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The role of the EU in the Libyan conflict since 2011

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Abstract

Since 2011, the EU role in the Libyan conflict has been characterized by an almost acritical faith in soft power, and in a strict adherence to the principles of UN political leadership and Libyan ownership. Unfortunately, soft power proved insufficient to stabilize Libya, the UN was too often paralyzed by veto-players, and the local ownership principle turned out to be a double-edged sword. Early EU failures magnified intra-EU divisions, making EU action even less consistent. This allowed external players to expand into Libya and ultimately overshadow the EU. The Union can invert the trend only by deciding to play a stronger political role.

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Introduction

Since 2011, when the regime of Mu'ammar Gaddafi, leader of the Libyan Jamahiriya since 1969, collapsed, Libya has been a focus for the European Union (EU). The anti-Gaddafi uprisings were fueled and won thanks largely to the initiative of European powers, mainly France and the UK. Thereafter, the EU offered to support the Libyan transition towards democracy. To date, the EU has invested €44.5 million in humanitarian assistance in Libya; it is contributing to 23 projects worth €70 million in bilateral support and has financed the Covid-19 response in Libya with €66 million. Additionally, €408 million have been mobilized under the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUETF) for Africa to help Libya cope with the migration challenge. The EU is also addressing security challenges in Libya through its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) to Libya, and two naval operations, European Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED) Sophia and Irini.²

This remarkable set of initiatives makes the EU the main promoter of the Libyan stabilization and democratization process. However, Libya was never stabilized. It has seen three civil wars in a decade, and currently has two competing governments. Over 800.000 people living in the country are in desperate need for humanitarian assistance.³ As a consequence of the Libyan crisis, Europe was exposed to a number of challenges and threats, including the expansion of the Islamic State (ISIS) in North Africa, a mere 180 miles from EU territory, an unprecedented migration crisis via the Central Mediterranean and the decrease in hydrocarbon imports from Libya due to sporadic drops in Libyan production. Additionally, the EU has progressively lost influence in the country to the benefit of external players largely hostile to the EU, such as Russia and Turkey.

This article assesses EU policies in Libya since 2011 and examines the causes of their shortfalls. These have been overwhelmingly attributed to divisions among the EU member states,⁴ – which undoubtedly played a part – yet there are further reasons for the EU's inadequate response to the Libyan crisis, including the limits of the EU's soft power, and the EU's decision to play a technical, rather than a leading political role in the management of the crisis.

The EU and the 2011 anti-Gaddafi uprisings

The February 2011 anti-Gaddafi uprisings broke out in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring escalating a crisis that soon turned into all-out civil war. On 20 February, the EU condemned the use of violence in Libya and called on Gaddafi to suspend his repression – an appeal that was ignored.⁵ Consequently, an EU Council declaration expressed moderate support for the rebel movement, welcoming the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) – a group of mutually-suspicious anti-Gaddafi figures – as a “political interlocutor”.⁶ It was a compromise between the interventionist policy of France and Britain which wanted the NTC to be proclaimed the “official” government of Libya, and the more cautious attitude of Italy and Germany.

² EEAS, “EU-Libya Relations”: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-libya-relations_en

³ European Civilian Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operation: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/africa/libya_en#ecl-inpage278-

⁴ S. Fabbrini, “The European Union and the Libya crisis,” *International Politics*, 2) 51), April 2014, p.185; N. Koenig, “The EU and the Libyan Crisis: In Quest of Coherence?”, *IAI*, 19) 11), July 2011, pp.11-10.

⁵ C. Ashton, “Declaration by the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on behalf of the European Union on events in Libya”, 20 February 2011: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/119397.pdf; J. Buzek, “On the Situation in Libya”, 21 February 2011: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/20%president/plen/press/press_release/-2011/2011February/press_release-2011-February28-.html

⁶ EU Council, “Extraordinary European Council, 11 March 2011, Declaration”: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/DOC_2_11

Such division in the EU impeded stronger EU action when the sanctions adopted by the Union failed to deter the Libyan leader. However, internal divisions cannot fully explain the EU's failure to enforce UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973, issued on 17 March 2011, which called for "all necessary means" to protect Libyan civilians. The real impediment to a leading role of the Union in the Libyan crisis lay in the perceived normative nature of the Union and its military unpreparedness. First, the prospect of sustaining and inflicting casualties, and especially of being involved in urban fighting, created anxiety in EU circles that the international media would accuse the Union of being engaged "in colonial warfare".⁷ Second, "The [EU] Security Committee had no operational options for a fast military intervention".⁸ The only EU military forces available were 3,000 men (from two EU Battle Groups) not intended for high-intensity fighting and with an autonomy of only 120 days.

Consequently, the military responsibility to enforce UNSCR 1973 fell to a coalition of the willing which launched four operations (one French, one British, one American and one Canadian) starting on 19 March 2011 with a broad range of participants, including Middle Eastern countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). NATO assumed command of the campaign on 31 March, unifying these operations into Operation Unified Protector (OUP). OUP lasted until the end of October 2011, when Gaddafi was killed and his regime collapsed. At that point, the EU eagerly offered its assistance to the Libyan people, backing their transition to democracy. NATO and others, viewed the EU as the perfect organization to do so, because the Union had "a variety of soft power tools which NATO lacks".⁹ Unfortunately, soft power proved insufficient to stabilize Libya, and the EU's inability to use hard power consistently and efficiently ultimately failed the Union in Libya.

The early transition years and limits of soft power

The EU approach

To understand the causes of the Union's shortfalls in Libya, we need to appreciate the context in which EU policies were developed and implemented from late 2011. In particular, the EU took two early decisions that marked its approach to Libya's stabilization to this very date. First, although the EU was ready to mobilize greater resources for Libya, the international forum charged with issuing political guidelines on the Libyan stabilization process was a UN ad hoc mission established in Tripoli (UN Support Mission to Libya, or UNSMIL). Second, any EU initiative would have to be requested by the Libyans according to the principle of local ownership. This was to channel the Libyan transition on a truly legitimate path and to amend the Western approach followed in Iraq in 2003, where rigid, top-down mechanisms failed badly. In other words, the EU would act in Libya essentially as a technical – not a political – player. These decisions hampered EU assistance and the Union's ability to be consistent and efficient in its initiatives.

The security challenge

After the 2011 conflict, Libya urgently needed to address the power vacuum and to ensure that the militias in the country did not "evolve into armed wings of political factions," but were "either merged into new, democratically accountable national security organizations or disarmed and demobilized".¹⁰ Accordingly, the EU was eager to launch a Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) initiative, followed by a Security Sector Reform (SSR). The

⁷ Interview with an EU official, EEAS, 2019/11/28.

⁸ Interview with an EU official, EEAS, 2019/07/25.

⁹ Interview with a NATO official, HQ, 2019/10/23.

¹⁰ International Stabilisation Response Team (ISRT), "Libya", 2011, p.27.

