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POLICY BRIEF

ROAD TO NOWHERE: WHY EUROPE'S BORDER EXTERNALISATION IS A DEAD END

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SUMMARY

- Mediterranean migration has been a crisis issue in Europe for decades. The central Mediterranean route that carries migrants from Libya and Tunisia to Italy and Malta has become the most active crossing. It is also the most dangerous way for migrants to reach Europe's shores.
- European migration policy frames migration as a security threat and focuses on externalising European borders to southern Mediterranean states, especially since the migration crisis of 2015.
- This approach colours the EU's and member states' relations with their southern neighbourhood. It also impedes their pursuit of strategic interests in the region and diminishes the EU's reputation as a values-based power.
- Border externalisation has failed to prevent a new surge in irregular migration on the central Mediterranean route since 2020. In fact, European externalisation policies likely contributed to this new crisis.
- Europeans need to stop handing control of their borders to warlords and autocrats in Libya and Tunisia. Instead, they should focus on measures that tie the short-term imperative to appear in control of migration to longer-term initiatives that lessen the need for people to migrate in the first place.

Permacrisis in the Mediterranean

On the eve of the December 2023 Global Refugee Forum, UN high commissioner for refugees, Filippo Grandi, wrote in the *Observer*: "we hear tough talk," mostly from rich countries, "about turning outsiders away … offloading responsibility onto others." But, he concluded, "refugee situations don't have to turn into crises if we work together to address and manage them." The European Union and its member states should take heed.

Especially since the 'refugee crisis' of 2015, migration management has become a core focus of European policymaking towards southern Mediterranean states. Since then, UN data indicate that over 2.39 million migrants have crossed the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. That figure includes refugees fleeing war and persecution and so-called economic migrants. As the distinction is often blurred, this paper uses 'migrants' to cover all people attempting irregular crossings of the Mediterranean – for whatever reason.

People who make the treacherous journey generally take one of three routes: across the western, eastern, or central Mediterranean. The central Mediterranean route covers departures from Libya and Tunisia towards Italy and Malta. Over the past decade, this route has become the most anxiety-inducing for European governments trying to snatch control of the situation.

That is because Europeans have limited tools left at their disposal to do so. The 2015 crisis acted as a catalyst for European migration policy to reduce into twin pillars of securitisation (treating migration as a security threat) and externalisation (pushing out border management to southern Mediterranean countries). Since then, Europeans have struck various externalisation deals with Libya's and Tunisia's assorted warlords and autocrats. Those agreements initially contributed to a significant reduction in the numbers of migrants arriving in southern Europe, with some officials claiming in private that they had "solved" migration. But a focus on arrival numbers obscures other dynamics of migration – and storm clouds gathered over North Africa that in 2020 prompted the numbers to rise again.

Now, the numbers of central Mediterranean crossings resemble the crisis years once more. Smugglers and traffickers pile thousands of people into unseaworthy vessels; many die en route; Italy's asylum infrastructure is overwhelmed; and the numbers look as though they will keep on rising.

This policy brief uses a case study of the central Mediterranean route to assess European externalisation policies. Due to the small numbers of arrivals in Malta, our analysis focuses mainly on migration into Italy. Securitisation and externalisation were not inevitable. The brief therefore sketches the political choices within Europe that led to the shrinking of the migration policy space. It then demonstrates the limitations of externalisation through an analysis of the dynamics that propel the current surge in central Mediterranean migration, including how European policy has contributed to the rise on that route. The paper also examines the consequences of externalisation in Libya and Tunisia, as well as for European interests in those states and beyond.

Externalisation has not prevented irregular migration into Europe; nor has it given Europeans greater control over migrant flows. It has, however, changed the EU's and member states' relationships with their southern neighbourhood – as partnerships are increasingly parsed through the lens of securitised migration cooperation. This in turn hands control of Europe's borders and considerable leverage to partners in the region. Yet, the southern neighbourhood remains fundamental to the EU's geopolitical goals: from climate diplomacy and energy deals to economic aspirations and political imperatives like support for Ukraine. Current migration policy undermines those goals and the EU's values-based foreign policy.

Meanwhile, experts argue that the massive funds and resources Europeans allocate to securitisation and externalisation projects could be spent more effectively in other ways. For instance, they could go towards soft-power tools that would help Europeans better manage migration and build regional partnerships over the long term: to strengthen democracies, fund development, and support civil society in countries that migrants originate. In essence, the money may be better spent solving the political economy of migration, rather than financially doubling down on a securitised solution.

Europeans therefore need migration policies that can tie the short-term imperative to manage irregular migration to such longer-term strategies. This should involve partnership building with origin and transit countries to manufacture visa schemes and increase the number and range of legal migration routes. Europeans could then deploy these schemes to disincentivise migrants from using smugglers. Such initiatives would also provide leverage for Europeans to create closer cooperation on counter-smuggling security efforts. Alongside this, the EU needs to help alleviate the burden of frontline states like Italy, including by providing them with administrative assistance to process arrivals in a just and dignified manner. This could all help to sustainably reduce irregular arrivals over the short term and create a platform for longer-term partnerships that can manage and ultimately reduce migration.

This would all have seemed politically risky just a couple of years ago. But Italy, the frontline country of this crisis, now has a leader in Giorgia Meloni with a strong mandate to substantively address migration – and who has even shown glimmers of a change in approach.

In July 2023, for example, Italy hosted the "International Conference on Development and Migration" with European, central Mediterranean, and African partners alongside multilateral development banks. The conference conclusions included and thus validated many of the above policies. Moreover, the "Mattei plan", Italy's new strategic plan towards Africa, aims at building energy partnerships with African countries and promoting development, with the goal of reducing migration flows towards Europe.

Meloni has the political space to drive a different European approach to migration – as she would be unlikely to face the same intensity of attack from her populist colleagues in doing so as some of more liberal counterparts. She needs to start (actually) solving migration, and she will need allies to do it. Leaders across the EU should use that leverage to foreground the Rome conclusions' more holistic policies – in place of the security and externalisation that has so far cost so much and delivered so little.

Building 'fortress Europe'

The construction of 'fortress Europe' – through which the EU and member states restrict the mobility of third-country nationals ostensibly to enable freedom within their walls – has been under way for decades.

Prior to the 1990s, the European migration conversation had largely centred around economic matters. But right-wing parties helped nudge this discussion towards socio-political issues, weaponising misplaced demographic and cultural anxieties over Europe's foreign populations . A ploy that contributed to an electorally potent fear of the 'other' that needed to be assuaged. In response, migration policy gradually transformed from responding to economic need to pre-empting threats: to European jobs, European sovereignty, and – crucially – European security.

This resulted in diminishing legal pathways for (non-rich) third-country migrants to live and work in Europe. Italy, under former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, exemplified this shift. In 1998, his government marked the Italian state's first attempt at legislating migrants' 'integration' into Italy. The 2002 'Bossi-Fini law' then criminalised irregular migration, turning migrants already in the country into security threats overnight and limiting their economic options.

But European economies still needed migrants. And, for a host of reasons, many people from across the world still wanted to migrate to Europe. For instance, while there remains no evidence to support the idea that accessible routes to work and student visas create 'pull factors', considerable support exists for the notion of chain migration: people will always be attracted to prosperous and safe countries, where other members of a familiar community reside. Europe's new migration policies did not (and cannot) change that fundamental logic. They did, however, push some people who would have once classified themselves as economic migrants to try to claim asylum, as the only route to settling and working in Europe.

So, the restriction of legal pathways cut the supply of routes without affecting demand for migrants or migration. This fuelled the growth of new service providers: the people smuggling industry. In Italy, for example, the numbers of undocumented migrants almost quadrupled between 2000-2002. Migrants were then increasingly funnelled into Europe's shadow economy, or trafficked into informal work under little to no government oversight or regulation. This only inflamed popular anxieties about foreign populations in Europe, generating more pressure on politicians to treat migration as a security issue and take 'tough' measures to confront it.

By the time war began to devastate Syria from 2011 onwards, a well-developed smuggling network into Europe was already in place; European asylum systems were creaking; and European policymakers lacked the legal mechanisms or policy space to absorb arrivals. Between 2014-2015, almost a million people crossed the Mediterranean – on the eastern, western, and central routes.

Main Mediterranean migration routes

— Central — Western — Eastern Mediterranean ● Exit points ● Entry points

Source: UNHCR; IOM; Global Initiative.
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Media and policymakers alike jolted into action. In the heat of the crisis, the framing of migration as a security issue hardened. The already-weaponised 'threat' and the intensity of the crisis meant that securitisation became politically dangerous to challenge, even as it shrunk the available policy space of acceptable solutions.

This pushed migration management firmly into the purview of interior ministries and security professionals such as police and border forces. These institutions operate under a simpler logic than politicians: to identify and neutralise threats. The problem became abstracted to such a degree that an impossible goal of stopping all irregular migration seemed necessary, even credible. The externalisation of Europe's borders – building legal, procedural, and often physical or violently coercive walls in the EU's neighbouring states to stop migrants leaving to enter Europe – was a natural solution.

