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## Italy's Libya Quagmire

*By Antonino Occhiuto*

The 2011 Odyssey Dawn Operation and subsequent collapse of the Gaddafi regime sent **Italy's foreign policy into a tailspin**. The current fragmentation of Libya and the presence of two rival administrations, the Tripolitania-based Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayeze al-Sarraj and the Cyrenaica based parliament supported by General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), make it **impossible for Italy to achieve its strategic goals of controlling migration, fighting terrorism and getting privileged access to natural resources**. Following the UN legitimization of Sarraj's GNA, Italian authorities thought they saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

Italy has, since 2011, desperately looked for a political partner in order to contain the effects of Libya's instability on Italy's interests. Italian authorities identified such a partner in Fayeze al-Sarraj. Severe problems for Italy's support to Sarraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) emerged during a joint press conference between US President's Donald Trump and Italy's Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni. The American president suggested that he did not see a US role in Libya. **US disengagement constrained Italy's support to Al-Sarraj's fragile government which is unable to control the numerous armed militias that pledge support to it. These militias constitute the only substantial military support to the GNA and find their main political and financial sponsors in Qatar and Turkey**. The militias are far more sensitive to the interests of their powerful foreign backers and their tribal and local political agendas than to the needs of the relatively powerless GNA or Libya as a state. Internal political power struggles, in turn, undermine the effectiveness of the GNA within Libya and Sarraj's credibility among potential foreign partners. The latter issue directly damaged the latest Italian migration strategy to allow Italy's navy to intercept human traffickers in Libya's territorial waters.

On the other hand, international support for the Cyrenaica-based Libyan National Army (LNA) is enhanced by the presence of a strongman, General Khalifa Haftar, who is effectively in control of Eastern Libya (with the exception of Derna), and of Cyrenaica's de-facto government. The authority structure in Eastern Libya – more simple and authoritarian but providing a solid partner – has the support of several countries such as the UAE, Egypt and France that Italy already considers as fundamental to safeguard its national interests in the Libyan crisis.

Egypt has been the staunchest supporter of Haftar's LNA and provides it political backing and military support. It even undertook joint military operations in Cyrenaica to subdue the anti-LNA militias. Egypt's President Al-Sisi supports the military establishment – like the one he commands – against Islamist militias across the border, as a key dimension to combat insurgents in Egypt.

The UAE's role is equally, if not more, important: not only has Abu Dhabi carried out joint bombing campaigns (with Egypt) in support of LNA forces, it has also strongly committed itself to Haftar's cause by establishing and maintaining a military base at Al-Khadim Airport in Benghazi. **UAE authorities have been among the most proactive members of the international community to stimulate reciprocal recognition and constructive working relations between Sarraj and Haftar, evidenced by the first-ever successful meeting between the two leaders in Abu Dhabi (May 2017).** France, has also decided to throw its political weight behind Haftar. In this context, it is important to remember that **France's energy interests in Libya are located in Cyrenaica. Paris' peace talks between rival Libyan leaders, strongly legitimised Haftar's position and increased the Cyrenaica's strongmen international importance-at the expense of the GNA.**

The recent meeting between Italy's Interior Minister, Marco Minniti, and Haftar which took place on 09 September in Benghazi is a clear signal **that Italy is realistically considering how international support seems to be shifting in support of the Eastern military government.** In particular, Minniti was keen to meet Haftar as the General controls many of the migrants' routes from Sub-Saharan Africa and across the Fezzan desert. Italy should be careful not to antagonise the GNA due to Italian energy giant ENI's interests in the GNA controlled Tripolitania. **Italy's priority should be to establish a solid cooperation network with the regional powers with leverage in Libya, especially with the UAE, in order for the country to have a future as a unified territorial entity and for Italy to be able to serve its strategic interests.**