EU delegation, which moved to Tripoli in September 2011, also recommended a peacekeeping mission, given the high number of Libyan armed groups – about 30 in the capital alone.¹¹ However, while some factions – the Zawiya militiamen, for example – were ready to lay down their weapons, others – in particular Islamist militias – were not. Facing internal conflicts, the NTC could not issue a request for EU assistance on DDR/SSR. UNSMIL too did not push for it, prioritizing instead a new political process and new elections, reasoning that a truly national and legitimate authority would have greater power to establish and coordinate DDR/SSR mechanisms. UNSMIL reminded the EU that the Friends of Libya Group – the players in the anti-Gaddafi intervention – had agreed in April 2011 that the EU would be asked to undertake border management. The EU had not been present at that meeting, but decided to abide. The EU preferred not to press its case for a stronger DDR and SSR mechanism. The new Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan remembered: “[The Europeans] hesitated to advise massively on any matter. ... They didn’t want to appear to the Libyan people to be interfering or dictating anything”.¹²

And still, it took almost a year for an invitation from Zeidan for an EU border assistance mission to materialize. A secular reformist and human rights activist, Zeidan was challenged by a noisy minority of Islamists and hesitated to invite the mission for fear of being labelled a puppet of Europe. The EUBAM Libya mission was established in May 2013 to “support the Libyan authorities in improving and developing the security of the country’s borders” through advising and training.¹³ The mandate was left vague enough for the EU member states to be able to push the mission to do more. A EUBAM Libya official declared: “The member states came up with a catalogue like a Christmas tree: training, capacity building, everything”.¹⁴ This resulted from frustration in the member states at the “loss of autonomy” caused by the decisions made by the broader international community, and turned EUBAM Libya into “a mission that strangely tried to do everything” with insufficient resources.¹⁵ Moreover, by the time the mission was launched, the situation in Libya had changed for the worse. In the absence of a DDR/SSR mechanism supported by international professional forces, there were violent ethnic-based conflicts between Tebu, Tuareg and Arab groups in Fezzan. The whole region was declared “off limits to any kind of international mission”.¹⁶ As a result, EUBAM Libya never achieved the planned personnel of 165, and was repeatedly evacuated to neighboring countries when military escalations occurred.

Without a proper and internationally-supported mechanism in place, Libyan authorities were left alone in attempting DDR/SSR schemes. The government felt it necessary to offer militiamen a salary to keep a modicum of internal security until a new, national force could be created. Unsurprisingly, militiamen mushroomed, jumping from some 40,000 in 2012 to 250,000 two years later,¹⁷ and of course with less appetite for disarmament. Any Libyan government would from now on be hostage to the militias.

¹¹ Interview with a former EU official, Delegation to Libya, 2019/11/25.

¹² The New York Times, “In their own words: the Libya tragedy”, 28 February 2016: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/02/28/us/politics/libya-quotes.html?mtrref=www.google.it&gwh=B4DA9F484E59FBC74256916B052E908F&gwt=regi&assetType=REGIWALL>

¹³ CSDP, “EU Integrated Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM Libya)”, 2020: https://eeas.europa.eu/csdp-missions-operations/euam-iraq/89602/eubam-libya-european-union-border-assistance-mission-libya-civilian-mission_en;

¹⁴ Interview with EUBAM Libya officers, 2019/10/16.

¹⁵ IECEU, “Africa: Conclusion Report”, D26 ,3.7 June 2017, pp.20-18.

¹⁶ IECEU, “The Libya Review”, D13 ,3.4 February 2017, p.33.

¹⁷ R.Alaaldin, F.Saini Fasanotti, A.Varvelli, T.M. Yousef eds., *The Rise and Future of Militias in the MENA Region* (ISPI 2019), p.44.

Misinformed economic initiatives

The EU placed greater hope in its assistance to Libya's economy, assuming that "economic growth would lead to stabilization".¹⁸ However, the EU External Action Service (EEAS) misunderstood the roots of Libya's economic needs. Influenced, once more, by contradictory Libyan requests, the EU assumed that its economic programs should aim at diversifying the Libyan economy – which was about 90% dependent on the hydrocarbons industry – and at assisting those Libyans most affected by the war. A first EU aid package totaled €355 million.¹⁹

Assistance programs, however, were needed only in the short term. The longer term, called for economic institution building. Existing Libyan institutions "embedded inefficiency and corruption at the core of the Libyan economy".²⁰ Those institutions, such as the Libyan Central Bank (CBL), the National Oil Company (NOC), and the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA), were structured to buy off social segments, enjoyed virtually no political supervision and had previously been responsible only to Gaddafi. Now, Libyan transitional authorities had neither the force nor the competence to police their activities. With few exceptions, the Libyan leaders who emerged from the revolution were little educated and totally inexperienced. The impending risk in the post-Gaddafi economy was that national institutions could be penetrated by the supporters of the different brigades, making funds allocation by such institutions permanent channels of militia enrichment.

It took a couple of years for the EU to scratch the surface of that problem, but when the EU recommended reforms to economic institutions, they found that their Libyan counterparts were either uninterested (former Gaddafians in the NTC, in particular, had benefitted from the corrupt enrichment provided by the subsidies and opacity of the economic institutions, and had no reason to change that), or were scared that they might be attacked by militias. The EU could have provided protection and threatened sanctions on those individuals and entities violating the rule of law but it did none of this to avoid accusations of "a neo-colonial approach".²¹ Libyan armed groups therefore extracted subsidies from economic juggernauts with impunity, exacerbating Gaddafi-style exclusion policies and fueling militia competition for control of those institutions.

As for the EU assistance programs, they were handicapped by the limited Libyan absorption capacity. Under Gaddafi, Libyans drew a state salary that did not imply actual work but rather loyalty to the regime. Since salaries were not connected to any constructive output, "there was no incentive to create an even moderately functional government bureaucracy".²² For EU funding mechanisms, Libya was "like a plug without a socket".²³ This was aggravated by the inconsistencies and duplication of efforts in EU financial schemes. The result, acknowledged an EU official, was that "Libyans simply didn't know where to look to get the money for any given activity".²⁴ Overall, EU assistance programs, especially in the humanitarian field, had some positive impact but progress was "painfully slow".²⁵ The EU economic giant got bogged down in the Libyan sands.

¹⁸ M.G. Amadio Viceré, and A. Frontini, "Path to resilience: examining EU and NATO responses to the Tunisian and Egyptian political transitions", in E. Cusumano and H. Hofmaier eds., *Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p.257.

¹⁹ ENP, MEMO/338/12: "ENP Package – Libya", Brussels, 15 May 2012, pp.2-1; EEAS, "European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument Libya, Strategy paper & National Indicative Programme, 2013-2011", pp.21-16.

²⁰ J. Pack, "It's the Economy Stupid: How Libya's Civil War Is Rooted in Its Economic Structures", IAI, 19 (17)), September 2019, p.9.

²¹ Interview with a Libya practitioner and economic consultant, 2019/10/25.

