ANALYSIS

PEACE AND SECURITY

THE POLICIES OF EUROPEAN STATES AND RUSSIA ON LIBYA

Tarek Megerisi
Vasily Kuznetsov
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UNPACKING THE POLICIES OF EUROPEAN STATES ON LIBYA

Tarek Megerisi

Since the British-French-led intervention in Libya in 2011, Europe has assumed a collective role of lead player in Libyan affairs. It was Europe that curated the majority of conferences concerning Libya, even though they were hosted by the UN special envoy and other international parties. This is how the role of the EU is clearly seen as the leading one despite the clearly different and often opposing intentions of the member-states. Moreover, the EU Trust Fund for Africa has played a leading role in funding and facilitating stabilisation work in Libya. The EU's Operation Sophia has been the sole formal operation aimed at engaging Libyan authorities and building their capacity for a long time.

Europe's leading role on the Libyan issue has long been supported by the USA due to American recalcitrance to get involved in another potential quagmire amidst its retrenchment from the MENA region. To add on, given its proximity to European shores, Libya is of greater strategic interest to Europe. Nevertheless, despite the features attributed to a collective Europe, European states have not been able to reconcile confronting interests and political positions, thus failing to create cohesive policies. These policies should have stabilised Libya and assisted its transition from Qaddafi's unique governing system towards a more inclusive, representative and effective political and economic model. Indeed, Europe's disunity and inability to effectively engage Libya's drivers of conflict have played a significant part in Libya's continuing collapse.

Europe's internal division and, in consequence, the divergent bilateral policies of EU member-states have become more significant at the EU level. Deep-seated concerns over refugees and migrations are exacerbating an already difficult situation. All this renders Brussels largely ineffective on the Libyan issue. Consequentially, one should divide Europe's approach and policy on Libya into the distinguishable positions of its member states and the EU itself. This remains the best way to understand the positions of European states on Libya and why European policy on Libya is playing out this way.

FRANCE

Of all the European states involved in Libya affairs, none has been more consistently or forcefully represented than France. France has often acted as a driver of the Libyan agenda at the EU and UN levels while also impacting developments inside the country. President Nicolas Sarkozy was one of the first to buy into Libya's 'Arab Spring' revolution. He also played a crucial role in creating the international consensus that facilitated the NATO intervention in support of the revolutionaries. It could be argued that at that stage, France's interests in Libya were mainly economic, geo-strategic and opportunistic, that is, they favoured Muammar Qaddafi's deposal.

Since Libya was claimed by Italy during the era of European colonisation of Africa, France had long perceived the African state as 'the one that got away' from what would come to be known as 'France Afrique'. Even during the reign of Muammar Qaddafi, Italy remained Libya's closest European economic partner. Libya is estimated to hold Africa's largest oil and gas reserves, along with gold and other natural resources, and substantial foreign cash reserves. This made it extremely attractive to the French private sector in terms of hydrocarbon production, defence and construction. After Sarkozy supported the revolution, France hoped for privileged access. However, the expected windfall never came, as Libya never managed to stabilise or begin its economic reconstruction in earnest.

As Libya's destabilisation triggered a jihadist insurgency in Mali, resulting in a French-led military operation organised to stabilise the Sahel, Libya's prospective role in France Afrique gained further importance. This became an issue that later resonated with wider French counter-terrorist activities following a spree of ISIS attacks in France. These interests coalesced in the figure of Khalifa Haftar, a Qaddafi-era Libyan general formerly captured by France during Libya's failed war against Chad in the 1980s. France seemingly perceive Haftar as an effective counter-terrorism partner. The European state has supported him militarily in that context. France also sees him as a potential bulwark for other French interests in the Sahel region.

This wider picture can be seen in the French interventions during Haftar's conquest of southern Libya in early 2019, when Chadian rebel groups driven back across the border were intercepted by French aircrafts.

France's position since Haftar's return to the Libyan political scene has been to try to make him the de-facto leader of Libya who could secure all its interests. This has primarily been a political project that both protects Haftar and enables him to get a privileged position in Libya's future political setup. It also shields his actions from scrutiny and accountability for undermining the UN process. This political course was best exhibited by Macron, who convened a conference on Lybya in La Celle St. Cloud in 2018. This conference equalised Haftar and President Serraj. It forever changed the UN process from an inclusive bottom-up initiative to a bilateral affair that would then be continuously tilted in Haftar's favour.

