENP, was to build an effective and tailored partnership, capable of recognising the growing interdependence between the two shores of the Mediterranean so that they could strategically work together to turn common challenges into opportunities³⁹⁹.

In this context, the initiation of the political dialogue between the EU and Tunisia is marked by the signing of the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement establishing an association between the European Community and its Member States, on the one hand, and the Republic of Tunisia, on the other, in 1995. In particular, the Association Agreement is based on five objectives, namely: to provide an adequate basis for the political dialogue between the Union and Tunisia, to allow for the development of close relations in all areas that the parties consider relevant to this dialogue; to establish the conditions for the gradual liberalisation of trade in goods, services, and capital; to promote trade and the expansion of harmonious economic and social relations, particularly through dialogue and cooperation, with the aim of fostering the development and prosperity of Tunisia and its people; to encourage the integration of the five countries of the Maghreb region (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia) through the promotion of trade and cooperation between the Republic of Tunisia and the other countries of that region; and to promote economic, social, cultural, and financial cooperation⁴⁰⁰. In this phase, prior to the Jasmine Revolution, European engagement was driven by a rather passive strategy towards the autocratic actions of Ben Ali’s regime. Despite the main objective of the ENP being to promote pro-democracy rhetoric, the Union never significantly intervened against the repressive regime, preferring instead to instruct Tunisia as a “good pupil” in terms of economic liberalisation⁴⁰¹. But even in the phase leading up to the Arab Spring, the complex interaction between strategic

³⁹⁸ Euro-Mediterranean Conference. 1995. “Barcelona declaration.” EEAS.

https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/euromed/docs/bd_en.pdf.

³⁹⁹ European External Action Service. 2024. “Middle East and North Africa (MENA) | EEAS.” EEAS.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena_en.

⁴⁰⁰ European Communities and Republic of Tunisia. 1998. “Euro-Mediterranean Agreement establishing an association between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Tunisia, of the other part.” EUR-Lex.

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A21998A0330%2801%29>

⁴⁰¹ Parks, Robert P. 2019. “An Outlook on Tunisian Elite Stakeholders’ Perspectives on the EU and Its Policy Preferences in Tunisia and the Mediterranean.” PODEM Public Policy and Democracy Studies.

<http://podem.org.tr/en/researches/an-outlook-on-tunisian-elite-stakeholders-perspectives-on-the-eu-and-its-policy-preferences-in-tunisia-and-the-mediterranean/>.

interests, political pragmatism, and normative commitments continued to shape the relations between the EU and Tunisia, lacking coherence between rhetoric and the actions concretely taken⁴⁰².

Three main reasons could be used to explain the EU's limited capacity to protect a system often praised as a model for other countries in the region. Firstly, the EU has progressively placed greater emphasis on migration control at the expense of supporting democracy. Indeed, frequently highlighting the importance of the country as a democratic partner was often perceived entirely as a European pretext to implement increasingly restrictive migration policies. This trait has generally characterised the ENP, to the point of being heavily criticised: by presenting the fight against informal migration as a shared interest between Europeans and Tunisians, the EU's overtly securitised approach towards the Mediterranean has, in fact, been built around "restrictive policies, [...] border closures and limitations on freedom of movement, negatively impacting the Union's credibility as a champion of human rights."⁴⁰³ Secondly, the European strategy in promoting democratisation in Tunisia has proved rather weak, failing to provide adequate and incisive measures to protect the democratic progress it helped to establish in the country. In other words, unlike in Eastern and Central Europe, where the Union was vigilant about threats from Russia, the European response to negative external influences in Tunisia, linked to the tensions between the Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Egypt axis on one side and the Turkey and Qatar axis on the other, was almost non-existent: despite these countries undermining Tunisian democracy over the past ten years, Europe has rarely exerted pressure or condemned their actions⁴⁰⁴. The third issue concerns the nature of the negotiations on the DCFTA. In general, European economic development tools mainly impose European norms and standards that do not pay "adequate attention" to issues such as the informal economy, social polarisation, youth unemployment, regional disparities, and the lack of good governance. Europeans insisted that Tunisia proceed with the DCFTA, presenting it as a condition for improving bilateral relations⁴⁰⁵. But, Tunisian civil society has almost unanimously expressed concerns regarding the DCFTA, considering it a threat to the country's

⁴⁰² Voss, Matthieu. 2010. "Mind the gap! Assessing the implementation of the EU-Tunisian action plan in the field of political cooperation." *L'Europe en Formation*, 2 n° 356/2010. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2010-2-page-139.htm>.

⁴⁰³ Cebeci, Münevver. 2019. "Problematising Effectiveness and Potential of EU Policies in the Mediterranean." *MEDRESET Policy Papers* (8 edition), 2019. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_pp_8.pdf.

⁴⁰⁴ Narbone, Luigi. 2020. "The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question." *CADMUS*, EUI Research Repository. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

⁴⁰⁵ Cebeci, Münevver. 2019. "Problematising Effectiveness and Potential of EU Policies in the Mediterranean." *MEDRESET Policy Papers* (8 edition), 2019. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_pp_8.pdf.

political and economic sovereignty⁴⁰⁶. At the same time, political instability has caused frequent shifts in the Tunisian government's priorities and numerous reshuffles in the negotiating team, often leading to a reversal of previously agreed decisions. No alternative has been agreed upon between the two parties, leaving the integration process and diplomatic relations in a state of deadlock and growing mistrust.⁴⁰⁷

However, the rhetoric of resilience has always been at the core of European policies. "It is in our citizens' interest to invest in the resilience of states and societies to the east, stretching to Central Asia, and to the south, down to Central Africa. Fragility beyond our borders threatens all our vital interests. By contrast, resilience – the ability of states and societies to reform, withstand, and recover from internal and external crises – benefits both us and the countries in surrounding regions, sowing the seeds for sustainable growth and dynamic societies."⁴⁰⁸ To this end, and within the framework of the ENP, in 2021 the European institutions proposed a new, ambitious, and innovative agenda for the Mediterranean, with the aim of revitalising cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean and realising the untapped potential of the region, which is facing governance, socio-economic, climate, environmental, and security challenges. The prospect of post-COVID-19 recovery offers, in fact, a rare opportunity for Europe and the Mediterranean region to engage in a common agenda⁴⁰⁹. Precisely to address geopolitical uncertainties by deepening cooperation with strategic partners, the EU and Tunisia agreed on a comprehensive package of measures with the signing of the MoU in July 2023⁴¹⁰. As is well known, the initiative is structured around five key pillars. The first pillar concerns people-to-people connections. Tunisia, with its young and energetic population, represents a strategic partner, and the common goal is to strengthen ties between the peoples. For this reason, new opportunities will be created, particularly for young people. Among these, the opening of a window on Tunisia within the Erasmus+ programme is planned, with funding of

⁴⁰⁶ Huber, Daniela, and Maria Cristina Paciello. 2019. "Towards a More Reflexive EU in the Mediterranean. Final Policy Recommendations." MEDRESET Policy Papers, no. 10. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_pp_10.pdf.

⁴⁰⁷ Narbone, Luigi. 2020. "The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question." CADMUS, EUI Research Repository. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

⁴⁰⁸ Cebeci, Münevver, and Tobias Schumacher. 2017. "The EU's Constructions of the Mediterranean (2003-2017)." Medreset 3 (April). https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_3.pdf.

⁴⁰⁹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy. 2021. "Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A new Agenda for the Mediterranean." EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf.

⁴¹⁰ General Directorate for Communication - European Commission. 2023. "Press statement by the President in Tunis." European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/statement_23_3870.

€10 million, to promote student exchanges. A Talent Partnership will also be launched to offer young Tunisians the opportunity to study, work, or train in the EU, thereby acquiring skills that will be valuable both in the European context and for the Tunisian economy upon their return. In parallel, joint work is planned to modernise schools: for example, 80 schools will be supported in the digital and green transition, thanks to a contribution of €65 million from Team Europe. The second pillar focuses on economic development. A collaboration is envisaged to build a stronger Tunisian economy that is resilient to shocks while promoting growth. The EU is ready to support Tunisia by mobilising macro-financial assistance as soon as the necessary conditions are met, also offering immediate budget support. The third pillar is related to investment and trade. The EU is already Tunisia's main foreign investor and trading partner, but much more is planned. The business environment will be improved to attract more private investment, and an investment forum will be organised in the autumn, bringing together investors and international financial institutions. The possibility of concluding a comprehensive air transport agreement will also be evaluated, which would be advantageous for the tourism sector and improve connectivity. A particular focus of investments will be dedicated to the digital sector, with projects already in the pipeline, such as the Medusa submarine cable, which will connect Tunisia to Europe and will see an investment of €150 million. Water resource management and sustainable agriculture will also be priority sectors, essential for adapting to climate change and strengthening the resilience of the food system. The fourth pillar concerns Tunisia's potential in the renewable energy sector. Tunisia has great potential in this field and needs to further develop the sector. The EU, a reliable supplier of technology, is aware of the need to ensure a secure supply of clean energy. Projects such as the ELMED submarine cable, which will connect Tunisia to Italy by bringing electricity to Europe, represent only the beginning of a collaboration that will see an investment of over €300 million. A strategic energy partnership will be concluded with Tunisia to accelerate the energy transition and create new local jobs, improving energy supply security and ensuring clean and affordable energy. The fifth and final pillar is centered on migration. Effective cooperation is needed like never before, especially in the wake of recent tragic events that have highlighted the urgency of taking action. Work will be undertaken with Tunisia on an operational partnership to combat human trafficking and strengthen search and rescue operations. It has been agreed to cooperate on border management, combat smuggling, repatriation, and addressing the root causes of migration, in full respect of international law, with funding of over €100 million from the EU. Equally important will be facilitating legal and regular

migration, including the already mentioned Talent Partnerships, thus emphasising the importance of people-to-people connections⁴¹¹.

Despite these developments, the political dialogue and the relations between the EU and Tunisia remain tense. Events such as Tunisia's refusal to host a delegation of Members of Parliament (MEPs) from the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), the return of a €60 million grant that was designated as part of a previous European COVID-19 recovery programme⁴¹², and criticisms of European positions regarding human rights and international relations have exacerbated tensions⁴¹³. Although the complex geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics further complicate the European position, the Union nonetheless appears determined to respond strategically to maintain influence and stability in the region⁴¹⁴.

3.2.2 Development assistance: supporting economic and social integration

Beyond political dialogue, implementing the objectives of the ENP requires the provision of a series of other instruments, including financial support and technical cooperation. The priorities for assistance are thus jointly agreed upon between the EU and each of its partners within association agendas, which establish political and economic reform agendas with short- and medium-term priorities⁴¹⁵.

In the Tunisian case, reference is normally made to the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement, which laid the foundations for greater market access and the removal of customs barriers. Even if its implementation over the years has highlighted the limited capacity of the Tunisian industry to compete with its European counterpart, raising concerns about the need to support the adaptation and modernisation of local production structures⁴¹⁶. The European

⁴¹¹ Directorate-General for Communication - European Commission. 2023. "Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Tunisia." European Commission.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887.

⁴¹² Ezzamouri, Akram, Colin Powers, and Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria. 2024. "Charting the Course: European Perspectives on EU-Tunisia Relations." Istituto Affari Internazionali.

<https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/charting-course-european-perspectives-eu-tunisia-relations>.

⁴¹³ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review* (71 (1) edition), 2024.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

⁴¹⁴ Narbone, Luigi. 2020. "The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question." CADMUS, EUI Research Repository.

<https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

⁴¹⁵ European External Action Service. 2021. "European Neighbourhood Policy | EEAS." EEAS.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en.

⁴¹⁶ Boughzala, Mongi. 2010. "The Tunisia-European Union Free Trade Area Fourteen Years On." IEMed. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-tunisia-european-union-free-trade-area-fourteen-years-on/>.

approach, in particular, has been criticised for primarily seeking to improve trade rather than develop the industrial sector⁴¹⁷. In fact, the launch of the SPRING Programme, with the objective of providing approximately €485 million between 2011 and 2013 to support economic recovery, address socio-economic challenges, and promote even deeper and more strategic cooperation with Tunisia, had the effect of paving the way for the conclusion of further trade agreements, to the extent that in 2012 the country managed to be recognised as a European Privileged Partnership⁴¹⁸. It is nonetheless important to emphasise that the industry was approached by the European Union through the premise of free trade agreements or through cross-cutting policies on governance improvement and training. However, the consequence was the creation of a highly unbalanced Tunisian industry, characterised by a few large enterprises and a large number of small, informal production businesses with relatively opaque management, with little use of commercial financing tools and shareholding. Even the comparative advantages achieved by Tunisia in the promising sectors of textiles, agri-food, chemicals, and the electrical sector place the country in a position of dependence on the international value chain. Certainly, Tunisia has become better integrated with Europe, but at the cost of total degradation, mainly explained by the turmoil of the 2011 Revolution⁴¹⁹. Particularly vulnerable to the economic upheavals inflicted by the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Europe began to provide support to the recovery programme implemented by the country both through grants, which reached €448 million for the period 2011-2016, and through loans, with total amounts reaching €2.5 billion. The EU also contributed €300 million and then €500 million in loans to supplement the agreement signed between Tunisia and the IMF in 2014. The aim was to enable Tunisia to address emergency situations, achieve a rebalancing of public finances, and initiate reforms. Crucial for the modernisation of the Tunisian industrial sector and the facilitation of access to the European market was, for example, the launch of the Programme to Support Business Competitiveness and Market Access Facilitation (PCAM 2010-2016); or the EMORI Programme (2017–...) to support education, mobility, research, and

⁴¹⁷ Huber, Daniela, and Maria Cristina Paciello. 2019. "Towards a More Reflexive EU in the Mediterranean. Final Policy Recommendations." MEDRESET Policy Papers, no. 10. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_pp_10.pdf.

