

Italy Needs to Accept the Changing Reality in Libya to Protect Its Energy Interests

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In Rome, it is being argued that Italy is in a weak position in Libya, especially as the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar are in the midst of liberating the capital city of Tripoli from the UN-recognized Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Government of National Accord (GNA). This was first seen with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte being excluded from the Summit of Four (United Kingdom, France, Turkey and Germany) who met in London earlier this month to talk about Libya, a former colony of Italy, on the sidelines of the NATO summit. It cannot be denied that both France and Turkey are significantly stronger on the international scene than Italy. They have much greater international clout and influence because they are willing to use military force to support their interests, which is arranged along the same conflicting lines of the early twentieth century, the era of colonialism.

Despite Italy having a respectable military, the political class has been unwilling to use its military outside multilateral frameworks, such as NATO, which prevents Italy from defining an autonomous line of action. Given the size of the stakes, with Libya just lying to the south of Italy and the source of mass refugees entering the European country, it is difficult for Rome to not get involved.

After announcing a greater Italian military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean to Parliament on November 28 to protect their corporate interests in exploiting Cypriot resources, the Italian Navy dispatched the new Fremm class frigate, a ship capable of firing even a hundred kilometers away, to Cypriot waters that are claimed by Turkey. The Italian ship participated in some exercises just as the Turkish pressure against Cyprus was intensifying, close to where Italian oil and gas company Eni is active, along with France's Total.

Although Italy is showing its naval prowess in Cypriot waters in defiance of Turkish aggression, the situation is completely different in Libya as Rome has been on the side of the GNA, following the actions of the Obama administration and Turkey. The French however support General Haftar, who is also supported by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and most recently Greece, along with volunteers from the Russian private military company Wagner.

Italy has not changed alignment even after neighboring and fellow EU-NATO member Greece began backing Haftar, remaining anchored to the Turkish-backed government due to the conditioning of some converging energy and security interests – essentially oil and control of illegal migratory flows. Despite Rome having several hundred of their soldiers deployed in Misrata, a Turkish-majority city, the units sent from Rome remained inert even when the LNA repeatedly bombed targets close to the Italian contingent. The internationally

recognized Libyan President Fayez al-Sarraj, an ethnic Turk himself like much of the upper echelons of the GNA, therefore understood that he could not count on Italian protection. Sarraj naturally turned to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with which agreements were reached in recent days concerning the delimitation of their illegal respective exclusive economic zones and cooperation in the field of defense.

With Turkish drones, advisers and special forces arriving in Libya, Italy has limited itself to intensifying aerial reconnaissance over the waters in front of Misrata. This asymmetry of determination seems to diplomatically weaken the Italian position. Sarraj believes, probably not without reason, that he can be better protected by Turkey, even though this remains highly unlikely with Haftar just a few kilometres from Tripoli center.

Under these conditions, negotiating with Erdoğan rather than Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is practically inevitable for Libya as Italy remains on the outskirts of the latest flareup in the North African country. Although the Ottoman Empire lost control over Libya in 1912 when Italy won the Italo-Turkish War, it is Turkey today returning to a position of significant influence over Libya, rather than Italy.

Ankara and Tripoli have transformed the 600 kilometers that separates the Turkish coast from the Libyan coast into an exclusive economic zone, ignoring the existence of the Crete and the other Greek islands in the Dodecanese. But that treaty has serious repercussions in the field of Italy's energy policies. The agreement recognizes Turkey's exclusive rights to prospect for gas and oil, putting Eni's offshore concessions at serious risk. The agreement also indirectly jeopardizes Eni's prospecting in the waters of Cyprus, effectively blocking the possible construction of the gas pipelines necessary to bring gas to European markets via Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy.

With the inevitable success of Haftar against the GNA, Italy appears to be the biggest loser after Turkey for its insistence of ignoring the reality on the ground. With significant Turkish assistance to the GNA not expected to arrive until well into the new year, Haftar is in a position of power to liberate Tripoli, leaving Misrata the only stronghold left for pro-Turkish forces. Whether Italy realizes this reality in time, remains to be seen. But with a new order likely to be established in Libya in the coming weeks, it would be in Rome's interests to realize this reality and establish relations with Haftar or risk being blocked from lucrative energy deals.

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