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Border Externalization and Invisible (In)securities:

A Feminist–Decolonial Critique of the EU-Tunisia Migration Agreement

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## 1. Introduction

In July 2023, the European Union (EU) and Tunisia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which they describe as a joint commitment to their "strategic and global partnership". It outlines enhanced cooperation and commitments in policy areas such as the economy, trade, and other "common challenges" (European Commission 2023). However, the central focus of the negotiations is no secret: stemming the flow of irregular migrants into the EU in exchange for EU budgetary support to the Tunisian government. Accordingly, the MoU is widely referred to as the "EU-Tunisia migration deal", part of the EU's ongoing practice of externalizing its borders (Strik and Robbesom 2024). Border externalization refers to the extension of the EU's border controls beyond its geographical limits, often involving the outsourcing of migration management to third countries by offering them economic incentives. Besides Tunisia, the EU has similar agreements with countries such as Turkey and Libya (Frelick et al. 2016). This practice underlines the general trend in the EU's global security strategy towards a 'hard security' approach and an increasingly threat-based perception of its environment (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023, p. 404).

Violence and human rights abuses at Europe's external borders have been the subject of significant research. However, the neo-colonial tendencies embedded in the EU's border externalization practices, and the racialized and gendered structures that these EU security policies reproduce, have rarely been brought into focus (Hoijtink et al. 2023). Addressing these aspects is crucial for understanding the dehumanizing violence occurring at the EU's external borders. Therefore, Cappiali and Pacciardi (2024) have called to take on a decolonial intersectional approach when studying EU border externalization. This brings attention to how gender and colonial systems intersect to determine which bodies and territories are subjective to security policies. Moreover, such an approach sheds light on how the externalisation of borders is part of a wider system of oppression and domination.

Thus, this paper analyses the EU-Tunisia MoU from a decolonial and intersectional theoretical perspective. As this paper wants to focus on what and especially *who* the EU considers to be outside of its own security realm, it seeks to answer the question: *"Whose security is rendered invisible in the EU-Tunisia migration agreement?"*. To address this, the paper conducts a critical discourse analysis of EU documents that outline EU-Tunisian cooperation on migration in the MoU. It begins by exploring decolonial and feminist theory in the context of border externalisation and will then explain the context of the MoU and EU-Tunisia relations in general. The paper will then carry out a critical discourse analysis and finally offer a conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Decolonial and feminist theories provide a critical and fruitful lens through which to analyze the implications of security and insecurity. Securitization processes tend to reinforce racialized and gendered inequalities (Hoijtink et al. 2023; Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023). Sachseder and Stachowitsch (2023, p. 408) argue that by securing "us", a dangerous and threatening "them" is created. In this process within the EU, "the Self is produced as white – a seemingly de-racialized and neutral position that invisibilizes structural power" (ibid.). The EU constructs itself as a white and masculine security actor, positioned in opposition to a gendered and racialized Other (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023, p. 409). This self-image is sustained through colonial narratives that depict the white Self as bearing the burden of global responsibility, framing its militarized power politics as both normative and ethical. "Other, non-European spaces are imagined as simultaneously threatening and vulnerable, yet in both instances portrayed as inferior" (Hoijtink et al. 2023, p. 342). Whiteness thus becomes a central element in legitimizing the EU's security practices, reframing them as an obligation rooted in a perceived "world-historic mission" (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023, p. 415). This portrayal of the EU as a white and masculine security actor is further reinforced through the feminization of borders, which leads to the prioritization of border security over the safety of people on the move. EU Borders are depicted as feminized, vulnerable spaces in need of care and protection from the threatening, non-EU Other (Sachseder et al. 2024). These framings justify violence against the racialized Other in the name of security. Gender and race, therefore, play pivotal roles in determining whether bodies and territories are subject to security policies in the sense of protection, authority or violence, while lending legitimacy to security actors and practices (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023, p. 408).