⁴¹⁸ Lisans, Yüksek. 2023. "Assessing the normative power of the European Union on Tunisian democracy: Navigating local challenges at major crossroads." Avesis İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi. <https://avesis.iku.edu.tr/yonetilen-tez/126bce83-6276-4781-8f72-44c12ac5b798/assessing-the-normative-power-of-the-european-union-on-tunisian-democracy-navigating-local-challenges-at-major-crossroads>.

⁴¹⁹ Huber, Daniela, and Maria Cristina Paciello. 2019. "Towards a More Reflexive EU in the Mediterranean. Final Policy Recommendations." MEDRESET Policy Papers, no. 10. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_pp_10.pdf.

innovation, which was implemented in 2017 to revitalise Tunisia's participation in the European H2020 research programme⁴²⁰.

As can easily be inferred, a crucial aspect of EU-Tunisia cooperation has been the support for the civil society, recognised as an essential element for the democratisation of the country. In fact, through the launch of instruments such as the Civil Society Facility (CSF)⁴²¹ and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED)⁴²², the EU sought to strengthen civil society participation and promote transparency and governmental accountability. However, the effectiveness of these efforts has been undermined by the tendency to direct the majority of financial assistance towards government institutions rather than local NGOs, thereby limiting the impact of support in enhancing local capacities and promoting a democratic culture⁴²³. Moreover, the perception of a paternalistic approach by the EU, along with criticisms of the conditions imposed on financial aid, has fueled a sense of frustration among the Tunisian population and authorities⁴²⁴. Thus, although the EU has played a crucial role in supporting post-revolutionary Tunisia by offering assistance and support to promote stability and socio-economic growth, the path towards full economic integration and social stability is still long and complex, with significant challenges requiring a balanced and inclusive approach. Progress in this regard will depend on the ability of both parties to address structural issues, promote effective reforms, and maintain a constructive dialogue, based on a more in-depth socio-economic and ecological assessment.

⁴²⁰ Guesmi, Khaled, and Jean-Yves Moisseron. 2018. "European Industrial Policies in Tunisia: A Bottom-Up Assessment." MEDRESET Working Papers No. 29, 2018.
https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_29.pdf.

⁴²¹ In order to provide financial assistance for the advancement of civil society, the Civil Society Facility (CSF) was founded in 2008. It consists of coordinated national and multi-beneficiary efforts aimed at achieving common goals. Three strands make up the CSF: funding for local and national civic projects as well as capacity-building to increase civil society's influence in the area; assistance for joint efforts between civil society organisations (CSOs) from EU member states and the area to build networks and encourage the sharing of information and expertise; a 'People-2-People' initiative that facilitates visits to EU institutions and the sharing of best practices, expertise, and experiences between civil society in Member States, the EU, and local civic society.
https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/civil-society_en

⁴²² The European Union and its Member States founded the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) in response to the Arab Spring, based on a Polish idea. In transitional nations and in cultures that are fighting for democratisation, the goal is to support and develop profound and durable democracy.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130458/LDM_BRI\(2013\)130458_REV1_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130458/LDM_BRI(2013)130458_REV1_EN.pdf)

⁴²³ Policy Department Directorate-General for External Policies. 2016. "EU policies in Tunisia before and after the Revolution." European Parliament.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578002_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU(2016)578002_EN.pdf).

⁴²⁴ Narbone, Luigi. 2020. "The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question." CADMUS, EUI Research Repository.
<https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

In light of these reflections, the novelty of the new Mediterranean Agenda is primarily that, with the implementation of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)⁴²⁵, the focus will be on EU strategic priorities for the green and digital transition, with an emphasis on reforms related to governance and the rule of law and macroeconomic stability to strengthen sustainable prosperity and resilience, as well as the business environment. In fact, the main characteristics and priorities of the new agenda are that: it offers opportunities for new partnerships on the strategic priorities of the green and digital transition; it is based on the belief that sustainable prosperity and resilience can only be built in a solid partnership across the Mediterranean; it proposes a set of actions along five key policy areas: 1) Human development, good governance and the rule of law; 2) Strengthening resilience, building prosperity, and seizing the digital transition; 3) Peace and security; 4) Migration and mobility; 5) Green transition: climate resilience, energy, and environment; it is supported by an Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Southern Neighbors, which includes a series of preliminary flagship investments and projects funded under the NDICI; the plan's objective is to help partners in their recovery efforts, contribute to boosting competitiveness and support sustainable and inclusive growth; it is based on common values and dialogue, and progress on our shared socio-economic and political agenda, including reforms in areas such as governance and the rule of law, and macroeconomic stability and the business environment, and aims at a green, digital, resilient and just recovery⁴²⁶. On this basis, it is necessary that the EU does not lose its moral compass and prepares strategies for inclusive and long-term integration, seeking solidarity and mutual understanding, not just the outsourcing of border controls or the stabilisation of regimes that torture and kill human rights defenders.

This new approach is reflected in the implementation of the MoU signed between the EU and Tunisia, which is already showing progress in technical contacts between the parties on the five pillars. In the macroeconomic sphere, the EU has completed the payment of €150 million in

⁴²⁵ The 9th of June 2021 saw the adoption of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI - Global Europe). It combined a number of earlier EU external funding programs. It helps the most vulnerable nations overcome long-term developmental obstacles and advances the international obligations and goals to which the Union has committed itself, particularly the Paris Agreement, the 2030 Agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals. The NDICI - Global Europe instrument, which has a total budget of €79.5 billion, supports EU cooperation with all third countries, with the exception of pre-accession beneficiaries and foreign nations and territories from geographic programs.

<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/ndici>

⁴²⁶ Miroudot, Sebastien. 2021. "The Externalization of EU Policies in the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: The Potential Impact of the New Mediterranean Agenda." IEMed.

<https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-externalization-of-eu-policies-in-the-renewed-partnership-with-the-southern-neighbourhood-the-potential-impact-of-the-new-mediterranean-agenda/>.

support of the Tunisian budget, signaling a renewed commitment to improving the investment climate. A further package of €900 million is contingent upon the conclusion of an agreement with the IMF⁴²⁷. Regarding the economy and trade, positive dynamics have been observed with the organisation of the EU-Tunisia Investment Forum and financial support through the European Investment Bank (EIB) and Agence Francaise de Developpement for specific projects, including agricultural ones, in addition to the €640 million funding for the MEDUSA digital interconnection project between Europe and North Africa⁴²⁸. In the green energy transition, the Energy Memorandum has promoted energy efficiency and the export of renewable energy from Tunisia to the EU, with a total support of €1.2 billion for the ELMED project⁴²⁹. In the educational field, funds have been allocated to build technologically advanced schools and improve the efficiency of the Tunisian education system. Specifically, the implementation modalities of the €610 million allocation for Erasmus+ are under evaluation; meanwhile, a €450 million grant for the construction of 80 new schools is nearing completion⁴³⁰. On the migration and mobility front, the EU has supported initiatives for border management and migrant protection, including voluntary returns and assistance to vulnerable migrants, with a focus on training projects for the Tunisian Coast Guard. More specifically, in 2023, contracts were concluded with the International Organisation for Migration IOM (€13 million) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR (€8 million) for returns and migrant protection. Additionally, agreements with Europol and Eurojust to strengthen the fight against migrant trafficking are being finalised; while Frontex has sent a draft agreement. With regard to the supply of equipment to combat flows on land and sea, the Commission plans to contract aid for €642 million (in addition to the €4 million already disbursed for the Tunisian Coast Guard). Tunisia has expressed its willingness to also work

⁴²⁷ Directorate-General for Communication - European Commission. 2023. “The European Union and Tunisia come to an agreement on a EUR 150 million programme.” European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6784.

⁴²⁸ Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. 2023. “EU and EIB's support helps accelerate the MEDUSA high-speed digital connection under the Mediterranean Sea.” European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-eibs-support-helps-accelerate-medusa-high-speed-digital-connection-under-mediterranean-sea-2023-10-25_en.

⁴²⁹ European Investment Bank. 2024. “Tunisia: Team Europe commits €472 million to support the ELMED electricity project and its ecosystem.” European Investment Bank. <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2024-205-team-europe-commits-eur472-million-to-support-the-elmed-electricity-project-and-its-ecosystem>.

⁴³⁰ European Investment Bank. 2024. “EIB Global announces €450 million in support for Tunisia at Tunisia Investment Forum 2024.” European Investment Bank. <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2024-200-bei-monde-annonce-450-millions-d-euros-de-soutien-pour-la-tunisie-lors-du-tunisia-investment-forum-2024>.

with the UNHCR to ensure respect for human rights. It has also shown a willingness to strengthen cooperation on legal migration through the Talent Partnership⁴³¹.

3.2.3 Security and migration cooperation: balancing control and human rights

The awareness that migration is a global phenomenon requiring joint responses, solidarity, and the sharing of global responsibilities has led European institutions to introduce a New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The main objective is to ensure that migration occurs in a safe and regular manner, preventing dangerous journeys and combating human trafficking, while offering international protection to those in need. In this regard, the approach includes strengthening migration and asylum governance, improving border management capacities, and promoting legal migration; additionally, particular attention is given to voluntary return and sustainable reintegration, as well as to regional and multilateral cooperation to improve the management of migratory flows. For this new strategy to be effectively implemented, the EU is committed to working with international partners through tailored partnerships, taking into account the specific needs and situations of each country in order to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, such as conflicts and socio-economic challenges⁴³².

It is precisely in this context that the MoU signed by the EU and Tunisia on 16 July 2023 fits, a milestone in the broader European strategy of outsourcing migration management to third countries, following Tunisia's emergence as a migratory hub and thus a key partner in managing irregular migration across the central Mediterranean, one of the most frequently used migration routes to reach Europe⁴³³. Historically, cooperation between the EU and Tunisia on security and migration has been characterised by multiple significant developments. With the Mobility Partnership of 2014, for instance, the Union began working to define a framework for migration management that included facilitating legal mobility and controlling irregular migratory flows. In particular, the objective was to improve migration governance through a series of measures, including strengthening border management capacities and cooperation in the fight against

⁴³¹ Vasques, Eleonora. 2024. "EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding state of play." Euractiv. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-tunisia-memorandum-of-understanding-state-of-play/>.

⁴³² High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. 2021. "Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A new Agenda for the Mediterranean." EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf.

⁴³³ European Union and Tunisia. 2023. "Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Tunisia." European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887.

human trafficking⁴³⁴. The 2023 MoU represents an evolution and a correction of this approach: the focus now is on developing more coordinated and integrated strategies aimed at preventing irregular departures and ensuring border security, central elements of the European Neighbourhood and Security Policy⁴³⁵.

Looking at the text, the Agreement provides for significant financial support from the European Union to enhance the capabilities of the Tunisian Coast Guard, including equipment and technical training, to improve maritime border control and prevent irregular departures, with particular attention to combating criminal networks of human traffickers⁴³⁶. The focus is also on improving search and rescue (SAR) capabilities at sea, again through the provision of financial and technical support, with the aim of preventing tragedies at sea. The implementation of these operations has often raised concerns regarding interception practices and pushbacks, which could violate the human rights of migrants. For this reason, the agreement pushes for the inclusion of cooperation between the two parties within the framework of a strengthened operational partnership against migrant smuggling, including also improving coordination between Tunisian authorities and European agencies, such as Frontex⁴³⁷.

The MoU places significant emphasis on promoting legal migration as a means of reducing irregular migration. The agreement provides for the establishment of a Talent Partnership to facilitate the legal mobility of Tunisian citizens to the EU, including seasonal work programs and other mobility opportunities. However, the effectiveness of these measures remains uncertain, given the lack of concrete details on how they will be implemented and the need for effective cooperation between EU Member States and Tunisia⁴³⁸. The MoU also includes initiatives to improve the employability of Tunisians and support economic development in disadvantaged areas, an approach aimed at addressing the root causes of irregular migration. This includes support for vocational training and employment, as well as support for the

⁴³⁴ EU-Tunisia Association Council. 2018. "Decision No 1 / 2018 of the EU-Tunisia Association Council - of 9 November 2018 - adopting the EU-Tunisia strat." EUR-Lex. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22018D1792>.

⁴³⁵ European Union and Tunisia. 2023. "Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Tunisia." European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887.

⁴³⁶ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review*, 71(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

⁴³⁷ Lehmann, Julian, and Angeliki Dimitriadi. 2024. "The Tunisian Red Flag." ASILE project. <https://www.asileproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Tunisia-paper-ASILE-final-update.pdf>.

⁴³⁸ Ezzamouri, Akram, Colin Powers, and Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria. 2024. "Charting the Course: European Perspectives on EU-Tunisia Relations." *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/charting-course-european-perspectives-eu-tunisia-relations>.

Tunisian private sector, with the goal of creating economic opportunities that dissuade citizens from irregular migration⁴³⁹.

