Panel discussion Memorandum of Understanding
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report written by Toqa Eissa

As migration to Europe continues, the European Commission resumes the contacts and ongoing discussions with Tunisia as part of an agreement designed to curb irregular migration from the country. In consideration of this, a panel discussion was organized by philomena+ involving artists from the "Off Your Shoes" exhibition Belhassen Handous, Joanna Pianka, and Tomash Schoiswohl along with Azizou Chehou (Alarm Phone Sahara/Agadez), Wael Garnaoui (Border Study Research Group/Sousse), Leonie Jantzer (Afrique-Europe-Interact/Hamburg), Thameur Mekki (independent journalist/ Tunis), Mariama Nzinga Diallo (artivist/Vienna), Petar Rosandić aka Kid Pex (SOS Balkanroute/Vienna).

The discussion allows a critical exploration of the European Union's funding for Tunisia, unraveling the layers of complexity surrounding migration policies, discussing the "global" memorandum of understanding signed between Tunisia and the EU, with following 5 pillars economic aid, investment and trade, energy, migration, and people-to-people contact.
Central to this agreement is the focus on migration, with Tunisia positioned as a "watchdog" for EU borders according to Thameur Mekki`s words. However, the panel illuminated the darker consequences, revealing how the agreement has turned Tunisia into an "open-air prison for migrants" said Wael Garnaoui. The anti-migrant policies of the EU force even harsher actions from the omnipotent and autocratic government of Kais Saied in Tunisia. Thus, triggering more violent escalations and even more racial tensions within Tunisia since, the

agreement has not only affected sub-Saharan migrants but has also impacted the Tunisian population. Furthermore, according to Azizou Chehou, migrants from countries south of the Sahara can no longer rely on the routes to Libya and Algeria. On the way to North Africa and in the countries themselves, they are confronted with arrests under inhumane conditions. Raids are being carried out, particularly in Algeria, to deport migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to Niger. To do this, they are crammed into lorries that let them out in the middle of the harsh desert, often robbed of their belongings. They then arrive in Assamaka in northern Niger, with little or no money, no mobile phones and no shoes. There, they receive little or no support to return to their countries of origin. In short, the increasingly strict border controls and deportation practices lead to increased suffering and in some cases even the death of migrants without anyone being held accountable. Also, as highlighted by the two panelists Thameur Mekki and Mariama Nzinga Diallo an ongoing involvement of North Africans in slavery-like networks that exploits some of the migrants using them as cheap labor, which is an issue that persists and is particularly evident in Libya. The panel emphasized the need to raise awareness about the consequences of EU border politics and funding in the region to curb migration.

As migration routes shift and borders tighten, the humanitarian crisis deepens. The lack of solidarity has left migrants stranded, facing hunger, exposure, and desperation.

Thus, the artists argue that “art can help denounce these issues” echoing Mariama Nzinga Diallo and serving as a powerful tool to amplify the voices of the people. They call for more residencies, which facilitate the crucial establishment of personal connections and the acquisition of firsthand information, discussions, and exposure to diverse perspectives to bridge the gap between communities.

Through the discussion, they touch upon challenges such as the emergence of “illegal prisons” and colonial practices, not only in Tunisia but also in Bosnia where the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) built a refugee camp, which the musician Petar Rosandić aka Kid Pex compared with Guantánamo, the US prison camp, due to heavy violations of human rights. The same ICMPD, with its headquarters in Vienna was founded by the former Austrian politician Michael Spindelegger, is supporting, and financing the Tunisian government and runs educational centers for frontier guards in Tunisia. Consequently, artists and activists are urged to collaborate, emphasizing the importance of understanding, and communicating the underlying issues. One of the artists proposed that passports should be international, advocating for human rights that include everyone, not just specific groups.

In hopes of Decolonizing thought and promoting solidarity, the panelists stressed the need to acknowledge the natural and cultural resources of Africa, and they argue that migration has been a part of human history, moreover, challenging the labeling of individuals as mere migrants. The discourse around migration policies is seen as a continuation of colonization, rendering Africa a large jail for both Arab and sub-Saharan Africans. The focus then becomes on shared experiences rather than divisions.

To conclude, art emerges as a powerful force to denounce and dissect the complexities of EU migration policies. The panel discussion with philomena+ as a continuation of the OFF YOUR SHOES exhibition calls for solidarity, understanding, and action. It highlights the urgency for a shift in global moral values, using examples like the war in Gaza to illustrate the crisis in the world's conscience. Ultimately, the artists advocate for a united front against colonization and discriminatory policies, urging the world to focus on shared humanity rather than divisive distinctions.

Toqa Eissa, born in Cairo in 1998, is a visual artist and an illustrator. She has completed her BA from Helwan University in 2020. She has also studied Fine Arts for a year at the Cardiff Metropolitan School of Art and Design, in Wales on an ERASMUS+ grant. Toqa has participated in several workshops and exhibitions, is currently an MA student at Angewandte`s Art & Science, and has been working with philomena+ since Oct. 2023.