

# THE ROLE OF EU IN THE LIBYAN CONFLICT

*Europe was marginalized in the Libyan conflict, not the least because the conflict exposed foreign policy flaws concerning a lack of coherence and cohesion. Working at cross purposes, European states were more interested in fulfilling their parochial interests than making an effort to give a typical response to the Libyan conflict. At the same time, the shortcomings related to tools and strategies in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) helped prevent the EU from adopting an influential position. This lack of a joint European position enabling it to play a significant role in the Libyan civil strife facilitated the functions of rival countries, such as Russia in Libya, leaving the EU sidelined.*

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**L**ibya is important for Europe due to several reasons, including issues and strategic concerns related to migration, terrorism, security, stability, energy security, and trade. The continent is negatively affected by the tide of mass migration from Libya, albeit as a transit country rather than the source. The instability in the country has enabled a dramatic rise in the number of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe; amid the civil strife, around 90 percent of migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean embark from Libya, according to the UN.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the Arab uprising, the rise of immigrants entering the EU took on a sense of urgency, affecting societies, domestic politics, and inter-state relations within Europe. The refugee crisis in 2015 led the EU to increase counter-immigration measures and press the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya to stem the migratory flow.

Libya also became a hotbed of terrorists because of the lack of border controls, the instability caused by the in-fighting between the two warring camps there, and the existence of a large, uninhabited area in the southwest of the country. The fluctuation in Libya caused a rise in violence stemming from jihadist terrorist groups operating in Libya's neighbors, Algeria, Egypt, Chad, and Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> The growth in terrorist networks in North Africa, close to Europe, could re-ignite the attacks by jihadists on the continent.

Europe has commercial and energy stakes in Libya, a significant source of the EU energy supply. In 2019, the EU imported 6.2 percent of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) and crude oil from Libya, making the country one of EU's leading alternative energy suppliers,<sup>3</sup> and European gas and oil imports from Libya only became more important following the Ukraine war that erupted in February 2022. Europe would "rely heavily on Libya... to diversify its sources of gas and energy," according to EU Spokesperson for the Middle East and North Africa Luis Miguel Beno, seeking to reduce its heavy dependence on Russian oil and gas.<sup>4</sup> EU-Libyan trade, meanwhile, was valued at €23 billion in 2021.<sup>5</sup> Stabilization of the civil strife in Libya will help to boost economic relations between Brussels and Tripoli.

The continued intra-state conflict in Libya also paved the way for the growing

<sup>1</sup> "Libya," *UNHCR*, <https://www.unhcr.org/libya.html>

<sup>2</sup> Sigvart Nordhov Fredriksen and Zenonas Tziarras, "The Libya Conflict and its Implications for the Broader Region," *Re-Imagining the Eastern Mediterranean Series: PCC Report 4/2020*, *Peace Research Institute Oslo*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> "Share of Crude Oil and LNG Imports into the European Union (EU) from Libya from 2017 to 2019," *Statista*, (7 April 2022), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1300359/share-of-libya-s-crude-oil-and-lng-imports-in-europe/>

<sup>4</sup> Walaa Ali, "Will Libya Meet Europe's Gas Needs Instead of Russia?" *Egypt Today*, (6 April 2022), <https://www.egypt-today.com/Article/1/114620/Will-Libya-meet-Europe-s-gas-needs-instead-of-Russia>

<sup>5</sup> "EU27 Trade in Goods by Partner," *European Commission Directorate-General for Trade*, (20 April 2022): p. 1. [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_122530.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_122530.pdf)

influence there of Russia, an important rival to the EU. Moscow may eventually be able to develop this to pose a security threat to the European continent. Because of the need for Russia's support on the part of Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar, the warlord ruling Libya's unrecognized, eastern-based government in Tobruk, Russia has the possibility of taking control of the port and airport at Sirte and a large military base in Jufra. According to the projection of the U.S. Africa Command, if Russia deploys anti-access/area denial air-defense systems in Sirte or Jufra, it would be able to target aircraft accessing the NATO airbase in Sicily directly. Furthermore, Russia's establishment of a naval base in Sirte would expand its sway in the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup>

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The civil strife in Libya has also affected European state interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey signed a deal with the GNA on creating an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) from Turkey's southern to the Libyan coast to invalidate the delimitation of the Egypt-Greece EEZ and challenge the planned EastMed pipeline from Cyprus to Italy. The EU became involved in this dispute by standing behind Greece and Cyprus.

This article reviews the situation outlined from the EU's role in the Libyan conflict. It first considers EU policies in Libya before focusing on the reasons for their failures.

