

# Italy and the Libyan Crisis: What Lessons for Foreign Policy?

by Camellia Mahjoubi

## ABSTRACT

Since 2011 the Libyan crisis has never stopped posing questions to the Italian political class and public opinion, showing all its relevance for the definition of the external action – either at the multilateral or bilateral level – of our country. From political mediation to the use of force, from the terrorist threat to the current COVID-19 crisis, from the management of irregular migration to the issue of human rights, Libya continues to represent an important test for Italy's foreign policy. In recent months, the Libyan conflict has undergone important changes. International mediation under the lead of the United Nations and with the involvement of the regional actors seems to have lost steam and a new intensification of military operations has produced rapid changes in the balance of power on the ground. What have been Italy's responses to the crisis? What are the objectives and the tools put in place? What lessons can we learn about the strengths and weaknesses of our foreign policy?

*Italy's foreign policy | Libya | European Union | Conflict mediation*

keywords

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### Introduction

On 29 May 2020, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) organised a web seminar on the Libyan crisis and the role of Italian foreign policy in it, with the participation of several international experts, IAI researchers and Italian foreign policy officials to discuss recent developments in the country. The briefing is part of an ongoing cooperation between IAI and the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and of the Strategic Partnership with the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. Entitled “L’Italia e la crisi libica: quali lezioni di politica estera?”,<sup>1</sup> the two-hour web meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. The discussion included two panels: the first one being an expert analysis of the recent escalation of the conflict in Libya, and the second one unpacking policy implications for Italy and the European Union.

### Session I: The analysts’ views on the Libyan conflict

The seminar started with the observation that the recent intensification of military operations in Libya in the last couple of months has put the international community in a real impasse because of its disruption of the local balance of power, and could be the sign of failure of the Berlin process. The latter, proposed by former UN Envoy to Libya Ghassan Salamé, committed the international community to a 3-point peace process which includes a call for: a ceasefire between the warring

<sup>1</sup> A video of the event is available in IAI website: <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11714>.

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parties; an arms embargo; and a Libyan-led process including an economic, a military and a political track. However, the recent military escalation in the country and the consolidation of Turkish and Russian interventionism in the conflict have added a further layer of complexity to it and make a return to mediation to put an end to the conflict in the near future less plausible.

In spite of the international community's support for a peaceful solution in Libya, the situation on the ground has deteriorated. Indeed, the increased flow of weapons and the emergence of new international actors in the conflict deeply contrasts with the UN-led peace process's call for a termination of all military movements in direct support of the conflict parties,<sup>2</sup> and instead leads the conflict towards more militarisation. Another important dynamic at play in the Libyan political arena is the role of tribal support and cross-border ties in shaping the geographic distribution of loyalties. The country's tribal dynamics continue to be harnessed by Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), to expand its control in a similar way to the former regime of Gaddafi used to do. In addition, cross-border ties are also a source of tension as the country's fragile borders with Niger and Chad constitute the main gateway for the fighters and all types of trade and traffic.

Equally important is the role of international players in the evolution of the conflict, namely Russia and Turkey, which are raising fears of a military escalation in a context of limited international opposition and the lack of political space for mediation. What seems to be at stake is more than just the Libyan crisis, but the whole geopolitical interests in the Mediterranean region, and the participants agreed that an eventual solution to the conflict is likely to pass by a Russo-Turkish political agreement.

As for the United States and China's respective positions on the conflict, they have been somewhat marginal and contradictory, and seeking influence in it does not seem to be high on their agendas. As a matter of fact, while the United States was supporting Haftar at the beginning of the crisis, its disengagement may signal that it has little interest in seeking influence in the conflict. China, on the other hand, has been maintaining a non-alignment policy in Libya, consistent with its strategic vision to protect its economic interests in the region and to "maximize its diplomatic and economic gains no matter the conflict's outcome".<sup>3</sup>

In addressing the ideological dimension of the conflict, participants maintained that contrary to Syria and Iraq, the role of political Islam is not as significant in the confrontation between the different factions in Libya. Indeed, even if an ideological cold war exists between the two regional blocs of power sustaining the conflict, their governance models are not so different from one another, which suggests

<sup>2</sup> The Berlin Conference on Libya, Conference Conclusions, 19 January 2020, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/the-berlin-conference-on-libya-1713882>.

<sup>3</sup> Frederic Wehrey and Sandy Alkoutami, "China's Balancing Act in Libya", in *Lawfare*, 10 May 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/node/19125>.

that the dividing line pertains more to economic and political interests than to an ideological clash. Similarly, at the domestic level, the same dynamic is confirmed by the alliance of ideologically opposed actors as is the case of the federalist Al-Abidat tribe's support of the more centralised power claims of Haftar. Nevertheless, the influence of political Islam should not be underestimated in Libya despite the fact that it currently does not play a decisive role.

### Session II: Italian and European policy making vis-à-vis Libya: Challenges and opportunities

In light of this deeply complex mosaic, the second panel discussed the relevance of the Libyan conflict to Italian foreign policy and addressed the responses that it solicited in the Italian political class, public opinion, and the Italian stances at the EU's level.

