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*Tunisia at the geopolitical crossroads of the Mediterranean: Migration, security and the European Union's border externalization*

**Abstract**

This article examines how migration flows from Tunisia to Europe in the aftermath of the Arab Spring have posed a security dilemma for the foreign policy of the European Union and its southern border states in the multipolar context following the decade of the uprisings. The research analyzes how the multipolar context and the anarchic structure of the international system influence European migration policy and its border externalization process. In the case of North Africa, and Tunisia in particular, it studies how the chaos generated after the events of 2011 has altered migration routes, transforming the country into a key point of both departure and transit for migration routes in the Central Mediterranean. The research offers a new academic reading to the migration phenomenon in the Central Mediterranean, overcoming the Eurocentrism predominant in current debates on European migration policy. It highlights the asymmetry of power between the traditional European powers and their southern neighborhood, proposing a critical reflection on how to address this security dilemma in a context of growing regional uncertainty.

### **Keywords**

Central Mediterranean; European foreign policy; security dilemma; Arab Spring; multipolarity.

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## I Introduction

Since the decade of the independences, the southern Mediterranean countries represent the origin of the main risks and threats to the European southern border, making it a fundamental strategic environment for the elaboration of the foreign policy of the European Union and its Member States (Guinea, 2015). Later on, and starting in 2011 with the Arab Springs stadia, irregular migratory flows from North Africa to the European borders by sea have increased considerably (Gozzi, 2018). This event represented a turning point for migration trends from Tunisia, the main country of origin of migration flows to the northern shore of the Mediterranean.

Tunisia was traditionally a country of departure for migrants to Europe especially to Italy (Natter, 2016), as Sicily is 145 km from the Tunisian coast (Choate, 2010). The alteration of power caused by the situation in Libya after the fall of Gaddafi and the foreign intervention of NATO, during 2011, generated an unexpected migratory chaos (Bisiaux, 2020: 28) and made possible a modification of both entry and exit routes. As a result, Tunisia became both a country of exit and transit of migratory routes to Europe (Colombo, 2022: 191).

In the decade following the uprisings, from 2011 to 2021 the number of irregular arrivals from the southern Mediterranean shore to the northern shore ranged between 690,000-720,000 (Frontex, 2022; International Organization for Migration, 2021). Between 2015 and 2016 the *Mare Nostrum* experienced the so-called, migration crisis, the main consequence of the Arab Springs (Pastore & Roman, 2020). Which manifested itself with the European concern of the arrival of large waves of migrants, which has led European countries to **strengthen their border control strategies** to address the risks of illegal migration (Bani Salameh and Alkatatsheh, 2019: 106), as a security dilemma of its southern members.

Therefore, the research is part of a framework of analysis of the security dimension of migrations in the Central Mediterranean, being Italy the main receiving State of migratory flows coming from Libya and Tunisia. Our theoretical interpretation of the migration phenomenon is based on a multipolar reading of the international and regional scenario in Tunisia since the Arab Spring. Indeed, we analyze from the theoretical framework of political realism how migration flows represent a regional security dilemma and how the European Union's foreign policy towards Tunisia has been formulated to protect its interests.

Thus, we will analyze through a review of the literature the limits of the European tools to face this security dilemma. **Consequently, the research is circumscribed to the phenomenon of the externalization of European migration policy, focusing critically on the securitarian aspect that such policy implemented**, subsequent to the Arab Springs (Oliveira Martins and Strange, 2019b: 196).

Therefore, firstly, we dedicate the research to contextualize the phenomenon of migration flows in the Central Mediterranean; what repercussions the Arab Springs have had on the formulation and implementation of its migration policy in the

regional multipolar context. The second section focuses on reviewing the literature critical of the externalization of European migration policy, described by many authors and scholars as a form of delegation by Member States of their duty to protect their borders to their southern neighbors. We explore the limits of this policy and its current results.

In the last section we reflect on the role Tunisia is taking since its political relations with its traditional European partners are experiencing an unprecedented diplomatic crisis. In essence, the ultimate aim of this research is to offer a new academic and theoretical reading of the phenomenon of migration in the Central Mediterranean.

It seems fundamental to us to review the transformations of the regimes from within and to **transcend Eurocentric analytical frameworks that have historically conditioned the academic literature on North African migration policies** (Natter, 2022; Gozzi, 2018). Above all, in the face of a situation of power asymmetry (Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019a: 236) between the European Union and its North African neighbors (De Castro and Del Rio, 2023) in dealing with migration as a security dilemma.

### *1.1 Theoretical framework and methodology*

The present research is part of an analysis of the security dimension of irregular migratory flows (Bigo, 2002) in the Central Mediterranean. Applying realist theory (Mearsheimer, 2001), the migration phenomenon in the Central Mediterranean is understood as a manifestation of power and security dynamics in a multipolar international system and as a consequence of the instability generated by the Arab Spring in the region (Natter, 2015).

We thus examine how migratory flows following the uprisings in 2011 have constituted a regional security dilemma in the Mediterranean basin. We assess the measures taken by European countries and the European Union to deal with this threat in the Tunisian case.

*“I argue that multipolar systems are more war-prone than are bipolar systems, and the multipolar systems that contain especially powerful states are the most dangerous systems of all”* (Mearsheimer, 2001: 5). Within this framework, migratory flows are not merely movements of people but represent a security challenge that can destabilize the region and affect national interests, since the objective of any great power is to survive in the international system, ensuring its security objectives and thus its national unification (Walt, 1991).