²² M. Toaldo, "Libya: security, economic development and political reform", SiT, April 2016, p.5.

²³ Interview with an EU official, Delegation to Libya 2021/02/11.

²⁴ Interview with an EU official, Delegation to Libya, 2021/01/29.

²⁵ Interview with a former EU official, Delegation to Libya, 2019/11/25.

Appeasing the spoilers

By mid-2012, Libyan armed groups were able to trade their potential to cause political or economic disruption, for material benefits or political positions. Undeterred by the international community, some factions also began to compensate through military means for their relative political weakness as evidenced in the campaign for the July 2012 elections. An EU assessment team, which had been requested to monitor the elections, denounced “major violent episodes” during the electoral campaign.²⁶ The EU took no action. In part, this was because, overall, the electoral process was judged sufficiently democratic and inclusive, and that violent episodes did not prevent elections from taking place; in part, it was the consequence of a bias leading EU observers to deem the Libyan 2012 elections a success simply because Islamist forces suffered a severe defeat. Yet the lack of any international reaction to unilateral and disruptive initiatives during the electoral campaign was destined to encourage more of the same.

The following two years were characterized by a crescendo of political interference by armed groups. This included the storming of the Parliament in Tripoli by Islamist groups to impose a discriminatory law against any Libyan linked to the former regime, in April 2013; the setting up of a parallel authority by Cyrenaican federalists in May 2013; the kidnapping of Zeidan by Zawiya militiamen in October; and various armed incidents culminated in the infamous Gharghour incident in November of the same year, in which Misratan militias killed some forty-four civilians.

In none of these cases did the EU take firm action, although violations of the rule of law, crimes, and disruption of the democratic process were blatant. It is true that Zeidan did not request international intervention even after his kidnapping, but the EU had plenty of reasons that made action in defense of civilians, ethnic minorities, and democratic institutions legitimate. Although it is difficult to assert a counterfactual, there is much evidence that, had EU policy been firmer, most extremist groups would likely have played the democratic game by the rules. The EU could have threatened sanctions or other international legal prosecution against any individual who disrupted the democratic process in Libya. Had this been done against violence during the 2012 electoral campaign, subsequent Islamist aggression in Tripoli might have been averted.²⁷ The key was to convince armed players that there was, on the one hand, a greater likelihood for them to achieve their aims by playing by the rules than by not doing so, and on the other hand, that there were red lines that could not be crossed. But the EU preferred to step back with the argument that no action could be taken unless explicitly requested. EU officials repeated: “If you want democracy, you have to find your way to it”.²⁸ Unfortunately, the fact that political posts and legislation could be obtained at gunpoint undermined the trust of both the Libyan public and politicians in their new “democracy”.

The same appeasement path can be seen in the EU reaction to the 2014 crisis, which saw the formation of two competing governments in Libya, one based in Tripoli and the other in Al-Bayda, each supported by a parliament and a militia coalition. The confrontation escalated into all-out civil war between the predominantly eastern forces led by former Gaddafian General Khalifa Haftar and some Tripolitanian militias. In this context, the EU’s priority was “to assist the UN in its mediation efforts” towards a cessation of hostilities and the creation of a government of national unity.²⁹ Such an agreement was reached in December 2015 at Skhirat, Morocco. Under the terms of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), a Government of National Accord (GNA) was established, which was expected to be endorsed by the House of

²⁶ EU, “Election Assessment Team to Libya”, 2012: pp.11-17, 8.

²⁷ E. Badi, M. Eljarh and M. Farid, 2018: “At a Glance: Libya transformation 2018-2011. Power, legitimacy, and economy”, Democracy Reporting International 2018, p.39.

²⁸ Interview with an EU official, EEAS, 2019/10/04; and with a senior US diplomat, 2019/10/04.

²⁹ EEAS, “Libya, a Political Framework for a Crisis Approach”, 1 October 2014, p.1.

Representatives (HoR) – the eastern parliament, elected in 2014, which was recognized as the legitimate legislative authority. The EU strongly supported the agreement and claimed some success in bringing it about. Through joint statements and declarations, the EU pushed the warring parties into the UN-led dialogue, legitimized the HoR, while rejecting all attempts by the eastern Libya authorities to establish independent economic institutions in Cyrenaica.³⁰ It seemed a classic and positive manifestation of a “Normative Power Europe”.

However, the main fault of the Skhirat agreement was the absence of a monitoring and enforcing mechanism. EU reports and international observers stressed that such a mechanism, possibly inclusive of a peacekeeping force to guarantee the safety of key government facilities and re-launch DDR and SSR initiatives, was badly needed. Without it, the UN would be unable to arbitrate the implementation of the LPA.³¹ Accordingly, a Libyan International Assistance Mission (LIAM) was planned in late 2015, providing for a 6,000-strong international force from the UK, Germany, France, and Italy to be deployed in Tripoli under Italian command and upon GNA request.³²

Such a request never came. Some Libyan militias, both in Tripoli and in the east, saw the prospect of an international monitoring force as smoke in their eyes, as they feared losing their leverage. The lack of a unanimous agreement among Libyans raised the stakes of a potential EU deployment and the same anxieties that had discouraged a military intervention in 2011 resurfaced. Of course, the EU withdrawal left the GNA hostage to a group of Tripoli militias, later known as the Tripoli Cartel. These armed groups extorted millions of dollars through intimidation and violence, and their influence over government institutions and policy became the new status quo.³³ At the same time, Haftar, in alliance with the HoR chairman, Aguila Saleh Issa, managed to deny the GNA’s endorsement of the HoR as the legitimate government in the east, thus crystallizing the political partition of the country.

Eventually, the EU adopted sanctions on Libyan figures that obstructed the implementation of the LPA: Saleh, Khalifa Ghwell and Nuri Abu Sahmain (the latter two being a former Prime Minister and the President of the previous Tripoli parliament, respectively).³⁴ The limited number of people sanctioned is striking. By comparison, the EU adopted sanctions against “19 persons and 9 entities involved in action against Ukraine’s territorial integrity” in the same period.³⁵ Worse still, the main offender of the LPA, Haftar, was not included. In part, this originated in the ties Haftar was building with France, but it is also a consequence of the EU’s conviction that “dialogue is more efficient than sanctions”, because the latter can limit EU leverage.³⁶ A senior EU diplomat observed: “Libyan warlords were not bandits. They were political players, and their units were usually embedded into Libya’s social fabric”.³⁷ It was half true. Some Libyan warlords were in fact little more than bandits – or even worse than that. But distinguishing between those Libyans who played by the democratic rules and those who

³⁰ M. Toaldo, “March to Folly 2.0: The Next Western Military Intervention in Libya”, ECFR, 2 February 2016, pp.7-6.

