



## Italy in Libya (2011-2019): Defending National Interests

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### Abstract

The fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, following the Arab Springs, and the subsequent outbreak of civil war with international intervention, has highlighted the different aims of the world players involved in the affair.

This article analyses Italy's position on the issue, highlighting that Rome's diplomatic, economic, and military actions towards Tripoli are guided by the defense of national interests, with continuity in energy supplies as a top priority.

**Key words:** Mediterranean- Arab Springs - oil - civil war - UN

### Introduction

In considering the Italian position in the complex crisis scenario following the end of the Gaddafi regime and the splitting of Libya into two governments [1], it is worth noting that Libya has been and remains a priority and strategic element of Rome's foreign policy in the Mediterranean basin.

This article analyses the period from February 2011 to April 4, 2019, when General Haftar launched his offensive on the capital, Tripoli.

The conflict involved the Government of National Accord led by Prime Minister al-Serraj, which was strongly supported by the United Nations. However, it was effectively abandoned and became hostage to Islamist militias that insisted on controlling the capital. This situation presented a challenging diplomatic situation. It is worth noting that the Muslim Brotherhood, which was supported by Turkey and Qatar, saw the GNA as a chance for a new foothold in the African continent after the failure of the Egyptian project. General Haftar was supported by al-Sisi's Egypt, the emirs of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Russia. He has positioned himself as a champion in the fight against Islamic extremism and as a promoter of national unification. Russia saw in the strongman of Cyrenaica an opportunity to extend its hegemony over the Mediterranean to the northern shore of the African continent.

This scenario was then exacerbated by the attitude of the international community and Europe, which, thanks in part to Washington's

considerable lack of interest in the issue, seemed incapable of acting with a united and far-sighted multilateral line, leaving ample room for individual states to propose their own policies in the country, aimed at conquering, as in the case of France, or defending, as in the case of Italy, their national interests on Libyan soil [2]. Even after the end of the colonial period, relations between Italy and Tripoli remained stable. Italy managed to establish a privileged position with the Rais during the Jamahiriya era. This relationship was built over half a century through consistent diplomatic and economic policies, resulting in numerous agreements and events that remain shrouded in mystery. From a certain point of view, this relationship led to one of the greatest achievements ever reached by Italian foreign policy: in 2008 a partnership and cooperation treaty was established. It not only placed Italy as a privileged partner of the African country but also officially consolidated the centrality of Italian economic policy in the Mediterranean and beyond. It is worth noting that this agreement may have been inconvenient for countries that are diplomatically aligned with Italy, but have become competitors on a regional level. So, this paper focuses on the analysis of the Italian attempts to measures to protect its achievements and safeguard its national interests in the aftermath of the crisis.

### Libya 2011-2019

The 2011 popular uprising and the subsequent overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi initially offered hope for a peaceful and democratic transition in Libya. However, the absence of a strong central authority and national security apparatus after the fall of Gaddafi created a power vacuum. This led to a tense competition between different factions for control of state institutions and resources during 2012-2013.

Constituent elections were held in July 2012, resulting in the establishment of the General Congress of the Nation (CGN) and an interim government to serve as the seat of parliament. Despite facing numerous internal crises, both institutions have been unable to quell the armed clashes between the various factions that control important territorial areas, including the oil fields and their commercial management. In 2014, the conflict escalated into an armed one,

resulting in the country's fragmentation into eastern and western factions between 2015 and 2018. As a consequence, parallel political, governance, economic, and security institutions were established in these respective regions. On 17 December 2015, representatives from across the country came together to negotiate and signed the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). The agreement was based on four fundamental principles: guaranteeing the democratic rights of the Libyan people, forming a consensual government based on the separation of powers, strengthening state institutions, and respecting the independence of the Libyan judiciary. However, years later, the LPA had weakened state institutions, leaving them vulnerable to non-state military actors. In recent years, the UN Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and the international community have attempted to mediate between Libyan political, economic, and military elites. However, their efforts have been perceived as biased, eroding their credibility, particularly in eastern Libya. The armed conflict, compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis in Libya from 2019 to 2020.

The conflict and power struggles have hindered the creation of a unified and stable government, leading to a deep division between the eastern and western parts of the country. The initial aspirations for a democratic and inclusive Libya have been impeded by prolonged conflict and political fragmentation, which have hindered progress towards a peaceful resolution and the establishment of effective state institutions [3].