Another fundamental pillar is cooperation on return and readmission. The parties have agreed to develop a system for the identification and return of irregular migrants present in Tunisia, as well as support for the return of Tunisian citizens in irregular situations in the EU. This includes a strong focus on assisted voluntary return, considered a more humanitarian approach and thus preferable to forced returns, and on the sustainable reintegration of returnees. This policy is crucial for managing the return of Tunisian citizens in irregular situations in the Union, while ensuring that human rights are respected during the repatriation process⁴⁴⁰. Although Tunisia has made it clear that it does not intend to become a settlement country for irregular migrants, reserving the right to refuse to accept third-country migrants for repatriation⁴⁴¹. Despite the apparent consensus on the objectives, cooperation on readmission has encountered significant obstacles. In fact, negotiations for a formal readmission agreement have been stalled since 2019, as Tunisia has expressed reluctance to formalise the text, likely to avoid being seen as a settlement country for irregular migrants. Further complicating the picture is the fact that Tunisia has not yet developed a national asylum system: this absence naturally leaves asylum seekers in a situation of vulnerability and dependence on an international protection system⁴⁴². Some civil society organisations and institutions such as the European Parliament have criticised the MoU. Firstly, despite providing for informal commitments, it has been highlighted that the text does not offer legally binding guarantees and relies on the “more for more” conditionality, linking economic and financial assistance to concrete progress in migration management. This strategy has raised doubts about its compliance with European procedural norms, as well as criticisms for the risk of subordinating human rights protection to security and migration control objectives. Secondly, the European Commission's decision to

⁴³⁹ Council of the European Union. 2023. “Update - Revised Action file - Tunisia.” Statewatch. <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4205/eu-council-mocadem-action-file-16821-23.pdf>.

⁴⁴⁰ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. “Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control.” *Netherlands International Law Review*, 71(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

⁴⁴¹ Tabbabi, Khaled. 2023. “Le Mémoire Entre La Tunisie Et L'union Européenne: vers un renforcement de la dépendance, de l'autoritarisme et de l'Europe forteresse.” European Council On Refugees And Exiles (ECRE) https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ECRE-Working-Paper-20_Le-Memorandum-entre-la-Tunisie-et-LUnion-europeenne.pdf.

⁴⁴² Tabbabi, Khaled. 2023. “Le Mémoire Entre La Tunisie Et L'union Européenne: vers un renforcement de la dépendance, de l'autoritarisme et de l'Europe forteresse.” European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) | https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ECRE-Working-Paper-20_Le-Memorandum-entre-la-Tunisie-et-LUnion-europeenne.pdf.

sign the MoU without clear consensus from the Council has been seen as a controversial move, heightening concerns about the use of soft law instruments to manage complex issues such as migration⁴⁴³. Regarding the lack of protection for asylum seekers and refugees in Tunisia, the text has been criticised for not adequately addressing this gap: despite Tunisia's adherence to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the country has yet to implement a national asylum law, leaving the management of refugees and asylum seekers in the hands of UNHCR and civil society organisations⁴⁴⁴. The MoU, in this regard, simply limits itself to border control and repatriation issues, without providing for a strengthening of protection capacities for refugees⁴⁴⁵. Another area of concern relates to visa treatment disparities: European citizens can enter Tunisia without a visa, while Tunisians face increasing difficulties in obtaining visas for Europe. This imbalance is seen as one of the causes fueling irregular migration and tragedies in the Mediterranean, as well as creating a sense of injustice and discrimination among Tunisian citizens⁴⁴⁶. Finally, the strengthening of the Tunisian Coast Guard's capacities, although aimed at saving lives, has been associated with risky and sometimes violent operations against migrants, with documented episodes of mistreatment and pushbacks⁴⁴⁷.

Thus, the MoU between the EU and Tunisia represents a significant step towards a more structured and cooperative management of migration, but not without challenges and criticisms. The emphasis on security and border control, while necessary for managing irregular migratory flows, must be balanced with a strong and concrete commitment to the

⁴⁴³ Andrade, Paula G. 2024. "The Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Tunisia: Issues of procedure and substance on the informalisation of migration cooperation – EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy." EU Migration Law Blog. <https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/the-memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-eu-and-tunisia-issues-of-procedure-and-substance-on-the-informalisation-of-migration-cooperation/>.

⁴⁴⁴ "Chapter 8 Understanding migration from Tunisia: Domestic marginalisation, regional instability and the EU's over-securitisation approach." 2023. In *Moving Towards Europe: Diverse Trajectories and Multidimensional Drivers of Migration Across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic*, edited by Lorenzo Kamel, Asli Selin Okyay, Luca Barana, and Colleen E. Boland. Peter Lang AG International Academic Publishers. <https://www.peterlang.com/document/1321490>

⁴⁴⁵ Andrade, Paula G. 2024. "The Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Tunisia: Issues of procedure and substance on the informalisation of migration cooperation – EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy." EU Migration Law Blog. <https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/the-memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-eu-and-tunisia-issues-of-procedure-and-substance-on-the-informalisation-of-migration-cooperation/>.

⁴⁴⁶ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review*, 71(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

⁴⁴⁷ Andrade, Paula G. 2024. "The Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Tunisia: Issues of procedure and substance on the informalisation of migration cooperation – EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy." EU Migration Law Blog. <https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/the-memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-eu-and-tunisia-issues-of-procedure-and-substance-on-the-informalisation-of-migration-cooperation/>.

protection of human rights⁴⁴⁸. The lack of a national legal framework for asylum in Tunisia and concerns regarding pushback practices raise ethical and legal issues that must be urgently addressed. The future of cooperation will depend on the ability of both parties to navigate these complex dynamics and build a partnership that not only addresses security issues but also promotes the protection of migrants' rights. An open and constructive political dialogue, which takes into account local sensitivities and the real needs of migrants, will be crucial to ensuring that the MoU does not become yet another missed opportunity, but rather a model of effective and human rights-respecting cooperation⁴⁴⁹.

3.3 Italy's influence within the EU regarding Tunisia-related matters

Italy has always interfered in the EU's policies towards Tunisia, exerting significant influence in various key sectors through a combination of active diplomatic advocacy, political coordination, and technical assistance.

In a context characterised by growing global and regional challenges, our country has recently distinguished itself by its ability to lead and shape European initiatives towards this Mediterranean partner, promoting cooperation that balances security with economic and social development. By engaging in proactive diplomatic activities, Italy has been able to leverage its strategic position within the Union to influence European policies towards Tunisia, promoting initiatives aimed at stabilising the country and strengthening ties between the two shores of the Mediterranean. A particularly significant role has been played also in ensuring the coordination and harmonisation of migration and security policies between the European Union and Tunisia, highlighting the importance of bilateral and multilateral collaboration in these crucial areas. Finally, analysing Italian initiatives aimed at strengthening Tunisia's institutional and infrastructural capacities, with particular attention to the energy transition and economic cooperation, demonstrates how technical assistance can become an essential tool for the sustainable progress of the region.

Through these three areas of intervention, Italy is not only consolidating its role as a leader in the Mediterranean but is also decisively contributing to shaping the relations between the European Union and Tunisia, promoting cooperation aimed at ensuring stability, security, and sustainable development for both sides of the Mediterranean.

⁴⁴⁸ Council of the European Union. 2023. "Update - Revised Action file - Tunisia." Statewatch. <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4205/eu-council-mocadem-action-file-16821-23.pdf>.

⁴⁴⁹ Lehmann, Julian, and Angeliki Dimitriadi. 2024. "The Tunisian Red Flag." ASILE project. <https://www.asileproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Tunisia-paper-ASILE-final-update.pdf>.

3.3.1 Diplomatic advocacy for shaping EU-Tunisia relations

Italy's role in diplomatic advocacy between the EU and Tunisia represents a clear example of how the adoption of a proactive and strategic approach by a European Member State can exert significant influence in shaping European policies towards a strategic partner, through a combination of diplomatic initiatives, concrete proposals, and leadership in multilateral discussions. Italy's diplomatic activity has developed in response to growing global and regional challenges, with a dual objective: to support Tunisia in its economic and political development path, while simultaneously protecting Italian and European interests in crucial sectors such as security, migration, and energy⁴⁵⁰.

Since the years following the Arab Spring of 2011, Italy has understood the importance of a stable and prosperous Tunisia for the security of the entire Mediterranean. Faced with increasing irregular migratory flows and political instability, Italy intensified its diplomatic efforts, positioning itself as an intermediary between the EU and Tunisia. This position was strengthened by the historic bilateral relationship between the two countries, which saw Italy at the forefront of promoting a strategic partnership with Tunisia. Italian diplomacy sought to influence European policies by proposing concrete initiatives and supporting the need for an integrated approach to addressing common challenges⁴⁵¹. An emblematic example of this approach has recently been Italy's leadership in the MED9 initiative, which led to the presentation of a non-paper containing proposals for managing the increase in migratory flows and the economic and political crises in Tunisia, taking into account the geopolitical context, especially after Russia's aggression against Ukraine⁴⁵². Italy is playing a crucial role in formulating and promoting European migration policies that responded to the pressures from Tunisia. The increase in sea arrivals, particularly after 2011, has prompted Italy to intensify its efforts to convince the EU to strengthen cooperation with Tunisia. These efforts have culminated in high-level discussions between European and Tunisian leaders, leading to the definition of a strategic and comprehensive partnership, including bilateral agreements and multilateral initiatives such as the MoU of 2023. This agreement is in fact significant as it

⁴⁵⁰ Governo Italiano Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. 2023. "Consiglio europeo del 29 e 30 giugno, le Comunicazioni alla Camera dei Deputati." Governo.it. <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/consiglio-europeo-del-29-e-30-giugno-le-comunicazioni-alla-camera-dei-deputati/23003>.

⁴⁵¹ Feroci, Ferdinando N., and Leo Goretti. 2024. "Il governo Meloni alla prova. Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2023." IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893683128.pdf>.

⁴⁵² MED 9 group. 2023. "MED9 DECL 2023 Valletta." Statewatch |. <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4065/eu-med9-valletta-summit-statement-sep-23.pdf>.

includes measures to improve the management of migratory flows and provide economic assistance to stabilise Tunisia, demonstrating the effectiveness of Italian diplomacy in aligning national interests with those of Europe⁴⁵³.

Italy is also actively promoting Tunisia's inclusion in various European economic development initiatives, recognising the importance of strengthening energy connections between the two shores of the Mediterranean. In particular, as the energy sector has been identified as an area of natural cooperation, Italy is supporting Tunisia's inclusion in investment programs, such as the Connecting Europe Facility and RepowerEU, aimed at improving energy infrastructure, promoting renewable energy and energy security and reducing dependence on unstable suppliers, all objectives of growing importance in the context of global geopolitical crises⁴⁵⁴.

On the security front, Italian diplomacy is working to ensure that the European Union considers Tunisia a strategic partner in the fight against terrorism and organised crime. In this area, the Italian government insists on the need to support Tunisian institutions, to maintain internal stability and prevent conflicts that could have repercussions on European security, by promoting Tunisia's participation in various European security and justice programs. The aim is to strengthen the capacities of Tunisian security forces through training and technical support. At the same time, Italy is trying to successfully combine its cooperative approach to security with a strong commitment to promoting respect for human rights and good governance⁴⁵⁵.

In fact, particular emphasis continues to be placed on promoting political reforms in Tunisia, aimed at consolidating democracy and civil participation. During periods of political crisis, Italy has always worked to keep dialogue open between the various political factions and Tunisian civil society, seeking to prevent authoritarian drift and ensure a balance between economic cooperation and the promotion of human rights⁴⁵⁶. This attention to the democratic

⁴⁵³ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review*, 71(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

⁴⁵⁴ Saba, Roberto, and Anna Pireddu. 2024. Energy and environmental synergy: cooperative strategies for the euro-mediterranea transition. Arkadia. <https://crenos.unica.it/crenos/sites/default/files/wp-24-09.pdf>.

⁴⁵⁵ Ezzamouri, Akram, Colin Powers, and Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria. 2024. "Charting the Course: European Perspectives on EU-Tunisia Relations." *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/charting-course-european-perspectives-eu-tunisia-relations>.

⁴⁵⁶ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review* (71 (1) edition), 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

dimension has also been reflected in Italy's proposal to strengthen political dialogue between European institutions and the Southern Neighbourhood countries, including Tunisia, by proposing the regular establishment of EU-Southern Neighbourhood Summits at the level of Heads of State and Government and sectoral Ministerials. The objective is to ensure constant coordination of common policies and a shared vision of the region's challenges and opportunities⁴⁵⁷.

Italy's diplomatic advocacy activity is therefore sought to strengthen the EU's position in the Mediterranean, with a focus on Tunisia. The strengthening of this approach could promote cooperation beneficial to both shores of the Mediterranean, creating an environment of stability and sustainable development. In this sense, Italy's commitment is materialising in a model of diplomatic advocacy that is trying to integrate economic, social, and political considerations, highlighting the country's ability to positively influence regional dynamics through effective and targeted diplomatic action. Looking to the future, Italy intends to continue to be a key player in promoting a constructive relationship between the EU and Tunisia. This commitment is evident in its goal of addressing emerging challenges through an increasingly close and fruitful partnership that can respond to security and development needs, while also promoting the fundamental values of democracy and respect for human rights. Italian leadership in the context of Euro-Mediterranean relations thus stands as a crucial element for the success of European policies towards Tunisia and for the stability of the entire Mediterranean region. The multidimensional and inclusive approach adopted by Italy will continue to serve as a reference point for future interactions between the EU and Tunisia, with the objective of building an increasingly strong and mutually beneficial cooperation.

3.3.2 EU-Tunisia policy coordination: migration and security

Italy's role in policy coordination between the EU and Tunisia has also proven to be central and strategic, particularly in the context of migration and security policies, sectors in which the country has assumed a position of leadership and guidance. Italy's commitment has materialised through a series of initiatives aimed at harmonising European policies with national ones, promoting effective and targeted cooperation with Tunisia, a country with which Italy shares historical and strategic ties, especially in the field of migration control.

⁴⁵⁷ MED 9 group. 2023. "MED9 DECL 2023 VALLETTA." Statewatch |.
<https://www.statewatch.org/media/4065/eu-med9-valletta-summit-statement-sep-23.pdf>.

