



# EU Security Practices and Democracy Support in Tunisia

PUBLICATION #37



Funded by the  
European Union



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF  
KYIV-MOHYLA ACADEMY



## SHAPEDEM-EU Publications

Published by the SHAPEDEM-EU Consortium. September 2025.

This publication is part of WP4, led by Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

Authors: Akram Ezzamouri

To cite:

Ezzamouri, Akram. EU Security Practices and Democracy Support in Tunisia. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications, 2025.

Design: EURICE GmbH

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## Abstract

This paper examines the European Union's (EU) security-related practices in Tunisia, assessing their democratic quality before and after the turning point of President Kais Saied's July 2021 self-coup. Once framed as a democratic success story, Tunisia's stalled transition and subsequent authoritarian turn tested the EU's commitment to linking security cooperation with democratic governance. Looking at democraticness as a combination and variation of social embeddedness, empowerment and accountability, the study evaluates whether EU engagement has fostered democratic oversight or reinforced authoritarian practices. Findings show that initial EU efforts at security sector reform largely strengthened unreformed institutions in Tunisia.

After 2021, the EU shifted further toward pragmatic security assistance, with migration control dominating the agenda. The 2023 EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding exemplified this trajectory, directing significant resources to Tunisian authorities while excluding civic actors and overlooking systemic human rights abuses. The analysis highlights a pattern of limited democratic (un)learning: EU practices have remained state-centric, opaque and resistant to recalibration in light of Tunisia's authoritarian consolidation. Rather than embedding democratic accountability, they prioritised short-term stability and border control.

## Introduction

Since the 2010-2011 revolution, Tunisia has held a unique position in the European Union's (EU) foreign policy framework to the Middle East and North Africa region. Hailed (once) as the success

story of the local protest movements that interested the EU Southern neighbourhood, Tunisia became a focal point for EU democracy support, with substantial political, financial and technical support directed toward governance, reforms and civil society, and socio-economic stabilisation. The EU's engagement spanned multiple policy domains – ranging from trade and development assistance to migration management and security cooperation – each reflecting broader EU strategic interests in the region. However, while democracy support was central to the EU's early post-revolutionary approach, its policies in the long run, particularly in the security sector, have raised concerns regarding their alignment with democratic principles on the ground. Following the 2011 revolution, the EU's engagement in Tunisia has been guided by other strategic frameworks, most notably the revised European Neighbourhood Policy ([European Commission, 2011](#)), which sought to enhance cooperation between the EU and Tunisia, reinforcing democratic governance and economic resilience. Tunisia was designated as a “privileged partner,” benefiting from increased financial and political support, alongside strengthened bilateral cooperation, aimed at linking political reform, governance, human rights and development with economic incentives. Financial assistance has played a pivotal role in EU-Tunisia relations. Between 2011 and 2013, the EU allocated approximately 278 million euros, with substantial funds directed toward judicial reforms and governance improvements. Additionally, civil society organisations received EU funding through instruments such as the European Endowment for Democracy and the European Neighbourhood Instrument, strengthening local non-governmental actors ([European Commission, 2016](#)).

In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, the EU's engagement with Tunisia was largely driven by the need to adapt quickly to an unexpected transformative grassroots push. From 2011 to 2014, the EU prioritised support for democratisation, recalibrating its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) with a “more for more” approach – offering increased financial aid and market access in exchange for concrete political reforms ([European Commission, 2011](#)). However, this focus gradually shifted back to immediate security concerns as European and Tunisian priorities converged on countering migration, transnational phenomena and threats, and radicalisation (Zardo and Cavatorta, 2016; Narbone, 2020). By 2014, increasing concerns among Tunisians about regional instability and domestic security threats deepened European anxieties over transnational risk, leading to a policy shift towards greater engagement with and reinforcement of Tunisia's security sector.