The realist paradigm focuses on competition between states and the primacy of national security (Morgenthau, 1949) and interprets the multipolar scenario as a context in which multiple actors seek to maximize their security and influence, giving rise to fluctuating rivalries and alliances (Waltz, 1979). In this sense, we gather the following definition of the securitization of migration: “the securitization of migration is, thus, a transversal political technology, used as a mode of governmentality by

diverse institutions to play with the unease, or to encourage it if it does not yet exist, so as to affirm their role as providers of protection and security and to mask some of their failures” (Bigo, 2002: 65).

From this conceptual framework, Italy and other European states, in their manifestation as rational actors (Mearsheimer, 2001: 31), consider immigration as a potential threat that must be managed in order to maintain the balance of power and internal stability (Bigo, 2002). It is within this framework that we will understand the response of European states to Tunisia after the Arab Springs in the field of migration governance, manifested in the externalization of European concerns about immigration, delegating to Tunisia the management of this security challenge.

Methodologically, this article follows a qualitative approach focusing on the critical review of the existing literature on the externalization of European migration policy and its evolution after the Arab Springs. It also analyzes the limits of European tools to address the migration-related security dilemma in the Central Mediterranean. Through a comprehensive literature review, the research uses both academic sources and policy reports and analysis from international (IOM) and intergovernmental (Frontex) agencies to assess how migration dynamics in Tunisia have become a central axis of European strategies.

First, an analysis of key texts exploring the concept of securitization in the field of migration is conducted in order to identify how Europe has prioritized a border control and security approach over other considerations. The analysis also includes a study of the agreements and policies implemented after the Arab Spring, focusing on how these events transformed relations between Europe and North African countries, particularly Tunisia.

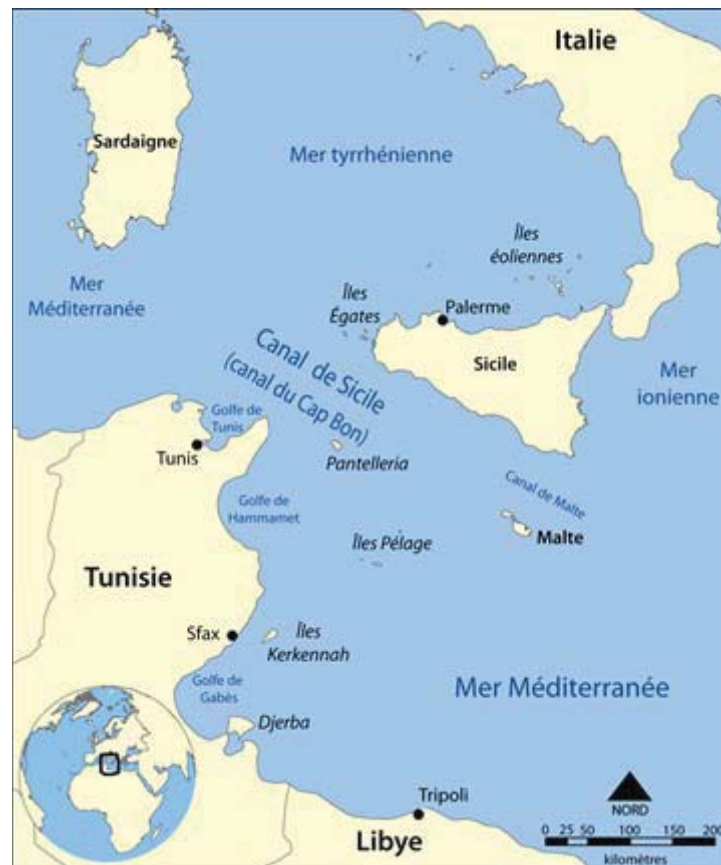
For this purpose, specific case studies are considered, such as bilateral agreements on migration and border security cooperation, for example within the European Neighborhood Policy. The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) is a framework for bilateral and regional cooperation established by the European Union in 2004, aimed at the countries bordering the East and South of the European space. Its objective is to deepen political, economic and social relations between the EU and its neighbors, promoting stability, security and mutual prosperity through instruments such as tailored action plans, regulatory integration, financial support (through the European Neighborhood Instrument) and dialogue in areas such as human rights, trade and mobility. The ENP operates under the principle of “differentiation”, recognizing the specific priorities of each partner, and is based on reciprocal commitments to reform (conditionality) (European Commission, 2023; European Neighbourhood Policy, 2023).

This methodological design articulates a critical examination of the securitarian mechanisms deployed by Europe and its Member States in migration management, deconstructing their epistemological foundations and confronting them with the alternative frameworks outlined by contemporary critical theory (De Castro, 2023). “There is a case, contradictory as many phenomena occurring in current times in which critical theory is called hegemonic and hegemonic is called realism, which has become (...) the true critical theory” (De Castro *et al.*, 2025: 12).

## 2 Migratory flows security dilemma in the changing multipolar context

### 2.1 Context and key figures

Our research is concerned with the migratory route of the Central Mediterranean: from the Tunisian and Libyan coasts to the nearest point in Italian waters: Lampedusa and Sicily, map (1).



Map 1. Sicilian Canal separating Tunisia from Italy, 143.7 kilometers

Italy's colonial legacy over Tunisia dates back to the 19th century since before being colonized by France in 1881, Italian settlers had settled there (Choate, 2010). Since the 1970s, the centrality of irregular routes between Sicily and Tunisia gave rise to a new stage in the history and transnational relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean (Fleri, 2022: 624).

Tunisia was identified by Italian diplomacy as a strategic point for its ties with North African countries (Natter, 2015). Indeed, Tunisian immigration to western Sicily became a key piece of the complex web of relations between Italy and the Maghreb (Fleri, 2022: 630). Italy's geographical location at the center of the Mediterranean basin provided its successive governments with the opportunity to exercise regional geopolitical leadership and promote strategic policies, at least in theory (Schumacher *et al.*, 2016: 264).

