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# The Libyan Crisis and Italian Policy: Military Intervention, Border Control and Fossil Exploitation

*Antonio M. Morone*

## Abstract:

During the last two decades, Italian policy has revealed continuity and adaptation towards local and international changes in Libya. Within this policy, however, there is an evident contradiction between the stated adherence to international standards for respecting human rights and the pursuit of national interests in Libya that involves actively collaborating with Libyan regimes demonstrating little consideration for human rights and democracy during the pre- and post-2011 era. After the end of al-Qaddafi's regime, Italy's support of the Government of National Accord of al-Sarraj was, in reality, subsequent to its special relationship with Misrata. This circumstance can easily and understandably represent a prejudice against Italy's ability to mediate with Haftar. Thus, the main ambivalence in Italy's foreign policy towards Libya is whether to support the Libyan process of national reconciliation or to take part in the conflict.

**Keywords:** *Libya, Italy, Misrata, international relations, migration*

## Introduction

Libya's popular uprising against Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi's regime erupted in February 2011 and quickly escalated into a country-wide, bloody civil war. Foreign military intervention was decisive not only in toppling the al-Qaddafi regime but also in internationalising the Libyan crisis itself. The conflict's dynamics reveal the progression of the interdependency among Libyan state and non-state actors and their foreign handlers on the path to warfare, which, combined, testify to the exploitation of Libya's economic resources (above all, oil and gas) and territorial fragmentation. The

causes of the Libyan crisis can be traced to widespread circumstances of "poverty, social exclusion, and corruption" (Naguib 2011: 383), factors similar to those of other transitions then underway in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The uprisings' sudden and massive character, the societies' economic polarization, the remarkable involvement of young people, local and international media's involvement in spreading the protest, and the role of Arab communities in exile in counteracting the regimes were all phenomena that could be observed in Libya as well as Egypt or Tunisia. Nevertheless, Libya possesses its own specificities in terms of regime ideology, economic revenues, social mobilization, history of state formation, and, above all, foreign involvement.

During al-Qaddafi's regime, political parties and labour unions were banned and replaced by direct representatives of Popular Committees, which pursued the idea of permanent social mobilization in support of the state ruled by the masses (*Jamahiriyya*), which was al-Qaddafi's invention. In fact, when al-Qaddafi's regime collapsed, the issue was not simply one of transitioning to a new regime, but how the country would undertake the constitutional process necessary to put in place a new state, which has yet to occur. Furthermore, Libya was and still is, though to a lesser degree, a relatively rich country in comparison with its neighbours, thanks to its fossil resources revenue. The Libyan "paradox" is "poor people in a very rich country" (Ouannes 2014: 33). This situation arose mostly because during the last two decades (1998–2018) a rapid economic overture (*infatih*) brought about social inequality, widespread corruption, and political contestations (Randall 2015: 201). The Libyan rentier state is at stake in the conflict of Libya's factions and their foreign supporters. Moreover, the Libyan case was characterized by exceptional decolonization "from above" and on behalf of the United Nations (UN), which in 1951 enthroned Idris al-Senusi, the former leader of Sanusi anti-colonial resistance, instead of the Libyan nationalists, and secured to the former colonial powers (the United Kingdom, France and Italy) and then to the United States important influence over the country (Morone 2018). The internationally imposed limitations on Libyan national independence were overthrown in 1969 when al-Qaddafi's revolution closed foreign military bases on Libyan soil, expelled the former Italian settlers' community and became the champion of Pan-Arabism. Paradoxically, the popular uprising against the regime in 2011 brought Libya back into a situation of limits on its sovereignty and increasing foreign interferences. Currently, the Libyan civil war is an international conflict in which Libyan political and military actors are operating in close touch with or against their respective foreign supporters.

The Libyan crisis represented a major challenge for Italian foreign policy because it affected, directly and indirectly, Italy's three main policy directions: Italy's alliance with the United States, Italy's place within the European Union and Italy's Mediterranean vocation (Felsen 2018). Italy demonstrated a high capacity to adapt and change Libyan interlocutors in order to secure its agenda in close continuity with the recent past.

Yet relations with Italy were extremely important for the new Libyan authorities in order to obtain international political recognition and present themselves as new, credible leaders, to enhance the economic partnership, and to secure military strategy support. This article analyses Italy's involvement in Libya's current affairs and Libyan responses to Italian interference in national security, border control and access to strategic resources as part of the broader international conflict in the country. It also argues that Italy's activism enabled Italy to gain some specific advantages but did not necessarily position Italy to readily act to foster the reconciliation process in Libya. On the contrary, Libya's domestic actors could profit greatly from external relations with Italy to enhance their positions in order to compete against each other for primacy in Libya's government. Finally, the article discusses how colonial and post-colonial history matters in order to understand Italy's involvement in the Libyan crisis and how it shapes the special relations between the two countries, so much so that it is quite misleading to analyse the present relations without considering the legacy and relevance of the history that dates to 1911, when Italy occupied the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan.