But that simplification collided with the complex reality of the migration phenomenon, creating divisions that strike at the heart of Europe and the European project. When migrants enter European waters or lands, legal obligations are triggered to protect them, their rights, and their dignity under the architecture of universal human rights; a cornerstone of European political systems, political cultures, and the international systems they have constructed. Despite this legal clarity, the change in perception triggered dissonance, requiring public and policymakers to suddenly recognise what had been presented as an existential threat as a human in need of protection. This fed polarisation in Europe. And a split emerged between those who prize the humanitarian angle and those who believe that the 'threat' of hundreds of thousands of people arriving in Europe in uncontrolled fashion needs to be stopped.

Externalisation aims to push that dilemma and discord out of sight.

The price of securing the moat

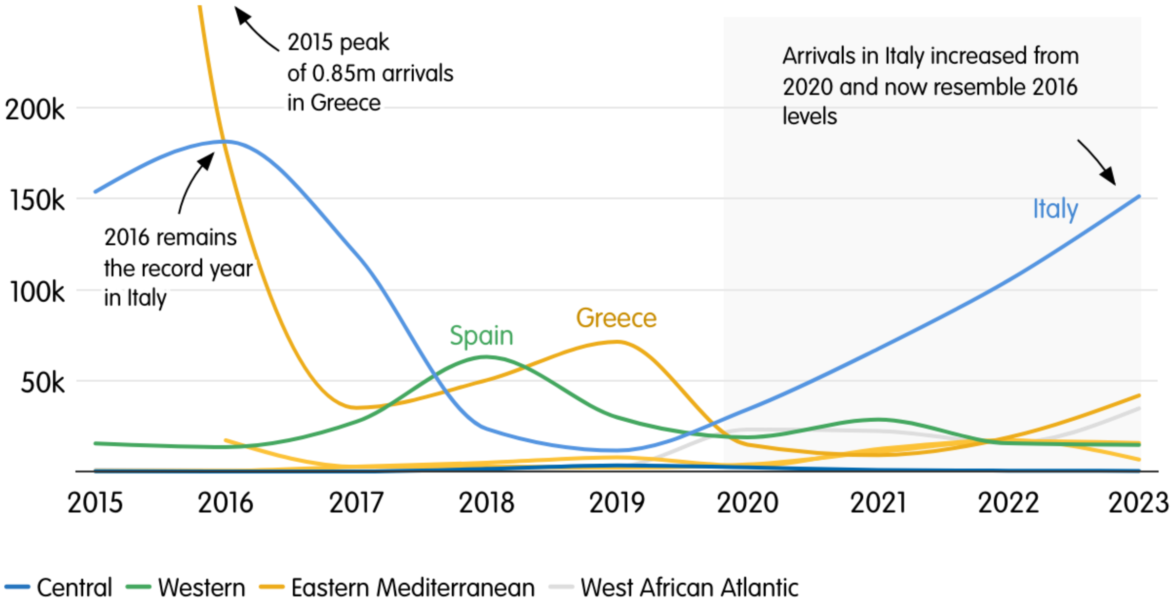
In practice, the European externalisation project meant creating a buffer zone in southern Mediterranean states. This took place via migration deals aimed at improving partner countries' border management and migrant interception abilities. The EU's 2016 migration pact with Turkey would become the blueprint for the success of such deals – increasing confidence in the potential of European cohesion and resources to develop a workable deal for partner countries and cut illicit arrivals (despite criticism from human rights groups). Alongside deals such as this, the EU spun an intricate web of funding mechanisms for a range of projects: from security initiatives to limit migrants' mobility to those aimed at improving migrants' quality of life in transit countries. Those involved claim that this byzantine system has made it difficult to keep track of projects or monitor their efficacy, let alone hold partners to account.[1] Watchdogs criticise the system for its lack of transparency, oversight, and accountability.

Externalisation thus created an implicit power exchange: the EU and member states handed partner countries leverage and considerable financial and material resources to improve their security structures – but gained little to no European leverage over them in return. It also allowed leaders in partner countries to extort Europeans by threatening to open the migratory floodgates: Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan regularly blackmails the EU by threatening to scrap the deal; Morocco has facilitated migrants towards Spanish territories seemingly to influence Madrid's Western Sahara policy; and Egyptian president Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi leverages migration to attract ever-greater amounts of European funding to aid his economic crisis. The deals have also created significant reputational damage – as the EU and member states appear complicit in their partners' human rights abuses.

And yet, at the surface level of arrival numbers at least, the trade-offs initially seemed to work. By 2018, following Italy's deals with Libya, year-on-year arrivals on the central Mediterranean route had fallen by almost 100,000. Countries such as Turkey and Morocco have significantly cut irregular migration to Europe over the medium term, and the eastern and western mediterranean routes now comprise narrow crossing points where Europeans can engage with strong state structures.

From 2020 onwards, however, that all began to change on the much broader (and less stably governed) central Mediterranean route – with 3,000km of coastline stretching from the eastern border of Libya to Tunisia's western tip. Now, the numbers of migrants arriving in Italy from Libya and Tunisia are returning to levels last seen during the crisis years of 2014-2016. People from across Africa and Asia are making their way towards Europe, propelled by the socio-economic impacts of the covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine – as well as deteriorating political and security conditions across sub-Saharan Africa. Climate change also contributes to increasingly inhospitable conditions in North Africa and around the world. At the time of writing, 2023 had seen a 91 per cent year-on-year growth in arrivals via the central Mediterranean. If the current trend continues, then Italy is back to square one.

Annual arrivals in Spain, Greece, and Italy via Mediterranean and west African Atlantic routes, 2015-2023. Registered first arrivals by sea and land.



2023 data cover 1 January-27 November 2023.

Source: IOM and national authorities
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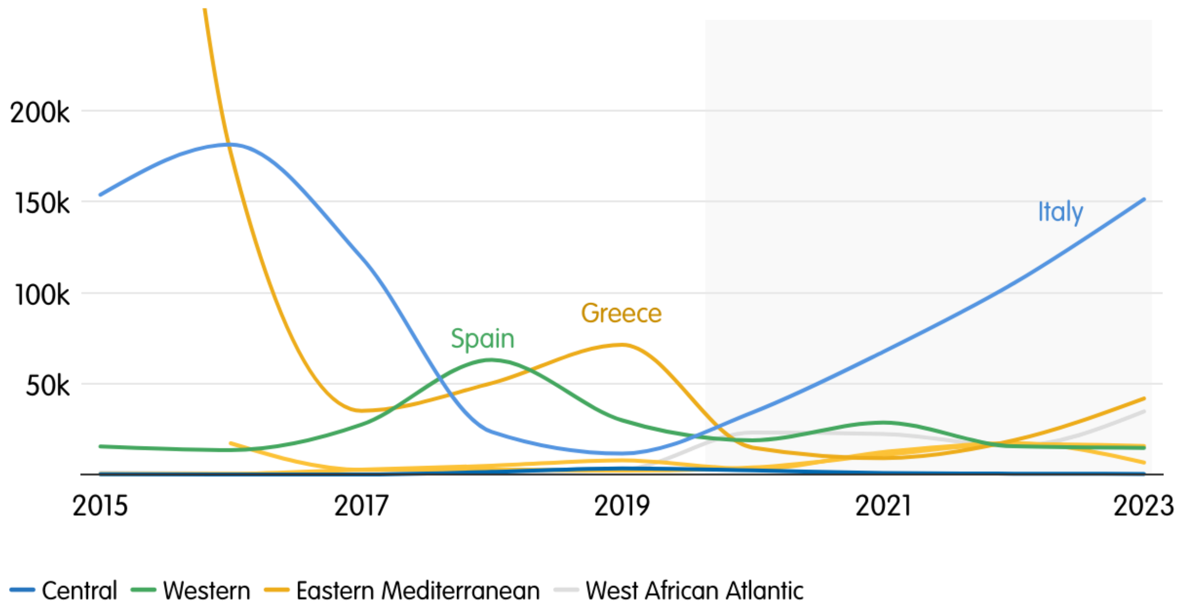

2023 data cover 1 January-27 November 2023.

Source: IOM and national authorities
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Europeans urgently need to take stock of what has gone wrong with externalisation on the central Mediterranean route. That would leave them better placed to upgrade their migration policy toolbox before the next crisis comes along.

Externalisation in the central Mediterranean

How many migrants arrive in Europe is one metric by which it is possible to assess externalisation policies. Focusing only on those numbers, however, obscures a wealth of revealing dynamics that could help make European migration policies less reactive to crises. These include the impact of European externalisation policies themselves, as well as the economies of migration and counter-migration, smuggling dynamics, and deaths and interceptions en route.

Taken together, a picture emerges of European policy playing a cat-and-mouse game with people smugglers across the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, militias, warlords, and dictators promise that they can stop the migrants in exchange for financing, recognition, and support that goes against Europe's geopolitical interests – and does not even cut arrivals beyond the short term.