The end of the Cold War led to the *Mare Nostrum* being seen as a new Rio Grande, as one of the major divisions between North and South in the world. After the fall of the Wall, we witnessed the configuration in the Mediterranean of a migratory space of the first order, which represented, at that time, a historical novelty (Arango, 1993). During the nineteen nineties, the migratory route from North Africa was the main source of irregular labor in Italy (Ibid.: 34). This was a key moment for Italy, as it understood that the end of the colonial era and the European integration could turn the country into a key geopolitical actor in a reorganized Mediterranean, with regularized and controlled migratory flows (Fleri, 2022: 630).

Thus, Italy's intentions to lead the migration dilemma were made possible by its efforts to incorporate its southern neighbors into its outsourced border control mission. Its migration cooperation objectives were achieved, at first, with the agreements signed with Tunisia in 2003 and 2009, for migration governance (Cusumano and Riddervold, 2023: 3030). Later, with Libya, through the agreement signed in 2010, which significantly limited the migratory flow (D'Angelo, 2018: 34).

In 2011, the context of the Arab Spring marked a before and after in terms of migration flows and south-north immigration (Oliveira Martins and Strange, 2019a, 2019b). This generated a disastrous situation for immigrants, both in their own countries and in the host countries. The increase in the number of migrants and the negative effects of their displacement are particularly highlighted (Amnesty International, 2017). Katherine Natter (2015) defined that one of the immediate effects that the Arab Springs have had on the migration phenomenon was a temporary increase in irregular immigration to Europe and placed trans-Mediterranean immigration at the top of the European political agenda (Campesi, 2011).

Indeed from 2011, immigration became a challenge for both sending and receiving countries, creating a chaotic and disastrous situation for both immigrants and both authorities (Bani Salameh and Alkatatshah, 2019: 106). Ozaa Busutil and Puente Marquez (2017) stated that this increase in the numbers of irregular immigration are consequences of the wars and military conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, the proxy environment in Libya, encouraged and financed by the West.

Although, in reality, irregular immigration from Libya did not immediately skyrocket after the 2011 uprisings. Until 2013 migrants were mainly trying to reach Italy from Tunisia. The number of departures from Libya only gained exponential relevance in late 2013 and early 2014, see figure (1). Due to the power vacuum created after the NATO-backed foreign intervention and the civil war (Cusumano and Riddervold, 2023: 3031), a mass exodus of migrant workers from Libya to southern Tunisia was caused (Bisiaux, 2020; Boubakri, 2013).

Undoubtedly, the power vacuum following the NATO intervention in Libya altered, in a considerable way, the migration governance of the European Union (Cusumano & Riddervold, 2023: 3039). Indeed, after the Arab Springs and the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011, there was an unprecedented increase in irregular migration through the central Mediterranean (D'Angelo, 2018: 34). We note that

between January and June 2013, more than 40 000 migrants crossed the central Mediterranean towards the Italian islands of Sicily and Lampedusa.

In 2015, inflows through the central Mediterranean increased by more than 40% (Oraza Busutil and Puente Márquez, 2017). Between 2014 and 2018, Sicily became the main arrival point for migration by sea in the Mediterranean (Migration Data Portal, 2020), highlighting at this time, the so-called “refugee crisis of 2015”, –when the number of migrants on the central Mediterranean route reached 153,900 people– (International Organization for Migration, 2016). In 2016, the historical high was recorded since Libya 181,436 (Amnesty International, 2017). It is only from 2018 and 2019, that migration flows started to decrease dramatically after the Agreements between Libya and the EU, reaching in 2019 the figure of 14,500 (Frontex, 2020).

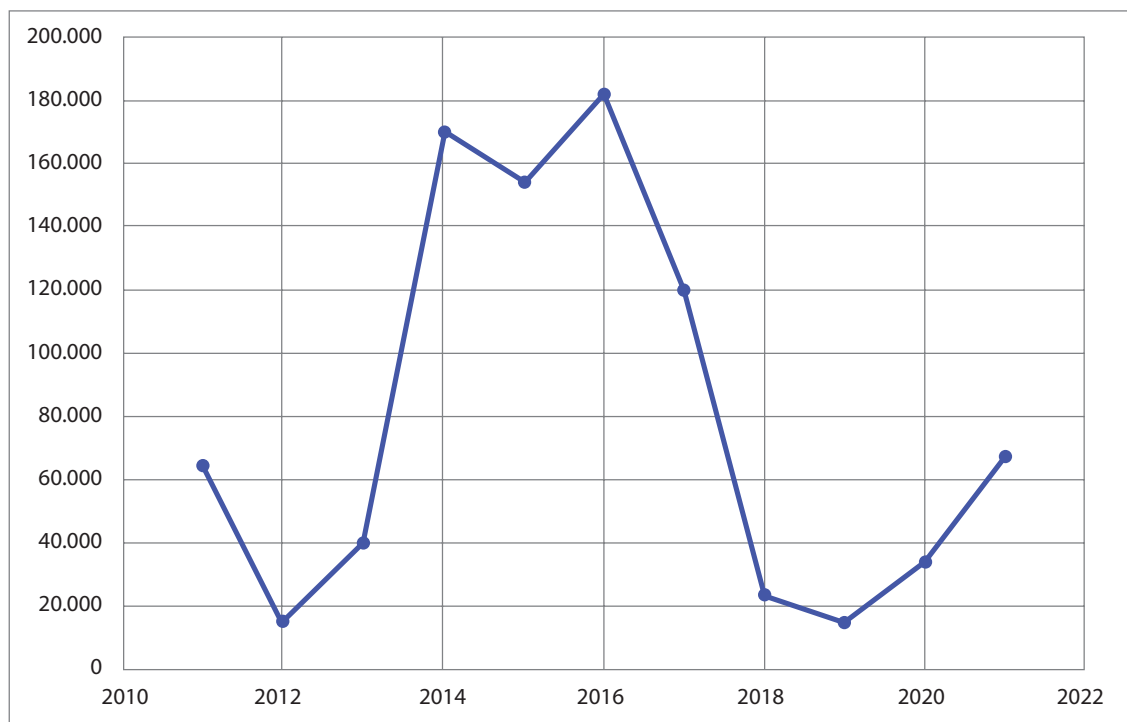


Figure (1) Irregular arrivals in the Central Mediterranean from North Africa (2011-2021)