³¹ EEAS, “Libya, a Political Framework for a Crisis Approach”, 1 October 2014, pp.28-27; L. Sizer, “Rewriting Libya’s Post-Revolution Narrative”, Atlantic Council, 16 December 2014: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/rewriting-libya-s-post-revolution-narrative/>

³² EU Commission, “EU Commission implementing decision of 28.11.2016 on the Annual Action Programme 2016 part 2 in favour of Libya to be financed from the general budget of the European Union”, 28 November 2016, p.3.

³³ See W. Lacher, A. Al-Idrissi, “Capital of Militias. Tripoli’s Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State”, SmallArms Survey, June 2018.

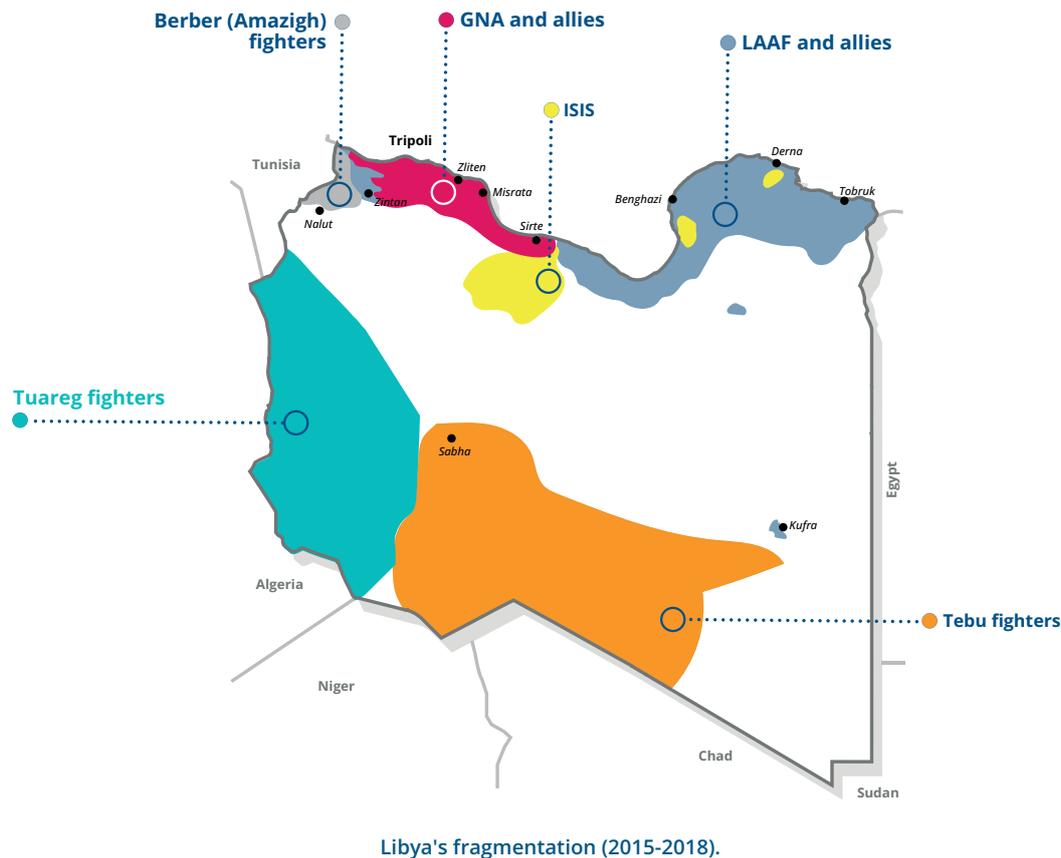
³⁴ EU Council, “Libya: EU adds 3 people to sanctions list”, 1 April 2016: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/01/04/2016/libya-sanction-3-new-people/>

³⁵ K. Ivashchenko-Stadnik, R. Petrov, L. Raineri, P. Rieker, A. Russo and F. Strazzari, “How the EU is facing crises in its neighbourhood. Evidence from Libya and Ukraine”, EUNPACK, 31 March 2017, pp.26-25.

³⁶ P. Rieker, “EU performance as a regional security actor. Comparing ENP to NATO’s MENA policy”, in I Peters ed., *The European Union’s Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective. Beyond the “actorness and power” debate* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), pp.132-131.

³⁷ Interview with an EU diplomat, 2019/10/30.

did not, meant taking a political stance which ran against the Union's initial approach. Thus, the EU ended up appeasing Libyan factions interested in maintaining a zero-sum game from which they were profiting, while most Libyans suffered.



The EU after Skhirat: distracted and divided

Deputizing security

The continued instability in Libya, which was coupled by new daunting challenges from the wider region, including the spread of ISIS and an unprecedented migration crisis across the Mediterranean³⁸ led to a recalibration of EU efforts in Libya from state-building initiatives to containment policies. In the words of an EU official, "It was high time to stop this farce [to promote Libyan stabilization] and the only thing we could actually do was to contain the threat ... and [henceforth we focused] not so much on the crisis itself, which is complex and multidimensional, but on the repercussions that this crisis has in Europe, namely in terms of terrorism and migration".³⁹ This produced three results: First, the EU largely outsourced its own security to Libyan actors. Second, EU members tended to promote their own agendas, because EU collective policies had evidently failed. Third, reduced EU engagement allowed the expansion into Libya of other geopolitical players hostile to the EU.

³⁸ Some 324,000 migrants crossed from Libya to Italy between 2014 and 2015: UNHCR, "Central Mediterranean Route Situation", March 2018: <https://www.unhcr.org/5aa78775c.pdf>

³⁹ K. Ivashchenko-Stadnik, et. al, "How the EU is facing crises in its neighborhood", cit., pp.32-29.

In the fight against ISIS, which had expanded into Libya in 2014 and had a hotbed in Sirte, the EU limited itself to supporting an Italian-sponsored strategy; it envisaged a joint operation by Tripolitanian and Cyrenaican militias against a common jihadi enemy as a preliminary step to reunifying Libyan armed forces. But although both Tripolitanian militias and Haftar's army vocally supported the operation, they refused to form a single coalition. The campaign thus evolved into a two-pronged endeavor entrusted to Libya's strongest militia coalitions, both using the fight on terrorism to lobby foreign support, until ISIS was expelled from Sirte in December 2016. The limited EU input thus favored Libya's "stable instability"⁴⁰ and division along competing blocs.

