

The Rivalry between France and Italy over Libya and its Southwest Theatre

Introduction

The 29th of May summit in Paris – the culmination of France’s diplomatic initiative in Libya – has been welcomed with reservations by other Western powers, skeptical in pushing for the immediate elections advocated in the agreement given the complexities of the situation on the ground. Above all, Rome, which still aspires to be recognized as holding a special responsibility for the country, has proven the most critical towards the French unilateralism, accusing Paris to aim at full ownership of the Libyan crisis resolution. Emmanuel Macron’s diplomatic activism is indeed evidence of a new-found French pre-eminence in leading (and forging) a European strategy towards the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), that inevitably includes a pivotal mediating role for France in the long-running Libyan crisis. Italy, which up until the French diplomatic intervention had managed to maintain its traditional role as a privileged mediator in Libya and to take the lead in the peace efforts for its former colony, has been taken aback by the French government’s new approach and immediately pushed back against the plan. The two European states are now – more than ever – at odds over Libya, but they have both been engaging with the country’s civil war since the fall of Qaddafi in 2011 with quite different strategies and intensities. Even though the two countries have a shared interest in breaking the political gridlock to find a near-term solution to the conflict, France and Italy have been constantly confronting each other pursuing self-serving agendas. Both Rome and Paris would benefit from a stabilization of the country, each of them struggling with their own security concerns (migration and terrorism), but Libya remains an important chessboard of their competition for several reasons. From motives such as the exploitation of the vast crude reserves in the country and offshore, to a more symbolic terrain with

both of them seeking enriched diplomatic status and increased political influence on the country, the rivalry between the two has been developing along their geostrategic ambitions. Particularly in Southwest Libya, the two countries are essentially in a dispute over “historical domains”, with Italy invoking its historical leverage over its former colony and France reaffirming its traditional influence within the broader region, the Sahel. Therefore, the stake between Rome and Paris is clearly not only the accomplishment of a peaceful resolution for an endless crisis that began seven years ago, but rather a situation that resembles a genuine geopolitical rivalry between two former colonial powers.

Contextual analysis

The French-Italian rivalry evolves within a complex and delicate political context. Since the death of Qaddafi in 2011, none of the priorities planned by the international community for the post-regime transition have been achieved. Not only has the country been divided into two main political centers of powers but it has sunk into an endemic civil war and the ensuing chaos has made it home to terrorists, criminals and smugglers. The international efforts to find a political compromise between Tripoli and Tobruk have been constantly undermined both by the political fragmentation on the ground and by the divergent positions held by the regional powers, of which the French-Italian rivalry is simultaneously cause and symptom. Both Paris and Rome are looking for the quickest and most effective solution to the crisis, but with different strategies and approaches. However, having different agendas, their efforts for an enduring stabilization of the country has serious downsides, which could likely create more instability. On top of that, the two European states find themselves acting in a very critical environment because of the political fragmentation affecting Libya from the

Mediterranean coast to its southern desert borders, with the North and the South of the country featuring different characteristics, balances, and threats. However, it is the latter, Southwest Libya, where the French-Italian rivalry further intensifies and where it displays its neo-colonial flavor. Here the stabilization process of the country becomes even more complicated and the diplomatic efforts to achieve political compromise and national reconciliation seem to be less effective. Yet, while the international community has its eyes fixed mostly on the Libyan Mediterranean coast, the roots of a range of issues – among which the proliferation of terrorist groups and the migration crisis – must be sought further South, in the Fezzan, the vast and desert region of Southwest Libya, and in Niger, its neighboring country.

Within the context described above, the Franco-Italian rivalry appears to be at the heart of ‘competitive cooperation’¹ dynamics, since Rome and Paris formally cooperate within the EU framework but basically compete with each other through their individual initiatives. Such unilateral interferences with the international multilateral process have strengthened the internal divisions in the country, contributed to complicating the implementation of the UN-promoted Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), and could further hamper future peace-building efforts. France and Italy are only two of the many international players active in Libya; with the result that many analysts even define the crisis as a proxy war.² Nonetheless, France and Italy, aim for similar results, yet by leaning on different allies. Their initiative is primarily motivated by security needs, and their priority is preventing the formation of a failed-state on their Mediterranean borders. However, while Italy keeps supporting the UN-backed government in Tripoli, France shifted towards Haftar in 2015. The difference in their preferences then, seems to be mostly driven by those national interests that

both sides have in Libya rather than by the belief of one ally being more reliable than others in face of the common emergency.