Today, despite the devastation wrought by the Haftar project after he discarded the UN process and tried to seize the Libyan capital, France continues to support him. This may be a case of an excessive commitment to a legacy policy, which makes perfect sense, as France's policy on Libya is still being determined by persons who have known Haftar since France started engaging him on the basis of counter-terrorism. However, the UAE's role, as well as France's wider ambitions to continue developing its close security and political partnership with Abu Dhabi across the wider region, is still crucial in terms of France's inflexibility over Libya. The UAE remains Haftar's key ally.

ITALY

As Libya is Italy's former colony and a key provider of energy via the Trans-Mediterranean Greenstream gas pipeline, the Libyan crisis has been the central concern of Italian foreign policy. Since the start of the revolution, Italy has been focusing its activities on maintaining Italian centrality in Libya and protecting its energy interests. These points explain Italy's eventual decision to join the NATO operation despite President Berlusconi's initial reticence. It is also clearly evident in the deployment of technical staff to key oil-infrastructure sites in Western Libya immediately after the revolutionaries had fulfilled their successful offensive operations. Indeed, throughout the turbulent period of the revolution and the subsequent years, assets belonging to Italian oil giant ENI were among the few infrastructure in the whole of Libya that were never targeted or attacked. This was mostly due to, first, Italy's generally quick acclimatisation to the new Libya conditions, and, second, the decision to make security deals with local militia groups. ENI's rapid re-deployment was symptomatic of this policy's prescience.

The migration or refugee crisis that began in 2014 re-focused Italy's priorities entirely. The continuous influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean from western Libya at the same time as the Syrian refugee crisis has radically altered Europe's political climate, especially that of Italy . Initially, Italy's response was to encourage the UN political process that would form the Government of National Accord (GNA). Italy believed that having an official government that could act as its partner was a necessary component of its containment strategy. Although Italy would sign an MoU with the GNA to partner on this issue, a policy that was buttressed at the EU-level through Operation Sophia and the activities of the EU Border Assistance Mission to Libya proved largely ineffective. Thereafter, Minister of Interior Marco Minniti initiated his own policy to curb migration by offering direct payments to militia representatives that would smuggle people. The militia were to be paid for detaining rather than smuggling the refugees or migrants.

As Italy believed the migration crisis to have been effectively resolved, the country returned to trying to maintain Italian centrality to any upcoming resolution on Libya's continuing partitioning. However, Italy found itself outmanoeuvred by France. Thus, in the last few years, Italy has been scrambling to retain relevance while growing increasingly marginalised in Libyan issues. The Italian belief that Haftar would become a prominent part of Libya's future setup forced Italy engage him at the Palermo Conference in December 2018. However, its main interlocuters remained the GNA and their strongest presence and relationships in western Libya. This evolved into a policy of 'equidistance' between the two sides, which is a confusing situation that only weakened Italy's position on Libya. Following the outbreak of war, Western Libyans felt betrayed as Italy continued to support Haftar. Haftar himself did not feel obliged to reciprocate Italian efforts, treating them contemptuously.

Currently, the Berlin Process is providing the platform for Italy to advance a new policy, which began over the winter of 2019. Under this policy, Italy will act as

a unifier and push for a resolution between Serraj and Haftar. This has become a new political course, accompanied by a flurry of diplomatic engagement of both Libyan and international parties to the conflict. Although Italy's current chairmanship of the Berlin Conference's follow-up committee has regrettably coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak, the Italians will likely seek to find European partners. Italy needs them to strengthen its new position whilst maintaining Italian centrality in the European approach. This will also likely guarantee the involvment of a significant Italian contingent in the new EU operation IRINI.

GERMANY

Germany's involvement in Libya has been motivated by an increasing concern over the multifaceted threat that Libya's increasing de-stabilisation poses to Europe as a whole. Ultimately, Germany is relatively well-isolated from Libya and its fallout. However, Berlin appears to be aware of the more existential effects of the Libyan conflict. First, Europe's division over the Libyan issue weakens the bloc as a foreign policy actor. Second, Europe needs to retain a strong handle on its southern neighbours and the energy supplies in the region. Moreover, there are the immediate risks of migratory and security threats.

