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From: Presidency

To: Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)

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Subject: Overview of the Central-Mediterranean Route  
- Presidency paper

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The Central Mediterranean migration route that connects North Africa with Southern Europe has faced significant challenges in recent years, which have only deepened and become more complex in 2023. While the dangers and risks of migration by sea, such as overcrowded vessels and the frequency of accidents, continue to be a major issue, the living conditions of migrants on land remain a concern, where infrastructures and humanitarian assistance are often underdeveloped or inadequate. On the route, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia emerge as countries of origin, transit and destination of outstanding importance. The continuous migratory influx puts pressure on the local economy, social structures, and infrastructures, especially in border and coastal areas. It poses a constant problem of accommodating migrants, providing for them and resolving their legal status, and make them more at risk of falling into the hands of smugglers and traffickers. In addition, migration flows can generate political and social tensions that affect the internal stability of countries as well as regional cooperation.

In 2023, migratory pressure increased again, reflecting growing geopolitical turbulence on the African continent. The Central Mediterranean route witnessed 67 724 illegal border crossings of the external borders of the European Union in 2021, 105 561 in 2022 and 158 020 in 2023, which means a 50% increase compared to the previous year. It should be noted that 2023 was the third consecutive year of significant growth in the number of arrivals, with the seasonal peak during the summer. In 2023, the most common nationalities were Bangladeshis, Egyptians, Guineans, Tunisians, Guineans and Ivorians, although the number of Burkinabe, Malians and Sudanese nationals increased. Migrant smugglers have mainly used makeshift metal boats to cross the Mediterranean, but more larger ships (such as fishing boats) have also appeared, indicating that maritime migration routes may become less seasonal than in the past.

Although Tunisians and Egyptians remain among the most frequently registered nationalities, in general, the number of illegal border crossings by nationals of North African countries on the Central Mediterranean route has started to decrease in 2023. In the Central Mediterranean, the detected arrivals of Algerian nationals decreased by 57.2%, Egyptian by 45.1% and Tunisian by 1.8%. Over the past year, strategic and comprehensive partnerships have been negotiated and concluded with Tunisia and Egypt. They combine actions in the field of migration and mobility with other joint policy priorities such as macro-economic stability, investments and trade, security, energy, human capital and food and water security.

The tense economic situation in the North African countries and negative public perceptions on migration have also led the authorities to step up their measures against illegal migration and promote the return of those illegally staying in their territory to their countries of origin, which is expected to remain a priority. In order to avoid this, in the coming period, some may decide to travel to Europe through the Central Mediterranean route, which poses a number of risks.

From the third quarter of 2023 onwards, arrivals decreased significantly, but from March 2024 onwards, migration pressures started to increase again, although still at around half the level of the same period last year (mainly due to the anti-smuggling and border protection efforts of the Libyan and Tunisian authorities), but with improving weather conditions in the summer season, the overall increase may also indicate that the capacity of border management systems is reaching some limits in the face of increasing migration flows. In the coming months, it may become clearer whether the cooperation efforts undertaken so far can address the root causes of illegal migration and not just the consequences. In the first six months of 2024, Libya became the main country of departure, taking over from Tunisia, accounting for around 56% of movements. The main nationalities registered in the first six months of the year are Bangladeshi (21%), Syrian (15%), Tunisian (14%) and Guinean (9%), compared to Ivorians, Guineans, Egyptians and Bangladeshis in the same period last year.

The European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats' (EMPACT) 2024-2025 Operational Action Plan (OAP) addressing migrant smuggling contains an operational action covering the Central Mediterranean Route. Operational Action (OA) "Central MED Route" aims to detect and disrupt organised crime groups active in migrant smuggling by developing and conducting intelligence led operations, investigations and prosecutions and by creating ad-hoc investigative/operational task forces whenever necessary. The action improves and makes effective the real-time information exchange (as well as financial data) and the operational response, including the exchange of intelligence/information with Europol and Eurojust, to enhance investigations in source, transit and destination countries along the Central Mediterranean Route.

