

Italy's Renewed Interest in the Horn of Africa

by Silvia Strangis



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E S S A Y P R I Z E

On 12 June 2022, a bilateral meeting between Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and Somalian President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was held in Mogadishu, as part of an official visit of the minister to Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. Di Maio's three-day tour was just one of his latest in Africa, which highlights Italy's attempt at establishing long-lasting cooperation with African countries.

In the last ten years, the objectives of Italy's foreign policy have been redefined to include the African continent as a priority. Although the media have paid little attention to Italy's engagement, this holds primary

importance, as also evidenced by Italy's efforts to build a diplomatic network in the continent.

The drivers of Italy's policy towards the continent are outlined in the 2020 "A Partnership with Africa" document,¹ which identifies priorities and approaches towards mutual cooperation in specific areas such as migration, security and human rights. In particular, Rome is strengthening ties with the countries of the Horn of

¹ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *A Partnership with Africa*, December 2020, https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/12/a_partnership_with_africa_en.pdf.

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Africa, a strategic region at the centre of the Red Sea route, one of the busiest trade routes in the world.

The region is part of the so-called "wider Mediterranean", as it is often defined, formed by North African countries and, according to the most recent definitions, the Horn itself. This has been described by former Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, on the occasion of the Encounters with Africa,² as the "fourth circle" of interests of Italian foreign policy, following the Atlantic, Mediterranean and European circles.

Securing the Italian presence in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is a pillar of current Italian foreign policy, with Rome recognising its centrality and being more involved in its politics. In the past, the relationship between Italy and Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia had been exclusively commercial until the end of the 19th century, when first Eritrea and then Somalia became Italian colonies.³ Ethiopia, instead, was conquered by fascist Italy in 1936 as part of the Italian Empire of East Africa.⁴ The military defeat in World War II and the process

of decolonisation in the 1950s led Italy to abandon the region. Yet, even in the following decades, the countries of the Horn and their former occupier remained tied through aid and development projects and also because of migration.⁵ Nonetheless, despite the ongoing flow of monetary assistance and mutual cooperation with Somalia and Ethiopia,⁶ a systematic strategy for engagement has been enacted by Rome only since 2013.

The Horn is strategically important, being located at the crossroads of commercial routes, but also vulnerable to political and military competition. Its geographic position is of strategic relevance for the security of not only neighbouring, but also European countries. Yet, the region is threatened by constant insecurity and instability, being a breeding ground for extremism and terrorist attacks. Different forms of political authority coexist, with Ethiopia being a semi-authoritarian state and having engaged in an internal war against the Tigray Front, and Somalia being internally fragmented and *de facto* without a functioning state. These political settings, internal conflicts, poor socioeconomic conditions and climate disasters add a layer of complexity to a region that is traversed by large migration flows.⁷

² Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Encounters with Africa, 7-8 October 2021. Concept Note*, https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2021/10/concept_incontri_con_lafrica.eng_30_sept_2021_def.def.pdf.

³ Bernardo Venturi, "Africa and Italy's Relations after the Cold War", in Dawn Nagar and Charles Mutasa (eds), *Africa and the World. Bilateral and Multilateral International Diplomacy*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 169-188.

⁴ Woldem Asres Degu, *The State, the Crisis of State Institutions, and Refugee Migration in the Horn of Africa: The Cases of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia*, Trenton, Red Sea Press, 2007.

⁵ Simone Brioni and Shimelis B. Gulema (eds), *The Horn of Africa and Italy. Colonial, Postcolonial and Transnational Encounters*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2018.

⁶ Paolo Borruso, "Le nuove proiezioni verso l'Africa dell'Italia postcoloniale", in *Studi storici*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2013), p. 449-479.

⁷ Eelco Kessels, Tracey Durner and Matthew Schwartz, *Violent Extremism and Instability in the Greater Horn of Africa. An Examination of Drivers and Responses*, Goshen, Global Center

The instability brought about by these factors reverberates on Italian national interests, thus affecting Italy's policy towards the region. Tackling migration flows from the Horn of Africa to Europe, stabilisation of political processes, protection of the environment and the fight against the climate emergency are just a few of Italy's priorities in the region.

Against this backdrop, the Italian government is involved in peacekeeping and security missions, as well as in the support of regional organisations fostering efficient strategies for the region. To this end, the Italian African Peace Facility (IAPF) has been created to promote the activities of the African Union in challenging areas. The initiatives encompass mediation, financing and capacity building, and are of great impact on a conflict-torn area such as the Horn of Africa. As stated in the official document establishing it,⁸ the Italian government contributes to these activities with financial support and through regular consultations with a bilateral committee appointed to supervise the achievement of the IAPF objectives.

The focus on security has been implemented through the enduring commitment of Italy to the work of

the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD),⁹ an entity dedicated to regional integration and partnership.¹⁰ Italy is not part of the organisation, but has been extremely supportive of several of its activities aiming at capacity building in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, Rome is co-chair of the IGAD Partners Forum, which gathers the IGAD members, several European countries and international organisations.

