



## How the EU Lost in Libya

MEDITERRANEAN PROGRAMME

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### Summary

- The EU did very little to stabilize Libya after NATO overthrew Gaddafi.
- The EU could not implement an overall Libya policy due to internal disagreements, namely the competition for influence between Italy and France.
- In 2019, the Libyan Crisis entered a new, and more violent and messy phase, as outside powers (namely Russia and Turkey) intervened on the side of the GNA or LNA.
- The EU's diplomatic and military responses to the outside interventions lacked both the capacity and the will to yield positive results.
- The Libyan Crisis and the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis became two communicating vessels as more and more actors were drawn into the fray.
- A loose anti-Turkish bloc emerged that involved European and non-European powers under the unofficial leadership of France.
- The outside powers successfully diminished the EU's influence in Libya, establishing a military foothold and dominating the negotiations for a political solution ever since.

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## The Ebb and Flow of the EU's Libya Policy

“With Gaddafi overthrown, the dreams of liberals within NATO and EU of establishing a Western-type parliamentary democracy vanished into thin air as the country relapsed very quickly into violence and factionalism.”

In 2011, Libya descended into a civil conflict that ended 8 months later with the defeat (and execution) of the autocrat who had ruled the country for decades: Muammar Al Gaddafi.<sup>1</sup> Despite putting up stiff resistance against the insurgents, the dictator eventually fell following an overt military intervention by NATO as an enforcer of UN Security Council Resolution 1973<sup>2</sup>.

The EU's two military powers, France and Britain<sup>3</sup>, lobbied within NATO and the EU in favor of an armed intervention against Libya's decades-old dictator on humanitarian grounds. In effect, the USA under President Obama reluctantly acceded to the constant pressure from its European allies and eventually participated in this endeavor with its full military might<sup>4</sup>. In a manner analogous with the Yugoslav Wars (1991–1995), while the EU amplified the Libyan Crisis it was the US that resolved it through military force.

With Gaddafi overthrown, the dreams of liberals within NATO and EU of establishing a Western-type parliamentary democracy vanished into thin air as the country relapsed very quickly into violence and factionalism<sup>5</sup>. The EU watched on uneasily, but passively on most occasions, as the oil-rich country was thrust into a second civil conflict (2014-present). Actually, the EU's almost exclusive concern were the migratory flows out of Libya and another victim of the Arab Spring in the Mediterranean Sea: Syria<sup>6</sup>. The EU decided to launch Operation EUNAVFOR Med – Operation Sophia in June 2015 in an effort to contain the migratory flows toward the Old Continent (which had exceeded 1.5 million souls by the end of that year<sup>7</sup>); this naval operation only achieved some of its stated objectives and was replaced by Operation Irini, an operation with an entirely different agenda, in March 2020<sup>8</sup>.

The EU twice attempted to broker a tentative peace deal between the rival Libyan camps: in May 2018 at the Paris Summit, and in November 2018 at the Palermo Summit<sup>9</sup>. The two summits were organized by France and Italy respectively, and spotlighted somewhat embarrassingly the competition between the two former colonial powers for influence in post-Gaddafi Libya<sup>10</sup>. Lacking any concerted effort on the part of the EU, the two summits achieved very little and the rival Libyan camps continued their in-fighting<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Spyridon Plakoudas: “Causes of the Arab Spring: A Critical Analysis” (Athens: KEDISA, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Kjell Engelbrekt et al. (eds.): *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign* (Stockholm: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Britain was still part of the EU at the time.

<sup>4</sup> Nicole Koenig: “The EU and the Libyan Crisis: In Quest of Coherence”, *The International Spectator*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (2011), pp. 11-30; Ted Galen Carpenter: “How NATO Pushed the USA into the Libyan Fiasco” (Washington D.C.: CATO Institute, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan M. Winer: “Origins of the Libyan Conflict and Options for its Resolution” (Washington: Middle East Institute, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Zakariya El Zaidy: “EU Migration Policy Towards Libya: A Policy of Conflicting Interests” (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> [BBC Staff]: “Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts”, *BBC News*, 4 March 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Butler and Martin Ratcovich: “Operation Sophia in Uncharted Waters: European and International Law Challenges for the EU Naval Mission in the Mediterranean Sea” *Nordic Journal of International Law*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (2016), pp. 235-259.

