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*How long were my ancient days?
I no longer care to count.
How high were the mountains in my ocean's fathoms?
I no longer care to measure.
How bitter was the bread of bitterness?
I no longer care to recall.*

(Khaled Mattawa)

A Elisabetta, Enrico, Claudio

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INTRODUCTION

The research aims to analyse the instability of Libya in light of its geopolitical relevance. Libya has been a deeply unstable country ever since the deposition of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, although representing an invaluable asset under both the geographical and the energetic points of view. A number of internal and external players are openly active on the Libyan territory to take as much as possible of the country's significant resources.

A credible analysis of the Libyan scenario cannot disregard three main areas: (i) the history of Libya in the 20th century and the specifics of its political, ethnic, tribal and cultural heritage; (ii) a full description of the causes of the current instability situation. The research will investigate also the factors that granted Muammar Gaddafi the lead and capability of keeping the country stable for 42 years; (iii) a comprehensive approach to the interests of the actors involved. Only taking into account all these factors the research can give a valuable contribution to the topic.

More specifically, the research encompasses the following questions and aims to provide possible answers.

- 1) Why is Libya a key country – or, in other words, why should we be interested in Libya? With the 16th largest surface area and the 10th largest proven oil reserve in the world, Libya is an extremely relevant country not only for the North Africa and Middle East quadrant but also for supra-regional interests. Its coastline runs for more than 1,700 kilometres along the Mediterranean Sea while its inland frontiers – from west to east – border with Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt. It has an invaluable position as a geographical link between Europe and Africa, i.e. between the richest continent and the one with the highest demographic growth, thus becoming an unavoidable hub for migration flows and a political priority for European countries. Moreover, the Russo-Ukrainian war triggered an energy decoupling between Russia and Europe, with the latter engaged to find alternative and reliable energy sources. Although not fully exploited because of the ongoing conflicts, nowadays the Libyan reserves of oil and gas are more valuable than ever. Against such background, the presence of global and regional powers on the ground and in plain sight confirms the relevance of the country, when considering the stability of the Mediterranean area at stake.
- 2) When did the instability begin and why is it ongoing? The instability the country is still facing started with the First Libyan Civil War in 2011, when NATO-backed rebels succeeded in deposing Muammar Gaddafi, who had ruled Libya for 42 years. As Libyan society is highly fragmented from the tribal and political standpoints, so far the country failed to find a common perspective on its way forward. There are two rival political centres, mirroring the long-standing division of the country between the main regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (alongside the southern region of Fezzan). The two factions partially recognize each other and have divergent interests; most of all, they rely on different and often conflicting international sponsors.
- 3) Who are the main external actors and what are their motivations? Libya's resources and its strategical position work as significant pull-factors for many external players. The country is the stage of competition for regional and global powers. Turkey and Qatar are currently backing the Tripoli-based government, whereas mainly Egypt, Russia (by means of the Wagner group) and UAE are sustaining the faction located in the eastern region. Although the European Union has set a specific mission to Libya, the two most interested Member States – Italy and France – seem to have different views on the future of the country. The U.S. shut its embassy in Tripoli in 2014 and disengaged from the quadrant ever since, although mounting voices among foreign policy experts urge the superpower to set foot again in Libya and challenge the aspirations of its opponents. Each actor has a very specific agenda. The research intends to dig into them in order to understand if they can serve Libya's stabilization.
- 4) Do feasible solutions to stabilize Libya exist? Forecasting is an essential part of the geopolitical analysis. The last part of the research will factor in all the elements mentioned above to investigate whether the country might be stabilized in the future.

The research was conducted with a geopolitical methodology. The geographical factors are crucial to understand Libya's prominence in the Mediterranean area – consequently, the research will make extensive use of maps. All the same, in line with the features of contemporary geopolitics many other elements must be considered. A comprehensive analysis should take into account also economy and energy resources, demography, ethnic differences, tribal rivalries, religion and traditional ties with foreign countries. Many factors compose the pictures as “[i]t is their simultaneous action and interaction that creates the complex phenomenon known as ‘foreign

policy”.¹ This approach requires the assessment to be both synchronic and diachronic, as the historic depth of a country is key to understand its trajectory from the past towards the future. Hence, one of the main challenge was to analyse the impressive volume of information available and make a selective use of the ones actually relevant for the research.

Available literature already provides important answers on all of the areas mentioned above and was the starting point of the analysis. Books, specialized publications and foreign affairs reviews were the primary source of contributions, alongside open source documents and researches. The considered contributions are in English, Italian and French. Media tend to disregard the Libyan situation. Foreign policy literature, especially the American one, does not primarily focus on it, given the U.S. disengagement from the region. Literature in other languages (Italian and French), at least its open source part, is keener to addresses the topic in a more comprehensive manner and the research duly considered it. The literature review showed particular attention to the presence and the interests of the external actors directly or indirectly involved in the Libyan case, as well as to the possibility to have free elections as soon as possible. While the research will cover the first area (i.e. the external actors), the path to orderly elections will remain marginal. As the thesis will try to demonstrate, elections do not seem to constitute a solution *per se* but rather the final stage of a long and complex process that should be set up with a different perspective.

¹ Spykman N., *Geography and Foreign Policy*, in The American Political Science Review, 1938, 32, p. 1.

CHAPTER 1

Recognizing the complexities of Libya's history is crucial to understand its present-day challenges and develop a meaningful approach to its future trajectory. This chapter will delve into Libya's contemporary history by highlighting the effects of the Italian colonialism, the struggle for independence and the challenges of a functional nation building, as well as the impact of the long Gaddafi's rule. Given the approach the thesis aims to develop, the chapter will mainly consider history of Libya's throughout the 20th century.

1.1 – The Ottoman domination and the Italian Colonial Rule

1.1.1 – Origins of current ethno-religious structures. The Ottoman age

The geographical area currently named Libya has always presented limited possibilities for human settlements. After the fall of the Roman Empire it was conquered twice, in a way that largely shaped the country as we know it nowadays. The first conquest was part of the Arab invasion of North Africa occurred during the 7th century. The invasion brought Arabs to lands previously populated by Berber tribes, alongside a new language, new customs and most of all a new religion. As Chapter 3 will show, the Arab ethnic group is still today (and by far) the predominant one in Libya. The second relevant conquest was the Ottoman invasion, started in 1551 when the admiral Sinan Pasha took control of Tripoli. Benghazi, in the east, was integrated only in 1639. After having conquered also the Fezzan in the south, from 1711 to 1835 the Karamanli dynasty ruled those Ottoman provinces with a high level of autonomy from Constantinople, analogously to what occurred in the Ottoman Algeria and Tunisia. The territory was organized according to the traditional features of the Bedouin society. Each tribe was mainly active in agriculture and pastoralism and built a system of alliances, often reunited in factions (*sufuf*), and rivalries.²

Although the 18th century was relatively prosperous for the region, the beginning of the 19th century showed severe symptoms of crisis: local rebellions, lack of substantial control over the Sahara trade, political instability. Between 1801 and 1815, Tripolitania was involved in the First and the Second Barbary Wars against the United States. Although fought over commerce raiding at sea, the conflicts showed the weakness of the Ottoman provinces, in line with the general decline the Sublime Porte was suffering at that time; the U.S. was even able to capture the Tripolitan city of Derna in 1805. Therefore, in order to avoid any risk of losing again a territory to a European power – as happened in Algeria, conquered by France in 1830 – the Sultan Mehmed II decided to regain the direct control of the provinces by sending troops to restore order. The Sultan's intervention ended the Karamanli dynasty and brought back Tripolitania under Constantinople's direct control, starting from the coastline and slowly expanding to the rest of the territory. After several years of internal conflict the Ottomans started to bring a relative degree of modernization. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the 20th century the Libyan provinces of the Ottoman Empire were among the poorest and less developed areas of the Mediterranean basin. Although the security of the trade routes increased and some families managed to accumulate notable wealth, the agriculture production did not enhance significantly. The grasslands were mostly shared among tribes and the manufacture sites were virtually non-existent. Although the Libyan provinces were some of the few African territories not directly nor indirectly controlled by European powers, this made the area even poorer: as the African trade route pivoted to the Atlantic Ocean because of Europe's priorities, commerce through Sahara became less and less relevant. One of the most important source of trade revenues was composed by slaves trafficking via the Sahara routes. Although widely abolished in the mid-19th century, slaves' trade continued for decades afterwards and in 1850 it constituted roughly half of the trade total value from Central Africa to Libyan coasts via Sahara.³ In other words, the route that brought people from sub-Saharan Africa to Libya – the same used by contemporary migrants to reach Europe – was well established hundreds of years ago.

1.1.2 – The Sanusiyyah

As a notable outcome of the Ottoman domination and the role played in the future Libya's independence, the rise of the Sanusiyyah deserves a rapid but separate mention.

² Cresti F., Cricco M., *Storia della Libia contemporanea*, Rome, 2018, p. 34.

³ Cresti F., Cricco M., *Storia*, p. 41.

The Sanusiyyah is a Sufi Islamic order founded in 1837 by al Sanusi, an Islamic scholar and teacher originally born in Algeria. Al Sanusi established the first Sanusi *ṣunīyas* (monastic complex) in 1843 at Al Bayda, near the ruins of Cyrene. The Grand al-Sanusi, as the founder came to be called, moved his headquarters to the oasis of Al-Jaghbug near the Egyptian frontier, and in 1895 his son and successor, Sidi Muḥammad Idris al-Mahdi, transferred it farther south into the Sahara to the oasis group of Al-Kufrah.⁴ The order spread principally in Cyrenaica, which signals how deeply is the Sanusiyyah related to the eastern part of the country. The main principle the Order was founded on included a rigid Islamic orthodoxy, canonical prayers, obedience to Allah and Muhammad; it emphasized piety, devotion, and the pursuit of knowledge while rejecting the ecstatic aspects of other Sufi movements. Most of all, for the Sanusiyyah the religious and the socio-politic aspects were interconnected: the Order encouraged work and economic activity in general, and the foundations of other *ṣunīyas* in eastern Libya helped the development of local community. Moreover, the Order was often able to mediate tribal feuds and emerged as an impartial solver of territorial conflicts. This approach spread the Sanusiyyah's authority over the whole Cyrenaica, given the mentioned lack of control by the central government. The *ṣunīyas* would serve as centres of Islamic education as well as sources of social welfare and political mobilization.⁵ At the end of the 19th century, Sanusiyyah's control over the Cyrenaica area was direct and effective and had a significant impact on the future events.

1.1.3 – The Italian colonization

Before describing the colonization of Libya, it is beneficial to explain what Italy was at the beginning of the 20th century. After Germany, Italy was the youngest among the European powers – the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed only in 1861. The unification of Italy happened with the decisive assistance of foreign countries – France in 1860 and Prussia in 1866 – that made it possible to defeat the Austro-Hungarian Empire and to conquer most of the Italian territories (except Trieste and Trento, who were annexed to the Kingdom of Italy only after World War I). The existence of a single and unified state in the Italian peninsula after centuries of local divisions would have a huge impact on the Mediterranean geopolitical landscape.

Being one of the late emerging powers, Italy was not able to have a say in the colonial expansion of Europe in Africa though. The causes of this state of affairs were internal and external at once. As for the latter, the timing of Italy's unification did not allow to effectively compete with other (and much more powerful) European states in conquering significant parts of Africa. The scramble for Africa – probably the peak of European global domination – culminated in the Berlin Conference of 1884 and 1885, where the major colonial powers such as France, Great Britain, Belgium and Germany regulated the respective areas of influence in what was once called the “Dark Continent”⁶. As a secondary power, towards the end of the century Italy gained limited colonies in Eritrea and Somalia, although the humiliating defeat of Adwa in 1896 by the Ethiopian army froze any further colonial expansion for years. The Berlin Conference was based on the principle of effective occupation, according to which powers could acquire rights over colonial lands only if they possessed them or had effective occupation at the times of the Conference. For those who arrived late in Africa's occupation, like Italy, this meant frustration of any colonial aspiration – it was impossible to claim colonial territories without being accused of revisionism and risking a clash with the rest of Europe. Although being in a similar position as a young state, Germany got a more relevant prize given its industrial and economic power, its position in the heart of Europe, its victories over Austria in 1866 and France in 1870-1871 and, last but not least, the diplomatic abilities shown by its chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

The comparison with Germany can explain the second order of problems Italy was facing, namely its relatively low power in economic, industrial and military terms. Analysing any traditional indicator of power at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Italy regularly scored very low – if not the lowest among European powers.⁷ Demographic curve steadily grew despite the massive migration flows overseas, until the point to reach and overcome France's before World War II. Other indicators show a worse situation though. In 1910 (the year before Italy's invasion of Libya) the Italian yearly production of steel would amount to 0.73 million

⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *History of Libya*, in www.britannica.com.

⁵ Cresti F, Cricco M, *Storia*, p. 37-39.

⁶ Conrad J., *Heart of Darkness*, Oxford, 2008, p. 3: “Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.”

⁷ The comparison takes into account the European major powers and excludes Russia and U.S. on purpose, as for many reasons they were bound to lead the international competition for most of the 20th century.

of tons, far not only from two major powers such as Germany (13.6) and Great Britain (6.5) but also from the relatively weaker Austro-Hungarian Empire (2.1) and France (3.4). The level of industrialisation per capita was again the lowest (scoring 17 against the second worst, Austria, that scored 23). The army and the navy were not negligible but not impressive either, when compared to potential peers: in 1910, the total effectives of both forces would amount to roughly 320.000, vis-à-vis Austria (425,000), Great Britain (571,000), Germany (694,000) and France (910,000).⁸ These blunt data add to the economic underdevelopment and the high level of illiteracy of some areas of the country. For instance, among the population aged six and older in 1911 the literacy rate varied from 89% in Piedmont to just 30% in Calabria.⁹

Italy was therefore in a very peculiar situation. Being a single state in the middle of the Mediterranean with a population of more than 30 million people, it was impossible to disregard it when defining the European balance of power; at the same time, its low level of industrialization, the military ineffectiveness shown during some conflicts and the shortage of internal cohesion made it impossible to place it among the first-tier powers. In a historical moment of surging nationalism and new imperialism, the lack of significant colonial dominions upset the Italian establishment, even more frustrated by France's seizure of Algeria (1830) and Tunisia¹⁰ (1881) in the Mediterranean.

*

Against this backdrop, at the beginning of the 20th century the expansionist ambitions of Italy aimed mainly at Libya, a perfect target to restore the prestige of the Italian colonialism just as much as a solution to the exceeding population in the south of Italy.¹¹ The public opinion unleashed its most rhetoric voices.¹²

At first, Italy attempted to expand its interests in Libya by economic means, especially through the Bank of Rome. The efforts did not result in the expected outcome, given Turkish suspicions on any European economic penetration in the Sultanate's territory and the widely known Italians intentions about Libya. Moreover, the Agadir crisis showed Germany's ambition on North Africa and urged Italian politics to accelerate the conquest using military force, without taking into account the other powers' position, the army's preparedness nor the potential reaction of the Arab population after centuries of Ottoman rule. These flaws affected both the short war and the subsequent Italian rule.¹³

In 1911 the Kingdom of Italy launched an armed invasion of Libya, landing troops in Tobruk, Tripoli, Benghazi and Derna. The invasion corps was composed of 34,000 men, with 72 cannons. In the two following months, other 55,000 men and further artillery were added to the corps. Against this numbers, the Ottoman troops would amount on about 7,000 men.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the Italians found an unexpected resistance by the local population and struggled to find their way into the Libyan heartland. On 5 November 1911, the King of Italy signed a decree annexing all the Ottoman territory between Tunisia and Egypt, officially named "Libya" for the first time.¹⁵

The Ottomans sued for peace in 1912 and the diplomatic efforts brought the parties to sign the Treaty of Ouchy, by the terms of which Turkey conceded to Italy its rights over Tripoli and Cyrenaica. Italy found it more difficult to subdue the local population though, and the effective conquest of Libyan territory continued for the years to come. While seizing Tripolitania and Fezzan was relatively easy, the presence of the Sanusiyyah in Cyrenaica increased the level of local resistance. At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the Kingdom of Italy controlled Tripolitania, Fezzan and part of Cyrenaica, excluding the Sirte and Marmarica areas. After the conquest, Italy found out that the geographical and climatic features made Libya unfit to sustain the agricultural production of the Kingdom and, thus, to increase the national wealth. The resistance to the Italian occupation continued throughout World War I,

⁸ Kennedy P., *Ascesa e declino delle grandi potenze*, Milano, 2022, pp. 269-273.

⁹ A' Hearn B., Ciccarelli C., *Literacy in the Italian census of 1911: disaggregating the data*, in *Rivista di storia economica*, 2021, 1, p. 66.

¹⁰ The Italian press and historiographers used the expression "slap of Tunis" to express the feeling of frustration and discontent following the French seizure of Tunisia, an area of strategic relevance to control the Strait of Sicily.

¹¹ Mack Smith D., *Storia d'Italia*, Bari, 2011, pp. 324-325.

¹² A successful song was released for the Italian colonization of Libya: *A Tripoli* also known as *A Tripoli, bel suol d'amore* ("To Tripoli, beautiful soil of love").

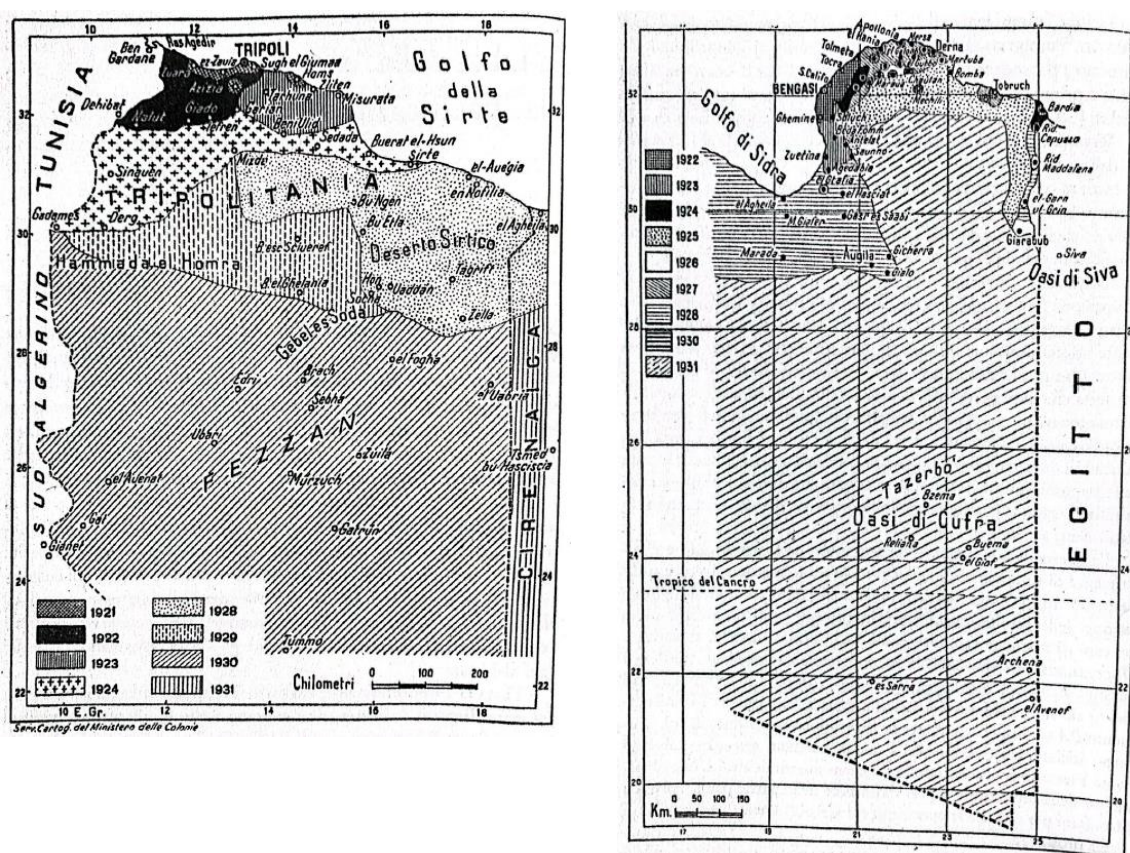
¹³ Mack Smith D., *Storia*, p. 326.

¹⁴ Cresti F., Cricco M., *Storia*, p. 61.

