

A EUROPEAN STRATEGY IN LIBYA: an Uneasy Bargain

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The capacity of the European Union to shape events constructively in southern rim Mediterranean countries has been questioned since its inception. Unable to sustain the Barcelona Process and its positive agenda of political, economic, and cultural dialogue in the 1990s, the EU's turn at the beginning of the 2000s to a policy of securitization of the Mediterranean reflected the change in perception of security threats such as migration and terrorism and the competing foreign policy interests of EU states. Nowhere is this more evident, since the onset of the Arab revolts in 2011, than in Libya.

NATO's Western intervention to topple Colonel Gaddafi in 2011, backed by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy, with the initial reticence of Italy and the refusal of Germany, fractured the EU's foreign policy making in a region vital for its security. The divergence of views over Libya that grew in the following years between France and Italy, a former colonial power of Libya, is reminiscent of rivalries in the Mediterranean between these two countries that stretch back more than a century. For instance, post 1945, Enrico Mattei, chairman of the Italian State Hydrocarbons Authority ENI, offered Middle East oil producers better terms to those of French and Anglo-Saxon oil companies, and advised the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) on oil and gas policies as it was negotiating the country's independence from France. This ensured the wrath of the French.

Such rivalry was once again exacerbated when President Emmanuel Macron convened a conference on Libya in Paris in May 2018. The unilateral and rushed move to invite Libyan stakeholders and representatives from the international community to the French capital, was seen by Italy as a risk to undermine the UN-led process that Rome had supported, and an attempt by Macron to rise as main arbiter of the conflict and to impose the French agenda. In recent years, France appears to have played a double game, ostensibly lending lukewarm support to the now dissolved internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli while *de facto* backing Khalifa Haftar, an Eastern-based commander who all along enjoyed the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt.

There are two reasons for a French policy which some senior officials in Paris have criticised as "incoherent". The first is Emmanuel Macron's conviction that Haftar was a *bona fide* fighter against hard-line Islamists groups in Libya as well

as in the conflicts which have destabilised Mali and the Sahel since 2011. That reading of Haftar's politics is not shared by some seasoned observers in Europe and has been torn to shreds following the death of the Chad dictator, Idriss Deby, a key French ally in the Sahel, at the hands of a rebel group, the *Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad* which enjoys close ties with the armed groups headed by Khalifa Haftar. The second reason can be traced back to France's policy in the Sahel and the Middle East that is mainly driven by its counterterrorism strategy and anti-Islamist obsession. This was reflected in the animosity towards Turkey and a strategic partnership with the UAE. The latter was built around lucrative arms deals. One of the *quid pro quo* of such contracts has been to turn France into a diplomatic contractor for Emirati interests in Libya.

That France tried to muscle in on Italy's sphere of interest in Libya is hardly a surprise but the failure of that policy has handicapped a united EU diplomatic and security approach to the Libyan crisis. It has encouraged new and powerful actors, most notably Turkey to join the fray.

Meanwhile, since its formation in December 2015, successive Italian governments have backed the UN-led process and the GNA, even when it was under siege from Haftar's troops and his Western allies in Tripoli from April 2019 until June 2020. The GNA was saved at the time by the prompt military intervention of Turkey, a country which had, hitherto played a minor role in the collapse of the Libyan state. Other countries and private militias had by then joined the fray, in particular the private Russian group Wagner in eastern Libya and Syrian Islamist groups brought in by Turkey. French policy had, unintentionally given a leading role to the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Him and his Libyan counterpart, Fayeze al Sarraj, signed a life-saving controversial defence deal for the GNA, as well as a maritime treaty that created an Exclusive Economic Zone between the two countries, cutting across Greek and Cypriot maritime territory and energy interests, breaking international law. French official policy in Libya has been described by SciencePo professor Jean Pierre Filiu as "confused". In private, some senior officials in Paris are blunter about what they believe is the lack of understanding of Mediterranean affairs of the French president who has publicly dressed down his Turkish counterpart, to little avail.

Meanwhile, the Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, whose career and political clout were built within the European institutions and that according to the European press has a "entente cordiale" with the French President, has been working to maintain and further develop the unique partnership between Italy and Libya. The Covid-19 pandemic and the European response to the climate crisis will reduce the commercial activities around oil between the two countries but will strengthen those in the gas sector in response to the energy demands from the Libyan and Asian markets. As the energy partnership evolves, the first visit abroad of Draghi to Libya in April 2021 aimed to relaunch trade on sectors such as infrastructure and health to respond to Libyan development needs while providing business opportunities to Italian private companies. The issue of migration remains one on

which while expressing support to the Libyan government for its interventions to stop the migrants from reaching the northern rim of the Mediterranean, Prime Minister Draghi continues to call upon the EU without success to find a solution to the humanitarian crisis.

The long-lasting historical ties between Italy and Libya, as well as their geographical proximity, economic ties, and the issue of migration have certainly created a unique partnership between the two. That France tried to muscle in on Italy's sphere of interest in Libya is hardly a surprise but the failure of that policy has handicapped a united EU diplomatic and security approach to the Libyan crisis. It has encouraged new and powerful actors, most notably Turkey to join the fray. The death of Idriss Deby might provide Emmanuel Macron with the excuse to finally come clear on French intentions in Libya. A united Italian-French approach built on a renewed and positive relationship between Prime Minister Draghi and President Macron is thus key to handing the EU a strong diplomatic card to play in Libya.