



# IAI

Istituto Affari Internazionali

## Italy and France at Odds over Libya?

by Lorenzo Falchi

A summit that took place on the outskirts of Paris on 25 July has brought the international spotlight back on the Libyan crisis, and the difficult road the country faces towards a lasting peace. At La Celle-Saint-Cloud, French President Emmanuel Macron met with the two most prominent political figures in today's Libya, Fayez al-Sarraj, chairman of the Presidential Council and prime minister of the national unity government recognized by the UN, and the military strongman Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army. Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the country has been at war with itself, becoming a hotbed of instability, as well as a major migrant departure point to reach Europe. A lasting solution remains elusive, and the ongoing attempts to find one has resulted in political friction between Italy and France.

Macron undoubtedly wanted to use the La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting

to assert himself as a decisive actor and peacemaker in Libya and the surrounding region. The meeting resulted in a communiqué – unsigned by the two Libyan leaders<sup>1</sup> – that included pledges for a ceasefire – with the exception of anti-terror activity – and elections to be held next year, but many doubt that it will be respected. In fact, in the days that followed the La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting, Sarraj and Haftar resumed quarrelling over their respective roles and the country's future power arrangements. Moreover, Macron's move ruffled a few feathers in Rome, where many saw France's initiative as a way to bypass Italy – and Europe – in the process.

Italy, which aspires to be recognized as holding a special responsibility for Libya, has followed a policy based on

<sup>1</sup> Libya - Joint Declaration, Paris, 25 July 2017, <http://www.elysee.fr/communiqués-de-presse/article/libye-rencontres-de-la-celle-saint-cloud>.

*Lorenzo Falchi has been an intern (June-July 2017) at the Istituto affari internazionali (IAI).*

support for the government of Fayed al-Sarraj in Tripoli established through the UN Security Council in the wake of the Skhirat accords of December 2015. The Italian government has also stressed the need to avoid a proliferation of mediating parties, and to concentrate efforts around the UN mediator Ghassan Salamé. But over the past months, the Italian government has also been in contact with general Haftar,<sup>2</sup> as have been other major states in Europe and beyond. Haftar has emerged as a major competitor of Sarraj by successfully fighting Islamist forces in Benghazi and keeping control of key oil terminals. Currently, Italy's presence in Libya is limited to a military hospital set up in Misrata with 300 servicemen to ensure the facility's functions and protection, as well as to lend support to the Tripoli government. Italian intelligence agencies are also active in the country.

Going beyond the security threats, Rome's interests in the country fall into two types of flows: energy and migrants. And while it wishes to safeguard the former, especially due to the strong presence of gas and oil conglomerate ENI in the country and offshore, the latter continues to pose a number of issues – for Italy, France, and more broadly Europe.

In light of that, on 28 July the Italian government decided to send naval vessels closer to the Libyan coast to help the local coast guard in stemming

the flow of migrants.<sup>3</sup> This decision was approved by a vast majority of Parliament a few days later, and the first of two ships arrived in Libyan waters on 2 August. Although the mission has been presented as in no way involving interference in the internal affairs of Libya, general Haftar threatened to repel any Italian vessels that enter territorial waters without permission from the Libyan military that he controls. Haftar had previously voiced his opposition to foreign intervention in Libya. General Haftar currently holds most military strength in Libya, and few believe that any future diplomatic move in the country can afford to exclude Haftar. By only consulting with the authorities in Tripoli, thus bypassing Haftar, apart from occasional contacts, Italy chose to uphold the content of the Skhirat accord and the UN-backed government. Such an approach neglects the political and military realities within Libya, as well as the number of important regional and international actors – including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia – who are supporting Haftar.

Up until now, France's position towards the two main factions within Libya has been one of extreme ambiguity. While officially supporting the UN-backed government, over the past years the French government has also kept an active line of communication with Haftar and the military authorities in Tobruk. Indeed, one of the figures of note present at the La Celle-Saint-Cloud negotiations was that of Jean-Yves Le

<sup>2</sup> Francesca Paci, "Alfano: 'In Libya there are too many initiatives. Let us unify efforts on the UN-led mediation'", in *La Stampa*, 25 July 2017, <http://www.esteri.it/mae/tiny/25239>.

