

Italy, the second Libyan war, and the Frontex Irini Operation

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Abstract

In 2011, Libya plunged into a civil war after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, a revolutionary movement characterized by massive civil protests which tried to build democratic societies in the Middle East and North Africa and put to an end the old repressive political regimes. After several months of civil war and bombings over Libya, longtime Muammar Ghaddafi's dictatorial regime fell. Although the U.S. did not directly intervene in Libya, it supported the overthrow of Ghaddafi through the intervention of NATO, providing aerial support and airstrikes for the opposition force (it also established a no-fly zone over Libya, authorized by the United Nations). In 2014, contested parliamentary elections led to the formation of two rival political power centers — one in the east, based in Tobruk and backed by military commander Khalifa Haftar, and another in the west of the country, an UN-supported administration in the capital of Tripoli. Each side was supported by a variety of militias and foreign powers, which competed for influence and oil resources, raising fears that oil-rich Libya could become the theater of a regional conflict. In April 2019, Haftar and his forces, backed by Russia (the Russian

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military contractors of the Wagner Group), Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates launched an offensive to capture the capital. His campaign collapsed after Turkey and Qatar offered their military support to the Tripoli government with hundreds of Turkish troops and thousands of Syrian mercenaries, belonging to the Free Syrian Army. The outbreak of violence in Libya in April 2019 severely affected the institutional reunification and stability of the country. Warning that the situation in Libya could become "a second Syria", with a new large wave of refugees directed towards the EU, Germany offered to call a peace conference for the conflicting sides, held on 19th January 2020 under the auspices of the United Nations. The aim was to stop the military support for the civil war parties and uphold an existing UN arms embargo, re-launching the peace process for a political settlement, after nine months of fighting over the capital.

Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI was launched by the European Union on 31 March 2020, as part of the European Union's contribution to the Berlin conference. The core task of the Operation is the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Libya through aerial, satellite, and maritime assets, an embargo that had been decided in 2016 by the United Nations Security Council Resolution.¹ This ongoing mission replaced the Sophia Operation, which had been in place for five years, combating the organized crime and trafficking of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. In June 2016, the European Council decided to extend Sophia's mandate until July 2017, adding two supporting tasks: training the Libyan coastguards and contributing to the implementation of the UN arms embargo on the high seas off the coast of Libya.

This paper attempts to analyze the response of the European Union to the Libyan crisis by launching the Irini operation, a military-naval Joint force, setting out to secure the Berlin

¹ United Nations, Security Council, Resolution 2292 (2016), adopted by the Security Council at its 7715th meeting, June, 14, 2016, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N16/174/94/PDF/N1617494.pdf?OpenElement>

Conference's commitments. Finally, we try to explain if Italy, which seems to have preferred to stay on the sidelines, succeeded in reinserting itself into the Libyan equation, a significant diplomatic area for the Chigi Palace.

Introduction

After NATO-led intervention that helped the revolutionary forces in 2011 overthrow dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi, Libya has fallen into a civil war, involving multiple armed groups and rival factions who are competing to control access to the country's economic resources. There are multiple layers of insecurity and instability in Libya, a national level competition over political influence, the control of resources, and above all, the nature of the Libyan state itself. The presence of armed extremist groups and local-level conflicts has contributed to the fragmentation of governance in Libya, allowing space also for foreign actors. The United States and the Western countries didn't play a decisive role in Libya, allowing Russia, Turkey, and Arab states to take the lead, transforming the conflict into a *proxy war*. Still, some European countries, like France and Italy supported different rival factions in Libya, competing for oil and gas interests in the oil-rich country. For instance, Italy saw the increasing violence in Libya as a real risk that would have created severe repercussions for ENI, the main Italian energy company present in the country, being at the same time, the leading foreign energy operator in Libya. Moreover, almost all of Eni's oil and natural gas assets were located in the western half of the country, under the control of the United Nations recognized government, thus Italian government supported the Tripoli-based GNA - **Government of National Accord** - led by Prime Minister Fayed al Sarraj. There is no doubt that the Libyan dossier was

essential for Rome, in terms of security (the fight against the resurgent jihadism), migratory issues (existing the risk of the intensification of migratory waves in the case of state collapse, Libya being a major transit country for illegal migrants), and finally, the energy policy (Eni's production and prospecting, not only in Libya but into the entire region of North Africa). Thus, Italy recognized the Libyan government headed by al-Sarraj as the country's legitimate authority.