¹⁵ Cresti F., Cricco M., *Storia*, p. 64.

especially in Cyrenaica thanks to the extensive power consolidated at local level by the Sanusiyyah. Towards the end of the war, Italy tried to design a new colonial policy to associate local elites the management of the territory rather than continuing an expensive and ineffective clash. The policy also foresaw a relative degree of freedom, the acknowledgment of Arab population's specificities and the establishment of a local parliament. The ambitious program was never put in practice and the same happened to a new common program agreed upon in 1921, envisaging the unification of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica under a single administration of an emir in charge of the civil and religious life. As noted in literature, although not realized in practice this program was the first step of Libya as a single and unified state.¹⁶

The program sank as in Italy Benito Mussolini and Fascists seized the power. From 1922, the new government inaugurated a new policy of thorough colonization¹⁷ and sent a strong governor, Giuseppe Volpi. Fascism saw the Mediterranean as part of the Italian living space and thus Libya was a key territory for both political and ideological reasons. From that moment, the so called "pacification" of Libya – especially in Cyrenaica – became ruthless. The Kingdom of Italy increased the control of territory over the years, using extreme means like use of mass deportation, concentration camps and mustard gas bombs, to win the strong Sanusi resistance mainly led by Muhammad al-Mahdi as-Sanusi (who later became King Idris I) and Umar al-Mukhtār, who was captured and executed in 1931.



Italian progressive conquest of Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica (Source: Ciasca R., *Storia colonial dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'Impero*, Milan, 1940)

Fascism used to celebrate Libya as the "fourth shore" of Italy. The last phase of the Fascist Italy's rule over Libya saw the attempt to put in motion the economic development of the country thanks to Italo Balbo's directives, certainly improving (although not revolutionizing) the economic perspectives of the colony. The Kingdom of Italy focused on public works and infrastructure development, building from 1934 to 1940 hundreds of kilometres of new roads and railways, encouraging the development of new businesses and creating several new agricultural communities. Libya's railway and road networks expanded, notably through building what was originally called the "litoranea libica", an 1822 kilometres long road running along the Mediterranean coastline. The highway

¹⁶ Del Boca A., *Gli italiani in Libia. Tripoli bel suol d'amore*, Milano, 1993, p. 394.

¹⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *History of Libya*, in www.britannica.com.

– renamed “Via Balbia” in 1940¹⁸ – connected the Tunisian border to the Egyptian one and was meant to improve the economic progress of the colony by enhancing communication and trade; at the same time, it was meant to speed up troops deployment from one border to another, considering the increasing hostility between Italy and France (that controlled Tunisia) and Great Britain (that controlled Egypt). According to historians, the infrastructure building also aimed at providing work to more than 10,000 Arab Libyans.¹⁹ At the border between Italian Tripolitania and Italian Cyrenaica a huge marble arch named Arch of Fileni was built. Gaddafi’s regime destroyed the Arch of Fileni in 1970.

World War II ended the Italian colonial rule, which had three main consequences from a geopolitical perspective:

- 1) Dozens of thousands of Italians settled in Libya over the years, often relocated to establish farms in the most fertile lands. The Italians amounted 108,405 in June 1939, mostly living in Tripoli and Benghazi, against an overall population of more than 800,000.²⁰ Italians hence constituted a significant part of the Libyan population, enjoying a more advantageous legal status, better paid jobs and, in general, superior life standards when compared to the natives. In line with the decolonization process occurred after World War II, this complicated the relationship between Libya and the former colonizer state in the aftermath of the independence.
- 2) The brutal repression of the local resistance by the Fascist government caused the flight of many Libyan refugees, especially to neighbouring Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Some of them returned home as soon as possible even during the Italian rule, while others stayed abroad and contributed to intense propaganda activity. One of the major contributions of Libyan expatriates in the 1930s was the creation of a new national image for Libya based on shared language, culture, religion and territory. In addition, it became clear that the traditional division between Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica made the Libyan nation more fragile and exposed to external threats.²¹
- 3) The resistance to Italy’s colonisation by the Sanusi showed the Order’s strength and the vast support it enjoyed from the local population. Moreover, the tacit alliance between Great Britain and the future King Idris (chief of the Order since 1916, in exile since 1922) resulted in a convergence of interests who lasted for decades and shaped Libya’s foreign policy even after the independence.

1.2 – The Kingdom of Libya and the decolonisation (1943-1969)

1.2.1 – The independence of Libya

When analysing the events occurred after the end of the Italian colonial rule, it is necessary to bear in mind the international environment in which they are cast. The end of World War II reshaped the international balance of powers through the ultimate rise of two global superpowers such as U.S. and USSR. The status of European states diminished and, although formally winners of World War II, France and Great Britain had to progressively relinquish their colonial dominions. This process triggered the global decolonisation in Asia, Middle East and Africa and, for what is relevant here, the surge of pan-Arabism. Libya’s contemporary history is the crossroads of all those tendencies.

Italy joined World War II in June 1940 and Libya soon became the stage of the hard-fought North African Campaign, which ultimately ended in defeat for Italy and its German ally in 1943. In the years from 1943 and 1951, the Allies occupied Libya. The two former Italian provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in Libya were governed by the British troops, while France governed Fezzan. Idris returned from exile in Cairo in 1944, but he decided against settling permanently back in Cyrenaica until part of the foreign influence was lifted in 1947. Italy gave up all claims to Libya in accordance with the conditions of the 1947 peace deal with the Allies.

The decolonisation process started to unfold all over the world, aided by the new role U.S. was taking on as undisputed leader of the West. Favoured by the new state of affairs, on 21 November 1949 the General Assembly of the United Nations passed the Resolution 289 who stated the constitution of a Libyan independent and sovereign State, including Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan, as of then

¹⁸ Governor of Libya from 1933 to 1940, Italo Balbo was one of Fascism’s most prominent figures. He was inadvertently killed by friendly fire in 1940, when Italian anti-aircraft guns shot down his jet over Tobruk, in Libya, after having misidentified the aircraft.

¹⁹ Baldinetti A., *The Origins of the Libyan Nation. Colonial legacy, exile and the emergence of a new Nation-State*, London, 2010, pp. 143-145.

²⁰ Cresti F, Cricco M, *Storia*, p. 118.

²¹ Baldinetti A., *The Origins*, pp. 143-145.

1 January 1952.²² The decision called for the appointment of a UN special representative to Libya in order to assist the start-up of the newly independent state. The Dutch diplomat Adriaan Pelt was picked and appointed with the task to oversee the establishment of a democratic political system in Libya through a new constitution, to be written by a committee representing evenly the country's three regions. A consultative council was assembled to support and advise the UN special envoy. It had ten members: one from each of Libya's three provinces, six from Egypt, France, Italy, Pakistan, United Kingdom and the United States of America, and one who represented minorities of Libya. The council had to face internal division on the form of state between the Western countries, who advocated for a federal state, and Egypt and Pakistan who feared that a federal structure would have favoured new forms of colonialism. This contrast shows how the local specificities and the interplay between the three Libya's main regions have been an issue since the constitution of an independent state.²³ The council chaired by Pelt, on the other hand, agreed unanimously on the form of government: a monarchy with Muhammad al-Mahdi as-Sanusi as King Idris I. The Libyan constitution was approved on 7 October 1951 in Benghazi by a National Assembly of 60 members, 20 for each region. On 24 December 1951, Libya declared its independence as the Kingdom of Libya, a constitutional and hereditary monarchy with a Senate and a House of Representatives and two capitals (Tripoli and Benghazi).

Since before the independence, U.S. and Great Britain kept a strong influence on the newly-created country. King Idris was fully aware of the structural weakness of the country, lacking resources, a solid industrial base and a reliable army. Therefore, with two treaties signed respectively in 1953 and 1954, Libya forged and formalized closer relationships with the United Kingdom and U.S. In exchange for military and economic aid, Libya conceded the use of two important military bases on its territory: the U.K. gained the Royal Air Force Station El Adem, located around 16 kilometres south of Tobruk and therefore close to the border with Egypt, where Great Britain had substantial interests; the U.S. obtained the use of Wheelus Fields air base, close to Tripoli, already used since the North African campaign against the Axis forces. Wheelus Field was once the largest U.S. military installation abroad, extending on an area of 52 sq. kilometres and housing up to 15,000 Americans²⁴. Its high strategic value is proved by a declassified document of the US government, who stated that the base was vital for U.S. defence as it was the only big field within 6,000 miles from Tripoli and a training area for NATO pilots.²⁵

The first years of independent Libya coincide with the beginning of the Cold War and the world division into blocs and, at least for some years, Libya was firmly tied to the West. U.S. and Great Britain's approach to the relationships with the newly independent Libya prove the relevance of its geographical position, as it was key to control eastern Mediterranean and limit the USSR influence in the area. Libya and USSR started diplomatic relations as of 1955, thanks to Egypt's mediation, and the Soviets tried to penetrate the country. Given the U.S. increasing efforts to avoid such outcome through the supply of further economic aid, USSR attempt was unsuccessful until King Idris held the throne. Only Gaddafi's rule after 1969 changed Libya's traditional ties with foreign powers and the West.²⁶

Regarding the relationships with its former colonizer, in 1956 the Kingdom and the Italian Republic²⁷ signed the first bilateral agreement after the end of the colonial rule. King Idris I demanded reparations for the colonial occupation, financial compensation and the repatriation of several items, while Italy aimed to protect its citizen still living in the African country and keep the formal ownership of building where to perform institutional or educational activities. No formal apologies were issued for the colonial atrocities and yet Italy agreed to invest in the development of Libyan infrastructure by paying GBP 5 million. This ambiguous move – granting financial investment while refusing to take responsibility for colonial violence – left Italy exposed to further demands, but the relationship between the two countries were to change dramatically only from 1969 onwards.

During the first phase of the monarchy, in conclusion, unified Libya struggled to find a way to prosperity. It had a low population and a weak economic structure, largely dependent on foreign aid. As for the international relationships, King Idris and his

²² The full text of Resolution 289/49 is available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/666748>.

²³ Cresti F, Cricco M, *Storia*, p. 144-145.

²⁴ <https://aoshs.org/memories/woznicki-robert-libya-1956-1957-wheelus-air-force-base>.

²⁵ Cresti F, Cricco M, *Storia*, p. 153.

²⁶ St John R.B., *The Soviet Penetration of Libya*, in *The World Today*, April 1982, 4 p. 131.

²⁷ Italy abolished monarchy and became a republic after an institutional referendum held on 2 June 1946.

governments followed two basic directives: on the one hand, the ties with U.S. and U.K. and, on the other hand, and the ethno-religious bonds with the Arab world, in particular with Egypt – the most relevant Arab country then headed by an energetic leader such as Nasser. The discovery of significant oil reserves on Libyan territory was about to change the scenario.

1.2.2 – “Libya has hit the jackpot”

The first links between Libya and oil date back to 1929, when a company of Italian notables living in Tripoli was granted permission to search for oil. The Italian geologist Ardito Desio made several trips to Libya from 1930 to 1936, mainly to identify the groundwater needed to carry out agrarian transformation projects of the semi-desert territory in the province of Misrata. During these trips, Desio not only drew the first comprehensive geographical and geological map of the region but also commented about a consistent presence of hydrocarbons. The first gallons of oil were extracted in 1938 and, shortly after, a three-year program of exploration and cultivation – with the participation of a State-owned Italian company – was drawn up in the Sirtica region (the same region in which years later the Americans would find the largest hydrocarbon fields). Eighteen wells reported a presence of oil, although in negligible quantity given the available technologies. Desio himself urged the then-governor of Libya Italo Balbo, to obtain more advanced tools from the United States to further explore Libya’s ground.²⁸ The outbreak of World War II and the Axis’ defeat in North Africa ended the projects.

The first actual oil exploration in Libya began in 1956, when the first well was drilled in the Sirte basin. Libya then granted concessions to Exxon, Mobil, Texas Gulf and others companies, leading to major discoveries from 1959 onwards. The American company Esso Standard Libya discovered a huge oil field in Zelten, in Cyrenaica, and communicated the news to the U.S. Department of State. The message said: “Libya has hit the jackpot”.²⁹

From the beginning, the Libyan government decided to manage external companies’ activity in Libya through competition. Having learned from the experience in the Middle East, Libyan leaders decided to divide the country into a large number of dispersed concessions, to be distributed to as many companies as possible. By 1956, seventy-three concessions were allocated to twenty different companies, leaving one million square kilometres available to prospectors. Alongside the large American and British companies, there were American, Italian, German and French smaller companies. The discoveries in the Sahara in the first half of 1956, followed by the nationalisation of Suez in the same year, accelerated the search considerably. The big companies, faced with growing demand in the Middle East, made no secret of their desire to find an important new source of oil west of Suez. As the country’s oil riches became evident, the Libyans amended the legislation to make it more stringent. The more attractive the country’s oil prospects became, the more expensive rents, bonuses and royalties became. More and more companies grew interest in Libya’s possibilities.³⁰ The oil production became significant only in 1962, when the inauguration of both the al-Sidr terminal and the pipeline system in the Sirte region completed the oil transportation network started with the Ziltan pipeline and the Marsa al-Burayqa terminal. Such infrastructures finally opened Libyan oil to the international markets. Oil revenues soared from USD 5.6 million in 1962 to USD 19.6 million in 1963, and kept rising in the following years.

The discovery and progressive exploitation of the country’s vast oil resources changed not only Libyan economic prospects, but also its value in the eyes of global powers and, consequently, its positioning on the global chessboard. From a geopolitical point of view, it could be said that the discovery of oil brought two main changes, one internal and one external.

Internally, as mentioned, the revenues coming from the oil exploitation increased considerably with concessions and royalties. Such increase reduced Libya’s dependence on foreign aid – especially American and British aid – and on the rental incomes from the military bases at Wheelus Field and El Adem, on which the Libyan state’s balance had been substantially based on since the independence. The considerable oil revenues would have been a perfect instrument to launch a capitalist-type programme of state development. However, Libya had the typical problems of a young nation without an established state tradition: the overwhelming power the monarchy and the court, the non-existence of a real bureaucracy, a stagnant political life. Moreover, as mentioned above, the 1951

²⁸ Airó A., *E Ardito Desio trovò il petrolio in Libia*, 30.3.2011, in *L’Avvenire*.

²⁹ Cresti F., Cricco M., *Storia*, p. 160.

³⁰ Berreby J., *Le plus pauvre des pays du tiers monde est devenu l’un des Etats les plus riches*, in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 1968, pp. 28-29.

constitution had opted for a federal system of power; but the traditional rivalry between the provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan and the relative weakness of the local administrations vis-à-vis Western powers risked making oil management inefficient.³¹ In 1963 a series of amendments to the 1951 constitution (which, among other things, introduced the right to vote for women) transformed Libya from a federal state to a centralised state. The provincial governments were abolished and replaced with ten administrative districts, each chaired by a government representative (*mubafiz*) appointed by the Minister of the Interior and assisted by local councils elected by the people. The changes were meant to encourage the unity of the country against regionalist tendencies, while preserving a popular participation in the management of power. In addition to this, there was a centralised management of relations with foreign companies and revenues from the exploitation of hydrocarbons.³² The explanatory memorandum annexed to the amending law highlighted many alleged “defects” of the federal system envisaged by the 1951 constitution, such as excessive bureaucracy and financial inefficiencies. In practice though, the centralisation of power would inevitably favour the power group tied to King Idris without really ending the differences between the main regions.

The effects that the oil discovery had outside Libya were even more remarkable. To understand them requires to briefly describe the international scenario at the turn between the 1950s and the 1960s. World War II had definitely terminated European domination of the planet. European states had suffered enormous devastation and would spend years to recover their economies. Therefore, they were no longer materially able to maintain and manage vast colonial domains, often far from the homeland. This had given rise to independence movements in Africa, Middle East and Asia and the broader process of decolonization that affected those areas of the world. The rise of the two superpowers that would dominate the next decades of international politics, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, contributed to this process. Both favoured decolonization and discouraged any residual imperial ambitions of European states for primarily political and, to some extent, ideological reasons. Since the Yalta Conference, the U.S. and the Soviet Union had established their respective spheres of influence over European territory. Now dominating the Old Continent, the two new superpowers could not accept European states maintaining autonomous imperial structures in other parts of the world. In addition, the colonial model was now unacceptable for ideological motivations; the United States itself had been a colony of the British Empire and had become an autonomous state by rebelling against George III.

One of the most notable consequences of decolonisation was the Suez crisis of 1956. Egypt was a republic since 1952, following the military coup of the so-called “Free Officers” who had overthrown King Farouk. At the head of the country was Nasser, who led the pan-Arabism movement and proposed to lead a unified Arab nation. Opposing the Western powers, he had also approached the Communist world to modernize its army (in 1955, for example, he concluded a deal for a major arms supply from Czechoslovakia). In 1956, Nasser decided to nationalize the Suez Canal, thereby damaging the interests of both Great Britain – which had historically controlled the chokepoint – as well as France and the newly formed state of Israel, all of them having regional specific interest in the quadrant. In November 1956 French and British paratroopers attempted to regain control of the Suez Canal. The Soviet Union threatened to intervene militarily to aid Egypt, which would have widened and made the conflict uncontrollable. The operation was not agreed upon with the United States, which reacted harshly by threatening sanctions against Israel and forcing Britain and France to withdraw troops. In official historiography, the Suez Crisis represents the end of Britain and France’s aspirations to conduct a power policy independently from the U.S.³³

The described scenario clarifies why the discovery of oil in Libya was so important in changing the U.S. and Great Britain’s approach to the country. The imposing oil reserves of a state directly overlooking the Mediterranean would alleviate the energy dependence of European countries on oil transiting through the Suez Canal, now controlled by a subject deemed unreliable and close to the Soviet Union as was Nasser’s Egypt. In addition to this, the establishment of OPEC (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) in 1960 constituted an economic bloc capable of dealing with the West from a position of greater strength. From a geographically strategic but economically underdeveloped country as it was in the 1950s, Libya suddenly became a major energy reserve and a

³¹ Cresti F, Cricco M, *Storia*, p. 172-173.

³² Amended Article (172): “All state revenues, including taxes, fees and other funds, shall be transferred to the public treasury as per the provisions of the Constitution and laws.” The full text of the 1963 amended constitution is available at <https://security-legislation.ly/en/law/101249>.

³³ Caracciolo L., Roccucci A., *Storia contemporanea – Dal mondo europeo al mondo senza centro*, Firenze, 2017, pp. 598-600.

significant economic player in the Middle Eastern quadrant. For these reasons, however, oil could have been a double-edged sword: oil revenues would have made Libya less dependent on Western aid and could have facilitated a slide of the country towards Egypt and other Arab countries, which tended to be hostile to the West. U.S. and Great Britain's fears seemed to come true in the following years, when the Libyan population developed a strong anti-Western sentiment, in line with the tendencies of the Arab world and the strong call of Nasser's pan-Arabism. This sentiment also produced a heated public discussion about the need to subtract the bases of Wheelus Field and El Adem, of which Nasser had made a symbol of Western imperialism in North Africa.³⁴

Oil benefitted the country in the short term already. About 25 oil companies with a total of 95 concessions were active in Libya towards the end of 1965. A total of 1,706 wells had been drilled, with producing wells accounting for over half of them. The amount of crude oil exported increased from 5 million barrels in 1961 to 443 million barrels in 1965; in that year, Libya placed fifth among the Middle East and North Africa oil producing countries and saw a 41% increase in oil output.³⁵ In the 1960s, the balance of payments improved radically, and it could be argued that Libya was actually developing – at least by 1960s standards in Africa. However, relying just on the enormous profits from oil might be deceiving for the purpose of this analysis. In fact, wealth had not spread homogeneously in the country but rather it had mostly favoured the upper classes, often with practices of corruption and nepotism. The order of the Sanusi was not immune from this dynamics and King Idris failed to intervene to appease the growing public discontent on the unequal management of oil fees. This aspect – the management and allocation of money deriving from oil – is still crucial to understand Libya's struggle and perspective of stabilization.