In the years following Libya's 2014 civil war and the inauguration of the GNA in 2015, this position led Germany to push for a cohesive European strategy and polical position on Libya at the EU-level as well as to become the largest single donor to stabilisation and migration projects in Libya. As the UN-led political process was subverted by other international players, resulting in war, the UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé approached Chancellor Merkel with a request to restrain the numerous international parties to Libya's conflict and bring them in line behind a new diplomatic process. This led to what is now known as the Berlin Process. Its members convene regularly with senior officials from all the states involved to find common ground and work on a consensual policy approach towards ending the conflict. This stance was formalised during the Berlin Conference on January 19th 2020.

The Berlin Process is challenging Germany's resolve and the limits to which it will go to advance its position on Libya. Many regional actors have not engaged in the process in good faith. This process is even being undermined by other European states like France, which supports Haftar, or Greece, which cares more about Turkey. Italy's recent chairmanship of the senior officials' meetings continuing the Berlin Process will reveal Germany's intentions. The European power will either continue advancing its goals via its allies in Europe or use the opportunity to retreat from the scene.

EU

The EU's policy on Libya has been a projection of the lowest common denominator of its member states' interests and positions, as it is the case with many of its foreign policies. As such, this actionable EU-policy revolved around supporting the UN process and curbing migration. The former has meant that the EU will follow through on the UN Security Council sanctions. For this, asset freezes, travel bans and other penalties should will be imposed on Libyans considered to be actively 'spoiling' the UN-led political process. Following the crisis provoked by waves of migrants and refugees from Libya, the EU was leveraged by its member states as a vehicle for comprehensive European engagement in resolving this crisis. This was delivered via a naval mission called Operation Sophia that was focused on combatting smugglers and destroying trafficking networks. However, it ended up strengthening the capacity of the Libyan coastguard and employment of containment strategies allowing it to pick stranded migrants and return them to Libya. Additionally, the EU Border Assistance Mission was founded. The mission was aimed at supporting Libyan authorities in upgrading their border management capacities. However both these missions were considerably constrained by Libya's lack of competent authorities with whom it could be possible to engage in the long term, as well as the generally weak central government. In this regard, the EU Trust Fund for Africa deployed significant funds towards stabilisation programmes in Libya. Through organisations such as the UN Development Project, it tried to help Libya to once again be able to absorb migrants and generally improve their treatment.

Since the conflict broke out in 2019, the EU has been as generally uninvolved and indecisive on Libya as its member states (except France) and the UN Security Council. Following the Berlin Conference and a UNSC resolution endorsing the communique, Brussels attempted to use this platform for EU actions on Libya. Germany hoped these actions would be focused on the arms embargo, which was still being routinely violated despite the commitments made in Berlin. However, a general lack of interest in Libyan affairs prevailed among the member states. Then there was the furore in Greece as a result of Turkey and GNA signing a memorandum of understanding over maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean. What

was more, the perennial fear of any operation that may facilitate further migration in the countries like Austria and Hungary was persisting. All this made the EU's response incoherent. As such, Operation IRINI has been largely advertised as an enforcement mechanism for the arms embargo. However, its only deterrence tool is naval. This suggests that its enforcement capacity is targeted solely at Turkey and not the UAE or Egypt who are supplying Haftar with weapons. However countries like Germany and Italy hope to use the aerial and naval assets proscribed by the operation to collect broader evidence for all violations. But it remains a questionable issue whether and how such data will be used.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, Europe's baseline position on Libya is best depicted on the EU-level. It is determined by the fear of a potential migrant crisis and expressed through the belief that multilateralism must be the solution. Therefore, the EU strongly supports the UN resolution process. Other foreign policy issues, such as the competition for resources currently taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean, are now weakening these policies and begining to distort Europe's position on Libya. European member states that are mostly involved in Libya have further developed in extremely different directions. They are trying to proactively shape the resolution to the conflict or political process as per their own positions or interests.

Events that have taken place since the first offensive on Tripoli in April 2019 have showcased the wider implications of Europe's internal division on the Libya issue. Europe's inability to reconcile its leading member-states' positions into a coherent or cohesive European policy has created a leadership vacuum and lack of a diplomatic framework for engagement on Libya. It has been exploited by the belligerent parties and empowered other regional powers who are directly intervening. Nevertheless, Europe still has significant weight in the Libyan question. The recent example of the 2015 political process has demonstrated Europe's political potential. Then, concerted European pressure on the Libyan parties (even to the extent of sanctioning major Libyan politicians) was established in order to engage them in the UN process along with a united front that included the USA. This was done to rally international support and cohesion. These tactics led to a more successful process that ended the fighting even if it failed to create a full solution.