With the power vacuum and internal conflict between rival groups, Libya became a risky and ungovernable country, representing the main starting point for African refugees and illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean and entering the EU. Italy reacted by signing in February 2017 a **Memorandum of Understanding on Migration** with Libya, a document which was extended in 2020 for another three years and endorsed by the EU. The Memorandum provided the Italian support to the Libyan maritime authorities to stop illegal vessels and return asylum-seekers to detention camps in Libya, a country that was accused of not having an adequate refugee protection system or a proactive and dedicated state-led Search and Rescue (SAR) capacity in the central Mediterranean Sea. The entire support cost about \$100 million in training, ships, and equipment financed by Italy and the EU through the Trust Fund for Africa. The MoU represents only a part of a broader defensive strategy, being pursued by the European governments. In theory, the Italian and European approaches seek to prevent illegal immigration and control migration flows. In reality, several NGOs, like Oxfam, denounced that in 2021, twenty thousand migrants have "disappeared" once they arrived in Libya. They may have ended up in dangerous "clandestine" detention centers, such as Tripoli's notorious Tobacco Factory, not having legal pathways to leave the country. The agreement between

Italy and Libya was accused of supporting the system of exploitation, extortion, and abuse in which so many migrants find themselves trapped.²

Since 2017, Italy has spent €271 million on international missions to support the Libyan Coastguard, with €10.5 million allocated only in 2021. In five years, EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA/IRINI absorbed a total of €191,5 million from the state budget.³ Compared to the Mare Nostrum operation which cost Italy 9 million euros per month (114 million in total, being operational only one year), the financial effort accorded to both Sophia and Irini's military naval operations was significantly much lower.⁴

France's clandestine military support for Haftar, the Libyan General, known for his opposition to the Islamist groups, began in Benghazi in 2015, through some covert cooperation with Egypt. In July 2016, an Islamist militia shot down a French helicopter, being the first formal confirmation that France had sent special forces inside Libya.⁵ Thus, Paris has supported Haftar's project towards the construction of a military dictatorship, intervening with some

² *** Rai News, Silvia Rocchi, *Scomparsi nel 2021 ventimila migranti riportati in Libia. La denuncia dell'Oxfam* in

<https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2022/01/scomparsi-nel-2021-20-mila-migranti-riportati-in-libia-la-denuncia-delloxfam-6d9b5c29-fcfe-4b6a-a78f-e622cd07361b.html>; *** Amnesty International, *Libya:*

New evidence shows refugees and migrants trapped in horrific cycle of abuses, in

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/libya-new-evidence-shows-refugees-and-migrants-trapped-in-horrific-cycle-of-abuses/> ; Medecins sans frontiers, *Italy-Libya agreement: five*

years of EU-sponsored abuse in Libya and the central Mediterranean in <https://www.msf.org/italy-libya-agreement-five-years-eu-sponsored-abuse-libya-and-central-mediterranean>

³ *** Oxfam Italia, *Comunicato Stampa, Aumentano di nuovo i fondi italiani alla guardia costiera libica*, 3th July 2021, Roma, in https://www.oxfamitalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CS_-MIGRANTI-OXFAM_AUMENTANO-DI-NUOVO-I-FONDI-ITALIANI-ALLA-GUARDIA-COSTIERA-LIBICA_3_7_2021.pdf

⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵ *** BBC, *Libya attack: French soldiers die in helicopter crash*, July 20, 2016 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36843186>

assistance for military operations, undermining the United Nations peace process for Libya.