### **The fall of al-Qaddafi's regime and Italian participation in the military intervention**

Compared with the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings - in which their respective national armies sought to ensure an orderly transition - in Libya the national army collapsed, and the uprising rapidly transformed into civil war. While protests rapidly spread to eastern Libya, in Bayda, Benghazi, and Derna after 15 February 2011, demonstrations also erupted in western Libya in Zintan and the Nafusa mountains, and quickly spread towards Tripoli and Misrata. International military intervention under the UN shield and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) direction was decisive in curbing al-Qaddafi's attempt to use "parts of [the army] to reinstate a coercive apparatus" across the whole country (Droz-Vincent 2011: 394). United Nations resolution 1970 on 26 February 2011 established a weapons embargo on Libya (which is officially still in force) that froze the al-Qaddafi regime's financial and economic assets abroad. The subsequent UN resolution 1973 on 17 March 2011 - approved by the UN Security Council, with the abstention of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries - imposed a no-fly zone over Libya and authorized "all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Jamahiriya, including Benghazi."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, France, the United Kingdom and the United States launched Operation Odyssey Down, which was taken over by NATO on 28 March 2011 and renamed Operation Unified Protector. The United States and the United Kingdom overcame France's resistance to using NATO to carry out the military operation and its fear that Italy and Turkey could "increase their influence over operations" by using their seat on NATO "to tightly restrict and possibly undermine" military intervention (Chivvis

2014: 74, 76). Turkey participated in the operation not only with its naval and air forces but also with their air base in Izmir, which became one of the operational centres for the NATO mission (Müge, Aylin 2013: 601-2). Finally, we know now that from the very beginning special forces from Britain, France, Italy, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were on the ground in Libya (Chivvis 2014: 154).

The humanitarian bombing went on well beyond achieving the declared objective set out in resolution 1973, as the toppling of al-Qaddafi became the true goal. In fact, international military operations officially ended on 31 October 2011, shortly after the capture and killing of al-Qaddafi on 20 October. The African Union (AU), which, contrary to the Arab League, was reluctant to act in favour of military intervention, was unsuccessful in its diplomatic mediation. The toppling of al-Qaddafi's regime pointed out the defeat of the AU commitment to resolve the African crisis by means of African tools and undermined the idea of an African Renaissance, which fostered democracy across the continent (Landsberg 2015: 168). On 17 March 2011, South Africa led Nigeria and Gabon to vote in favour of resolution 1973 at the UN Security Council, despite the "full knowledge that [the international intervention] might be a pretext for regime change on the part of some Western powers" (De Waal 2013: 368). On 10 March 2011, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) adopted what became known as the 'roadmap' to solve the Libyan crisis, which called for an immediate ceasefire and an inclusive peace agreement with al-Qaddafi. When South African president Jacob Zuma travelled to Tripoli at the end of May, al-Qaddafi committed himself to adopting the AU roadmap as the only solution to resolve the conflict, but the National Transitional Council (NTC) – the nascent transitional government of Libya based at Benghazi – rejected the proposal, arguing that it could not accept any settlement which did not entail the departure of al-Qaddafi. Western powers "might well have pressed the NTC to compromise" (De Waal 2013: 372), but they decided not to support the African diplomatic mediation and opted for al-Qaddafi's ouster. The AU failed to have a united front in the matter of the Libyan crisis: whilst South Africa was leading his mediation, Niger and Chad openly support al-Qaddafi, Sudan military intervened in Libya in support of the NTC, and the governments of Ethiopia and Nigeria recognised the NTC as the authority in charge in Libya. Sudan was 'paying back' al-Qaddafi's support to the Justice and Equality Movement during the Darfur War in 2003, Ethiopia did the same for Libyan support of the Eritrean government during the Ethiopian–Eritrean War in 2008, and Nigeria did not forget al-Qaddafi's provocation and his call in 2010 to split the African country into two states, one Christian and another Muslim (Apuuli 2013: 131). The international intervention in Libya not only weakened the AU commitment of an 'African solution for African problems' but also spread insecurity across the Sahel-Saharan region and severed remunerative relations between many African countries and Libya. In actuality, Libyan investments in sub-Saharan Africa decreased and so too did sub-Saharan workers' remittances, contributing to increased migration from

sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean region and Europe.

The humanitarianism of the international intervention made reference to the paradigm of "the responsibility to protect" officially adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2005. Accordingly, "the facade of territorial sovereignty should not be used to justify ethnic cleansing and the UN should have an obligation to protect people from mass killing at the hands of their own governments" (Neethling 2012: 28). The process of regime criminalization was a preliminary step towards international intervention, notwithstanding that information was inaccurate or even false. The alleged bombing of Tripoli or mass graves along its shores made the Qatari news agency al-Jazeera an improper weapon in the hands of Qatar, which was committed to the Arab League's support for international intervention and was (and is) playing an active role in the Libyan crisis. In conclusion, the international intervention in Libya represented a setback, if not a real defeat, for the Global South and recanted "the superiority of soft power that Europe for a long time boasted against the US's hard power and unilateralism" disavowing the European model based on consensus and partnership as stated in the 1995 Barcelona Conference (Calchi Novati 2011: 28).