### ***EU Policies in Libya***

Following the popular revolts in Libya that broke out in February 2011 in the context of the “Arab uprising,” the EU enacted a series of measures involving humanitarian aid, diplomacy, the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), and trade. Brussels condemned the use of violence in the country and called on the regime to avoid further violence and resign. However, it was clear from the outset that internal divisions within the EU made a common front on the Libyan conflict difficult. The first event hampering a united response to the crisis was France's unilateral move on 10 March 2011 to recognize the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the lawful representative of Libya. Subsequently, while Britain and France sponsored United

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<sup>6</sup> Tarek Megerisi, “Spoiler Alert: How Europe Can Save Diplomacy in Libya,” Policy Brief, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, (January 2021): p. 10.

Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 on a no-fly zone in Libya, Germany abstained and ruled out any contribution to a U.S.-led NATO intervention there, thus dealing another blow to the efforts to devise and implement joint EU actions regarding Libya.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the other policy fields, the EU implemented some actions in the context of the CSDP through the EU Force (EUFOR) Libya and the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) Libya. EUFOR aimed at helping humanitarian assistance operations in Libya. Nevertheless, the EU played a more important part in border control and civil training with the launch of EUBAM Libya, supporting the local authorities improve their border management and security capabilities.

Despite these initiatives, the EU suffered from some difficulties in helping settle the Libyan conflict and achieving a smooth transition in the country after the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi. Its bilateral and multilateral attempts to act as a mediator in summits in Paris, Rome, and Berlin achieved very little by ending the conflict. Importantly, this can be linked to the absence of an Association Agreement between Libya and the EU, leading to Brussels' reduced clout in the country.<sup>8</sup> This inadequacy, the lack of an influential EU role, induced member states to fill the void and dictate their policies to the Union.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, having not signed an Association Agreement, Libya was unable to benefit from most of the EU's cooperation frameworks in the Mediterranean region, including the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Nevertheless, Libya received funding in the new European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) framework and through thematic programs. The overall EU assistance for Libya totaled €700 million during 2014–20.<sup>10</sup>

A stance focusing on the security interests dominated the EU's approach in Libya, stemming the tide of mass migration to the European continent, an important determinant of Brussels' policies. To tackle this issue, the EU established the EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Med Operation Sophia in the framework of the CSDP on 18 May 2015, aiming to contain the activities of human smugglers and traffickers from northern Libya to the Mediterranean. This organizational structure was replaced by EUNAVFOR Med Operation Irini on 31 March 2020. The new operation has some deficiencies and may exacerbate the in-fighting between the warring parties and risk Brussels' credibility as an impartial mediator in Libya. Operation Irini aims

<sup>7</sup> Timo Behr, "The European Union's Mediterranean Policies After the Arab Spring: Can the Leopard Change its Spots?" *Amsterdam Law Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1 March 2012): p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Silvia Colombo and Daniela Huber, "The EU and Conflict Resolution in the Mediterranean Neighbourhood: Tackling New Realities through Old Means?" Euromesco Series, *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, (March 2016): p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Silvia Colombo and Daniela Huber (March 2016): p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> "EU-Libya Relations," *European Union External Action*, (11 February 2022), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-libya-relations\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-libya-relations_en)

to enforce the UN arms embargo by sea, land, and air by stemming the supply of arms to the rival camps in the country. Focusing on naval arms transfer activities will have little influence on Haftar's military operations as he is supplied by land across the Egypt-Libya border and by air, which is challenging to track and intercept. Thereby, the EU may appear to stand behind one side in the crisis, thereby undermining Brussels' credibility as an honest broker in Libya.<sup>11</sup>

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### ***Reasons for the EU Failures in Libya***

Disparate policies stemming from the competition among the member countries were a major reason for the failure of the EU in the Libyan crisis. Also, inadequate tools and strategies in the ENP and shortcomings concerning the implementation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the sovereign debt crisis undermined Brussels' role in its neighborhood, including Libya.