This paper examines EU security-related practices in Tunisia and their alignment with democratic practices with a specific focus on the shifts that followed President Kais Saied's self-coup on 25 July 2021. The event, which saw Saied consolidate power by dissolving parliament and ruling by decree, marked a turning point in Tunisia's transformative and once democratic trajectory and tested the EU's commitment to democratic governance in its partnerships, especially when it comes to sectors where EU lays interests. Against this backdrop, the central research question guiding this paper is: *To what extent have EU security-related practices in Tunisia upheld democratic principles, and how has the July 2021 turning point affected the EU's approach to security governance in the country?* The analysis assesses whether EU engagement has reinforced democratic security practices or whether it has contributed to the erosion of democratic norms by prioritising stability over practices entailing accountability and local ownership.

Building on the conceptual approach of the SHAPEDEM-EU project (Gawrich, 2024; Achraïner and Pace, 2024), this study explores the evolution of EU-Tunisia relations through the lens of democratic (un)learning – assessing whether EU policies have shifted towards and supported

greater democratic accountability or whether they have retrenched into technical approach that consolidates and condones the authoritarian practices of President Kais Saied. Particularly, the paper investigates whether the EU's practices in the field of security remain sensitive to local democratic aspirations or whether they are enablers of a democratic backsliding. By applying this framework, the study aims to provide a critical assessment of how the EU's security engagement has adapted – or failed to adapt – to Tunisia's shifting political landscape, offering insights into the broader implications for EU foreign policy in the Southern Neighbourhood.

This article is based on data collected through interviews conducted between July and October 2024 with Tunisian and foreign researchers on Tunisia, Tunisian civil society representatives and EU officials. Drawing on these data, as well as grey and academic literature and primary sources on EU security and migration policies, it first outlines the conceptual framework by defining the democraticness of practices and examining their relevance in the context of domestic politics and EU actions, particularly in relation to Tunisia's turning point of July 2021. The paper then analyses how the EU engaged with Tunisia in the field of security before and after this turning point, highlighting the democratic character of these practices and exploring the elements that can explain the EU's failure to (un)learn following Tunisia's authoritarian shift in 2021.

## 1 Conceptual definition of democraticness

To analyse the democratic nature of EU security practices in Tunisia, this paper employs a conceptual framework that interrogates the intersection between EU security-related policies (in the field of security sector reform, security assistance and migration) and democracy as a practice. Drawing from the literature on EU foreign policy and democratic projection in the Southern Neighbourhood (Khakee and Wolff, 2021), the paper examines EU security policies through three interrelated dimensions: social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

*Social embeddedness* refers here to the extent to whether EU security interventions are integrated into Tunisia's local political and social contexts. This dimension questions whether EU practices are responsive to Tunisia's evolving political landscape, including the role of civil society, wider political stakeholders and affected communities. In light of Saied's authoritarian consolidation, assessing social embeddedness means inquiring whether the EU's security support aligns with democratic principles or whether it strengthens coercive state structures that suppress dissent.

Closely linked to this, *social empowerment* examines whether EU security practices enhance the agency and ownership of local actors, including civil society organisations, grassroots movements and democratic institutions. This dimension interrogates whether EU security-related practices in Tunisia create spaces for democratic participation or whether it marginalises local actors in favour of a state-security-centred approach. Given Tunisia's current political crisis, assessing social empowerment means analysing whether and how, following the July 2021 turning point, the EU has recalibrated its security-related practices to support democratic forces or whether it has maintained or strengthened its partnerships with increasingly authoritarian state institutions.

Finally, *social accountability* assesses whether EU security interventions are subject to oversight and local scrutiny. This includes examining the transparency of EU-funded security initiatives, the extent of civil society involvement in monitoring their implementation, and the mechanisms available for oversight and contestation. As Tunisia's political space becomes increasingly restricted, understanding whether the EU has adapted its behavioural practices to address

democratic backsliding – or whether it continues to operate without meaningful (un)learning – is critical to evaluating the democratic quality of its external engagements and foreign policy practices in Tunisia.

## 2 Tunisia's critical juncture

This paper approaches the 25 July 2021 self-coup by Tunisian President Kais Saied as a significant turning point, with the country's departure from the decade-long process of political transition and democratic consolidation. Saied's dismissal of the Prime minister, suspension of Parliament, and subsequent consolidation of power signified a shift towards democratic backsliding. The policies Saied implemented following this turning point facilitated the centralisation of power, which can be understood as a consequence of an incomplete democratic transition and the structural weaknesses of intermediary institutions from 2011 on ([Sadiki and Saleh, 2023](#)).