Paris had several interests in the Libyan conflict: first of all, containing the Libyan conflict was a key part of a large counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel region (Operation Barkhane),⁶ Libyan insecurity could have threatened the stability of the entire region. Then, Islamic State's presence in Libya represented a domestic security problem for France - the series of attacks on bars, restaurants, a concert hall, and the national football stadium in Paris on November 13, 2016, where 130 people were killed, frightening the whole world. Moreover, because Libya served as a major departure point for migrants heading for Europe, France was hoping that its intervention in 2011 would control the illegal flows of migration and offer new contracts for oil purchases, with good conditions and new economic opportunities for French businesses and companies.⁷

In 2014, the outbreak of violence critically affected institutional reunification and stability in Libya. Violence escalated after the contested parliamentary elections, leading to the formation of two rival administrations: the Tripoli-based **Government of National Accord (GNA)**, led by Prime Minister Fayez al Sarraj, recognized by the United Nations (UN) and backed by several

⁶ The Barkhane operation is an ongoing anti-insurgent operation that started on 1 August 2014. Operation Barkhane is France's largest overseas operation, with a budget of nearly €600 million per year and is led by the French military against Islamist groups in Africa's Sahel region. The operation is led in cooperation with five countries, all of which are former French colonies that span the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The allied force, with approximately 4,500 soldiers, is spread out between Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Its headquarter is in N'Djamena, Chad's capital. Around 4,500 French personnel are deployed, and they work alongside the G5 Sahel joint counter-terrorism force that aims to train 5,000 troops, as well as peacekeepers deployed to the United Nations Minusma stabilization mission in Mali.

⁷ Christopher Griffin, *French interests and strategy in Libya after Qaddafi*, September 2, 2015, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/french-interests-and-strategy-in-libya-after-qaddafi/>

armed groups, and on the other hand, the rival administration in the country's east, the **House of Representatives** (HoR), allied with General Khalifa Haftar, who commanded the so-called **Libyan National Army** (LNA). In 2016, Fayeze al-Sarraj and the GNA obtained international recognition, while General Khalifa Haftar launched a military offensive that offered him control of a large territory in the Eastern part of Libya. The Islamic State terrorist group also shortly gained the east and central parts of the country – particularly in what is known as the Oil Crescent, being able to capitalize on Libya's instability but was eventually defeated.

The loyal forces of General Haftar hoped to take control of Tripoli, which further escalated the conflict and posed a persistent threat to political stability in Libya. After nine months of confrontation, the offensive resulted in a stalemate, but wrecked Libya's economy, disrupting the entire country's oil production. Public spending on services, as well as the market of work and all economic activities, are based on the oil and gas industry. This income represents about 70% of the Libyan GDP and 95% of the state's revenue, with no alternative economy, being dependent on hydrocarbons and imports. The launch of the *Operation Flood of Dignity*, with which Haftar intended to take control of the capital and, consequently, of the whole country, represented the end of the strategic plan started in May 2014 with *Operation Dignity*.⁸ The government's *Dawn operation* has inflamed the Libyan conflict, deteriorating the country's stability. The insecurity of Libya also jeopardized the European countries, which

⁸ On 16 May 2014, Khalifa Haftar, a former officer in Qaddafi's military, after an abortive coup attempt, launched *Operation Dignity* in the city of Benghazi. Haftar's campaign it was designed to eliminate Islamist factions from eastern Libya. Very soon, Haftar extended the *Operation Dignity* campaign beyond Benghazi, turning the crisis into a real civil war.

were concerned about the threat that jihadist militias caused to their domestic security.⁹

The launch of EUNAVFOR MED IRINI OPERATION

On 19th January 2020 after the Libyan peace talks in Moscow fell, mediated by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who unsuccessfully tried to get rebel commander Khalifa Haftar and Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj to sign a ceasefire,¹⁰ the German Government launched an initiative aimed to resolve the conflict within the United Nations. The focus of the meeting was to obtain a commitment from external parties that influenced the Libyan war to uphold the UN arms embargo and bring their influence on the Libyan parties to agree on an open-ended ceasefire. Moreover, the German government's long-term goal was to establish "a sovereign Libya" and an "inner-Libyan reconciliation process", according to the invitation made by the former German Chancellor, Angela Merkel.¹¹

A process of consultation on Libya was initiated in September 2019 by the German government and Ghassan Salamé, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG). The Berlin Process was step number two of a three-

⁹ For more information, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Nathaniel Barr, *Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War*, ICCT Research Paper February 2015, in <https://www.icct.nl/app/uploads/download/file/ICCT-Gartenstein-Ross-Barr-Dignity-and-Dawn-Libyas-Escalating-Civil-War-February2015.pdf>