On 4 April 2019, forces loyal to general Khalifa Haftar launched a large-scale offensive from the centre and east of Libya with the aim of capturing the capital, Tripoli. The offensive initially surprised armed groups in western Libya, allowing Haftar's forces to advance into the southern suburbs of Tripoli. However, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) offensive had stalled when armed groups across western Libya mobilised under the 'umbrella' of the GNA to counter Haftar's forces. This led to a stalemate from late April onwards. It was not until June 2019 that forces allied to the GNA achieved a major victory against the LAAF by capturing Gharyan, the LAAF's key forward base for its operation in Tripoli, which is located 80 km south of Tripoli. Prior to Haftar's offensive, political actors and armed groups in western Libya were divided. However, Haftar's offensive united political and military factions that were previously rivals. It mobilised volunteers from communities that had fought against Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011, all motivated by the common goal of preventing the restoration of a dictatorship. In contrast, the Libyan forces in the west mobilised by Haftar mainly came from communities that had experienced the 2011 revolution as a defeat [4].

## Rome's energy policy

Eni is a crucial topic in any discussion about relations between Italy and Libya. Precisely for this reason, it is appropriate to understand how and to what extent the red thread that binds the Italian six-legged dog with the North African country has influenced and still influences Italian foreign policy. Italian diplomacy has often conveyed the intentions of the National Hydrocarbons Authority in North African countries like Libya and Algeria, as well as in the Middle East since its inception after World War II.

Since 1953, the newly founded company has established itself on the international scene, largely due to the ambitions of its then-president, Enrico Mattei. Mattei's policies significantly influenced the Italian state's strategies towards the oil-producing countries of the Mediterranean basin and Arab countries. Mattei had no intention of submitting to the will of what he called the 'seven sisters': a lobby that identified the seven major Anglo-American oil companies holding the economic monopoly linked to the world of oil. These companies regulated the parameters of the energy market at an international level through their exclusive relationships with almost all producing countries. Therefore, Mattei began to look for independent sources

of supply. In this context, relations with Tripoli can be placed, which led to a 17-fold increase in trade between Italy and Libya in the 1960s and 1970s.

Libya was considered a valuable asset for Italy in terms of foreign and economic policy due to its potential wealth as the richest country in Africa.

With the advent of the Rais in the early 1970s, Italy assumed a position of strength in the entire Mediterranean area: Gaddafi, having come to power, expelled the American and British bases from the country, and expressed to foreign oil companies his intentions to nationalise the oil economy and manage its prices and concessions; a process from which the National Oil Corporation (NOC) came into being and with which ENI, which today manages 70% of the Libyan state body's total production, has enjoyed highly privileged relations, right from the start [5].

Once in power, if on the one hand the Rais expelled all the various foreign companies, including Italian colonists, from Libyan territory, on the other he signed secret trade agreements with Italy and ENI. It is no coincidence that all ENI and Fiat's possessions in Libya were saved from confiscation; while in strictly confidential meetings between Gaddafi and the then Foreign Minister Aldo Moro, Italy offered skilled labour in the petrochemical sector and in the construction of imposing infrastructural works that were part of the modernisation project of Libya devised by Gaddafi, who in return would grant enormous advantages to the government in Rome in the supply of oil and in the supply of weapons and military equipment [6]. Italy, thanks to ENI, quickly became Libya's main trading partner, whose relations with Rome, despite the countless provocations launched by the Rais over the years regarding the colonial question, have always remained constant and fruitful in content. In addition to a number of important agreements made over the years, prior to the 2011 crisis, Italy managed to obtain important contracts from the NOC that extended ENI's concessions for oil and gas production until 2042 and 2047 respectively [7].

ENI was able to overcome the disruptions caused by the crisis that began in 2011 and continues to this day. Although hostilities forced ENI and other international oil companies to halt production and evacuate their staff overnight, ENI was the only company able to promptly re-establish its leading role in the production and distribution of oil and gas in Libya. A quick analysis of the data is sufficient to comprehend the extent of the company's dominance. Financial reports indicate that the Italian multinational produced 240,000 barrels of oil per day in 2014 and 365,000 in 2015 during the post-2011 crisis years. It is worth noting that the total production declared by the NOC in those years in the North African country was just over 400. At 24 billion dollars [8] in turnover according to the NOC's latest financial report for 2018, it is clear that ENI played a significant role in the system. ENI produced almost 70% of the turnover that is poured into the coffers of the Central Bank of Tripoli every year.

Other multinational companies, such as France's Total and Britain's BP, saw the 2011 crisis as an opportunity for a 'regime change' that would have allowed them to review contracts and concessions, interrupting the unchallenged hegemony of the Italian company. However, they did not achieve these much sought-after results. On the contrary, they found themselves forced to completely review their policies and activities in the country due to the continuous deterioration of the situation, which was difficult to predict even for the best analysts. The events of May 2019 serve as an indicator of the tense political and social climate. In that month, the Tripoli government issued an ultimatum to over 40 European companies, including French Total. These companies' licenses to operate in the North African country had expired and had not been renewed due to the chaos that has persisted in the country since 2011 [9]. A sort of