Saied's justification for his actions was rooted in Article 80 of the 2014 Tunisian Constitution, which allows the president to take exceptional measures in the event of an imminent threat to national security. However, his interpretation of this provision was contested, as the lack of a functioning Constitutional Court – a crucial element of Tunisia's transitional democratic framework – meant there was no judicial body to assess the legality of his actions ([International Commission of Jurists, 2022](#)). The absence of such an institution exemplifies the incomplete nature of Tunisia's transition, leaving the Tunisian political system vulnerable to unilateral decision-making. This legal vacuum enabled Saied to rule by decree, bypassing checks and balances and rendering legislative oversight ineffective.

Following the initial power grab, Saied pursued policies that entrenched his authority, systematically dismantling democratic institutions and weakening political intermediaries. One of his first major moves was the suspension and later dissolution of Parliament, which removed a key counterbalance to presidential authority. By sidelining the legislative branch, Saied was able to govern without parliamentary scrutiny, further concentrating power in the executive. Additionally, in February 2022, he dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, an independent body responsible for overseeing the judiciary, replacing it with a provisional structure under his direct control – meaning effectively eroding judicial independence, allowing Saied to influence legal proceedings and eliminate opposition through legal means ([Arab Reform Initiative, 2024](#)).

The centralisation of power was further reinforced by the constitutional referendum held in July 2022, which resulted in the adoption of a new constitution that significantly expanded presidential prerogatives. The new legal framework diminished the role of Parliament, restricted judicial independence and abolished key oversight mechanisms, effectively institutionalising hyper-presidentialism ([Nafti, 2024](#)). Under this system, the president gained unchecked authority over executive and legislative functions, a stark departure from the power-sharing arrangements established during the political transition. The referendum, however, saw low voter turnout, indicating a lack of broad societal consensus on the legitimacy of the new constitutional order.

Saied's policies also targeted political parties and civil society organisations, both of which play critical intermediary roles in Tunisia's democratic parenthesis. Political parties, particularly those that had been dominant in post-2011 Tunisia, such as Ennahda, were subjected to repression,

with several of their leaders arrested or investigated on charges of corruption and conspiracy. Similarly, restrictions on civil society organisations, including restrictions on foreign funding and increased state oversight, weakened their ability to mobilise resistance or safely advocate for democratic principles ([Benghazi, 2023](#)).

The economic and social context also played a crucial role in enabling Saied's consolidation of power. The years leading up to the July 2021 turning point were marked by economic stagnation, high unemployment and widespread disillusionment with political elites ([Meddeb, 2022](#)). Successive coalition governments had failed to address Tunisia's structural economic issues, leading to a decline in public trust in democratic institutions. Saied capitalised on this frustration, presenting himself as a populist figure committed to rooting out corruption and restoring national sovereignty. His narrative resonated with a significant portion of the population, who viewed political parties as self-interested and ineffective. This erosion of public confidence in traditional political intermediaries created a political vacuum that facilitated Saied's unilateral governance. Marked by structural deficiencies, Tunisia's incomplete democratic transition created the structural conditions that enabled the materialisation of Saied's authoritarian turn. The failure to establish a Constitutional Court, the fragmentation of political parties and the inability to implement effective reforms on economy, justice and security all contributed to the vulnerabilities that Saied exploited. Moreover, the reliance on consensus politics in the post-2011 period, while initially seen as a strength, ultimately led to reforms paralysis and institutional inefficiency, further eroding public confidence in democratic practices.

Against this backdrop, the following paragraphs aim to first evaluate how the EU engaged with the Tunisian context by examining the elements that characterised the country's transition, as well as to understand, in terms of democraticness, whether and how the EU's security-related practices in Tunisia have undergone a recalibration following the July 2021 coup.

### **3 From democratic security reform to security assistance**

The EU's engagement with Tunisia after 2011 presents a complex case study in assessing the democratic nature of security-related practices regarding security sector reform, security assistance and migration.