1.3 – Gaddafi's Era and the Libyan Arab Republic (1969-2011)

1.3.1 – The 1969 coup and the Republic

By 1969, the discontent with the monarchy had become very high. In the middle of the year the King left to Turkey and then to Greece to receive medical therapies, while the U.S. and British ambassadors had been recalled to their respective countries to be assigned to new posts. On September 1, 1969, a group of roughly 70 young army officers known as the Free Officers Movement overthrew abruptly the Libyan monarchy. The coup started in Benghazi and it was carried out with great levels of effectiveness as the majority of the country – except the eastern city of Tobruk – was seized in less than two hours. Also thanks to the favourable public support, the revolutionary forces firmly established military rule in Tripoli and throughout the country within a few days. A twelve-member directorate known as the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), which later became the Libyan government, declared the free and sovereign state of the Libyan Arab Republic. The RCC informed diplomatic personnel in Libya that previous treaties and accords would stay in force and that foreign lives and property would be protected, in an attempt to reassure the international community. Foreign powers rapidly accorded diplomatic recognition to the new government. The first foreign country to recognize the Libyan new regime on 4 September 1969 was USSR, in a clear attempt to establish good relationship with the new government and to push it as far as possible from the U.S. influence. United States, Great Britain and Italy communicated their recognitions on 6 September.

The first remarkable foreign policy act of the new regime was to accelerate the negotiations for the U.S. and the United Kingdom to leave the Wheelus Field and El Adem basis. Both basis were withdrawn in 1970, showing the political strength of the new regime but also contradicting what some Anglo-Americans analysts had envisaged, namely a renewed collaboration between the republican Libya and its former international sponsors.³⁶ Instead, Gaddafi soon began one of Russian heavy industry's best customers and further approached the Soviet Union in 1976 after detecting an increased American penetration in the Middle East. Libya negotiated

³⁴ Little D., *To the Shores of Tripoli: America, Qaddafi, and Libyan Revolution 1969–89*, in *The International History Review*, 2013, 1 Vol. 35, No. 1 (February 2013).

³⁵ Bengur A.R., *Financial Aspects of Libya's Oil Economy*, in *International Monetary Fund - Finance & Development*, Washington D.C., March 1967, pp. 58-61.

³⁶ Cresti F, Cricco M, *Storia*, p. 172-173. A U.S. Department of State memorandum drafted in the aftermath of the coup reported: "We know, however, that through the years a large number of Libyan military officers have received some training in the U.S. They have almost uniformly been deeply and favourably impressed by their experience in America. For this reason there is some basis for considering that the new Libyan junta's strong expressions of friendship for the U.S. are sincere and not simply a tactical manoeuvre." (*Memorandum for Mr Henry Kissinger*, 9.9.1969, in www.cia.gov).

agreements to get roughly a thousand Soviet engineers and military instructors to build new missile bases. That marked the start of a close and enduring friendship: over the course of the following ten years, more than 11,000 Russian soldiers appeared in Libya and, according to some reports, actively took part in numerous conflicts side by side with Libya's army.³⁷

The second immediate action the Libyan Arab Republic took was addressing the mounting popular intolerance towards the former colonizer and to the Jewish community. About 20,000 Italians³⁸ were ordered to leave the country by 7 October 1970 – a day celebrated since then as the Day of Victory. The Libyan Arab Republic seized their properties, the estimated value of which would roughly amount to USD 100 million: 37,000 hectares of cultivated land, 1,570 residential properties, 500 professional properties, 1,200 vehicles. The expulsion came as a surprise for the then Italian government, who claimed that the Italy-Libya relationships were too much relevant to be damaged abruptly.³⁹ Despite the Day of Victory, such perspective proved correct in the following years, when Italy and Libya built closer ties and signed agreements concerning economic cooperation – mostly related to infrastructure building and oil production – military supplies and scientific research. During the 1970s Italy became Libya's privileged partner in several fields, also through the State-owned companies ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi) and AGIP (Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli), involved in extracting oil and in building oil pipes and refineries. Many specialized Italian workers actually moved to Libya for fixed-term contracts, only a few years after Italy was publicly addressed by Gaddafi as a usurper and a raider.⁴⁰ Such an ambiguous behaviour will be a constant in Gaddafi's political life.

Between 1973 and 1974, Libya fully nationalised the assets of all the oil companies operating in the country and created the National Oil Corporation (NOC), entrusted with the task of producing, refining and distributing 70% of Libyan oil. The almost complete takeover of the oil produced in Libya allowed Gaddafi to consolidate its grip on the country and to try to change its economic and social structure.

1.3.2 – The long-standing regime of an unpredictable leader

The military coup created a new regime that would last for 42 years in Libya, the history of which can only be summarized in this chapter. However, before analysing the major facts of Libyan history from 1969 onwards, it is necessary to briefly outline the story of the man who led the Free Officers during the coup, Muammar Gaddafi. Although an influential geopolitical stream points out the need to disregard personal leaderships to focus on the features of human communities⁴¹, it is impossible to describe – let alone to understand – Libya's trajectory in the second half of the 20th century without taking into account Gaddafi's personal story, his views and his erratic behaviour throughout the years.

Gaddafi was born in 1942 in a tent close to Sirte, in Tripolitania. He lived for ten years according to the Bedouin society lifestyle, that he would eventually mythicize during part of his adult life.⁴² He attended the Libyan Royal Military Academy in Benghazi and further training in the United Kingdom, reaching the rank of Colonel (as the people and the media will call him informally after the seize of power). As back then British officers trained the Libyan army, historians report that Gaddafi developed a certain degree of anger towards Great Britain and its imperialist approach; he refused to learn English and eventually failed some exams.⁴³ During the military training, Gaddafi founded the Free Officers Movement along with other members of the army. Soon after the coup, Gaddafi showed peculiar ideological features partly inspired by Nasser pan-Arabism and its theory of the three circles⁴⁴ – the Arabic, the African, the Islamic – but with a stronger emphasis on the latter. The personal elaboration of different ideological streams soon led Gaddafi to summarize its views of the state in the Green Book, published starting from 1975 and heavily disseminated inside and outside Libya. In the Green Book, Gaddafi criticized both capitalism and communism and developed the so-called Third International Theory:

³⁷ Saini Fasanotti F., *Russia and Libya: A brief history of an on-again-off-again friendship*, 1.9.2016, in www.brookings.edu.

³⁸ Hollifield J., Foley N., *Understanding Global Migration*, Stanford, 2022.

³⁹ Cresti F., Cricco M., *Storia*, p. 214-216.

⁴⁰ Cresti F., Cricco M., *Storia*, p. 216.

⁴¹ Friedman G., *The Role of Political Leaders*, 16.5.2018, in www.geopoliticalfutures.com.

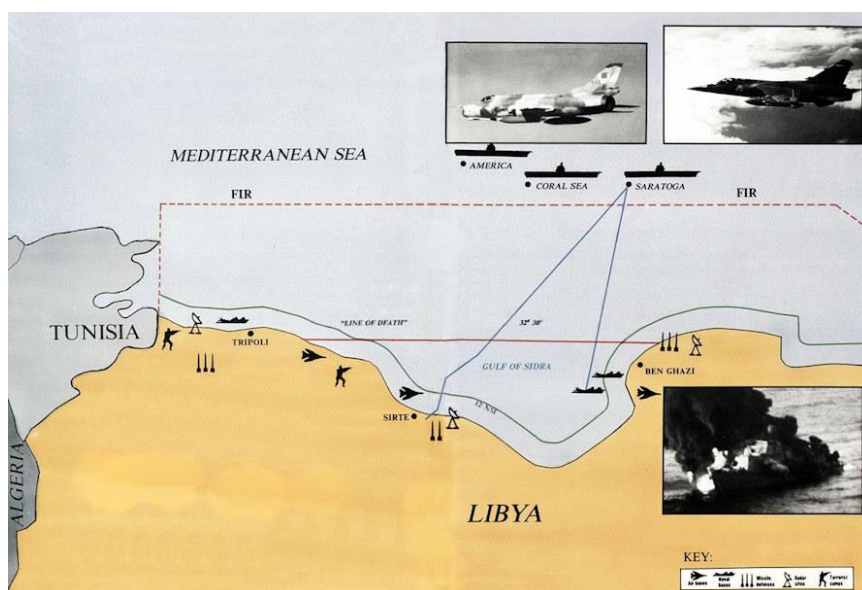
⁴² Cresti F., Cricco M., *Storia*, p. 206-207.

⁴³ Blundy D., Lycett A., *Qaddafi and the Libyan Revolution*, Boston, 1987, p. 45.

⁴⁴ Gibson B., *Nasser's Three Circles*, 4.10.2012, in <https://en.majalla.com>.

abolition of representative body within the state, dismantlement of bureaucracy, pursuit of society tribalisation.⁴⁵ In 1977, Gaddafi proclaimed the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya⁴⁶ – an untranslatable neologism referring to the state of masses, underlining the direct relationship between the “people” and the republic. Gaddafi substituted the traditional red-white-black flag, common to many other Arab states, with a solid green flag.⁴⁷

The Jamahiriya is one of the turning points of Libya's geopolitical perspective. From 1977 onwards, Gaddafi promoted its role as a prominent Arab World leader and actively supported Islamic movements in Africa and Middle East, sustaining especially the Palestinian cause against Israel. In the second half of the 1970s, the U.S. attitude towards Libya changed rapidly as Gaddafi's support for terrorism rose. Ronald Reagan considered him one public enemy of the United States' strategic interests in the Mediterranean, branding him a ‘Soviet spy’ and ‘terrorist’ whose ‘elimination would have reduced the USSR's influence in Africa and the Middle East’.⁴⁸ The U.S. would see Gaddafi as unreliable and, potentially, a Russian proxy in the Mediterranean; plus, his military arsenal reached significant dimensions. The 1980s marked the lowest ever Libya-U.S. relationships with episodes such as the Gulf of Sidra incident,⁴⁹ with the tension rising to the point where the Americans bombed several military targets (including the barracks of Bab al-Azizia where Gaddafi used to reside for most of the year – and that will serve as the Colonel's base also during the 2011 uprisings).



The Gulf of Sidra action in 1986. The Line of Death is marked in red. (Source: <https://en.difesaonline.it>)

On an American proposal, on 31 March 1992 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 748, which imposed a harsh embargo on the North African state. Pursuant the so-called ‘rogue-state doctrine’, the U.S. government branded Libya as a sponsor of international terrorism and a holder of weapons of mass destruction, starting the approach that would characterise U.S. policy towards the Tripoli regime until the 2000s. In the early 2000s, in fact, Libya tried to progressively exit the isolation status in the international community to see the sanctions lifted and recovery its economy. In 2003, Tripoli formally withdraw any program weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and accepted external inspectors to verify the compliance with such commitment. Afterwards, Libya established international relationships with several foreign countries and notably with Italy, through the 2008 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation: Italy apologized for the colonialism atrocities and accepted to pay compensations for USD 5 billion, while the two countries improved economic cooperation and partnership.

The last two decades of Gaddafi's rule saw a particular commitment on pan-African cooperation in line with one of the Nasser's theory on the three circles. As one of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) leaders in the 1990s, Gaddafi revived the idea of an

⁴⁵ Rahem S., *Les élites de l'ancien régime libyen : reconfigurations politiques en context transnational*, in L'Année du Maghreb, 28, pp. 41 e ss.

⁴⁶ The word Jamahiriya derives from *jumhuriyah*, the usual Arabic for “republic” – whereby the component *jumhur* (“public”) is substituted by *jamahir* (“the masses”).

⁴⁷ *History of Libya under Muammar Gaddafi - Contemporary flags, symbols and insignia*, in <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

⁴⁸ Cricco M., Cresti F., *Psicogeopolitica di Gheddafi*, in Limes 2/2011 – *La Guerra di Libia*, Rome, pp. 65 ss.

⁴⁹ Blum Y., *The Gulf of Sidra Incident*, in *The American Journal of International Law*, 1986, 80, 3, p. 668.

African Union whose establishment was called with the Sirte Declaration (named after Sirte, in Libya, close to Gaddafi's birthplace) on 9 September 1999. In 2009, he was finally elected head of the African Union for a one-year term.

Gaddafi's rule over Libya lasted for 42 years, from 1969 to 2011. Given the internal divisions among tribes and factions, the recent independence and the constant instability Libya faces, the duration of his regime is somewhat surprising. It is therefore necessary try to investigate the reasons of such duration, to understand if (and how) Gaddafi's rule model is replicable in a different situation such as the current one.

Notwithstanding different early attempts, Gaddafi never managed to fully eliminate any intermediation between the people of Libya and their leader; the traditional tribal division of Libya is too rooted into its social structure to be simply disregarded or wiped out. Hence, from the end of the 1970s, the Colonel took care to place members of his own tribe in the most important positions concerning political and public affairs management, including its own security and that of his government. This allocation of posts to members of a few selected tribes created a substantial discrimination though, which eventually erupted in open conflicts between tribes and power struggles, particularly within the army.⁵⁰ Then Gaddafi changed strategy again: while keeping its family members in the inner circle of power, he reshaped hierarchies and spheres of power and created a system of "temporary elites" built on patronage networks. The system would be based no longer on political posts, but also on a well-designed redistribution of the oil revenues. The tribal system channelled very well these patronage networks, especially considering the absence of real political parties.⁵¹ On the other hand, the new strategy aimed at capitalizing on the natural divisions existing among the tribes. The tribes who remained loyal to the Colonel benefited from wealth and privileges, including the allocation of the best armed and most efficient combat units, while the opposing ones were severely punished.

As noted in literature, "for much of Gaddafi's reign, he relied on a highly personalized network of advisors and associates to run the regime and ensure the loyalty of those around him. The network consisted of extended family members, [Gaddafi] tribesmen, members of other loyal tribes, a handful of trusted military officers and old friends from the Free Officers Union."⁵² In other words, Gaddafi's system of power was deeply personalized and based on two indispensable elements: a centralized and absolute control of oil revenues, distributed across tribes according to the loyalty to the regime; and a thorough and capillary knowledge of tribal traditional rivalries, to be exploited from time to time to Gaddafi's own advantage. As is often the case in deeply authoritarian regimes, the system unfolds around the leader, who rewards some and punishes others, ensuring at all time that no power group has enough influence to threaten his position.

1.4 – Gaddafi's fall and its aftermath (2011 - present)

1.4.1 – First Libyan Civil War

In February 2011, in the midst of a wave of popular demonstrations in the Middle East and North Africa commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring", anti-government protesters raised after the arrest of Fethi Tarbel, a human rights lawyer. The uprising was unexpected by several analysts, considering the traditional stability Gaddafi's regime benefitted for decades. The regime immediately tried to suppress the protests by blocking internet communications and telephone service across the country. However, the rioters took control of Benghazi and the unrest spread to Tripoli and other areas of the country. On 21 February 2011 Sayf al-Islam, one of Gaddafi's sons, gave a harsh speech against alleged external agitators and evoking civil war. The next day, Muammar Gaddafi publicly accused protesters of being traitors and asked his supporters to fight them. The government's use of violence against civilians has shown serious divisions within Libyan society. Several senior officials resigned in protest and Libyan embassies around the world signalled their support for the uprising by flying the pre-Jamahiriya Libyan flag.⁵³ By the end of February, rebel forces had expelled most of the loyalist troops from eastern Libya and many western cities, while Gaddafi's units continued to hold Tripoli. The newly formed National Transitional Council (NTC) claimed to take the military leadership of the rebellion and to represent the Libyan

⁵⁰ Istituto Alti Studi per la Difesa, *Influenza geopolitica della Libia nel bacino mediterraneo*, 2017, in www.difesa.it, p. 21.

⁵¹ Rahem S., *Les élites*, p. 45.

⁵² Bell A., Witter D., *Roots of rebellion*, Institute for the Study of War, 2011, p. 6.

⁵³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *History of Libya*, in www.britannica.com/.

political opposition to the regime, in the attempt to provide services in rebel-controlled areas and lead the country's transition to a democratic government.

As clashes between rebels and loyalists continued (among other things, for control of oil export terminals on the Gulf of Sidra), the international community was divided over the possibility of military intervention. Some countries, including France and the United Kingdom, supported the creation of a no-fly zone over Libya (officially to protect rebels and civilians from air strikes) while others, including the U.S. and Germany called for caution and warned for consequences of military intervention. The African Union rejected any military intervention, saying that the crisis should be resolved through negotiations, while on 13 March 2011 the Arab League passed a resolution calling on the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone on Libya. In the meantime, Gaddafi's forces were advancing on the remaining rebel positions in Benghazi and Tobruk to the east and Misrata to the west, making use of the impressive weapons arsenal accumulated over the years. On 17 March, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1973 to authorise military action and impose the no-fly zone.⁵⁴ Against this backdrop, on 19 March France unilaterally launched an air bombardment to disable Libyan aviation and air defence systems to impose the no-fly zone, putting the Libyan Air Force and air defences out of service within a week. The French intervention eventually merged into the NATO operation 'Unified Protector', started on 27 March 2011. Resolution 1973 specifically excluded any possibility of using an occupation force – which means that foreign operation force would have to be used during the civil war (in other words: no 'boots on the ground'). This strategic choice, however, in addition to complicating and extending the methods and timing necessary to connote the objectives and distinguish the many factions and groups operating on the ground, had reduced the competence, control and influence that the international community would exert in the post-conflict phase.⁵⁵

In August 2011, rebel forces seized control of strategic areas of the country, conquering both the outskirts of Tripoli and the city of Zawiyah, the site of one of Libya's largest oil refineries. On 20 October 2011, after conquering Sirte, the rebels captured and killed Gaddafi. The violent death of the Colonel is the starting point of the post-revolutionary chaos that has shown how serious the current social, economic and territorial fractures of Libya are.

1.4.2 – Second Libyan Civil War and the current stalemate

As expected, Gaddafi's death did not improve the stability of the country. The NTC struggled to establish a functional government and exercise its authority in the months following the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Local rebel militias who fought independently during the uprising, particularly those in western Libya, were reluctant to submit to an interim government formed in eastern Libya with little input from the rest of the country and were suspicious of past ties between some NTC officials and the old Gaddafi regime. Militias refused to disarm and skirmishes between rival militias became common. In July 2012, the first elections were held to choose members of a 200-seat assembly that would be known as the General National Congress (GNC). Of the 200 seats available, only 80 were allocated to party lists while the remaining 120 seats were reserved for independent candidates to promote political inclusion. The National Forces Alliance, a secular party led by Mahmoud Jibril, a former NTC official and interim prime minister, won the largest number of seats (39) while the Justice and Construction Party – associated with the Muslim Brotherhood – won 17.⁵⁶ On 8 August the NTC formally ceded power to the GNC.

Like the NTC, the GNC had difficulties in stabilising in the country. Just a month after the GNC took power in September 2012, al-Qaeda-affiliated group Ansar al-Sharia launched a surprise attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, killing four Americans including U.S. ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens. Divisions between armed groups continued to deepen – with bloodshed steadily increasing – as the GNC proved unable to control even those that were formally aligned with government ministries.

Despite the formally balanced distribution of seats, Islamist forces soon managed to prevail over the others and assumed control of the GNC assembly. By mid-2014, the GNC had effectively split into competing factions. In May 2014, Khalifa Haftar, a former general and leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA), led his forces against Islamists and their allies in eastern Libya in a military

⁵⁴ The full text of U.N Security Council Resolution 1973 is available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org>.

⁵⁵ Istituto Alti Studi per la Difesa, *Influenza*, p. 25.

⁵⁶ *Libya Electoral, Political Parties Laws and Regulations Handbook – Strategic Information, Regulations, Procedures*, 2015, p. 25.

offensive called 'Operation Dignity'. New elections were convened in June 2014 to form a new assembly, known as the House of Representatives, to replace the GNC, whose original mandate expired in February. The Islamist parties that were defeated (although with a participation of less than 20%) rejected the legitimacy of the elections. As the citizens prepared for the vote, the Islamist militias of Tripoli together with those of Misrata decided to launch operation 'Libyan Dawn' against forces allied with Haftar. Concerned about the situation and the outcome of the elections, the Islamist forces, and in particular the "Operating Chamber of the Libyan Revolutionaries", intended to gain control of the main points of the city, including Tripoli airport, thus taking it away from the authority of Haftar. Meanwhile, the new assembly elected in June, the House of Representatives, met in the eastern city of Tobruk under the protection of Haftar's troops.

When the government began to crumble, the main institutions divided accordingly. While the National Oil Corporation in Tripoli maintained control of the country's oil, a rival company was established in the east. Meanwhile, internal tensions loomed on the Libyan Central Bank, which collected and administered the country's oil revenues. The Governor of the Central Bank reversed his deputy's attempts in September 2014 to transfer funds to the House of Representatives. Later that year, the House of Representatives placed the Deputy Governor at the head of the Eastern Branch of the Central Bank.