Migration management was a greater challenge; it created both humanitarian concerns and anxieties that massive migration might destabilize EU states politically. The main EU tool to address the crisis was Operation EUNAVFOR MED Sophia, launched in the summer of 2015 with a 4-phase mandate combining the need to "prevent further loss of life at sea"⁴¹ with the disruption of human smuggling networks. This needed to operate on both the high seas and in Libya's territorial waters and onshore. But the GNA denied consent for this latter activity, thus impeding the operation from moving beyond phase 2. By 2016 the sophisticated and lucrative business of human trafficking had become deeply embedded in, and critical to, the Libyan economy, but also to the family systems of some countries in the Sahel region. EU officers realized that it was not uncommon for smugglers to enjoy the support of local communities.⁴²

In June 2016, the EU Council reinforced Sophia's mandate with the two tasks of training the Libyan Coast Guard and contributing to the UN arms embargo on the high seas off the coast of Libya.⁴³ Training the Libyan Coast Guard was supposed to provide the GNA with an efficient force capable of doing the job that Tripoli was not happy to entrust to EU ships – operating in Libyan waters and onshore.⁴⁴ Yet results were slow, largely because of insufficient resources. By early 2017 only 89 coastguards had been trained and they lacked the strength to take on "heavily armed smugglers".⁴⁵ At the same time, a UN 2016 report found that both migrants and NGO staff had "recounted dangerous, life-threatening interceptions by armed men believed to be from the Libyan Coast Guard".⁴⁶ This stimulated intense debate regarding the reliability of the Libyan units, despite the efforts made by the Libyan and EU authorities to abide by the highest possible selection criteria. A leaked 2016 report from Frontex also revealed that "some members of Libya's local authorities are involved in smuggling activities".⁴⁷

The Sophia operation had saved some 49,000 migrants and had harassed smugglers' activities on the high seas. The EU considered it a success,⁴⁸ but in fact Sophia had failed to dismantle

⁴⁰ Interview with an EU official, EEAS, 2019/11/28.

⁴¹ EU Council, "Special meeting of the European Council, 23 April 2015 – Statement: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/-23/04/2015special-euco-statement/>

⁴² Interview with EU official, 5 February 2018.

⁴³ EU Council, "EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia: Mandate Extended by One Year, Two New Tasks Added", 20 June 2016: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/20/06/2016/fac-eunavfor-med-sophia/?utm_source=dsms-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EUNAVFOR20%20MED20%20Operation20%20Sophia3%A20%20mandate20%20extended20%20by20%20one20%20year2%C2%20two20%20new20%20tasks20%20added

⁴⁴ EEAS Strategic Review on EUBAM Libya, EUNAVFOR MED Op Sophia & EU Liaison and Planning Cell, 15 May 2017, p.32.

⁴⁵ Interview to an EU high-ranking officer, Op. Sophia, 16 June 2017.

⁴⁶ UNSMIL, "Detained and Dehumanised'. Report on human rights abuses against migrants in Libya", 13 December 2016, p.1.

⁴⁷ Z. Campbell, "New evidence undermines EU report Tying refugee rescue group to smugglers," The Intercept, 2 April 2017:<https://theintercept.com/02/04/2017/new-evidence-undermines-eu-report-tying-refugee-rescue-group-to-smugglers>

⁴⁸ EEAS Strategic Review on EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia, EUBAM Libya & EU Liaison and Planning Cell, 27 July 2019, pp.31 ,5.

the smuggling networks and failed to deter smugglers: migration into Europe increased by 18 percent in 2016, and by another 19 percent in the first six months of 2017 compared to 2016.⁴⁹ Eventually, the operation was practically brought to a halt when Italy – after repeated, ignored appeals to its EU partners for alternating the ports where rescued migrants were disembarked – withdrew its naval assets in March 2019.

Competing agendas among the member states

Sophia's failures spurred independent actions by individual EU member states. From summer 2017 Italy, the country most affected by migration from Libya, began to make arrangements with Tripoli-based militias, tribes, and local authorities to cut migration flows. The other EU countries de facto approved this approach "as a political and practical necessity to assert control over Europe's external borders".⁵⁰ This policy did produce a steady drop in sea crossings from Tripolitania (the main launching area for migrants): 80 percent in one year and almost 98 percent by 2019.⁵¹ But by adapting to a fragmented Libyan political context, Rome also accommodated it, and even legitimized some armed groups suspected of being themselves involved in the human smuggling business, such as the Al-Ammu and Brigade 48 groups in Sabratha.

The EU also suffered reputational damage; migrants intercepted and stopped in Libya, as well as those rescued and brought back by the Libyan Coast Guard, ended up in overcrowded detention centers where they suffered inhuman conditions and well documented abuses.⁵² An increasing number of Libyans accused the Union of "trying to dump the dirty job to us" and of violating its stated "universal values", while a Libyan ambassador to the EU warned, "Libya needs to be stabilized, not isolated".⁵³

Belatedly, the EU mobilized €408 million under the EUTF for Africa to protect migrants and internally displaced people in Libya and to support local communities to cope with the migration challenge.⁵⁴ This initiative, like the Nicosia Initiative launched in 2017 to foster municipality-based intra-Libyan dialogue and development,⁵⁵ was hampered by the prolonged instability and continued low-intensity intra-militia clashes. In September 2018, the EU Commission found that, out of a Libyan population of about 6.5 million people, 1.1 million were still in desperate need of humanitarian aid.⁵⁶ Three months later, the Commission stated that Libya was "close to being considered a failed state". Inflation was "at its highest since the conflict started in 2011 and hit a record high of 28.5 percent during the first half of 2017, up from 25.9 percent in 2016, driven by acute shortages of basic commodities and speculation in the expanding black market".⁵⁷

The partial EU withdrawal also promoted greater influence of external players. The geopolitical confrontation between Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and the UAE and Egypt on the other, led both camps to arm those Libyan factions ideologically closest to them – Qatar and

⁴⁹ S. Marcuzzi, "NATO-EU maritime cooperation: for what strategic effect?", NCD Policy Brief 2018 ,7, p.3.

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch 2019, "No escape from Hell. EU policies contribute to abuse of migrants in Libya", 2019 Report, p.22.

⁵¹ Ministero dell'Interno 2019: "Sbarchi e accoglienza dei migranti: tutti i dati": <http://www.interno.gov.it/it/sala-stampa/dati-e-statistiche/sbarchi-e-accoglienza-dei-migranti-tutti-i-dati>.

⁵² Human Rights Watch 2019, "No escape from Hell", cit.

⁵³ Interview with a Libyan analyst, 2019/09/25; and with a former Libyan ambassador to the EU, 2020/05/28.

⁵⁴ EEAS, "EU-Libya Relations", cit.

⁵⁵ European Committee of the Regions (COR) 2019: "Memo: Results obtained through the Nicosia Initiative 25 ",2018-2017 July 2019.

⁵⁶ EU Commission facts & figures, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2018: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/aggregator/categories/2_en

⁵⁷ EU Commission, "EU Commission implementing decision of 10.12.2018 on the special measure in favor of Libya for 10 ",2018 December 2018, p.5.; and *ivi.*, Annex 2, p.5.