## 2.2 Migratory flows: why it is a security dilemma

We mentioned previously that, from a realist perspective, immigration can be seen as a security dilemma for European powers (Walt, 1991). Indeed, irregular migration flows affect the balance of power and may lead to increased competition between states (Rudolph, 2006). As states seek to maximize their security, the flow of immigrants could be perceived as a threat to national identity and social cohesion, potentially destabilizing the internal order (Huntington, 1993; Weiner, 1995). This, in turn, can lead to increased tensions and competition as states react to perceived threats, reflecting the anarchic nature of international politics where power and security are paramount (Mearsheimer, 2001; Walt, 1991).

Much of the academy has emphasized the securitization dimension (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998) of immigration in the European Union (Bigo, 2002). Which has

been a dominant paradigm for understanding the externalization of Union policies and has attracted numerous contributions, encompassing many of the debates that took place in recent years (Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019a: 237).

The momentum offered by the context of the Arab Springs made the externalization of European migration policies the cornerstone of the European Union's migration strategy to address migration as a threat to its security. We argue that the post-2011 process of securitization of migration policies transforms immigration from a social policy issue to a security issue (Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019a), so that extraordinary measures are first requested, then implemented and finally normalized (Buzan Wæver and de Wilde, 1998).

As immigration ceased to be a purely domestic issue and became a central element of EU foreign policy (Pacciardi and Berndtsson, 2022: 4013). This process of over-securitization was mainly framed by the strong emphasis placed on radicalization and migration as two contiguous challenges in the discourse of the EU and its leaders (Colombo, 2022), extending to categories such as transnational terrorism, organized crime and perceptions of cultural insecurity linked to ethno-religious diversity (European Commission, 2020). Certainly, the ambiguity in distinguishing between real threats –based on empirical data– and perceived threats –amplified by political or media narratives– has generated criticism about the rhetorical instrumentalization of migration (Guild *et al.*, 2019: 23).

Externalization was therefore consolidated as the default instrument of European governance of irregular mobility (Cusumano and Riddervold, 2023: 3026) and is part of the European Union's overall approach to migration, being complementary to the Union's foreign policy and development cooperation (Atassanov *et al.*, 2018, cited in Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019a).

Long before the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, the European Union had intensified its pressure on migration control as a central demand in its negotiations with African states and regional organizations (Rudolph, 2006; Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019a). Although actually, Italy, as the main country affected by the crisis, faced inaction and lack of support from Member States, since as Bingo explained: "Securitization of the immigrant as a risk is based on our conception of the state as a body or a container for the polity. It is anchored in the fears of politicians about losing their symbolic control over the territorial boundaries" (2002 : 65).

In short, Italy became more concerned with containing flows and externalizing borders than with carrying out migrant rescue and reception operations (D'Angelo, 2018: 40). Bearing in mind that the "Search and Rescue" actions, the so-called SAR, was not achieved by Frontex's "Hermes" operation but by the Italian authorities (Cusumano and Riddervold, 2023: 3031). In contrast, France has always maintained a unilateral and authoritative *modus operandi* to maintain its influence and interest (Schumacher *et al.*, 2016: 262).

In this context, it is rational and understandable to analyze the reasons why Italy opted for an action of a bilateral nature (Pastore & Roman, 2020), materialized in the agreement reached in 2017 with the Libyan authorities, which contributed

significantly to a drastic decrease in irregular arrivals to its shores (D'Angelo, 2018: 35). These tactics, inscribed in a realist logic on the part of the Italian government, reflect a renewed assertion of its national sovereignty.

The analysis shows that the bilateral mechanism was the predominant strategy to address the security dilemma, achieving more tangible effects than other European alternatives. This phenomenon reveals that the European Union acts fundamentally as a public policy agent, a reactive intergovernmental actor, whose primary function lies in articulating consensus among the divergent wills of its Member States (De Castro, 2025), without the capacity to impose binding frameworks in migration policies (Guinea, 2015: 254). This institutional limitation derives, to a large extent, from the heterogeneity of geopolitical interests and the **asymmetry of priorities** towards the Mediterranean among community partners, where some privilege border security and others regional cooperation (Olmedo Alberca, Fonts Picas and El-Khatib, 2024).

In this regard, Tunisian authorities are aware that, within the European Union, there is no single homogeneous perception regarding its role and relevance to the migration dossier, nor is there a clear consensus among Member States as to their strategic interests, whether individual or community, in the region (Parks and Gülöz Bakır, 2019: 40). In parallel, Oliveira Martins and Strange (2019b: 196) warn that, since 2015, the EU faces a multilevel governance crisis, characterized by the inability of its members to transcend unilateral logics and build a cohesive migration response, due to a simple lack of political will.

In the following section, we will analyze in greater depth how the security dimension of European migration policy has led to the transfer of this security challenge to southern Mediterranean countries. This subregion constitutes the southern shore of Europe, what Arango called the –famous– “South” from which the entire migratory system originates (Arango, 1993: 7).