The Italian government contributed both to the funding of the construction of the IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre (ICPAC) in Nairobi as well as with the transfer of technical know-how on management and prevention of climate disasters. In January 2022, an Italian delegation visited ICPAC together with representatives of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and of the African Union.¹¹ A further investment has been made in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to finance the Rome Centre for Sustainable Development, which focuses on environmental protection and the fight against climate change in fragile ecosystems, mainly the Horn of Africa and Sahel.¹² These

for Cooperative Studies, April 2016, <https://www.globalcenter.org/publications/violent-extremism-and-instability-in-the-greater-horn-of-africa>.

⁸ Italy and African Union, *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Italy and the Commission of the African Union on the Management of the "Italian African Peace Facility (IAPF)"*, Lisbon, 8 December 2007, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2008/05/10/109/so/118/sg/pdf>.

⁹ Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Eritrea take part in IGAD.

¹⁰ IGAD, *About IGAD*, accessed 30 November 2022, <https://igad.int/about>.

¹¹ UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), *High-Level Italian Delegation Visits IGAD Climate Centre Disaster Operations Centre*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.undrr.org/node/70040>.

¹² Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *A Partnership with*

initiatives are in line with the plan for the fight against climate change and sustainable development, as reiterated by Italy during its G20 presidency in 2021.

Furthermore, great advancements have been made in programmes for the provision of primary goods, such as water. Through the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) programme in Ethiopia and Kenya, Italy has become a leader in projects concerning water resources.¹³ Italy is allocating funding and know-how to initiatives to tackle drought and climate change in Ethiopia.¹⁴ Moreover, the Italian Development Cooperation Agency is participating in a UNICEF project on drought response in Ethiopia that would implement sustainable water supplies in affected areas.¹⁵

At the supranational level, steps have been taken towards a joint collaboration and cooperation between the European Union, with Italy as a leading partner, and the countries of the Horn. Italy, as part of the Union, participates in the

Africa, cit., p. 37.

¹³ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Directorate General for Development Cooperation, *Linee operative della cooperazione italiana allo sviluppo in Africa Orientale*, 25 June 2014, https://www.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Linee_Operative_Africa_Orientale_2014_06_25.pdf.

¹⁴ Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), *Ethiopia Emergency: 9 Million Euros Approved by the Italian Cooperation*, 22 September 2022, <https://addisabeba.aics.gov.it/?p=5453>.

¹⁵ AICS, *Sustainable Water Supply for Drought Affected Areas in Somali and Afar Regions. Progress Report*, 15 March 2017, https://openaid.aics.gov.it/activity_attachment/652%20-%20CONTENTS.pdf.

Horn of Africa Initiative, a programme aimed at supporting economic and state-building reforms in the region: so far, 7.5 billion US dollars have been deployed by the European Union, the African Development Bank and the World Bank as part of the Initiative.¹⁶

Finally, at the bilateral level, Italy is reinforcing its ties with Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea through aid and development programmes. Between 2017 and 2018, an overall amount of 81 million US dollars was donated to these countries. A stronger relationship has been built with Ethiopia especially, for which Italy is the second-largest commercial partner in Europe.¹⁷

The Horn at a crossroads

Italy's commitment to the wider Mediterranean faces growing competition by countries such as China, Russia, India and Turkey. The new "great game" of Africa is now being played among these powers in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, the monarchies of the Gulf have a pervasive presence in the region due to their geographic proximity and, in the last years, regional spillovers of Saudi-Iran competition.¹⁸

¹⁶ European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships, *Horn of Africa Initiative: The EU Steps Up Its Commitments to the Region*, 30 June 2022, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/1394_en.

¹⁷ Giuseppe Dentice, "Il ruolo di Italia ed Europa nelle dinamiche del Corno d'Africa", in *Approfondimenti dell'Osservatorio di politica internazionale*, No. 143 (November 2018), p. 13, https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0143_App.pdf.

¹⁸ Alexander Rondos, "The Horn of Africa. Its Strategic Importance for Europe, the Gulf



For its part, Italy has the possibility to influence the relations with its African partners through cooperation and transfer of know-how on technology, energy supply and infrastructure. In this direction, a role could be played by Italian energy company Eni, although this may face competition from other European companies such as French Total. This reinforces the necessity for a foreign policy based on mutual recognition of interests with European partners in Africa.

Indeed, in the European context, a shared initiative and plan of action could be developed to take on the challenges of the Horn. Within this framework, Italy is also called to support and be a promoter of the projects implemented by the EU and the UN. For example, Rome may play a key role in the mobilisation of capital towards the Horn of Africa.¹⁹ Moreover, concerns about terrorism and migration push Italy to promote a dynamic collaboration within the EU in these areas of intervention.

Overall, confronted with such an array of challenges, Italy needs to make sure that its efforts for economic growth and regional integration and in the fight against the climate emergency in the Horn of Africa are part of a joint effort with European partners and investors.

30 November 2022

States, and Beyond", in *Horizons*, No. 6 (Winter 2016), p. 150-160, <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2016--issue-no-6/the-horn-of-africa---its-strategic-importance-for-europe-the-gulf-states-and-beyond>.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Dentice, "Il ruolo di Italia ed Europa nelle dinamiche del Corno d'Africa", cit.

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