In light of this, patriarchy and coloniality also work together within EU border externalization policies. Systems of oppression divide people into those who can move freely and safely and those who cannot (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, p. 302). Cappiali and Pacciardi (2024) therefore call for a decolonial-intersectional approach when studying the power and oppression of EU border externalization. Decolonial theory, herby, questions how colonial and imperial histories continue to shape the modern world, while intersectionality examines the interconnectedness of discrimination based on social categories such as gender, ethnicity and class. These systems of oppression can be understood as interlinked products of colonial history, working together to maintain structures of domination. Cappiali and Piccardi (2024, p. 305) see a combination of these approaches as necessary in border studies, as the intersection of gender and race significantly affects people on the move. They propose an interpretive framework with three key concepts originating from a combined approach: coloniality, Eurocentrism, and gendered racialization.

*Coloniality* is a concept of decolonial theory and describes the permanent systems of domination and power structures that continue to exist after the end of formal colonial rule. From this perspective, the externalization of EU borders can be seen as part of a (neo-)colonial system that restricts the mobility of the "global poor" (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, p. 303). The EU exerts economic and political

influence over formerly colonized territories while at the same time restricting the freedom of movement of formerly colonized people. This dynamic preserves the EU's privileged position and wealth, justifying continued interventions in, for example, African countries. The violence at the externalized borders can thus be understood as a continuation of the dispossession of black bodies since colonial times (idem, p. 307).

This perspective is closely linked to *Eurocentrism*, an ideology that privileges and universalizes European perspectives and values. Eurocentrism hierarchizes knowledge, positioning EU border policies as neutral and normative. The EU imposes its own definition of mobility – based on securitized borders, passports, visas – on others and determines access to certain territories according to its world view. In doing so, the EU makes a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of mobility, depending on how they align with its own interests (idem, p. 308).

Crucially, both colonial ideologies and Eurocentrism are based on the concepts of race and gender. The third concept of *gendered racialization* illustrates this by describing a process of inferiorization of certain bodies along racist and gendered lines. People belonging to certain migrant groups with higher vulnerability such as women, LGBTQI+ people or racialized communities are subjected to heightened levels of violence and differentiated security practices at borders or on the move in general. The intersectional approach provides a deeper understanding of how violence against racialized and gendered bodies on the move is perpetuated through ongoing processes that justify exclusion as part of a broader neo-colonial project (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, pp. 308-309).

## 3. Analysis of Migration Cooperation between the EU and Tunisia

### 3.1 Setting the Context

EU-Tunisia Cooperation formally began in 1995 with the signing of an Association Agreement and since then, multiple accords aimed at enhanced migration and mobility policy coordination have been signed. However, since 2019 the cooperation on migration policy has become a more pressing issue for the EU, as Tunisia has increasingly become a major departure point for migrants on the Central Mediterranean route to Europe. In 2022, the European Commission adopted an 'Action Plan' for Tunisia, the main aim of which was to examine various options for increasing cooperation and a reduction of departures (Strik and Robbesom 2024, p. 206). According to non-governmental organizations, the increase was mainly among sub-Saharan Africans who had lived and worked in Tunisia for years. The reason for the higher emigration rates is the desperate economic situation in Tunisia and the increase in racist and xenophobic violence against migrants, since President Kais Said came to power in 2019 with a harsh anti-immigration stance, fueling hatred (Human Rights Watch 2023).

On July 16 2023, the EU concluded a 'Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic and Global Partnership with Tunisia', which combines cooperation on migration control with comprehensive socio-economic support initiatives. It is a non-legally binding instrument aimed primarily at stemming the flow of irregular migrants to the EU and enhance the return of Tunisian nationals residing illegally in the EU (European Commission 2023). In return, the EU pledged approximately €900 million in economic support to Tunisia in policy areas like trade, investment and energy, as well as around €100 million allocated specifically for migration control (Natter 2023).

However, the agreement has been heavily criticised for its lack of concrete human rights guarantees, particularly for vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors. Civil society organisations and members of the European Parliament, have expressed concerns that the MoU could further jeopardise the rights and safety of migrants while simultaneously legitimising the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of Tunisian President Saied (Strik and Robbesom 2024, pp. 200-201).

By signing the MoU, the EU has turned a blind eye to accusations that the Tunisian authorities are violating the rights of people on the move, not least because President Saied has made it clear that he has no intention of granting reception or protecting people intercepted at sea (Strik and Robbesom 2024. p. 212). It is also important to note that only around 5% of the aid allocated under the MoU is designated for the protection of migrants and refugees in Tunisia, while 62% is earmarked for police, search and rescue operations, repatriation, and border protection equipment (Strik and Robbesom 2024. p. 210). This distribution underlines the 'hard security' approach the EU is taking, addressing migration primarily as a threat rather than a humanitarian challenge.