### ***The Primacy of Individual European States' Foreign Policies over the Joint EU Foreign Policy***

Some EU member states sought to satisfy their short-term goals in Libya, sidelining the EU's institutional policies. Italy and France were the most active member states in Libya with their colonial legacies. Italy believes that it has a special responsibility because of its colonial history there. France, meanwhile, pursues an active foreign policy in Libya and seeks to lead European diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Both countries would like to act as primary peace-brokers in the country, which exacerbates their competition. Despite the fact that the settlement of the conflict in Libya would be beneficial to the interests of both Rome and Paris, they have their different agendas and ways of dealing with the relevant security concerns, above all, migration and terrorism. Paris and Rome are also competing

<sup>11</sup> Luigi Scazzeri, “The EU's New Libya Operation is Flawed,” Insight, *Centre for European Reform*, (8 April 2020): p. 2.

in exploiting oil reserves there. Another aspect of this rivalry concerns geopolitical influence in the country. While Italy has been vying for influence in southwest Libya, France has been seeking to expand its traditional sway in the broader region, the Sahel. These divergent geopolitical ambitions further feed the rivalry between Libya's two former colonial powers.

French–Italian rivalry in Libya is described as “competitive cooperation”<sup>12</sup> since they formally work together in the EU while also pursuing unilateral policies in this vying for influence. Rome and Paris support rival camps in Libya to achieve their different and opposing objectives with individual initiatives that hamper international efforts in the war-torn Arab country, such as the UN-led Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). Whereas Italy backs the UN-recognized GNA in Tripoli led by Fayeza Mustafa al-Sarraj at the head of the Government of National Accord in western Libya, France supports the unrecognized Tobruk-based government led by Haftar in the east.

In pursuit of its national interests, French unilateral actions in Libya have sidelined its European partners. To cite a few examples, France forged an alliance with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as its regional partner, significantly at the expense of Europe. France deployed special forces and military assistance in the framework of a counter-terrorism mission in Libya that entailed supporting Haftar in his battle in Benghazi. However, Italy, the U.S.A., and the UK backed the western Libyan troops led by the GNA to expel the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) from Sirte. Moreover, France prevented an officer in Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) from being arrested on charges of war crimes by the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>13</sup> France was not alone in its culpability on this front, however. Italy also protected its Libyan allies from likely EU sanctions, undermining Brussels' ability to leverage this instrument for peace or apply it for justice. Furthermore, through the intervention of France, the inclusive, “big-tent” approach to Libyan diplomacy of Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General Ghassan Salamé in 2018 was wasted by its replacement with bilateral negotiations between Haftar and al-Sarraj.

Paris' efforts to act as an honest broker in the Libyan conflict contradict its overt military support to Haftar. In July 2017, France had helped achieve the ceasefire between the two rival camps of Haftar and al-Sarraj. Still, its mediating role in the conflict is now undermined by its military support for Haftar through military advisors and special forces deployment. As for Rome, it seeks to maintain its traditional ties with its previous colony, cultivating a special political and economic relationship with it. Like France, Italy prioritizes its national interests in Libya

<sup>12</sup> Matteo Ilardo, “The Rivalry Between France and Italy Over Libya and its Southwest Theatre,” *Fokus, Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik*, (5/2018): p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Tarek Megerisi (January 2021): p. 11.

rather than being part of a common EU approach with joint policies and multilateral frameworks. For instance, in line with the “Minniti Doctrine,” named after Italy’s Minister of Internal Affairs, Libyan militias detained likely migrants to Europe in exchange for financial aid. According to the UN Panel of Experts, this initiative helped destabilize and intensify violence in northwestern Libya.<sup>14</sup>

Italy’s main concerns regarding Libya are to stop illegal mass migration into and through Italy and ensure its energy security by supporting the Libyan investments of the State Hydrocarbons Authority (*Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi*), Italian energy giant ENI. France, on the other hand, prioritizes the fight against terrorist groups. The sparsely inhabited, vast region of southwest Libya is particularly significant to Italy and France for their efforts, respectively, to stem the migratory tide to the Mediterranean and contain terrorist activities. Spanning a vital part of southwest Libya, the Fezzan connects the south of the country to the Sahel and includes the migratory sub-Saharan routes to the northern parts of Libya and thence to Europe across the Mediterranean. The Fezzan is a safe haven for radical Islamist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Controlling this region, where the forces of Haftar and al-Sarraj fight with each other, is critical to the overall stability of Libya. Thus, France and Italy are also engaged in a diplomatic competition.

Italy and France further compete in Libya over the energy sector. Italian and French oil firms make efforts to extract lucrative concessions from Libyan authorities. A case in point is the competition to control the oil terminals in the Oil Crescent in Eastern Libya. Italy, in particular, is a major buyer of Libyan energy, importing 25 percent of its gas consumption and 10 percent of its oil consumption from the country.<sup>15</sup> ENI has major investments in Libya’s energy industry, rivaling France’s Total.