For context, EU-Tunisia relations emerged under Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali within a framework of economic and political partnership. The 1995 Association Agreement between the EU and Tunisia set the stage for cooperation that was initially centred on economic development and trade ([EU-Tunisia Association Agreement](#)). The launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy in the early 2000s marked another step in EU-Tunisia relations. Cooperation in the field of security became more systematic, with the 2004 ENP Action Plan introducing a dedicated chapter on cooperation on justice and home affairs. The plan sought to build the capacity of Tunisian security institutions through targeted programs such as AENEAS for migration, and bilateral police and judicial cooperation initiatives (Zardo and Cavatorta, 2016).

By formalising these channels in security-related initiatives, the EU institutionalised its approach to Tunisia, embedding a network of contacts and negotiations that primarily involved senior officials from the Tunisian Ministry of Interior and other security actors. As discussed later, the European reliance on this structure, rooted in networks established during the Ben Ali regime, will be revealed as the primary reason for prioritising "stability" over significant reform, with

critics arguing that this approach both reinforced authoritarian practices and hindered the potential for democratic renewal.

The focus of EU interventions in Tunisia's security landscape has been, at first, on reforming and supporting the security apparatus, particularly under the Ministry of the Interior, which has not only survived the fall of the Ben Ali regime but also managed to carve out an increasingly autonomous sphere of influence since 2011. This "resilience" of the security sector, especially through the emergence and strengthening of police unions and due to contextual rising threats related to domestic and regional security, has created a paradox. At the outset of the revolution, Tunisia aimed to reform its security sector in a democratic manner, and it sought the EU's assistance. In 2013, a peer review process, conducted by twelve security experts from EU Member States (EUMS), was launched by the EU in collaboration with the Tunisian authorities to assess Tunisia's security apparatus. While this process marked a first positive step towards democratic reform, it also highlighted the central issue of the securitisation of Tunisia's transitional political agenda, which increasingly undermined democratic aspirations. The EU's initial support for security sector reform in Tunisia, based on the conclusions of the inaugural political dialogue on security and counterterrorism in Tunis in September 2015 ([EEAS, 2015](#)), and the launch of a 23-million-euro programme for security sector modernisation (PARMSS) in November 2015, sought to enhance the country's security apparatus, border control and counterterrorism efforts. In practice PARMSS prioritised aligning internal security forces with international standards on oversight, training and human rights, and enhancing their land border control capacities (Peinaud, 2019). Yet, despite the stated goal of promoting democratic practices, respect for human rights and the rule of law in the sector – and against the backdrop of a stalled transition and the slow adoption of radical reforms in post-revolution Tunisia – these efforts ended reinforcing state power than facilitating transformation (Interview 3).

The growing influence of police unions in Tunisia, coupled with democracy resistance from the old guard, significantly hindered domestic and external reform efforts, as these local stakeholders became a powerful force within the Ministry of the Interior. Following the 2011 revolution, these newly formed unions were seen as crucial for protecting the interests of the police force in the changing political environment (Pluta, 2023). However, their influence expanded to such an extent that by 2015, the Ministry of the Interior no longer demonstrated any commitment to security sector reform, leading to a situation in which the EU's security policies, even when aiming at involving local CSOs actors ([EEAS, 2017](#)), became embedded in a structure that resisted democratic change. This, among other things, undermined the EU's broader objectives of supporting the political transition and local democratic practices, and ultimately caused international support for this sector to shift from promoting security sector reform to prioritising security assistance (Interview 3).

### **3.1 EU democraticness in the context of Tunisia's flawed transition**

Although democracy promotion was an explicit priority, the EU's commitment to advancing democratic reforms was tempered also by the renewed imperatives of regional stability and migration control. The 2013 political assassinations of prominent Tunisian politicians Choukri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi, the 2015 terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse, and the contextually rising prominence of migration in the EU political agenda, triggered a shift toward a more security-driven engagement, leading to a reorientation of EU policies towards counterterrorism and border security. This shift also reflects broader contextual transformations in the EU's self-

representation on the international stage, particularly in its southern neighbourhood, with the introduction of the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the concept of “principled pragmatism” ([EEAS, 2016](#)). Scholars such as Assem Dandashly (2017) highlight the tension between the EU’s normative commitment to democracy promotion and its realpolitik security concerns, with the Global Strategy marking a recognition of the limitations of the EU’s transformative power and emphasis on stability and resilience over direct democratic transformation. Along this logic, in Tunisia while EU continued to support reforms, it increasingly framed these efforts within the broader context of security, prioritising stability over deep democratisation.