The lack of central authority in Libya, meanwhile, created an opening for the militant extremist group Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Fighters from the group's central territories in Iraq and Syria began to arrive in early 2014, and in the summer of 2015 the group took control of the central coastal city of Sirte. In 2016, a coalition of Western militias confronted ISIS with the help of U.S. air support, moving them away from Sirte and the surrounding area. ISIL fighters remained active, operating small desert camps scattered and organising occasional attacks.

In December 2015, delegates from rival Libyan factions signed the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) – a UN-mediated power-sharing agreement establishing a Government of National Accord (GNA), led by a prime minister and a nine-member presidency council, from constituencies and factions across the country. Although the GNA has received recognition from the UN Security Council as the legitimate government of Libya, it struggled to consolidate its authority in both the eastern and western half of the country.

In September 2017, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya announced an effort to modify the LPA, with the aim of creating a viable agreement for power-sharing between opposing factions. At the end of the year, however, the prospects for a deal seemed weak, while Haftar rejected the legitimacy of the GNA, whose mandate stemming from the LPA had expired in December. However, efforts for unity continued and in May 2018 factions approved a plan to hold elections in the coming winter. The plans were interrupted, however, after a summer of tumultuous events and the failure to meet the September deadline to establish the framework for the elections.

Meanwhile, the struggle for control of the country's oil revenues intensified, although the international community affirmed its commitment to trade exclusively with Tripoli-based NOC. At the end of the offensive, most of the country and most of its oil fields were under Haftar's control, while Tripoli's leverage depended on its international legitimacy and ability to sell oil abroad. Despite several attempts at reconciliation between the two sides, in April 2019 the LNA embarked on a military offensive, targeting Tripoli to overthrow the GNA and impose itself across the country. At this stage, the role of two key external actors intensified. By the end of 2019, it became apparent that Russia had sent mercenaries to support the LNA and, in response, Turkey deployed troops to support the GNA. Meanwhile, Haftar's offensive stopped at the gates of Tripoli.

Pressure from Russia and Turkey led to a ceasefire on 12 January 2020, although not before the LNA reached a key victory on 6 January with its capture of Sirte. A summit was held in Berlin on 19 January to reduce the escalation of the conflict and to create conditions for the resumption of peace negotiations. Meanwhile, the LNA took the opportunity to put pressure on the international community by forcing a blockade of the Tripoli NOC, cutting most of the country's oil production. No agreement was reached and the fighting continued. In May and June, the GNA, assisted by Turkish-backed foreign forces, successfully displaced the LNA from the area around Tripoli, ending the 14-month siege on its capital and leading LNA forces eastward.

After the battle lines stabilised just east of Sirte, the two sides entered into new negotiations. In September, the NOC blockade was lifted after an agreement was reached to share its revenue. In October, they signed an agreement calling for an immediate and lasting ceasefire and that foreign fighters leave Libya within three months.

The UN Security Council endorsed the conclusions of the international Conference on Libya in Berlin and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) facilitated the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in Tunisi. The LPDF brought together 75 participants with the aim to represent the full social and political spectrum of the Libyan society. In January 2021, the Forum agreed to establish a transitional Government of National Unity (GNU) tasked with the reunification of belligerent factions and civilian institutions and holding elections in December. In February, the representatives elected entrepreneur Abdul Hamid Dbeibah as prime minister. A presidential council was also elected and led by GNA diplomat Mohamed al-Menfi and included a member of Tobruk's House of Representatives. The proposed government was approved in early March by a joint session of the country's two rival parliaments. Plans to hold elections collapsed after the unity government failed to produce a unified framework to hold them by the December deadline. Although the international community has urged the unity government to continue its mandate and set a new date for the elections, the Tobruk House of Representatives considered Dbeibah's mandate passed and elected Fathi Bashagha in February 2022 to replace him as prime minister. Dbeibah, however, refused to grant his post before the election took place.⁵⁷ In the east, in May 2023, the parliament voted to suspend Fathi Bashagha as prime minister and assigned its finance minister Osama Hamada to his duties.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Saini Fasanotti F., *Two prime ministers further destabilize Libya*, 11.8.2022, in www.gisreportsonline.com.

⁵⁸ *Libya parliament suspends rival eastern-based PM Bashagha*, 16.5.2023, in www.aljazeera.com.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 – Geographical coordinates



Position of Libya (in red) on the world map. (Source: <https://www.naturalhistoryonthenet.com>)

From the geographical standpoint, Libya has several features that make it unique. The country extends for 1,759,541 square kilometres, ranking 16th among the largest countries in the world. Its coastline runs for more than 1,700 kilometres along the Mediterranean Sea, making it the longest of any other African state. Its inland frontiers – from west to east – border with Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt.

The territory is scarcely populated by only 6.735.277 people⁵⁹ according to the latest available studies, with a density of roughly 4 inhabitant per square kilometre. The density population is unevenly distributed across the country, being about 50 inhabitants per square kilometre in coastal areas and falling to less than one inhabitant per square kilometre in the rest of the country. Given its geographical characteristics and history, the population is mainly concentrated in the cities along the coastlines – with a Mediterranean climate of warm summers and mild winters. Most of the rest of the territory is desert, characterized by hot summers and extreme temperature ranges. This predominance of the desert regions, with low rainfalls⁶⁰ and no major rivers (unlike Egypt with Nile) strongly limits the agricultural production, that in 2019 would account – together with forestry and fishing – only for 4.1% of national GDP.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Vv. Aa. (2022). *Atlante Geopolitico Treccani 2022*, Rome, p. 339.

⁶⁰ According to the World Bank, “Rainfall in Libya occurs during the winter months, with average annual rainfall of 26 mm and great variations from place to place and from year to year. Approximately 93% of the land surface receives less than 100 mm of rain per year”. The full report is available at <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org>.

⁶¹ The evolution of such industries impact on Libyan GDP across time is available at <https://data.worldbank.org>.

Köppen-Geiger climate classification map for Libya (1980–2016)



Source: Beck et al.: Present and future Köppen-Geiger climate classification maps at 1-km resolution. Scientific Data 5:180214. doi:10.1038/sdata.2018.214 (2018)

Libya map of Köppen climate classification. (Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org>)

One of the most prominent features of Libya is its traditional division in three different regions: Tripolitania in the northwest, Fezzan in the southwest and Cyrenaica in the east. As repeatedly noted in Chapter 1, such division has specific historical reasons. It still justifies part of the internal divisions Libya is facing and have remarkable repercussions on both the internal and the external players. This aspect will be thoroughly analysed in Chapter 3.

Since geopolitics relies much, although not exclusively, on the subjective perception of geography, the thesis will try to explain why its geographical position makes Libya a unique case. Libya's role in international politics may change along with the observer's standpoint: it can be defined at once as the opposite Mediterranean shore of Europe, the northern edge of Africa, the eastern edge of Middle East, a piece of the Turkish neo-Ottoman restoration. All these definitions are accurate to some extent, as Libya is indeed many things at the same time. As the literature has effectively noted "Libya arguably occupies an important place, sitting at the intersection of rival geopolitical imaginaries and competing spheres of influence that overlap and collide here, including EU border externalisation, Turkey's hinterland strategic depth, NATO southern stability projection, Russia's longing for the warm seas, the Mediterranean offshoot of China's Belt and Roads Initiative, and the periphery of a contested Arab world. The convergence of these vectors has few parallels in the international system, and contributes to emphasising how critical geopolitics can be valuable in shedding lights on the inherent fragilities of Libya state (un-)making in a volatile international environment."⁶²

2.1.1 – Libya and the Mediterranean

One of the first and foremost Libya's features is its long coastline on the Mediterranean Sea. At 1,770 kilometres, Libya's coastline is the longest among African countries bordering the Mediterranean. Its position and role on the Sea is crucial to understand Libya's geopolitical relevance.

The first question to be answered is why the Mediterranean itself is important. One could argue that Mediterranean has lost most of its relevance after the end of Cold War, when it was an area of direct confrontation between the two blocs. After all, Indo-Pacific is now widely recognized as the most strategic quadrant of the globe and possibly the future stage of the clash between U.S. and China. From this perspective, the Mediterranean may seem rather peripheral. It is not.

One intuitive reasons lies with trade. According to OECD⁶³, around 90% of traded goods are carried over the waves. Data and trade volumes may change over years, but the magnitude is likely to remain approximately the same for very long time. The maps below shows the main maritime shipping routes as well as the main chokepoints. Both are extremely relevant elements, the routes showing the flow of goods across the world while the chokepoints represent the keys to maritime control. The map below shows clearly that

⁶² Raineri L. (2022), *Imagined Libya: geopolitics of the margins*, in L'Année du Maghreb, 28, p. 2.

⁶³ The data are available at www.oecd.org/ocean/topics/ocean-shipping.

the core shipping routes cross the northern hemisphere from one edge to the other, where three main market areas lie: East Asia, U.S. and Europe. Any good produced in China can be shipped to Europe only via the Indian Ocean, Bab el Mandab strait and the Suez Canal; if its final destination is Northern Europe or any Atlantic country (including the West Coast of U.S.), it shall pass Gibraltar too. The inverse route is just as much valid. In all cases, the good must cross the Mediterranean Sea. Libya is exactly in the middle of this route and would provide its controller with an excellent position to favour or rather to hamper any shipping. In other words, as recently said the Mediterranean might be easily framed as a connector – a role synthesized by its appropriate definition of “Middle-Ocean”⁶⁴.



Maritime shipping routes and strategic locations. The green rectangle shows the Med. Sea. Libya is in red. (Source: [https:// porteconomicsmanagement.or](https://porteconomicsmanagement.or))

The same elements are applicable also in a war scenario. In case of conflict between superpower, for instance, the maritime dimension is likely to be crucial. The Mediterranean is an asset in this regard mainly because it is the fastest way to move any warship from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indo-Pacific quadrant, as well as to defend Europe. It is not by chance that the U.S. Sixth Fleet is centred on the Mediterranean and headquartered at the Naval Support Activity of Naples, in Italy. The U.S. presence in the Mediterranean is also linked to another aspect that is becoming more and more relevant since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022: the Mediterranean also constitutes the southern flank of the NATO. As most of Europe is part of the U.S. sphere of influence and given the geographic situation of the continent, it is intuitive that its southern border constitutes an area of extreme relevance – and potentially weakness – for the Old Continent. Like Chapter 3 will thoroughly analyse, it is not coincidence that Russia has consistently been trying to increase its presence in the Mediterranean over the last years, acting in Libya and Syria. The whole phenomenon of Russian presence in Middle East and Africa is wider and linked to the historical will of having free access to warm seas as well as to the NATO enlargement towards east Europe. Nonetheless, what is worth to underscore here is how the Mediterranean is at the centre of this complex interaction and will continue to be so for the years ahead, as a link between two Oceans and as a room of inevitable friction between powers.

2.1.2 – An African country...

When analysing the geopolitical status of Libya, one shall always bear in mind that its huge territory lays entirely on the African continent. The size and the position of the country make it border Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt. As shown by the map below, Libya is completely nestled into the African continent.

⁶⁴ Limes 8/2021 – *Lezioni afgane*, Rome, *passim*.



Satellite map of Libya (bordered in white and red – Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>)

Tripoli is somewhat a gate between Maghreb (i.e. the north-western part of Africa, encompassing Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya) and Mashrek (i.e. the Arab-populated region located east of El Cairo). Algeria and Egypt are two of the most important Arab countries, with a prominent influence in their regions and significant role in the military and energetic fields. They jointly account for roughly 150 million of people, while Libya only has around 6 million – an impressive disproportion that must be duly taken into account when examining the interests the two countries have for Libya's destiny.

At the same time, Fezzan and the southern part of Cyrenaica border Niger, Chad and Sudan, part of which are crossed by the Sahel region. Given its dimension and the deserted environment, southern borders of Libya are porous and hard to control. Sahel is the region of transition between the Sahara to the north and the Sudanian savanna to the south. Sahel is unstable but with significant military presence (especially in Chad and Sudan), and as such it is of interest for several foreign powers. France considers it as an area where to expand its influence, also by means of the French-speaking communities (la “*Francophonie*”) as well as a potential sanctuary for Islamists terrorists. Russia sees the region as part of its wider strategy of influence in Africa and plays a key role in the quadrant, mainly by means of the paramilitary company Wagner Group. Lastly, the climate change is making the region less and less fit for human settlements, triggering mass migration towards Europe – mainly via Libya.

2.1.3 – ...on the edge of Middle East

While being in full an African country for its geographical position, Libya is majority-populated by Arabs and hence part of the Arab World. It has been a member of the Arab League since 1953.

This makes Libya one of the stages where the frequent confrontations within the Arab World take place, as shown by the presence of relevant Arab countries on different side of the ongoing clash of power (see Chapter 3). In other words, in light of the significant international presence, what happens in Libya reflects (and to some extent determine) what happens in Middle East, the heart of the Arab World. For instance, in August 2023 internal riots occurred after news spread that the Libyan Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush met with her Israeli counterpart Eli Cohen in Rome, in a session allegedly brokered by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Libya, like many other Arab countries, does not in fact have formal relations with Israel. Although Najla Mangoush claimed that the meeting was casual and unprepared, it is highly likely that it was arranged at the highest institutional levels of the two countries. Israel said the meeting was planned indeed.⁶⁵ The Libyan Minister was suspended and fled the country, after the riots fuelled by Tripoli's militias got worse.

⁶⁵ *Libya suspends foreign minister after meeting with Israeli foreign minister*, 20.8.2023, in www.reuters.com.

On the other hand, although not populated by Arabs, Turkey is keen to gain influence in Libya as part of its often-called neo-Ottoman strategy to become the major regional power of Middle East. A complex web of interests and historical ties between the two countries originates Turkey's projection in Libya, particularly in Tripolitania and in the city of Misrata.

In other words, it is impossible to understand Libya's unrest without seeing it as a part, however peripheral, of the wider Middle East region and without taking into account the constant turmoil such region goes through. As the U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor said in 2023, Middle East has "often been a net exporter of turbulence and insecurity".⁶⁶



Middle East region, with Libya lying on the left part of the map. (Source: 2012 Encyclopædia Britannica)

2.2 – Energy resources

The huge energy resources are one of the elements that make Libya's case unlike any other. They are, at the same time, one of the main pull-factors for internal and external players and one of the potential solution to address the country's current instability. Hence, a deeper look at this element is nothing less than crucial. Among its notable effects, the Russo-Ukrainian war triggered an energetic decoupling between Russia and its formerly best market – European Union. The Russia-West detachment urged Europe to quickly find alternative energy sources for gas and, to a lesser extent, for oil. Libya's resources can play a key role in this new scenario.

2.2.1 – Oil

As Chapter 1.2.2 explains, oil reserves in Libya were discovered only in 1959. Such discovery, along with the consequent use of the reserves for internal needs as well as for the export, dramatically changed the perspective and the position of the country at global level. Libya joined the OPEC in 1962.

Libya holds current esteemed oil reserves for roughly 48 billion barrels, an amount equal to the 39% of Africa's total reserves.⁶⁷ The amount makes Libya the first country for proven oil reserves in Africa and the tenth at world level, according to the outputs provided by the Oil and Gas Journal in December 2022.⁶⁸ It is also worth mentioning that Libya's crude oil is commonly considered a high-quality one, given the overall low quantity of sulphur (less than 0.1% of the total), easily processed into petroleum products and as such very valuable in comparison with other African reserves.⁶⁹ Given the situation of ongoing unrest, it does not come as a surprise

⁶⁶ Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer Ahead of the G20 Summit, 9.9.2023, in www.whitehouse.gov.

⁶⁷ U.S. Energy Information and Administration, *Country Analysis Executive Summary: Libya*, 2022, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Oil and Gas Journal, *Worldwide look at reserves and production*, 12/22. The report is available at www.ogi.com.

⁶⁹ Tijani A., *Libya, Congo, Algeria....Who has the best oil in Africa?*, in The African Report, 26.8.2021.

that the production stands at around 1.1 million barrels per day, consistently below countries with less reserves.⁷⁰ It is thus possible to conclude that the significant oil resources in Libya are far from being completely exploited. The oil production levels reflect naturally the political stability, as the historical production easily shows.

Libya's crude oil production reached around 1.7 million barrels per day between 2006 and 2010, shortly before the First Libyan Civil War. The political turmoil started in 2011 caused severe disruptions in oil extraction and in the exports, falling below 400,000 barrels per day in 2016. Despite a slow recovery in the production levels through 2019, the following conflicts made it fall to a record-low of 365,000 barrels per day in 2020. In January 2020, the eastern government's armed forces blockaded all of the country's eastern oil export terminals and closed the pipelines connecting two of the major oil fields, Sharara and El Feel. During most of 2020, Libya's offshore oil fields were the only ones in production, and from February through September, crude oil production averaged 100,000 barrels per day. The eastern and western governments signed a ceasefire agreement in October 2020, and Libya's national oil company lifted its force majeure on the coastal ports, which raised oil production. In 2021, Libya's crude oil production rose to nearly 1.2 million barrels per day, the highest output since 2012, with temporary disruptions to ports and pipelines during certain months because of pipeline leaks, maintenance issues, insufficient funding, and labour disputes. Analysts expect anyway the oil production to rise, despite the persistent lack of a political solution to unify the country. Finally, although being a remarkable producer, Libya has limited refining operational capacity that make it a net importer of petroleum products as a result.⁷¹

In line with the outlook of a classic rentier state, resource production and sale account for most of the national economy. The oil and gas production industry, in fact, currently constitutes around 60% of Libya's gross domestic product (GDP)⁷² and the value of oil exports was almost the 95% of total value of the exports between 2021 and 2022.⁷³ In 2021, oil incomes accounted for around the 98% of the total government revenues in 2021.⁷⁴ These data are not caused exclusively by the political instability; even during Gaddafi's era, the government relied mainly on energy revenues to sustain its budget, the GDP per capita and, ultimately, the vast majority of the population who was loyal to the Colonel's regime. From 1999 to 2003, for example, the oil sector contributed about 50% of GDP, 97% of the exports, and 75% of government revenues.⁷⁵ The export markets are not particularly diversified, in light of Libya's geographical position. Most of the crude oil is sold to European countries. In 2020, Europe accounted for about 63% of Libya's crude oil and condensate exports. The main terminals of such exports were Italy, Germany and Spain. China's position as Libyan oil purchaser has been consistently growing in the latest years and in 2020 accounted for 25% of total oil exports in 2020. The U.S. restarted oil imports in 2004 after lifting the sanctions previously imposed, although the overall numbers are negligible compared to the total production.⁷⁶

Blunt data hide part of the truth though. The most relevant piece of information concerning oil is not only the yearly production but most of all the location of the fields and of the infrastructure needed for export. The onshore fields located in the Sirte Basin holds about 80% of Libya's proven oil reserves and have a key role in the national oil output. The Sirte Basin is located in the centre of the country, bordered on the north by the Gulf of Sidra and developing south into the desert towards Chad. The major oil fields of the Sirte Basin include the Waha, Dahra, and Samha ones, in the west of the area; the Defa-Wah and the Nasser fields, in the north-centre; and the Amal, and Sarir fields, located toward the east. Additional deposits have been located elsewhere in the country, including near Ghadames on the western border, Murzuq in the southwest, and the Al-Kufrah oasis in the southeast. Exploration for new deposits has concentrated on Tripolitania and offshore, where a large field was discovered northwest of Tripoli in 1988. The Gulf of Sidra hosts some of the most relevant oil refinery, as well as ports and liquefied natural gas terminal that are crucial for the export. Other ports are also located in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

⁷⁰ According to the Oil and Gas Journal *Worldwide look*, for instance, Algeria and Angola produce respectively 1.47 and 1.26 million barrels per day, despite proven reserves of 12.2 and 2.5 billion barrels.

⁷¹ U.S. Energy Information and Administration, *Country Analysis*, p. 3.

⁷² Federal Republic of Germany BMZ, *Extreme dependence on oil*, 23.1.2023, in www.bmz.de.