Libya

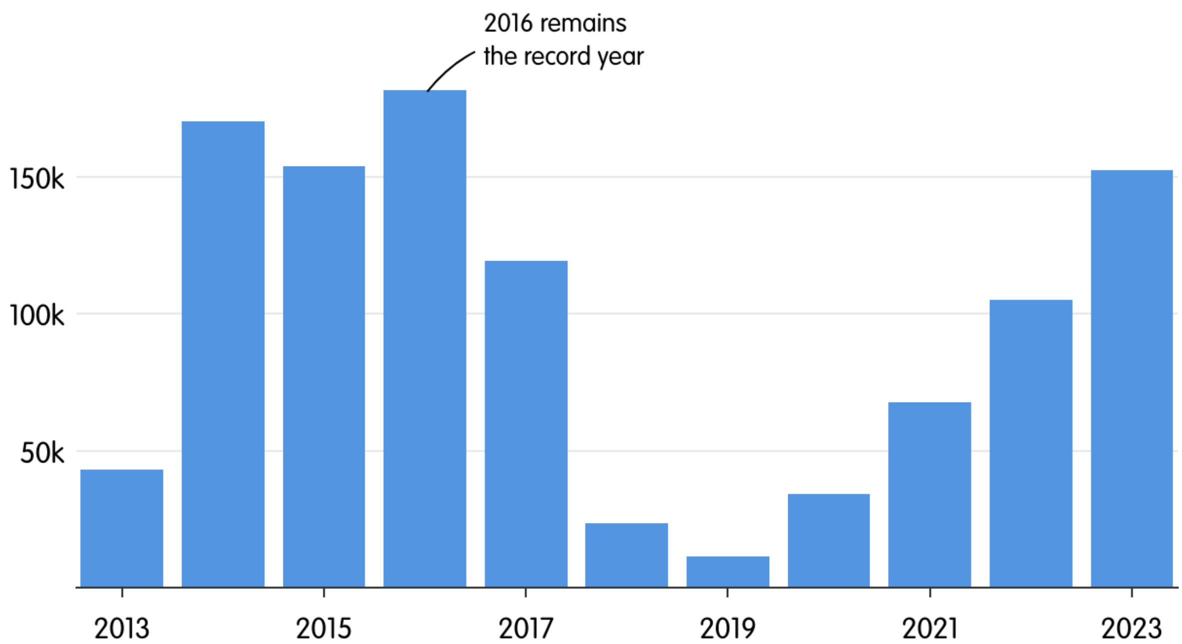
Italian externalisation policies towards Libya pre-date the migration crisis of 2015. In 2008, Italy signed a controversial deal with then-dictator Mummar Gaddafi. The €5 billion agreement included Libyan investments in Italy and access to oil-rich Libya for Italian companies, dressed up as reparations for Italy's brutal colonial occupation of the country. The headline commitments, however, overshadowed Berlusconi's attempt to commit Gaddafi to upgrade Libya's border management and allow Italian naval vessels to turn boats back to Libyan shores. The dictator smelled the power shift, using a visit to Rome just two years later to demand €4 billion annually to stop Europe "turning black". In 2012, following the fall of Gaddafi, Italian policymakers returned to make a new deal with Libya's post-revolutionary authorities. This enabled the "pushbacks" of migrant boats, a practice the European Court of Human Rights condemned. When the migration crisis came, and – according to data collected by Italy's interior ministry – 140-160,000 people a year arrived in Italy from Libya between 2014-2016, the former already had a well-established foundation of securitising migration and externalising its borders.

During that 2014-2015 crisis, the largest spike in arrivals in Europe occurred along the eastern Mediterranean route. This peaked in 2015 at 855,000 people crossing from Turkey to Greece, mainly fleeing war-torn Syria and Iraq but also from countries as distant as Eritrea and Somalia. The EU and Turkey struck their deal in March 2016, which included an accompanying €6 billion payment to improve the conditions of refugees living in Turkey.

Subsequently, the eastern Mediterranean route saw a steep decline in traffic. Some of this drop was due to the Turkish government's efficient implementation of the externalisation elements of the deal. But the initial surges of people fleeing violence in Syria and Iraq had also eased, and refugees had begun to settle in increasing numbers in Turkey as well as countries such as Lebanon and Jordan.

African migrants rerouted to the central Mediterranean. The main thoroughfare thus transformed from Turkey-Greece to Libya-Italy (with negligible numbers also leaving from Tunisia), specifically through cities such as Zawiya and Zuwara on Libya's north-western coast. As a result, 2016 remains the record year for arrivals along the central Mediterranean route.

Annual arrivals in Italy, 2013-2023. Registered first arrivals by sea



2023 data cover 1 January-13 November.

Source: IOM and Italian ministry of interior.
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In response, the Italian government attempted a smaller version of the EU-Turkey deal with Libya. In February 2017, Italy and Libya signed a new memorandum of understanding that aimed to bolster Libyan capacities to guard its borders and coastline, fight people-smuggling, and return migrants captured at sea to Libya. Italy's then-interior minister Marco Minniti followed up the memorandum with a tour of Libya – where he observed first-hand the limits of a deal on paper when the Libyan government was so weak on the ground.

Minniti conducted a series of negotiations with militias and other non-state actors. Through these he identified a way to bypass Libya's weak government and achieve quick results by creating new incentives for smugglers to change their business model. The accompaniment to the 2017 memorandum – which became known colloquially as the 'Minniti deal' – formalised smugglers overnight into coastguards, detention centre managers, and other employees of the counter-migration security infrastructure.

The July 2017 EU Foreign Affairs Council conclusions buttressed the Minniti deal by facilitating the use of EU policy instruments – the EU Border Assistance Mission and the EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia – to provide training and other support to the Libyan coastguard and newly formalised groups in southern Libya. A 90 per cent reduction followed in arrivals in Italy from 2017 to 2018. However, just as the 2016 Turkey deal funnelled migrants towards the central Mediterranean route, so too did the Minniti deal turn the western Mediterranean route into the main thoroughfare, as year-on-year arrivals into Europe from Morocco more than doubled in 2018.

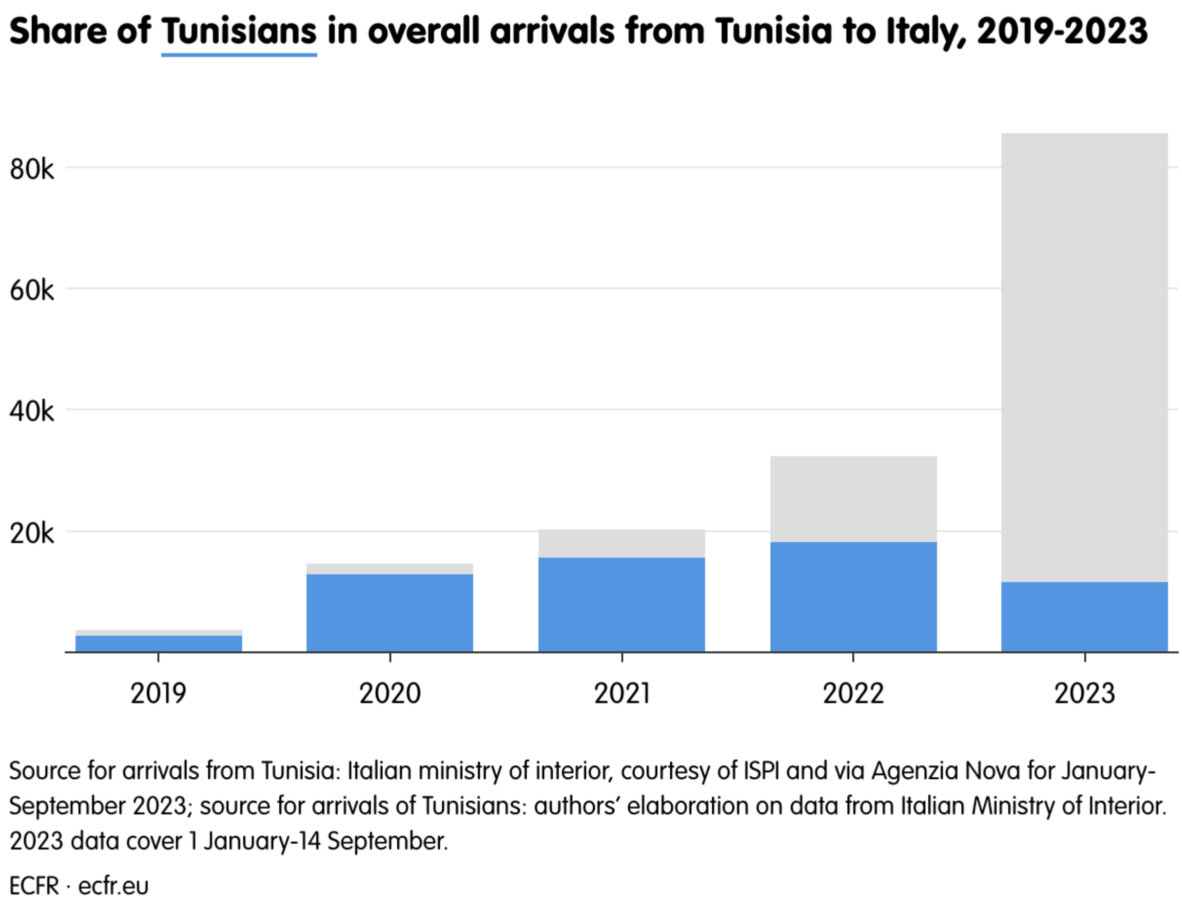
Moreover, the Minniti deal did not account for eastern Libya. And, from 2020 onwards, arrivals in Italy from Libya began to increase once more, mainly due to the opening of new smuggling routes. Notably, Saddam Haftar, the son of eastern Libya's ruling military dictator, Khalifa Haftar, oversaw the enlargement of two new routes to Europe. The first of these takes mainly Bangladeshi and Syrian migrants by plane (via Syria) to Benghazi's airport and then onto boats to Europe – likely with the cooperation of Russia's Wagner Group. Haftar eventually claimed a second route, this one smuggling mainly Egyptians and Sudanese migrants across Libya's land borders and towards the coast. By 2023, over half of arrivals in Italy from Libya came from Haftar's eastern routes.

