

EU in Talks With Egypt for Help With Curbing Flow of Migrants

Refugees could be diverted to the North-African country in return for investments, financial incentives.



Sebastian Kurz, the chancellor of Austria, visited Egypt's president General Abdel Fattah Al Sisi in Cairo for talks last weekend. PHOTO:BARBARA GINDL/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

BRUSSELS—The European Union is exploring a landmark deal with Egypt it hopes could alleviate a refugee crisis that has upended politics on the continent, EU officials said on Thursday.

An agreement, on which EU leaders were briefed at a summit in Austria, could see Egypt step up its policing of coastal waters and divert refugees intercepted on the Mediterranean Sea to the North-African country, according to officials involved.

In exchange, the EU would offer Egypt substantial investments and other

financial incentives as well as diplomatic accolades, including high-profile visits to Cairo by European heads of governments.

If successful, the effort would represent an important development in the EU's concerted campaign to stem the flow of Europe-bound migrants by working with transit countries or home countries of the new arrivals.

Donald Tusk, who chairs the EU council—an assembly of all EU national governments—said in a news conference Thursday that the EU would be “reaching out to other African countries in the coming weeks” to discuss similar agreements.

EU officials warned that discussions with Egypt were still at an early stage with nothing in writing at this point. Egypt has so far made no promises to take people in and the Europeans haven't yet laid out what steps they would take in exchange for Egyptian cooperation.

However there has been a flurry of talks in recent weeks which have advanced the discussions. Sebastian Kurz, chancellor of Austria, which currently holds the rotating EU presidency, and Mr. Tusk visited Egypt's president General Abdel Fattah Al Sisi in Cairo last weekend.



Relatives of people missing after a boat carrying migrants capsized, waiting at the

port city of Rosetta, north of Cairo, Egypt. PHOTO: TAREK ALFARAMAWY/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

Mr. Tusk will meet with Mr. Sisi again on Sunday in New York ahead of the annual United Nations General Assembly meeting, officials said. He also announced a planned summit in February between EU and Arab leaders in Egypt.

Europe wants Egypt's help in policing the seas off and around its coast with an understanding that Egypt would take in asylum seekers rescued in those waters. That could mean accepting refugees trying to reach Europe from third countries—chiefly Libya.

The EU has experienced a violent anti-immigration backlash since hundreds of thousands of refugees crashed through the bloc's borders in 2015. Under heavy domestic pressure, its governments agreed last July to divert asylum seekers toward so-called disembarkation centers in third countries—a move driven by Angela Merkel, the embattled chancellor of Germany, which has taken the bulk of the newcomers in recent years.

But no country has agreed to host such centers. Mr. Kurz said Thursday he didn't expect Egypt, which has refused to do so, to change tack.

"Egypt and the North African countries can be important partners for us in preventing ships heading to Europe and after the rescue, them being brought back—in other words to the countries of transit. Only in this way can we reduce illegal migration," he said in a news conference.

EU officials say that Ms. Merkel's aides had been discreetly negotiating with Cairo for two years, with Jan Hecker—now Ms. Merkel's chief policy adviser—acting as the main intermediary. Mr. Hecker couldn't be reached for comment.

During their meeting with Mr. Al Sisi last weekend, Messrs Kurz and Tusk discussed making an EU-Egypt deal the centerpiece of the EU-Arab summit. While the gathering would ostensibly focus on boosting economic cooperation, EU officials said the immigration plank of the agreement wouldn't be publicized as much.

A spokesman for Mr. Al Sisi confirmed the meeting with messrs Kurz and Tusk.

The spokesman said: “President Al Sisi underscored Egypt’s great efforts to combat illegal immigration and to control its land and sea borders, in light of the state of instability in a number of its neighboring countries.”

While it has slowed substantially, the tide of migrants to Europe has settled at a relatively high level. Some 20,734 migrants arrived in Italy by sea this year, compared with more than 119,000 in 2017, according to the United Nations. The slowdown is a result of a crackdown by Libyan, Egyptian, and Turkish authorities in cooperation with European governments.

— Jared Malsin in Cairo contributed to this article.

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