<sup>3</sup> *Deliberazione del Consiglio dei ministri in merito alla partecipazione dell'Italia alla missione internazionale in supporto della Guardia costiera libica*, 28 July 2017, <http://www.camera.it/leg17/494?categoria=250&idLegislatura=17>.

Drian. As Minister of Defence during the Hollande years, Le Drian worked closely with general Haftar despite the government's official support of PM Sarraj. As Minister of Foreign Affairs under the new president, it seems likely that this relationship will continue, though the degree of influence it will have on a peace process is hard to evaluate.

In any event, it seems clear that Macron has no wish to place all his eggs in one basket, and by negotiating with both factions, he aims to ensure the best possible outcome and opportunities for his country once the question of Libya is resolved. However, this attitude should not be viewed as purely opportunistic, but also reflecting a realistic assessment of the situation. The Sarraj government, on which many international actors initially pinned their hopes, has failed to deliver the expected results. Indeed, the fragile government in Tripoli only controls a small portion of the country while Haftar has a far stronger control over most of Libya.

Just two days after the La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting, President Macron made a statement that was as confusing as it was unexpected, announcing the creation of "hotspots", that would be under French control, on the soil of Libya, and possibly on that of other African countries, by the end of the summer, in order to prevent the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean, and to keep economic migrants from reaching European shores. No mention was made of cooperating with international organizations or other countries, and he said France would act with or

without Europe on this matter.

This tendency for unilateralism and lack of consultation with the UN or other parties concerned (such as the many factions present in Libya) is worrisome, and not easy to understand coming from someone who campaigned on a staunchly pro-EU platform. Italy was quick to criticize Macron's announcement, which was also ill-received in Brussels. On the same day the Élysée made a rapid u-turn, by specifying that no "hotspot" would be "presently" opened in Libya because of the lack of the basic security conditions.

After backtracking from the hotspot plan, President Macron also called PM Gentiloni to establish a common position to deal with the Libyan crisis. Italy, among others, had viewed some of the positions taken by the Elysée as rash and unpredictable. However, Macron's phone call showed more willingness to cooperate than his previous actions indicated. A meeting between the leaders of France, Germany, Italy and Spain is planned for late August in Paris to discuss Libya. Indeed, the new French government would do well to see Italy and others as strategic allies, and not to ignore the potential for cooperation on such a complex issue.

Before the La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting, an Elysée spokesperson stated that the conflict in Libya is unfolding "on the doorstep of Europe – and, thus, France".<sup>4</sup> Macron's current strategy

<sup>4</sup> Brenna Daldorph, "Can Macron's Libya Talks Deliver Anything More Than a Photo Op?", in *France 24*, 24 July 2017, <http://f24.my/1XUh.T>.

is arguably that of safeguarding the national interests even at the expense of Europe's unity of action. Macron's newfound unilateralism, penchant for improvisation (as it seemed with the "hotspot declaration"), and lack of consultation with strategic allies like Italy, may pose serious risks for Europe and its security. On the other hand, Italy and other strategically relevant countries should take into account the new realities of the Libyan crisis, reconsider their stance vis-à-vis general Haftar in order to include him in the political process, and take more robust measures to stem migration flows. In this last regard, Italy's decision to send ships off the coast of Libya is a promising step.

*4 August 2017*

### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, IAI does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), two series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Papers*) and other papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Working Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

- 17 | 09 Lorenzo Falchi, *Italy and France at Odds over Libya?*
- 17 | 08 Adrian Eppel, *Making Sense of Rising German-Turkish Tensions*
- 17 | 07 Nathalie Tocci, *The Time for European Defence Has Come: Rome Must Step Up to the Task*
- 17 | 06 Marcel Plichta, *Macron's Africa "Problem": Will a Marshall Plan for Africa Make a Real Difference?*
- 17 | 05 Mattia Polvanesi, *Ten Years On: Gaza Blockade Brings Society to the Brink*
- 17 | 04 Giorgio Gomel, *Violence Grips Jerusalem*
- 17 | 03 Cinzia Bianco, *The Intra-GCC Crisis: Domestic, Regional and International Layers*
- 17 | 02 Jean Pierre Darnis, *Macron's Foreign Policy: Not a Zero Sum Game*
- 17 | 01 Bobby McDonagh, *Why Europe Matters More Than Ever*