¹⁰ *** DW, *Libya's Haftar leaves Russia without signing cease-fire deal*, <https://www.dw.com/en/libyas-haftar-leaves-russia-without-signing-cease-fire-deal/a-51993281>

¹¹ *** DW, *Germany calls Libya conference in Berlin*, in <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-calls-libya-conference-in-berlin/a-51999875>; *** Euractiv, *Libya peace talks in Moscow fall short of ceasefire deal*, in <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/libya-peace-talks-in-moscow-fall-short-of-ceasefire-deal/>

step initiative, announced by Salamé to the Security Council on 29th July.¹² The United Nations co-chaired the process, alongside the Government of Germany which hosted the event and gave diplomatic support to the Libyan peace process.

The Berlin conference produced a fifty-five-point conclusion paper on all relevant issues, including a ceasefire endorsement and renewed calls for respecting the long-ignored arms embargo. A special committee made up of five military officials from each side was established to monitor the truce. There were also established several working groups to unify the rival political, economic, and security institutions.¹³ In addition, the European Council reached a political agreement to launch a new operation in the Mediterranean Sea, aimed at implementing the UN arms embargo on Libya by using its aerial, satellite, and maritime assets. As secondary tasks, the operation should implement UN measures to prevent the illicit export of petroleum from Libya, build up the capacity of training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy, and disrupt the human smuggling and trafficking networks business that still operates in Libya.¹⁴

The origin of this mission is linked to a previous military naval mission in the Mediterranean area: in March 2020, the expiry of the mandate of the Sophia Operation has given rise to long months of negotiations between the Foreign Ministers of the EU member states, deciding whether or not to confirm a new military mission. Some countries, including Italy, had expressed concern that the

¹² *** UN, *Remarks of SRSG Ghassan Salamé to the United Nations Security Council on the situation in Libya*, July 29, 2019, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/remarks-srsg-ghassan-salam%C3%A9-united-nations-security-council-situation-libya-29-july-2019>

¹³ *** *The Berlin Conference on Libya CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS* in https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/berlin_conference_communique.pdf

¹⁴ *** *COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2020/472 of 31 March 2020 on a European Union military operation in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI)* in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32020D0472>

continuation of the Sophia mission could act as an encouragement, a *pull factor*, rather than a deterrent, for illegal migrants. As a result, it expressed the desire to restore the presence of the European Union in the Mediterranean, but with a new naval-military mission, the Sophia Operation being a precursor for the next Irini Operation.

Another sensitive issue that decided the ending of the Sophia operation was the loss of the Italian government's support. The Sophia Operation was the first EU-wide naval military operation, in cooperation with Nato forces, showing the twist of shifting attention from the illegal migrants themselves to the smugglers/traffickers that facilitate their transit. In particular, the implementation of the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council appeared to be a primary concern for the EU, given the constant worsening of the Libyan crisis and the increasing involvement of external actors in the region, such as Turkey, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates.

On 17 February 2020, during the usual press conference at the end of the European Affairs Council, the High Representative for the European Union's foreign policy, Josep Borrell, officially decreed the end of the Sophia mission and the start of a new operation in the Mediterranean for strengthening the UN embargo. Named EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, the new naval mission is destined to change the way that the European Union operates in the Mediterranean, no longer placing the control of migration as an undisputed primary objective as it has been in recent years. It is for this reason that the announcement by the High Representative has aroused much interest in the future of the European presence

in the area. The details of the new Irini mission were cleared in the following months, after the official announcement.¹⁵

With the headquarters in Rome and commanded initially by Italian Admiral Fabio Agostini, the core task of the operation is the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Libya, using European aerial, satellite, and maritime assets. In particular, the mission is mandated to carry out inspections of vessels on the high seas off the coast of Libya suspected to be carrying arms or related material to and from Libya following the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2292 (2016). Where there are reasonable grounds to believe that such vessels are carrying arms or related material to or from Libya, directly or indirectly, in violation of the arms embargo on Libya, EUNAVFOR MED IRINI could take relevant action to seize and dispose of such items, including to divert such vessels and their crews to a suitable port to facilitate such disposal, with the consent of the port State. Moreover, EUNAVFOR MED IRINI assists in the development of the capacities and in the training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy in law enforcement tasks at sea, in particular, to prevent human smuggling and trafficking. Finally, Italy and Greece alternate the Force Commander every six months. Avoiding that the Irini mission could become a *pull factor* for illegal migrants, the progress of the mission will be monitored and reconfirmed every 4 months by the Political and Security Committee (CSFP). In the case that the mission produced an attraction effect for migratory flows, the Member States may decide to cease their activities. Moreover, the commander has to conduct the