In addition, also on the operational side, Europol is coordinating investigations into the Central Mediterranean Route in the framework of the recently established Operational Task Force Mediterranean, as part of the 10-point plan for Lampedusa, which is already leading to fruitful results with ongoing investigations. OTFs are an important instrument to enhance operational cooperation in this field, with and beyond the EU MS.

## 1) Egypt

Egypt plays a key role in the prosperity, security and stability of the Central Mediterranean region, which got even more significant following the outbreak of the conflicts in neighbouring Sudan and Gaza. The North African country hosts a large migrant population, with over 9 million migrants and refugees residing in the country, accounting for almost 9% of the Egyptian population. Out of these, 80% are Sudanese, Syrians, Yemenis, and Libyans. Around 1.5 million (out of the whole migrant population in Egypt) are in vulnerable situations. Despite the large migrant stock present in the country, no significant departures from Egypt to the EU have been recorded since 2017. However, Egypt has become a transit country for some migrants aspiring to reach coastal departure locations with less effective marine patrol measures, such as Libya. Smugglers operating from Egypt offered integrated hybrid smuggling packages encompassing legal or semi-legal transport by plane from origin countries (mainly from Bangladesh, Syria and Pakistan) to Egypt and, thereafter, to Libya and possibly further travel towards Tunisia and Algeria. The latest statistics with numbers from 2022, ranks Egypt among the top 10 non-EU countries of origin for suspects of trafficking in human beings registered in the EU.

In recognition of Egypt's importance in the current geopolitical context and the economic difficulties being faced by the country, a Joint Declaration was signed by President von der Leyen and President Sisi on 17 March 2024 to launch the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership, which builds on the Association Agreement concluded in 2004 and the Partnership Priorities agreed in 2022. The Partnership aims to support Egypt's macroeconomic resilience and to enable the implementation of socio-economic reforms crucial for Egypt's stability and prosperity and in turn the stability of the region. It covers 6 key pillars: (1) political relations; (2) economic stability; (3) trade and investment; (4) migration and mobility; (5) security and (6) demography and human capital. This Partnership is accompanied by a financial and investment support package of EUR 7,4 billion from the EU for the next four years (2024-2027) to strengthen the Egyptian economy and foster EU-Egypt cooperation across various sectors, including migration. This includes a macro-financial assistance component of up to EUR 5 billion, EUR 1.8 billion in additional investment support under the EFSD+ instrument and EUR 600 million in additional support from other instruments (e.g. NDICI) to support specific priorities under the Partnership, of which EUR 200 million will be dedicated to migration.

The Commission had envisaged a joint statement on migration and mobility (covering border management, counter-smuggling, counter-trafficking, returns - both Egyptian nationals from the EU and voluntary returns from Egypt to countries of origin – and their reintegration, legal migration and labour mobility, as well as protection and asylum) as a follow-up to the meeting in Cairo on 18 April 2024, with the aim to operationalise the migration pillar of the Partnership and provide an overarching framework for its implementation. However, the Egyptian side has not yet shown interest in concluding a joint statement on migration and mobility.

Technical work continues under all pillars of the Joint Declaration. On migration, the EU follows a holistic approach, including support to legal migration pathways and mobility schemes, combating the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings, strengthening border management, as well as protection, in addition to ensuring dignified and sustainable return and reintegration. Building on ongoing programmes, the foreseen EUR 200 million for migration until 2027 will further reinforce EU's support in line with the comprehensive approach.

As regards cooperation with EU JHA agencies, negotiations are ongoing on a working agreement with Europol. Nevertheless, Egypt has not shown much interest in negotiations with the EU for an international agreement enabling the exchange of personal data with Europol, since the adoption of the relevant Council authorisation in 2018.

