

# Giorgia Meloni's Foreign Policy and the Mattei Plan for Africa: Balancing Development and Migration Concerns

by Karim Mezran and Alissa Pavia

Despite Italy's economic significance as the Eurozone's third-largest economy and founding member of the G7 and NATO, the country has struggled to translate its economic power into political influence. Yet, with Giorgia Meloni's ascent to power, Italy's approach to foreign policy appears to be evolving. In fact, since the very beginning of her term, Meloni displayed a rather bold approach towards reshaping Italy's international status.

As the President of the Council of Ministers – analogous to the post of Prime Minister in other countries – Meloni has adopted a distinct posture in addressing issues related to the Southern Mediterranean. Since taking office in October 2022, Meloni has made numerous visits to North Africa, engaging in a diplomatic offensive aimed at reinvigorating Italian policies. In January this year, following in the footsteps of former Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Meloni travelled to Algeria on her first bilateral visit abroad.

Algeria is an instrumental country for Italy due to its vast hydrocarbon reserves and geographical proximity.<sup>1</sup> In 2022, Draghi paved the way for Algeria to become Italy's top energy supplier, replacing Russia and thus allowing for a swift decoupling from Moscow as the Ukraine war rages on and energy prices continue to soar.

Meloni's posture in Algeria seeks to evidence her willingness to move beyond a mere set of energy memorandums and broaden Italy's foreign policy to include strategic diplomacy with long-term goals. She described Algeria as Italy's "most stable, strategic and long-standing" partner in North Africa,<sup>2</sup> and reassured

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Dodman, "Italy Plays on Historic Heartstrings with Algeria to Boost Critical Energy Ties", in *France 24*, 23 January 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230123-italy-plays-on-historic-heartstrings-with-algeria-to-boost-critical-energy-ties>.

<sup>2</sup> Colleen Barry and Andrea Rosa, "Algeria, Italy Look to Broaden Ties Beyond Coveted Energy", in *AP News*, 23 January 2023, <https://apnews.com>.

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President Tebboune that Italy stands by Algeria. The country has recently felt cornered following Morocco's joining of the Abraham Accords, a feeling few other countries aside from Italy had the courage to assuage and which had pushed Algeria further towards Russia and China as a result.

Meloni's activism in North Africa did not end there. The prime minister and her cabinet promoted high-level missions and diplomatic efforts with Libyan government officials, allowing Italy to reap diplomatic wins in the energy field. In January, a few weeks after visiting Algeria, Meloni flew to Tripoli for a meeting with Libya's UN-backed Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh. The visit led to the signing of an 8 billion US dollars gas deal between Italian energy company Eni and Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC).<sup>3</sup>

Then, in May, Meloni hosted Benghazi militia leader Khalifa Haftar in Rome to discuss the surge in migration;<sup>4</sup> and the following month, she met Dbeibeh to discuss the economy as well as energy and infrastructure projects, stressing the importance of Libyan stability for Italian interests. By discussing political and economic priorities with both Libyan leaders, Meloni seemingly went beyond the transactional approach that Italy (and Europe more broadly) has long adopted vis-à-vis North Africa

[com/cc5bd14001637f121ecc46e9b0a700dc](https://www.reuters.com/cc5bd14001637f121ecc46e9b0a700dc).

<sup>3</sup> Gavin Jones, "Italy's Eni Signs \$8 Billion Libya Gas Deal as PM Meloni Visits Tripoli", in *Reuters*, 29 January 2023, <http://reut.rs/3wCNEng>.

<sup>4</sup> "Meloni and Haftar Talk Migrant Flows to Italy", in *Ansa*, 4 May 2023, [https://www.ansa.it/english/news/world/2023/05/04/meloni-and-haftar-talk-migrant-flows-to-italy\\_df89a23d-ecff-47e3-b20d-bd54ef6e461c.html](https://www.ansa.it/english/news/world/2023/05/04/meloni-and-haftar-talk-migrant-flows-to-italy_df89a23d-ecff-47e3-b20d-bd54ef6e461c.html).

promoting a more comprehensive framework which seemingly seeks to embrace the region's own priorities as well.