The French Perspective: counterterrorism and strategic positioning

Diplomatically, France is doubtlessly the most active international player in Libya. Militarily, it ranks behind the more active UAE, Qatar, and Egypt, but still plays a major role in the shift of the balance of power in favor of its main ally on the ground, General Khalifa Haftar. The interface between these two dimensions appears somewhat ambiguous, considering France's diplomatic role of the honest broker and its lateral military support to one of the parties. On the one hand, France offered itself as the main mediator between the two disputing authorities of Tripoli and Tobruk, first achieving a ceasefire in July 2017 between Al-Serraj and Haftar³ and then securing upcoming elections in a larger gathering of important Libyan political and security actors in the last Paris summit.⁴ On the other hand though, France doesn't hide its pro-Haftar stance and provides for active support to the General's army by deploying advisers and special forces alongside his Libyan National Army (LNA) troops.⁵ However, in the light of French national interests, this formula – albeit unorthodox – is rational and indeed effective.

France's intervention in Libya is, in the first place, a direct consequence of the 'security-first approach' of Jean-Yves Le Drian. Previously Defense Minister under Francois Hollande's Presidency and now Foreign Minister in Emmanuel Macron's government, Le Drian has been the prime architect of France's shift towards supporting Haftar in 2015. His pragmatic approach to security policy was first delineated in France's 2013 intervention against jihadist groups in Mali, and then repeated in Libya as a reaction to the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks. Operation Serval (2013) and Operation Barkhane (2014) in Mali, are unquestionable tactical successes for France in its highly militarized approach to counterterrorism in Africa's Sahel, but also come at the cost of supporting strong repressive governments.⁶ A similar situation exists today in

Libya, with France supporting Haftar and clearly prioritizing the enhancement of its security and counterterrorism cooperation, partially ignoring human-rights concerns and democratic ideals.⁷ This policy towards Libya fits into the larger framework of the new French approach towards the whole MENA region. This new approach, aimed at promoting stability and reassuring regional partners⁸ regardless of the nature of their regime, represents new France's long-term realist positioning in the region, according to which supporting Haftar makes perfect sense.

The Italian perspective: migration and energy security

Italy and Libya are historically bound by diplomatic and economic relations that have been characterized by continuity and asymmetry since the fall of the Italian colonial empire. Following the death of Qaddafi in 2011, though, Rome lost any reliable counterpart with whom to establish stable relations. Since then, within the chaos caused by the revolution, successive Italian governments have opted for Tripoli as the center of power to look at, and for the UN-backed GNA as their legitimate interlocutor. Four principal guidelines have led the Italian strategy towards Libya since then and during the entire Matteo Renzi's government (2014-16): i) sustaining the UN-led mediation efforts to stabilize the political situation in the country; ii) suggesting Italy as a reliable leader for a UN-peacekeeping operation offering an important military contribution; iii) managing the illegal migration flow towards the EU; iv) safeguarding national energy security needs by supporting ENI's initiatives, the most important Italian energy company.⁹

Today, however, national security concerns seem to be at the center of the Italian approach with the priority being stemming mass migration flows passing through the increasingly porous Libyan borders. The man behind this new approach towards the migration crisis is former Minister of Interior Paolo Minniti¹⁰, who prioritized security concerns by implementing old provisions already in place but didn't

shift from Al-Serraj's GNA as the main political interlocutor on the ground. Commitment towards the LPA provisions notwithstanding, the Italian approach took a more pragmatic turn. The new Italian government's strategy towards Libya proceeds along the same lines designed by Minniti in 2016, yet under the leadership of the new Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini – leader of the far-right party Lega – it acquired more interventionist rhetoric and policies. If Minniti's plan envisaged closer cooperation between Rome, Tripoli and various Libyan local constituencies (tribes in the South,¹¹ municipalities on the coast¹²), Salvini's strategy comes permeated of intransigent rhetoric, centered on short-term gains and uninterested on possible long-term consequences. After a categorical "no" from Tripoli concerning the creation of hotspots in Northern Libya,¹³ the Minister of Interior is now willing to establish new "protection and identification centers" outside of Libya's southern borders.¹⁴

