

Italy May Recover Historic Ties with Libya

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Libya is a country of particular economic and political importance for Italy. The geographical proximity and the historical ties between both nations make the African country a strategically important state for Rome. But the violent instability that has been hitting Libya in recent years has increasingly isolated Italy from effective participation in the Libyan political scenario.

Italy's natural interests in Libya do not correspond to the European country's performance in the Maghreb. Since the end of World War II, when Italy lost its territories abroad, Rome's colonial rule over Libya ended, however, many Italian communities remained in the country until they were expelled by Muammar Gaddafi after the 1969 Revolution. However, despite political tensions between both countries generated by the Revolution, the economic cooperation has always been very intense and profitable. For example, Libya has been one of the largest suppliers of oil to the Italian market since the 1950s, being one of the largest strategic partnerships between a North African country and a European state.

Due to the historical ties between both States, it was expected a more significant and incisive participation by Italy in the political life of the neighboring country, but several factors have prevented such participation. The first fact to be highlighted is that Italy participated in the so-called "Operation Odyssey Dawn" against Muammar Gaddafi, in 2011, breaching a bilateral friendship and cooperation treaty between both states signed a few years earlier, in 2008. Since the violation of the treaty, the credibility of the Italian government in Libya has been completely undermined, not only among Gaddafi's supporters, but even among his opponents, and the act was considered a real betrayal against the Libyan people. Due to this scenario of collective distrust of Italy, Rome's participation in Libya was limited to the Operation, with no involvement of the European country in the political situation of Tripoli after 2011. In a general context, the conflict in Libya currently can be defined in the confrontation between the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA). The US supports the GNA, but without direct intervention in the conflict. Several other nations and organizations have direct or indirect involvement in Libya. France, Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, for example, act effectively in the civil war, through military, diplomatic or economic means.

None of these countries directly involved in the Libyan conflict has as strong historical ties to the country as Italy, which remains passive. In the nine years since Gaddafi's death, Rome has failed to develop a clear strategy for the Libyan issue. At first, Italy supported the GNA, with an agreement between both governments being signed in 2017, providing for economic cooperation and training of Libyan military personnel by the Italian armed forces. But a scandal of violence against immigrants by Libyan and Italian troops put an end to the project of training and cooperation. In addition, the growth of the LNA and Turkish support for the GNA made Rome retreat to any form of participation in Tripoli - Italy has several

disagreements with Ankara and fears reprisals and attacks by the LNA.

All of this has further damaged Rome's image in Tripoli and Italy has come to be seen as an increasingly less reliable country. But, in fact, the reasons for understanding these attitudes are simple. Italy has been experiencing a serious political and economic crisis since the beginning of the Libyan civil war. Since 2011, six prime ministers have led the Italian government, creating a great scenario of instability. In addition, there is a fundamental issue, which is Italian military weakness. In fact, the country does not currently have strength enough to defend, if necessary, its positions in Libya.

However, this year, Italy has shown little interest in recovering its ties with the African country. Italy's foreign minister, Luigi di Maio, met LNA leader Haftar earlier this year and made several statements saying that Rome will no longer tolerate foreign intervention in Libya. Months later, in a conversation with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the Italian chancellor defended the same positions and reaffirmed Italy's interest in Libyan peace. It seems that Rome's intention currently is to work as a pivot in the negotiations for a permanent peace agreement in Tripoli. Having realized that it cannot explicitly support one side because of its military weakness, Italy is betting on diplomacy and dialogue with all parties involved in the conflict as a way of seeking a real solution and defending its interests.

It remains to be seen whether Italy's image among Libyans can be recovered. After two episodes being interpreted by Tripoli as acts of betrayal, it is likely that it will be a long time before relations between the two countries are fully restored. Above all, Italy needs to firmly defend its positions and not retreat again under foreign pressure. The Italian strategy for Libya must be developed exclusively in Rome.

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