Similarly, Meloni held several high-level meetings and signed strategic partnerships with Tunisia, a country that currently faces deep economic and political challenges. Since June, Meloni has met with Tunisia's President Kais Saied three times. Initially aimed at unblocking International Monetary Fund (IMF) funds to help macroeconomic stability in the country, her later visits, which she undertook with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, underscored the need to find long-term solutions to stabilise Tunisian finances while improving migration cooperation. In Tunis, the leaders stressed European support and announced a package of assistance which includes 150 million euro in budgetary support for Tunisia to avert an economic default.<sup>5</sup>

Meloni has framed her Mediterranean diplomacy as part of a broader initiative termed the "Mattei Plan for Africa".<sup>6</sup> Named after Eni's founder Enrico Mattei, the initiative seems to be aimed to encourage a holistic approach to

<sup>5</sup> Jorge Liboreiro and Vincenzo Genovese, "The Contentious EU-Tunisia Deal Is Finally Here. But What Exactly Is in It?", in *Euronews*, 17 July 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/07/17/the-contentious-eu-tunisia-deal-is-finally-here-but-what-exactly-is-in-it>.

<sup>6</sup> Silvia Sciorilli Borrellin, "Italy Renews Its 'Mattei Plan' to Develop Energy Ties to Africa", in *Financial Times*, 11 January 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/05d17d35-b0c3-47d2-b6b7-6f7d65d758fc>.

dealing with African countries of interest to Italy. It also aims to turn Italy into an energy hub between North Africa and Europe. Through the construction of new pipelines, Italy would become an exporter of both natural gas and hydrogen to countries such as Germany and Austria and the gateway linking North Africa to Central and Northern European countries.<sup>7</sup> Given Europe's vital role for North African trade, these deals could become pivotal in securing long-term strategic gains for both sides of the Mediterranean.

The specifics of the Mattei Plan remain undisclosed. Very little is known about the plan, and some fear that its true nature is simply linked to the goal of curbing irregular migration to Italy. In fact, Meloni's stance on migration has long been a controversial topic of discussion in Italy, one that has awarded her criticism from state authorities and segments of the public at large.

It is through this lens that the international community should view Meloni's proactive diplomacy in North Africa. Alongside the energy and economic priorities, the issue of irregular migration has always managed to creep onto the agenda through the back door. On Libya, Meloni discussed the issue at length with both Haftar and Dbeibeh, and Italy has recently donated five vessels to the Libyan coastguard in Tripoli to enhance security operations

<sup>7</sup> Francesca Landini, "Italy, Germany, Austria Sign Letter to Support Hydrogen Pipeline", in *Reuters*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/italy-germany-austria-sign-letter-support-hydrogen-pipeline-2023-05-09>.

in the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> In Tunisia, Meloni shied away from making any public statements on President Kais Saied's reversals of the country's fragile democratic transition.<sup>9</sup> Instead, during her visit with von der Leyen and Rutte to Tunisia, the three European leaders announced the immediate release of 105 million euro to assist the Tunisian coastguard and border police.<sup>10</sup>

Whether Giorgia Meloni's Mattei Plan truly seeks to help alleviate poverty and exploitation in Africa through comprehensive and holistic approaches remains to be seen, and Tunisia might hold the keys to this verdict.

Indeed, the real litmus test for Meloni's Mattei Plan for Africa is the developing situation in Tunisia, once considered the only successful case of democracy emanated from the so-called Arab Spring. Post-revolution elites in Tunisia did not operate successfully in managing the economy or the social development of the country and actually brought it to the verge of collapse by the end of 2018. The delegitimisation of the political class

<sup>8</sup> Cesare Treccarichi, "Cos'è il Piano Mattei di cui parla tanto Giorgia Meloni", in *Today*, 14 April 2023, <https://www.today.it/economia/piano-mattei-governo-meloni-africa-gas-cosa-e.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "Italy Calls Med Migration Conference on Tunisia Model", in *France 24*, 23 July 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230723-italy-calls-med-migration-conference-on-tunisia-model>.