Tunisia

In contrast to Libya's role as a transit country, Tunisia was traditionally an origin country for migrants to Europe. European migration policy towards Tunis had therefore long centred around repatriating Tunisian nationals who were deemed ineligible for asylum. But externalisation played its part too. Italy, as the largest recipient of Tunisian arrivals, was at the forefront of this twin-track of repatriation and externalisation.

Since 1998, successive Italian governments have signed six migration deals with Tunisia. The externalisation element of these deal intensified following the migration crisis. From 2016, the EU began providing instalments of a €37m disbursement through the EU trust fund for Africa (EUTFA). The EUTFA was the primary vehicle for EU funding for migration-management projects. Ostensibly, its purpose was to address the root causes of irregular migration in Africa – but it was often used to fund securitised border management projects. The €37m for Tunisia aimed to improve border control and the country's "management of migration flows". It went towards improving the Tunisian coast guard's interception capacity and preventing the Tunisians from leaving through the criminalisation of unauthorised departures. The latter was the legacy of a 2004 law generally attributed to Italian pressure from past attempts to curtail migration. In 2017, the Italian government struck a new bilateral deal aimed at further modernising Tunisia's coastguard.

Yet, Europe's investment in Tunisia's maritime borders did little to stop a jump in Tunisian migration in 2020; nor did it stop Tunisia's transformation from an origin to a transit country that coincided with an attack by Khalifa Haftar on Tripoli in 2019. Since this period the eastern Tunisian city of Sfax (at just 130km from the Italian island of Lampedusa) has become a migration hub.



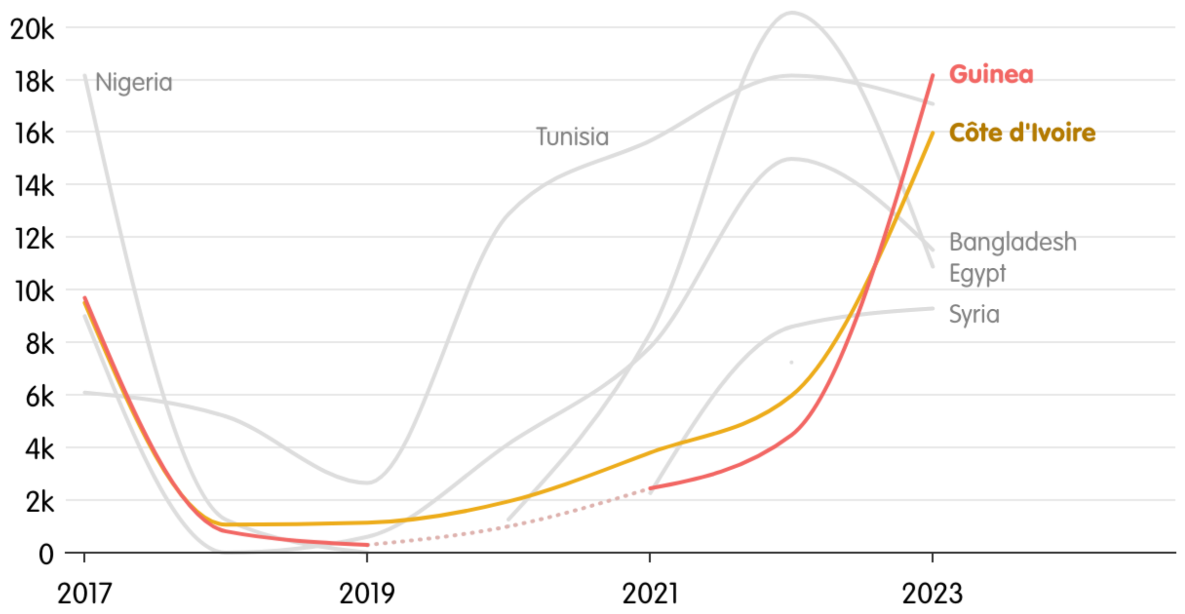
The covid-19 pandemic had a disastrous economic impact on Tunisia. But Tunisians had already been primed to migrate by years of deteriorating political and economic conditions in the country. Indeed, the numbers of Tunisians migrating to escape the social impact of those conditions had been steadily growing for some time. One 2022 survey from the Arab Barometer at Princeton University found that the percentage of Tunisians considering migration more than doubled between 2011-2022. As a result, Tunisians made up the largest group of arrivals in Italy between 2019 to 2021. Even in 2022, Italian ministry of interior data show that they remained at 17 per cent, having been displaced at the top by Egyptians arriving in Europe from eastern Libya (20.5 per cent of all arrivals).

From the second half of 2022 onwards, however, sub-Saharan Africans have become the largest group migrating to Europe from Tunisia. Europeans' focus on Tunisia's coast and confidence in deals with Libya meant they overlooked Tunisia's porous land borders. As Libya descended into conflict in 2019, sub-Saharan migrants started fleeing over those borders into Tunisia. Alongside this, the covid-19 pandemic pushed many sub-Saharan migrants already in Tunisia out of their informal jobs. From 2020 onwards, a tent city began to sprawl around the offices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in an upmarket suburb of Tunis, comprising sub-Saharan migrants desperate for assistance and support. They largely received nothing.

But the failure of European externalisation policies to either accommodate future threats such as spillover from Libya, or to achieve their goal of managing Tunisian migration, did not stop the European Commission and Italy doubling down with a further €160m between them to continue developing Tunisia's coastguard and counter-smuggling capabilities.

The growth in departures continued unabated. The earlier demand from Tunisians to migrate had sparked a booming migration economy. [2] This covered multiple industries from boat-building to temporary accommodation. At the start of 2023, Tunisia's authoritarian president Kais Saied gave a speech (laden with 'great replacement' conspiracising beloved by the European far right) that sparked a surge in violent racism towards sub-Saharan Africans who were working or studying in the country. These migrants began to seek refuge in Europe – facilitated by the Tunisian migration economy. In the first nine months of 2023, Ivorians and Guineans represented the largest number of arrivals in Italy from Tunisia. The Ivorian community perhaps provides the clearest example: it is the largest sub-Saharan migrant community in Tunisia. But, over the first 11 months of 2023, Ivorians were among the top overall arrivals in Italy.

Top overall arrivals in Italy including Ivorians and Guineans, 2017-2023



2023 data cover 1 January-29 November.

Source: Italian ministry of interior
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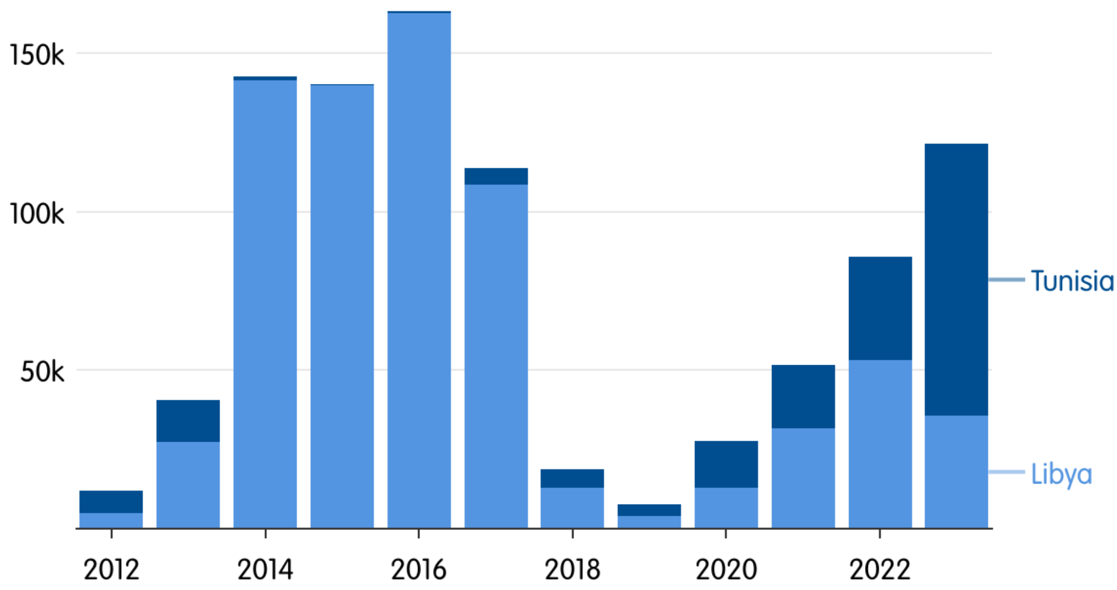
Despite Tunisia's security issues for black Africans, the country likely also offers a more hospitable and safer route than Libya for migrants fleeing war and instability in countries such as Sudan, Chad, and Eritrea. And, over 2023, an estimated 5,000 people have crossed Tunisia's land borders with Libya and Algeria.[3] Tunisian migration and the rise in transiting migrants through Tunisia have thus transformed central Mediterranean migration. In 2017, Libya was the source of 91 per cent of arrivals in Italy; in the first nine months of 2023, Italian ministry of interior data indicate that around 70 per cent departed from Tunisia and 30 per cent from Libya.