Clash of interests and strategies

National security concerns and strategic geopolitical stances are surely key drivers of the French and Italian approaches to Libya. Yet, they are not the only ones. Economic and political interests have also a significant influence in the related decision-making process. If tackling Islamist and jihadist forces for France, and stemming the migration flows for Italy, are the priorities in Libya, the two countries are also seeking financial gains and have hegemonic ambitions for the country. These concurrent interests – the ones actually giving rise to the rivalry – can be encapsulated in two features: oil and influence. The race for the Libyan oil dates back to the 2011 intervention, with France challenging the Italian market-oriented status quo,¹⁵ and continues now with French and Italian major companies vying for favorable concessions from the national authorities to exploit Libyan crude reserves. In this respect, the intensity and frequency of the fighting to control the oil terminals in the so-called Oil Crescent (East Libya) is a direct outcome of the French-Italian tensions. The two countries – both leading

foreign stakeholders in the country's hydrocarbons sector – support, in fact, opposing sides fighting for the control of the oil legal exports.¹⁶ Simultaneously, the tender for the establishment (or reaffirmation) of a privileged sphere of influence on Libyan politics is mainly performed on the diplomatic level. Both Rome and Paris aim to achieve a preeminent diplomatic status playing the role of the honest broker in resolving the Libyan conflict, but with different (and contradicting) strategies. The French unilateral diplomatic approach aims to convene international actors and local leaders behind a single roadmap to new elections by the end of 2018, with the latest agreement brokered in Paris being more inclusive than previous attempts.¹⁷ Italian diplomatic efforts, on the contrary, are more consistent and multilateral – with Italy being at the head of the European Union's Mediterranean migrant mission and officially supporting the LPA's provisions – and are centered on inclusive dialogue between stakeholders, municipalities, and militias.¹⁸ The former is more resolute, but seems to be linked to unachievable deadlines, also considering the ongoing violence and insecurity in the country.¹⁹ The latter is comprehensive and careful, but also dilatory and delicate given the difficulty to reconcile the highly fragmented Libyan political environment and the risk of negotiating with armed groups.²⁰ Anyhow, the French-Italian dispute – both concerning oil and influence – pervades almost any aspect of the Libyan crisis, but converges in one specific strategic area of competition between the two European States, Southwest Libya. It is in (Fezzan) and around (Niger) this region that both the tide of the Libyan crisis and a large extent of the French-Italian neo-colonial antagonism are being played out.

Two opposing powers, one main theatre: Southwest Libya

Southwest Libya almost entirely consists of the vast and scarcely inhabited Fezzan, a remote region lying at the crossroads of Algeria, Niger, and Chad. The region links southern Libya to the Sahel and sub-Saharan migrant routes to northern Libya and onto Europe, which is one of

the reasons why it is increasingly drawing the attention of European policymakers. The region – historically at the periphery of Libya's politics – suffers from a lack of central authority and offers a whole series of lucrative opportunities for a plethora of actors among which jihadists, arms traffickers, and warlords. On the one hand, the Fezzan region is another theatre of the East-West conflict between Haftar's forces and Tripoli-aligned armed groups, while on the other hand it is a major hub for migrant smuggling networks moving towards the Mediterranean shores, a transit zone for illegal trafficking, and a safe haven for jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Daesh.²¹ Securing the region is therefore crucial to stemming the flow of transnational migrants and countering terrorism, and vital to stabilizing the situation on the national level. Italy and France, each for its own reasons and with separate and at times competing priorities, are the two most active international players in the Fezzan. Italy's biggest concern is to curb the flow of migrants transiting through the region to reach first the Libyan coast and then the Italian shores,²² while France's main interests are fighting Islamist terrorism and ensuring a general strategic stability in the Sahel. The already tangible tensions between Rome and Paris over their respective plans for the Libyan crisis on the national scale, are even more evident in the South and are likely to undermine any stabilization efforts in an already precarious security environment.