### 3 European Foreign Migration Policy

#### 3.1 Regional context: the construction of Mediterranean hegemony

After the end of the Second World War, during the era of decolonization, Europe assumed the role of a civil *power* with the intention of maintaining its influence over the states on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, territories that historically constituted one of its most important colonial spaces.

North-South dynamics have been sustained by the establishment of asymmetric relations, based on political and economic dependence. In particular, the conditionality of economic and financial assistance linked to the adoption of liberal-democratic governance models and the implementation of institutions inspired by Western models (Gozzi, 2018: 20). Which reflects an instrumental approach that seeks to consolidate structures akin to their interests.

What in the European Neighborhood Policy was defined as Europeanization: An assimilation of the neighboring country to the principles of the European Union, basically democracy, respect for human rights and development of a rule of law (European Neighbourhood Policy, 2023). However, reality has evidenced a clear contradiction between the EU's migratory interests and its stated policy objectives (Gobantes 2018: 149). A paradigmatic example of this tension is observed in Tunisia.

Historically considered as the logical and natural extension of the extension of the French colonial empire in North Africa (Hussey, 2015: 126), the EU –through the conditionality clause– demanded democratization as a requirement for granting financial aid, while, simultaneously supporting anti-democratic elites (Natter, 2015: 16). This was the case of the Ben Ali regime, which used migration policy to consolidate its international credibility (Gozzi, 2018: 25).

This duality reflects a continuity in the traditional practices of European politics, in which strategic interests prevail over democratic principles (Luengos Fernández, 2015: 7), what Huntington called the “double standard of the West” (1993: 81). This dynamic underlines the hierarchical (Gozzi, 2018: 27) and hegemonic (Mearsheimer, 2001) relationship that the EU maintains with its southern Mediterranean partners, particularly in the migratory and securitarian spheres, where its priorities often take precedence over formal commitments to democratization and regional development.

Ultimately, since the 19th century, this dynamic has allowed the consolidation of European interests in their sphere of influence over the Mediterranean, which helps to understand why Italy and France have emerged as the main Western powers in the southern Mediterranean (Choate, 2010, Schumacher *et al.*, 2016). In this way, in addition to consolidating a notable influence in the formulation of European migration policies, the strategic relevance of the region for both States is highlighted, and how essential it is for them to maintain the *status quo* in their favor on their southern shores: a key geopolitical space for the maintenance of their hegemony and power projection.

The Arab Springs represented a turning point that offered the EU the opportunity to redefine its strategies and break with outdated policy approaches, thus fostering long-term development on its southern shore (Carrera, Den Hertog and Parkin, 2012: 22). Despite this, post-2011 European migration policies towards the southern Mediterranean region have not undergone significant transformations. We understand below the central axis of the European migration policy that is based on the externalization of its borders, which not only seeks to shift migration management to third countries, but also perpetuates a dynamic of asymmetrical interdependence, where the strategic interests of the European Union take precedence over the democratic principles formally promoted in its southern neighborhood.

### 3.2 *Externalization of borders: the basis for migration governance*

The externalization of migration governance has dominated much of the academic literature. In this context, Pacciardi and Berndtsson (2022) argue that migration management was formerly the formulation of a set of rules and practices historically

and originally developed by a state. However, the end of the Cold War marked the recontextualization of the securitarian and migration issue in an unprecedented development of institutionalism and the promotion of Mediterranean multilateralism (Gozzi, 2018: 24). At that time the management of migration as a security dilemma took another dimension transcending the state with the relocation of the border outside the state territory (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998), “*externalisation*” and the delegation of border control functions to third states and even non-state actors “*outsourcing*” (Pacciardi and Berndtsson, 2022: 4010).

This externalization process includes a multi-stakeholder approach, in which European states have traditionally looked to third countries to solve their migration problems (Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019a: 236). The objective of externalizing European migration policy is aligned with a strategic imperative to neutralize without concessions the massive arrivals of migrants to European shores and delegate their management to countries on the southern shore, such as Tunisia, for example (Bisiaux, 2020: 27). Oliveira Martins and Strange underline the importance of delocalized migration policies that have grown exponentially, as the most relevant measures of the European Union’s migration management are implemented outside its territory (2019b: 196).

Pastore and Roman (2020) add confirming that throughout the 2000s, the externalization of the European Union’s European migration policy was gradually reinforced and had been integrated into the broader EU foreign policy framework, especially after the launch of the Global Approach to Migration (GAM) in 2005 and its renewal as GAMM (with a second M for Mobility). Although the authors specify that the GAMM, surprisingly, significantly reduced the proactive partnership-oriented approach that characterized the first European reaction to the Arab Springs and revealed a renewed focus on security aspects and a conditionality-based approach (Ibid.,).

From a realist approach, it is fundamental to remember that the EU’s joint design and conceptualization with its southern neighbors for migration governance is not understood in terms of equal balance of power as the distribution of power itself is considerably asymmetric (Gozzi, 2018: 25). In this sense, policy formulation remains essentially unilateral and top-down, often excluding from planning and negotiation their so-called “partners” on the southern shore (Roman, 2019). Pastore and Roman (2020) confirm that “an analysis of EU policy documents clearly shows that the EU’s and European countries’ approach to cooperation with third countries has always been driven by Euro-centric security concerns and economic interests, while it has overlooked the partner countries’ perspectives, needs and priorities.”

Therefore, the present research understands the externalization process as a process that frames and articulates a particular narrative that legitimizes the political process (Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019a: 239). Cusumano & Riddervold define it as a politics of *heading forward*, which is based on liberal intergovernmentalism and neo-functionalism. The processes of such a policy describe the tendency of the European

Union to integrate progressively in response to crises (2023: 3028). Indeed, the first joint initiatives developed by the European Union on its southern maritime borders reflect a limiting orientation to migratory flows. One example that stands out is Frontex's "Hermes" operation. Designed as a support mechanism towards the EU Member States most affected by migratory flows (Frontex, 2020). However, "Hermes" only focused on coordinated maritime border control activities to manage illegal migration flows from Tunisia to southern Italy (Cusumano and Riddervold, 2023: 3031).