¹⁵ *** European Union External Action, Foreign Affairs Council: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference, Brussels, 17 February 2020, in https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-affairs-council-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-press-0_ar

naval operation in such a way as to prevent the *pull effect* by the deployment of the maritime vessels of the operation, including through the immediate repositioning of the assets if such an effect is observed or the maritime assets will be withdrawn from the relevant areas. The annual budget of the mission is about **9 million** and eight hundred thousand euros for common expenses. The European Member States, except Denmark,¹⁶ because in 2020 it wasn't part of the European common defence and security arrangements, having a derogation or so-called a defence **opt-out**, must pay for the operational expenditure of the mission.¹⁷ On 23rd September 2021, the EU Council appointed **Rear Admiral Stefano Turchetto** as EU Operation Commander for the European Union military operation in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI), taking command from Rear Admiral Fabio Agostini on 1 October 2021.¹⁸

In the first year of activity, from April to December 2020, the Italian Parliament authorized the participation of 517 members of personnel, 1 vessel, and 3 aircraft, for an estimated cost of approximately 21 million and 300 thousand euros granted to the Irini operation. On 31 December 2020, the naval operation had 2 ships, the Italian patrol vessel Cigala Fulgosi and the Greek frigate Adrias; 3 patrol aircraft, supplied by Luxembourg, Poland, and Germany,

¹⁶ For more information, see Ulla Neergaard & Graham Butler, *Denmark's Defence Opt-out, the Forthcoming Referendum, and the Changing Face of EU Defence and Security Arrangements* in <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/en/eu-information-centre/the-danish-opt-outs-from-eu-cooperation>

¹⁷ *** COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2020/472 of 31 March 2020 on a European Union military operation in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI) in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32020D0472>

¹⁸ *** European Council, *EUNAVFOR MED IRINI: new Operation Commander appointed*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/09/23/eunavfor-med-irini-new-operation-commander-appointed/>

as well as 1 Italian drone. Two other aircraft (one Greek and one French) were not permanently assigned to the operation, but to support occasionally some activities. For satellite assets, Irini works with the support of the European Union Satellite Center (SATCEN) and the Intelligence and Situation Center (INTCEN). The operation doesn't have a predetermined range of action, even if its activities are more concentrated on the eastern part of the Libyan coast, especially in front of the Cyrenaica region, where the trafficking of arms is most active. The mission cannot operate within Libyan territorial waters.¹⁹

On March 17th, 2021, the EU extended the operation for two more years, until the end of March 2023. The decision to prolong the mission comes from the United Nations experts who warned that the embargo imposed on Libya in 2011 was "totally ineffective" being violated by numerous international actors.²⁰

In July 2021, many NGOs protested against the renewal of the mission and the continuation of cooperation with the Libyan authorities without concrete guarantees for protecting the human rights of migrants and refugees. They accused the European governments of ceding responsibility to Libya for overseeing rescue operations in a vast area of the Mediterranean Sea, rather than ensuring a proactive and dedicated state-led search and rescue (SAR) capacity in the central Mediterranean, encouraging a system of exploitation, extortion, and

¹⁹ *** Senato della Repubblica, *L'OPERAZIONE MILITARE DELL'UE NEL MEDITERRANEO EUNAVFOR MED IRINI*,

<https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01207628.pdf>

²⁰ *** Libya Alahrar, *EU to renew Operation IRINI mandate for two more years*, in

<https://libyaalahrar.net/eu-to-renew-operation-irini-mandate-for-two-more-years/>;

For more information about the Panel of Experts on Libya see United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 8 March 2021 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council* in

https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_229.pdf

abuse funded and promoted by the EU and Italy. Thus, the EU has chosen deterrence strategies and border defense over respect for human rights and protecting people's lives.²¹