Italy's role as a precursor in this context has been fundamental since 1998, the year in which the conclusion of a series of bilateral agreements under the framework of the 1995 EU-Tunisia Association Agreement laid the foundations for the development of close Italo-Tunisian cooperation in the area of migration. In fact, Italy was the first European Member State to undertake significant bilateral action, becoming a model for other Member States, which subsequently entered into similar agreements with Tunisia⁴⁵⁸. The Arab Spring of 2011 marked a turning point in the migration dynamic between Tunisia and Italy. The wave of political and social instability that swept the region led to a significant increase in the arrivals of irregular migrants in Italy, many of whom used Tunisia as a transit country. Tunisian visa policies, which exempted many African countries from visa requirements, further facilitated the flow of migrants towards Europe, highlighting the urgency of a coordinated response at the European level. In this context, Italy started to play a key role in promoting a more structured dialogue between the EU and Tunisia on migration, mobility, and security issues⁴⁵⁹. This dialogue led to the creation of a Mobility Partnership, culminating in an agreement in 2014, which included enhanced security measures and greater cooperation in border management⁴⁶⁰. The need for a more structured agreement became even more pressing with the increase in departures from Tunisia to Europe, and particularly to Italy, in the period 2022-2023. In response, Italy actively collaborated with the Netherlands and the European Commission to develop an Action Plan in 2022, followed by signature of the MoU in 2023. These instruments are the result of a process of policy coordination between the various actors involved and includes a series of measures for the management of migratory flows and cooperation in security matters.

During the negotiations, Italy has always pushed for greater flexibility in migrant management, proposing to ease the criteria for qualifying safe third countries and facilitating the return of rejected asylum seekers to Tunisia. This approach was pursued within the negotiations on the Asylum Procedures Regulation (APR), gaining the support of other Member States in exchange

⁴⁵⁸ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review* (71 (1) edition), 2024.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

⁴⁵⁹ Mohnblatt, Debbie. 2024. "As African Migration to Europe Spikes, Tunisia Takes Center Stage in Italy's Foreign Policy Agenda." *The Media Line*.

<https://themedialine.org/by-region/as-african-migration-to-europe-spikes-tunisia-takes-center-stage-in-italys-foreign-policy-agenda/>.

⁴⁶⁰ Directorate-General for Communication European Commission. 2014. "EU and Tunisia establish their Mobility Partnership." European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_208.

for an accelerated procedure for returns at the Union's external borders⁴⁶¹. However, despite being instrumental, Italy's action was not without criticism. Some European Member States and various observers raised concerns about the legitimacy of the decision-making process and the respect for human rights. The Italo-Dutch coalition⁴⁶² was also accused of bypassing normal institutional procedures, raising questions about the balance of power within the European Union, and of not ensuring adequate involvement of all Member States⁴⁶³, highlighted the challenges of maintaining a balance between the effectiveness of migration policies and the respect for democratic principles and human rights⁴⁶⁴.

Always related to migration issues, currently Italy is actively participating in the Talent Partnerships programme launched by the European Commission, which is part of the broader framework of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. This programme aims to create a European framework to strengthen Member States' initiatives on regular labour mobility channels, with European funding, responding to the skilled labour needs of European companies and contributing to migration management. Italy's participation in the programme is part of a broader migration policy aimed at strengthening legal entry channels for work in Italy, through international agreements. These agreements were expanded and strengthened in 2023, with the approval of new regulatory instruments such as the three-year flows decree, which allows out-of-quota entry for foreign workers trained in education and vocational training programmes in their countries of origin. Among the top five identified countries is Tunisia. Italy supports specific initiatives with countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco,

⁴⁶¹ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review* (71 (1) edition), 2024.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

⁴⁶² Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, together with Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni, is instrumental in bringing the Memorandum of Understanding to an early completion in July 2023. Rutte had made the commitment to his conservative party's members more than six months prior, during the party conference in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, to "stop irregular migration." Early in March 2023, European leaders Rutte and Georgia Meloni, the right-wing conservative prime minister of Italy, paid each other an official visit in Rome.

Van Der Linde, Irene. 2023. "EU-Tunisia: Why the Dutch were compelled to strike a deal with an autocrat." *Nawaat*.

<https://nawaat.org/2023/10/23/eu-tunisia-migration-why-the-dutch-were-compelled-to-strike-a-deal-with-an-autocrat/>.

⁴⁶³ Ezzamouri, Akram, Colin Powers, and Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria. 2024. "Charting the Course: European Perspectives on EU-Tunisia Relations." *Istituto Affari Internazionali*.

<https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/charting-course-european-perspectives-eu-tunisia-relations>.

⁴⁶⁴ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review* (71 (1) edition), 2024.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

with projects aimed at vocational training for workers destined for both the local and Italian markets. In particular, in 2023, it supported an initiative involving Tunisia and Morocco, with projects aimed at training 2,000 Tunisian construction workers and 500 Moroccan workers in the mechatronics sector. Both projects have a duration of 36 months and were made possible thanks to teamwork involving various Italian ministries, the IOM, and the private sector. These projects represent a concrete example of how Italy is seeking to combine economic needs with security requirements, while simultaneously promoting international cooperation⁴⁶⁵.

Thus, Italy has played and continues to play a leading role in policy coordination between the EU and Tunisia, particularly in the field of migration and security. Despite the criticisms and challenges encountered, the country seeks to balance the need to ensure security with that of promoting economic cooperation and sustainable development, while demonstrating how cooperation between the EU and third countries, although complex, is essential for addressing global challenges such as migration. However, questions remain about the long-term sustainability of these policies and the impact they may have on human and democratic rights in Tunisia.

3.3.3 Italy's role in capacity building and technical assistance

Italy has assumed a decisive role in capacity building and technical assistance between the EU and Tunisia, a crucial initiative that reflects the country's commitment to promoting sustainable development, energy transition, and economic and social cooperation in the Mediterranean area. This commitment has been manifested through a series of projects and initiatives aimed at strengthening Tunisia's institutional capacities, improving its critical infrastructure, and supporting the adoption of innovative policies in various strategic sectors.

One of the most significant areas where Italy has exerted its influence is the energy transition, where the country has positioned itself as a leader in promoting environmental sustainability and the development of renewable energy. Italy's energy strategy, within the broader context of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, aims to transform the country into a regional energy hub, capable of acting as a bridge between Europe and North Africa. In this context, the Mattei Plan is emblematic of its commitment to supporting the energy transition of North African countries,

⁴⁶⁵ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2024. "Italy's participation in the EU "Talent Partnerships" for the attraction of skilled labour from abroad – Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale." Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2024/02/partecipazione-italiana-ai-partenariati-per-il-talento-della-ue-per-lattrazione-di-manodopera-qualificata-dallestero/.

including Tunisia, through the enhancement of energy infrastructure, the provision of technical assistance, and the strengthening of local capacities.

As it is already known, the focus of energy cooperation is progressively shifted towards renewable energy sources and electricity, rather than gas, reflecting the importance of these resources for achieving the EU's climate goals and ensuring the region's energy security⁴⁶⁶. A key project in this context is the ELMED project, which aims to create an electrical interconnection between Italy and Tunisia, promoting the integration of North African and European electricity markets. This project represents a milestone in international collaboration in the field of renewable energy and capacity building, with significant financial commitment from the EU, including €334.6 million in European grants mobilised by Team Europe. Italy, through the involvement of Rete Elettrica Nazionale TERNA and collaboration with Société Tunisienne de l'Électricité et du Gaz (STEG), is playing a crucial role in the realisation of this project, which will not only strengthen Tunisia's energy security but also contribute to the country's economic stability, while creating a model of sustainable cooperation that can be replicated in other contexts. The realisation of the ELMED project required an integrated and multidimensional approach, which included the modernisation of the dispatching centre in Tunisia, the technical supervision of the project's design and construction, and the conducting of social and environmental studies to ensure regulatory convergence between the Italian and Tunisian grids. Italy, in collaboration with European institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the EIB, is ensuring the success of these initiatives, trying to demonstrate how capacity building and technical assistance can become essential tools for promoting sustainable development and international cooperation⁴⁶⁷.

Precisely regarding international cooperation, Italy is currently playing a significant role in promoting cross-border cooperation between Italy and Tunisia through the Interreg NEXT Italy-Tunisia programme. Approved by the European Commission in 2022, this programme represents a further example of Italy's commitment to strengthening cooperation with Tunisia, leveraging the economic, environmental, and social growth potential of the territories involved. With a budget of approximately €36 million, the programme aims to promote innovation, support SMEs, protect the environment, and strengthen social inclusion. The expansion of the cooperation area, which now includes 16 Tunisian governorates and nine Sicilian provinces,

⁴⁶⁶ Saba, Roberto, and Anna Pireddu. 2024. Energy and environmental synergy: cooperative strategies for the euro-mediterranea transition. Arkadia. <https://crenos.unica.it/crenos/sites/default/files/wp-24-09.pdf>

⁴⁶⁷ Delegation of the European Union to Tunisia. 2024. "Team Europe commits €472 million to support the ELMED electricity project and its ecosystem." EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/ELMED-Tunisia_en?s=126.

reflects Italy's desire to create a more competitive, resilient, and sustainable cooperation space, capable of responding to global and local challenges. The Interreg NEXT programme is particularly relevant because it builds on the successes of previous editions and aims to capitalise on the results achieved to address emerging challenges, promoting inclusive and sustainable growth. Italy is paying particular attention to the specific needs of cross-border territories, actively involving civil society and promoting the participation of young people and women through small projects and capitalisation initiatives. The adoption of this integrated approach demonstrates the importance of considering the social and economic dimensions of cooperation, in order to create a lasting and positive impact on local communities⁴⁶⁸.

Finally, as it can be noticed, Italy has recognised the importance of supporting innovative entrepreneurship as a means to strengthen the Tunisian economy and stabilise the country. In a context where Tunisian companies face significant challenges, Italy could promote the idea of integrating Tunisia into international trade through greater participation in global value chains, in order to modernise the Tunisian economy, promoting growth and creating a favorable environment for investment. Italy could also propose reallocating unused European funds to a co-development technology fund, which could be used to finance innovative and technology-oriented Tunisian companies, creating new opportunities for economic development and countering the brain drain phenomenon. Such collaborative efforts could help Tunisia overcome the multi-crisis and mitigate multiple shocks and the socio-economic situation. Support for innovative cross-border Tunisian companies could, in fact, not exacerbate competition in Europe but add efficiency and competitiveness to the continent's industry as a whole, creating synergies and new opportunities for both parties⁴⁶⁹.

3.4 International Monetary Fund and Tunisia: challenges and future prospects

Tunisia, under the leadership of President Kais Saied, has seen its political system approaching the form of an authoritarian presidential regime, resulting in increasing political repression and an exacerbating economic crisis. The country, already marked by years of weak economic

⁴⁶⁸ Autorité de Gestion – Secrétariat Technique Conjoint. 2022. “Programme Interreg NEXT Italie-Tunisie.” Coopération Transfrontalière Italie Tunisie.

<https://www.italietunisie.eu/programme-de-cooperation-interreg-vi-a-next-italie-tunisie/>.

⁴⁶⁹ Ahmed, Ghazi B. 2023. “Critical Crossroads: Tunisia’s Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse.” Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2365.pdf>.

growth, has suffered a series of economic shocks since 2020, bringing public debt to unsustainable levels⁴⁷⁰.

In this context, the IMF could represent a lifeline for the Tunisian economy. However, the relationship between Tunisia and the IMF has become critical for the country's economic future. In 2022, Tunisian authorities had reached a preliminary agreement with the IMF for a \$1.9 billion loan, aimed at supporting the economic policies necessary to stabilise the country. But, Saied rejected the agreement, criticising the conditions imposed by the IMF as foreign interference that would increase poverty. This refusal has further complicated the situation, making it difficult for Tunisia to meet debt repayment deadlines and restore financial reserves. The concerns of international partners, particularly in Europe, have grown, as a potential default by the North African country has been associated with possible increases in migratory flows to the European Union and greater instability in the Middle East and North Africa region⁴⁷¹.

Despite the challenges, Tunisia possesses the resources and expertise to emerge as a regional economic power. However, the lack of reforms and the deteriorating business environment threaten this potential. Widespread corruption and repressive policies have stifled small and medium-sized enterprises, hindering economic growth. In the absence of other options, Tunisia may have to seek funding from countries such as Saudi Arabia or Algeria, but these solutions appear limited. With presidential elections scheduled for October 2024, if they take place as planned, the refusal to accept an IMF aid programme risks leaving the country in an explosive socio-economic situation. Therefore, it is crucial that Tunisia seriously considers the reforms proposed by the IMF and builds international partnerships to support a sustainable economic recovery⁴⁷².

⁴⁷⁰ Diwan, Ishac. 2024. "The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/the-buildup-to-a-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

⁴⁷¹ Ayari, Michaël, and Riccardo Fabiani. 2023. "To Deal or Not to Deal: How to Support Tunisia out of Its Predicament." Istituto Affari Internazionali.
<https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/deal-or-not-deal-how-support-tunisia-out-its-predicament>.

⁴⁷² Ahmed, Ghazi B. 2023. "Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse." Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).
<https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2365.pdf>.

3.4.1 Tunisia's economic reforms and IMF financial support

Tunisia, after the 2011 Revolution, has undergone a long and tortuous political transition, characterised by persistent economic instability. While the country struggled to consolidate its democratic path, it simultaneously faced a series of economic challenges that undermined its growth and stability. The Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the war in Ukraine, further exacerbated pre-existing economic weaknesses, bringing Tunisia to a turning point⁴⁷³.