The EU-Egypt Investment Conference took place on 29-30 June 2024 in Cairo, focusing on macro-economic reforms to improve the business, trade and investment environment and served to enhance EU-Egypt cooperation as a whole in key sectors of mutual interest (e.g. renewable energy, circular economy, green transition, digitalisation, manufacturing, skills and human development). The first Memorandum of Understanding to provide Egypt up to EUR 1 billion in Macro-Financial Assistance was signed at the Conference to assist Egypt in the implementation of its economic reform agenda. In addition, the financing agreement of the “EU Support to Youth Employability and Skills (EUR 25 million)” project was signed at the Conference to support technical and vocational skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship for young people in Egypt and promote youth employability in local and international labour markets, including through the Talent Partnerships framework.

On 16 July, the EEAS, DG HOME and DG NEAR co-chaired the High-Level Migration Dialogue with Egypt in Cairo.

## 2) Tunisia

In 2022, the number of illegal arrivals from Tunisia to Italy reached 32,371, a new record, while the highest level ever recorded by Frontex was reached in 2023 with more than 99,000 (roughly three times the 2022 figure). In 2022, Tunisia ranked among the top 20 non-EU countries of origin of victims of trafficking registered in the EU and ranked 6 among non-EU countries of origin of suspects.

Moreover, the persistent refusal by the authorities to progress towards a national migration strategy was becoming more and more problematic in view of the figures of continuous arrivals from Sub-Saharan Africa to Tunisia. In addition, Tunisia's short- and mid-term macro-economic situation was very uncertain end 2022/beginning 2023 following President Saied's refusal to pursue negotiations with the International Monetary Fund to conclude a new agreement. In view of this complex situation, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a strategic and global partnership was signed between the European Union and Tunisia on 16 July 2023.

The MoU provides a comprehensive framework to support Tunisia in addressing a number of challenges as well as seizing cooperation opportunities in sectors of joint interest. The priority is to continue advancing in the implementation of the MoU across its five pillars on macroeconomic stability, trade and economy, green energy transition, people to people contacts and migration and mobility, for the mutual benefit of both sides, in a spirit of equal partnership, and within the overall framework of the EU-Tunisia Association Agreement. Regular and constructive technical contacts with the Tunisian side are taking place in Brussels and Tunis. The implementation of the MoU, and notably its migration pillar, is of high priority and regular information exchange and transparency remain key. Progress in the implementation of the migration-related MoU priorities is contrasted with an overall challenging situation.

Tunisia benefits from bilateral and regional migration-related funding under the NDICI-GE and under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, and previously in 2017-2020 under the North of Africa window of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of illegal migration and displaced persons in Africa, for a total of around EUR 200 million of ongoing programmes. The EU and Tunisia cooperate on all aspects of migration in a holistic approach comprising migration governance, border management, protection, fighting migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, labour migration and legal mobility, diaspora mobilisation, return, readmission and reintegration. In 2023, Tunisia benefitted from an indicative amount of EUR 105 million migration-related funding under NDICI-GE. Of the EUR 105 million, by mid-July 2024, EUR 53 million has already been contracted. Activities should be anchored within the respect of human rights and human dignity of all migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, in accordance with International Law.

Negotiations for a working arrangement with Europol are ongoing, but Tunisia has not shown particular interest to negotiate an international agreement with the EU enabling the exchange of personal data with Europol since the adoption of the relevant Council authorisation in 2018.

Following the situation in Lampedusa, in autumn 2023, as a result of enhanced cooperation, the Tunisian authorities intensified their operations against smuggling networks to prevent illegal crossings, and the Italian authorities reported a substantial decrease in October 2023. Departures have increased again since April 2024, and although the figure is more than 60% lower than the number recorded in the same period in 2023, the EU continues to monitor the situation.

In terms of voluntary returns and protection, the EU works closely with UNHCR and IOM, important implementing partners in Tunisia. With IOM, 3,300 EU-funded voluntary returns from Tunisia to countries of origin were carried out between January and May 2024, compared to around 2,500 in all of 2023. Through an EU-funded protection programme with UNHCR, migrants receive assistance with basic services - such as provision of water, food, non-food items, shelter, medical and legal assistance. The work of implementing partners, such as UNHCR, is however hampered by the deterioration of the situation for migrants in Tunisia.