The stabilization process in the South is per se problematic due to institutional weakness, persisting lawlessness, and fluid, fragmented local loyalties,²³ but two main factors unique to the region further complicate a de-escalation of the conflict. Tribal conflicts over identity, authenticity, and citizenship,²⁴ and the growing presence of foreign mercenaries mainly from Sudan, Chad, and Niger,²⁵ are the principal threats to local security and broader regional political ties. It is in this complex framework that both Rome and Paris try to pursue their respective policies attempting to mediate an intra-tribal dialogue and a dialogue between tribes and Libyan cen-

tral institutions. However, a large extent of the Italian and French strategies for the Fezzan passes through Libyan bordering countries, where most of the problems and threats affecting the region originate. The Western part of the Fezzan – the territory including the cities of Ghat, Awbari, and Sebha – represents the most unstable and dangerous area of Southwest Libya, since the principal Central African transit routes for the illicit trafficking pass through it.²⁶ Nonetheless, it is further south where the main logistics hub for this illegal trade is to be found. The cities of Agadez and Gao, in Niger, are in fact the nerve centers of Sahel's smuggling and necessary corridors to reach Southern Libya.²⁷

While a diplomatic competition between France and Italy is taking place in the Fezzan, the two countries rival through competitive military missions in Niger. Since early 2017, Italy started engaging with the South of Libya, promoting its ambitious stabilization process²⁸ through tribal dialogue and reconciliation, with the idea to convert local tribes into anti-smuggling local police while in parallel ending the tribal conflict and stabilizing the area. Nonetheless, France, in spite of the agreements concluded in Rome, is now emerging as a key mediator among the conflicting parties. In April 2018, according to Al Senoussi Masoud, leader of the Awlad Suleiman tribe, various factions from Southern Libya held talks under the auspices of France with the intent of reaching an agreement to replace the one promoted by Italy.²⁹ Not for nothing, the meeting took place in Niamey, the capital of Niger, former French colony where Paris has its counterterrorism-force deployed since 2014 Operation Barkhane. Competitive diplomatic initiatives are therefore intertwined with the military ones, evidence that the French-Italian rivalry in the region develops across multiple levels. At the end of 2017, the Italian parliament approved a military mission in Niger that has its main objectives in the control over the flows of migration and a general stabilization of the Libyan crisis. However, the mission is not fully-functional yet, because of frictions between Rome and members of the local government in Niamey,³⁰ supposedly

due to France's pressure that would hardly tolerate an Italian military presence in an area of privileged French influence.³¹

In response to rumors of an impending Italian military engagement in the region, Haftar himself – trustee of the French interests – emphasized that Italy would not be welcome in southern Libya, and incited local tribes for “Jihad against the fascists”,³² clearly referring to the Italian colonial experience. The new Italian aspirations are then hampered both in Libya and Niger, with Paris keeping Rome away from the Southwest Libyan region thanks to the complacency of French-dependent local leaders. Initially, an Italian military engagement in the Sahel could have been interpreted as a potential rapprochement between Italy and France after the controversy that began in the aftermath of the 2011 French intervention in Libya. The Italian government harshly criticized the French-led 2013 initiative in the Sahel, and some thought the Italian mission could have mitigated the disagreement between Rome and Paris.³³ However, as the recent developments show, the Italian mission in Niger is rather the exacerbation than the resolution of their rivalry, and so is the French hostility towards it. For this crisis there is no end in sight, and bilateral agreements between Paris and Rome seem now a far-off prospect. This French-Italian rivalry is nothing else than a glimpse of the return of geopolitical competition among the EU member states, and therefore the solution must be sought within and by means of the EU.

Conclusion

In a country divided into East and West by legitimacy claims, into North and South in terms of institutional and security settings, and overall affected by political fragmentation, the dispute between Rome and Paris is only adding fuel to the fire. Lack of coordination and simmering tensions between French and Italian diplomacies are undermining any international pacification efforts and posing serious risks for both Libyan and European security. Still, the same issues are more evident on the ground where they converge into a