Therefore, the EU’s renewed engagement with Tunisia has been situated within a broader security-stability nexus, emphasising the EU’s dual objective of promoting democratic practices while ensuring regional stability and security, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, migration management and regional stabilisation. This approach was reflected in key bilateral engagements, including the 2014 Mobility Partnership, which offered visa facilitation for select groups such as Tunisian students and businesspeople, in exchange for Tunisia’s commitment to readmitting irregular migrant people reaching the EU ([European Commission, 2014](#)). All at the same time, the EU has also provided significant financial and technical assistance to Tunisia’s security sector, focusing on border security, intelligence sharing and counterterrorism training. These efforts, however, have reinforced pre-existing patronage networks that were associated with the previous regime. The continuity of institutional frameworks from the Ben Ali era in post-2011 Tunisia has led to concerns over the lack of transparency and social accountability in security sector reform, with civil society organisations questioning the degree to which EU-funded initiatives genuinely contributed to democratic oversight (Interview 2; [Terre Solidaire, 2024](#)).

Another significant concern with the EU’s security-related practices in Tunisia has been the gap between the formal objectives of support to reform and the changing priorities and transitioning political reality on the ground. Initially, Tunisia’s post-revolutionary government sought European support to align with democratic norms. However, progress has been slow, as evidenced by the ten-years delay in finalising the code of conduct for the country’s security forces under the PARMSS ([DCAF, 2023](#)), highlighting a broader trend in which the Tunisian security sector and executive, rather than integrating into a democratic framework or reform-driven context, has largely resisted meaningful change. Against this backdrop, the EU’s limited interventions in support of security sector reform ultimately prioritised state-centred security practices over broader democratic empowerment. The absence of robust oversight mechanisms allowed security sector reforms and assistance to modernise infrastructure, such as border surveillance and intelligence systems, without ensuring transparency or social accountability. This, in turn, empowered entrenched state actors, who resisted substantive democratisation and hindered wider social empowerment. As a result, rather than fostering a more democratic and socially embedded security apparatus, EU interventions contributed to the (unintended) consequence of securitisation of Tunisian politics, shifting the focus away from essential reforms that were deemed crucial for the country’s democratic transition.

In terms of democraticness, the EU’s security-related practices in Tunisia, particularly in supporting reforms, highlight a critical disconnect between external support and democratisation. The EU aim to promote democratic governance and reform has been hindered by the dynamics of Tunisia’s transition, which featured characteristics of democracy resistance.

The failure to address the obstructive role of local stakeholders and the lack of robust oversight mechanisms weakened the democratic quality and impact of its interventions. By reinforcing existing power structures, the EU's approach ultimately unintendedly contributed to the persistence of undemocratic frameworks and practices at the local level.

#### 4 Assessing EU (un)learning in Tunisia

In front of Tunisia's trajectory post-2021, the EU initially framed its approach to Tunisia's democratic regression within the context of upholding fundamental rights and the rule of law. However, despite initial statements by EU High Representative Josep Borrell calling for the maintenance of Tunisia's commitment to democratic practices ([Council of the EU, 2021](#)), the EU ultimately adopted a cautious wait-and-see approach. The political crisis that unfolded following Saied's consolidation of power garnered significant popular support among Tunisians, leading the EU to temper its criticism and avoid any policy intervention. However, as the situation evolved, the EU's and EUMS's concerns about democratic backsliding were increasingly overshadowed by security-related issues, particularly on migration.

The resurgence of migration as a central concern in EU-Tunisia relations became particularly evident in 2023, with a sharp increase in irregular departures from Tunisia to Italy, amid a tense environment for Sub-Saharan migrant people in Tunisia, following xenophobic statements by President Saied echoing "great replacement" theories. This shift in the EU's focus was driven by the broader political agenda of EU member states, particularly Italy, where controlling migration flows became a priority. According to UNHCR data, Tunisia surpassed Libya as the primary departure point for migrants crossing the Mediterranean, with nearly 157,000 sea arrivals in Italy from Tunisia in the 2023 ([UNHCR, 2024](#)).