It is in this context that the role of the IMF has become central to the nation's economic future. Tunisia's engagement with the IMF dates back to 2016, when the country received a \$2.9 billion loan, conditioned on the implementation of crucial economic reforms. These reforms included the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, a review of subsidies, and stricter control of public spending. However, the implementation of these measures was slow and often hindered by internal resistance, not only among the political class but also from the population. The fear of worsening living conditions and rising unemployment led to a widespread reluctance to adopt radical changes, with the result that many of the promised reforms were either partially implemented or not implemented at all⁴⁷⁴. The Tunisian public sector, which absorbs about half of the state budget, is one of the areas most in need of reform. After 2011, the government sought to placate social unrest by creating numerous public sector jobs. However, this led to an unsustainable swelling of public spending, limiting the resources available for investments in key sectors such as infrastructure and industry, which are essential for stimulating long-term economic growth. Despite the urgency to reform this sector, attempts have been partial and insufficient, largely due to the fear of social and political repercussions⁴⁷⁵. In 2022, faced with an increasingly severe economic crisis, Tunisia negotiated a new preliminary agreement with the IMF for a \$1.9 billion loan. This loan was intended to provide temporary support to the economy while the country implemented the necessary reforms to stabilise public finances and restore international market confidence. However, President Kais Saied rejected the agreement, describing it as a “foreign diktat” that would entail unpopular measures, such as cuts to energy

⁴⁷³ Ayari, Michaël, and Riccardo Fabiani. 2023. “To Deal or Not to Deal: How to Support Tunisia out of Its Predicament.” Istituto Affari Internazionali.
<https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/deal-or-not-deal-how-support-tunisia-out-its-predicament>.

⁴⁷⁴ Tunisian Observatory of the Economy. 2021. “FMI: Impact of Tunisia's Currency Devaluation.” Observatoire tunisien de l'économie.
https://www.economie-tunisie.org/sites/default/files/fmi_impact_of_tunisias_currency_devaluation_en.pdf.

⁴⁷⁵ Diwan, Ishac. 2024. “The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/the-buildup-to-a-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

and food subsidies, as well as a reduction in the public sector wage bill. Saied's decision was motivated by concerns about further exacerbating the economic hardships of a population already heavily impacted by inflation and unemployment. The rejection of the IMF agreement created a funding gap that Tunisia sought to fill with loans from other countries, such as Algeria and Saudi Arabia. But, these sources of funding proved uncertain and, more importantly, insufficient to address the structural problems of the Tunisian economy.

The absence of an agreement with the IMF has had a direct impact on Tunisia's access to international financial markets, which has been virtually blocked due to the prohibitive interest rates resulting from the country's low credit rating. Moreover, the depreciation of the Tunisian dinar has made foreign debt repayments even more burdensome, contributing to rising inflation and further reducing the purchasing power of Tunisian households⁴⁷⁶. The economic situation in Tunisia is therefore critical. In 2024, the country will have to repay \$2.6 billion in foreign debt, including \$900 million in euro-denominated bonds. Without an agreement with the IMF, Tunisia risks facing an unprecedented liquidity crisis, which could lead to default. Such a scenario would have serious consequences not only for the Tunisian economy but also for the social stability of the country and the region. Tunisia, in fact, plays a strategic role in North Africa, and an economic collapse could have significant repercussions in Europe, with a potential increase in irregular migration, especially towards Italy⁴⁷⁷. The international community, particularly the EU, has recognised the severity of the situation and has sought to intervene to mediate a solution. The Union, with Italy at the forefront, has proposed a macro-financial assistance package of €900 million, conditional on the signing of an agreement with the IMF. This is in addition to €105 million earmarked for border control and migration management. However, Saied's response has been ambivalent: while he has rejected part of the funds offered by Europe, describing them as “charity,” he has simultaneously dismissed key officials involved in the IMF negotiations, signaling a clear reluctance to accept the terms of the agreement⁴⁷⁸.

Tunisia's situation therefore represents a complex dilemma. On the one hand, the economic reforms required by the IMF are necessary to restore market confidence and ensure long-term

⁴⁷⁶ Ahmed, Ghazi B. 2023. “Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse.” Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).
<https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2365.pdf>.

⁴⁷⁷ Tunisian Observatory of the Economy. 2021. “FMI: Impact of Tunisia's Currency Devaluation.” Observatoire tunisien de l'économie.
https://www.economie-tunisie.org/sites/default/files/fmi_impact_of_tunisias_currency_devaluation_en.pdf.

⁴⁷⁸ International Crisis Group. 2023. “Steering Tunisia away from Default.” International Crisis Group.
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/steering-tunisia-away-default>.

economic stability. On the other hand, the adoption of such reforms would entail immediate sacrifices for an already exhausted population, with the risk of aggravating social and political tensions. The economic crisis in Tunisia is the result of years of misguided economic policies, combined with a series of external shocks, and requires a balanced approach that takes into account both the need for reforms and the social and political realities of the country⁴⁷⁹.

To emerge from this situation, it is crucial that Tunisia builds a strategy that goes beyond mere financial support. The future of Tunisia depends on the ability of its government to balance the need for economic stability with the necessity of preserving social cohesion. A serious commitment is needed to implement structural reforms that improve the efficiency of the public sector, reduce dependence on subsidies, and incentivise private investment. At the same time, the international community, and particularly the EU, must play a more active role in supporting Tunisia not only financially but also through a partnership that promotes long-term stability and development. The role of the IMF remains crucial, but equally important is the support of the international community to ensure that economic reforms do not become a source of further instability⁴⁸⁰. The road ahead is difficult, but with strong leadership and effective international cooperation, Tunisia can still hope to overcome this crisis and build a future of prosperity and stability for its people.

3.4.2 IMF conditions and Tunisia's economic dilemma

The relationship between Tunisia and the IMF has been marked by a complex interplay of economic, social, and political challenges that have deeply influenced the decision-making process of the North African country. The conditions imposed by the IMF as a prerequisite for financial support have raised a series of critical issues, not only concerning macroeconomic stability but also with respect to national sovereignty, social cohesion, and Tunisia's economic future. President Kais Saied's resistance to accepting these conditions highlights the delicate position of the country, trapped between the need to adopt unpopular reforms and the desire to preserve its decision-making autonomy⁴⁸¹.

⁴⁷⁹ Ahmed, Ghazi B. 2023. "Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse." Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2365.pdf>.

⁴⁸⁰ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Steering Tunisia away from Default." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/steering-tunisia-away-default>.

⁴⁸¹ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

Since the 2011 Revolution, Tunisia has faced a long and troubled transition towards democracy. This political transition has been accompanied by persistent economic instability, characterised by high unemployment, growing public debt, and an oversized public sector. The country's economic challenges have been further exacerbated by a series of external shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which has devastated the tourism sector, and the war in Ukraine, which has caused a sharp rise in commodity prices. In this context, financial support from the IMF has been seen as a necessary solution to avoid economic collapse. However, the conditions associated with this support have raised deep questions about the sustainability and impact of such measures on the Tunisian population⁴⁸². The IMF's conditions have been perceived in Tunisia as interference in the country's economic sovereignty. In other words, the proposed reforms, which included raising fuel prices, privatising state-owned enterprises, and reducing subsidies, have been seen not only as necessary to improve economic efficiency and reduce public debt but also as measures potentially destabilising the country's social cohesion⁴⁸³. For example, the monthly increase in fuel prices, a central measure to reduce state subsidies, has met strong opposition from President Saïed. His fear has been fueled by the historical memory of the "bread riots" of 1984⁴⁸⁴, when a similar price increases sparked mass protests and social unrest⁴⁸⁵.

The Tunisian government's reluctance to accept the IMF's conditions and the staff-level agreement with the IMF for an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) of \$1.9 billion in 2022 has been fueled not only by fears of escalating social tensions but also by concerns about the impact of the reforms on the country's economic and social fabric. The IMF's proposed measures, such as greater exchange rate flexibility, the gradual elimination of social protection for the most vulnerable, the liberalisation of bank interest rates, and the cuts to public sector wages have been seen as a direct attack on Tunisia's economic model, which is based on strong state

⁴⁸² Diwan, Ishac. 2024. "The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/the-buildup-to-a-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

⁴⁸³ Ahmed, Ghazi B. 2023. "Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse." Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2365.pdf>.

⁴⁸⁴ The price of bread increased as a result of an IMF-imposed austerity program, which led to a series of violent protests in Tunisia between December 1983 and January 1984.

⁴⁸⁵ Ayari, Michaël, and Riccardo Fabiani. 2023. "To Deal or Not to Deal: How to Support Tunisia out of Its Predicament." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/deal-or-not-deal-how-support-tunisia-out-its-predicament>.

intervention and social protection⁴⁸⁶. In this sense, for example, one of the most controversial aspects of the IMF's conditions is the issue of the devaluation of the Tunisian dinar. Since 2016, under pressure from the IMF, Tunisia adopted a more flexible exchange rate regime, abandoning the previous managed exchange rate system. This change led to a significant devaluation of the dinar, with negative consequences for the economy. The devaluation increased the cost of foreign debt, aggravated inflation, and worsened the trade deficit. Moreover, it eroded Tunisia's foreign exchange reserves, further compromising the country's ability to support essential imports and pay off foreign debt. The devaluation of the dinar had a significant impact on public enterprises, many of which became over-indebted and inefficient. The IMF insisted on the need to reform these enterprises, proposing greater centralisation of their supervision, strengthening governance, and increasing financial transparency. However, these reforms were perceived as a prelude to privatisation, a measure that met significant resistance, particularly from the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the country's main trade union. The perception that the proposed reforms could lead to mass layoffs and a reduction in public services fueled discontent and distrust towards international financial institutions. The UGTT, which enjoys broad popular support, expressed strong reservations about the proposed reforms, highlighting the risk of worsening living conditions for millions of Tunisians. Internal resistance to the reforms proposed by the IMF was exacerbated by the perception that these measures were imposed from outside without taking into account the real socio-economic dynamics of the country. The IMF's rhetoric, which attributed the negative effects of its policies to shortcomings in the institutional and governance environment, did not consider the complexities of Tunisia's transition. The structural reforms proposed by the IMF were seen as a repetition of the austerity policies of the 1980s and 1990s⁴⁸⁷, which led to a reduction in economic sovereignty and continued dependence on international financial markets⁴⁸⁸.

⁴⁸⁶ Ahmed, Ghazi B. 2023. "Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse." Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2365.pdf>.

⁴⁸⁷ In the 1980s, Tunisia implemented traditional economic policies—such as privatisation, free trade, and austerity measures meant to reduce state spending—in response to pressure from foreign donors. These policies cut back on financing for vital public services including healthcare, education, transportation, and social safety nets. The government started selling state-owned businesses to the private sector in the 1990s, but this did not provide the desired results and instead concentrated money in the hands of the already powerful economic elite. Menzli, Ayoub. 2024. "Beyond Extraction and Austerity: Tunisia's Path to Prosperity - The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy." The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy -. <https://timep.org/2024/04/30/beyond-extraction-and-austerity-tunisias-path-to-prosperity/>.

⁴⁸⁸ Tunisian Observatory of the Economy. 2021. "FMI: Impact of Tunisia's Currency Devaluation." Observatoire tunisien de l'économie.

Despite all the mentioned tensions, negotiations between Tunisia and the IMF continued, but with growing uncertainty. The downgrading of Tunisia's credit rating by Moody's from B2 to B3⁴⁸⁹ further weakened the country's negotiating position, making access to international financial markets more difficult. Thus, Tunisia finds itself facing a difficult choice: accept a package of painful but potentially stabilising reforms proposed by the IMF, or risk economic isolation and possible default. The need for structural reforms is undeniable, but the adoption of such measures requires a delicate balance between the demands of macroeconomic stability and the protection of social cohesion. Internal resistance to reforms is rooted in a history of austerity and sacrifices that have left deep scars on Tunisian society. The challenge for the Tunisian government is to find a path that allows the country to emerge from the economic crisis without compromising its sovereignty and without fueling further social tensions. Its decision, in fact, will determine not only the country's economic future but also its political and social stability⁴⁹⁰.

3.4.3 Long-term perspectives for Tunisia-IMF cooperation

The cooperation between Tunisia and the IMF represents a crucial juncture for the future of the North African country's economy. The long-term prospects of this relationship will not only influence Tunisia's macroeconomic stability but also determine its economic and political development path in the decades to come. In a context of increasing economic, social, and geopolitical challenges, Tunisia is confronted with a complex set of issues that require coordinated external intervention, with the IMF as a central, though not the only, actor. The nature of the proposed economic reforms, the associated conditions, and the role of the international community, particularly the European Union, will be decisive in charting a sustainable course for the country⁴⁹¹.

One of the main aspects of the long-term prospects concerns Tunisia's ability to implement the structural reforms necessary to modernise its economy. After the 2011 Revolution, Tunisia

https://www.economie-tunisie.org/sites/default/files/fmi_impact_of_tunisias_currency_devaluation_en.pdf.

⁴⁸⁹ Reuters. 2021. "Moody's Downgrades Tunisia's Rating to B2, Outlook Changed to Stable." Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/africa/moodys-downgrades-tunisias-rating-to-b2-outlook-changed-to-stable-idUSFWN1QW0TG/>.

⁴⁹⁰ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Steering Tunisia away from Default." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/steering-tunisia-away-default>.