Turkey supported the GNA, the UAE and Egypt supported Haftar. The latter received substantial aid from Russia as well, in the shape of billions of Russian-printed Libyan dinars and a sophisticated information campaign orchestrated by various Russian propaganda outlets. By 2019, more than 1,000 Kremlin-linked Wagner mercenaries were also fighting on Haftar's side.⁵⁸

Thus, the new containment-inspired EU course only made things worse for both the EU and Libya. Needless to say, the growing "nationalization" of EU policy in Libya aggravated the progressive loss of EU leverage. Italy, for example, exploited its new network in Tripolitania to advance its own interests in the fields of energy, construction, communication and in the finance sector.⁵⁹ This led Rome into direct competition with Paris, which was the first EU player to support, both politically and materially, Haftar. The French priority was to find a Libyan ally with a military force strong enough to try to bring order and stability over the plethora of Libyan militias. Such French policy was diametrically opposed to the stated EU aim to strengthen the UN-recognized Tripoli government: it favored an aspiring autocrat responsible for despotic actions and alleged human rights violations, public executions and war crimes.⁶⁰

The degree of EU paralysis caused by French unilateral initiatives was revealed when Haftar launched a major attack on Tripoli on 4 April 2019, igniting a third Libyan civil war. On the heels of this blatant violation of the LPA, some Libyan observers asked the EU to "force" Haftar "to accept an immediate ceasefire to stave off the prospect of civil war".⁶¹ By protecting Tripoli, the Europeans would also have been able to exert unprecedented leverage on the GNA, and could have pushed it "to implement the stalled economic reform program"⁶² and other initiatives – such as the improvement of migrant detention centers, or the signing of international conventions on human rights, over which Libyan authorities had always glossed. But France blocked an EU condemnation of Haftar's actions. In a context where the UNSC was also paralyzed by Haftar's allies (France and Russia), the EU institutions preferred not to embark on a nerve-racking political battle to push EU member states to protect the UN-recognized Tripoli government. EU foreign policy, which had been dictated on the migration issue by a self-interested state – Italy – was now hijacked by France on the Tripoli affair. By failing to act in the 2019 crisis, the Union left what an EU diplomat called a "cosmic vacuum" in the Libyan dossier. It dissipated the little leverage the EU still enjoyed in Libya.⁶³

⁵⁸ F. Wehrey, "This War is Out of Our Hands: The Internationalization of Libya's Post2011- Conflicts From Proxies to Boots on the Ground", *International Security*, 14 September 2020, p.22; S. Raghavan, "Arrival of Russian mercenaries adds deadlier firepower, modern tactics to Libya's civil war", *The Washington Post*, 6 November 2019: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arrival-of-russian-mercenaries-adds-deadlier-firepower-modern-tactics-to-libyas-civil-war/05/11/2019/f330820c-fa11-03e-9534-9e0dbcc9f5683_story.html

⁵⁹ A. Liga, "Playing with molecules: The Italian approach to Libya", *Études d'Ifri*, April 2018, pp.41-34.

⁶⁰ A. El Gomati, "Libya's Political Culture Wars", *Sadeq Institute*, 16 November 2020, p.27.

⁶¹ T. Megerisi, "The march of Haftar: Why Europeans should stand in the way of the Libyan National Army", *ECRF*, 5 April 2019: https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_march_of_haftar_why_europeans_should_stand_in_the_way_of_the/

⁶² J. Pack, "Kingdom of Militias. Libya's Second War of Post-Qadhafi Succession", *ISPI*, 31 May 2019, p.30.

⁶³ G. Baczynska and F. Guarascio, "France blocks EU call to stop Haftar's offensive in Libya", *Reuters*, 10 April 2019: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-eu-tajani-idUSKCN1RM1DO>; ICG, "Stopping the War for Tripoli", 23 May 2019: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/b-069stopping-war-tripoli>

The Berlin Process: a reunited agenda – for failure

The arms embargo joke

On 27 November 2019 the GNA signed two agreements with Turkey, under which the GNA agreed on a partition of maritime boundaries between Tripoli and Ankara that granted Turkey exploration and drilling rights to offshore hydrocarbon resources, in exchange for Turkish military support in Tripoli. This provoked a chorus of objection from most EU capitals,⁶⁴ preoccupied that Ankara might dominate the Eastern Mediterranean from Smyrna to Misrata. The uncomfortable truth was that Turkey was filling the vacuum left by the EU.

Hoping to regain the initiative, the EU organized an international summit in Berlin in January 2020 involving all powers interested in Libya. Expectations were high in the Union. For the first time in recent years, EU capitals seemed ready to speak with one voice on Libya. In Brussels the key role of Germany was seen as both a conduit to bridge Italo-French differences, and as a sign that the EU might enjoy fresh diplomatic leadership. Germany had a limited record in Libya, and could be considered neutral by all the parties.⁶⁵

The Berlin Conference did not address the militarized crisis in Libya directly. It did not even involve the Libyan players, leaving the responsibility to promote a political reconciliation to UNSMIL. Instead, the EU tried to convince the external powers involved in Libya to find a diplomatic solution among themselves and stop fueling the conflict.⁶⁶ The Berlin communiqué bound all participants to “unequivocally and fully respect and implement the arms embargo”, and “refrain from any activities exacerbating the conflict ... including the financing of military capabilities or the recruitment of mercenaries”.⁶⁷ The problem lay once more in the lack of a monitoring and enforcing mechanism for the agreement. Somewhat unsurprisingly, a UN report in late January 2020 declared that “several” countries that had participated at Berlin were not fulfilling their commitments, and that arms shipments continued.⁶⁸ It was clear that, in the words of UNSMIL’s head Ghassan Salamé, “Without a robust enforcement mechanism, the arms embargo into Libya will become a cynical joke”.⁶⁹ To meet this problem, the EU launched a new naval operation, EUNAVFOR MED Irini. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell promised, “This operation will be essential and a clear contribution to promoting peace in our immediate neighborhood”.⁷⁰ But the operation suffered from having only four ships and six air assets, as well as other operational constraints and a strategic problem linked to its mandate.

⁶⁴ P. Wintour, “Greece expels Libyan ambassador in row over maritime boundaries”, *The Guardian*, 6 December 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/06/greece-expels-libyan-ambassador-row-maritime-boundaries>

⁶⁵ Interview with a former EU official, 2019/22/25; and with a German policy analyst, 2020/03/30.

⁶⁶ The inclusiveness of the Berlin conference was somewhat hampered even vis à vis external players: Tunisia, which was directly impacted by the Libyan crisis, was only invited two days before the conference. Algeria was also invited just one week prior to the conference. Tunisia ultimately declined while Algeria accepted: Republic of Tunisia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs communique, “Tunisia turns down invitation to participate in Berlin conference on Libya”: https://www.diplomatie.gov.tn/en/mission/press/news/detail/etranger/mission-permanente-de-tunisie-aupres-des-nations-unies-a-new-york-etats-unis/?tx_news_pi15%Bnews5%D=1714&cHash=9ad44320f4e6e0ded3d0c372b93a5af2

⁶⁷ Bundesregierung Pressemitteilung, “The Berlin Conference on Libya. Conference Conclusions”, 19 January 2020, pp.4-3.

