
Financial difficulties, migrations and dialogue with Brussels: Italians in Tunisia describe a country at risk of defaulting

Foodstuffs are lacking or rationed in supermarkets, while the coasts of Sfax and Mahdia are crowded with people ready to leave for Europe on a barge. In the meantime, the European Commission is holding talks with the President of the Republic, Saïed, on a 'financial assistance' programme. The various faces of the Tunisian crisis include poverty, migration and international interests. Italian citizens living in the defaulting country described this scenario to SIR. Giovanni Chiappisi, a retired journalist, has been living in Djerba, an island on the Tunisian coast overlooking the Mediterranean, for several years. Through his YouTube channel, he chronicles the country's attractions, traditions, personalities and, today, also the crisis that is affecting the country. Some facts and figures. **The figures of the crisis.** The Tunisian Central Bank held its interest rate steady at 8%. "This makes it virtually impossible for households and businesses to access loans, as they would pay a huge interest on these loans and they may not even be able to repay the capital," he explained. Tunisia Government debt accounts for 94 per cent of GDP, a figure close to EUR 35 billion. The inflation rate is at 10 per cent, according to the cost of a basket that "does not reflect the situation". Inflation in connection with foodstuffs alone stands at 16 per cent. "Terror attacks, Covid and widespread impoverishment have slowed down tourism. Remittances from emigrants provide 20 per cent of incoming foreign currency." Unemployment is at 15%. In the under-30 age group it is close to 40 per cent. The International Monetary Fund had opened negotiations with Tunis a year ago for a EUR 1.9 billion rescue package. But it has now been frozen because the conditions imposed are political, structural and economic reforms affecting people in who already live in poverty." **A country of immigration.** The photos of the landings of the last few weeks remind us of these people's countries of departure: Tunisia, which also turns out to be a country of immigration. Not only of emigration. "Approximately 7,000 migrants from the Ivory Coast live here, 1,700 have asked Côte d'Ivoire authorities to repatriate them. The remaining migrants entering Tunisia come from the Africa's Atlantic or sub-Saharan coasts or are fleeing from Libyan migrant centres resembling concentration camps," Chiappisi remarked. "They work illegally for a few years to put aside some money and venture across the Sicilian Channel to Europe. Many more people are leaving Tunisia in this period, but only a small percentage of them are Tunisians. "On March 9, the Tunisian authorities said they had thwarted 25 attempts to leave their shores and had rescued 1,008 people in distress at sea. Of these, 954 people were from other African countries. Less than 100 were Tunisians." **The talks with Europe.** A loan programme from the International Monetary Fund could serve to revive Tunisia's financial situation. However, it comes with conditions that Tunisians are not very happy about, such as food subsidies elimination and fuel price cuts, along with cuts in civil servants' salaries, which "are not particularly high already." "Tensions are running high in Tunisia. On the one hand there is a lack of money, but the money that could flow in would entail sacrifices for people who are living on the verge of survival." For different reasons, Europe and the United States are pressuring the Maghreb country to accept the IMF's conditions. The former because it fears a massive influx of refugees; the latter, for the sake of increased global stability. Meanwhile, the EU is prepared to deliver subsidies and aids. EU Commissioner for Economic Affairs Paolo Gentiloni discussed the matter a few days ago with the President of the Republic Saïed. However, there is widespread fear that a large part of the money will be used not for the country's development, but to purchase equipment to patrol the coasts and stop migrants from leaving for Europe. **Political instability.** It is no secret that the crisis is fuelled also by political distortion and instability. In fact, President Saïed and the renewed parliament were elected with a 10 per cent voter turnout. "It is a delegitimised albeit legitimate parliament. Everything is being clamped down on. Governing is an explosive situation, which does not mean it will explode. It is not at all easy for anyone." On one side Saïed is still supported by the majority of Tunisians, but in foreign countries and among his opponents he is seen as a restraint on possible

reforms. **Daily life in the country.** From Djerba, Giovanni Chiappisi confirms: "Tunisia is in a bad place now, it's a fact. But it is also true, as President Saïed said, that Tunisian people's past history testifies to their resilience." "Foreigners who live here, pensioners or tourists, have no problems at the moment. In Tunisian supermarkets, customers cannot buy more than two litres of milk or more than a kilo of flour at a time. We are managing so far with this rationing, without undue panic" Alice Marchese returned to Italy from Tunisia approximately 20 days ago, after spending six months in the capital for the double degree programme offered by the University of Palermo's Faculty of Cooperation, Development and Migration. Thanks to this master's degree in International Relations at El Manar University, she had the opportunity to get to know the city in its various facets. "Tunis is going through a very challenging period, partly due to the political and food crises that are wearing it down - she explains -. People who recognized my nationality kept asking why I was there and whether I needed to stay for the entire time stipulated in the call for applications that I was awarded months ago." One of the most frequent comments they made was that "Tunisia is no longer the country it once was" and that "the 2011 Revolution has irreversibly changed the country." What is certain is that "in Tunis you cannot cook what you want, only what is available in supermarkets and grocery stores. "Despite there being a large number of shopping centres and, therefore, supermarkets, one needs to be careful because certain food items are no longer available or are discarded items, which should not even be sold. On my first day in Tunis it was very hot weather and there was a shortage of water, sugar, rice, milk and flour - she recalled - Over the months, these products, essential to say the least, returned to the shelves, except for sugar because it has been rationed."

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