The Libyan intervention was also the first war waged by Western forces since 11 September 2001 that was not against the threat of international terror. Indeed, the Libyan intervention was a "new transatlantic burden sharing model" in which the Europeans were taking the lead with American support, reversing the previous and consolidated operational scheme in which the United States led international military coalitions (Hallams, Schreer 2012: 4-5). According to former U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert M. Gates, speaking on 10 June 2011 at the Security and Defence Agenda, a think-tank based in Brussels: "While every alliance member voted for the Libya mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission. Frankly, many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can't. The military capabilities simply aren't there"<sup>2</sup>

The United Kingdom and France were the most proactive members of the international coalition; France was especially willing to intervene in Libya "in order to re-establish its direct colonial stranglehold on the Sahel and West Africa" (Boyle 2013: 201). For the President of the French Republic at that time, Nicolas Sarkozy, the Libyan crisis indeed represented the opportunity to relinquish the previous and ineffective policy of Jacques Chirac who was not able "to support the democratization processes in African countries, neither to counteract in an innovative way the transformations putted in motion by the new [successful] relations between Africa and China, Africa and United States," or even Africa and Libya (Pallotti, Zamponi 2010: 205).

Italy shared the burden in an important, but nonlinear, way. Although Italy participated in the no-fly zone and deployed a relevant number of air and naval units, it started to attack ground objectives only 1 month after the beginning of military operations,

accounting for 10 percent of all air strikes (Haesebrouck 2017: 2244). Italian participation in military operations was also decisive because of the country's territorial proximity to Libya and the consequent strategic role of its air bases. In actuality, the Anglo-American-French military coalition started to target Libya on 17 March 2011 without the use of Italian bases and with "the British and French warplanes that have to fly for a quite long distance before to drop their bombs on the targets; afterwards, at the end of March, when the Operation Unified Protector began and warplanes were flying from NATO bases in Italy, military operations became not only easier, but above all cheaper": this point was made clear during the author's anonymous and confidential interview with a top-ranking official of the Italian Air Force who was serving at the time of the operations in the command room at the NATO base in Naples.<sup>3</sup>

Italy's reluctance to join the international coalition was due to the principle that Italy made its participation in NATO involvement conditional on the non-opposition of the Arab League and the AU. However, Italy was also trying to gain time and postpone a clear decision on the Libyan uprising: "Italian-Libyan relations had been, and still were, relations with the Qaddafi regime. As long as that regime appeared to have a chance of surviving, the Italian government was reluctant to throw its lot in with Qaddafi's opponents, with whom moreover it did not have any official contact" (Croci, Valigi 2013: 45). The possible warning to deny the use of Italian bases "nearly broke up the coalition" (Chivvis 2014: 70). At that time, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi never clearly condemned al-Qaddafi's regime and he refused to use his personal connection to al-Qaddafi to urge a cessation of violence, asserting that "the Libyan leader was 'too busy' at the moment" (Lombardi 2011: 35). Italy's interest was not in regime change but in keeping the *status quo*. For this reason, the Italian government's attitude was non-interventionist: only when the operations started was Italy forced to take action to protect its interests in Libya beyond the civilians' uprising. In principle, Italy's intervention was motivated by the intention to promote democracy and human rights. However, Italy's real objectives were to guarantee its agenda to halt irregular migrants who were leaving from Libya and to secure its economic interests (Ceccorulli, Coticchia 2015: 311-313).

Border control and fossil resources exploitation were at the core of the Italian agenda towards Libya and, in fact, constituted the most important chapter of the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation that Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Libyan Guide Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi signed in Benghazi on 30 August 2008. In 1956, post-colonial and republican Italy signed an international treaty with the newly independent Libya to turn the page after 32 years of colonial occupation. However, although Italy gave Libya 5 billion lire for the country's "economic contribution to the reconstruction of Libya" (Del Boca 2003: 26), Italy never admitted its colonial crimes, among them being the use of illegal weapons (i.e., mustard gas), civilian deportation and internment in concentration camps, and mass executions. From the first moment

of revolution in 1969, al-Qaddafi contested the agreement, arguing on several public occasions for more substantial compensation and Italy's apologies for colonial crimes. For the first time since the end of colonial occupation, Italy recognized al-Qaddafi's claims when at the time of the signing of the treaty Mr. Berlusconi publicly apologised for the Italian colonial occupation. The treaty acknowledged "the sufferings caused to the Libyan people by the Italian colonialism"<sup>4</sup> and explicitly committed the two countries to refuse to allow its territories to be used for any hostile act against the other.