In order to assess the Italian approach to the conflict so far, it is important to note that despite the fact that the Italian state enjoys privileged diplomatic relations with all of the states involved in the conflict, it has not capitalised on this advantage. The main reason for that is that the Libyan question is consistently hijacked by internal conflicts and divergences within the Italian political arena, and is usually framed as only relevant to Italian foreign policy insofar as it regards the migration issue. This means that Italy's foreign policy toward Libya has been instrumentalised to advance partisan positions in domestic conflicts, which has significantly weakened the Italian position internationally.

In addition, a resolution of the conflict is further hindered by the division of the international community into at least three groups of states that have invested in the conflict with different agendas. Likewise, the failure of diplomatic instruments is also an issue that regards not only Libya but also other conflicts in the region. The reason for that is because a considerable part of the conferences that were held to solve the Libyan conflict can best be described as "quick fix" solutions because they have not really involved a thorough political peace process that contains a gradual development of political, economic and military tracks. Instead, the military solution has been championed on many occasions, undermining the potential for a real comprehensive resolution of the conflict.

After discussing the shortcomings of the Italian foreign policy towards the Libyan conflict, the speakers turned to addressing the issues underlying the role of the EU and its external action capacity, and both the internal and external limits that it has been confronted with when dealing with the crisis in Libya. The European inertia in the face of the crisis at hand is actually the result of many intertwined paralyses both inside the EU and at the level of the international system. To better understand it, participants considered some aspects that tend to weaken the position of the EU.

Internally, the interference of internal policies on external ones is not only an Italian problem, but it also manifests itself at a macro level within the Union. In fact,

the inability of France and Italy to bring their squabble to an end – over supporting General Haftar or the UN-endorsed administration of Al-Sarraj – signals a deeper structural division over other internal conflicts regarding issues such as migration and terrorism. The zero-sum-game that resulted from it hampers any step towards a clear unanimity that can be used in a strategic manner to formulate a European response to the Libyan conflict.

On a larger scale, the international system also suffers from fragmentation. The divergent positions at the Security Council over Libya, added to the violations of both the UN Security Council Resolution 2510's call for a lasting ceasefire as well as the Berlin conference's commitment to an arms embargo, are all signs of failure. At this point, whether the conflict will escalate or be frozen depends on many factors, including the economic sustainability for each of the actors involved, the leadership capacity of Turkey and Russia towards the local actors, as well as the role of the upcoming US election results and the possibilities that a new presidency could open.

Above all, the price of inaction is not sustainable, neither for the EU nor for Italy. And as the participants have previously maintained, the political vacuum that was left by the European actors has allowed players such as Russia and Turkey to take advantage of it by advancing a military logic. On the other hand, despite its poor achievements, the German-backed Berlin conference has been a positive attempt to bring the French and Italian positions closer. In addition to that, it has also emphasised the necessity of a more comprehensive and rigorous peace process by defining the priorities – security, economy and political dialogue – and insisting on the involvement of all the regional actors in finding a solution to the conflict.

That being said, while the EU's involvement has so far been limited, the same can be said about Italy whose untapped potential could play a crucial role in ending the Libyan conflict. With its good relations with all the parties in the conflict and the absence of any hidden agenda, Italy could do more by initiating a dialogue with them in a bilateral form, which could have the merit of bringing about the resumption of the peace process, first formulated in the Palermo conference in November 2018 then in the Berlin conference in the beginning of 2020.

Accordingly, participants agreed on three implications for the EU's foreign policy towards Libya. The first one regards the complete activation of Operation IRINI to continue the enforcement of the UN arms embargo on Libya. The second implication concerns the necessity on the part of the EU to launch and nurture a positive agenda towards the principal actors in the conflict, starting from Turkey. Finally, the EU has to redefine a new strategy for its Southern Neighbourhood Policy, and that, in the light of all the new challenges that emerged since the latest revision in November 2015, has to take place in a rapidly changing regional environment. A new policy towards the Greater Mediterranean region would be key in confronting both the existing crises and the ones to come.

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## Programme

### Welcome remarks

**Ferdinando Nelli Feroci**, President, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

**Giampiero Massolo**, President, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI)

### Session I: The analysts' views on the Libyan conflict

Chair **Armando Barucco**, Head of the Unit for Analysis, Planning and Historic Diplomatic Documentation, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Speakers **Claudia Gazzini**, Senior Analyst for Libya, International Crisis Group  
**Giulia Ghiggia**, Libya Programme Assistant, Promediation  
**Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux**, Director, North African Policy Initiative  
**Dario Cristiani**, IAI/GMF Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)  
**Francesco Strazzari**, Professor in International Relations, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna

### Session II: Italian and European policy making vis-à-vis Libya

Chair **Silvia Colombo**, Head of the Italy's Foreign Policy Programme, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Speakers **Lia Quartapelle**, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Italian Chamber of Deputies  
**Guglielmo Picchi**, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Italian Chamber of Deputies  
**Luca Gori**, Deputy Director General/Principal Director for the Mediterranean and Middle East, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation  
**Lapo Pistelli**, Director International Affairs Department, ENI  
**Fabio Massimo Castaldo**, Vice-President, European Parliament  
**Lorenzo Cremonesi**, Journalist, Corriere della Sera  
**Arturo Varvelli**, Head of Rome Office, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)

### Final remarks: Lessons Learned

**Marina Sereni**, Deputy Minister, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

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