<sup>9</sup> The two summits were attended by Fayed al-Serraj (Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord or GNA), Khalifa Haftar (Commander-in-Chief of the Libyan National Army or LNA), Ageela Saleh (President of the House of Representative or HoR), and Khalid al-Mishri (Head of the High State Council).

<sup>10</sup> Karim Mezran and Elissa Miller: “France, Italy and Libya's Crisis”, *Atlantic Council*, 28 July 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/france-italy-and-libya-s-crisis/>.

<sup>11</sup> ICG Staff]: “Making the Best of France's Libya Summit” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018); Giovanna de Maio: “The Palermo Conference on Libya: A Diplomatic Test for Italy's New Government” (Washington: Brookings Institute, 2018); Dario Romano Fenili: “Italy's New Approach to Libya” (London: RUSI, 2020).

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In April 2019, 4 months after the Palermo Summit and 10 days before the Libyan National Conference<sup>12</sup>, Haftar launched an assault on Tripoli and, in effect, brought the 2015 Skhirat Accord to an end<sup>13</sup>. The EU condemned the attack, but did very little to stop the bloodshed: after all, France supported Haftar's LNA whereas Italy was co-operating with Sarraj's GNA<sup>14</sup>, leaving the EU unable to agree on a unified policy on Libya.

### The EU Ousted from its "Near Abroad"

*"However, it was the first time these actors would establish a military foothold in Libya."*

The Battle of Tripoli did not progress as Haftar had anticipated, despite his continued support from outside powers (namely France, Egypt and the UAE) and, by extension, his military superiority. The stalemate offered Turkey and Russia a unique opportunity to intervene in Libya. This was not, of course, the first time that external actors had intervened in Libyan internal affairs. However, it was the first time these actors would establish a military foothold in Libya that could not be easily removed.

Turkey and Russia capitalized on the inaction or even indifference of the US and the EU over Libya and, despite their support for rival Libyan camps (Turkey was supporting the GNA and Russia the LNA), the two actively sought a *modus vivendi* in Libya<sup>15</sup>. Their actions accorded with the same motif of "controlled competition and cooperation" that would be evident later on the battlefields of Syria and Nagorno Karabakh<sup>16</sup>.

*"Their actions accorded with the same motif of 'controlled competition and cooperation'."*

Everything started when the Wagner Group deployed its battle-hardened mercenaries in Tripoli in the fall of 2019 to support the LNA's stalled offensive. Under severe pressure, the GNA appealed to Turkey in earnest for urgent aid and, despite initial objections, acceded to the latter's burdensome terms – a controversial MoU regarding the delimitation of maritime zones<sup>17</sup> and a MoU regarding military cooperation – in November 2019<sup>18</sup>. The two deals angered Greece and impelled Athens to approach the GNA's opposition – Haftar and Saleh – through French and Emirati mediation.<sup>19</sup>

Despite their differences, Turkey and Russia agreed to seek a *modus vivendi* and thus outmaneuver every other actor (e.g. Egypt and France) in Libya. They used their respective influence over the rival Libyan camps to organize a summit in Moscow. However, this initiative failed to yield any positive results, due to Haftar's inflexibility<sup>20</sup>. He was equally intransigent during the Berlin Summit later that month: after all, he could

<sup>12</sup> This conference would determine the details for the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Libya.

<sup>13</sup> [Al Jazeera Staff]: "Haftar's Assault on Tripoli: An Interactive Explainer", *Al Jazeera*, 10 May 2019, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2019/whats-happening-in-libya-explainer/index.html>

<sup>14</sup> Italy's ENI had been awarded almost the entirety of the gas fields in Tripolitania, and Italy had inked a defense agreement with the GNA. Tarek Megerisis and Arturo Varvelli: "Italy's Chance in Libya" (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Maxim Suchkov: "Russia's 'Leading From Behind' Strategy on Libya", *Al Monitor*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/russia-leading-from-behind-libya-strategy-putin-germany.html>

<sup>16</sup> Spyros Plakoudas: "Russia and Turkey: Competitors, Not Rivals" («Ρωσία και Τουρκία: Ανταγωνιστές, Όχι Εχθροί»), *Capital (Greece)*, 25/1/2021, <https://www.capital.gr/me-apopsi/3521459/rosia-kai-tourkia-antagonistes-oxi-exthroji>