⁶⁸ Deutsche Welle, “Several countries violated Libya arms embargo since Berlin summit: UN”, 26 January 2020: <https://www.dw.com/en/several-countries-violated-libya-arms-embargo-since-berlin-summit-un/a52152283->

⁶⁹ UNSMIL, “Remarks of SRSG Ghassan Salamé to the United Nations Security Council on the situation in Libya”, 21 May 2019: <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/remarks-srsg-ghassan-salam%C3%A9-united-nations-security-council-situation-libya1->

⁷⁰ Op. Irini, “About Us”: <https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/>

Irini was mandated to carry out inspections of vessels at sea suspected of carrying arms or related material in accordance with UNSCR 2292 which was based on the concept of “compliant boarding”, meaning that the flag state has to consent to EU inspection.⁷¹ This was in stark contrast to previous coercive embargos employed against Iraq in 1991 and Yugoslavia in 1992. The consent rule was adopted following a joint request from Russia and China, and EU military sources saw it as an attempt to tie their hands.⁷² But not for a moment did the EU consider a mandate disconnected from a UNSC resolution, which would have required the Union to take an autonomous political role.⁷³ The EU conceived Irini as yet another technical tool, and in so doing deprived the operation of most of its enforcement potential before it was launched. As a result, a mere 9 ships were inspected in one year, with just one cargo of war-related material seized.⁷⁴ In some cases, Turkish naval units escorted Turkish cargos suspected of transporting weapons to Libya and threatened to open fire on European vessels – at which point the latter withdrew. Irini issued detailed reports to an ad hoc UN Panel of Experts, but the UN – again due to Russian veto – never established a naming-and-shaming mechanism with clear legislation about imposing penalties on embargo violators.⁷⁵

A Turkish-orchestrated counteroffensive that the GNA launched against Haftar in late spring 2020 demonstrated Irini’s failure. The attack was supported by Turkish artillery and aerial assets, and spearheaded by thousands of Syrian mercenaries shipped to Tripoli. Haftar’s men were routed and withdrew to the Jufra-Sirte axis. In August, both Libyan sides agreed on a ceasefire. The EU had practically no role in that: “The ceasefire was an imposition of the countries backing the fighting coalitions, above all the Turks, the Russians and the Egyptians”, recorded a Libyan source.⁷⁶ EU officials admitted as much: “The August ceasefire was the recognition that the country is split in two: we have a significant Russian influence in one area, and a strong Turkish influence in the other”.⁷⁷

⁷¹ R. McLaughlin, “Authorization for maritime law enforcement operations”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 2016 ,(2) 98, p.476.

⁷² Interview with an Italian admiral, 2020/12/18.

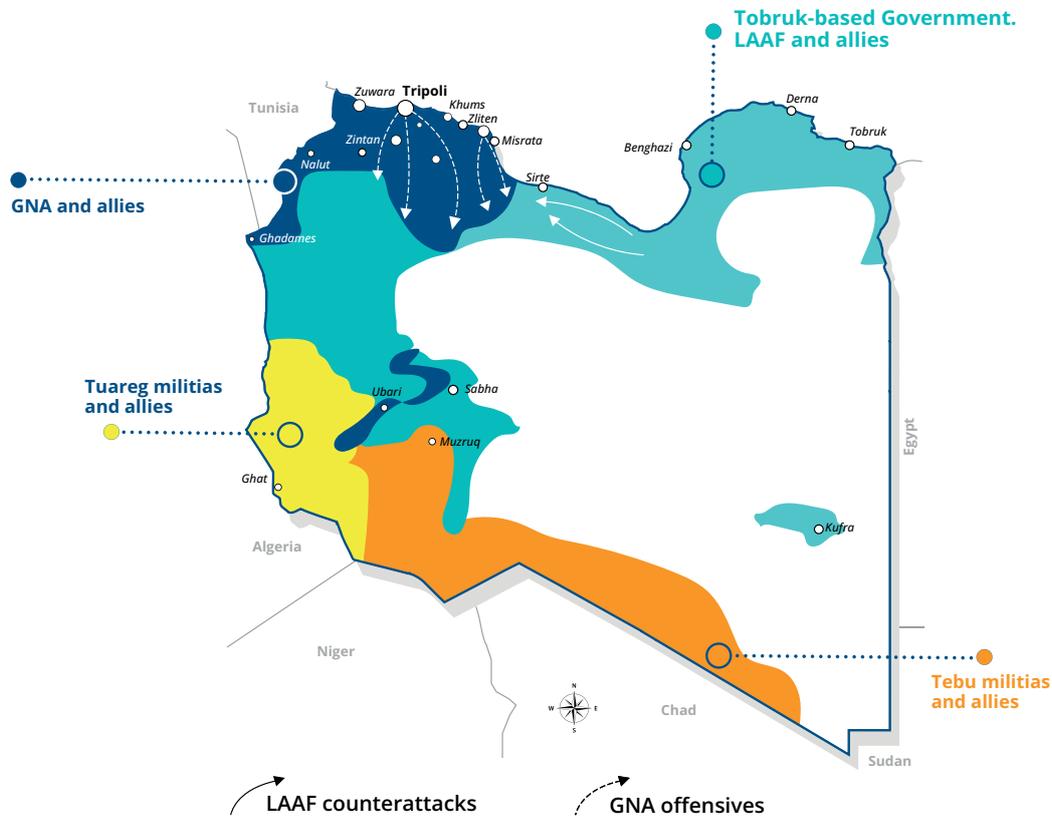
⁷³ Interview with an EU official, Delegation to Libya, 2021/01/29.

⁷⁴ Op. Irini, “Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Sigonella Naval Air Station Airport”, 19 March 2021”: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/95365/operation-irini-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-sigonella-naval-air_en

⁷⁵ R. Soyulu, “Drama in the Med: Greek navy tries to stop cargo ship accompanied by Turkish frigates”, ¹⁰ June 2020: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/greece-turkey-libya-navy-cargo-ship-standoff>; S. Marcuzzi, “Libya needs European boots on the ground”, *Carnegie Europe*, 5 May 2020: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/81716>

⁷⁶ Interview with a Libyan analyst, 2021/02/08.

⁷⁷ Interview with an EU official, Delegation to Libya, 2021/02/11.



MILITARY SITUATION MAP OF LIBYA - 10 MAY 2021
The GNA counteroffensive, spring 2020.