The treaty designed a broad framework of cooperation, including cultural, economic and defence affairs, the core contents of which could be found in the 1998 Joint Communiqué signed by Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lamberto Dini (Lombardi 2011: 37). Despite this wide range of cooperation, the first article to be implemented was the one on security and economic collaboration, while the impact, for example, on the cultural cooperation was very limited (Baldinetti 2018: 428). In addition, Berlusconi's apologies were not followed by any "precise and specific historical reference" to colonial crimes that can shed light upon the public opinion about former Italian rule in Africa (Borgogni 2015: 26). According to Berlusconi's declaration to the Italian press once back in Rome, the treaty meant "less illegal immigrants as well as more gas and oil".<sup>5</sup> Immediately after the Italian Parliament ratified the treaty in 2009, Italy obtained full collaboration from the Libyan Coast Guard to jointly patrol the Central Mediterranean Sea to push back irregular migrants to the Libyan coastline (Morone 2017). In exchange, al-Qaddafi obtained Italy's decisive sponsorship in lifting the international embargo against Libya and support for the resumption of United States-Libya diplomatic relations. Indeed, the U.S. Undersecretary of State Condoleezza Rice arrived in Tripoli on 5 September 2008, immediately after the signing of the Italian-Libyan Treaty. The Treaty's signing corresponded with an improvement in Libyan-Italian economic relations and a positive trend in Libya's booming economy after the suspension of international sanctions in April 1999 and the lifting of the international embargo in September 2004. Italy became Libya's largest trading partner and its main European arms supplier (Cresti, Cricco 2012: 267), while the holdings of the Italian multinational oil and gas company Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI) were among of the most important oil and gas producers in Libya.

Italian participation in the international intervention in Libya not only went against Article 4 of the treaty signed in 2008 but also revealed Italy's disregard for its apology for colonial crimes. Importantly, returning to the former colony through military actions as part of an international operation was not discussed amongst the main Italian political parties, and the only explanation for Berlusconi's hesitation to intervene was the obvious consideration that regime change in Libya could easily undermine Italy's recent and remunerative achievements in partnership with al-Qaddafi. However, Italy's opposition party requested that the government formally suspend the provisions of

the 2008 treaty "in order to send a clear message of dissociation from the al-Qaddafi's regime" (Croci, Valigi 2013: 50) and to allow for Italian participation in the international military intervention. Thus, the treaty was suspended due to the international conflict in 2011 and reactivated when it was needed to once again serve Italian purposes. In 2017, Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Libya on border control, which is discussed further below. Of note, the preamble clearly recalls "the aim to put in effect the undersigned agreements between Italy and Libya, among them the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation signed in Benghazi on 8 August 2008, and in particular the article 19 on the intensification of cooperation in the fight against terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking and illegal immigration".<sup>6</sup> Italy, then, was resorting to the 2008 treaty in a very pragmatic and opportunistic way that ignored its wider understanding, i.e. the attached Italian apologies for its colonial criminal past and the promise to conduct its policies differently and to refrain from the use of hard power in its relations with Libya.

### Post al-Qaddafi's Libya and Italy's policy

The liberation of Tripoli in August 2011 and the conquest of Bab al-Azizia headquarters corresponded with a new occupation of the Libyan capital city by revolutionary forces and its partition among those forces, especially between Zintan and Misrata. The control of territory, economic resources, and political institutions "offered opportunities for accumulating power and wealth [...] [by] well established local elites, who expanded their power, as well as newcomers, who owed their rise to armed force or revolutionary legitimacy" (Lacher 2016: 65). From the very beginning of the Libyan political transition, the NTC banded together major former regime personalities who had earlier defected and revolutionary forces with the commitment to achieve "full liberation;" however, the revolutionary armed groups supported the NTC and, at the same time, challenged its mandate (Pargeter 2012: 231). From many revolutionaries' points of view, Libya's transition institutions were stocked with former loyalists, and, for this reason, revolutionaries started to infiltrate these institutions to protect their revolution. In this situation, "the maintenance of the status quo therefore emerged as a, or *the*, primary interest of many Libyan revolutionaries" (Fraihat 2016: 28). Becoming a commander of an armed group or a partisan of a *katiba* (battalion) was and still is the most remunerative position in post al-Qaddafi Libya. This trend progressively reduced the NTC's capacity to govern the transition process.

Within the process of increasing conflict overlapping international rivalry, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Franco Frattini, overcoming Italy's hesitations, quickly tried to establish good relations with the NTC, which Italy had officially recognized on 4 April 2011 as the only legitimate Libyan authority. During the first year of the war, Libyans' attitude towards Italy was quite negative: Italy was represented as the closest foreign ally of the former regime; moreover, it was reputed to be culpable to have waited too



long before siding with the revolutionary forces. This narrative was mixed with the former representation of Italy's role as a colonial power that occupied the country and oppressed the people. Despite this general perception, the real interests that bonded the two countries prevailed. Thus, NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil's first trip abroad was to Rome on 12 April 2011. On 31 May 2011, Italy signed an MoU to use Libya's frozen assets as a guarantee for Italian firms extending credit to the NTC. On 29 August 2011, the CEO of ENI, Paolo Scaroni, agreed to supply refined oil against payments in crude "that would be made once Libyan oil fields resumed production" (Croci, Valigi 2013: 47).

Italian relations with the new Libyan authorities were intended above all to secure more or less the same former agenda, at the top of which was the exploitation of fossil resources (oil and gas), followed by access to Libya's market and, of course, border control in order to prevent irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea. Italian support for the Libyan transition to democracy certainly enriched this agenda; however, Italy never prevailed in these objectives, which was possibly a mistake in Italy's Libya strategy. The idea to protect Italy's core policy interests, theoretically keeping good relations with whatever Libyan authorities were able to protect Italian interests, was at the risk of becoming a 'loser' in the near-term because it fostered factionalism rather than stabilization.