### 3.3 *European migration management*

The previous analysis evidences how migration flows across the Mediterranean have exacerbated Europe's political inability to articulate supranational, coherent and effective responses to contemporary challenges (Heisbourg, 2015; D'Angelo, 2018: 33), revealing a gap between declared ambitions and actual institutional capacities.

In short, the discriminatory approach characterized the measures designed by both European governments and the supranational entity, in total ignorance of their historical responsibility (Oraza Busutil and Puente Márquez, 2017). Therefore, we can note that European migration policies were limited to sectoral and security-oriented approaches (e.g., bilateral and European readmission agreements), or have been diluted in broader but formalistic instruments with little influence, such as, mobility programs (Pastore and Roman, 2020).

At the macro level, it is evident that migration foreign policy reflects the overall failure of the European Neighborhood Policy (Guinea, 2015). Based on bilateralism and political conditionality (Govantes 2018: 148) it is the manifestation of the Europeanization project, "with neocolonial features", at dealing with the institutions of the Mediterranean, Arab and Muslim neighborhood (Gozzi, 2018: 25, 26). The 2011 revisions of the ENP have been criticized for adopting migration policies that primarily serve the interests of the Union, which has led to the prevalence of securitization over democratization initiatives in the region (Parks and Gülöz Bakır, 2019: 43). Likewise, the securitization approach adopted for the sake of stability has been questioned, as it is argued that, instead of focusing exclusively on stabilization, it is a priority to first address the root causes of instability, both in the economic and political spheres (Guinea, 2015; Govantes 2018).

As for, the militarization of the Mediterranean as a response to the ongoing migration crises (Bigo, 2002), the use of military force was mainly aimed at mitigating the effects, and not the causes, of the increased irregular flow (Oraza Busutil and Puente Márquez, 2017). Ultimately, we note that the European Union has failed to manage the migration crisis in the Central Mediterranean (Cusumano and Riddervold, 2023), shifting the consequences of this humanitarian catastrophe to the borders of its southwestern Member States (Oliveira Martins and Strange, 2019b).

## 4 Tunisia as a key actor for European migration policies: what role in the current context?

### 4.1 *The border externalization dilemma for Tunisia after 2011*

Tunisia became a priority for the European Union in terms of migration since the fall of the Ben Ali regime and the outbreak of the civil war in Libya, both in 2011. In such a way that, the migratory issue resumed its fundamentally securitarian character (Bisiaux, 2020: 28). In its historical-symbolic dimension, the Arab Springs offered a *momentum* in the framework of relations between the European Union and Tunisia, which could have potentially changed (Pastore and Roman, 2020). However, the chaos generated after the migration crisis of 2015 allowed reframing the issue of cooperation at migration control and readmission, placing Tunisia again at a high priority level on the European agenda and in the interests of Member States (Ibid.).

This geopolitical casuistry is due to Tunisia's strategic position as a central migratory actor on the Central Mediterranean route. And, it is explained through the analysis of interconnected regional factors, which reflect a structural interdependence with dynamics of instability and insecurity that cut across North Africa and the Sahel (Hussey, 2015). African regional interconnectedness not only underscores the country's role as a critical node in migration flows, but also evidences its insertion in a regional context marked by protracted conflicts, fragile governance and transnational phenomena (Colombo, 2022: 188).

The post-2011 Tunisian governments, for their part, were divided in the face of the European Union's ambiguous stance and rhetoric between its discourse and the real support it could demonstrate to Tunisia (Parks and Gülöz Bakır, 2019: 44). They were hesitant to accept the dominant European view of migration as a mere security issue, showing increasing reluctance to implement decisions pushed by their European partner (Pastore and Roman, 2020: 7). In the first months of 2017, reaffirming the European securitized framework of migration cooperation in the "Renewed Action Plan on Return", the European Commission identified Tunisia as one of the priority countries to conclude an EU Readmission Agreement (Ibid.: 8), underlining its relevance in the Euro-African migration fabric.

However, and despite the revisions that the European Neighborhood Policy underwent after the Arab Springs (Guinea, 2015) and with which it managed to sign an action plan for 2013-2017 to grant Tunisia the status of "Privileged Partnership", migration cooperation between Tunisia and the European Union faced a series of several obstacles (Colombo, 2022: 199). By way of example, the Union's insistence on signing a readmission agreement with Tunisia met with opposition from the Tunisian authorities, who refused to sign the readmission agreement proposed by the European Union and, sometimes, even to start negotiations, considering both instruments as mere means for the EU to externalize migration controls (Pastore and Roman, 2020). The Tunisian refusal to the readmission agreement based its criticism by emphasizing the securitarian approach of the Union and its leadership towards Tunisia and its constant search for stability in its favor in the region (Parks and Gülöz Bakır, 2019: 28).

Pressure from Italy and Germany for Tunisia to accept the readmission of third-country nationals, also suggesting the possibility of replicating the mechanism established by the Declaration with Turkey of March 2016, would allow European countries to return to Tunisia not only non-Tunisian irregular migrants, but also potential asylum seekers. Which reflected, even more extremely, the security-driven Eurocentric approach to migration management (Pastore and Roman, 2020: 8). In the words of Oliveira Martins & Strange (2019b: 197) “a neocolonialist behavior towards the states of the southern shore of the Mediterranean”, as the readmission conditionality aimed at making Tunisia the future *hostpsot* of European migration policy in Africa (Bisiaux, 2020: 29).