Since its launch until August 2022, Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI has boarded and inspected 24 suspect vessels. Two vessels out of 24 were diverted to a port of an EU Member State where their cargo was seized. One flag State (Turkey) has denied access to go on board and inspect suspect vessels on 8 occasions. Operation IRINI has also investigated 7,142 merchant vessels through a request of information via radio calls (hailing) and visited 367 vessels upon their commander's consent (so-called friendly approaches). Furthermore, the Operation has investigated 972 suspect flights, 25 airports, and 16 ports, and provided 40 special reports to the UN Panel of Experts on Libya, most of which referred to violations or possible violations of the arms embargo and oil smuggling activities in the West and the East of the Country. Finally, through the embedded Crime Information Cell, the operation issued to the relevant Law Enforcement agencies 69 recommendations for inspection of suspect vessels in EU Member States' ports, 54 of which were conducted (see figure 1).²² In August 2022, Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI investigated 174 merchant vessels via radio calls (out of 7.142) and carried out 24 visits on ships with their commanders' consent (out of 367). The Operation also monitored 22 suspect flights (out of 972) and continued to monitor 25 airports (and landing strips) and

²¹ AP News, *Rights groups to Italy: Don't renew migrant deal with Libya*, January 31, 2020 <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-italy-africa-europe-libya-8c3ea3d137fea4c26d5fd6fde8f444cb>; la Repubblica, *Migrazioni, Libia: "Una benda per non vedere": la società civile in piazza in occasione del voto alla Camera che rinnova le missioni internazionali*, July 14, 2021.

²² European Union, *Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI - August report*, in https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/operation-eunavfor-med-irini-august-report_ru

16 ports (and oil terminals). Through the Crime Information Cell, the Operation issued 2 (out of 69) recommendations for inspection of suspect vessels in EU Member States' ports.²³



Source Figure 1: European Union External Action

A sensitive aspect of the operation was the availability of the landing ports. The operation needed that a State-Member to grant its own port for the disembarkation of people who could have been probably rescued at sea. This commitment was made by Greece, which has always been among the major supporters of the operation. The other European countries, however, accepted, with two conditions: after disembarkation, the migrants have to be distributed voluntarily among the European Union countries (although some of them, including Italy, had expressed their unavailability) and the costs of welcoming migrants have to be considered "common expenses", charged to its budget. On

²³ *Ibidem.*

November 19, 2020, France declared the availability of the port of Marseille (which already in Sophia's time had played this task). Therefore, a port had been settled where the vessels engaged in illegal activities had to be directed, even if the location was not in a particularly strategic position regarding the area where the Irini mission operates. Some countries, including Italy, have instead given a generic willingness to evaluate the cases and have offered the possibility of granting a landing in its own port (possibly in addition to the French one or even according to the area of the operation), while others, for example, Romania and Netherlands decided to participate in any operations that may be necessary for destruction and disposal of seized weapons.²⁴

Turkey

In November 2019, Turkey signed two agreements on security and military cooperation and restriction of marine jurisdictions with the Tripoli-based government. De jure, the memorandum of understanding on security signed between the two countries was aimed at maintaining security in Libya and protecting the country's sovereignty with Turkish help. This document (MoU) delineates the maritime boundaries between the two countries in the Mediterranean Sea, Turkey receiving to expand the right of gas exploration in areas that Greece considers its own, triggering protests at Athens and Nicosia. Both European countries denounced the agreement, saying that it was a serious breach of international law, violating the rights of other eastern Mediterranean countries.²⁵ Egypt also dismissed the deal as "illegal", and Greece said that any

²⁴ *** Senato della Repubblica, *L'OPERAZIONE MILITARE DELL'UE NEL MEDITERRANEO EUNAVFOR MED IRINI*, <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01207628.pdf>

²⁵ *** *Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of National Accord-State of Libya on delimitation of the maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean*, in

such accord would be geographically absurd because it ignored the presence of the Greek island of Crete between the coasts of Turkey and Libya.²⁶

Soon after, Turkey began illegal gas drilling in the territorial waters of Cyprus despite the European Union's repeated calls to cease the illegal activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. The European Council decided to suspend contacts with the high-level officials, as well as to reduce the pre-accession assistance to Turkey for 2020, inviting the European Investment Bank "to review" its lending activities in Turkey, in response to Ankara's gas exploration in Cypriot national waters.²⁷ Notwithstanding the international protests, in April 2021, Turkey and Libya agreed to maintain the Mediterranean Accord signed in 2019.²⁸ The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) demarcating maritime zones in the region between Turkey and the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli was the first step of international friction with Turkey.