On the economic side, the quick resumption of oil production (after a year, almost at the same level as the beginning of the war) represented a very important and positive signal, even in consideration of a 10 billion USD deficit in the NTC's budget.<sup>7</sup> ENI recovered and increased (mostly offshore) its production in Libya, thanks to its capacity to establish good relations not only with the NTC but also with local authorities throughout the country. This situation was promising for Italian investors in Libya, who were following ENI's lead. Nevertheless, Libya's instability and the rising conflict progressively reduced Italian businesses' economic perspective. Access to oil fields, transportation via pipelines, and finally selling the oil became more and more a political lever for Libyan local actors bargaining with central institutions and, in turn, for those bargaining with foreign actors. Overall, since 2011 production fluctuated, and the oil revenue became the main instrument to finance Libya's armed groups. The black market for Libyan oil assumed gigantic proportions, overflowing the whole Tunisian southern region and involving the contraband network in Malta and Sicily.<sup>8</sup>

As for border control, Italy never really ceased to resort to the use of military power. Since Operation Unified Protector, when a considerable number of Italian naval units participated in multinational operations at sea, the Italian Navy was and is still operational in controlling the Central Mediterranean corridor and irregular migration. Italy faced the influx of irregular migrants deploying the so-called 'Operazione Mare Nostrum', a search-and-rescue mission from October 2013 to December 2014. The supposed change in Italian policy from one of pushing back migrants towards Libya's

shore to their rescue was in reality "more quantitative than qualitative" (Cuttitta 2015: 133): Italy's final objective remained repatriating migrants following at-sea rescues, except for those recognized as political asylum seekers or in need of humanitarian protection. Since fall 2014, Italy's naval mission has been gradually replaced by a new European naval mission 'Operazione Triton' and, since April 2015, by the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med) 'Operation Sophia'. Both operations have been under the direction of the European Border Control Agency (FRONTEX) and were still pursuing the same objectives of securitization of the Mediterranean Sea. Of course, the Italian effort to militarily control the sea was the direct effect of the collapse of the border externalization system on Libya territory negotiated between the Italian and Libyan governments starting in 2000, and finally implemented in 2009. The fall of al-Qaddafi's regime provoked the collapse of the border externalization system; however, Italian diplomacy was deeply committed to its revival. On 21 January 2012, the MoU between the Italian Ministry of Interior Annamaria Cancellieri and her Libyan counterpart expressed the intention to renew cooperation for training the Libyan Police and Coast Guard, building infrastructure aimed at containing migrants, coordinating programs for repatriating migrants to their countries of origin, and bolstering joint border control.<sup>9</sup> The first result was that the Libyan authorities began working to resume "the control of migratory flows in the region", monitoring migrants' detention facilities<sup>10</sup> and deporting migrants: from May 2012 to April 2013, at least 25,000 people were taken to the southern border of Libya near Gatron at the border with Niger.<sup>11</sup> Even on border control, Libyan political instability and the ineffectiveness of Tripoli's central government to control and administer the capital city's territory was decisive in affecting and limiting Italy's attempt to rebuild the border externalization system.

### **Al-Fajr al-Libia war and its aftermath**

According to Lacher (2016: 65), political actors in post al-Qaddafi's Libya can act to establish or to participate in a dominant coalition at the national level or, contrarily, to create a counter-coalition. A third option is to pursue a 'default option' and to try to consolidate their local power against that of national institutions. In 2014, this whole scenario was taking shape as the military situation in Libya escalated again during the so-called al-Fajr al-Libia War: two opposing coalitions at the national level, Libya Down led by Misrata's political and military elite, and Operation Dignity under the command of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, competed for control. In the end, the warring coalitions obtained the opposite result, splitting national institutions into two parliaments - one in Tripoli and the second in Tobruq. During the last five years, the Libyan crisis had constantly revolved around the antagonism between these two blocs and their capacity to gain international support for their respective positions. Not by chance, the accumulation of weapons and ammunitions culminated in a new escalation of violence during the spring of 2019. Despite the narrative of a collapsed

or failed state, the state *is* the stake, and the major players fought for (not against) the state. However, other minor actors pursued a local strategy as an exit option from the complex, unmanageable national context, or they pursued a local strategy because they were too far away to engage.