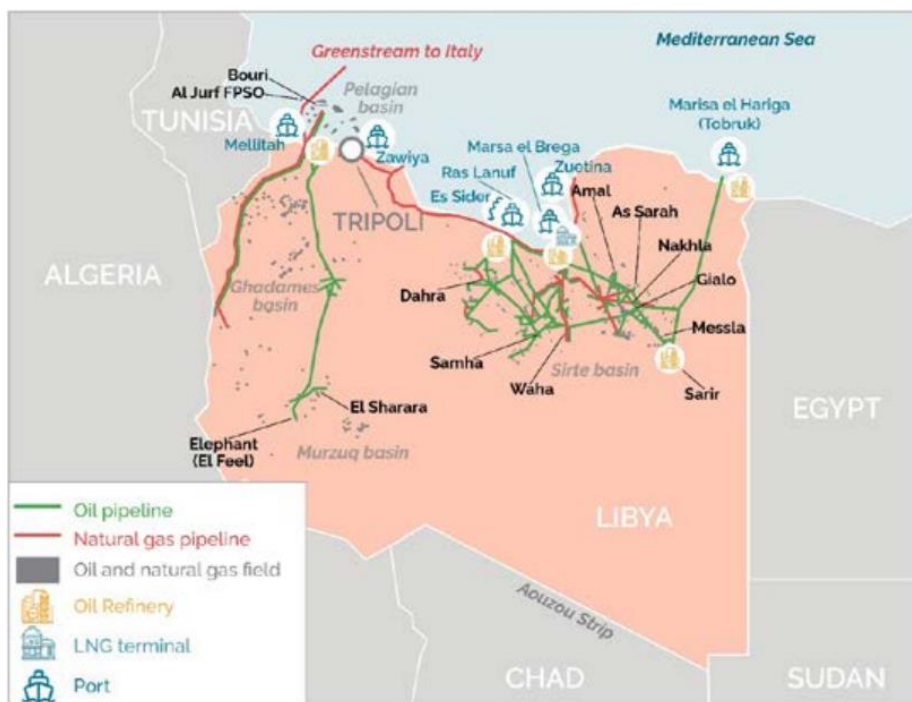
⁷³ OPEC, *Libya facts and figures*, in www.opec.org.

⁷⁴ Central Bank of Libya, 2021 *4th Quarter Economic Bulletin*, in www.cbl.gov.ly.

⁷⁵ Nasef A., *The Impact of Oil Revenues on the Libyan Economy*, in International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 2016.

⁷⁶ U.S. Energy Information and Administration, *Country Analysis*, p. 5.

The map below provides a comprehensive overview of the oil and gas fields and infrastructure, including pipeline and ports. Considering the location of the major fields in the Sirte Basin and, in particular, in the so called “oil crescent” area, it is easily understandable why such area has a primary strategic importance. Whoever controls the Sirte Basin and the export terminals control most of Libyan national wealth and has a clear advantage in seizing the country. From 2014, the two rival governments clashed over the control of oil incomes. The only entity authorised to sell Libyan oil on the international markets is the National Oil Corporation (NOC) established in 1970, while the revenues are collected by the Central Bank of Libya – both controlled by Tripoli’s government. Nonetheless, Field Marshal Haftar’s militias controls most of the oil crescent area and, therefore, is able to use any increase or decrease in the production as a political leverage.



Oil and gas fields and infrastructure. (Source: www.ispionline.com)

In July 2022, Farhat Bengdara was appointed Chairman of the National Oil Corporation. The appointment is relevant as it seems to be the outcome of a political deal between the Government of National Unity and Khalifa Haftar, considering how the oil production rose immediately after Bengdara entered into office.⁷⁷ In other words, such increase would not have been possible without Haftar’s consent, given its control of the most relevant production sites. Bengdara showed a strong will to increase the production pace, which may be a key element – alongside other factors – to try and reach a higher level of stability.

2.2.2 – Gas

Although oil is by far the most important energy resource in Libya, gas reserves and perspective are not negligible either. At the end of 2022, Libya had proved natural gas reserves of 53 trillion cubic feet, the fifth-largest African reserves behind Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria and Mozambique.⁷⁸

Non-associated gas (namely the gas produced by natural gas wells rather than by oil fields) accounted for more than 80% of Libya’s natural gas production over the past decade. Such gas comes mainly from the offshore site Bahr Essalam northwest of Tripoli and the onshore Wafa field in the western Ghadames Basin. Most of Libya’s associated gas instead is located in the Sirte Basin. This basic data show that the major location of currently used gas production site are located in Tripolitania and hence under the control of the Tripoli government. In terms of production, in 2020 Libya’s dry natural gas production fell to 438 billion cubic feet compared to the 500 in 2019. From 2014, the output has declined because of the unstable political and regulatory environment that discouraged

⁷⁷ Hajbi M., *Who is Farhat Bengdara, the new chief of Libya’s black gold?*, in The African Report, 19.8.2022.

⁷⁸ Oil and Gas Journal, *Worldwide look at reserves and production*, 12/22, in www.ogi.com.

international oil companies from developing natural gas fields. Moreover, shutting oil fields compromised the production of associated gas too.

The NOC plans to increase Libya's production by reducing natural gas flaring and developing new fields, although the current political stalemate and budget constraints make it difficult to respect the esteemed timeline for the completion of projects. The NOC started three new natural gas development projects since 2018 in an effort to bolster the natural gas production and offset natural declines from aging fields. In late 2018, the Mellitah Oil and Gas Company (partly owned by the NOC), brought online the second phase of the Bahr Es Salam field and completed a compression upgrade at the Wafa natural gas field to increase its capacity. In January 2023, the NOC announced a new partnership with the Italian state-owned company ENI to develop two new plots with expected natural gas reserves of 6 trillion cubic feet and an estimated production capacity of 750 million cubic feet per day for 25 years. The agreement is intended to increase gas production to supply Libya and Europe. According to the publicly available information, the project also includes the construction of a carbon capture and storage plant in Mellitah.⁷⁹ In early 2021, the NOC also started operations at the Al Faregh oil and natural gas field project expansion, located in the Sirte Basin. Additional NOC plans include increasing natural gas production from offshore and onshore fields.⁸⁰ It is relevant to note that in 2022 the NOC Chairman Farhat Bengdara declared that Libya has "concluded an agreement with Eni and BP to start drilling and producing gas in the Mediterranean". According to Bengdara, the gas field from which ENI and BP will start production is even larger to the Egyptian Zohr field - considered the largest gas field in the Mediterranean Sea – and the overall country's proven gas reserves exceed 80 trillion cubic. To full exploit this significant potential, the sector seems to need new investments of USD 4 billion annually to maintain the volume of production.⁸¹

The exports amounts suffered naturally from the disorder following Gaddafi's deposition and the subsequent civil wars. After having peaked in 2010, the gas exports decreased steadily because of the scenario and the oil fields closures. Thanks to a slow rise, in 2021 exports of Libyan dry natural gas was 111.98 billion cubic feet. From 2012 all the natural gas was exported through pipelines, among which the Greenstream one – a 520km long pipeline connecting since 1959 Mellitah, on Libya's north-western coast, to Gela in Italy – has a preminent role. Greenstream became the sole outlet of natural gas exports after the civil war destroyed the country's only liquefaction terminal in 2011.

Unlike oil, the gas deal is more relevant from the geopolitical point of view rather than from the economic one. Two main reasons drive this conclusion.

The first one, as mentioned above, is the consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Although its duration is difficult to forecast, the energy decoupling between Europe and Russia seems to be here to stay. The challenge brought by Russia to the U.S.-led order, Russia's reluctant pivot to China and the decline of the European approach that saw Moscow as a reliable partner, are elements that probably will design the international relations in the years to come. Consequently, European societies (and especially their industrial production sites) have to find reliable and affordable sources of energy, the most important of which is surely gas. Liquefied natural gas does not seem to be a long term option, as it requires considerable investment to build the regasification plants and it is normally more expensive for the importing countries. This dynamic was proven correct by the export prices European countries had to pay to have the U.S. liquefied gas supplied on their territory in 2022.⁸² Libya's gas reserves may take over a significant share of gas consumption in Europe, which in turn may also benefit the country's stability thanks to the steady income linked to medium-long term contracts.

Libyan gas matters also matters because of the infrastructures necessary to export it. As noted before, the Greenstream pipeline to Italy has been the only working pipeline in Libya for a long period. If Bengdara statements on the new gas fields hold true, Libya may have to decide soon how to export all this gas to Europe. In principle, two ways are possible: (i) the first one is building a short pipeline to transport the newly extracted gas to Egypt, where it is liquefied and shipped on the other side of the Mediterranean. This solution is not invasive but likely to increase the final price, thus making Libya's gas less competitive. Also, it would imply for Libya

⁷⁹ Gnana J., *Libya's NOC, Eni sign agreement to develop two plots with 6 trillion cubic feet of gas reserves*, 29.1.2023, on www.spglobal.com.

⁸⁰ U.S. Energy Information and Administration, *Country Analysis*, p. 6.

⁸¹ Zaptia S., *Libya concludes agreement with Eni and BP to start drilling for gas in Mediterranean*, in Libya Herald, 31.10.2022.

⁸² Hernandez A., *Why cheap US gas costs a fortune in Europe*, in Politico, 15.11.2022.

to rely on a third party and specifically Egypt, a powerful neighbour country with its own specific program for Libya; (ii) the second possible solution is to use investments both from inside and outside Libya to build a new pipeline, for instance a branch who would connect Libya's gas fields to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline between Greece, Albania and Italy. The downside of this project would be to hamper the ambition of Turkey, one of the most relevant actor on the Libyan stage. One of the foundations of the Turkish strategy in the Mediterranean is the 2019 deal with Tripoli's government, establishing two economic exclusive zones (EEZ) who increased Turkey's power projection on the seas (see Chapter 3). Bypassing the Turkey-claimed EEZ and directly connecting Libya's gas field and Greece's Trans Adriatic Pipeline would lower Ankara's centrality in the area and ultimately diminish its role. Moreover, any Turkish' threat to Europe of interrupting the gas flow from Azerbaijan would be much less worrying if the Trans Adriatic Pipeline could benefit from the Libyan gas. Any step in this direction, in other words, is likely to trigger Turkey's reaction.

2.3 – Migrations

Migration is a complex global trend that entails social, economic and political issues. In 2020, the International Organization for Migration estimated around 281 million international migrants in the world, which amounts to 3.6% of the global population. In other words, one person in thirty is moving elsewhere from its place of origins.⁸³ It is a constant flow of human beings moving far away from where they were born, with a pace impossible to stop and barely possible to manage. Migrations have deep consequences over the human communities they affect, both those the migrants leave and those where they settle. Since the human communities are the ultimate foundation of geopolitics, migration are nothing less than a genuine geopolitical phenomenon.

Migration routes from Africa to Europe are among the most intensely trafficked in the world, for structural (and quite intuitive) factors. In terms of wealth, Africa remains the world less developed continent. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2023 the average Gross Domestic Product per capita of African countries at current prices was USD 2,140, while in the same period it was USD 39,940 within the European Union – almost twenty times as much. Against this well-known disproportion, the median age of the two continent is even more striking. Africa is the youngest continent in the world and its median age in 2022 was 18.8 years⁸⁴, meaning that half of the population is younger and half is older than this threshold. In 2000 it was 17 – having increased only by 1.8 years in a period of twenty-two years. On the other hand, in the European Union the median age for 2022 was 44.4 years, from 41.9 years in 2012 – having increased by 2.5 years in ten years.⁸⁵ Data show not only that EU countries are significantly older than African ones, but also and – most of all – that such gap is bound to thicken over time.

Lastly, climate change is hitting Africa hard. Factors such as water scarcity, extreme weather events and sea level rise would make some lands even less fit for human settlements and force millions of people to move to survive. Climate change will add to water stress globally and will reduce food security, which may be already hampered by the block of Ukrainian grain if the Black Sea Grain Initiative does not last until the end of the conflict with Russia. All these factors has major consequences for health and livelihoods, and for internal and international conflicts. The western Sahel and part of North Africa are particularly at risk.⁸⁶

In a nutshell: on one side there's a rich, developed and averagely old continent. On the other, a huge space inhabited by very young people, lacking resources and hardly hit by climate change. The flow of people is massive and it is not going to arrest anytime soon. With its northern position and a long Mediterranean coastline, Libya is exactly in the middle of what it is conventionally called the Central Mediterranean route of migrations.

Although a small percentage of migrants departing from Libya reaches Malta, the majority of them actually disembarks on Italian shores. Yearly data show gradual increase of migrations towards Europe via Libya. According to the UNHCR, from 1 January 2022 until 30 November 2022 Italy received 100,942 sea arrivals, with a 64% increase compared to the same period of the previous year. Out of the total amount, 51,288 (i.e. the 50.8%) people departed from Libya, without prejudice for the over 21,000 migrants rescued and brought back by the Libyan Coast Guard in the same period.⁸⁷ The second most relevant place of departure was Tunisia, with

⁸³ International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2022*.

⁸⁴ Data available on www.statista.com.

⁸⁵ Eurostat, *Half of EU's population older than 44.4 years in 2022*, 22.2.2023, in <https://ec.europa.eu>.

⁸⁶ Noonan E., *The future of climate migration*, in www.europarl.europa.eu.

⁸⁷ International Organization for Migration, *Maritime Update*, 5.12.2022.

about 30,000 people.⁸⁸ Breaking down the arrivals by nationality, it is not surprising finding Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan and Cote d'Ivoire among the most frequent countries, while it is also interesting to see how the Libyan route is often chosen by people coming from Syria, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.⁸⁹ This lead to the intuitive conclusion that the Libyan route to Europe has a vast catchment area in Africa and Asia, probably because of its well-tested mechanism.

For the purpose of this research, it is worth to note that the most used ports for the migrants' departure from Libya are traditionally located in Tripolitania, as shown by the International Organization for Migration data:



Ports of departure in 2023, flagged by orange dots (Source: <https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals>)

This factor has drawn Europe's and Italy's attention on the stability of Tripolitania, in order to control the departures and avoid massive flows of migrants. The chance to stabilize the region was likely one of the element who brought European countries, alongside most of the international community, to back the Tripoli-based government during the civil wars. Nonetheless, this traditional feature of the Central Mediterranean route is changing, as the map above shows that recently people started leaving from Cyrenaica's ports more often.⁹⁰ This is a crucial element who may affect the international support to the rival governments in Libya; in May 2023, the Italian Prime Minister met for the first time in Rome the Field Marshal Haftar precisely to discuss such issue, despite the Italian official support to the Government of National Unity.⁹¹

The European Union sought to address the migration with low results. In 2023, the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM) was launched in order to provide capacity-building services and help Tripoli's government to effectively manage its borders. EUBAM Libya was quite criticised by the available literature, who underscored the inefficiency and inconsistency of the mission and its lack of vision over the Libyan administrative apparatus. In particular, some authors noted as the features of a rentier state and the constant distribution of oil revenues under Gaddafi's regime was a disincentive to build a proper state structure; Libya, in other words, would not be able to absorb EU's help for borders management.⁹² At the same time, the EU border security efforts (as well as the one put in place by member states such as Italy) have benefitted a wide range of informal forces and armed groups who most likely increased the fragmentation and made stabilization even harder.⁹³ It comes not as a surprise that the EU itself was criticized for pursuing own interests in Libya beyond the statutory mandate of the mission.⁹⁴

Migrations from Libya are relevant because they constitute a formidable mean of pressure on European governments, seeking to avoid any discontent in their public opinions. Gaddafi was perfectly aware of this and acted for years as a gatekeeper, choosing to

⁸⁸ UNHCR, *Italy Weekly Snapshot* 25.12.2022, in <https://data.unhcr.org>.

⁸⁹ UNHCR, *Italy Weekly*, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Agenzia Nova, *Libya: General Haftar's forces block 3.400 migrants in just over a month*, 2.1.2023, in www.agenzianova.com.

⁹¹ ANSA, *Libia: Meloni vede Haftar, focus sui flussi migratori verso l'Italia*, 4.5.2023 in www.ansa.it.

⁹² Akamo J.O., *The Vicious Circle of Fragmentation: The EU and the Limits of Its Approach to Libya*, JOINT Research Papers, 2023, p. 23.

⁹³ Herbert M., *Less than the sum of its parts. Europe's fixation with Libyan border security*, 27.5.2019, in <https://issafrica.org>.

⁹⁴ European Parliamentary question - E-004411/2021, 28.9.2021, in www.europarl.europa.eu.

control (or not) the migration flows based on its political needs. In fact, he was for long time an important player in the international discussion about migrations. Since Gaddafi's deposition, the situation became increasingly problematic as migration control requires control of territory, which in turn implies the monopoly of force. As we have seen in the previous Chapter, on the opposite, Libya is an area where multiple powers exist and compete. Helping stabilizing Libya is for Europe the pre-condition to have a say in the migration control.

That said, two other elements must be factored in the equation. The first one is that migration control is a zero sum game. Human trafficking is one of the most lucrative businesses in a war economy, such as the one existing in Libya today. Armed groups, however integrated in the official forces, enjoy high revenues from smuggling people on the other side of the Mediterranean. Thanks to the deals reached with some European countries such as Italy, they received significant means and, to some extent, political legitimacy. They can represent themselves as authorities in their respective areas of influence, providing a service that thousands of people every year seek for. Such groups will strenuously fight back every attempt to weaken illegal migrations, as they would lose their main source of profit. The second element is that stabilizing Libya does not mean *per se* that the migration would be under control. As mentioned below, it is a vast and complex phenomenon the management of which requires coordinated actions in different quadrants, including consistent and significant development projects in the migrants' countries of origin.

CHAPTER 3

Geopolitics is concerned by any power confrontation over a certain territory and, as such, it includes interstate as well as intrastate rivalries.⁹⁵ In line with such premise, this chapter aims to describe and analyse the several players, both internal and external, currently active on the Libyan soil. One of the main peculiarities of Libyan situation is in fact the presence of multiple centres of powers collaborating or competing; some of them represent internal (even local) concerns, while some others – perhaps the most relevant ones – come from the outside and yet consider Libya a key piece of their own foreign strategy.

3.1 – Internal actors

Unlike other international scenarios in which factions are defined and not very mobile, the Libyan case is characterized by the extreme fluidity of political positions. Tracing the multiple centres of interests back to defined patterns would be difficult. One of the most common views describe Libya as a clash between Islamist forces, based in Tripoli, and secularist forces, based in the east. While reflecting part of the truth, this simplification is fallacious; evidence of this, for example, is the fact that in 2022 Fathi Bashagha – considered very close to the Muslim Brotherhood – was appointed prime minister of the National Stability Government supported by Haftar. Analysts highlighted how the Libyan intrastate relationships see continuous reconfigurations of alliance and rivalries, often based on nothing else than the common interest to protect a certain *status quo*. Localism is what characterise Libyan constituencies, a major hurdle on the way for stabilising the country.⁹⁶ Such fluidity makes also the analysis more complex. However, there seem to be underlying trends through which to study Libyan political life. It has been keenly observed, for example, that for a variety of historical reasons Libya is the only oil-rich Middle Eastern country in which the ‘periphery’ (disparate social forces and communities) prevails on the ‘centre’ (centralized institutions).⁹⁷

In terms of **ethnicity** and **religion**, Libya does not present major divisions. 92% of the population is made of Arabs and 5% is made of Berbers. The Touareg and Tebou groups are mainly active in Fezzan and south Cyrenaica, limited in amount but with relevant bonds across the neighbouring country. The remaining population, negligible in numbers, includes Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Italian, Maltese, Pakistani, Tunisian, and Turkish people. The Islam is followed by 96.6% of the population, most of which is Sunni.⁹⁸

The **tribes** are nothing less than a founding element of the Libyan society. Although slightly declined over the decades thanks to urbanization and internal migrations, the influence of the tribes as a mean of direct socio-political organization is still present in rural areas as well as in towns and cities. Even before – and more importantly for the purpose of this analysis – tribes are a mean of social identification and affiliation. The literature noted correctly that the “tribal ethos is still important; you still use the tribe from which you come as a means of identity. When the control of the state breaks down, then the tribal ethos becomes an alternative mechanism by which you seek security.”⁹⁹ In a failed-state situation like the one Libya has been experiencing since Gaddafi’s deposition, tribes are more important than ever.

According to some analysts, the major tribes are about 140, only 30 of which are considered the most relevant from a social, economic and political standpoint. Only 15% of the people living in Libya does not belong to any tribe.¹⁰⁰ The situation is made even more complex by the fact that tribes do not act as collective and monolithic actors but rather as group of “sub-tribes”, often linked by family connections.¹⁰¹ Tribes are so deeply embedded into the Libyan society that they have been able to survive throughout the history of the country, regardless of regimes’ changes. Indeed, as explained above (see Chapter 1.3.2) Gaddafi’s rule even reinforced the tribal bonds as most of the people relied on their tribes to get protection, welfare or a job – while the tribes that the regime considered as enemies were punished by cutting them out from any assistance or benefit. They represent one of the major factor of

⁹⁵ Lacoste Y., *La Géopolitique par les cartes*, Paris, 2022, p. 90: “Le raisonnement géopolitique ne se limite pas aux rivalités entre des États : il prend aussi compte des rivalités plus pacifiques entre toutes sortes de pouvoirs sur des territoires nationaux.”