genuine strategic rivalry, that has in the predominance over oil and political influence its major stake, in border-management and counter-terrorism operations its prime expressions, and in Southwest Libya its main theatre of confrontation. Yet, Southwest Libya is not only the focal point but also the symbol of this French-Italian dispute. In the region – just like in the broader national scenario – blinded by colonial-fashion ambitions, Rome and Paris pursue individual initiatives that often overlap or compete. All the Italian efforts aim at stemming the migration flows towards the Central Mediterranean Route, while the French initiative is primarily motivated by the fight against Islamist radicalization and terrorism. Even though the two goals appear as being not necessarily mutually exclusive, far-ranging national interests undermine a potentially beneficial synergy between the two states that would allow the accomplishment of both. As a result, both France and Italy's efforts end up being relatively inefficient while they could be optimized by the two countries focusing on common benefits and by each of them operating in the area where they have comparative advantages. Cooperation between Rome and Paris, at least in Southwest Libya, would allow the two countries to face their most urgent concerns while contributing to stabilizing the crisis on a national scale. Such cooperation – possible and desirable – should be achieved under a Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) joint action, with France and Italy leading the new European Defense Cooperation within a re-conceptualized EU neighborhood policy. The positive experience of the EU Operation Sophia, active off the Libyan coast, should be taken as an example, and a new EU mission on the Libya-Niger border could be drafted on the same model of cooperation. After all, this is not a new idea, since a similar solution was jointly proposed by Germany and Italy in 2017, but to no avail. However, now even more urgently than one year ago, European solutions are needed for this entirely European dilemma. Realistically, it is unlikely that France and Italy would overlook their national interests, but the two countries must find a common denominator and act as strategic

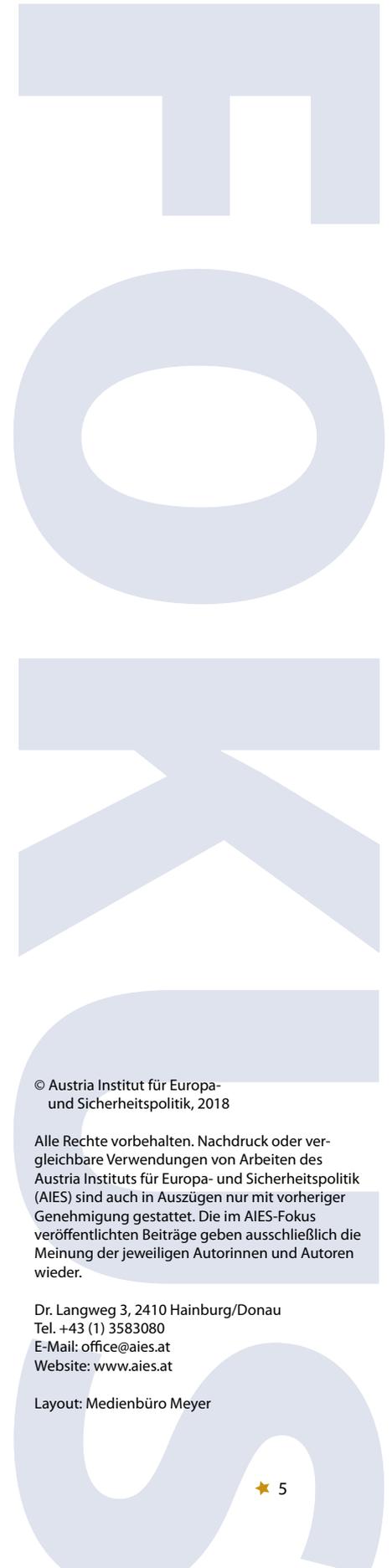
allies coordinating their efforts at least in Southwest Libya, where both would largely benefit from their cooperation.

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Endnotes

- 1) Competitive cooperation is a phenomenon occurring when actors interact with partial congruence of interests. They cooperate with each other to reach a higher value creation if compared to the value created without interaction and struggle to achieve competitive advantage. This phenomenon is defined as “coopetition” in the pioneering work of Dagnino and Padula (2002). Dagnino, Giovanni B.; Padula, Giovanna. “Coopetition Strategy: A New Kind of Interfirm Dynamics for Value Creation.” Paper presented at the European Academy of Management Second Annual Conference, Stockholm. January 2002. www.researchgate.net/publication/228605296_Coopetition_Strategy_A_New_Kind_of_Interfirm_Dynamics_for_Value_Creation.
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