The situation worsened as a consequence of the increasing rivalry between Libyan blocs catalysed by the second general election in June 2014 (the first general election was held in July 2012). In May 2013, the adoption of the Political Isolation Law "excluded those politicians, technocrats and military officers who had defected at the beginning of the revolution" (Lacher 2016: 68), favouring the former exiled opposition and revolutionary leaders, but also Islamists, mostly at the expense of the National Forces Alliance (NFA) of Mahmud Jibril, one of the most prominent figures of the former NTC. The military confrontation escalated along political as well as regional divides. The bloc of Revolutionary-Islamist forces was led by Misrata and by the Justice and Constitution Party in the western part of the country. The Justice and Constitution Party could be considered to be the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose political strategy "never included a mass uprising", but the party was ready and able to profit from mass uprisings to enhance its political agenda (Chalcraft 2016: 11). Misrata was in contact with the Islamist forces in eastern Libya, who were promoting a hardliner agenda, like Ansar al-Sharia, which considered the Afghan Taliban and the Islamic state as their models.<sup>12</sup> On the opposite side, the NFA bloc and former regime elites, who had defected early on, were joined in eastern Libya around the charismatic figure of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who was allied with the Zintani military and political forces in Tripolitania. During the 1980s, Haftar was the former commander of the Libyan military intervention in the civil war in Chad. After his capture by the Chadians and his abandonment by al-Qaddafi in 1987, Haftar became the "CIA's man against the Tripoli regime" and lived in the United States until his return to Libya in 2011.<sup>13</sup> His army represents one of the main military players in the Libyan crisis and supports the idea of stabilization through hard power more than through democratic confrontation, in a manner similar to the rule of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt. In fact, and not by chance, Egypt's present regime is one of the main military allies of Haftar, who is leading an army mostly staffed by former officials of al-Qaddafi's regime and, for this reason, is representing a non-democratic and also reactionary exit option for the Libyan crisis. The precarious equilibrium between the different regional alliances became more and more difficult in the aftermath of the 2014 general elections. Misrata's armed group and city entrepreneurial elite were closely aligned and used the base to wield great political and economic influence in Tripoli's new central institutions. In the 2014 elections, the alliance between businessmen and the revolutionaries won most seats in Misrata; however, they failed to get this same result at the country level. Haftar repeatedly acted to dismantle the former General National Congress (GNC), elected in 2012, which was progressively infiltrated by Islamist groups. The prospect of Misrata's

diminishing power inside the new parliament led to the military showdown during the summer of 2014. The former GNC was resurrected by Misrata-backed forces, while the newly elected parliament, the House of Representatives (HOR), was forced to flee to Tobruq, in the eastern part of the country, under the protection of Haftar's army, while Zintani forces in Tripoli were defeated and obliged to withdrawal to the city of Zintan on the Jabal al-Nafusa (Lacher 2016: 72). Thus, the al-Fajr al-Libia War resulted in a split in the country and its central institutions.

Adding to the political complexity on the ground, at the end of 2015, the Libyan Islamist hardliners, especially in the eastern part of the country, declared their association with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). The international intervention that toppled al-Qaddafi's regime evidently "opened the way" to the rise of religious radicalism (Ouannes 2014). The threat of the Libyan conflict joining with both the Syrian and Yemeni crises triggered Western countries, together with their regional allies, to once again intervene in Libya. In actuality, the fight against ISIS in Libya became another front of the conflict between Misrata and Haftar. They fought ISIS because it was trying to gain control of Libya and because, by fighting ISIS, they could gain international recognition and military support, and consequently enhance their domestic position at each other's expense. After Misrata's capture of Surt in August 2016, the UN and Western diplomacy tried to facilitate a national peace agreement among the major Libyan players. Negotiations lingered but resulted in peace talks at Skhirat, Morocco, in December 2015. The compromise was to create the Government of National Accord (GNA) under the guidance of Mr. Fayez al-Sarraj, who should have merged with and thus included Misrata's and Haftar's forces. The peace deal between Misrata and Zintan on 29 March 2018 deprived Haftar of his major ally in Tripolitania; however, the Western/UN-sponsored government never gained full recognition from Haftar's partisans, and its permanence in Tripoli will be dependent upon its good relations with Misrata. In actuality, in April 2019, at the time of writing, Haftar's army is trying to oust al-Sarraj's government and to take over Tripoli. Nevertheless, the two fighting blocs are proving to possess considerable strength, and a military solution for the Libyan crisis thus seems to be very unlikely.

The last five years of conflict escalation in Libya overlapped with a progressive internationalization of the crisis and foreign intervention, in which Italy participated in an attempt to play a major role. Generally, Turkey and Qatar supported Misrata, while Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan supported Haftar. Direct military intervention and airstrikes on Tripoli were carried out by Egypt and the UAE in 2014,<sup>14</sup> while Turkey and Qatar constantly shipped and continue to ship military material to Misrata, events in late December 2018 proved. A cargo from Turkey was unloaded in the port city of al-Khoms in eastern Tripolitania, not far from Misrata, containing more than 4.2 million bullets, "enough to kill nearly 80 percent of the Libyan people," Haftar publicly denounced.<sup>15</sup> Of course, all foreign interference in Libya was carried out in defiance

of the UN Security Council embargo imposed on Libya since 2011, which concerned the supplying of arms and military equipment. Among Western countries, Italy, the United States, the United Kingdom, and most European allies were supporting the GNA and Misrata; however, France opted for a double-track policy of officially supporting the GNA while sponsoring Haftar's army. The French military presence became indisputable when in July 2016 a French helicopter was shot down in Cyrenaica.<sup>16</sup>