⁴⁹¹ Diwan, Ishac. 2024. "The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/the-buildup-to-a-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

went through a long phase of political and economic instability, which exacerbated the country's structural weaknesses. The public sector, which represents about half of the state budget, has become an unsustainable burden on public finances. Additionally, dependence on state subsidies and the lack of a favorable environment for private entrepreneurship have hindered economic growth⁴⁹². The reforms proposed by the IMF aim to reduce these imbalances, promoting greater economic efficiency and encouraging private sector participation. However, implementing these reforms requires political and social consensus that currently seems lacking. President Kais Saied, with his populist and nationalist rhetoric, has expressed strong opposition to the reforms proposed by the IMF, arguing that they threaten Tunisia's economic sovereignty. This opposition has slowed the reform process and led to growing uncertainty about the future of cooperation with the IMF⁴⁹³. Despite internal resistance, it is clear that without the implementation of structural reforms, Tunisia risks finding itself in an increasingly precarious economic situation⁴⁹⁴. The long-term prospects of cooperation between Tunisia and the IMF therefore depend on the Tunisian government's ability to strike a balance between the need for economic stability and the protection of social cohesion⁴⁹⁵.

Another crucial aspect of the long-term prospects concerns the diversification of Tunisia's sources of financing. The Tunisian Economic Observatory (OTE) has highlighted how dependence on the IMF represents an obstacle for Tunisia, as the Fund acts as the leader of a cartel of donors that limits competition in international liquidity markets. This makes it difficult for Tunisia to find financial alternatives, reinforcing the IMF's dominant position and reducing the options available to the country⁴⁹⁶. The OTE has identified several alternatives that Tunisia

⁴⁹² Ahmed, Ghazi B. 2023. "Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse." Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2365.pdf>.

⁴⁹³ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Steering Tunisia away from Default." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/steering-tunisia-away-default>.

⁴⁹⁴ Diwan, Ishac. 2024. "The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/the-buildup-to-a-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

⁴⁹⁵ Ayari, Michaël, and Riccardo Fabiani. 2023. "To Deal or Not to Deal: How to Support Tunisia out of Its Predicament." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/deal-or-not-deal-how-support-tunisia-out-its-predicament>.

⁴⁹⁶ Observatoire Tunisien de l'Économie. 2023. "L'OTE propose des alternatives au financement du FMI (1/3)." Observatoire Tunisien de l'Économie. <http://www.economie-tunisie.org/fr/lote-propose-des-alternatives-au-financement-du-fmi-1-3>.

could explore, including Bilateral Swap Agreements (BSA)⁴⁹⁷ and Regional Financial Arrangements (RFA)⁴⁹⁸. Although access to these instruments is often limited by geopolitical considerations, diversifying sources of financing remains a priority for Tunisia⁴⁹⁹.

Strengthening institutions such as the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) could offer more substantial support, while the creation of regional agreements similar to those in East Asia could provide greater financial stability without the strict conditions imposed by the IMF⁵⁰⁰.

The long-term prospects of cooperation between Tunisia and the IMF also depend on the country's ability to integrate economic reforms into a stable and inclusive political context. Tunisia needs a governance model that encourages political participation and promotes transparency in economic decisions. The risk, in the absence of such integration, is that economic reforms may be perceived as imposed from above and therefore rejected by the population, with the risk of new social tensions. Political stability is thus a fundamental prerequisite for the success of the reforms and for lasting cooperation with the IMF. In this context, building political consensus around economic reforms is essential to ensure that they are not only technically effective but also socially acceptable⁵⁰¹. Cooperation with the IMF, in fact, should not be limited to the adoption of austerity measures. Long-term prospects must also include a focus on sustainable development and the creation of a more equitable economy. Tunisia indeed has the potential to emerge as a regional economic power if it can harness its resources sustainably and promote inclusive growth. This requires an integrated approach that considers not only macroeconomic stability but also the reduction of inequalities, environmental protection, and technological innovation. Cooperation with the IMF, in this sense, should be oriented not only towards debt reduction and inflation control but also towards promoting development that is economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable. In this context, the role of the international community, particularly the European Union, will be

⁴⁹⁷ The BSA is a two-way arrangement where both authorities can swap their local currencies in exchange for the US Dollar.

⁴⁹⁸ RFAs are mechanisms or agreements through which groups of countries mutually pledge financial support to countries experiencing financial difficulties in their regions. The ESM is the Regional Financing Arrangement for the euro area, while a few other world regions have their own RFA.

⁴⁹⁹ Observatoire Tunisien de l'Économie. 2023. "L'OTE propose des alternatives au financement du FMI (3/3)." Observatoire Tunisien de l'Économie.
<https://www.economie-tunisie.org/fr/lote-propose-des-alternatives-au-financement-du-fmi-3-3>.

⁵⁰⁰ Observatoire Tunisien de l'Économie. 2023. "L'OTE propose des alternatives au financement du FMI (2/3)." Observatoire Tunisien de l'Économie.
<https://www.economie-tunisie.org/fr/lote-propose-des-alternatives-au-financement-du-fmi-2-3>.

⁵⁰¹ Diwan, Ishac. 2024. "The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/the-buildup-to-a-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

crucial. The Union has a strategic interest in Tunisia's stability, as a stable and prosperous Tunisia can be a key partner in the Mediterranean, contributing to regional security and migration management. For this reason, the European Union should adopt an approach that goes beyond providing economic assistance, including a commitment to the promotion of human rights and governance reforms. This requires a coordinated strategy that involves not only the IMF but also other international and regional institutions to provide comprehensive and integrated support to Tunisia⁵⁰². Also, Italy has a particularly important role to play in this process: strengthened cooperation between the two parties could facilitate the implementation of economic reforms, promote greater integration of Tunisia into global value chains, support innovative entrepreneurship and the modernisation of Tunisian economic structures. Italy could even lead European Union policies towards more targeted support for the country, promoting initiatives such as the creation of a co-development technology fund to assist innovative Tunisian companies and prevent brain drain⁵⁰³.

Thus, the long-term prospects of cooperation between Tunisia and the IMF depend on a series of interconnected factors: Tunisia's ability to implement structural reforms, the diversification of sources of financing, the integration of reforms into a stable and inclusive political context, and the support of the international community. The road ahead is complex and requires a multidimensional approach that takes into account Tunisia's economic, social, and political needs⁵⁰⁴. Cooperation with the IMF is necessary, but it must be accompanied by a commitment to sustainable development and the promotion of inclusive growth. The role of Italy and the European Union in this process cannot be limited to that of donors but must also include active support for reforms. Only through a balanced partnership that respects Tunisia's sovereignty will it be possible to build a future of stability and prosperity for Tunisia⁵⁰⁵.

⁵⁰² International Crisis Group. 2023. "Steering Tunisia away from Default." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/steering-tunisia-away-default>.

⁵⁰³ Ahmed, Ghazi B. 2023. "Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse." Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2365.pdf>.

⁵⁰⁴ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

⁵⁰⁵ Ayari, Michaël, and Riccardo Fabiani. 2023. "To Deal or Not to Deal: How to Support Tunisia out of Its Predicament." Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/deal-or-not-deal-how-support-tunisia-out-its-predicament>.

3.5 Future prospects and potential areas of cooperation

The relations between the EU and Tunisia have gone through various phases, characterised by a constant adaptation to the changing political, economic, and social realities of the region. In light of these dynamics, Italy emerges as a key actor capable of guiding and shaping the future of cooperation between Europe and Tunisia. Currently, the numerous socio-economic and political challenges place Tunisia at a crucial crossroads, threatening its internal stability. The situation is further complicated by President Kais Saïed's nationalist rhetoric and the repression of opposition, in a context of deteriorating living conditions for much of the population. The combination of these factors could lead to significant destabilisation if not addressed urgently and attentively. Adding further risks is the possibility of an economic default, which could trigger devastating ripple effects, further fueling discontent and internal unrest⁵⁰⁶. In this scenario, the approach of Western donors, particularly the EU, is of crucial importance. By exploring the opportunities and challenges that arise in this crucial partnership, three main areas can be identified where cooperation can lead to the development of a sustainable and inclusive partnership model: economic development and trade, political and security cooperation, and the implementation of the rule of law and the protection of human rights.

Especially after the 2011 Revolution, the European institutions have attempted to support the democratic transition and promote reforms, but these efforts have often been perceived as insufficient or misguided⁵⁰⁷. To enable an emerging democracy to achieve stability, it is not enough to work solely on improving security and governance; a more comprehensive approach that integrates sustainable socio-economic development is necessary. In the economic and trade domain, the potential for closer collaboration, especially in the energy and infrastructure sectors, is examined, where Italy can play a leading role in promoting strategic projects that favour Tunisia's sustainable development. It must be recognised that, from the beginning of the transition, funding for cooperation in these areas has been allocated; however, the scope of the problems and the dysfunctions of Tunisia's economy and political system have rendered these interventions partially ineffective. At the same time, the assessment of European policies highlights fundamental compromises that have limited the effectiveness of cooperation,

⁵⁰⁶ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

⁵⁰⁷ Narbone, Luigi. 2020. "The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question." CADMUS, EUI Research Repository. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

perpetuating a dynamic of unsustainable stability⁵⁰⁸. In the sphere of political and security cooperation, what can be outlined is the importance of putting in place an integrated approach that combines security measures with economic development initiatives, promoting regional stability and the protection of human rights. Finally, the analysis of lessons learned from the MoU with Tunisia and the comparison with the subsequent agreement signed with Egypt offer valuable insights into how to balance flexibility and rigor in promoting democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights.

By looking at these three aspects, what can be highlighted is that, to improve the effectiveness of European Union support to Tunisia, it is necessary to explore new areas of collaboration and develop more ambitious and creative future perspectives. A balanced and well-calibrated approach is essential to encourage meaningful reforms without provoking adverse reactions from the Tunisian government. Italy, with its geographical position and historical proximity to Tunisia, can play a key role in facilitating a more open and constructive dialogue, promoting initiatives that support not only political stability and security but also sustainable economic and social development. Under Italian leadership, the EU can indeed have the opportunity to recalibrate its engagement strategy with Tunisia, as already foreshadowed by the signing of the MoU in 2023.

3.5.1 Economic development and trade: cooperation for sustainable growth

The evolution of economic and commercial relations between the EU and Tunisia represents one of the cornerstones for the future of the North African country, particularly when considering the crucial role that Italy, along with other Member States, can play in defining and implementing a cooperation strategy aimed at promoting Tunisia's sustainable socio-economic development. Deepening these relations requires a coordinated and multifaceted commitment that can combine European resources and expertise with local needs, within a framework that enhances the potential for long-term collaboration and adequately addresses contemporary challenges.

One of the most promising sectors for future cooperation between the EU and Tunisia is undoubtedly the energy sector. Tunisia has significant potential for the development of renewable energy, which could be strategically enhanced through greater European

⁵⁰⁸ Policy Department Directorate-General for External Policies. 2016. "EU policies in Tunisia before and after the Revolution." European Parliament.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578002_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU(2016)578002_EN.pdf).

involvement⁵⁰⁹. Although the EU's commitment in this sector has so far been limited compared to Tunisia's expectations, the presence of important factors such as Germany⁵¹⁰, Italy, and France⁵¹¹ has already made a substantial contribution, laying the groundwork for deeper and more articulated cooperation. Under Italian leadership, a comprehensive and integrated vision could be promoted, one that not only coordinates the efforts of various Member States but also unifies them in a common strategy for the coming decades. In this context, first steps seemed to have been moved with the launch of the ELMED Project, the high voltage direct current line between Tunisia and Italy, which would represent a significant step forward for the facilitation of the export of green energy from the South and the import of electricity from Europe⁵¹². In parallel, the promotion of energy efficiency and the improvement of the thermal characteristics of buildings are areas where Italy could offer technical assistance and know-how. Investments in thermal insulation projects and efficient lighting technologies would help reduce energy consumption and limit greenhouse gas emissions, thereby also addressing the increasingly pressing environmental needs. Such interventions, in addition to facilitating Tunisia's access to new forms of international financing, could be accompanied by local skills development programs, ensuring sustainable and inclusive growth in the energy sector⁵¹³. However, it is essential that the EU, under Italy's leadership, takes into account Tunisia's social dynamics in the planning and implementation of these reforms. The numerous social protests in recent years, which have called for a more equitable distribution of natural resources and transparent management of the energy sector, cannot be ignored. The adoption of reforms, such as those concerning energy subsidies, necessary to promote market efficiency, will need to be carefully balanced with adequate social policies to avoid exacerbating local poverty and to ensure that

⁵⁰⁹ Chibani, Achref. 2024. "Europe's "Green Battery": Extraction and Dispossession of Energy Infrastructure in Tunisia's South - The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy." The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy -. <https://timep.org/2024/04/04/europes-green-battery-extraction-and-dispossession-of-energy-infrastructure-in-tunisias-south/>.

⁵¹⁰ Since 2017, the German international cooperation agency GIZ has supported Tunisian partners like the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Renewable Energies, the STEG, the ANME and other public and private actors, granting to Tunisia some donations for help finance, for example, implementation of the Tunisian Solar Plan or the Desertec super-grid which aims to develop solar energy in the desert and connects several African and European countries.

⁵¹¹ France is very active and efficient in supporting the solar sector, especially with the SUNREF programme of the Agence Française de Développement (AFD).

⁵¹² Moisseron, Jean-Yves, Khaled Guesmi, and Marie Gerin-Jean. 2018. "Assessing EU–Mediterranean Policies in the Fields of Energy from a Bottom-up Perspective: The Case of Tunisia." MEDRESET Working Papers (33 edition), 2018. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_33.pdf.

⁵¹³ Ibidem.

the benefits derived from new energy opportunities are equitably distributed among the population⁵¹⁴.