<sup>17</sup> This memorandum flagrantly violated the provisions of the UNCLOS and made real the dream of the "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan) nurtured by Turkey's Eurasianists. Ryan Gingeras: "Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey's New Maritime Strategy", *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>

<sup>18</sup> Keith Johnson: "Newly Aggressive Turkey Forges Alliance with Libya", *Foreign Policy*, 23 December 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/23/turkey-libya-alliance-aggressive-mediterranean/>

<sup>19</sup> Vassilis Nedos: "The Background of Haftar's Visit to Athens" («Το Παρασκήνιο της Επίσκεψης Χάφταρ στην Αθήνα»), *Kathimerini*, 24/1/2020, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/1061645/to-paraskinio-tis-episkepsis-toy-ch-chaftar-stin-athina/>

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Wintour: "Libya Talks in Moscow in Diplomatic Coup for Putin", *Guardian*, 13/1/2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/13/libya-talks-moscow-diplomatic-coup-vladimir-putin>

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“...the Libyan Crisis became intertwined with the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis.”

still count on the support of his foreign patrons. Like its predecessors, this summit was organized unilaterally by an EU heavyweight: on this occasion, Germany. This initiative did not sit well with every EU member-state: France and Italy resented this “new German lead”, whereas Greece and Cyprus chafed at their non-invitation and non-participation<sup>21</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the summit proved to be a farce, with the warring factions paying only lip-service to the agreed ceasefire and arms embargo, and preparing methodically for war instead<sup>22</sup>.

Egypt invited the resentful EU states to a summit of its own; Cairo’s core objective was crystal clear: to denounce the MoUs between Turkey and Serraj’s GNA and enforce a peace settlement that would exclude Turkey and/or Russia. However, Italy refused to sign the joint communiqué, in the light of its interests in Tripolitania. Italy would try instead to mediate between Haftar and Serraj – but to no avail.<sup>23</sup> And while other powers were expending their energy on debates about the Libyan Crisis and the COVID-19 Pandemic, others were accelerating their military preparations.

In the first quarter of 2020, in direct violation of the UN-imposed arms embargo, Turkey transferred by air and by sea the men and weaponry needed to counter Haftar’s overwhelming military superiority.<sup>24</sup> Turkey’s military build-up alarmed Greece and France, and it was on their insistence that the EU decided to replace EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia with EUAVFOR MED Irini. The EU would from now on focus on containing not the migratory flows out of Libya, but the flows of men and weapons into the country. Ankara criticized the mission as unbalanced, since only the maritime flows (i.e. the flows from Turkey), and not those by air or land, would be monitored<sup>25</sup>. Lacking both a clear-cut mandate and the necessary resources, the mission achieved very little<sup>26</sup>.

At that point, the Libyan Crisis became intertwined with the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis. France, Egypt, Cyprus and Greece, all of whom had been impacted by Ankara’s aggression<sup>27</sup>, gradually coalesced into a *loose anti-Turkish bloc*. Italy and Israel were conspicuously absent from this bloc – each for its own reasons.<sup>28</sup> Another powerful actor, however, would join the bloc: the UAE. Abu Dhabi and Turkey were already facing off in the Gulf and the Horn of Africa; now they would do so in the Eastern Mediterranean, too<sup>29</sup>. In May, the foreign ministers of the new bloc issued a

<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Brzozowoski: “EU Sidelined as Berlin Summit Thrashes Out Shaky Libya Ceasefire”, Euroactiv, 20/1/2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-sidelined-as-berlin-summit-thrashes-out-shaky-libya-ceasefire/>

<sup>22</sup> Gerjon and Yörük Işık monitored the flows of weapons and men to Libya (by sea and air) into both camps (GNA and LNA) during the so-called ceasefire on their Twitter accounts.