As is evident a readmission agreement is both irresponsible (Oraza Busutil and Puente Márquez, 2017) and unrealistic. The political authorities and European community bodies were fully aware of the weaknesses of the Tunisian institutional and legal framework for managing readmitted persons and the lack of an official regularization policy or voluntary return programs (Colombo, 2022: 200). This situation makes it impossible for Tunisia to take on even the readmission of its nationals deported from Europe, let alone that of third-country nationals in transit through its territory (Bisiaux, 2020: 28). Undoubtedly, it is an agreement that would expose the fragile socio-economic and political context of Tunisia to contrary reactions from its population<sup>1</sup>, for having to take in a large number of migrants.

However, and under the realist premise, “The ‘security dilemma’ reflects the basic logic of offensive realism. The essence of the dilemma is that the measures a state takes to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 36). Thus, we can understand that the readmission agreement is a constellation of migrations as a security dilemma in European foreign policy, in its attempt to maintain its survival in the current insecure multipolar context.

#### 4.2 *What future for Tunisian-European relations in the current multipolar context?*

From 2021, the new Tunisian head of state does not hide his rejection of European and foreign aid conditioned by the implementation of democracy and liberal values (Kahlaoui, 2024), even interpreting it as interference in national affairs (Bobin, 2024).

<sup>1</sup> For a complementary reading on Tunisia’s migration situation since 2023 and the sub-Saharan migrant crisis between challenges to national security and fostering hate speech and xenophobia, see also:

Presidency of the Tunisian Republic. *Declaration of President Kaïs Saïed on “exceptional measures to protect the national identity*. 2023. Available at: <https://www.carthage.tn>

UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). *Report on human mobility in Tunisia: Forced displacement and protection risks*. 2024. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/tunisia>.

Amnesty International. *Tunisia: Systematic violations of sub-Saharan migrants under the pretext of “national security”*. 2024. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/es>.

IOM (International Organization for Migration). *Report on migration flows in the Central Mediterranean: Tunisia as a critical node*. 2023. Available at: <https://www.iom.int/es>.

By virtue of the above, after a series of diplomatic and political crises between Tunisia and the international financial institutions, mainly the International Monetary Fund (Kahlaoui, 2024: 255), the European Union and its Member States became aware of the progressive deterioration of their monopoly of influence over their North African neighbor (Memmi, 2025: 161).

This scenario is framed by the loss of effectiveness of the traditional European *laissez-passer* (Cusumano and Riddervold, 2023), an approach based on conditional permissiveness towards its Mediterranean partners. This model has faced a critical challenge under the new Tunisian head of state, who has adopted an openly anti-Western and anti-liberal rhetoric (Rejichi, 2023), distancing himself from cooperation on migration issues (Colombo, 2022).

This stance, contrary to EU-driven governance schemes, reinforces the decline of the previously noted European monopoly of influence, evidencing how Tunisia's resistance to align with external demands not only challenges the Union's political hegemony, but also redefines power dynamics in a region where strategic balances are in constant reconfiguration (Memmi, 2025).

Concurrently, migration flows continue to increase steadily, following an upward trend, and recorded in 2023 a 51% increase compared to 2021<sup>2</sup>. Italy, adopting a unilateral stance –without the backing of its European partners– as in previous contexts (Nascimbene and Di Pascale, 2011), perceives the arrival of migrants as a constant threat to its security (Nese, 2023).

In this same temporal context, Georgia Meloni activated a bilateral mechanism with the Tunisian president, assuming a one-man leadership of the management of the issue to put pressure on its European partners (Latif, 2024). This bore fruit as the European Commission in July 2023 proposed a protocol agreement ranging from economic cooperation to migration. An agreement that materialized in an official visit to Tunisia by Ursula Von Der Leyen, accompanied by Georgia Meloni and the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte.<sup>3</sup>

It has become clear that the Italian *modus operandi*, based on an externalized but bilateral migration policy, showed positive results (Carrera, Den Hertog & Parkin, 2012: 8). In light of the increase in migratory arrivals from Tunisia in the summer of 2021, Italian authorities requested their Tunisian counterparts to intensify their commitment to control and curb migratory flows. These requests were set out in a

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2 EuroNews. *Tunisia and the EU seek a “strategic partnership” on immigration*. 16. 07. 2023. Available at: <https://fr.euronews.com/2023/07/16/la-tunisie-et-lue-scellent-un-partenariat-strategique-sur-immigration>.

3 ABC. *Von der Leyen to travel with Rutte and Meloni to Tunisia to discuss migration cooperation*. 08. 06. 2023. Available at: <https://www.abc.es/internacional/von-der-leyen-viajara-rutte-meloni-tunez-20230608131543-nt.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.abc.es%2Finternacional%2Fvon-der-leyen-viajara-rutte-meloni-tunez-20230608131543-nt.html>

series of visits to Tunisia made by several Italian political figures during those months, which continued until 2023<sup>4</sup>.

These meetings provided an opportunity to address migration relations in the framework of broader cooperation initiatives, leading, among other things, to an increase in bilateral economic support to Tunisia in exchange for more rigorous efforts to stop the arrival of migrants in Europe and the announcement in May 2021 of a hotline to improve the exchange of information on irregular departures from Tunisia (Colombo, 2022: 200). During 2024, Georgia Meloni visited Tunisia four times, official visits that aspired to underline the strategic relevance of Tunisia for Italy in achieving the objectives of its migration management project (Gaseteli and Kaval, 2024).