veiled intimidation. Just to remember, ENI was the only one to have the rights guaranteed until at least 2040. In 2018, the Libyan energy market saw a record recovery before relapsing due to the new conflict that began in April 2019 with the siege of Tripoli. Under the supervision of the NOC, ENI signed a historic agreement to acquire 50% of the concessions for oil and gas extraction from British Petroleum (BP). The intention was to restart activities and investments in an area that, like many others, had been at a standstill since 2014 [10]. The Italian company was considered the most stable and reliable partner in the North African country. Despite any diplomatic challenges, Italy maintained a leadership position in the international economic arena, surpassing regional competitors such as Total. However, the outbreak of hostilities in April 2019 not only brought further instability Libya, but also created uncertainty for ENI and Italy. Rome maintained its position alongside the national government in Tripoli, which was a strategic choice because most of Italy's interests were located in the country's western belt. The area was traversed by oil and gas pipelines that connected the Greenstream terminals on the Tripoline coastline between Mellitah and Sabratha, with the extraction fields of the Italian multinational Wafa and El Feel, located further south in the Fezzan, near the Algerian border. General Haftar's troops captured these fields during manoeuvres near the siege on Tripoli, but this did not affect production. At the end of 2019, unidentified armed groups attacked the same extraction terminals. This fact appeared to suggest that the GNA might be attempting to exert pressure on Rome to provide more effective support for a government that felt trapped by the General of Cyrenaica. Alternatively, this could have been a warning from Haftar to inform Italy that opportunities to join the 'supposed' winners were dwindling over time. Additionally, France's Total seemed to have returned to the attack on the wave of the latest conquests of the Elysée-backed strongman of Cyrenaica. Meanwhile, the ever-increasing involvement of Ankara on the one hand and Moscow on the other place, two other fierce energy competitors on the Libyan stage, which could seriously undermine Italian interests in the country.

### Italy's political choice

In the aftermath of the Skhirat agreements that established the onusian government of al-Serraj, Italy, along with the rest of the international community, had to take action to address the situation. After the United Nations recognized the new government, all major international powers pledged to support it. During the rift between East and West, Italy remained faithful to its commitment to the United Nations and the new government in Tripoli. This government was recognized as the only legitimate one, and all diplomatic and foreign policy activity should be addressed to it.

It is difficult to attribute such a diligent attitude solely to keeping one's word in 2015. Other, more pragmatic reasons were likely at play. As previously mentioned, one of these reasons was dictated by the strategies and interests of the Italian multinational oil giant in the west of the country. However, there are also other factors that drove Italian strategies towards Tripoli.

The issue of security was a fundamental concern for Rome. Illegal immigration was a problem that raises many concerns in this regard. The issue at hand is complex and requires a thorough treatment beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to mention the fundamental points that play a crucial role in the Italian government's actions towards its North African counterpart, given the nature of the problem. A few numbers are enough to give you an idea: in 2010, thanks to the cooperation treaty signed in Benghazi in 2008, a little more than 4,000 people landed in Italy; in 2011, with the country in the grip of civil war, 62,962 arrived; in 2014, when the country fell into chaos again, there were 170,000 landings, and in 2016 a record 181,436 landed in Italy. From 2014 to 2019, around 650,000 people from Africa have landed in Italy; 90% of these have come from Libya and more precisely from the coasts around Tripoli [11].

To address the migration phenomenon, Italy had to turn to the Government of National Accord. The 'Memorandum of Understanding

on Cooperation in the Field of Development, Combating Illegal Migration, Trafficking in Human Beings, Smuggling and Strengthening Border Security between the State of Libya and Italy' [12], commonly referred to as the 'Migrants Agreement', should be viewed in this context. The Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and the President of the GNA in Tripoli al-Serraj signed an agreement in which Italy pledged to provide financial and technical support to the Government and the Libyan Coast Guard. The aim of the support was to enable the units to autonomously manage the control of territorial waters and limit the trafficking of migrants.

Italy has a vested interest in presenting itself as a friendly country to the government controlling western Libya. Rome's policy has been effective and measured. Italy was the first country to reopen its embassy in Tripoli in 2017. Italy is officially present in Libya also to assist the Government of National Accord with the 'Miasit' mission [13]. This mission built upon and strengthened the already existing 'Hippocrates' mission from 2016, which aimed to support the operations of the Misurata militias in their fight against the Caliphate in Sirte. As a result of this mission, a field hospital was established at the Misurata airport base, providing 30 beds and medical assistance to the wounded from the fighting. Till 2019, the mission combined the humanitarian support activities of Operation Hippocrates with some technical support tasks for the Coast Guard that are part of Operation Mare Sicuro. As previously mentioned, a significant portion of the personnel was stationed at Misurata airport. The remaining personnel was located in Tripoli, specifically at the port of Abu Sitta, which also housed the offices of the Government of National Accord. They worked closely with the Tripoline authorities to provide training and technical advice to the Coast Guard units involved in combating illegal immigration.