Arrivals in Italy from Libya and Tunisia, 2012-2023



2023 data cover 1 January-14 September.

Source: Italian ministry of interior (courtesy of ISPI); Italian ministry of interior via Agenzia Nova.
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The new Tunisian route also likely represents a more fertile business environment for people smugglers than Libya, which is dominated by select militias that more often engage in trafficking.

Smuggling dynamics in the central Mediterranean

People smuggling and human trafficking are two distinct activities. The former refers to a paid service to move people across borders; the latter is an act of violent coercion based on control over those being trafficked for the purpose of exploitation. In the central Mediterranean, migrant experiences often exist on a fluctuating spectrum of smuggling and trafficking. The well-documented experience of migrants in Libya typifies this: people pay for smuggling services only to end up being ransomed, sexually abused, tortured, and forced to work to buy their freedom.

Politicians tend to reduce people smuggling and trafficking to the work of organised transnational cartels. But central Mediterranean smuggling is more a network of highly localised 'service providers'. Migrants must therefore negotiate with different providers across each leg of their journey. These complex and fluid networks have proven highly adaptable to emergent threats from reinforced border policing, internationally supported anti-smuggling campaigns, and even global events such as the covid-19 pandemic. That is because smugglers and smuggling networks are most sensitive to economic stimuli: as long as there is demand for their services and money to pay for it, they will exist in some form or another.

Numerous services are available to migrants at different price points, depending on the length of the journey, the quality of the experience, and of course the reliability. The market is so sophisticated that people are even able to purchase crossings in bulk (as any boat could sink or be intercepted). Some offer escrow systems through "Hawala" partners to ensure that the smugglers do not receive their payment until the migrant has successfully landed in Europe. The price of the sea journey also depends on the weather: summer journeys over calm waters are considerably more expensive than winter journeys across choppy seas. North African and Asian migrants can generally afford less perilous services than those from sub-Saharan Africa.

Different countries also have very different markets. Tunisia's smuggling networks are smaller and less developed than those of Libya. In Tunisia, a marketplace of agents offers increasingly professional packages to migrants. Sub-Saharan African agents play an increasingly prominent role in this market due to Tunisia's transformation from an origin to a transit country – underlining the fluidity of the networks.[4] Nevertheless, sub-Saharan Africans still often travel in poor conditions and are subject to structured smuggling operations (verging upon trafficking), which carry them to the coastal towns of Zarzis and Sfax and across to Europe.

Since roughly 2021, Tunisian migrants appear to have turned away from smugglers and are instead increasingly self-smuggling. This leads to highly decentralised and irregular departures all along the coastline, resulting in sporadic waves of Tunisians arriving on Italian shores and in Tunisian morgues. Smugglers also usually have relationships with local authorities – so the shift to self-smuggling is making migratory dynamics more difficult to read and manage.

In Libya, people smugglers have undergone waves of mafia-isation as local militias become accepted actors involved in both smuggling and policing. Smuggling networks grew freely in the chaos of post-revolutionary Libya. Militias in north-western coastal cities such as Zawiya, Sabratha, and Zuwara link up with smugglers further inland, all the way down to Libya's expansive land borders. This cooperation resulted from local militias seeking to maximise the profitability of the turf they controlled – which was smuggling for those on the northern coasts, the southern borders, and key junctions in between.

The Minniti deal that transformed these people smugglers into counter-smuggling officers represented a powerful injection of capital and opportunity. And the EU bolstered the smugglers' financial inducements to 'change sides' through funding for migration projects. This became so valuable that it fed conflicts for control over migrant infrastructure in key coastal cities.

The 'ex-smugglers' then gravitated towards trafficking through their control of the migration-management infrastructure and the commercialisation of counter-smuggling. The groups engaged in a dark trade of migrants to detention centres: enslaving them and violently coercing money from migrants' families to pay the fees for the crossings they still managed. Most migrants enter Libya through a smuggling system, but they almost inevitably become part of these trafficking networks. By 2019, roughly 1 per cent of Libya's estimated 700,000 migrants were trapped in the country's detention system. These networks have dominated in western Libya since 2016, with smaller-scale smugglers operating on the fringes.

Since 2021, Haftar in eastern Libya has sought to emulate this model. The Pylos shipwreck in June 2023, when hundreds of migrants perished in a grossly overburdened vessel, underlines how people using Haftar's services are abused to such an extent that they can be considered trafficked, despite paying for the crossing. Like in western Libya, the violent monopolisation of the eastern market created significantly worse conditions for migrants. It also saw the removal of the higher quality and safer smuggling options available in more competitive networks.

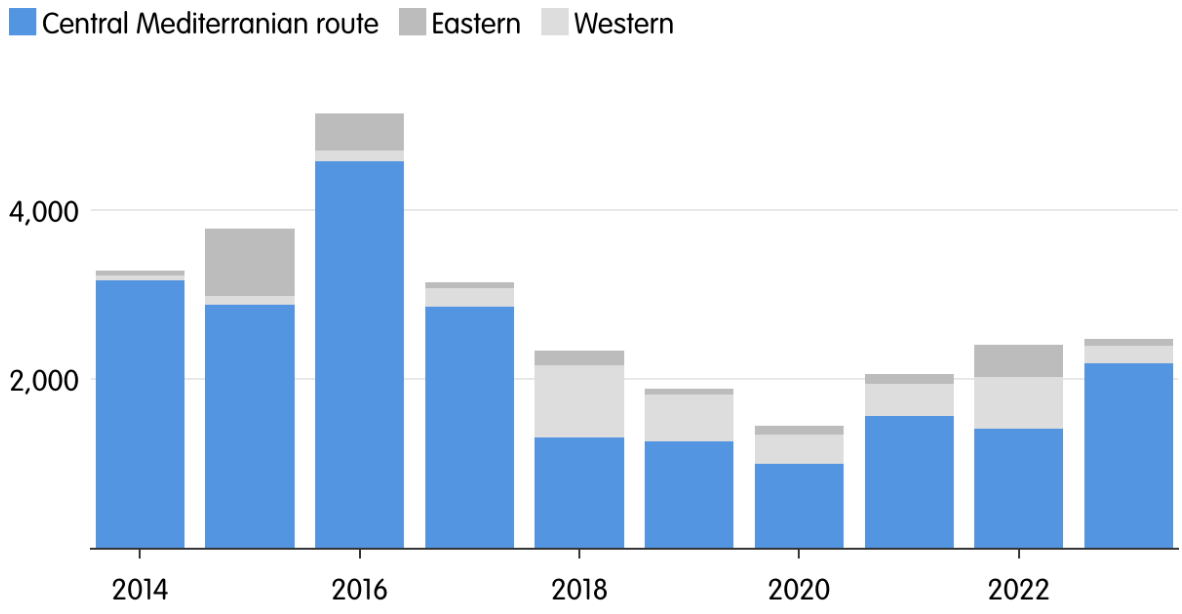
The migrants who don't make it

The central Mediterranean is dubbed the "the world's deadliest migratory route". Between January 2014 to June 2023, the route claimed more than 22,000 of a total 28,000 migrant deaths and disappearances in the entire Mediterranean. Disturbingly, the numbers could easily be far higher, as migration organisations recognise that they have no means of accurately accounting for all the “ghost ships” that leave North Africa never to arrive.

The Libya-Italy trip is particularly dangerous due to its length, especially – as the Pylos tragedy illustrated – for those travelling from eastern Libya. The trip is shorter from Tunisia, but the IOM’s Flavio Di Giacomo has called the locally-produced makeshift boats “the most fragile we have ever seen in the Mediterranean”. To make matters worse, climate change is contributing to increasingly extreme weather, further imperilling migrants at sea.

So, the increase in departures since 2020 corresponds with an increase in deaths and disappearances on the central Mediterranean route. The first nine months of 2023 recorded 2,000 fatalities – the deadliest year since 2017. Externalisation deals may have contributed to an initial drop in arrivals, but they also seem to have increased the proportion of those dying en route relative to those arriving.

Dead and missing migrants along the Central Mediterranean route, 2014-2023



2023 data cover January-November 2023.