### *Problems Stemming from the ENP*

Shortcomings in the EU’s conflict-prevention and crisis-management strategies and tools were another obstacle to an effective EU role in the Libyan conflict. From the outset, the EU failed to develop these strategies and tools fast enough to tackle intra-state conflicts. Neither the multilateral Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) nor the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) nor the bilateral ENP covers the region-wide dynamics.<sup>16</sup>

The EMP conflict prevention and conflict-management strategies were not sufficiently developed. EU strategies in the framework of the EMP had the disadvantage of

<sup>14</sup> Tarek Megerisi (January 2021): p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Mustafa Fetouri, “Italian-French Competition Over Libya Pushing Country Toward More Chaos,” *Al-Monitor*, (26 July 2018), <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/07/libya-elections-france-italy-control-competition.html>

<sup>16</sup> Silvia Colombo and Daniela Huber (March 2016): p. 18.

being seen by the southern Mediterranean countries as Europe's unilateralism and intrusion. At the same time, the EMP instruments for conflict prevention and crisis management were restricted to political dialogue. They did not cover the use of military and civilian tools for conflict prevention and crisis management.<sup>17</sup>

The flaws regarding Brussels' tools and strategies to address the conflicts in the MENA became more pronounced in the ENP and the UfM during the 2000s. Established in 2003, the ENP, prioritized long-term, structural measures, including promoting human rights, democracy, good governance, civil society, and economic development based on conditionality. Meanwhile, conflict settlement and prevention goals were put on the ENP back-burner.<sup>18</sup>

Developing and enacting strategic autonomy—acting autonomously, inclusive of military operations—in Libya could raise the profile of the EU in its neighborhood. However, given that foreign policy is, to a substantial extent, an intergovernmental domain in nature, taking any military action in conflict-ridden countries like Libya requires a pooling of sovereignty to Brussels on the part of member states, which seems unlikely in the short term.

*Hardships Related to the Eurozone Crisis and the Implementation Problems Regarding the EEAS*

The Eurozone crisis weakened the EU's role and image in its neighborhood by disincentivizing member states from financing the neighborhood programs, exacerbating regional economic problems, and generally reducing the EU's lure in MENA and other countries.<sup>19</sup> The creation of the EEAS at the end of 2010 was expected to expand the influence of Brussels in its neighborhood in particular. However, its launch coincided with such challenges as the Eurozone crisis and the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which undermined its impact. The EU was surprised by these developments and unable to fully deploy the new foreign policy instruments introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, such as the EEAS, as they were not yet fully operational.<sup>20</sup> Despite these difficulties, the EEAS became relatively successful in the Balkans by promoting negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia in March 2011 and then contributing to the stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina when, in May 2011, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton persuaded President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik to forego his plan to hold a referendum. However, the EEAS did not

<sup>17</sup> Silvia Colombo and Daniela Huber (March 2016): p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> George Joffé, "Libya and the European Union: Shared Interests," *Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2011): p. 233-49.

<sup>19</sup> Richard G. Whitman and Ana E. Juncos, "The Arab Spring, the Eurozone Crisis and the Neighbourhood: A Region in Flux," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 50 (2012): p. 148.

<sup>20</sup> Richard G. Whitman and Ana E. Juncos (2012): p. 151.



play a similar role in its neighborhood outside of the Balkans, such as in the MENA region, not least because the MENA countries region had no prospects of joining the EU, thus weakening the Union's leverage over them.<sup>21</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The Libyan crisis highlights the failures of Brussels as an actor in its neighborhood. Having initiated the air strikes to oust Gaddafi, the EU did not do much to subsequently stabilize the conflict-ridden country. This made the EU look like a paper tiger with no stomach for a fight and caused it to be marginalized. While Brussels' reactions to the intra-state conflict in Libya had indicated that the EU is a global actor equipped with conflict prevention tools in the long term, it appeared to be unprepared and unwilling to manage conflicts on the ground, partly because of the policies of individual EU states overshadow the EU's institutional initiatives and partly because Brussels does not have the requisite tools and strategies for this.

Unable to resolve the intra-state conflicts through conflict prevention instruments, Brussels should enrich its toolbox to manage the crises, including multilateral diplomacy and military measures if it becomes a more influential actor in the neighborhood. The Libyan crisis and subsequent developments have demonstrated the difficulty for the EU of assuming a significant role in conflict situations and thereby becoming a more influential actor in its neighborhood. In fact, the pursuit of parochial interests there by individual EU member states, primarily Italy and France in a postcolonial competition, prepared the ground for the rise of other (regional and global) powers in Libya, notably the UAE and Russia.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard G. Whitman and Ana E. Juncos (2012): p. 150.