The unconventional path of alliances and their pragmatism is demonstrated by Haftar's dealings with France and concomitantly with Russia. In 2011, Russia abstained from approving UN resolution 1973 because, like Italy, it was hopeful for an economic and political partnership with al-Qaddafi.<sup>17</sup> Russian relations with the new Libyan transitional authorities never resumed a comparable level of cooperation to that of al-Qaddafi's Libya until the al-Fajr al-Libia War, when Russia sided with Haftar's forces against the Muslim Brotherhood-led coalition. Russian military support of Operation Dignity sought to guarantee Russia a more important role in Libya and achieve Russia's broader policy aim to counteract Islamist movements within the post-revolution MENA. Russia's support of military regimes as the main and most stable alternative to radical Islam in the MENA region (Haftar in Libya, Sisi in Egypt, or Assad in Syria) corresponded with Putin's national security strategy of the connection between the Mediterranean and post-Soviet Caucasian region. The reciprocal gain was that Russia could escape Western isolation following its annexation of Crimea and war in Ukraine thanks to the improved relations with the military regimes in the MENA region, while Arab military regimes, like Haftar's, could use "the rapprochement with Russia as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis the US and EU member states" (Schumacher, Nitoiu 2015: 104).

Italy's policy attempted to face the new developments in the Libyan crisis by trying to mediate between Misrata and Zintan forces, and consequently the Misrata and Haftar rivalry. Military escalation and Zintani's withdrawal from Tripoli caused Italy to more convincingly put its support behind Misrata. Once again, the Italian strategy was one of pragmatism as it sought to ally itself with the "winner" at the moment. Italian support for Misrata climaxed during 2016, at the time of the war against ISIS in Libya, and then during the diplomatic discussion for the formation of the GNA of al-Sarraj with the Italian General Paolo Serra as his military advisor.<sup>18</sup> The so-called Libyan Interim Assistant Mission, the new international coalition to fight ISIS, brought the United States and Western allies back to Libya and Italian bases were once again at the allies' disposal. Furthermore, Italy launched *Operazione Ippocrate* on 13 September 2016, deploying a field hospital in Misrata. Italy's 300 military staff also trained Misrata soldiers and treated the injured personnel during the battle for Surt against ISIS. Although the Italian Minister of Defense Mrs. Roberta Pinotti stressed that *Operazione Ippocrate* was a "humanitarian mission, not a military operation,"<sup>19</sup> for the first time since 1943, Italian soldiers were back in Libya. In fact, approximately 30 Italian soldiers from the special corps had been operating in Libya since August,

with the task to support Misrata's rear flank.<sup>20</sup> The presence of Italian soldiers fuelled anti-Italian sentiment, especially in eastern Libya, which mixed with the former but recurrent narrative of colonial crimes committed by Italian troops. Of course, Italy's direct military intervention was not advancing its preferred policy to act as a bipartisan mediator between Libya's east and west. Even Italy's last attempt to merge the al-Sarraj and Haftar rift during the Palermo Conference on 12 and 13 November 2018 was unsuccessful.<sup>21</sup> During the spring of 2019, the new escalation of the Libyan crisis has further marginalised Italy's role as mediator and has increased international and Libyan attention over the Italian military base in Misrata.

Italy's military involvement on the ground also indirectly responded to border control requirements. On 2 February 2017, Italy signed a second MoU, which permitted new refoulement operations at sea, this time executed autonomously by the Libyan Coast Guard thanks to Italy's training and materiel. Thus, Italy guarded against a possible new condemnation from the European Court of Human Rights, as had happened in June 2012 when Italy was found guilty of disrespecting the international principle of non-refoulement and preventing potential refugees from applying for asylum.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the agreement reaffirmed the will to cooperate in managing "temporary hosting camps" in Libya, which were to serve for repatriating migrants.<sup>23</sup> The 2017 MoU marked a direct return to the past, despite the commitment of Mario Monti's government, announced on 20 June 2012, to officially give up the push-back strategy as a possible means of migrant flow control.<sup>24</sup> Border militarization resulted in greatly reduced irregular landings on Italian shores; however, it consequently increased their deaths at sea.

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Italy's military activism was intended also to enhance (or better defend) Italy's key role and that of Italian investment. The al-Fajr al-Libia War produced a deep economic and financial crisis. In 2013, public sector wages increased to 30.9 percent of total state expenditure, with an upward trend in comparison with wages during the al-Qaddafi regime: if the former regime increased salaries in regions that it controlled, the new government later increased them elsewhere, because in Libya state administration is still the most important employer. The state budget deficit rapidly increased from 11% of GDP in 2014 to 31% in 2015, and combined with a liquidity crisis and a heavy devaluation of the LYD, which dropped from 1.5 to 1.0 EUR to 10 to 1 (Randall 2015: 215-6). At the end of the al-Qaddafi regime, in 2010, oil production reached 1.65 million barrels/day, but after the quick resumption of production in 2012, the trend was not so positive: during the worst moments of the conflict, oil production fell to 2,000 barrels/day.<sup>25</sup> Even if "ENI was able to produce and distribute oil in Libya" during the last few years "thanks to the agreements with local armed groups and moving production offshore" (Labbate 2017: 8), in June 2016, the Haftar army's conquest of the two major oil terminals in Ras Lanuf and al-Sidra made ENI's position even more complex. Generally, Libya's instability affects not only ENI's activities but also

commercial and economic partnerships between the two countries. Thus, Italy was concentrating its political effort and military presence in Tripolitania, where ENI has its main assets, rather than in Cyrenaica, where the French company Total is enlarging its investment and the French government is supporting Haftar.