The commercial sector represents another crucial area for cooperation between the EU and Tunisia. The evolution of European policies in Tunisia, especially in the post-revolution period, has shown an increasing attention to local needs and a commitment to a more global vision that integrates trade negotiations with support for structural reforms. However, trade liberalisation, symbolised by the DCFTA currently under discussion, must be carefully calibrated to avoid sectoral shocks and to promote inclusive growth⁵¹⁵. Italy could lead European efforts to ensure that trade liberalisation does not merely remove tariff barriers but is accompanied by initiatives aimed at strengthening Tunisia's ability to compete in the global market. This could include technical assistance to improve the quality of Tunisian products intended for export, as well as support for the development of efficient logistical infrastructures that facilitate access to European markets. In this context, improving the investment climate in the energy sector is a key objective, as greater market openness could attract foreign capital and promote the development of renewable energies. Tunisia will, in turn, need to work on liberalising its energy market, improving the legal framework to open electricity production to private companies. Investors, in fact, are particularly sensitive to the economic climate and regulatory stability, and the country's political instability represents a significant deterrent. In this context, Italy could facilitate dialogue between Tunisian authorities and European investors, promoting the creation of a regulatory environment that is conducive to investment and offers adequate guarantees against political risks⁵¹⁶. Another area of strategic intervention concerns the promotion of peer-to-peer contracts between consumers and energy producers, which could revolutionise the Tunisian energy market, fostering greater participation by citizens and small businesses in energy production and distribution. The possibility of implementing an incentive tariff that allows families to sell surplus electricity to the grid could represent an important lever to stimulate investments in small-scale renewable energy plants, contributing to the democratisation of the energy sector and the reduction of carbon emissions⁵¹⁷.

⁵¹⁴ Saba, Roberto, and Anna Pireddu. 2024. Energy and environmental synergy: cooperative strategies for the euro-mediterranea transition. Arkadia. <https://crenos.unica.it/crenos/sites/default/files/wp-24-09.pdf>.

⁵¹⁵ Policy Department Directorate-General for External Policies. 2016. "EU policies in Tunisia before and after the Revolution." European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578002_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU(2016)578002_EN.pdf).

⁵¹⁶ Saba, Roberto, and Anna Pireddu. 2024. Energy and environmental synergy: cooperative strategies for the euro-mediterranea transition. Arkadia. <https://crenos.unica.it/crenos/sites/default/files/wp-24-09.pdf>.

⁵¹⁷ Moisseron, Jean-Yves, Khaled Guesmi, and Marie Gerin-Jean. 2018. "Assessing EU-Mediterranean Policies in the Fields of Energy from a Bottom-up Perspective: The Case of Tunisia." MEDRESET Working Papers (33 edition), 2018. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_33.pdf.

On the economic-financial front, Tunisia faces a series of complex challenges, including the need to implement structural reforms that enable an economic transition without compromising social balance. In this context, a flexible and gradual approach, supported by Italy and the European Union, could facilitate the implementation of these reforms in a sustainable manner, taking into account the needs of the population and limiting social costs. An agreement with the IMF will likely be necessary to stabilise the Tunisian economy, but it is crucial that the conditions of such an agreement do not further aggravate the country's social situation. Tunisia's economic and social resilience is closely linked to the stability of the Mediterranean region and, more generally, to the security of Europe itself. Should Tunisia struggle to meet the conditions of the agreement, it will be essential for Italy, together with other European countries and international financial institutions, to be ready to provide emergency assistance to prevent a humanitarian crisis that could lead to violent unrest⁵¹⁸.

Italy, with its traditional role as a bridge between Europe and North Africa, is in a privileged position to lead a new phase of economic and commercial cooperation between Europe and Tunisia. This new vision must go beyond simple trade, integrating a holistic approach that mobilises all available means to help Tunisia achieve high-value socio-economic goals. This could include the promotion of large regional and transregional programs that connect Tunisia with the Maghreb and Europe, offering new opportunities to private sector actors and promoting socio-economic resilience. In particular, European involvement could prove crucial in promoting initiatives that foster social inclusion and reduce inequalities through support for vocational training programs, the development of technical skills, and the creation of jobs. These initiatives, combined with strategic investments in key energy and trade sectors, could transform Tunisia into a model of sustainable and inclusive development for the entire North African region, thereby contributing to greater stability⁵¹⁹.

3.5.2 Political and security cooperation: a path to regional stability

Political and security cooperation between the EU and Tunisia represents one of the most delicate and strategically relevant areas of their relations, with Italy called upon to play a leading role in defining a coordinated and sustainable approach. The relations between Europe

⁵¹⁸ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

⁵¹⁹ Narbone, Luigi. 2020. "The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question." CADMUS, EUI Research Repository. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

and Tunisia have historically been influenced by the security dynamics in the Mediterranean region, and in recent years, these have been further complicated by the growing challenges related to irregular migration, political stability, and regional security. With the signing of the MoU, there is an opportunity to recalibrate cooperation in a way that addresses these challenges more effectively and sustainably, focusing on a strategy that integrates security with economic development.

One of the crucial areas for political and security cooperation is border management and the fight against terrorism and organised crime. Tunisia, located in a strategic geographical position, represents a bulwark against threats emanating from the Sahel and Libya, where instability continues to grow. Therefore, security cooperation must be intensified to jointly address these challenges. Italy, with its long experience in the Mediterranean region, can lead the EU's efforts to strengthen Tunisia's capacity to control its borders through training programmes for security forces, the provision of advanced technological equipment, and support in the modernisation of security infrastructures. In this context, particular focus could be placed on strengthening cooperation between Tunisian security forces and European agencies such as Frontex and Europol, to improve the monitoring of migratory flows and combat human trafficking⁵²⁰. However, the approach to security cannot be limited to a perspective of control and repression. It is essential that security measures are integrated with initiatives that address the root causes of instability and irregular migration, such as poverty, youth unemployment, and the lack of economic opportunities. Italy could lead the EU in promoting economic development programmes in Tunisia, aimed at creating jobs and improving living conditions, particularly in the country's most vulnerable regions. In this sense, exerting pressure on Saied's government would be crucial to Tunisia's achievement of necessary political and economic changes. These programmes should be designed to be complementary to security initiatives, creating a more stable and resilient environment, capable of countering extremist narratives and reducing migratory pressure towards Europe⁵²¹.

Another key aspect of political and security cooperation concerns Tunisia's role as a partner in the stabilisation of the Sahel region, which represents one of the main sources of instability and

⁵²⁰ Council of the European Union General Secretariat. 2023. "Update - Revised Action file - Tunisia." Statewatch. <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4205/eu-council-mocadem-action-file-16821-23.pdf>.

⁵²¹ Meddeb, Hamza. 2024. "Tunisia's Transformation into a Transit Hub: Illegal Migration and Policy Dilemmas." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/tunisias-transformation-into-a-transit-hub-illegal-migration-and-policy-dilemmas?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

migration to Europe⁵²². Italy, with its traditional focus on Mediterranean issues, could promote greater Tunisian involvement in regional initiatives aimed at stabilising the Sahel, providing support both bilaterally and within the framework of multilateral initiatives. Tunisia, with its relative success in democratic transition and its experience in combating terrorism, could become a model and a strategic partner for the Sahel countries, contributing to the dissemination of good governance practices and the building of resilient institutions. In particular, Italy could facilitate Tunisia's participation in peace and security missions in the region, promoting cooperation between the Tunisian armed forces and those of other Sahel countries. Furthermore, collaboration between Tunisia and African regional organisations, such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), could be strengthened to develop joint conflict prevention and crisis management strategies. The creation of a regular forum that includes Sahel countries, Tunisia, and EU members, under Italy's aegis, could offer a platform for dialogue and coordination of security and development policies.

Promoting democratic governance and respect for human rights is another pillar of political cooperation between the EU and Tunisia⁵²³. Despite the progress made by Tunisia in terms of democratisation, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding freedom of expression, the independence of the judiciary, and the protection of minority rights. Italy, along with other EU Member States, could play a key role in supporting political reforms in Tunisia, offering technical and financial assistance for the strengthening of democratic institutions and the promotion of civic participation. In this context, Italy could facilitate dialogue between Tunisian authorities and civil society, encouraging the active participation of non-governmental organisations, trade unions, and social movements in the shaping of public policies. This dialogue could also be extended to Tunisian intellectual and academic elites, promoting exchanges and collaborations with European universities to foster the integration of European norms and values into Tunisian political culture. The creation of academic exchange and cooperation programmes between Italian and Tunisian universities, with European support, could help to train a new generation of Tunisian leaders committed to defending democracy and human rights. However, the promotion of democracy and human rights in Tunisia must be

⁵²² Ibidem.

⁵²³ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review* 71(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

accompanied by constructive diplomatic pressure on President Kais Saied's regime for the implementation of the necessary reforms to ensure respect for the rule of law and the protection of fundamental freedoms. Italy, with its established diplomatic tradition and deep understanding of the Tunisian context, could take on a leadership role in coordinating the Union's efforts to promote a peaceful and inclusive political transition in Tunisia, which considers the expectations of the population and respects the principles of justice, freedom, and democracy⁵²⁴.

Political and security cooperation between the EU and Tunisia cannot be separated from greater regional and transregional coordination involving key international and regional actors. In this sense, Italy could lead the EU in promoting a coordinated approach that involves not only Mediterranean and Sahel countries but also regional organisations such as the Arab League, the African Union, and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The goal should be to develop regular consultation and cooperation mechanisms that address common challenges, such as migration management, the fight against terrorism, and conflict prevention, more effectively. A regular forum, such as the G7+, could become a privileged platform for discussing political, economic, and social issues relevant to the security and stability of the Mediterranean and Sahel regions, improving the coordination of international cooperation and offering new opportunities for resolving migratory issues. Italy, with its experience and influence in the G7, could play a key role in advancing this initiative, promoting constructive dialogue between member countries and regional partners⁵²⁵. In this context, the creation of the G3 initiative in April 2024, which brought together Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya, adds a new layer of complexity to the region's dynamics. This tripartite alliance, which has effectively shelved any revival of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), poses both opportunities and challenges for regional cooperation. While the G3 seeks to enhance economic ties and promote political and security cooperation, its success is far from guaranteed. Each of the three countries involved faces significant tensions in its relations with the EU, particularly concerning issues such as migration, economic aid, and political conditionality. The G3 could either become a powerful platform for the Maghreb states to negotiate collectively with the EU, or it could falter due to internal divisions

⁵²⁴ Voss, Matthieu. 2010. "Mind the gap! Assessing the implementation of the EU-Tunisian action plan in the field of political cooperation." *L'Europe en Formation*, 2 n° 356.
<https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2010-2-page-139.htm>.

⁵²⁵ International Crisis Group. 2023. "Tunisia's Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace." International Crisis Group.
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/234-tunisias-challenge-avoiding-default-and-preserving>.

and differing levels of economic development among its members⁵²⁶. The G3's goal of creating a flexible, non-binding alliance could serve as a diplomatic tool to negotiate more favorable terms and concessions with larger powers like the EU, such as easing visa restrictions and enhancing cooperation on migration management. However, this approach could backfire if the G3 fails to establish itself as a credible economic and political bloc. The G3's alignment with powers like China and Russia could also complicate its relationship with Europe. While Chinese investments could significantly boost the economies of Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya, these countries risk becoming pawns in a larger geopolitical game, particularly as Russia seeks to expand its military influence in North Africa⁵²⁷. Such developments could alarm European nations, especially if they perceive the G3 as a threat to their security interests. Therefore, careful management of these alliances is crucial to ensure that the G3 remains a constructive force for regional stability rather than a source of further tension⁵²⁸.

Political and security cooperation between Europe and Tunisia presents significant potential for effectively addressing common challenges, promoting stability and security in the Mediterranean region. To fully exploit this potential, the EU, for its part, must work to improve internal cohesion and manage disagreements among Member States. Only through consensus and prior consultation can an integrated approach be adopted that combines security measures with initiatives for economic development, the promotion of democracy, and respect for human rights, guiding efforts to build a future of solid and sustainable cooperation between Europe and Tunisia⁵²⁹.

⁵²⁶ For instance, Tunisia's rejection of a €60 million loan from the EU on the grounds that it was "insufficient" highlights the strained relations and the perceived dominance of European powers. This resentment is compounded by the EU's stringent conditions for financial aid, which often require adherence to democratic governance, economic transparency, and the rule of law—standards that some Maghreb states find restrictive. The frustration is further evident in the EU's restrictive visa policies, which conflict with the expectations placed on Maghreb countries to curb irregular migration towards Europe.

⁵²⁷ The G3 will seek to position itself on cross-cutting economic and commercial policy issues on which all three countries agree, and there are likely many such areas. One of these is the development of solar energy, where Chinese industry has real expertise. Another is the development of infrastructure and services sectors. Iran has already expressed interest in investing in Algeria in the pharmaceutical and agricultural sectors. Moscow and Tunis have signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement. As for Libya, the Misrata Free Zone (MFZ) was announced in 2023, and the Chinese group Wangkang Holding, which specializes in industrial investments abroad, has already established its first company there.

⁵²⁸ Boussel, Pierre. "Will the 'G3' of Maghreb states reshape the balance of power in North Africa?" *Manara Magazine*, Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum (MENAF), 4 July 2024, <https://manaramagazine.org/2024/07/will-the-g3-of-maghreb-states-reshape-the-balance-of-power-in-north-africa/>.

⁵²⁹ Tabbabi, Khaled. 2023. "Le Mémorandum entre la Tunisie et l'Union Européenne: vers un renforcement de la dépendance, de l'autoritarisme et de l'Europe forteresse." *European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)* | https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ECRE-Working-Paper-20_Le-Memorandum-entre-la-Tunisie-et-lUnion-europeenne.pdf.