<sup>10</sup> Jorge Liboreiro and Vincenzo Genovese, "The Contentious EU-Tunisia Deal Is Finally Here. But What Exactly Is in It?", cit.; European Commission, *EU Comprehensive Partnership Package with Tunisia*, 11 June 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/FS\\_23\\_3205](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/FS_23_3205).

became evident in the 2021 presidential elections, when the vast majority voted for the outsider and relatively unknown constitutional law professor, Kais Saied, and his programme of state renewal and anticorruption.

Saied took the wishes of his electorate to the extreme and by December 2022 centralised most powers around his person, becoming a *de facto* authoritarian ruler. Meanwhile, as conditions worsened in the country and the Tunisian president himself increasingly scapegoated black African migrants in Tunisia, many opted for the solution of last resort: emigration to Europe. The number of illegal migrants, mostly of non-Tunisian origin, reaching Italian shores rose almost threefold by July 2023.<sup>11</sup> Tunisia, meanwhile, gradually replaced Libya as the major departure point for migrants seeking to reach Europe via Italy.<sup>12</sup>

As a consequence, the Meloni government ultimately replicated past attempts to address illegal migration: it revived the classical transactional approach of providing resources to North African authorities in exchange for cracking down on smugglers who facilitated illegal crossings.

Yet, Italy's previous policies, such as those adopted in Libya since 2017, have proven ineffective. Ultimately,

<sup>11</sup> Italian Ministry of the Interior, *Cruscotto statistico giornaliero*, last updated on 26 July 2023, <http://www.interno.gov.it/it/node/8686>.

<sup>12</sup> Monica Pinna, "Crisi migranti nel Mediterraneo: dalla Tunisia all'Italia, chi si imbarca verso l'Europa?", in *Euronews*, 1 June 2023, <https://it.euronews.com/2023/06/01/crisi-migranti-nel-mediterraneo-dalla-tunisia-allitalia-chi-si-imbarca-verso-leuropa>.

they have empowered smugglers and their associates within North African security forces, while not resolving the issue of migrant crossings and severely damaging Italian and European moral credibility in the process.<sup>13</sup> The lack of effective governance in Libya allowed smugglers to exploit the situation and continue their activities by extorting the government for financial gain. Moreover, migrants who were returned to Libya often endured harsh conditions, including detention, exploitation and abuse in Libyan facilities. These conditions, consequently, drove migrants to reattempt the perilous journey again, perpetuating a cycle of smuggling and irregular migration.

For Giorgia Meloni's vision of a "virtuous model of collaboration and growth" between the EU and African countries<sup>14</sup> to succeed, Tunisia's fate will be decisive. Tackling the migration issue requires comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of migration: poverty, conflict and lack of opportunities. Failing to do so may result in a serious migration crisis, which no amount of coastguard financing can avert.

The coming trip of Meloni to Washington DC carries important

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Bühler et al., "On the Trail of African Migrant Smugglers", in *Spiegel International*, 26 September 2016, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/migrant-smuggling-business-means-big-money-in-libya-a-1113654.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Italian Government, *President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Address on the Government Programme*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21000>.

significance in the sense that it can help reiterate the strategic importance of North Africa to the US and its vital significance for the EU. Meloni has the chance of convincing US President Joe Biden to invert trends of US retrenchment from the Mediterranean and recognising the important role allies like Italy can play in the region as Washington contends with other competing priorities. A wider involvement of the US administration may also help to ensure that any new European-led approach to the Mediterranean carries within it a strong commitment to human rights and the rule of law. Such elements will prove indispensable for the success of Meloni's new activism in the Mediterranean – including the much-awaited Mattei Plan for Africa – and in improving EU policies and credibility in the area as well.

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