⁹⁶ Lacher W., *Libya’s Fragmentation: A Conversation with Wolfram Lacher*, in <https://pomeps.org>.

⁹⁷ Pack J., *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder*, Oxford, 2021, p. 56.

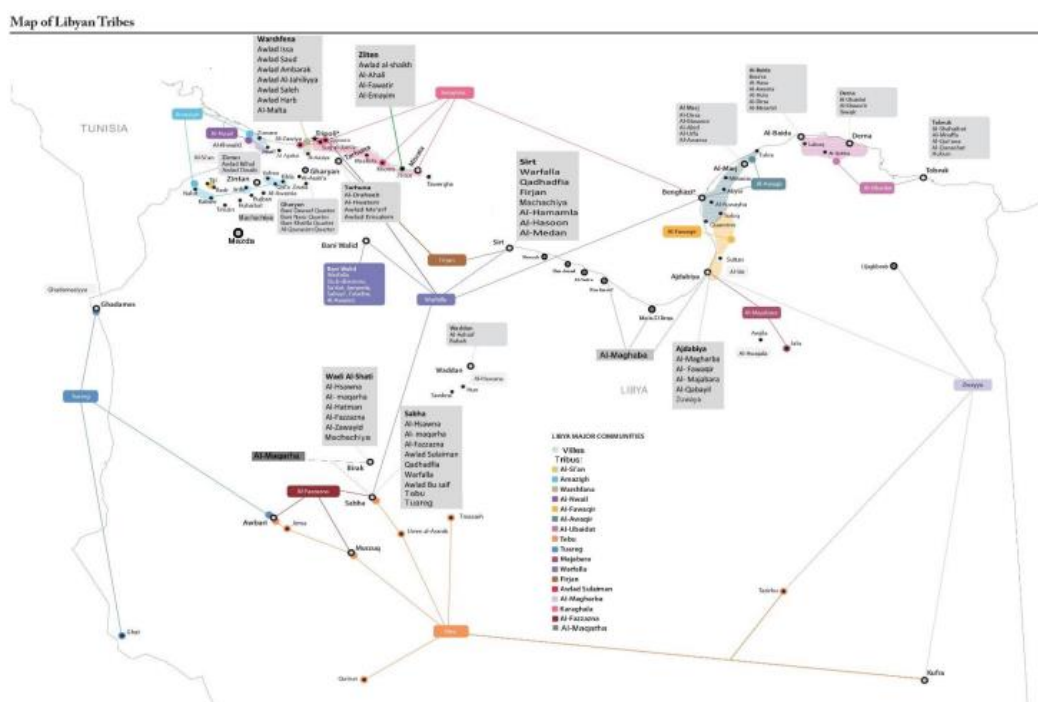
⁹⁸ The World Factbook – Libya, in www.cia.gov.

⁹⁹ Bell A., Witter D., *Roots of rebellion*, Institute for the Study of War, 2011, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ Hatitah H., *Libyan Tribal Map: network of loyalties that will determine Gaddafi’s fate*, 24.2.2011, in www.cetri.be.

¹⁰¹ Ben Lamma M., *The Tribal Structure in Libya: Factor for fragmentation or cohesion?*, in *Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman et du Sahel*, September 2017, p. 12.

complexity in Libya and yet having a broader picture of tribal affiliation is essential to the analysis. The scope of the thesis does not allow a comprehensive analysis of all the Libyan tribes; hence, only the major ones will be hereinafter described in short.



Map of major Libyan tribes. (Source: *The United States Institute of Peace*, 118, August 2016)

The Warfalla is the biggest Libyan tribe and the most powerful one in Tripolitania, counting approximately one million of people. Warfalla has been allied for decades with the Gaddafi tribe – the one the Colonel belonged to – that, although much smaller and mostly situated in the Sirte area, got to improve its influence during the 42 years of Gaddafi's regime. Consistently with the tribal conception of society, Gaddafi mainly relied on his own tribe and on the Warfalla allies for his security and the regime stability. The town of Zintan generated the eponymous tribe, who rose as a significant political and military player after Gaddafi's fall.¹⁰² Although based in Tripolitania, during the Second Civil War the Zintan tribe sided with Haftar and participated to the failed siege of Tripoli – a further proof that a schematic division east-west is reductive and limited. Again in Tripolitania, Bani-Walid and Tarhuna tribes are also worth to mention as they are numerically relevant and were part of the Colonel's regime backbone.

The differences between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica are visible also when it comes to tribes' consistency and position, as in the east they play even a more important socio-economic role. For sake of description, Cyrenaica tribes can be divided into either Marabtin or Saadi tribes. The Marabtin tribes are not less than fifteen and have indigenous Berber or older Arab lineages. The Zuwata tribe is possibly the most relevant in Cyrenaica, holding a large area from the Kufra Oases to Jalu and Ajdabiya, near the Gulf of Sidra – namely the area where many oil fields lie, making the Zuwata one of the most relevant tribe in the country regardless of their dimension. Historically speaking, the nine tribes of the Saadi confederation would hold instead the towns and fertile lands along the Mediterranean coastline between Egypt and Tripolitania. The Bara'sa, the Obeidi and the Magharba are among the most relevant Saadi tribes, with the former traditionally living in the Green Mountain area and considered close allied of the Sanusi Order, as proven by the prominent high-ranking posts their members had under King Idris. Even Gaddafi tried to co-opt the Bara'sa through political affiliation and marital links, and gain legitimacy from their participation to the regime.¹⁰³

The Fezzan region is dominated by the large Magariha tribe, based in the surroundings of Sabha. Despite ruling over a vast but desertic area, the Magariha tribe benefitted from a strong relationship with Gaddafi and many of its members held high-ranking positions under the Colonel's rule.

¹⁰² Istituto Alti Studi per la Difesa, *Influenza geopolitica della Libia nel bacino mediterraneo*, 2017, in www.difesa.it, pp. 41-42.

¹⁰³ Bell A., Witter D., *Roots of rebellion*, Institute for the Study of War, 2011, pp. 17-19.

Alongside the tribes, armed groups and **militias** are probably the most relevant factors of instability in Libya. As mentioned for the tribes, militias flourished as soon as the centralized institutions fell apart as of 2011, working as means of military strength as well as tools of socio-economic local control. The huge availability of weapons accumulated by Gaddafi during his long regime made a huge difference, as in a war scenario armed groups become the front line of political clash. Militias constitute the backbone of the military arms of the two rival governments.

The lack of alternative sources of power, the availability of valuable marketable resources, the control of the territory: all these elements led the analysts to conclude that in 2011 Libya steadily transformed from a 'neopatrimonial state' – where a single leader uses the institutions to arbitrarily distribute revenues in exchange for loyalty – to a situation of 'armed neopatrimonialism', where many leaders replicate the same scheme (revenues for loyalties) to gain political legitimacy, although on a smaller scale.¹⁰⁴ After years of armed clash, the militias managed to develop centralized leadership structures and to absorb several of the former regime's military and intelligence officers, creating more stable structures of power. As a result, the militia landscape – that in Tripoli alone initially involved dozens of different groups – is now progressively consolidating.¹⁰⁵ Militias are probably the group benefitting the most from the dissolution of any centralized institutions, as the lack of oversight leave them free to control their territory, run legal and illegal business and consolidate people's loyalty. Against this scenario, it comes as no surprise that a myriad of armed groups are currently active in Libya. Whether formally or not under the authority of one of the two rival governments, all of them enjoy broad autonomy, access to sources of incomes and vast arsenals, control of strongholds in the country. It is here possible to quickly summarize their existence based on the area they mainly operate in. Needless to say, having a reliable estimation of how many soldiers belong to all the countless militias is not possible. What is worth to mention here, however, is each of this group has access to men, weapons and sometimes international sponsors. They manage a wide range of business, including oil extraction and smuggling, through which they receive the economic resources to pursue their own political goals:

- the Zintan Brigades (Al Qaqa, Al Sawaiq, the Civic Brigade) well trained paramilitary groups siding with the eastern government and allied with Haftar's Libyan National Army. They are currently united under the Zintan Revolutionaries' Military Council. Although having a weak demographic base, the Zintan militias gain military prestige by controlling the international airport and capturing Gaddafi's second-born son Saif al-Islam;
- the Tripoli militias (grouped under the RADA Special Deterrence Force or Tripoli Military Council) tend to support the Tripoli-based government with high level of independence. Being politically Islamists, some of them benefitted from Qatar's financial support¹⁰⁶ (on Qatar's role in the Libyan crisis, see the second part of this chapter);
- the Misrata militias, the largest ones in Libya, equipped with heavy weapons including tanks and artillery. Misrata is a city 180km east of Tripoli, traditionally considered an important base of the Muslim Brotherhood and the closest political stronghold of Turkish interests in Libya. Given several clashes in the past and notwithstanding its role in defeating Daesh in 2016, Misrata is quite isolated among Tripolitania's political and armed groups.¹⁰⁷ All the same, they count more than 200 armed groups and up to 40.000 soldiers;¹⁰⁸
- the Benghazi militias, some of which are grouped under the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries, a military coalition composed of Islamist and jihadist militias (the most important being Ansar al-Sharia and Libya Shield 1). Other prominent groups are the 17 February Martyrs and the Rafallah al-Sahati brigades.

The number, the military equipment and the strong link with the population make the hundreds of armed group one of the main obstacles on the way of Libya's stabilization, taking into account that they obviously refuse to disband as this would terminate instantly their political power. Ever since Gaddafi's removal, the National Transitional Council and later the General National Congress tried

¹⁰⁴ Ardemagni E., Saini Fasanotti F., *From warlords to statelords. Armed groups and power trajectories in Libya and Yemen*, 2022, in www.ispionline.it, pp. 18-19.

¹⁰⁵ Lacher W., *Libya's New Order*, 26.1.2023, in www.newleftreview.org.

¹⁰⁶ Pack J., Mezran K., Eljarh M., *Libya's Faustian Bargains: Breaking the Appeasement Cycle*, in *Atlantic Council*, 5.5.2014.

¹⁰⁷ Pusztai W., *Libya's conflict – A very short introduction*, November 2019, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Istituto Alti Studi per la Difesa, *Influenza*, p. 50.

to put under control the activity of armed groups, by disarming the militias and integrating them into the newly formed state. Instead, the final decision was to subsidize the revolutionary militias through public funds. The main consequence was the proliferation of revolutionary groups, rising from 25,000 estimated to have fought during the First Civil War up to 200,000 self-proclaimed revolutionaries one year later.¹⁰⁹ In addition those groups control part the two most vital economic resources of Libya: oil fields and trade routes, the latter being used also for smuggling human beings on the opposite shores of the Mediterranean. In the vacuum of Gaddafi's aftermath, militias control *de facto* microstates and the consequent war economy. It is beneficial to repeat that analysing allegiances and rivalries in Libya through the lens of purely geographical, tribal or ideological reasons would be misleading; the state of armed groups proves above all the rest that Libya faces primarily a fluid conflict of powers.

3.2 – External actors

Although several analysts argue otherwise, the action and the inputs of external actors have been crucial to amplify Libya's instability and, conversely, they can serve as key factors to stabilize the area. Many States have direct geographical, economic or military interests in Libya. To try and put some order in this complex universe of conflicting interests, it is beneficial to categorize the main outer players currently active in Libya into three main classes: (1) the neighbouring States; (2) the other Arab States; (3) the great powers.

3.2.1 – The neighbouring States: Egypt, Turkey, Italy, France

When considering the border of a State in the most conventional way, we normally refers to a land boundary. Hence, only Egypt can be considered as a Libya's bordering State *stricto sensu* as it lies on the country's east side. However, this would give a partial vision of the geopolitical situation: for the reasons hereinafter explained, also Turkey, Italy and France as Libya's neighbouring States are crucial. Their geographical position and, even more, their subjective perception of geography make them so.

According to a famous quote attributed to Henry Kissinger “the Arabs can't make war without **Egypt**; and they can't make peace without Syria”. As the most populous Arab country and a bordering State, Egypt has vital interests in Libya. It is not by chance that Cairo became one of the hubs of Libyan political life after Gaddafi's regime dissolution¹¹⁰, in line with its tradition of safe shelter to Libyan political refugees throughout the 20th century. Egypt shares a land frontier with Libya, which means that Libyan situation can be a direct threat to Cairo's security. From a territorial perspective, Egypt must secure Cyrenaica in order to avoid military threats and gain strategic depth in case of war: the huge Libyan Desert would be a useful area to stretch the enemy supply lines in case of military attack from east, as proven by the North African Campaign between 1940 and 1943 (as the German General Johann von Ravenstein once said: “The Western desert may be the tactician's paradise, but it is the quartermaster's hell”).¹¹¹ Egypt can simply not afford a hostile government at its west. This became particularly evident when Field Marshal el-Sisi overthrown the Morsi government in 2013, ending the Muslim Brotherhood grasp on Egyptian power. Egypt's internal politics sees a deep divide between secularist and Islamists, that exacerbates the national cohesion and led to dozen of terrorist attacks yearly. From 2013, el-Sisi consistently challenged any attempt of Islamist forces to control the whole Libya since the Cairo regime itself would be at stake should the Islamist politics forces or, even worse, Islamist terrorism regain power in the region.¹¹² Furthermore, Egypt has strong economic interests in Libya: roughly 900,000 migrants live and work there and Egyptian companies have concluded considerable investments in the country.¹¹³ In the final stage of the Second Libyan Civil War, President el-Sisi asked and obtained the Parliament permission to deploy troops in Libya in case any threat to Egypt's national security arises.¹¹⁴

Moreover, Egypt approach towards Libya reflects the competition with Turkey's increasing assertiveness in Eastern Mediterranean. The Egyptian Zohr field is the largest gas field in the Mediterranean Sea and Egypt seeks to become the regional hub for gas supply. Europe would be a natural market for gas outputs, and yet any attempt to bring gas in Europe would clash with Ankara's interests and with the claimed EEZ described above. Against this backdrop, the two countries seem natural rivals. Hence, it comes as no

¹⁰⁹ Ardemagni E., Saini Fasanotti F., *From warlords*, p. 49.

¹¹⁰ Rahem S., *Les élites de l'ancien régime libyen : reconfigurations politiques en contexte transnational*, in L'Année du Maghreb, 28, pp. 41 e ss.

¹¹¹ A British Officer, *Behind the British Victory in North Africa*, 1.1.1944, in www.foreignaffairs.com.

¹¹² Istituto Alti Studi per la Difesa, *Influenza*, p. 67.

¹¹³ Pusztai W., *Libya's*, p. 6.

¹¹⁴ Mourad M., *Egypt's Sisi wins parliamentary approval for possible Libya intervention*, 20.7.2020, in www.reuters.com.

surprise that Egypt is strongly backing Haftar's forces in Cyrenaica while Turkey supports the GNU in Tripoli. The underlining logic of Middle East competition is consistently reflected in Libya's fragmentation.

Turkey has been perhaps the most active player in the Mediterranean region in the last years. Its heterodox attitude within NATO, its convergence with Russia and its role in Syria and Libya made it a unique player. Despite losing the area to Italy in 1911-1912 after centuries of domain, Turkey kept close ties with Libya, in particular with the city of Misrata. Hundreds of thousand people living in western Libya are '*Kouloughlis*', namely descendants of Turks living in the then-Ottoman domain.¹¹⁵ Moreover, good relationships facilitate trade: Libya can be a convenient market for Turkish export and, more in general, a small but reliable economic partner.

The renewed Turkish posture in international affairs has led to analysts to discuss, with a somewhat simplistic expression, of neo-Ottomanism. It seems more correct to say that Turkey has rediscovered its imperial aspiration, adapting them to the times (for instance, with regard to the use of political Islam), and that Libya is a cornerstone of such project. As described in Chapter 1.4.2, in 2019 Khalifa Haftar – backed by Russian and Sudanese mercenaries – launched a massive offensive to conquer the western part of Libya and sieged Tripoli. Seizing the capital would have most likely annihilated the western government recognized by the international community and let Haftar to grasp the whole country. The then-GNA Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj made a desperate plea for help to Libya's closer partners such as Italy, US, UK, Algeria and Turkey¹¹⁶ – a call only Ankara responded to by sending military staff, Syrian mercenaries and equipment. Turkey's intervention was decisive in holding off Haftar's assault to Tripoli and led to the 2020 ceasefire, brokered also by Russia, which is still standing. Thanks to President Erdogan's determination, the country was able to take advantage of other countries uncertainties and promptly filled the gap left by Western countries in the crucial moment of Tripoli siege; a further proof that geopolitics does not accept vacuums of powers. Turkey's intervention came with strings attached though.

The greatest expression of the new Ankara's geopolitical posture is its maritime policy, the '*Mavi Vatan*' ('Blue Homeland') doctrine. Conceived by the Turkish navy and in particular by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in the early 2000s, the doctrine has become a cornerstone of Ankara's foreign policy ever since, arguing for Turkey's need to claim a vast maritime domain in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea.¹¹⁷ Obviously, claiming broader maritime domains around Turkey triggers reactions by other States, given the relatively small dimension and the highly competitiveness of the Eastern Mediterranean quadrant. As shown by the map below displaying the Mavi Vatan extension, countries like Greece and Cyprus would be directly affected while others such as Israel and Egypt would perceive a direct threat stemming from Ankara's maritime expansion.



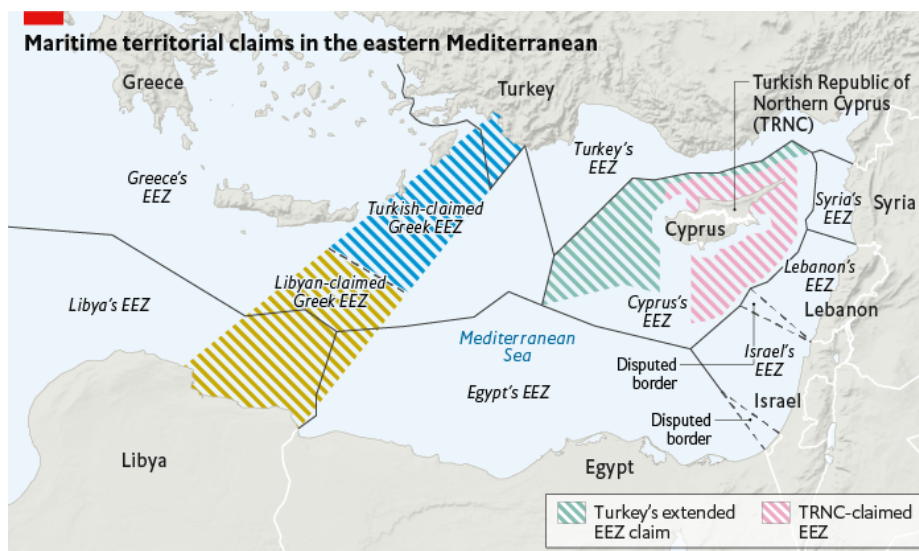
The Mavi Vatan doctrine maritime extension. Turkey's maritime claim is coloured in blue (Source: <https://fr.wikipedia.org>).

¹¹⁵ Pusztai W., *Libya's*, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ Serraj chiede aiuto all'Italia e ad altri 4 Paesi "amici" (ma non alla Francia), 20.12.2019, in www.agi.it.

¹¹⁷ Valenzano C.G., *Mediterranean Equilibria: Italian-Turkish Balancing and competition over Libya*, IAI Commentaries, December 2021, p. 5.

This holds particularly true when it comes to the definition of the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of the region. The EEZ are set forth by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea signed in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1982, as the maritime areas in which a State has special rights for exploring and using marine resources, including energy production from renewable sources. The EEZ can extend from the outer limit of the territorial sea (12 nautical miles from the baseline) up to 200 nautical miles. Turkey and Libya never adhered to the Montego Bay Convention, which was in turn ratified by – among others – Greece, Cyprus and Egypt. In this context, the prize of Turkey's help against Haftar's offensive was a Memorandum of Understanding signed in Istanbul on 27 November 2019 and composed of two parts: the first one guaranteeing Turkish military help to the GNA, the second one establishing the boundaries of the respective EEZ.