On September 22, 2023, the European Commission announced that a 150 million euro aid to Tunisia is foreseen in order to conclude an agreement to fight against irregular immigration (European Commission, 2023). However, despite the migration agreement that the European Union, under pressure from Italy, had proposed to Tunisia and the activated funds, the Tunisian president, Kais Saeid, continues his diplomacy that belittles the European side (InfoMigrants, 2024). In addition to the hostile attitude of the Tunisian authorities, Tunisia and its European partners are experiencing, for the first time, a *frozen conflict*.

In this context, Europe seems to be realizing that the new Tunisia, led by Kais Saeid, is looking for new allies, outside the Western orbit or models of liberal democracies, former or current rivals of the West. In addition to refusing the invitation of the G-7 held in Italy, in June 2024 (Ben Hamadi, 2024), the signing of the strategic partners agreement with China, in May 2024 during an official visit of the Presidency of the Tunisian Republic to Beijing<sup>5</sup>, marks a precedent in the international relations of Tunisia and its traditional pro-Western positioning. Undoubtedly, these tactical moves can be interpreted as incentives paving the way for improbable scenarios in the current changing context and a reformulation of Tunisia's international position after the Arab Springs.

Following a press round of the European Union Foreign Ministers' Council meeting, Josep Borrell demonstrated their concern about Tunisia's rapprochement with Russia, China and Iran, and that Tunisia remains a key partner for security in the Mediterranean and North Africa<sup>6</sup>. One interpretation of Mr. Borrell's statement

4 Europa Press. *Meloni praises Italy's "strategic relationship" with Tunisia after signing three agreements*. 17. 04. 2024. Available at : <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-meloni-ensalza-relacion-estrategica-italia-tunez-firma-tres-acuerdos-20240417173235.html>.

5 La Presse. *Tunisia and China establish strategic partnership: Kais Saïed honored in Beijing*. 31. 05. 2024. Available at: <https://lapresse.tn/2024/05/31/la-tunisie-et-la-chine-etablissent-un-partenariat-strategique-kais-saied-honore-a-pekini/>

6 El País. *Press conference by Josep Borrell after the meeting of EU foreign ministers*. 24. 06. 2024. YouTube: Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkCHT-UCItQ>.

underlines the inescapable need to consider Tunisia as a key player in addressing migration as a security dilemma. By virtue of which, European leaders should take more into consideration that no viable solution to migration can be achieved without Tunisia's cooperation.

Rather than adopting a defensive posture in the face of security threats in the region, there is a need to cooperate in addressing the underlying causes of these regional challenges (Parks and Gülöz Bakır, 2019: 28). This situation reflects the duality that characterizes the current distribution of power in Tunisia, highlighting the uniqueness of the historical moment, in which Europe must recognize that its influence and monopoly of power in the country are no longer guaranteed and, to some extent, it has lost part of it (De Castro, 2025; Memmi, 2025).

Finally, it is of utmost relevance to take into account the regional, febrile and multipolar context of Tunisia's southern neighborhood. As described by realist theory, in a multipolar system, the likelihood of security threats increases due to the complexity and number of possible sources of conflict, which generates more opportunities for war and miscalculation, making deterrence more difficult to manage (Mearsheimer, 2001: 166).

The possible influences of the Sahel domino effect (Mora Tebas, 2024; Gogny, 2025), together with the insecurity *continuum* in Libya (Parks and Gülöz Bakır, 2019), no better scenarios for migration flows from Sub-Saharan Africa to Tunisia, and the unexpected consequences they will have on security in the entire southern Mediterranean rim region.

## 5 Conclusions

The present research presents an innovative theoretical-analytical framework, which has not been proposed before, to examine migration flows from Tunisia to Europe after the Arab Springs, from the paradigm of the security dilemmas inherent to a multipolar international order.

Using the postulates of the theory of political realism, the study has analyzed how migration flows from Tunisia represent a security dilemma for European foreign policy, particularly Italian foreign policy, in an international environment characterized by instability and competition between states.

The theoretical approach has made it possible to examine how the anarchic structure of the international system-altered by regional disorder in North Africa following the 2011 upheavals-has altered migration dynamics in the Central Mediterranean. The research has highlighted Tunisia's transformation into a key transit and departure point for migrants and a critical geostrategic node for European migration policies and border regimes.

The results of the analysis reveal the structural ineffectiveness of the European strategy of externalization of migration governance, based on the delegation of responsibilities to the southern neighboring countries. Such a model, articulated as

a peripheral containment mechanism without addressing the structural causes of human mobility, has exacerbated diplomatic tensions between Tunisia and the EU, while revealing the ontological contradictions of securitizing approaches.

At the bilateral level, we note that migration policy has catalyzed a progressive deterioration of relations between Tunisia and the Union's institutions and its leaders. This tension reached its turning point with the consolidation of a Tunisian political leadership that has led to a break with the traditional patterns of the historical relationship between Tunisia and the Union. In this sense, the episodes of punctual and recurrent crises not only reflect Europe's loss of influence in the region, but also the unresolved tensions between the EU's strategic interests and the endogenous dynamics of Tunisian political reconfiguration.

In short, the gradual breakdown of Euro-Tunisian relations is part of a changing, volatile and considerably multipolar spatiotemporal context that plunges future scenarios into acute uncertainty and systematic instability. Our research corroborated the ineffectiveness of the current European mechanisms to face and manage the challenges of immigration, including the impossibility to stop the exponential growth in the number of people leaving, detained, and even lost in the middle of the *Mare Nostrum*.

Through both idealistic multilateral and even personal bilateral channels, Europe is losing its power of influence in Tunisia and its traditional status of regional *hegemon* in North Africa. This is undoubtedly a historic moment for Tunisia, a traditional ally of the West.

Based on these findings, it would be pertinent to deepen academic work on the analysis of how emerging multipolar dynamics could redefine relations between Tunisia, Europe and other actors on the international scene, which would influence future migration and security scenarios in the region.

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