3.5.3 Lessons learned from EU-Tunisia cooperation

The agreement between the EU and Tunisia, formalized with the signing of the MoU in 2023, represents an emblematic example of how bilateral cooperation can evolve in response to regional political and economic dynamics. In a context characterized by instability and delicate transitions, Italy, with its long tradition of privileged relations with the Mediterranean and North Africa, has played a crucial role as a promoter and mediator of this agreement, continuing to find itself in a unique position to guide and shape the future of cooperation between the two shores. Its influence has been decisive in defining a partnership that adopts a flexible and adaptive approach, in line with the specificities of Tunisia's political and economic transition. However, this flexibility, though necessary, has raised criticisms and concerns from some Member States, such as Germany, regarding the respect for human rights and the promotion of democratic values, elements that have been deliberately marginalized in favor of more immediate economic support⁵³⁰.

The signing of the MoU with Tunisia, partly modeled on the 2016 agreement between the EU and Turkey, has sparked intense debate on the implications of such a model of cooperation. Even in the case of Turkey, although often controversial, the agreement has demonstrated some effectiveness in reducing irregular migration flows to Europe, but at the cost of a heavy compromise on human rights: Turkish President Erdogan, in fact, exploited this agreement as a political lever, threatening to allow the passage of migrants to Europe to obtain concessions from the European side, thus maintaining a position of strength that contributed to strengthening his autocratic regime. This scenario could easily repeat itself with Kais Saied, who, in consolidating his personal power in Tunisia, could use the MoU as a tool of political pressure, threatening to halt cooperation if Europe attempts to interfere in his government's internal affairs.

A particularly concerning aspect of the agreement between the European Union and Tunisia is precisely the absence of conditionality clauses on human rights. The agreement does not include provisions to assess or monitor the impact of the agreement on human rights, nor mechanisms to suspend cooperation in case of abuses. This lack of guarantees raises doubts about the EU's actual commitment to the protection of human rights in its cooperation with Tunisia. The European Commission's decision to negotiate the agreement in secret, perhaps

⁵³⁰ Strik, Tineke, and Ruben Robbesom. 2024. "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control." *Netherlands International Law Review* 71(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380094743_Compliance_or_Complicity_An_Analysis_of_the_EU-Tunisia_Deal_in_the_Context_of_the_Externalisation_of_Migration_Control.

anticipating that it could lead to further human rights issues for migrants and refugees, sadly recalls the experience with Libya, where ongoing violence against people on the move has been widely documented. In response to these concerns, the European Ombudsman has requested clarifications from the Commission on how it intends to ensure respect for human rights within the agreement. This intervention reflects ongoing efforts to hold the Commission accountable and to ensure that any collaboration with Tunisia prioritizes human rights considerations.

The issue of human rights is not an isolated problem. Tunisia has gone through a period of significant democratic regression under the presidency of Kais Saied, who has progressively concentrated power in his hands, bypassing democratic institutions and limiting civil liberties. Despite this, the EU has opted for a pragmatic approach, focusing on economic support and migration management rather than imposing strict political conditionality. This has led to an agreement of €127 million, divided into two tranches: €60 million to support Tunisia's struggling economy and about €67 million to strengthen border controls and discourage migrant departures. However, this strategic choice had unforeseen consequences when, after receiving part of the funds, Saied changed his position, rejecting the idea that Tunisia would become a “guardian country” for Europe. This move led to an escalation of tensions, culminating in a request by European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy Olivér Várhelyi to return the €60 million, which the Tunisian government indeed did on October 9, 2023, causing a further deterioration in relations. Despite these turbulences, the Tunisian Coast Guard resumed cooperation with Brussels from October 2023, and irregular migration flows to Italy significantly decreased in the following months, although there are still individuals willing to risk their lives to reach Europe. This fluctuating cooperation reflects the uncertainty about the future of the agreement, leaving open the possibility that Saied may once again change his approach, making the collaboration short-lived⁵³¹.

While there is not yet a definitive conclusion on the (positive or negative) outcome of the agreement with Tunisia, the Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen seems determined to establish similar partnerships with other countries in the region. A recent example is the agreement signed with Egypt on March 17, 2024, which provides €87 million and new equipment to continue a migration management project initiated in 2022⁵³². The agreement

⁵³¹ Mustafazade, Nargiz. “Unforeseen dilemmas: the EU-Tunisia migration deal in light of human rights concerns. was it a mistake?” Europeum, 2024, <https://europeum.org/data/articles/eu-tunisia-migration-law.pdf>.

⁵³² Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. 2024. “Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership between The Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union.” European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).

with Egypt presents some key differences compared to the one with Tunisia, particularly regarding the inclusion of a strong political component. The Egyptian agreement emphasizes the importance of promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, highlighting how a flexible and locally adapted approach can be effective in promoting economic stability without compromising fundamental democratic values. This contrast with the Tunisian agreement offers an important lesson: while a flexible and contextually adapted partnership can be useful for promoting economic stability, it should not do so at the expense of a commitment to promoting democratic values.

Valuable lessons could be drawn from these experiences to better guide future interactions with the country. Cooperation with Tunisia can be strengthened in several areas, starting with democratic governance. Although the MoU with Tunisia avoided imposing stringent human rights conditionality, it is essential that Europe promotes greater attention to these aspects in future interactions. This could include the creation of joint EU-Tunisia monitoring mechanisms that periodically assess the country's progress not only in economic terms but also in human rights and political reforms. These mechanisms could serve as a platform for constructive dialogue, avoiding the imposition of sanctions but offering incentives to encourage real improvements. Another area of potential collaboration is represented by sustainable economic reforms. The 2023 MoU has already emphasized the importance of supporting Tunisia through substantial macro-financial packages linked to structural economic reforms. However, Italy could lead the EU in further strengthening this support by promoting the integration of social and ecological considerations into Tunisia's economic policies. This could translate into specific programs aimed at promoting youth employment, vocational training, and technological innovation, particularly in the sectors of renewable energy and natural resource management. The experience gained from the agreement with Egypt, which adopted a more holistic approach to cooperation, could be used to extend the scope of cooperation programs with Tunisia, ensuring that economic development goes hand in hand with the creation of a more open and inclusive political environment. Finally, regional security is another area where EU-Tunisia cooperation, under Italian leadership, can be further developed. The regional context, characterized by instability in Libya and increasing migratory pressure, requires a coordinated and multifaceted approach. Italy, as a central actor in the Mediterranean, can promote greater cooperation between Tunisian security forces and European agencies such as

https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-declaration-strategic-and-comprehensive-partnership-between-arab-republic-egypt-and-european-2024-03-17_en.

Frontex, as well as facilitate a trilateral dialogue that also includes Libya, to jointly address security and migration management challenges. The agreement with Egypt has already demonstrated the importance of including security aspects in these agreements, so Europe can use this experience to strengthen cooperation in this sector with Tunisia.

An analysis of the lessons learned from the 2023 EU-Tunisia MoU, compared with the 2024 agreement with Egypt, reveals the importance of a balanced and adaptive approach. While the flexibility demonstrated by the EU in the Tunisian case allowed the establishment of a solid partnership and the provision of essential economic support at a critical moment, the lack of sufficient emphasis on human rights and the rule of law risks limiting the long-term impact of such efforts. Future cooperation must therefore learn from these lessons, ensuring that partnerships are designed not only to meet immediate needs but also to promote sustainable democratic governance. Italy's role as a facilitator in the Mediterranean, and particularly in managing relations between the EU and Tunisia, is crucial to ensuring that regional cooperation does not compromise fundamental democratic values. Italy has the responsibility to lead an approach that not only addresses economic and security challenges but also promotes tangible improvements in Tunisia's political and social conditions. Only through a balanced and consistent commitment can Italy and the EU hope to build a stable and prosperous future for the Mediterranean region while avoiding repeating the mistakes of the past.

Conclusion

The thesis has highlighted the persistent complexity of Italy's role in the Mediterranean and the delicate nature of its relations with Tunisia. Historical, political, and economic dynamics suggest the need to define strategies that balance the defence of national interests, the commitment to liberal principles, and the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Italy is striving to assume a leadership role in managing Euro-Mediterranean relations and positioning itself as a facilitator between Tunisia's internal challenges and international pressures.

Focusing on three fundamental issues—the objectivity of Italy's advocacy towards Tunisia, the possible neglect of Tunisia's democratic regression due to national interests, and the difficult balance between liberal principles and the necessity of avoiding Tunisia's economic and social collapse—the first chapter analysed the historical and geopolitical context that has shaped Italy's position in the Mediterranean, with a specific focus on its relations with Tunisia. Historically, Italy has viewed the Mediterranean as a region of crucial strategic importance, a point of contact between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. This centrality has been leveraged through various phases of Italian history, from imperial Rome to fascist ambitions, and into the more recent foreign policy of the 21st century, which seeks to balance multilateralism and bilateralism to maintain regional leadership. The second chapter explored Italy's most recent diplomatic initiatives, such as the Rome Process and the Mattei Plan, analysing how these strategies have been developed to strengthen bilateral relations with Tunisia through economic cooperation, security, and sustainable development. Finally, the third chapter examined Italy's role within the EU and international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, highlighting how Italian diplomacy seeks to influence European policies towards Tunisia and promote a common agenda for the Mediterranean, fostering greater economic cooperation and migration management. However, the growing political instability in Tunisia, exacerbated by the erosion of democracy under President Kais Saied, complicates this approach and raises questions about the sustainability of such initiatives without a stable political context.

The three research questions that guided this thesis now allow us to reflect on the most relevant conclusions and the political implications emerging from the analysis conducted.

The first research question focused on the degree of objectivity in Italy's advocacy for Tunisia in international fora, questioning whether this was influenced by bilateral negotiations aimed at reducing irregular migration flows. The analysis demonstrated that Italy's approach towards Tunisia is shaped by a complex interaction between objective criteria and strategic

considerations linked to its national interests. On one hand, Italy recognizes the strategic importance of Tunisia's stability for the security, stability, and prosperity of the Mediterranean. For example, Rome has openly supported the need for economic assistance to Tunisia in international forums such as the G7, arguing that a stable Tunisian economy would reduce migration pressures and limit the destabilising influence of non-state actors and terrorist groups in the region⁵³³. However, it is undeniable that bilateral negotiations concerning the management of irregular migration flows have significantly impacted how Italy has acted in international forums. Italy has sought to gain European and international support for its migration policies, using its position in favour of Tunisia as leverage to negotiate agreements that can limit the arrival of migrants on its shores. This approach, while pragmatic, raises questions about the genuineness of Italy's advocacy, which may appear more instrumental than based on a selfless commitment to Tunisia's future.

The second research question examined whether and to what extent Italy is neglecting Tunisia's democratic regression due to considerations related to dominant national interests. In this case, the analysis reveals a tension between the liberal principles that Italy claims to support and the reality of its political choices. After consolidating power with a series of moves that many observers have described as authoritarian, Saied has progressively dismantled the democratic institutions established after the 2011 revolution. In this context, Italy has adopted a cautious approach, avoiding overly severe public criticism and continuing to support the Tunisian government both economically and politically. Although it has expressed concern about the erosion of democratic institutions, Italy has refrained from openly criticising Kais Saied's regime, fearing that isolating Tunisia could exacerbate instability and compromise security in the Mediterranean region. This attitude reflects a compromise between maintaining stable relations and promoting democratic values—a difficult balance to maintain in light of international pressures and growing internal instability in Tunisia. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that this choice involves a significant risk: undermining Italy's credibility as a promoter of democracy and human rights. A concrete example of this precarious balance is Italy's support for Tunisia within the European Union. Italy has pushed for greater European involvement in managing the Tunisian crisis but has also avoided placing too much emphasis on Saied's democratic violations, probably to avoid jeopardizing dialogue on other key issues such as security and migration. The challenge for Italy is thus to balance its support for the

⁵³³ de la Feld, Simone. “Al via il G7, i leader mondiali in Italia. In agenda Africa, Ucraina e Medio Oriente, ma tiene banco la polemica sull'aborto.” Eunews, 2024, <https://www.eunews.it/2024/06/13/g7-italia-africa-ucraina-aborto-ue/>.

Tunisian government with the need to promote an agenda that does not betray democratic values.

The third and final research question focused on the necessity of finding a balance between liberal principles and the need to avoid Tunisia's economic and social collapse. Difficult to achieve but not impossible, a reasonable balance could be found through an approach that combines quiet diplomacy with conditional support. In other words, Italy could adopt a dual-track strategy, combining economic support and security cooperation with discreet but incisive diplomacy aimed at promoting gradual democratic reforms. In this context, the role of the European Union is fundamental. Italy, leveraging its influential position within the European context, could push for a European policy that provides economic incentives to Tunisia, conditioned on progress in the field of human rights and freedoms.

Thus, Italy as a facilitator in Tunisia?

This is not merely a simple question, but a true test of Italy's ability to tackle the complex dynamics of the Mediterranean while maintaining its integrity and commitment to a region that, despite being of fundamental importance, is also extremely fragile. In this context, Italy faces the challenge of preserving its leadership position in the region, striving to promote stability and development without compromising its core values. To succeed, a foreign policy is needed that is both pragmatic and based on solid principles, capable of responding to immediate challenges while also maintaining a long-term commitment to promoting democracy and human rights. The goal should be to build a partnership that goes beyond mere economic assistance and helps Tunisia become a stable and prosperous actor in the region.

Italy's relationship with Tunisia offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate that it is possible to reconcile *realpolitik* with a genuine commitment to liberal values. If Rome succeeds in this task, it will not only strengthen its position in the Mediterranean but also contribute to building a more stable and prosperous future for Tunisia and the entire region.

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