Under the leadership of Prime minister Giorgia Meloni, the Italian government spearheaded diplomatic efforts in fostering renewed engagement between the EU and Saied's Tunisia, advocating for pragmatic solutions that prioritised migration control over political conditionality. The outcome was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in July 2023 which outlined a framework for cooperation in migration management, economic support and energy partnership. The financial package worth 1 billion euros, included an immediate 150 million euros in budgetary aid and 105 million euros dedicated to migration management. The remainder of the package left conditioned to the signature of an IMF deal, which President Saied rejected, describing it as "diktats." However, the broader EU-Tunisia engagement in border management extends beyond this recent 105 million contribution and is rooted in a series of sustained financial commitments. From 2018 to 2022, the EU allocated 73 million euro to Tunisia's border security, primarily through the EU Trust Fund for Africa and Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe. Under the NDICI-Global Europe framework (2021–2027), the EU has reinforced its commitment through the Multi-Country Migration Programme for the Southern Neighbourhood, ensuring continuity of prior initiatives ([Casajuana and Pintus, 2023](#); [European Commission, 2023](#)).

While President of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen hailed the EU-Tunisia MoU as a blueprint for the future engagement with the Southern neighbourhood, the agreement has faced substantial contestation within the EU (see WP4 Deliverable on Taxonomy of European Contestation; and WP3 Report on local Tunisia perceptions). High Representative Josep Borell

expressed concerns about the exclusion of all EUMS and the European Council from the design and negotiation of the document (O'Carroll, 2023). Members of the European Parliament and human rights organisations voiced their objections, arguing that the EU's financial support could be seen as legitimising and supporting President Saïed's authoritarian rule while failing to address ongoing human rights abuses (Tineke and Robbesom, 2024). In line with these concerns, the EU Ombudsman also raised questions regarding the human rights situation and the procedure, requesting clarifications on whether the EU Commission conducted a human rights impact assessment prior to the signing of the MoU ([European Ombudsman, 2024](#)). Reports of mistreatment and deportations of black African migrant people in Tunisia's desert areas during the 2023 summer further complicated the EU's position, as human rights organisations and observers accused Tunis of abuses and violence and the EU of complicity ([ECRE, 2023](#)).

The EU's engagement with Tunisia following the July-2021 critical juncture shows continuities in terms of deficiencies of democraticness of EU security-related practices and underscores a broader dilemma in European foreign policy: the tension between short-term interests and democratic practices and reforms.

While the EU had previously positioned itself as a normative power advocating for democratic transition, its policy towards Tunisia post-2021 reflected a further shift towards *realpolitik*. This was particularly supported by EUMS like Italy, which had more immediate stakes in the immediate fate of Tunisia and by the von der Leyen Commission's broader ambition for the EU to act as a geopolitical actor internationally, especially in the Mediterranean. The prioritisation of migration control and economic stabilisation over democratic practices marked a significant departure from the EU's earlier emphasis on principles. This trend is not unique to Tunisia; it reflects an EU's broader strategy in the Southern neighbourhood, where concerns about security and migration often outweigh democracy-related considerations.

The European Union's response to the 2021 turning point, particularly in security-related practices, has been characterised by a lack of (un)learning, with pragmatism taking precedence. The EU's engagement with Tunisia, particularly through migration and security cooperation, has revealed significant contradictions between its stated democratic values and its operational strategies. Rather than fostering democratic governance, the EU has increasingly prioritised border control and stability, often at the expense of transparency and human rights considerations. A key indicator of this shift is the limited space for political opposition and civil society engagement in Tunisia, which has deteriorated significantly since 2021. As one Tunisian expert noted, "civic space is shrinking (and) the centralisation of power is having a profound impact on the social fabric, leading to economic stagnation, reinforcing violations against migrants and paralysing decision-making and reform processes, even within ministries" (Interview 3). This political reality has not, however, deterred the EU from deepening its engagement with Tunisian authorities, often without fully behaviourally considering the consequences for democratic governance.