The EU sidelined

The EU inability to use hard power to support diplomacy was confirmed in the following period. Some commentators urged the EU to take the lead in a broader multinational initiative for a joint peacekeeping mission, inclusive of Muslim countries, to prevent further escalations.⁷⁸ A highly qualified international force might have driven a wedge between the hawks in both Libyan camps and the rest of the population who had had to live with the war, and suffered from it, but had not sought it. Such a force could have promoted channels of communication between the sides and could also have decreased the leverage that external patrons had on Libyan proxies. EU authorities did start planning such a mission, but the project was sunk by the usual problems in EU's management of the Libyan crisis – the lack of a unanimous invitation by Libyan players, and the lack of a UN request, due to Russian veto.⁷⁹

An EU official commented, “We suspected very much that Russian and Turkish influence had an impact [on the Libyan refusal to invite the mission], because neither those powers nor their proxies had any real interest in an international mission monitoring what was going

⁷⁸ Among others, see N. Tocci, “Europe needs boots on the ground in Libya”, POLITICO, 10 February 2020: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-libya-strategy-boots-on-the-ground/>; T. Megerisi, “It’s Turkey’s Libya now”, ECFR, 20 May 2020: https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_its_turkeys_libya_now/

⁷⁹ J. Barigazzi, “EU draws up options for boots on the ground in Libya”, POLITICO, 1 October 2020: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-libya-military-options-ceasefire/>

on”.⁸⁰ Instead of battling to build consensus for a multilateral mission, the EU institutions limited themselves to calling for new Libyan elections. As a result, both Turkey and Russia strengthened their grip on their areas of influence. In late summer 2020, Ankara obtained a

presence at the Misrata naval base and the Al-Watiya air base. Commercial and infrastructure agreements were reportedly discussed in meetings between GNA and Turkish representatives. Turkish programs were also initiated to demobilize Tripolitanian militias and fuse them into new, more centralized units organized and financed by Ankara.⁸¹ At the same time, Russia expanded its military presence in Cyrenaica, including by shipping 14 MiG-29 and Su-24 aircraft. It secured further infrastructure contracts, and consolidated its influence through soft power initiatives such as the provision of Russian Covid vaccine.⁸²

Of course, Turkish and Russian encroachment diminished any prospect of a unifying electoral process. A Government of National Unity (GNU) was established in March 2021 under Abdul Hamid Dbeibah with the mandate to organize new elections by 24 December 2021. The EU endorsed the new Libyan course at a second Berlin summit in June 2021, which this time involved the GNU itself.⁸³ But the lack of any monitoring and enforcing mechanism, and the presence of thousands of foreign mercenaries, discouraged any Libyan demobilization process and increased mutual suspicion in both Libyan camps. Disruptive actions of players interested in a zero-sum game, including Haftar and some Tripoli militias contributed to the GNU failure to meet the electoral deadline.⁸⁴

With elections postponed, the HoR appointed Fathi Bashagha, former GNA Interior Minister, as the new Libyan Prime Minister in February 2022, arguing that Dbeibah’s mandate had expired. But Dbeibah maintained that he would relinquish power only to an elected authority, and refused to leave. Libya is therefore back to a bipolar order, with militias in the capital bargaining their support to competing Prime ministers. Minor clashes occurred between militias in Tripoli on 4 April and 17 May 2022, and Haftar supporters closed the main Libyan oilfield on 18 April for three weeks. Although both competing Prime Ministers are Misratan businessmen linked to Turkey, Bashagha has recently established stronger ties with Saleh and Haftar, and has been recognized by Moscow as the legitimate leader of Libya. The oil stoppage orchestrated by Haftar can therefore be seen as a means to force Dbeibah’s hand.⁸⁵

The EU remains practically silent. It offered to monitor future elections in Libya, but that has been declined by Dbeibah. As the prospect of Libyan elections becomes increasingly remote, a vocal call for elections seems to be the only EU policy at the moment – “It is not crucial when. All we ask is that the future Libyan authority be elected, sooner or later”.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Interview with an EU official, Delegation to Libya, 2021/02/11.

⁸¹ C. Bertolotti, *Libia in transizione Guerra per procura, interessi divergenti, traffici illegali* (Lugano, START InSight, 2021), pp.24-18. Libyan sources confirmed this: interviews made on 2020/12/02 and 2020/09/15.

⁸² J. Pack and W. Puszta, “Turning the Tide. How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli”, Middle East Institute, November 2020, p.14; Al Jazeera, “First drop of rain: Libya receives Russia’s Sputnik vaccine”, 4 April 2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/4/4/2021/first-drop-of-rain-libya-receives-covid-vaccine-delivery>

⁸³ UNSMIL, “The Second Berlin Conference, 23 June 2021. Conference Conclusions”: https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2021_berlin_2_conclusions_final_-_eng.pdf

⁸⁴ Interview with a Libyan analyst, 2019/09/25.

⁸⁵ Energy Connects, “Libya Closes Biggest Oil Field and Warns of More Shutdowns”, 18 April 2022: <https://www.energyconnects.com/news/oil-and-gas/2022/april/libya-closes-biggest-oil-field-and-warns-of-more-shutdowns/>; Crisis24, “Libya: Clashes reported near Libyan Passport Authority in central Tripoli late April 4”, 4 April 2022: <https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/04/2022/libya-clashes-reported-near-libyan-passport-authority-in-central-tripoli-late-april4->; K. Semenov, “Russia voices support for new Libyan PM”, Al Monitor, 17 February 2022: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/02/2022/russia-voices-support-new-libyan-pm>

⁸⁶ Interview with an EU official, Delegation to Libya, 2022/04/19.

Conclusions: the case for a stronger EU political role in Libya

The EU's role in Libya since 2011 has been characterized by an almost acritical faith in soft power and by a dependence on UN guidance and the local ownership principle. Unfortunately, all these proved problematic. Soft power turned out to be simply inappropriate to stabilize a war-torn society awash with weapons and competing armed groups. The UN was frequently paralyzed by states hostile to the EU, which exploited their veto to disempower EU initiatives. And the local ownership principle was itself weaponized by some Libyan actors to maintain a zero-sum game.

The prolonged Libyan instability multiplied the challenges for the EU, with the result that the Union increasingly focused on the symptoms of the crisis rather than the crisis itself. Insufficient organizational response to Libya's needs also magnified incoherence among the EU members, and led to a progressive loss of EU influence in Libya – something the Union cannot afford, especially in the light of the need for reliable sources of energy necessitated by the war in Ukraine. The recent oil blockage and the risk of yet another armed escalation in Libya expose both the local population and the EU interests to serious risks and the EU's room for maneuver is shrinking. The Union can invert the trend only by playing a stronger political role in Libya. It must use its influence vis à vis regional and global powers to impose the deployment of a multilateral peacekeeping mission in the debate on Libya's stabilization, especially if further armed escalations occur.

Of course, such an option is likely to be rejected by some Libyan stakeholders, even if Muslim countries and/or neutral countries are included. Militia leaders in Libya are very sensitive to the risk of losing their hegemony. But this is precisely why the option should be expressed. If Libyan armed groups suspect that another militarized crisis would provoke the deployment of a peacekeeping or peace-enforcing mission, they may feel deterred from escalating the current tensions. At the same time, the EU can use its "power to legitimize" to foster a democratic political process, starting with parliamentary, and later presidential elections. Finally, the EU should take a firm stance against any further blockage of the Libyan hydrocarbon industry. Unless some real measures against spoilers of the political process are set, the future of Libya will be left in the hands of armed groups, foreign mercenaries or external powers interested in sustaining the current fragmentation.

Disclaimer: *The information and views set out in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or its Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean.*

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