To address my research question about whose security is rendered invisible in the EU-Tunisia migration agreement, I will conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how the EU's framings and discourses reveal what kind of security is prioritised in its border externalisation deals with Tunisia. This approach applies the theoretical frameworks of decoloniality and intersectionality to analyse how the

texts position various actors, whose interests are served or neglected, and how these framings reinforce or challenge existing power relations. My empirical material consists of EU documents, that were retrieved from official EU websites. Specifically, the analysis focuses on two documents that are crucial for Tunisian-EU cooperation on migration: the 'Memorandum of Understanding' itself, issued on the 16 July 2023 in Tunis (European Commission 2023) and the European Commission's 'Action Plan: Tunisia' from 3 February 2022, which outlines strategies for "strengthening comprehensive migration partnership" with Tunisia (European Commission 2022). The second document was included because the MoU itself contains only a brief section on migration cooperation between the two countries. Presumably, this was done deliberately to emphasize economic cooperation, which is seen as less controversial. However, the 'Action Plan' deals specifically with migration, making both documents essential for understanding the EU's position and intentions.

## 3.2 Analysis

To uncover which groups of people, nuances of vulnerability, and structures of violence are overlooked in the EU-Tunisia MoU and related policy frameworks, this section will conduct a critical discourse analysis of key EU documents. Guided by the decolonial and intersectional framework laid out in the theory section, this analysis identifies how racialized and gendered insecurities are obscured by securitization processes.

*(Neo-)colonial power imbalances*

The 2022 'Action Plan' by the EU for Tunisia explicitly outlines the EU's primary objective in its migration partnership with Tunisia:

> "The EU seeks a reduction of irregular departures of migrants from Tunisia, both Tunisian citizens and third-country nationals." (European Commission 2022, p. 1).

Here, migration is framed as a problem to be solved and the emphasis on 'reducing irregular departures' signals a preoccupation with controlling movement rather than the well-being of people on the move or addressing the root causes of their displacement. While this is an EU objective, Tunisia is seen as responsible for preventing migration flows to Europe:

> "The EU will support Tunisian efforts to prevent irregular departures from its coast, conduct rescue operations, as well as build up its reception capacity and facilities. The EU counts on Tunisia to continue these efforts." (European Commission 2022, p. 2).

This exposes a paternalistic relationship and frames Tunisia as a subordinate actor dependent on EU guidance and resources, thereby limiting Tunisia's agency. The EU exerts economic and political influence through the agreements, maintaining power structures that reflect neocolonial power imbalances (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, p. 307). This dynamic is reinforced by statements such as:

"Tunisia faces a challenging period today, which the EU is following closely." (European Commission 2022, p. 1).

As noted by Sachseder and Stachowitsch (2023, pp. 412-413), non-European spaces are often depicted in official EU documents as chaotic and in need of EU guidance and intervention. Tunisia, which is framed as addressing "complex and mixed migration challenges" (European Commission 2022, p. 1), is reduced to a passive recipient of European security policies to safeguard European borders (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, p. 311). In this way, the EU legitimizes its security practices and externalization of borders as benevolent "support" while invisibilizing their main security concern, the protection of its external borders from the Other.

*Eurocentric Narratives*

A critical Eurocentric narrative in the EU documents lies in the dichotomy created within the category of people on the move, distinguishing between desirable, controlled migration and undesirable, irregular migration. While they want to prevent "irregular" migration to Europe, the MoU states:

"Both Parties agree to promote legal pathways for migration, including seasonal employment opportunities, to stimulate international mobility at all skills levels and to strengthen cooperation on skills development in a mutually beneficial manner." (European Commission 2023, p. 4).

Legal migration is framed as "mutually beneficial" and normative, while irregular migration is treated as a threat. The EU thus creates a hierarchy of mobility in which access to certain territories depends on conditions set by the EU and in which the desirability of migration depends mainly on an individual's skills. A mobility system based on securitized borders is seen as a universal norm (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, p. 308). For many, especially those fleeing violence or systemic oppression, these legal pathways are inaccessible, rendering their security concerns invisible. This is because the Eurocentric distinction between regular and irregular forms of mobility also distinguishes who deserves protection and who does not. Reception centers, camps and other hotspots are a physical manifestation of this practice, as they filter people in need and determine which threats to human security take priority over others (Fontana 2022, p. 469).