One of the most striking failures in democratic (un)learning has been the EU's opacity in its dealings with Tunisia, particularly regarding the July 2023 MoU. While migration control remains a priority, information about agreements between Tunisia and the EU and EUMS is often not directly disclosed to the Tunisian public, leading to an information gap that undermines both social accountability and empowerment. Tunisians often don't learn about the details of

agreements through local media but rather from non-governmental organisations or opposition groups, or European media, creating a gap in information, highlighting a broader issue of non-transparent decision-making that excludes local stakeholders from critical discussions, thus missing to guarantee social embeddedness and accountability (Interview 2; Interview 3; Interview 4). This lack of transparency has fuelled skepticism towards European engagement, reinforcing perceptions of external interference rather than partnership. Moreover, this information asymmetry is not merely a failure of communication but reflects a broader practice in which European institutions, adapting to the new Tunisia political context post-2021, primarily engage with executive authorities while bypassing wider consultations with both local and European civil society organisations.

At the member-state level, divergent national interests have further complicated the EU's approach to Tunisia. Italy, in particular, has been a leading force in shaping the recent EU-Tunisia migration partnership, driven by its domestic political priorities rather than a coherent European strategy. While Meloni is seen as having been able at mobilising Europe not only for Italian interests but also for broader European ones, reinforcing a pragmatic rather than values-based approach, the EU practices to Tunisia appear contradictory and fragmented. This divergence has contributed to a reactive rather than strategic European approach, where short-term goals are shaped by external pressure rather than a commitment to democratic practices in foreign policy. However, recent reports of abuses committed by Tunisian security forces against migrant people have triggered a discussion regarding a possible reassessment of the EU's policies with the European Commission indicating a potential shift towards incorporating human rights conditions into future funding agreements, suggesting a belated recognition of the need to align security-related cooperation with human rights commitments ([Townsend, 2025](#)). While these proposals signal an acknowledgement of past malpractices, their adoption and implementation remains uncertain.

## Conclusion

While the EU initially positioned itself as a normative actor promoting democratic transition, its approach increasingly adapted to the constraints of Tunisia's limited and inconsistent reform process, as well as to the growing influence of internal EU dynamics and member state interests, particularly those related to migration. What becomes evident through this analysis is that the challenges confronting EU-Tunisia security cooperation and the shortcomings in advancing democratic reform were not solely triggered by the 2021 self-coup but had been gradually unfolding well before this political rupture. These dynamics, entrenched authoritarian legacies within Tunisia's security apparatus and the EU's own evolving priorities collectively set the stage for a gradual erosion of the initial joint democratic agenda. The political crisis and Saied's consolidation of power functioned more as an accelerant than as an origin point for this deterioration.

In sum, despite some recognition of human rights concerns by the European Commission, the EU's approach to Tunisia remains largely focused on safeguarding immediate interests, particularly migration control, at the expense of local and European democratic practices. The shift towards high-level political engagement with Tunisian authorities, as evidenced by the EU-Tunisia MoU, has further reduced opportunities for consistent operational cooperation and democratic dialogue, thus narrowing the space for socially embedded and accountable

processes and for civil society and independent institutions in shaping Tunisia's democratic future.

To conclude, it's true that the EU's engagement with Tunisia exposes a critical dilemma: the contrast between goals of democracy promotion and the practices of realpolitik shaped by security and migration concerns. This case illustrates how EU foreign policy learning can be path-dependent and susceptible to external pressures if not socially embedded and accountable, resulting in policy trajectories that privilege state-stability over long-term democratic reform and practices. Understanding this shift is essential for rethinking how the EU can reconcile its normative ambitions with its practices responding to security concerns in its future neighbourhood policies.

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## List of interviews

- Interview 1: Tunisian expert. *Online Interview*. September 2024.
- Interview 2: Representative of Tunisian CSO. *Online Interview*. September 2024.
- Interview 3: Confidential discussion with Tunisian expert, October 2024.
- Interview 4: Confidential discussion with Tunisian expert, October 2024.