<sup>23</sup> Tarek Megerisi: “Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey and the New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines” (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Jason Pack and Wolfgang Puztai: “Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli” (London: Middle East Institute, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> [Al Arabiya Staff]: “Turkey Criticizes EU’s Operation Irini to Contain Arms Shipments to Libya”, *Al Arabiya*, 19/6/2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2020/06/19/Turkey-criticizes-EU-Operation-Irini-to-contain-arms-shipments-to-Libya>

<sup>26</sup> Hugo Decis: “Operation Irini: EU’s Latest Libya Mission Short on Assets” (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> These countries had already experienced a crisis with Turkey by the first half of 2020: Greece (the Evros Crisis – March 2020), Cyprus (illegal drillings in its EEZ – from 2019 to mid-2020) and France / Egypt (Operation “Peace Storm” in Libya – March-June 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Megerisi: “Deep Sea Rivals”.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew England, Laura Pitel and Simeon Kerr: “UAE vs Turkey: The Regional Rivalries Pitting MbZ versus Erdogan”, *Financial Times*, 26/10/2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/990f13cf-613f-48a5-ac02-c8c73741a786>

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communiqué denouncing Turkey's interventions in Libya and Cyprus<sup>30</sup>. These developments did little, however, to change the balance of power on the battlefields of Tripolitania.

*“Sirte and Al Juffrah would be Egypt's red line.”*

The GNA's military forces were able to counter-attack against Haftar's LNA in April thanks to Turkey's military backing. In May, the LNA's offensive against the capital (about which the EU did nothing for over a year) collapsed utterly after Turkey seized control of the skies over Tripoli and negotiated the Wagner Group's orderly withdrawal from Tripoli. By mid-June, the GNA had advanced eastwards to Sirte and Al Juffrah.<sup>31</sup> At that critical moment, two non-European powers intervened to contain Turkey: Egypt and Russia.

*“...the EU would be conspicuously absent. Egypt, Russia, and (to a lesser degree) Turkey would dominate the new political track.”*

Egypt, though never truly supportive of the ill-conceived military adventurism of Haftar in Tripolitania, could not allow Turkey and the GNA to completely destroy the LNA (and thus its “buffer zone” in Central and Eastern Libya) and capture the “Oil Crescent”<sup>32</sup>. Sirte and Al Juffrah would be Egypt's red line. Moscow, which supported Haftar only as long as doing so would increase its leverage over the other players in Libya and allow it to re-establish its influence in the oil-rich country<sup>33</sup>, stepped in and stopped the GNA's offensive against Sirte and Al Juffrah in its tracks<sup>34</sup>. With Haftar sidelined by Russia and even Egypt, the road to peace talks opened up in August and an official ceasefire was announced in October<sup>35</sup>. On this occasion, however, the EU would be conspicuously absent. Egypt, Russia, and (to a lesser degree) Turkey would dominate the new political track<sup>36</sup>.

These developments would set two parallel processes in motion: On the one hand, the members of the loose anti-Turkish bloc would accelerate their burgeoning cooperation and sign several diplomatic and military agreements. Greece would sign two maritime zone delimitation agreements, with Italy (June) and Egypt (August), and, still more importantly, a mutual defense accord with the UAE (November)<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, France agreed to implement an earlier defense agreement with Cyprus and inked a major defense deal with Greece in January 2021<sup>38</sup>.

On the other hand, France and Italy scrambled to salvage whatever (negligible) influence

<sup>30</sup> [National Staff]: Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece and UAE Condemn Turkey's Actions in Eastern Mediterranean”, *National*, 12/5/2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/cyprus-egypt-france-greece-and-uae-condemn-turkey-s-actions-in-eastern-mediterranean-1.1018108>

<sup>31</sup> Pack and Pusztai: “Turning the Tide”.

<sup>32</sup> Samir Salama: “Turkey Advances towards Egypt's Red Line as Sirte Battle Looms”, *Gulf News*, 27/6/2020, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/turkey-advances-towards-egypts-red-line-as-sirte-battle-looms-1.72281083>

<sup>33</sup> Jalel Harchaoui: “The Pendulum: How Russia Sways its Way to More Influence in Libya”, *War on the Rocks*, 7/1/2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/>

<sup>34</sup> This defeat was facilitated partly by the new air units that Russia deployed in Libya – a development that irked NATO's AFRICOM. Anton Mardasov: “Why Did Russia Deploy Fighters Jets to Libya”, (London: Middle East Institute, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> The Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for Libya and deputy head of UNSMIL, Mrs Stephanie Williams, launched the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in October 2020. Kizzi Asala: “Inter-Libya Political Dialogue Makes Strides in Egypt”, *Africa News*, 20/1/2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/01/20/inter-libyan-political-dialogue-makes-strides-in-egypt/>