The MoU also states that the EU and Tunisia agree to support the return of irregular migrants in Tunisia to their countries of origins. They claim to do this in "accordance with international law" (European Commission 2023, p. 4), which is questionable as Tunisia lacks a national asylum system, leaving refugees and asylum seekers reliant on the services provided by the UNHCR. This means that refugee status, which would normally guarantee basic rights such as access to education or employment, offers little security in Tunisia (Human Rights Watch 2023).

*Humanitarian Rhetoric and Complicity in Violence*

The MoU also employs humanitarian rhetoric to justify its security-driven approach. The EU mentions that their approach shall be directed at "saving human lives" and respecting the "dignity" of migrants (European Commission 2023, p. 1, 3). This portrays people on the move as vulnerable and in need of EU protection, reinforcing a white saviour narrative of the EU (Sachseder et al. 2024, p. 1916). However, Casajuana and Pinto (2023, p. 23) note in their report that there is a strong dissonance between the EU's declared foreign policy objectives in its migration cooperation with Tunisia and the distressing situation on-ground. Human rights organizations have documented abuses especially against individuals coming from sub-Saharan African by the Tunisian police, military and the coast guard. Incidents include beatings, arbitrary arrests, forced expulsions, dangerous actions at sea and even some cases of torture. Often migrant groups are left in the desert by military and national guard without sufficient food and water (Casajuana and Pintus 2023, p. 23; Human Rights Watch 2023). By supporting these forces and turning a blind eye, the EU is complicit in this violence and the expropriation of black bodies, a continuation of colonial structures and interiorization (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, p. 307). The EU remains silent on these documented abuses by the Tunisian authorities and instead applauses their work and cooperation:

> "Both Parties agree to continue working together to address the challenges posed by the increase in irregular migration within Tunisia and the EU, recognising the efforts made and the results achieved by the Tunisian authorities." (European Commission 2023, p. 3).

The MoU further states that they want to go against smuggling networks and human trafficking, through creating legal pathways for migration:

> "The two Parties also share the priorities of combating irregular migration in order to avoid loss of human lives and developing legal pathways for migration." (European Commission 2023, p. 1).

> "This approach shall be based on respect for human rights and shall include combating criminal networks of migrant smugglers and human traffickers." (European Commission 2023, p. 3).

As noted above, these legal channels are deliberately denied to most people on the move, and therefore studies have shown that increased border security often has the opposite effect. It forces people on the move to take longer, more dangerous and more expensive routes, putting them at greater risk of injury, trauma and death along the way (Fontana 2022, p. 466). This in turn increases the profits of trafficking networks and encourages their professionalization, rather than preventing exploitation of people (Natter 2023). Thus, by focusing on the externalization of borders, the EU claims to be fighting smugglers and human traffickers to control irregular migration, but inadvertently exacerbates the vulnerability of those it claims to protect.

*Prioritization of Border Security over Human Security*

Generally, there is a prioritization of border security over human security in the documents noticeable, for example here:

> "The European Union shall endeavour to provide sufficient additional financial support, in particular for the provision of equipment, training and technical support necessary to further improve the management of Tunisia's borders." (European Commission 2023, p. 3).

This commitment to enhancing Tunisia's border management capacities to reduce migration to Europe, ignores the violence that people on the move are exposed to. This was also seen in the breakdown of the allocation, where only 5% of the support package for migration was thought for their protection (Strik and Robbesom 2024. p. 210). This illustrates how the EU prioritizes the security of its borders, even at the expense of others. For people on the move, border practices become a "source of vulnerability and insecurity, when they are often framed as the opposite" (Fontana 2022, p. 468). People on the move are constructed as the Other, with their bodies subject to control and violence rather than protection. Border externalization is essentially designed to protect 'us' – the EU and its borders – by framing migrants as threats to European security and stability rather than as individuals with rights and vulnerabilities (Sachseder et al. 2024, p. 1918). This view not only legitimizes coercive practices but also perpetuates a dichotomy between the secure 'inside' and a dangerous and 'insecure' outside, reinforcing exclusionary and racist narratives (Fontana 2022, p. 468).