Based on this data, it might be reasonable to assume that Italy had the necessary elements to play a leading role as a mediator in the ongoing crisis in the North African country. However, the theory was far removed from reality. Italy's role was becoming increasingly diminished, revealing a certain feeling of immobility in Italian foreign policy. Italy found itself mired in a dilemmatic situation, in which no position was completely just or exempt from negative contraindications.

### Italy and the 'Libyan dilemma': Which Side is Right?

It is acknowledged that Italy has faced a challenging situation in Libya. Initially, Italy was unable to prevent the aggression and downfall of its most significant ally in the Mediterranean. Subsequently, Italy found itself in a difficult position, balancing its national interests in the African country against its international role in Europe and the Mediterranean. In this scenario, Italy has adopted a wait-and-see approach and aligned itself with al-Serraj's Government of National Accord, in line with the United Nations' intentions, while also protecting its own interests. Rome has adopted a well-considered and balanced policy, avoiding direct involvement to prevent compromising Italy's role in the crisis. However, when faced with a dilemma, choosing the 'lesser evil' always carries the risk of missteps.

Italy had faced a series of challenges due to the country's instability. From energy levels to politics and security, when discussing Libya, immigration became a key topic for Rome. This topic inevitably influenced the political line towards Libyan partners. However, it appears that all attention had been solely focused on containing the problem without considering the root causes, which were closely linked to the country's situation. Without a stable government capable of effective control over the territory, any agreement or action to support institutions that wielded partial power on the national scene could only provide a partial solution to the problem of instability and crime. In 2019, there was discussion about a potential revision of the memorandum on migrants and the investigation opened by Avvenire into the Bija case [14]. This investigation raised doubts about the fact that the head of the Libyan Coast Guard, with whom Italy interacted, had a profile similar to that of many militia chiefs with questionable pasts.



The issue of migrant smuggling was a complex problem that required a collaborative effort to address. In the Libyan capital, the government faced challenges in exerting control due to the presence of numerous militias. These militias leveraged the threat of Haftar's advance to increase their power and gain political and institutional relevance. It has been observed that some militias wore police or government uniforms, but in reality, they were armed gangs that reflect the identity of their respective tribes. There were reports of ex-jihadists and extremists infiltrating these groups, which were often manoeuvred by the Misuratini movements of the Muslim Brotherhood. In any case, these groups did not represent the official police or government bodies. Islamist movements had the ability to exert influence over the government in Tripoli with the support of regional allies such as Qatar and Turkey.

In summary, Italy took a passive approach and deferred to international action for managing the crisis on a larger scale, while focusing solely on addressing urgent issues. However, Italy's absence and lack of action went not unnoticed in Tripoli. As a result, Tripoli turned its attention to those who consistently support the UN-backed government, while Italy had not provided the tangible support requested. Despite this, Italy remained a valued partner in the international community and was committed to finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

Turkey took on a more prominent role in the international community, which had been left vacant by. For some time, Turkey was known to support the operations of militias in Misurata and Tripoli. This activity had then intensified due to the maritime cooperation agreement (EEZ) [15] and the memorandum of understanding between Turkey and Libya. The Turkish President expressed willingness to send troops to support the government in Tripoli. The situation presented a complex challenge for the Italian government. While the convergence of the Rome-Ankara axis in support of the Government of National Accord was initially promising, it turned into a divergence due to Turkey's growing influence in Tripoli. This had the potential to negatively impact Italian interests, including those related to energy, economics, and immigration. Italy adjusted its approach, showing more openness towards Cyrenaica and reevaluating its stance towards the leadership of Libya's eastern flank. At the Palermo conference in late 2018, Italy exerted pressure on Moscow to encourage the Libyan general to attend the summit. This helped to legitimize Haftar on the international stage and establish him as a crucial player in resolving the crisis in Libya.

Italy was confident in its ability to act as a mediator between the two contenders in the local political landscape. This is probably the perspective of the Italian Foreign Minister Di Maio, who, after visiting first Tripoli and then Benghazi [16], called on the European Union to appoint a special envoy for a mission to seek a diplomatic solution to a crisis that was increasingly taking on the characteristics of a proxy war.

Although the vast majority of Italian interests were in Tripoli and the west of the country, pushing for a peaceful solution in which mediation between the parties plays a key role was the only way for Italy to regain a prominent position on the scene. Rome seemed to want to adopt a different strategy from the one it had pursued till then: a broad diplomatic action, more inclusive, capable of engaging in dialogue with both al-Serraj and Haftar, and of regaining ground from the sponsors, first and foremost Turkey and Russia, who had a well-established position in the country's dynamics.

**Competing Interest:** The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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