

# Renavigating a Soft Power Relationship Between the West and Tunisia

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Brief Analysis

## Without a sea change, U.S. and European soft power will continue to erode in Tunisia at a moment of increasing crisis for the country.

For decades, Tunisians have viewed their country's relationship with the West as a relationship built on a sense of mutual alliance. Tunisia has long seen itself as a vital ally for both the United States and Europe; in 2012 a host of bilateral and multilateral agreements solidified the economic and political ties between Tunisia and Europe, and in 2015 Washington deemed Tunisia a Major Non-NATO Ally. These relationships span much of the past century; aside from being under French and Italian control during the colonial period, Tunisia became a key site of conflict in the North African theater during World War II, when Allied forces eventually broke into the Italian peninsula from the south. And for many Tunisians coming of age in the 1990s, the United States was seen as the ideal model of a superpower.

Despite these deep ties between Tunisia and the West, the true nature of the country's relationship with the United States and Europe continues to be unclear and ever-changing. However, geopolitical shifts and harsh realities have snuffed out that once-bright optimism. In Tunisia, the recent actions of the United States in the region have damaged its reputation, perhaps irreparably. This was evident in the United States' stance on the ongoing war in Gaza since last October, where it did not intervene effectively to stop the war using its diplomatic leverage. Moreover China, Russia, and other powers are steadily making economic and political inroads at the expense of the United States and Europe.

Yet Tunisians' frustrations are also developing in how the United States and Europe have handled policies towards Tunisia itself. In some regards, Tunisia is considered an invaluable strategic partner in the fields of counterterrorism, migration, and security. In other respects, Tunisians see foreign policies that treat their country as dispensable, including the delay of important aid in times of need and the removal of the country's educated

professional class. For many Tunisians who once took pride in these relationships, frustrations have eroded the soft power the West once possessed, especially among professional classes who are increasingly either leaving or frustrated at their treatment by Europe.

This has not been an overnight process; a number of recent crises and political realities have stressed Tunisia's relationship with the West and have accentuated the fundamental power imbalances that have existed for decades. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic showed the limits of Western solidarity. The virus spared no nation, with millions ultimately dying around the world. The global economy was frozen, and even the most prosperous nations were severely affected by the ensuing shutdown. However, economically developing countries like Tunisia were hit especially hard. While the United States ultimately ended up donating 2.9 million doses of vaccine (<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/u-s-international-covid-19-vaccine-donations-tracker/#recipient-country>) to Tunisia, delays led to a low vaccine rate during July 2021—when Tunisia faced some of the highest death rates in the world—alongside competing highly publicized vaccine deliveries from Arab states and China led to frustrations with the limitation of the United States' Covax system. The perception became that the inability (or unwillingness) on the part of the United States and Europe to effectively help their allies in their time of need highlighted the transactional nature of their relations with said countries.

### **Migration Crisis in the Mediterranean Sea**

Few issues occupy the minds of contemporary European leaders like migration. Throughout the continent, fears over unmitigated migration and “demographic change” have fueled anti-immigrant sentiments and propelled far-right movements to political relevance in Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands, among others. In capitals across Europe, stemming or halting the flow of migrants is a top issue. The most common routes for irregular migration begin in the sub-Saharan countries and the Sahel, then lead to North Africa and across the Mediterranean Sea.

Because Tunisia is one of the primary transit countries for entry into Europe, much of the Europe-Tunisia relationship is currently characterized by the issue of migration. As of now, most European countries demand that departure countries guard their borders in exchange for a few coast guard boats, a handful of dollars, or limited cooperation. A notable exception to this model is Italy, which is attempting to forge its own policy vis-à-vis Tunisia through the Mattei Plan—efforts that Tunisia have taken seriously and prioritized through the energy projects included in this plan. Italy has shown great willingness to advance economic cooperation with Tunisia, which has in turn made many Tunisians less frustrated with Rome in comparison to other EU member states.

But for Tunisians listening to the statements of European officials, the European immigration system as a whole represents a remarkable case of double standards that acts to the detriment of Tunisia. While the migration of “unskilled” and middle-class workers is a cause of great concern, trained and educated immigrants are welcomed with open arms, facilitating a “brain drain” that further exacerbates Tunisia's economic crisis. According to the National Observatory of Migration (<http://www.migration.nat.tn/ar/actualites/%D8%AD%D8%B3%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86-36-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A7%E2%80%A6%D9%88%D9%87%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B9>), more than 36,000 Tunisians leave the country annually,

and the migration of engineers and doctors is increasing. Various [studies](#)

<http://www.migration.nat.tn/ar/actualites/%D8%AD%D8%B3%D8%A8->

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[%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B9](#)) indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the

urgent need for European countries to recruit more in the fields of digital engineering and medicine. Young

Tunisians with advanced degrees and professional experience—the intellectual and economic future of the country—

are encouraged to leave for Europe, a phenomenon that will certainly stifle Tunisia’s potential in the years to come.

Meanwhile, other Tunisians seeking regular visas often struggle with delays and host countries’ reluctance to issue

the necessary consular permits to repatriate Tunisians residing in those countries illegally.

### **Tunisia’s Stolen Funds in European Banks**

For years, the Tunisian government has been attempting to recover stolen funds sitting in European banks dating

from the Ben Ali era, when he and his confidants stored billions of dollars in overseas accounts. Despite the state’s

persistent efforts in retrieving the funds, it has recovered only a fraction. This is due to a number of issues such as

the strict procedures of Swiss banks, the expiration of deadlines, or even some of those who have been in power

themselves contributing to [lifting the freeze](#)

<https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2019/2/1/%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3->

[%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84-](#)

[%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-](#)

[%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%83](#)) on some funds deposited abroad, thus

preventing their repatriation to Tunisia.

The Central Bank of Tunisia had identified a list of countries where some looted funds and properties are located.

However, this file remains stagnant after more than a decade due to the complexity of procedures, the multiplicity of

intervening parties, and especially the failure to convince foreign parties of the location of these funds and the

necessity of recovering them through a final court ruling. Again, the optics of these struggles are especially poor in a

country with immense financial struggles.

Given the current international tensions among major powers, the lasting damages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and

regional war in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, many Tunisians believe that it is high time for Western

governments and institutions to clearly define their relationship with Tunisia and treat a longtime ally with the

respect and goodwill that it has earned through years of cooperation. Without a sea change, U.S. and European soft

power will continue to erode in Tunisia at a moment of increasing crisis for the country.

If the West wants to reverse this trend and hold on to their allies in the region, then they must translate goodwill into

reality by convincing Tunisians of their willingness to see Tunisia as more than just a gate-keeper to prevent

migration from Africa. Professional Tunisians could establish mutually beneficial relationships if the United States

and European countries are willing to facilitate visas and allocate a certain percentage of work contracts for all

specialties, while supporting Tunisian tourism and creating partnerships that facilitate startups and spur economic

growth in Tunisia. If these kind of investments become more visible to Tunisians, it could make a difference when it comes to soft power in Tunisia while stemming the greatest dangers of a brain drain that benefits no one. ❖

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