The MoU includes a commitment to addressing "root causes of irregular migration":

> "Both Parties agree to promote sustainable development in disadvantaged areas with high migratory potential by supporting the empowerment and employability of Tunisian people in vulnerable situations." (European Commission 2022, p. 4).

While this initiative seems more sustainable and appears to tackle the structural drivers of migration, it is focused on Tunisian nationals, ignoring the plight of people from other countries staying in or transiting through Tunisia. UNHCR reports show that in 2022, 43% of people arriving in Italy from Tunisia were not Tunisian nationals but from West and Central Africa, and this figure rose to 82% in 2023 (UNHCR 2024, p.1). This exclusion in the MoU is problematic because it reinforces the invisibility of people who are subject to intensified violence in Tunisia and who are among those most affected by socio-economic and structural insecurity.

*What is left unsaid*

At the end of the analysis, I want to highlight three critical omissions in the EU-Tunisia migration agreement. Firstly, neither the MoU nor the previous Action Plan included mechanisms for monitoring human rights violations. There is evidence that EU-funded border management programs are linked to abuses by the Tunisian authorities, but the MoU was not made conditional on respect for human rights. The agreement contains no provisions for monitoring the impact of its projects, no human rights

requirements and no enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with legal obligations (Strik and Robbesom 2024, p. 211).

Secondly, one of the most significant omissions in the MoU is the failure to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of people on the move in an intersectional manner. There is no consideration of how intersecting identities such as race, gender or sexual orientation shape migrants' experiences of violence. The report by Casjuana and Pintus (2023, p. 23) finds that the Tunisian authorities are unable to respond to specific protection claims or people with special needs, such as women, children, disabled or queer people. Their safety is not considered in the MoU, partly because border externalization practices often refer to a masculine image of the migrant as a neutral standard (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, p. 308). These exclusions perpetuate a dehumanizing security framework characterized by racist and gendered structures. Finally, the documents fail to address the EU's colonial responsibility for the conditions that lead to the displacement of people on the move. These people have been made vulnerable by colonial domination, which is now exacerbated by neo-colonialism and the practice of border security (Cappiali and Pacciardi 2024, p. 305). Migration is presented as a contemporary challenge for the EU, which ignores the colonial history of exploitation and dispossession that continues to characterize global insecurities.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the answer to the research question *"Whose security is rendered invisible in the EU-Tunisia migration agreement?"* is that the security of people on the move, especially those most vulnerable, is systematically rendered invisible.

Although the documents emphasize the importance of saving lives and combatting smugglers and human trafficking, no concrete measures are taken to guarantee the safety of migrants and refugees. The migration partnership remains vague and fails to account for the realities and intersectional vulnerabilities of people on the move.

Through a decolonial and intersectional lens, it becomes evident that the EU gives little priority to an effective system of protection, but rather pursues to its own interests, even if this harms others. These policies are not only tools of border management but mechanisms for maintaining global hierarchies, where harm to racialised and gendered Others is legitimized to secure Europe's self-image as a defender of stability and order. This process of exclusion is based on stereotypes and binaries, meaning that it disproportionately affects migrant women and other marginalized groups such LGBTQI+ people (Sachseder et al. 2024, p. 1914). In Tunisia, people from sub-Saharan Africa are also particularly vulnerable to violence perpetrated by border authorities and security practices. By prioritizing border protection, the EU not only ignores the structural violence to which migrants are exposed but also reproduces colonial logics of control and exclusion of black bodies.

Thus, from an intersectional perspective, while the security of all people on the move is undermined, these marginalized groups are especially affected by the dehumanizing practice of EU border externalization. The absence of human rights monitoring mechanisms and the lack of accountability for violations committed by the Tunisian authorities in the agreement further illustrate the discrepancy between the EU's normative commitments and its pragmatic security-oriented practices. As Strik and Robbesom (2024, p. 222) note, such agreements "leave civil society, human rights defenders and the judiciary out in the cold, together with the EU's external action objectives to promote human rights, democracy and good governance."

In sum, the EU-Tunisia partnership prioritizes the security of European borders over human security of people on the move. This reflects deeper structural inequalities and colonial continuities that invisibilize the needs and rights of those most vulnerable.

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