On mobility, the Commission wants to build on the momentum of the successful second Talent Partnership roundtable, which took place on 21 June 2024 in Tunis, where discussions allowed to explore concrete recommendations for future cooperation. To advance Talent Partnership's objectives, a technical meeting will be organised in autumn 2024 to endorse the jointly agreed roadmap and help prepare upcoming activities, as well as the 3<sup>rd</sup> roundtable in 2025.

As regards cooperation with EU JHA Agencies, negotiations for a working arrangement with Europol are ongoing, but Tunisia has not shown particular interest to negotiate an international agreement with the EU enabling the exchange of personal data with Europol since the adoption of the relevant Council authorisation in 2018.

### **3) Libya**

The political situation in Libya remains highly fragmented, with deep-seated divisions, historical grievances and the formation of armed groups continuing to pose significant obstacles to achieving lasting peace and stability in the country. The Tripoli-based GNU's (Government of National Unity) authority is challenged by the parallel executive based in the East of Libya, the GNS (Government of National Stability). Some 300 000 people in Libya continue to be in need of humanitarian assistance, and the situation is further complicated by the presence of migrants, displaced persons and asylum seekers. Libya is a country of origin, transit and destination at the same time. According to figures provided by the IOM and UNHCR, as of May 2024, Libya is home to at least 720,000 migrants and around 60,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers. While in 2023 Libya was the second country of departure on the Central Mediterranean route (around 55,000 migrants), in 2024 it became again the first one as of May 2024 (around 11,400), with borders that are difficult to control and an unstable security situation.



On 28 November 2023, the International Conference on a Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling provided an opportunity to engage bilaterally with Libyan partners, during which the Libyan side expressed its interest in enhancing migration cooperation with the European Union. Cooperation with Libya could be strengthened in particular on border management, search and rescue operations, prevention of departures, effective migration governance, increasing voluntary humanitarian returns, improving international protection, human rights and cooperation on the field of labour migration. Member States have proposed a cautious approach, and the Commission and the EEAS would also recommend a "step-by-step" basis for any cooperation with Libya, with regular monitoring of implementation on the ground. From 5 to 8 February 2024, five years after the last mission, DG HOME, DG NEAR and the EEAS visited Libya to meet and exchange views with the competent authorities and found that the Libyan side is open to further cooperation in key areas. The Libyan side would put the geographical focus of cooperation on the south and the eastern regions, with a particular emphasis on strengthening reception centres and increasing voluntary returns. As a follow-up to the February mission, the Tripoli delegation visited Brussels on 16 May 2024 and confirmed its openness to further cooperation with the EU, including in the fight against illegal migration, strengthening search and rescue operations, increasing access to reception centres for international organisations and support for refugees. The EU side emphasised the urgent need to find alternative solutions to detention and to increase voluntary returns by simplifying the current procedures. Between 29 June and 2 July 2024, an EU mission visited Libya again, travelling first to Tripoli and then to Benghazi. In Tripoli, the parties discussed a comprehensive migration agenda, the relations are developing dynamically and overall positively. The Libyan side is showing commitment to the pressing issues, most notably Libyan authorities issued a decree exempting voluntary humanitarian returns from visa fees. In Benghazi, the first meeting was held at a strictly technical level with the competent authorities. Given the openness of Libya and the common objectives identified so far, further development of the dialogue is expected.

### **Questions for discussion**

- 1) *How do Member States view cooperation with the main countries of departure on the Central Mediterranean route over the past year?*
- 2) *Where could more be done to promote cooperation and reduce illegal border crossings? How could Member States contribute to joint efforts, possibly complementing existing instruments through their bilateral relations?*
- 3) *Do Member States consider that other non-migration related pillars of the comprehensive partnerships with Tunisia and Egypt could in the future indirectly contribute to reducing arrivals on the Central Mediterranean migratory route?*
- 4) *Several Member States are actively participating in Talent Partnerships with Egypt and Tunisia, and a number of Member States are observers. Are other Member States interested in participating and possibly proposing concrete actions to define their participation in this initiative?*

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