Despite all their differences, European states share considerable common ground on Libya. The longer the war drags on, the less likely there will be an elaboration of a clear military solution. The more regional rivals entrench themselves in Libya, the more likely will Europe try to recreate the events of 2015. The dynamics of relations between Germany and Italy, as the latter takes over chairing the follow-up meetings to the Berlin Conference; the number of other European allies they can bring under their banner; the manner in which Operation IRINI will be deployed – these are the main factors determining how Europe's position will evolve over the coming year.

RUSSIA AND THE LIBYAN CONFLICT: THE LOGIC BEHIND IMPULSIVE MOVES

Vasily Kuznetsov, *PhD in History*

The late 2019 and early 2020 period was marked by a renewed aggravation of the situation in Libya. The new escalation of hostilities between the GNA and the LNA, Turkey's threat to deploy troops in Libya and the real buildup of Turkish military presence, continuing rumours about the Russian military presence on the ground, the Libyan leaders' meeting in Moscow followed by the conference in Berlin, the spate of diplomatic activity on the part of Algeria, as well as the resignation of the UN Special Envoy for Libya Ghassan Salamé – all these developments have led one to believe that, firstly, the Libyan conflict is entering a new stage, and, secondly, external players, including Russia, Turkey and Algeria, are suddenly beginning to show a newfound interest in the crising gripping the African state.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which, in theory, could slow down this process, in fact did not seriously affect it. The decline in international diplomatic activity was quickly compensated by the activation of players „on the ground", which, apparently, made it look for some compromises and their regional and global allies.

Although other events have made the Libyan crisis take a back seat in terms of media coverage, the conflict itself has not gone away, and neither has a host of related issues, including concerning Russia's role and interests.

Looking at the Libyan conflict in the context of the overall development of the Middle East situation, we see an odd peculiarity. With all its significance, all the far-reaching implications of the Libyan crisis for the Mediterranean region, and all the drama-filled events taking place in that country, the Libyan conflict itself has been fairly sidelined on the global and the Middle East agenda alike. This is manifested not only in the fact that this conflict has been deemed of lesser importance to key regional and external actors than, say, the one in Syria, but also in that Libya has been witnessing repeated scenarios that seem vaguely familiar and the use of mechanisms that have already been tried before. The use by all parties to the conflict of paramilitary forces, proxy and hybrid wars, ad hoc alliances, various formats of mediation, and, finally, asymmetric partnership between state and non-state actors, as well as global and regional players – all these quasi-novel tools of international relations have already been applied in Syria and Iraq, from where they have been exported to Libya.

Often viewed as one of the chief purveyors of cutting-edge tricks in international relations, in reality, Russia has been acting merely as one of many players here, with each of them enthusiastically drawing on each other's experience.

Another peculiarity of the Libyan conflict making it similar to other conflicts in the region has something to do with the fact that it may be interpreted through multiple – at least four, narratives. The Libyan conflict may be viewed as a fight of the legitimate GNA against the non-state paramilitary LNA. It may also be viewed as a fight of the electorally legitimate HoR and the LNA associated with it against the GNA, which lost its legitimacy following the expiry of the Skhirat Agreement and ceded its power to local militias. Similarly, it appears to be a standoff between two partially legitimate centres of power – the government and parliament. Finally, one may view it as a confrontation involving numerous actors, each of them taking advantage of the available ideological, political, economic, symbolic, international legal and other means. The latter interpretation makes the issue of legitimacy totally irrelevant.

A similar situation accompanied by a somewhat scholastic dispute over the nature of the warring parties may be observed in Syria where the ongoing conflict is perceived as a struggle against the authoritarian regime by some, and as a war waged by the state against the terrorist threat by others, while identification of the exact source of that threat is turning out to be quite a task in itself.

Each narrative is being supported using a separate set of arguments, and accepting each of them presupposes a different course of political actions.

Moscow's attitude towards the parties to the Libyan conflict post-2011 wavered between the third and the fourth narratives, allowing for maintaining an equidistant or, as Russian diplomats are wont to say, equi-proximate stance.

In the past few years, Moscow has moved away from repeatedly blaming NATO for the destruction of the Libyan statehood towards building a relatively dense and diverse network of contacts with various stakeholders in the Libyan political process. A peculiar "polyphony" of the Russian policy was reinforced through parallel engagement of various state entities both at the federal and regional levels, each pursuing their own relations with different Libyan actors. Throughout this process, Moscow was extremely careful to fend off any suspicions that it enjoyed special relations with either Khalifa Haftar, who would regularly meet with representatives of the Russian Defense Ministry, or the leaders from Tripoli and Misurata, who visited Moscow and Grozny on numerous occasions.