<sup>36</sup> [Mada Masr Staff]: “A Gulf of Difference: How the UAE and Egypt's Coordination Fell Apart and What's Next”, *Mada Masr*, 17/12/2020, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/12/17/feature/politics/a-gulf-of-difference-how-the-uae-and-egypts-close-coordination-fell-apart-and-whats-next/>

<sup>37</sup> Paul Iddon: “How significant is the Greece-UAE defense agreement?”, *Ahval News*, 28/11/2020, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkish-foreign-policy/how-significant-greece-uae-defence-agreement>

<sup>38</sup> Remi Daniel: “France in the Eastern Mediterranean: Rushing to Save Beirut, Losing in Libya, and Standing Alone against Erdogan” (Tel Aviv: The Institute for National Security Studies, 2020).

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they still had in Tripoli. Despite its diplomatic engagement with the GNA, France could not easily carry out a relationship reset. Italy was slightly more successful, as Rome signed several military and energy cooperation deals with the GNA. However, neither could influence the ongoing political track in Libya and thus restore the status quo post bellum.

The outcome of months-long negotiations under UN auspices, a new interim government was formed in February 2021 to stabilize the country and prepare it for elections in December 2021. Against all the odds, the underdogs on the candidate lists – Menfi and Dbeibah – were elected. It is interesting to note that Menfi was the ambassador to Athens until his ignominious expulsion in December 2019 during the row over the MoUs between Turkey and Libya. This development represented a surprise victory for Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood and a defeat for Egypt, France and the two Libyan front-runners, Saleh and Bashagha<sup>39</sup>.

*“The outcome of months-long negotiations under UN auspices, a new interim government was formed in February 2021 to stabilize the country and prepare it for elections in December 2021.”*

This development does not augur well for the future of Libya. A Saleh-Bashagha administration would have enjoyed far more support from crucial actors at the national (e.g. the militias in Tripoli) and international level (e.g. Egypt). Their loss has allowed Haftar to preserve his status and power in Eastern Libya vis-à-vis his rivals, and no one can rule out the possibility of the old warlord acting as a spoiler once again. After all, his foreign backers (the same ones who backed him in the Battle of Tripoli) would certainly not object. Nor can anyone guarantee that the militias in Tripoli will accept the results of the vote and not oppose it violently.

In short, immense effort is required if Libya is to avoid more civil strife in the run-up to the elections. Unfortunately, the EU appears to be more divided than ever and thus less able to intervene and contribute positively to the political process in Libya.

## The Failures of the EU

The Libyan Crisis epitomizes the failures of the EU as a power in its near abroad. Though instrumental in the overthrow of the decades-old dictator, Gaddafi, the EU did little to later stabilize the war-torn Arab country either politically or financially. This was less due to a lack of capacity and more to a lack of will and cooperation. Even the two EU heavyweights with vested interests in the country, France and Italy, were eventually outmaneuvered by other powers (Turkey and Russia) in their own backyard, having failed to coordinate their actions.

*“These powers perceive the EU as a paper tiger with no stomach for a fight.”*

These powers perceive the EU as a paper tiger with no stomach for a fight<sup>40</sup>; given that Brussels has not imposed sanctions, they coordinate their actions freely with a view to expanding their influence in the Maghreb at the West's expense. What can the EU do in Libya? Brussels could adopt the traditional practice and bandwagon with the USA; with the latter's might, it might be able to contain challenges to the status quo. Alternatively, the EU could, embarrassingly, accept the interventions of the outside powers as *faits accomplis* – though appeasement was never a viable solution. Finally, the EU could take a leap of faith at last and agree to act as a single entity, speaking with a single voice and implementing a single policy (either diplomatic or military) in times of crises.

<sup>39</sup> Mohamed Eljarh: “Analysis: Libyan Political Dialogue Forum Appoints New Government for Libya”, *Libya Desk*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.libyadesk.com/articles/libya-new-government-analysis>

<sup>40</sup> Antoine Got: “Turkey's Crisis with the West: How a New Low in Relations Risks Paralyzing NATO”, *War on the Rocks*, 19 November 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/turkeys-crisis-with-the-west-how-a-new-low-in-relations-risks-paralyzing-nato/>

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Past experience suggests that the first option is the most likely. However, choosing it would only further increase the EU's (growing) dependence on the USA and NATO in military terms, and reinforce the perception of the EU among its Southern Mediterranean neighbors as an impotent and divided entity.