EEZ in Eastern Mediterranean according to the November 2019 deal (Source: <https://country.eiu.com>)

As shown by the map above, both Turkey and Libya agreed bilaterally to expand their EEZ well beyond the limit of 200 nautical miles imposed by the Montego Bay Convention, so that the two zones will touch creating a *de facto* corridor. From Ankara's standpoint, this is perfectly consistent with the Mavi Vatan doctrine. Although not recognized by international law, the deal has two immediate effects. The first one is that the Turkey-claimed EEZ would prevent Greece and Cyprus (i.e. the internationally recognized Cyprus, controlling the southern part of the island) to claim their EEZ in accordance with the Montego Bay Convention, thus fuelling the regional tensions. The second effect is that, sticking to their claim, Turkey and Libya may control any attempt to trespass the EEZ corridor from east towards west, for instance building a pipeline to bring gas from the rich fields close to Israel and Egypt to Western Europe.¹¹⁸ The first victim of the deal is the EastMed pipeline, planned to transport East Mediterranean energy resources to mainland Greece via Cyprus and Crete – crossing exactly the Libyan-Turkish EEZ corridor. Again, this is not just an economic goal but rather a geopolitical leverage. Whatever the issue arising, Turkey will have a say. Ankara's influence in Libya was confirmed in October 2022, when the GNU then led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah signed a new cooperation agreement with Turkey reaffirming the 2019 deal, thus consolidating Turkey's role in Libya and its crucial position for any future negotiation.¹¹⁹

Beyond what explained above, Turkey has several other pull-factors in Libya that we can only briefly mention here. One of them is the historical revenge for the 1912 defeat to Italy, only apparently remote in time (Turkey is a power with an imperial legacy: as such, the past is just as important as the present). Another one is the prevailing of a model of political Islam, given the strength Islamist forces enjoy in Western Libya. Last but not least, supporting Libya means having a political partner in a region where Turkey is constantly at risk of isolation as the only Muslim non-Arab country. In a nutshell, the ties between the two governments seem now stable and hard to jeopardize, considering how much Tripoli needs Turkey's military assistance for its own security and the many interests Ankara holds in Libya. The aggressive posture and the resoluteness in exploiting the chances offered by the (rather confused)

¹¹⁸ Dentice G., Colombo M., *Approfondimento: l'accordo Turchia-GNA sui confini marittimi*, in *Focus Mediterraneo Allargato*, 21.2.2020, in www.ispionline.com.

¹¹⁹ Santoro D., *L'accordo con Tripoli mette la Turchia al centro del Medioceano*, 13.10.2022, in www.limesonline.com.

international scenario, makes Turkey an unavoidable interlocutor when it comes to Libya's future. Currently, there are no reason at sight to forecast that this situation will change anytime soon.

As former colonizer and a rich and populated country just across the Mediterranean, **Italy** is supposed to have a central role in the country once denominated its "fourth shore", although recent years proved otherwise. Despite being part of the West and founding member of the European Union, Italy is deeply embedded in the Mediterranean context. It is probably the only country for which all Libya's pull-factors analysed in Chapter 2 – geography, energy and migrations – are equally essential. As it lies on the opposite side of Libya's coastline, Italy has vital interest in avoiding that instability crosses the Mediterranean. After all, one of a state main tasks should be guaranteeing security at its borders and the Mediterranean is certainly a border, although a maritime one. The flourishing of militias, armed groups, terrorists and conflicting governments is not a positive situation for Rome. Instability affects every factor: in absence of a centralized interlocutor, migrations remain uncontrolled and Lampedusa – the Italian closest territory and one of the main disembarkation points for migrants – is only 355km away from Tripoli. Lastly, the African country is a major exporter of oil and, secondarily, gas. The two countries have been strategic trade partners for decades and the State-owned companies ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi) has historically played an essential role in extracting oil and in building oil pipes and refineries on Libyan soil. According to open-source estimations, in 2021 Italy exported USD 1.43bn to Libya, mainly refined petroleum products (USD 665mn), insulated wire (USD 68.3mn) and agricultural products such as tomatoes (USD 64.4mn); in the same year, Libya exported USD 7.47bn worth products to Italy, mainly crude oil (USD 5.52b), and gas (USD 1.78bn).¹²⁰ It also worth to mention that from 1995 to 2021 the value of export from Libya to Italy have increased at an annualized rate of 2.7% - an impressive rate when considering that ten out of these twenty-six years have passed in war and internal conflicts. Right before his deposition, Gaddafi was a privileged interlocutor for Rome as proven by the Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation signed in 2008. Therefore, supporting NATO intervention in 2011 was likely a mistake from Italy's standpoint: Gaddafi's fall was not followed by an ordered regime change but rather by years of conflicts and destabilization, as nobody in the West had prepared any fall-back plan to replace the Colonel with someone capable to manage the country with the same level of effectiveness.¹²¹

Despite the poor management of 2011 events, Italy supported the Tripoli-based government during the Second Libyan Civil War and tried to put order in the North-African chaos by means of several initiatives. In 2017, mainly driven by the need to control migrations, the Italian government signed a Memorandum of Understanding aiming at securing national borders while eliminating human trafficking. The Memorandum set forth the Italian obligation to provide funding, equipment and training to the Libyan authorities in charge of border control and in particular to the disreputable Coast Guard, in exchange for a stronger oversight of the migrations flow towards Europe. Alongside this deal the Italian government hosted 60 leaders of Fezzan tribes reaching a new agreement to secure southern borders of Libya and, furthermore, brokered confidential agreements with local player, tribes and armed militias in a clear attempt to cope with the internal fragmentation.¹²² Even from 2017 onwards Italy tried to play a central role in the crisis, for instance by hosting the Palermo conference in 2018 whose purpose was to create a forum for the rival factions. None of these efforts have produced significant results so far, although one can say that these were one of the few attempts to seriously address the effects of Libya instability on Europe. As said, it worked on the effects rather than on the causes: the absence of a comprehensive strategy on Libya's crisis led to what has been defined an 'hyper-focus' on a short-term goal like migration control, at the expense of a stable long-term policy. Hence, the direct interlocution between the government of a relevant country such as Italy and the myriad of informal local forces resulted in political legitimacy and economic means for the latter. Ironically, these groups are often the very same ones fuelling and benefitting from the human trafficking.¹²³

Having missed the chance to respond al-Sarraj's call for help in 2019 was probably the turning point of Italian influence in Libya. The vacuum was promptly filled in by Turkish, whose presence makes now harder for Italy to become again an essential player as it used

¹²⁰ Italy-Libya trade data, 2021, in <https://oec.world>.

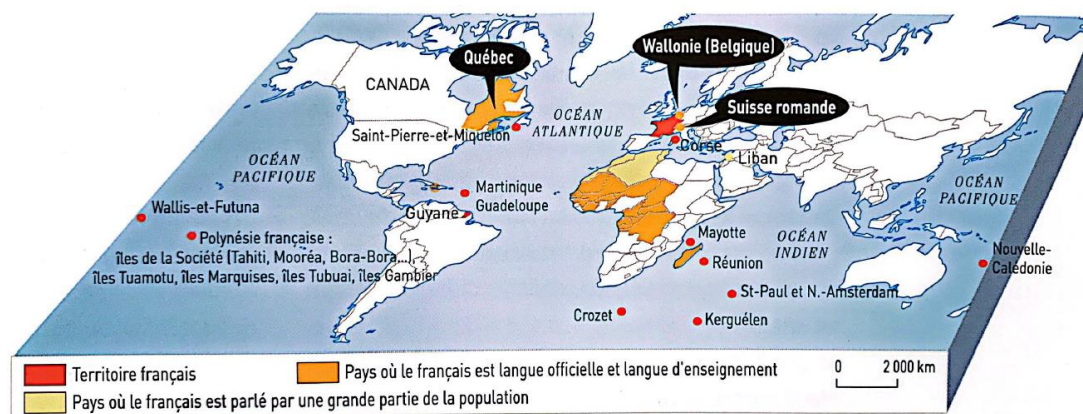
¹²¹ Caracciolo L., *La Libia non è mai stata così lontana*, 26.11.2020 in www.limesonline.com.

¹²² Colombo S., *Italia, Francia e Germania di fronte alla crisi libica tra interessi nazionali divergenti e competizione*, in *Italia ed Europa di fronte alla crisi libica*, Roma, 2020, p. 95.

¹²³ Ardemagni E., Saini Fasanotti F., *From warlords*, p. 107.

to be. Libya is a field for pure power dynamics and national interests rather than for multilateral discussions and inclusivity, which have been the main field of action for Italy as for other European countries.¹²⁴ Recently, Rome engaged in official discussions with Khalifa Haftar in order to promote again migration control – apparently, a new iteration of the same short-sighted and unfruitful approach pursued in the last years, made potentially worse by Haftar’s connections with Russia and his own role in Libya’s destabilisation, as analysts highlighted.¹²⁵ Despite the progressive loss of influence, given the historical ties and the relationship built in the second half of the 20th century, Italy may still play a role though. The European country is regularly called upon a more active role in peace and nation-building operations¹²⁶ and the direct flight connections between Rome and Tripoli might reopen soon after having been shut for more than ten years.¹²⁷

The ‘hyper-focus’ approach weakened the position of **France** as well. Out of the four countries we categorise as neighbouring States, France may seem the furthest away; but Libya share a long boundary to north-western Africa, an area France considers part of its sphere of influence for colonial heritage as well as for language connections – the so-called ‘*Françafrique*’.



Zones of influence claimed by France. Libya borders its African part (Source: Lacoste Y., La Géopolitique par les cartes, Paris, 2022)

The eagerness to constantly hold control of the north-western African quadrant, and especially of Sahel, led France to propose the military intervention in Libya to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The main flaw of the plan, as it turned out afterwards, was that neither France nor the rest of the intervening countries had any feasible project to keep Libya stable. France tried to pursue its own interests in Libya ever since, with unprompted initiatives, poor results and a decreasing level of credibility to the eyes of Libyans. Moved by strong economic interests mainly related to oil exploitation¹²⁸ and the traditional geopolitical ambition to act on a global scale, France has officially supported the governments in Tripoli since 2014. However, a helicopter crash in 2016¹²⁹ revealed the presence of French special forces in Cyrenaica in support of Haftar’s plans, forces to which some analysts had already attributed part of the Libyan National Army (LNA) military successes. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second Libyan Civil War and Libya’s division in two competing factions, France theorized the need for a ‘strong man’ capable of stabilizing and controlling the whole country. In Paris’ view, Haftar would be the ideal candidate to the office. Hence, while stating official support (but giving no material help) to the governments in Tripoli, France provided Haftar with intelligence and military advisers¹³⁰, as well as a limited supply of anti-tank missiles. Against this scenario, it comes as no surprise that France and Italy have pursued different agendas in an atmosphere of mutual suspect and prejudice on Libya’s future.¹³¹ France’s public narration about its role in Libya underlines continuously the need to fight Islamist forces and to avoid the country becomes a safe haven for terrorists. In this regard, Paris interests are perfectly aligned with Egypt’s and United Arab Emirates’, which are incidentally solid military and trade partners of France, and specular to Turkey

¹²⁴ Massolo G., *Se in Libia cambiano le regole del gioco*, 10.1.2020, in www.ispionline.com.

¹²⁵ Saini Fasanotti F., El Gomati A., *Charting Risky Waters: Italy and Khalifa Haftar’s Role in Libya*, 5.7.2023, in www.ispionline.com.

¹²⁶ Alharathy S., *Libya urges Italian support for country’s peace process*, 31.5.2023, in <https://libyaobserver.ly>.

¹²⁷ Noëth B., *After an absence of ten years, Italy will be connected again with Libya*, 10.7.2023, in www.aviation24.be.

¹²⁸ The French multinational Total has interests in the Mabruk field, connected to the Es Sider refinery and terminal, but also in the western El Sharara fields connected to the Zawiya oil hub.

¹²⁹ *Libya attack: French soldiers die in helicopter crash*, 20.7.2016, in www.bbc.com.

¹³⁰ Colombo S., *Italia*, pp. 89-90.

¹³¹ Akamo J.O., *The Vicious Circle of Fragmentation: The EU and the Limits of Its Approach to Libya*, February 2023, JOINT Research Papers, p. 13.

and Qatar who not surprisingly back the GNU.¹³² Supporting Haftar means fighting Islamists forces and sponsoring a potential future for Libya; from this point of view it seems a rational choice for France, although the price to pay in terms of credibility will probably not be negligible.

3.2.2 – The Arab World: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. The Maghreb

Although located in the western periphery of the Middle East, Libya reflects the dynamic of the region where, far from reaching a political unification, Arab states compete for regional primacy and national security, often by means of local proxies. Leaving aside Egypt – whose role is shaped not only by the common ethno-religious roots but primarily by the land boundaries shared with Libya – Tripolitania and Cyrenaica are one of the stage where intra-Arab conflicts take place. Unlike other war stages such as Yemen, Libya does not suffer a typical Shia-Sunni conflict, as the vast majority of the population in North Africa is Sunni. The fast-moving dynamics of international affairs within the Middle East are too complex to be fully depicted here; thus, the following part will focus on specificities of Arab-state actors in Libya. It is worth to mention, however, that the region is seeing a progressive and somewhat decisive normalization of relationships among some of their members, as demonstrated by the Abraham Accords in 2020 (between Israel, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain), the end of the diplomatic crisis between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council¹³³ and Syria's readmission to the Arab League after more than a decade of suspension linked to the civil war and the repression perpetrated by al-Assad's regime.¹³⁴ Some analyst dared to define it the 'great reset' of Middle East.¹³⁵

Analysts have long theorized that the main line of division in the MENA region is due by the conflict between a group of moderate Sunni governments led by Saudi Arabia and made of the other Persian Gulf countries plus Egypt and Jordan, and an "axis of resistance" led by Iran and encompassing Syria and Hezbollah. Since 1995, Qatar has frequently shifted back and forth between these two poles.¹³⁶ Starting in 2011, a new Sunni cluster centred on the alliance between Doha and Ankara began to take shape. Many of the crises engulfing the Arab world, most notably Libya, are affected by the rivalry between the three fronts. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have supported Khalifa Haftar, while Qatar supported Tripoli.

The role of **Qatar** in Libya is consistent with the geopolitical approach taken in the last years and its convergence with Turkey. Given the modest entity of its territory (11,581 square kilometres, ranking 158th in the world) and native population, as well as the well-known abundance of oil and gas, Qatar spreads its influence primarily by funding other actors and expanding its soft power where possible. The small Gulf State backed the anti-Gaddafi forces during the First Libyan Civil War, training revolutionary soldiers and, according to some sources, even providing five fighters jets.¹³⁷ Ever since the outbreak of the second civil conflict, Qatar has been backing the Tripoli-based government either by providing financial assistance or by funding the Turkish military actions in the area, with the perspective of a trans-national support to the political Islam and to the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, who have in Ankara and Doha their main international sponsors. The reason of Qatar choosing Tripoli's side is not purely ideological though, even if the defeat of secular forces would strengthen its position in the area. The research for political influence in the context of the broader alliance with Turkey against the Saudi-led Arab bloc is probably the main driver of Qatar's presence in Libya. Qatar has indeed an uneasy neighbour: much bigger and more populated, Saudi Arabia has roughly 250,000 active troops while Qatar has a 15,000 active-duty personnel.¹³⁸ The disproportion creates tension and encourages Qatar to limit Saudi Arabia's ambitions in the hotspots of Middle East. That said, it is worth to recollect that Qatar's territory is far away from Libyan shores. For Doha, stabilizing Libya is not a matter of national security and this justifies a more pragmatic approach, who recently brought Qatar to establish relationship with the eastern forces and to host in Doha the speaker of the Tobruk House of Representative Aguilah Saleh.¹³⁹

¹³² Manfredi Firmian F., *Libia: recenti sviluppi e prospettive*, Rome, 2022, p. 21.

¹³³ Suliman A., *Saudi Arabia lifts blockade of Qatar in breakthrough agreement easing Gulf crisis*, 5.1.2021, in www.nbcnews.com.

¹³⁴ Lewis A., *Arab League readmits Syria as relations with Assad normalise*, 8.5.2023, in www.reuters.com.

¹³⁵ Dalai G., *Making Sense of the Middle East's 'Great Reset'*, 9.1.2022, in <https://nationalinterest.org>.

¹³⁶ Cafiero G., *Turchia e Qatar, coppia di fatto*, Limes 7/2020 – *Il Turco alla Porta*, Rome, p 309.

¹³⁷ Siegel R., *What Tiny Qatar Stands To Gain In Libya*, 9.8.2011, in www.npr.org.

¹³⁸ The World Factbook – Qatar and Saudi Arabia, in www.cia.gov.

¹³⁹ Belmonte N., *The abrupt change in Libyan-Qatari relations*, 12.9.2022, in www.atalayar.com.

Saudi Arabia and **United Arab Emirates** are sitting on the opposite part of the bench and support steadily the forces based in Cyrenaica. They aim to restrain the Muslim Brotherhood as they consider them a threat for the regional stability and ideological enemies. Thus, both countries back Khalifa Haftar's efforts to seize the whole country and seek to defeat the GNU. In this position they are natural allies of France – given Paris' concern about the spread of jihadist movements in Africa and Middle East – and Egypt, to secure a safe area west of Cairo and avoid that any destabilization can move towards east, potentially to the heart of Middle East. Saudi Arabia and UAE support to Haftar has been financial and military at once. According to some open source intelligence, for instance, UAE supplied the LNA with advanced weaponry including a Pantsir-S1 air defence system, which provides protection against military aircraft, helicopters, guided missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles.¹⁴⁰ During the 2019 offensive, the UAE performed several drone strikes on Haftar's behalf, supplying the LNA with weaponry, and jet fuel and financing Sudanese mercenaries. Having their territory (relatively) far away from Libya, neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE perceive Libya as a key issue of national security and thus they can afford to be pragmatic; without prejudice for their goals, their involvement in the Libyan case has been progressive and seemed to recently shift to concrete discussion with both sides, especially after the appointment of Abdul Hamid Dbeibah as GNU prime minister. The appointment of Bengdara, having alleged policy affinities with Abu Dhabi, as Chairman of the National Oil Corporation is probably the peak of the UAE-brokered discussions between eastern and western Libya.¹⁴¹

In theory, the Maghreb countries could play a support role in stabilizing the country. **Tunisia** – notably the country where the Arab Spring started in the first place – hosted representatives of both factions for meetings and medical care, taking a sort of equidistant position toward the civil conflict. Until the most recent events, Tunisia offered a model of coexistence between constitutionalism and political Islam for many Libyans, despite its obvious flaws. Also **Morocco**, possibly the most stable country of the region, has also frequently sponsored meetings between Libyan officials and armed groups either on its own or on behalf of the UN, such as the 2015 Skhirat Agreement. However, it was noted how these efforts seem sometimes more designed to hedge **Algeria's** action rather than to gain a result. Algeria, in fact, has also sponsored its own Libyan talks without bringing forward a long-term settlement to the country's situation.¹⁴²

3.2.3 – Great powers: Russia, U.S., and China. The role of the EU

The analysis would not be complete without a brief examination of the role (or lack thereof) of the great powers in the Libyan crisis and the action of a major economical player such as the EU.

Russia is the only one among the great powers that seems to have a leading role and a coherent strategy for Libya and, more generally, for Africa. Ties with the African continent date back to the days of the Soviet Union but have strengthened in recent years as part of the Kremlin's strategy to regain prestige and power abroad and to consolidate its presence in the Mediterranean, namely NATO's southern front. It was pointed out that Russia is implementing the so-called 'lily-pad strategy', projecting its strength abroad through an extensive network of small military bases and modest deployment of forces, rather than through a conspicuous and continuous troop presence.¹⁴³ In some situations, Russia-Africa ties come through traditional economic and military cooperation agreements while in other Russia has filled real power vacuums due to the ineffectiveness or even inertia of the West. In the latter kind of cases, the Russian presence has often developed using the Wagner Group, a notorious proxy of the Kremlin's with extensive military and operational capabilities, who provided Moscow with 'plausible deniability' for several military operations abroad. In 2023, the so-called Discord Leaks revealed that the U.S. intelligence worries over the Wagner Group's attempts to create an anti-West confederation of States in Africa, taking advantage of the West fading influence in the region.¹⁴⁴ The Wagner Group deployed units to Libya in 2019, supporting Khalifa Haftar during his military campaign towards Tripoli and provided advice, assistance and training

¹⁴⁰ Ellmer M., *Libyan Civil War: Saudi Arabia & UAE Involvement*, 15.4.2021, in <https://greydynamics.com>.

¹⁴¹ Badi E., *The UAE is making a precarious shift in its Libya policy. Here's why.*, 27.10.2022, in www.atlanticcouncil.org.