### Conclusion

Italian policy towards post al-Qaddafi Libya has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt itself to the new Libyan context in order to protect and consolidate its unchanged agenda of relying on access to Libyan fossil resources, economic partnership, and border control. This attitude was in reality a long-run trend in Italian relations with Libya since the end of Italian occupation in 1943 and Libya's independence in 1951. After the fiasco of the Bevin-Sforza Compromise in 1949, according to which Italy and the United Kingdom tried to divide up the former Italian colonies, Italy quickly changed its policy in order to influence the Tripolitanian elite, which was ready to lead the federal government under the kingship of Idris al-Sanusi (Morone 2018). Following this strategy, Italian policy was able to accommodate a new partnership with al-Qaddafi's revolutionary regime, not only after the expulsion of Italian community in 1970 (Varvelli 2009) but also during the US-Libyan crisis in 1986 (Soave 2017; Malgeri 2011). Within that framework of post-colonial relations with Africa and despite loyalty/antagonism to the Western alliance, Libya represented the most important partner for Italy among the Arab and African countries and, vice versa, Italy for Libya among European countries (Bucarelli, Micheletta 2018: 9, 12).

Continuity and adaptation in Italian policy reveal the limitations of a strategy that pursued Italy's national interests but did not refrain from pragmatically agreeing with different regimes without considering Libyan authorities' excesses during both al-Qaddafi's regime and post-2011. Italy's policy to be involved in Libya at all costs and to serve its national interests before Libya's transition to democracy was problematic: its support of the GNA of al-Sarraj was, in reality, subsequent to special relations with Misrata; this circumstance can easily and understandingly represent a prejudice against Italy's chances to mediate with Haftar and the eastern bloc. Thus, the main ambivalence in Italy's foreign policy towards Libya is whether to support the Libyan process of national reconciliation and to take part in the conflict (the same being true for France, with opposite Libyan counterparts). So, Italy cannot be said to hold a good position for truly fostering a peaceful transition in Libya. Of course, which political strategy to conduct was a problem not only for Italy but also for other countries involved in the Libyan crisis, and possibly for many Libyan players who are all the more willing and interested in defending and securing their parochial interests rather than acting to enhance the national dialogue and their country's stabilization. The pity for the ordinary people of Libya, who suffer significantly from the conflict, is that



maintaining the status quo is in the interest of more than one Libyan or foreign actor.

Antonio M. Morone is Associate Professor of African History at the Department of Political and Social Sciences in Pavia

#### NOTES:

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- 2 - *Remarks by Secretary Gates at the Security and Defense Agenda*, Brussels, Belgium, "U.S. Department of Defense", 10 June 2011: <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4839>.
- 3 - Author's anonymous interview with an Italian Air Force officer, Beirut, 15 August 2017. At the time of our interview, the Italian Air Force officer was stationed at the UNIFIL Mission (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon).
- 4 - *Treaty of Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation*, Article 4: [https://www.camera.it/\\_dati/leg16/lavori/schedela/apritelecomando\\_wai.asp?codice=16pdl0017390](https://www.camera.it/_dati/leg16/lavori/schedela/apritelecomando_wai.asp?codice=16pdl0017390).
- 5 - P. Di Carlo "Berlusconi, patto con Gheddafi. Ora meno clandestini e più gas", «Corriere della Sera», 31 August 2008.
- 6 - *Migranti: accordo Italia-Libia. Il testo dell'accordo*, «La Repubblica», 2 February 2017.
- 7 - R. Bongiorno, *Fondi cruciali per la Nuova Libia*, «Il Sole 24 Ore», 29 March 2012.
- 8 - One of the most famous episodes was in March 2014, when U.S. Special Forces intervened to take control of the North Korean tanker Morning Glory that was smuggling an oil upload in Cyrenaica, after which the Tripoli government sent air and naval units to halt the foreign ship without success. R. Bongiorno, *Libia, la petroliera dei ribelli finisce sotto custodia USA*, «Il Sole 24 Ore», 18 March 2014.
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- 10 - Author's anonymous interview with a Libyan Police officer, Khums, 20 April 2014. The officer was in charge of the operations of monitoring migrants' flows from Khums to Gasr Garabulli, along the eastern Tripolitanian coastline.
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- 12 - *Libya Loses Track of Islamist Militants*, «Financial Times», 4 October 2012.
- 13 - *The Story Behind the General Who Will Likely Shape Libya's Future*, «Al Monitor», 5 May 2017.
- 14 - *Libya Dawn Accuses Egypt and The UAE of Tripoli Airstrikes*, «Libyan Herald», 24 August 2014.
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- 16 - *Libia, abbattuto elicottero francese: tre morti*, «La Repubblica», 20 July 2016.



- 17 - In April 2008, Russian President Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to Libya and signed agreements for economic, technical, and military cooperation for 10 billion USD (Schumacher, Nitoiu 2015: 99).
- 18 - *Libia, pronto il nuovo governo*, «Il Sole 24 Ore», 27 March 2016.
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- 20 - *In Libia unità speciali italiane sul terreno, «ma non combattono»*, «Il Sole 24 Ore», 11 August 2016.
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