Source: IOM
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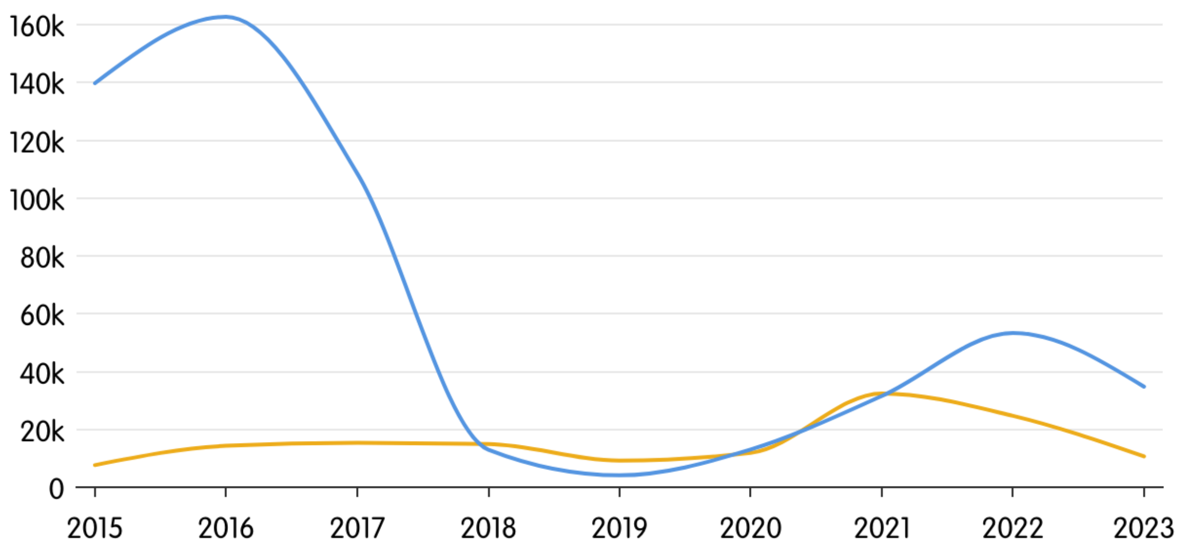
Combine these numbers with those being intercepted or detained, and it suggests that – rather than stopping people migrating – externalisation deals just make the journey more arduous and dangerous, without that serving as a deterrent.

In Libya, the EU and member states have only increased their cooperation with and support for the coastguard, despite repeated instances of alarming violence against migrants at sea by the erstwhile smugglers. European border officials even help Libya's coastguard intercept ships beyond Libyan waters. Yet, despite considerable European financial and logistical assistance, the proportion of interceptions versus arrivals suggests the coastguard is limited in its effectiveness. Coastguards cannot prevent people attempting to migrate so are most effective when the flows to Libya's coastlines are lower.

Libyan coastguard interceptions at sea v arrivals to Italy from Libya, 2015-2023



Number of Libyan coastguard interceptions
Number of arrivals in Italy from Libya
2023 data cover January-September 2023

Source: UNHCR, EEAS, IOM, Mixed Migration Portal, Italian ministry of interior (courtesy of ISPI)
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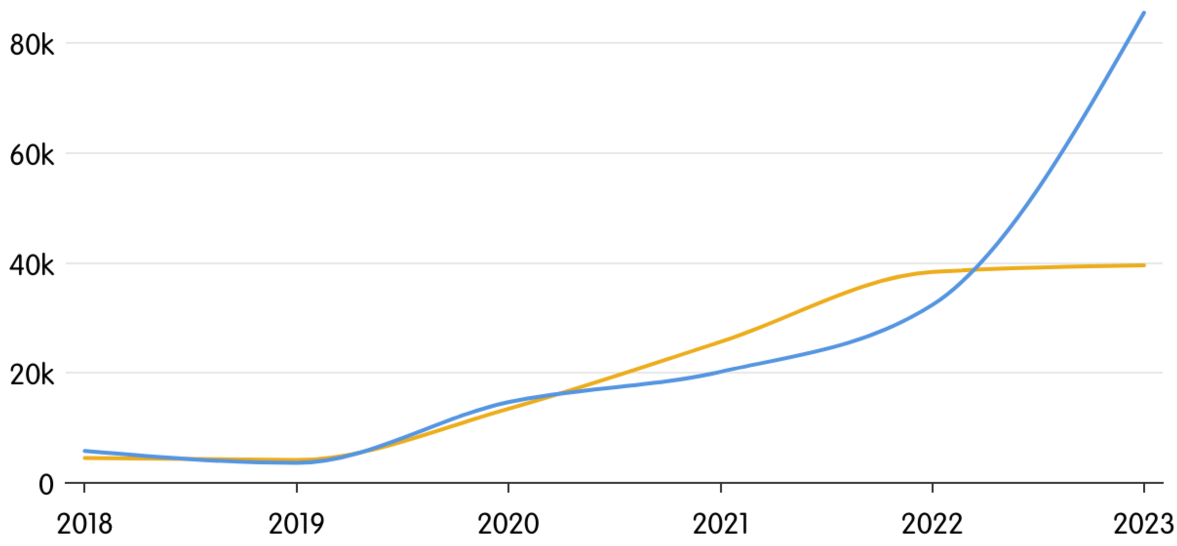
In Tunisia, steadily increasing EU and Italian support for the coastguard since 2019 resulted in a steadily increasing number of interceptions. But, as in Libya, it has failed to keep up with increasing numbers attempting to migrate and the sharp rise in departures over 2023. This again demonstrates that coastguard interceptions can inhibit arrivals but not prevent them altogether or diminish migrants' aspirations to travel. There appears to be a certain point at which the effectiveness of coastguard interceptions plateaus.

Tunisian coastguard interceptions at sea v arrivals in Italy from Tunisia", 2018-2023



— Number of Tunisian coastguard interceptions
— Number of arrivals in Italy from Tunisia
2023 data cover January-August.

Source: UNHCR, EEAS, IOM, Mixed Migration Portal, Italian ministry of interior (courtesy of ISPI).
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The limitations of externalisation are thus increasingly apparent. Not only are people smugglers and traffickers highly adaptive – able to latch on to state structures to either dominate them, co-opt them, or dovetail with them – but they are also highly responsive to changing political and economic conditions. The scale of demand is what drives these hydra-esque qualities of the illicit migration industry, creating a migratory phenomenon that is too vast for border forces to effectively contain or curtail beyond a certain limit. The most notable impact of European securitisation and externalisation policies is therefore not to curtail migration or neutralise smugglers and traffickers, but to increase the value of the smugglers' services and imperil the lives of those who use them.

Europeans should not expect this demand for migration and smuggling simply to disappear. The political volatility around Africa's "coup belt", for example, is degrading previously poor and poorly-functioning state systems across the Sahel and west Africa: regions that already supply significant numbers of migrants to the central Mediterranean route. The ongoing civil war in Sudan is also creating a migratory wave. In its first five months, that war resulted in 5 million forcibly displaced people, of whom an estimated 1 million have already travelled abroad – fast outstripping UN estimates of 815,000 refugees. Sudanese refugees are already travelling through Libya and Tunisia towards Europe; this will likely intensify as the conflict continues.

Moreover, many of the world's most climate vulnerable locations are across the Middle East and Africa. Climate-related migration is already beginning in North Africa, for instance, where Tunisia faces a severe drought that is decimating agriculture in an environment of already prevalent food insecurity. In Libya, an entire city was destroyed by a recent hurricane . That catastrophe created a wave of tens of thousands of internally displaced people, also highlighting the inability of the region's kleptocracies to manage natural disasters that are becoming more frequent. Further east, countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh are highly climate vulnerable too – and already have a high rate of migration to Europe. Climate change's steadily worsening consequences will exacerbate failing states and struggling economies across the Middle East and Africa, as well as drive conflicts over increasingly scarce resources.

Another concerning multiplier is that while historically most African migration takes place within the continent, the increasing prevalence of conflicts and sudden hostility of previous migratory focal points in North Africa like Tunisia will push more people towards Europe. Externalisation cannot address underlying migratory drivers such as these. In fact, it may exacerbate them.

The price of not securing the moat

A focus on arrival numbers not only blurs the picture of what is happening on the central Mediterranean route, it also obscures the consequences of externalisation for Europe's partner countries. That is, externalisation hinders the long-term development of Libya and Tunisia – thereby also making them more susceptible to smugglers and migration – and undermines a diverse set of European geopolitical interests in the southern Mediterranean and beyond.

Libya

The Minniti deal came at a significant cost – both for Libya and for Europe. Libya's government was already weak; Italy weakened it further by directly negotiating with militias. The deal provided non-state groups with an independent means of empowerment and further leverage over the government in Tripoli. The militias' new role as migration enforcers may have been less financially profitable than smuggling, but it gave them the security of being formally under Libya's interior ministry. This in turn gave them access to government funding for salaries and profitable public-sector corruption mechanisms. By making migrants victims of trafficking, the Minniti deal also increased the likelihood that they would be forced into Europe's illicit economies following the journey.

Embarrassingly, two major beneficiaries of the Minniti deal, Mohammed Kashlaf, who managed a notorious detention centre in Zawiya, and Abdel-Rahman Milad (Al-Bidja), who headed Zawiya's coastguard unit, were placed under UN sanctions in 2018 for trafficking. In a demonstration of how non-state groups had accumulated significant power over any Libyan civilian government, they escaped any real punishment. In September 2021, Libya's prime minister appointed Milad to a prestigious role as the head of Libya's naval academy.

So, instead of trying to develop a long-term partner in the Libyan government, Italian leaders snatched a short-term success. They may now be coming to rue that decision as the Haftars are sending migrants across the Mediterranean in large numbers in a bid to get the same deal. Haftar aims to use migration as leverage to develop a working partnership with Italy and the EU. That partnership would help to empower him politically, militarily, and financially – against the current European consensus on Libya of recognising the government in Tripoli and pushing for elections.

By training and funding Libya's counter-migration apparatus, the EU also tied itself to these unsavoury actors at great reputational cost for a values-based power. This likely does little to nullify accusations of hypocrisy from leaders in the global south when Europeans come calling to shore up the rules-based international order. Indeed, human rights groups argue that the EU's and member states' externalisation policy in Libya is a strategy to shirk their legal responsibilities by keeping migrants in Libya where they are subject to extreme abuse by the militias-turned-coastguards.