¹⁴² Wehrey F., *Security dialogues and architectures in the Maghreb: Lessons from the past, opportunities for the future*, 7.2.2023, in www.chathamhouse.org.

¹⁴³ Colombo S., *Italia, Francia e Germania di fronte alla crisi libica tra interessi nazionali divergenti e competizione*, in *Italia ed Europa di fronte alla crisi libica*, Roma, 2020, p. 43.

¹⁴⁴ Miller G., Dixon R., *Wagner Group surges in Africa as U.S. influence fades, leak reveals*, 23.3.2023, in 'The Washington Post'.

capabilities. Wagner's help was essential in helping Haftar taking control of some fields in the oil crescent and it is still a key player in supporting the western forces.

Analysts estimate that the Wagner Group's presence in Libya is between 2,000 and 3,000 troops. Such magnitude makes Wagner a significant military presence and - also in light of its proven operational capabilities - an impossible actor to ignore in the search for a solution to the Libyan crisis. It is remarkable that, as publicly stated by the Italian Chief of the Defence Staff in 2022¹⁴⁵, Wagner's presence in Libya has not diminished since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, despite the massive deployment of paramilitary troops on the Ukrainian front and especially in Bakhmut. This shows that Libya is a key piece of Russian strategy in Africa. It is therefore likely that Russia will remain present in Cyrenaica in support of Haftar even after Wagner's failed coup and the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023, which will most likely lead to the weakening and perhaps disappearance of the paramilitary corps. Wagner is likely to be restructured or replaced by other militias of proven allegiance to Vladimir Putin; in both cases, Russia's presence in the country will not decrease spontaneously, also in light of the Russians' constant research for free access to warm seas. It is recent news that Russia engaged in discussions with Haftar to have access for its warships to a Mediterranean port in Cyrenaica.¹⁴⁶

One of the most striking action Russia was accused of regards currency counterfeit. In fact, Moscow was accused of piling on Libyan chaos by illegally manufacturing and circulating roughly USD 10 billion worth of Libyan dinars through the state-owned company Goznak.¹⁴⁷ As Russia currently holds part of the territory through the Wagner Group, whose operations seem to be currently self-financed with the oil revenues¹⁴⁸, it can keep a significant political room for manoeuvre while spending limited financial and human resources. Hence, in terms of strategy Russia has no incentive for a comprehensive solution to the crisis, as keeping the *status quo* would better serve its interests. It comes as no surprise that Sergey Lavrov mentioned the 'Astana format' as a successful model to solve Libyan crisis, recalling the talks facilitated by Russia, Turkey and Iran to compose the crisis in Syria, circumventing U.S. and West interests while formalizing the division of the country in zones of influence.¹⁴⁹

The role in Libya reflects the structural struggle that the **United States** is going through. While having endorsed Western intervention in the Libyan crisis and the deposition of Gaddafi, the U.S. proved to lack a coherent strategy for the country. After the assassination of the ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens and the closure of its embassy, the United States began a gradual disengagement from the country to focus on other fronts deemed more crucial for its foreign policy. The result was the creation of a vacuum, which was readily filled by, among others, Russia and Turkey. American intervention in Libyan dynamics, as well as in other African countries, has been limited to circumscribed issues such as the fight against terrorism, without a proper policy to favour the stability of the area. However, this state of affairs may change. In the first instance, the war in Ukraine has overturned the precarious post-Cold War world order and revitalized the dispute between NATO and Russia. If the Mediterranean returns to being a primary geopolitical theatre, NATO cannot simply leave the vast Libyan area at the disposal of the Moscow (and Ankara). In this perspective, some analysts have stressed that the absence of the United States from Libya is a missed opportunity and potentially a problem, rather than an advantage.¹⁵⁰

It is probably no coincidence that in April 2022, President Biden announced the United States would prioritize engagements and partnerships with Libya under the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict & Promote Stability (SPCPS). The strategy was finally released in March 2023 and structured around four objectives: (i) the transition to a stable government system; (ii) the integration of the South in the national structures; (iii) a civilian-controlled, unified military and security apparatus with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; (iv) economic development.¹⁵¹ From this angle, it is interesting to note that in January 2023 news spread that the CIA Director

¹⁴⁵ *Perché servono le Forze armate - Cavo Dragone dialoga con Caracciolo - IX Festival di Limes a Genova*, 22.11.2022, in www.youtube.com.

¹⁴⁶ Faucon B., *Russia Seeks to Expand Naval Presence in the Mediterranean*, 15.9.2023, in The Wall Street Journal.

¹⁴⁷ Ardemagni E., Saini Fasanotti F., *From warlords to statelords. Armed groups and power trajectories in Libya and Yemen*, 2022, in www.ispionline.it, p 57. Russia has denied the allegations.

¹⁴⁸ Manfredi Firmian F., *Libia: recenti sviluppi*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁹ *Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answer to a media question at a joint news conference following talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Ara Aivazian*, 7.12.2020, in <https://russiaeu.ru>.

¹⁵⁰ Wehrey F., *Why Isn't the U.S. in Libya?*, 6.4.2023, in www.foreignpolicy.com.

¹⁵¹ U.S. Department of State, *The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability 10-Year Strategic Plan for Libya*, 24.3.2023, in www.state.gov.

William Burns met the GNU Prime Minister Dbeibah in Tripoli to discuss cooperation, economic and security issues¹⁵². In September 2023, in the wake of the dramatic flood cause by a storm, the Commander of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the Special Envoy for Libya Richard Norland have also landed in Tripoli for a series of meetings with Libyan military and political leaders, reaffirming the American support for the Libyan population and towards the national unity.¹⁵³ As meetings of sort are not frequent, this might prove a renewed U.S. interest for Libya's fate, although a direct involvement of America does not seem likely for the moment: the imperial fatigue the U.S. is going through is a serious obstacle to an intervention in Libya, given the worrying scenario in Ukraine (with Russia) and Taiwan (with China). Within NATO, however, the U.S. may allocate the Libyan file to trusted partners with field experience, such as Italy or France.

Lastly, it is worth to briefly mention **China's** absence from Libyan theatre. As is well known, China has greatly intensified its presence in the Middle East and Africa in recent years as part of a global strategy of primarily economic penetration that had its highest point in the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁵⁴ China's activism in distant theatres has been demonstrated by the remarkable rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, favoured precisely by Beijing, which could greatly increase Chinese influence in the area.¹⁵⁵ However, Libya has remained on the sidelines of this strategy, despite its significant economic relations with the Gaddafi regime. China abstained on UN Resolution 1973, thus allowing armed intervention in support of the rebels. However, it has avoided siding with any of the factions involved in the civil war ever since, partly because of the traditional principle of non-interference that has often guided Chinese foreign policy. In a dynamic context such as Libya, this attitude has relegated China to a marginal role in which, under current conditions, it does not seem able to influence the dynamics of the area whatsoever. Chinese hesitations seem to demonstrate Beijing's inability to act in highly militarized contexts where the country's enormous geoeconomic strength is not advantage.¹⁵⁶

The **European Union** has been having a significant presence in Libya, although from the civil standpoint much more than from the political one. As happened in during international crisis, Bruxelles looks as a forum of discussion and negotiation for its Member States rather than an actual centre of decision.

The official EU policy is to back the UN-led Berlin Process for Libya and to implement the October 2020 ceasefire agreement. To this end, since 2018 the EU has provided EUR 9.3 million to support a wide range of civil society issues: human rights, free media, health services, entrepreneurship, youth empowerment, and gender equality. In this regard, after the Berlin Conferences on Libya in January 2020 and June 2021 and the Paris Conference in November 2021, the EU also adopted sanctions targeted to fight violation of human rights and international humanitarian law, as well as people traffickers. In line with the priorities of some prominent Member States, a significant part of the EU support to Libya concerns protection and assistance of migrants, refugees and vulnerable groups, as well as actions for border management. Those include support, for example through technical trainings or equipment, to improve the capacities of Libyan authorities to provide life-saving activities at sea in accordance with International law. The official EU position also entail working with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to facilitate voluntary returns and humanitarian evacuations from Libya.¹⁵⁷

The outcome of the key EU priorities in Libya was the establishment of two main mission. The first one is Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, set up in March 2020 to implement UN arms embargo and measures against the illicit export of crude oil. The mission aims also at capacity building and training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy, as well as the disruption of human smuggling and trafficking networks at sea. The second significant mission is the European Union Integrated Border Assistance Mission in Libya (in acronyms, EUBAM Libya), supporting the Libyan authorities in their efforts against criminal networks involved in smuggling of migrants, human trafficking and terrorism.

¹⁵² *CLIA chief in rare visit to Libya, meets Tripoli-based PM*, 12.1.2023, in www.apnews.com.

¹⁵³ *Assad A., US AFRICOM commander, special envoy arrive in Tripoli in solidarity with floods' victims*, 20.9.2023, in www.libyaalahrar.net.

¹⁵⁴ *On the recent shift in such strategy for Africa*, Wordsworth R., *China's New Approach in Africa. The Belt and Road Initiative hasn't gone as planned*, 18.5.2023, in www.geopoliticalfutures.com.

¹⁵⁵ *China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal driving 'wave of reconciliation', says Wang*, 21.8.2023, in www.aljazeera.com.

¹⁵⁶ *Cristiani D., Gli Stati Uniti e la Cina nella crisi libica: superpotenze marginali?*, in *Italia ed Europa di fronte alla crisi libica*, Rome, 2020, p. 62.

¹⁵⁷ *EU-Libya relations*, 11.2.2022, in www.eeas.europa.eu.

Although EU claims its successes in Libya, the missions have proven insufficient to achieve their goals, for a number of reasons. The first one is that the EU is driven by the interests of some of its Member States, such as Italy and France, whose geopolitical approach to the Libyan crisis seems – as highlighted above – to be short sighted at best. The second reason for such inefficiency is the actual competition within the EU, and specifically between Italy and France, over the fate of Libya, which prevents an effective EU action.¹⁵⁸ This competition has manifested itself in a series of unilateral and often conflicting initiatives that undermine the credibility of the EU's projection as a coherent and homogeneous actor. France supports Haftar and his counterterrorism activities, while Italy supports Tripoli as part of UN action. It seems no exaggeration to say that France and Italy have conflicting strategies in the Mediterranean quadrant, despite the fact that the so-called Quirinal Treaty signed in 2021 formally established a framework for enhanced cooperation between the two countries. The third type of mistakes the EU has run into is the choice of the wrong tools to deal with Libyan problems. For example, Operation IRINI aims to enforce the UN arms embargo, with a particular focus on arms transfer by sea. The approach is ineffective on Haftar's military operations, as it is supplied primarily by land across the Egypt-Libya border and by air, more difficult to track and intercept. In this way, the EU could appear as indirectly favouring one of the rival factions and thus lose credibility as an impartial mediator in the crisis.¹⁵⁹

More in general, the EU suffered the same partial approach other players adopted, namely an excessive focus on Libya's democratisation before the right circumstances to this end came into existence. Without strong institutions and a reliable political landscape, the elections are a path to chaos rather than to democracy. The EU approach to Libya is not bound to chance anytime soon, given the issues described above. This brought experts to state that "Europe failed Libya".¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ilardo M., *The Rivalry between France and Italy over Libya and its Southwest Theatre*, in Fokus, Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik, 2018, 5, p. 1.

¹⁵⁹ Bardakci M., *The Role of the EU in the Libyan Conflict*, 7.6.2022, in www.transatlanticpolicy.com.

¹⁶⁰ Saini Fasanotti F., *Europe's mistakes in Libya*, 8.5.2023, in www.gisreportsonline.com.

CHAPTER 4

4.1 – Conclusions

Today's Libya seems a blatant failure of what Henry Kissinger called the Westphalian order.¹⁶¹ Libya as a nation-state is roughly 70 years old, during which time it has suffered – as many other African countries – a military coup, two civil wars and countless local armed clashes, as well as a number of (both direct and indirect) interventions from foreign powers. From 2011 onwards, the country has been in the grip of chaos and violence. Saying that Libya is today a failed state is not an overstatement. It lacks state structure, unitary government and reliable armed forces. Above all, the state has not the monopoly on violence and does not control the territory, which is divided into at least three major areas, with a myriad of more or less significant local rulers. Alongside them, foreign powers follow their own agenda with a variable degree of effectiveness.

Hence, in the current state there is not only one Libya but rather multiple ones. Even before providing answers, this geopolitical analysis aims at putting forward the right questions. The first of them is whether Libya still makes sense as a unitary state. From the perspective of national identity, the answer seems negative. While the brief monarchy was structured around the prestige and the individual power of King Idris, Gaddafi's regime was rather based on the Colonel's personal charisma and a clever mix of tribal rivalries and distribution of oil revenues. In other words, Libya's moments of national unity were determined by quite exceptional circumstances. On the opposite, the recent years of civil war exacerbated the divisions among the three traditional regions of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan. Regardless of the regime in power, Libyans struggle to find a culture or a common spirit they can shape their national identity around. The national history is not shared enough to offer a founding myth. Against a backdrop of local fragmentation and tribal affiliations, expecting Libyans to feel that they are citizens first and only secondarily members of their own tribe or city seems unrealistic. Recent history of Libya seems a further argument for criticizing the application of nation-states to decolonized areas of the world.

When looking at the bigger picture, however, the perspective changes. The wide geographical area we refer to as Libya occupies a strategic position at the crossroads of Europe and Africa. Its long coastline is an essential intersection between the eastern and western parts of the Mediterranean, which (as Chapter 2 sought to demonstrate) still plays a crucial role in the challenge for global power – a role bound to increase after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. The tension between NATO and Russia will not end soon and the Mediterranean, also thanks to the growing influence of Turkish foreign policy, will continue to be a crowded theatre. Despite its difficulties in Ukraine, Russia is still actively seeking a military port on the Mediterranean. On the other hand, Europe's research of diversified energy sources can be effectively tackled by Libyan resources, which in turn might lead to an increase in export and investments in the country. These goals require a stable situation though. The country (or the group of countries) that would succeed in stabilising and, within certain limits, controlling Libya will enjoy a considerable tactical advantage. For Europe, it would also allow to govern part of the flow of migrants.

Stabilising Libya is a zero sum game and by no means a common goal of all the actors involved. The reunification of the country has several opponents, the first of which are local armed groups that run (often illicit) economic activities and exercise real power over significant areas of the country. Also several external actors, however, risk losing influence should Libya be stabilised. Russia and Turkey currently seem to be the powers most interested in maintaining the *status quo*. Both have decisive military relevance in their respective factions, to such an extent that it is now unrealistic to think that the GNU can do without Turkey or Haftar can do without the Wagner Group (whose fate after Prigozhin's death is uncertain, while it is certain that Russian influence will not diminish spontaneously but rather take on different forms).

Against this backdrop, the key question is whether Libya can actually be stabilised. Unlike what some argue, democratic elections do not seem to be a successful solution. As demonstrated by other cases, democracy could be the finish line rather than the starting point of a country's stabilisation process. In a militarised and violent context like the Libyan one, the elections can only further fuel conflicts. In other words: why should any centre of power relinquish its influence and accept to participate in elections without the

¹⁶¹ Kissinger H., *World Order*, London, 2015, *passim*.

certainty of succeeding? Believing that the whole world shares the Western democratic spirit is a misrepresentation that has already caused troubles in the international affairs. The same reasoning applies to the idea of a new Constitution. There is little doubt that a form of federal government is the most appropriate to address the historical divisions and differences between the Libyan regions. Nevertheless, a fundamental law does not solve conflicts by itself. The history of constitutional engineering teaches that constitutions reflect existing power relations, they do not create them.

The existence of diverging and irreconcilable interests among the foreign powers present in Libya is probably the greatest challenge on the path to stabilise the country. In an era of increasing international unrest and tension, Libya is a crossroads of conflicting interests where regional and global powers pursue their foreign policy strategies independently. What emerges from an analysis of the last few years of Libyan history is that the internal and external political situation is extremely fluid. Unlike during the Cold War, there are no predefined blocs or impenetrable walls. On the contrary, the alignments are chaotic and shifting. Even within NATO – still the world's largest military alliance – Italy, France and Turkey act in opposite ways. The United States, in the ongoing attempt of “leading from behind”, still shows no coherent strategy and lies in the background of the picture.

While making the Libyan situation difficult to understand, this also provides the necessary flexibility to facilitate the search of a solution. Not all countries, however, seem to have a sufficient degree of preparedness or coherence to achieve a lasting result. France is showing increasing difficulty to assert itself in what Paris considers its African sphere of influence, as recent coups in the Sahel have shown. Italy continues to focus on partial objectives such as migration control, without developing a comprehensive strategy, despite the deep knowledge of Libya its diplomatic apparatus developed over decades of relations with Gaddafi. Turkey regards the relationship with Tripoli as an essential piece of its Mediterranean strategy and shows no sign of giving up the ground. Egypt is bound by geographical proximity – whatever political regime is in place in Cairo, it simply cannot afford the presence of hostile powers on its western border. Having an instable neighbour is not a good option either though.

The other Arab states, further away geographically, can afford less rigidity. Qatar on the one hand, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the other, could help find a lasting agreement for the stability that would benefit the entire Arab world. Many Middle Eastern states have proven to be pragmatic and concrete actors at a time when regional balance is changing rapidly. On the contrary, the Maghreb states do not seem to be able to influence decisively the scenario.

As for the great powers, Russia has taken advantage of the power vacuum through military support to Haftar and has no reason to give it up. Libya is a crucial piece of the African strategy that Moscow considers key to increase its geopolitical influence. China has been less than marginal in recent years and there is no reason to believe in its greater involvement in Libya, even more so because China is suffering economic difficulties and is selecting with more scrutiny its African investments. The United States has perhaps begun to realise that Libya cannot simply be left to itself. The plan of the Biden administration and the recent visit of the CIA Director suggest a renewed American interest. It must be borne in mind, however, that Libya is a secondary theatre compared to the quadrants where a direct confrontation with Russia and China can take place. The imperial fatigue the U.S. is going through does not allow to use human and material resources in a non-primary confrontation in North Africa. Therefore, it seems more likely that the United States could outsource the Libyan file to those among NATO allies who propose a credible and lasting plan for stabilisation.

Regardless of the content of such plan, however, it seems clear that only a multilateral intervention can produce concrete results. The war in Ukraine has shown that a significant part of the world – the so called Global South – does not share the Western vision of the international order. In some cases it is a modern form of non-alignment, in other cases a real hostility to the West and its history of global domination. Nonetheless, an intervention conceived and carried out by the West alone as in 2011 is no longer plausible and even less desirable. At the same time, the countries who managed to perform successful interventions in Libya such as Russia or Turkey did not hesitate to use armed forces, either national ones or private militias. Against this attitude, an approach based exclusively on diplomacy and moral suasion is bound to failure. As difficult as it may seem – especially to Western public opinions' eyes – in highly militarized contexts a ‘boots on the ground’ approach is often necessary.

What distinguishes the case of Libya from other (perpetually unstable) African countries is, in addition to the geographical position, its exceptional energy reserves. They can be the keystone of a country reconstruction that promotes actual development and supports the population. As part of a stabilisation process, rich and neighbouring European countries could commit to buy guaranteed

minimum amounts of oil and gas from Libya, for instance under multi-year long-term contracts. At the same time, they could invest in the construction and improvement of energy infrastructure and staff training, which would increase annual production. Europe would ensure a stable flow of energy in the attempt to disengage from Russian supplies, while the Libyan economy would count on certain and definite revenues to reboot its economic development. The main issue would be designing a mechanism that ensures a fair distribution of the oil revenues among the population sectors. It is a difficult project but not a utopian one. Libya has long been a stable country with the highest GDP per capita in Africa. As happened in the past, it could channel economic migrants from the rest of Africa and thus help to contain irregular migration to Europe.

At the time this thesis was written, the Libyan situation appears to be consolidated. Armed clashes have been steadily decreasing and the 2020 ceasefire remains in place. The country is divided into zones of influence, and neither side seems willing to try a new military assault anytime soon. Limited contacts between factions occur all the time, making it at least plausible that the situation could evolve. In which direction, however, it is difficult to say: it is not just one country but the entire dynamic of international relations to be in disarray. In a way, Libya reflects the global disorder. Like Libya, the world lacks a hegemonic centre and existing powers fluctuate between a total clash and an agreement on the rules of the game. Since neither trend seems capable to prevail over the other, the current international system is not ready to produce an ordered system in the short-to-medium term. Until this happens, Libya's fate will be far from stabilisation.

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