



DOES ITALY STILL HOPE TO PLAY A CORE ROLE IN THE LIBYAN CRISIS?

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For almost over a century now, Italy and Libya share important economic, political and cultural ties that have survived several crises and critically tense moments. Following the Italo-Turkish war in 1911, Libya had become an Italian colony. During this period, many Italian entrepreneurs had begun to start businesses, developing financial and fiscal ties in the region. The Libyan colonial period lasted up till 1943 when the Allied forces took control of the region until the independence of Libya in 1951 under King Idris. Despite tense moments, such as the [missilistic attack on Lampedusa](#) in 1986 carried out by the Libyan army, the constant Italian presence in the region for thirty years had created the possibility to strengthen and set the base for commercial and economic agreements between the two countries.



Between the 80s and the 90s, the bilateral relations amid Italy and Libya lived a complicated moment characterized by a high level of tension. Muammar Gaddafi forced the hand advancing disparate threats and requests to the Italian government such as compensation for the damages caused during the colonial period and the demining of previous war zones. Nevertheless, in 1998, due to the important geopolitical Italian interests in Libya, under the Romano Prodi government, Italy and Libya started a round of negotiations to normalize and better the relations. The Joint *Communiqué* agreement, included a series of commitments for the Italian government and the implementation of some projects in Libya which should have been built under joint ventures. This first agreement, which was not ratified, however, paved the way for the Treaty of Friendship, signed in Benghazi in 2008 under the last Silvio Berlusconi cabinet. The treaty is noteworthy because ended once and for all the dispute between Italy and Libya and strengthened the relations [providing considerable security](#) (limits to the inflow of migrants) and economic (energy supply and contracts for many firms) gains.

Libya, therefore, represents itself as a vital region for Italian foreign policy for a different range of reasons which fall into [three main spheres](#): energy, immigration and security. Libya covers an important role in the Italian energy sector both for the imported amount and quality of the Libyan oil. Due to the current era requirements of petroleum and energy, the production capabilities and the quality of Libyan oil has given Libya an important role in



the Italian energy sectors. [Imports from Libya](#) cover a huge part of energy demands in Italy.

One of the main drivers of the Italian foreign policy in Libya can be identified in the hydrocarbon corporate ENI. ENI's presence in the Libyan region dates back to 1959. Since then, ENI has been able to gain [eleven mining licences](#) (4 exploration permits and 7 production permits), produce reaching 37 million barrels of condensed oil, 374 billion cubic feet of gas and 106 millions barrels of oil equivalent in 2019's production. The collaborations between ENI and Libya covered a reciprocal role: on one side, ENI provided its know-how for oil extraction and on the other Italy benefitted from a secured amount of oil, while Libya received Italian support and improved the economy. Notwithstanding, Libya is now not the most important source of oil, since the 70s oil crisis Italy had begun to diversify its imports reducing dependency on the Libyan oil.

The second important factor is validated by the [massive streams of migrants](#) trying to reach the Italian coasts. Most of the illegal immigrants reaching Italian shores come from Libya through the Mediterranean Sea. This also creates some tensions between European countries regarding the [Dublin regulation](#) on the redistribution of migrants. After the outbreak of the Libyan civil war, the posture of the country towards migrants completely changed. Once a region of immigration and work opportunity especially within Africa, the country started to be a set-off point towards Europe. Due to its geographical position looking at the



Mediterranean Sea, Italy is the most affected European country by uncontrolled immigrants flows.

The third, and most noteworthy, of the spheres is in regard to the security of the Mediterranean region. After the birth of the Islamic State (Daesh), that dates back to 1999 in Afghanistan, the internationalization of the terroristic organization has [increased the threat of terrorism](#) in the Mediterranean region. Therefore, the stabilization of the Mediterranean region with a specific focus on Libya should cover a primary role and be of vital interest to Italian foreign policy.

To understand the role of Italy in the Libyan crisis, it is important to underline a recurrent behaviour of Italian policymakers when it comes to taking strong positions in international crisis and foreign policy. As it happened in 2011 with the invasion of Libya, Italy, after having spent many years in strengthening bilateral relations, could side against the invasion, nonetheless, this led to the folding back of Italy's stance and interest, ending up with agreeing with the aforementioned invasion led by France, USA and UK. Moreover, it is very unlikely that Italy would carry out an independent military operation outside of a mission led by the United States. The reasons can be identified in the fear of [worsening its position](#) within some multilateral institutions such as NATO and the EU.

The recent Italian approach to the Libyan region can be split into two main phases. The first one took place under the government of Matteo Renzi. During this period Italy played a coherent and



stronger role in the round tables organised by the United Nations. This phase culminated with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and the government of Fayez al-Serraj in 2017.

The debatable but still coherent position assumed by Italy under Renzi's government has been weakened by the following governments, especially under Conte's legislature. Thus, the weaker and confused position assumed by Italy gave space to Turkey which has been able to fill the gap with a military intervention. The Turkish offence, carried out with a massive deployment of drones, twisted the future of the Libyan conflict.

Following the inauguration of Conte's new government in 2018, the Italian approach towards the region completely changed as stated by Emeritus Professor Carlo Degli Abbati. The new government with Matteo Salvini covering the Ministry of Domestic Affairs, "completely blocked the border control operation negotiated by the previous Minister of Domestic Affairs Minniti," told me Professor Degli Abbati during a recent interview.

One of the main reasons why Italy cannot play a determinant role in the region is recognizable in the low interest of public opinion in Italian foreign policy. Media outlets are not following the crisis and giving it enough attention, therefore the Italian government is unable to side with any of the factions in a strong way, as demonstrated during the last meeting when Italy invited both Fayez al-Serraj, leader of the GNA government recognized by the



United Nations, and General Khalifa Haftar, the LNA commander, in the same day. The double invitation created some friction between the governments.

The last noteworthy event between Italy and Libya took place on the 4th of December 2020 when the Italian Minister of Defence held a [bilateral meeting](#) with his Libyan counterpart Salahuddin Al-Namroush. The meeting paved the way to a new military cooperation agreement, renewing a memorandum signed in 2013. This marks how Italy, despite all the difficulties, is still trying to cover the role of an important actor in one of the nearest crises.

Foreign policy is an important pillar of every governments, albeit it is also costly. Thus, the critical economic situation and the massive public debt does not allow Italy to develop a multidirectional and independent foreign policy aimed at defending the vital interest of the country, especially in the Mediterranean region.

As a conclusive remark, the news of a newly reached agreement between Fayez al-Serraj and Aguila Saleh, head of the Tobruk House of Representatives, supported by the Libyan National Army (LNA) militias led by General Khalifa Haftar, opened the way to a possible stabilization of the crisis as Federico Donelli, Professor of International Politics at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, told me during a recent interview.

To put it into a nutshell, the new peace process started in Tunisia with more than seventy delegates might turn into a lasting solution



for the stability of the country, notwithstanding some difficulties such as finding an agreement across all the actors involved are still on the table. However, it is important to keep an eye out on the other stakeholders involved in the region such as Turkey, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Qatar without forgetting the new US administration led by President-elect Joe Biden. The fragile situation as a result of more than ten years of civil war, is likely to fall into another impasse if the involved countries will resume an assertive foreign policy approach due to the high level of fragmentation.