Despite the coastguard's abuses, EU border agency Frontex allegedly helps it capture migrant ships in a likely violation of the principle of non-refoulement. One recent investigation found that Maltese authorities and Frontex have taken this a step further by employing Haftar's brigade to pull migrant vessels back from Maltese waters to eastern Libya; simultaneously pulling Europeans into even dirtier legal waters in their quest to externalise borders.

In March 2023, a UN Human Rights Council (HRC) Fact Finding Mission into abuses in Libya called on the EU and member states to withdraw their support for the Libyan coastguard. The EU responded with hostile indifference. The next HRC session a saw European states including Italy and Malta help to quietly bury the mission; others simply turned a blind eye to its demise. This was a mission that the Netherlands and other member-states had spent years trying to initiate to advance accountability in Libya. And it could have proven a powerful tool in advancing Libya's political process and security sector reform.

Moreover, at least since 2016, countries such as Italy, Greece, France, Germany, Denmark, and Spain have increasingly criminalised NGO's attempts to rescue migrants by deploying counter-smuggling laws. This has hampered search and rescue missions, increasing the chances of a migrant dying in the waters off Libya from 1-in-42 in 2016 to 1-in-18 in 2018. The situation worsened in 2020, when the EU removed the search and rescue mandate of its naval mission in the Mediterranean, while retaining support functions to the Libyan coastguard. Member states such as Austria forced this move by threatening to block the mission's renewal, claiming that search and rescue creates a "pull factor" for migration to Europe. [5] There is, however, no evidence to support the pull factor argument – while proof of its deadly consequences increases by the day. A sorry state of affairs that demonstrates how a commitment to externalisation policies comes at the cost of other important European interests and policy projects.

The EU's response now that numbers of crossings are nearing the crisis years once more is eerily familiar: to double down on a securitised approach to migration hoping to strengthen border externalisation (albeit stating that more needs to be done to protect human rights). The bloc's new action plan for the central Mediterranean focuses on strengthening Libya's border management capacities and tightening their integration with Frontex through the EU border assistance mechanism. The EU is also rehashing diplomatic vehicles such as its trilateral Libya taskforce with the UN and the African Union, in the hopes of enhancing mechanisms for voluntary repatriations of migrants. Given that people are willing to risk their lives and freedom to arrive in Europe, any voluntary returns plan seems doomed to have limited impact.

In short, the main lesson from Libya should be that the EU traded its values, resources, and Libya stabilisation policies not for a robust externalisation partnership but for time. While Libya's state remains weak and overrun by the interests of armed non-state actors, the Minniti deal did result in a substantial drop in arrival numbers from 2018 onwards – which dispelled the feelings of crisis around irregular migration in Europe. But that deal came at great cost and would never have stopped arrivals forever. This is because it did not target underlying migratory drivers and inadvertently strengthened smugglers and traffickers.

Tunisia

The Tunisian case underlines the cost of externalisation for the EU and member states and their values-based foreign policy. Thanks to Italy's longstanding returns policies, Tunisians often represent around 70 per cent of deportees from the country each year. But that only accounts for just under 2,000 returns annually; a negligible number when tens of thousands of people arrive in Italy annually. Again, this is because migrants retain the rights to claim asylum, access other migrant schemes such as family reunification, and are protected from collective expulsion under article four of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Italy has tried to ameliorate this by bamboozling newly arriving Tunisian migrants into surrendering these rights through a series of administrative and legal traps, an activity recently ruled to be in violation of multiple ECHR articles.

In their desperation to make repatriation work, Italian governments have exposed themselves to legal damage. But, as the numbers show, this has been to very little avail. Italy's problem is not that it lacks the diplomatic framework to repatriate Tunisian migrants; it is that it lacks the administrative capacity to provide Tunisian migrants (and the tens of thousands of other migrants who arrive annually) the legal process that is their right. It also lacks the capacity to actually repatriate many of those found ineligible for asylum, who often disappear into other member states and into the illicit economy.

Recent developments in Tunisia also again illustrate the risks to European interests of surrendering control of migration policy to authoritarian or weak regimes. Over 2023, as Tunisian migration waned while sub-Saharan migration grew, Meloni led a 'team Europe' response to forge a new migration deal with Saied. In July 2023, the parties agreed a memorandum of understanding that could have symbolised the start of a new approach to migration partnerships.

Instead of the traditional securitised framework, the deal framed European migration support for Tunisia within a broader context of sustainable development, with the aim of cutting medium to long-term migration. Only one of the deal's five pillars explicitly relates to migration. The broader provisions included a pledge of €150m of direct budgetary support to ameliorate Tunisia's balance of payments crisis, and a further €900m in macroeconomic support that was conditional on Tunisia agreeing a broader package of cash for reforms from the International Monetary Fund. European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen trumpeted the deal as a model agreement for other southern Mediterranean countries.

The specific migration provisions of the deal, however, remained focused on externalisation. With a sense of déjà vu, the EU would immediately disburse €105m to enhance Tunisia's border management capacities. Meloni and the EU also built up the deal and framed its announcement as a migration deal. Subsequent commentary on the matter followed suit: Italy and Tunisia had struck a new migration deal to strengthen the latter's borders. A flurry of criticism followed, given that the deal would bolster Tunisia's interior ministry at a time when

Tunisian security services were flagrantly abusing migrants in the wake of Saied's incendiary speech.

Saied benefited from the legitimisation of high-level visits by European leaders. The deal was announced in Tunis by Saied, the Dutch and Italian prime ministers, and von der Leyen at a press conference (with no press allowed). This sent a message that the EU was aligned with an authoritarian president who had dismantled a democracy Europeans had spent the last decade promoting – an isolating and chilling moment for democratic advocates across North Africa.

It also provided political validation and economic support for a coastguard service mired in abuse allegations, and security services that were deporting migrants (including children and pregnant women) into desert border zones and leaving them there to die. Critics of the deal argue that Europe's political and economic support to Saied empowers him to continue pursuing a policy path that is wrecking Tunisia's state and economy – sacrificing the leverage Europeans need to press him to change from a course that will eventually cause another huge surge in Tunisian migration.

The deal also contributed to divisions and discord within the EU. German decision-makers, for instance, insisted that the EU could provide none of the funding without Saied agreeing to the IMF bailout deal, following his disastrous management of Tunisia's economy. Saied had recently rejected a deal his government had developed with the IMF, claiming he could not tolerate foreign dictats in reference to the deal's austerity policies. This caused considerable consternation in Europe given Tunisia's need for constant budget support to maintain imports of crucial goods like food and medicines.

Behind the scenes, German policymakers and others also expressed frustration that the deal had taken place under a European banner without first obtaining a European-wide agreement. For Italian policymakers and von der Leyen, on the other hand, the pact represented the formalisation of longstanding collective positions on migration: funding for the deal's migration components was separate, ring-fenced, and therefore not conditional on Saied accepting the IMF proposal. These behind-the-scenes disputes escalated to the point that Germany's foreign minister wrote to the European Commission claiming that insufficient consultation with member states, as well as the deal's lack of consideration for human rights and procedural faults, meant that it could not become a template for future agreements. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell echoed these sentiments, privately warning the EU may well lose in court if sued over the deal. The agreement sparked similar clashes in the European Parliament.

Despite this, Italy and the European Commission pressed on. Following a mini-crisis that saw 7,000 migrants arrive in Lampedusa in just two days, they supplied parts to help Tunisia's coastguard maintain vessels, alongside €127m of further support. But this only vindicated the analysts, activists, and migration experts who had long critiqued EU migration policy as reactionary.

As discussed, coastguard interceptions are most successful when the numbers of people migrating are low – and the numbers of interceptions by Tunisia's coastguard are plateauing while crossings are rising. This raises the question of whether Tunisia has the capacity to provide further externalisation concessions to Europe. Moreover, recent reports suggest that the coastguard is increasingly hampered by administrative issues and corruption; problems that sending money and equipment do not solve.

Saied himself has rejected the concept of externalisation, repeatedly proclaiming that Tunisia would not be Europe's border guard; nor would it become a country of resettlement for migrants deported from Europe. He even seems to be driving out migrants who study and work within Tunisia. That he continues to engage in counter-migration negotiations could suggest other motives: he may be trying to boost the coffers of an interior ministry he increasingly relies upon to cling on to power; or he may be extorting the legitimacy Europeans provide by playing to their migratory fears. As we have seen, this is a common tactic by the region's dictators.

Said lent credence to these more cynical readings by sending back the initial disbursement of EU funds, calling it derisory and not what was promised – and forcing Europeans back to the negotiating table. This was an unprecedented move, and one that suggests Saied thought he would receive the entire €1.1 billion pledged in the deal as migration cooperation financing (irrespective of any IMF deal). European attempts to market the agreement both as a migration deal and a broader partnership package were therefore at best confusing. The flagship deal now looks to be on the rocks, in part due to its success depending on the mercurial character of a dictator.

In Tunisia, just as in Libya, numerous migration deals over more than a decade seem to be powerless to influence the underlying currents of migration. Instead, they prove more effective at endangering migrants, degrading their rights, and shoring up the power and leverage of authoritarian leaders. This reinforces the destabilising political dynamics that create further migration.