However, at the end of 2019 and at the beginning of 2020, signs emerged that the Kremlin was leaning more towards stronger support for the country's East. However, the problem here is that a shift from an equi-proximate stance to proclaiming support for one of the warring sides called for a fundamental review of the legitimacy of the parties to the conflict. The opening in Damascus of an embassy by Libya's interim government linked to the LNA and the planned visit to Benghazi by representatives of the Yemeni anti-Houthi tribes might signify ambition by the country's East to raise its international profile.

However, Russia was in no rush to make moves towards recognising Libya's interim government, although, it at first it did not prevent it from preparing the ground for such steps in the future.

If one views the Libyan crisis outside the regional context, this shift in Moscow's position seems illogical and inexplicable. However, once this broader context is taken into account, everything falls into place.

Generally speaking, Moscow does not have any special interests to pursue in Libya, and its policy in this particular area, just like the policies of most other actors, has always been characterised by political opportunism and a striving for short-term gains. However, Russia's increasing exposure to the tangled puzzle of the Middle East reality is making Russian policy in Libya a hostage to its relations with Turkey, Egypt, UAE, EU member states and other actors for whom Libya, for one reason or another, turns out to be of greater importance than for Moscow.

Such exogenous pressure, which necessitated a confrontation with Turkey and pushed Russia closer to the UAE at the beginning of 2020, has sparked a series of actions on the Libyan track.

At the same time, a vast web of contacts developed in Libya by Russian business and political circles in the last few years has provided some Libyan actors with back channels for lobbying their own interests in Moscow. Coupled with the desire to retain opportunities to leverage the Libyan agenda without getting bogged down in the deadlocked settlement process, this has created an impression of seeming impulsiveness of the Russian policy in which rash and showy actions fail to produce any external effect.

Under normal circumstances, Moscow would have likely tried to continue its current peculiar policy on Libya, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the OPEC+ deal collapse followed by the deterioration of Russian-Saudi relations had thrown a spanner in the works.

It is unlikely that these "black swans" will force Moscow to scale down its activity in the Middle East on the back of growing concerns over political and economic problems back home. On the contrary, having put so much effort into turning a catchy slogan that run "Russia's Return to the Middle East" into reality, today, the Kremlin will be particularly sensitive to any attempts by its opponents to expose the fragility of that return.

In this context, Russian relations with Saudi Arabia assume special significance, as quite a great deal of resources have been invested into securing a rapprochement with that country in the last few years. Even against the backdrop of a dramatic deterioration of economic ties, both sides show reluctance to take radical political steps, and try to do their utmost to prevent the economic standoff from spilling over into the political sphere in the future.

All this leads us to believe that Moscow will try to beef up its leverage potential in Libya so that, when needed, it could put the Libyan agenda to a more efficient use in its relations with third countries. From this standpoint, bolstering the Libyan interim government's international legitimacy, preserving and expanding ties between the Russian elites and various local parties to the Libyan conflict, improving economic relations

to the extent possible and with regard for unforeseen restrictions, attempts at positive interaction with European partners, primarily Italy and Germany, on the Libyan issue, as well as active engagement with Egypt and Algeria, will allow Russia to raise its profile in a potential Libyan settlement which, in turn, will enable Moscow to tackle other challenges in the region more robustly.

Expressed by the Russian leadership, confirmation of recognition of the GNA and dissatisfaction with Haftar, who tried to declare his special powers, together with the military-political weakening of the LNA that followed, indirectly confirm this strategy of Moscow.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tarek Megerisi is a policy fellow with the North Africa and Middle East programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He is a political analyst and researcher who specialises in Libyan affairs and more generally politics, governance and development in the Arab world.

Vasily Kuznetsov
PhD in History, Head of Centre for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences.

Authored a monograph on the political transformation in post-revolutionary Tunisia based on the fieldwork conducted in 2011-2017 and titled: "Tunisia's Hidden Pathways: To Live and Talk About the Revolution". Also authored and co-authored several research papers for the Valdai Club, the Russian International Affairs Council, etc.

Interested in social and political issues, problems of statehood and religious life in contemporary Arab societies.

Involved in several track-two initiatives on Russian politics in the Middle East.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Russland.
Jausski Boulevard 13/3
109028 Moscow | Russia

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