Untangling the Gordian knot

After years of doubling down on securitisation and externalisation, Europe has become the proverbial man with a hammer: only seeing nails when the situation requires a range of economic, diplomatic, and political tools deployed cohesively by a coalition.

Securitisation led to the creation of a lucrative externalisation market. This has now trickled down to North Africa, where Tunisia and Libya criminalise and commoditise the many migrants they once absorbed. The result is more irregular arrivals in Europe.

Creating and managing externalisation partnerships has also dominated European relationships with the wider southern neighbourhood since 2014. This comes at the cost of pursuing other long-term interests. It surrenders European leverage and fuels accusations of hypocrisy that undermine efforts to develop closer political and economic partnerships. It stands in the way of stabilising long-term crisis zones such as Libya and the Sahel. And it displaces resources that could be used to promote sustainable development. Progress on all these fronts would reduce the need for people to migrate in the first place, and help repair the status of current transit countries such as Libya and Tunisia as countries of destination for migrants.

Moreover, the securitised framing divides the EU thanks to the trade-offs against European values that externalisation demands. The perception of migrants as a security risk – and migration as something to be defended against – is thus turning Europeans against each other when they most need to work together. A recent leaked call between Meloni and a prankster pretending to be an African leader highlights Italian anxiety that it is now being made a buffer zone by northern Europe, just it has tried to make a buffer zone of northern Africa.

The root of Europe's migration conundrum is insecurity: the twin anxieties of a lack of control over migration flows and misplaced blame on migrants for socio-political problems such as crime and wage stagnation. This serves as easy pickings for a politics of fear. Yet, just as in the 1990s, European economies still need migrants to fill labour and skills shortages. But now, major European countries such as Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom also require young migrants to rebalance their ageing populations.

However, when people arrive in an uncontrolled fashion by the tens of thousands, it feeds anxieties and closes the space to promote the benefits of migration. It also makes productive assimilation almost impossible. Asylum systems become overwhelmed, leaving thousands of people stranded, unable to work, in camps or makeshift accommodation, as a burden to the state. This churns migrants into the shadow economy or unregulated work. Those who are trafficked are often pushed straight into crime or forced labour. Popular feelings of a lack of control over migrants become replicated in rhetoric at the political level.

European politicians need to show their electorates that they are "taking back control" over migration. But ironically, the externalisation policy they keep doubling down upon to assuage these anxieties necessitates relinquishing control over migration flows. By definition, externalisation hands migration management to a partner country – whose leaders often have more interest in leveraging European anxieties about migration to accrue benefits for themselves than in stopping migration.

To truly control migration and fight the crisis-extortion cycle, Europeans will have to undermine the business of people smugglers. The only way to sap the massive demand that drives this illicit business is through broadened visa programmes and upgraded asylum processing. This would provide European leaders with tangible evidence of 'doing something' about migration flows.

Ultimately, this would enable complete European ownership over migrant arrivals, processing, and distribution – targeting settlement to where migrants can best support European economies. With genuine control to show electorates, policymakers may then have the space to develop a more systematic policy platform to engage the developmental, governance, and policing requirements of origin and transit countries that is needed to manage migration over the longer term.

Such an approach may been political suicide just a couple of years ago. But, as the new wave of sea arrivals buffs away the sheen of externalisation policies, Europeans seem to be reassessing their options. Nowhere is this more evident than in Italy, where Meloni – who was carried into office on the back of promising extreme securitisation and externalisation – seems to be trying to manufacture new migration policies that can balance the short-term imperative with longer term migration management mechanisms.

This should be the focus the Mattei Plan, a roadmap under construction for a win-win strategic partnership with Africa: the promotion of African countries' economic development, adaptation, and resilience to climate change would result for Italy (and Europe) into a decrease of migration flows. Moreover, Meloni included expanded Italian visa programmes with Tunisia as the carrot component of her externalisation negotiations with Saied. The July 2023 Rome conference conclusions also accentuated the need to: defend the human rights of migrants, create broadened visa programmes as a means of undercutting illicit migration, found developmental programmes as part of migration partnerships between Europe and

Africa, and reframe the European approach from bilateral to collective solutions.

Multilateral conference conclusions usually struggle to make it off the page. But Europeans should still recognise this as a potentially pivotal moment: all of these arguments have been made before – but never under the roof of an Italian government that swept into power on the basis of anti-immigrant sentiment.

How to seize the opportunity

Europeans need to treat migration as the long-term, structural phenomenon that it is – not just react to crisis after crisis. This implies that they need to balance short and long-term policy moves to successfully regain control.

Internalise the flaws of externalisation

Border externalisation has so far been practically the sole vehicle towards that goal. But Europeans need to acknowledge that externalisation is an imperfect tool rather than a solution in and of itself. The EU's and member states' experiences in the Mediterranean show that externalisation is only of limited effectiveness in reducing arrivals. It will not be able to stop migration. It also lessens European control over migration flows, handing that power to a third state.

In some cases, externalisation can temporarily slow migration and buy Europeans the political space and time to enact more comprehensive policies. The success of externalisation is also dependent on the choice of partners, their capacity, what incentivisation tools are available, and how feasible it is to control crossings. This, in turn, depends on the size of the crossing points, the sophistication of smugglers, the demand for crossings, and the competence of local authorities.

Europeans should therefore deploy externalisation only as one context-specific tool among many. They could sometimes use it to reduce numbers in the short term and as a bridge to a deeper relationship with a suitable partner country. But any use of externalisation needs to do more than pay lip service to human rights so that it does not undermine the EU's values-based foreign policy. That deeper relationship should therefore aim to undermine the business model of smugglers and develop a working partnership that neutralises the abuses migrants suffer at the hands of local border forces.

Reset the balance of leverage

Europeans can improve the current deployment of externalisation by developing broader agreements that include visas with partner countries in exchange for joint counter-smuggling partnerships. This would help to reverse the power shift implicit in externalisation policies. Enlarged visa programmes with origin countries would bring considerable leverage for European governments. Agreements such as these would open the door to enhanced cooperation in combatting traffickers and improving policing standards at the borders.

Europeans and their partners should apply this leverage at the popular level. Enhanced legal routes could involve measures to discourage migrants from using smugglers by ensuring that the costs of taking an irregular route outweigh the benefits; for instance, by enhancing repatriation schemes and making future access to visas more complex or slower for those who use smugglers.

More and easier visa access would be popular measure in origin countries. This would increase European soft power with local populations and their governments. Even authoritarian governments are sensitive to the street and benefit from remittances from migrants in Europe. Europeans could leverage this to facilitate more active involvement in joint counter-smuggling operations that would help to prevent the kind of human rights violations that occur when local forces capture migrants at sea or raid smuggling hotspots.

Europeans need to underpin this with fair and efficient asylum processing. The ability to process incoming claimants reduces the bad optics of thousands of refugees stranded in camps. It also allows unsuccessful claimants to be quickly returned and those who are successful to receive the care they need. Moreover, successful claimants can be rapidly integrated into becoming productive members of their new communities. Improving asylum processing measures is thus a pre-requisite to the appearance of control over migration and a stronger negotiating position with partner states.

Process the need for intra-EU solidarity

This all requires solidarity within the EU: more capably handling migration is a common European problem and requires a combined European solution to be effective. For example, the EU should increase its efforts to assist the Italian government in processing irregular arrivals. This would also help alleviate Italy of an undue burden that drives resentment and political tensions.

To be most effective, visa and counter-smuggling agreements also need to be applied cohesively by multiple European states. Italy should therefore conduct negotiations over legal visa routes in concert with other member states, especially those that need migrants. Negotiating on a joint platform allows for broader European involvement in partnerships with transit countries over cooperative border security and with origin countries over development cooperation.

Member states' initial steps to explore mechanisms to create more accessible work, student, and other visas – and their negotiations with partner states – could then become the platform to build on this year's discussions in the European Parliament on an intra-European migration deal. These have focused on reaching an agreement to allocate arrivals where they can be assimilated productively, and have proven fractious. Visa agreements could help to overcome some of these barriers.

Ultimately, Europeans need to work to realise the conclusions of the Rome conference. That would allow them to maximise the mutual economic benefit of migration and undermine the drivers of mass migration. They should work through multilateral vehicles like the EU and development banks to support origin countries towards sustainable development. This would also pay the geopolitical dividend of creating closer ties between Europe and these states: a true asset in an era of increased multipolarity and competition between powers.

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For decades, European countries have framed migration as a security risk and doubled down again and again on border externalisation in response. And for decades, externalisation has resulted in increasing arrival numbers, extortion from Europe's North African partners, complicity in human rights abuses, and the opportunity cost of other strategic interests. It bears repeating: it is time to try a different approach.

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[1] Authors' interviews with European officials and practitioners involved at different stages of migration project work funded by the EU, off the record, Rome, September 2023.

[2] Authors' conversation with expert on migration, off the record, Rome, September 2023.

[3] Authors' conversation with expert on Tunisia and migration, off the record, Rome, September 2023.

[4] Authors' conversation with an expert on Tunisia and migration, off the record, September 2023.

[5] Authors' interviews with those privy to EU parliament debates, off the record, 2020.

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