Both Greece and Cyprus, faced with Turkish claims, immediately condemned the government of Tripoli and subsequently supported, albeit at a diplomatic level, the action of general Haftar in an anti-GNA and anti-Erdogan action.

At the same time, another Turkish controversial move was the purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles, deteriorating US-Turkey relations, and making an unprecedented gesture for a Nato country. The Alliance, in its initial response to the Russian military delivery, raised concerns about the

https://www.un.org/depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/Turkey_11122_019_%28HC%29_MoU_Libya-Delimitation-areas-Mediterranean.pdf

²⁶ Reuters, *Turkey signs maritime boundaries deal with Libya amid exploration row*, November 28, 2019, in <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-libya-idUSKBN1Y213I>

²⁷ *** *Turkish drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: Council adopts conclusions* in <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/07/15/turkish-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-adopts-conclusions/>

²⁸ *** *Aljazeera, Turkey and Libya renew commitment to the contested maritime deal*, April 12, 2021, in <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/12/turkey-and-libya-renew-commitment-to-contested-maritime-deal>

interoperability of the Russian system with the Nato system, while trying to strike a positive note by commenting that Ankara remains interested in developing long-range air and missile defense systems with several allies. But the most pressing concern for the Americans was security. They feared that if Russian technicians operated in Turkey for training and calibrating the S-400 missiles then they could have obtained all sorts of data on the F-35 if Turkish F-35 jets were in the same air space with the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles.²⁹

Turkey was also irritated about the vote in the US Senate that recognized the 1915 mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as genocide.³⁰ It followed a similar resolution approved by the House of Representatives in October 2019.³¹ Erdogan called the congressional votes "completely political" and lashed out at the West's "history of racism and colonialism". Until today, Turkey denies that there was a systematic campaign to kill Armenians as an ethnic group during World War One, contending that the number of victims is closer to 300,000 Armenians. President Erdogan moved forward with escalation, in response to the genocide resolution and potential US sanctions over his country's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system and warned that Turkey could "if necessary" close two key military bases used by the US forces: Incirlik and Kurecik. The Incirlik base has been heavily used by US aircraft for raids against Islamic State (IS) militants in Iraq and Syria, while the Kurecik military base holds a Nato radar

²⁹ *** BBC, *Where does Turkey's S-400 missile deal with Russia leave the US?* July 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48962886>

³⁰ *** CNN, *Senate passes resolution to formally 'commemorate the Armenian Genocide'*, December 12, 2019, in <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/12/politics/senate-armenian-genocide-resolution-passes/index.html>

³¹ *** BBC, *US House says Armenian mass killing was genocide*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50229787>;

installation.³² Finally, Turkey's 2020 intervention in the Libyan civil war to preserve Libya's GNA has reversed the course of the hostilities, with Ankara becoming the GNA's security main guarantor and providing arms, drones, and military equipment.

Finally, the launch of the European Irini operation provoked Ankara's criticism which considered the mission biased and accused the Europeans of seeking, through this maritime mechanism, to prevent the delivery of weapons by sea to the Tripoli government, ignoring the supply by air and land from Egypt to Haftar group.³³

There were many theaters and dossiers in which Turkey moved in contrast with the European interests, and sometimes from an undeniable position of strength. We remember, for example, the migrant flows towards Greece, a threat that Turkish President Erdogan always returns to agitate with profound political repercussions on European governments, already in serious difficulty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Equally sensitive is the dossier of the energy exploitation of gas resources in the extension of Cyprus and in the eastern Mediterranean, where important European companies are involved, such as the Italian ENI and the French Company, Total.

In the activity of the Irini operation, there were moments of tension, some of which have also had diplomatic aftermath. These include the episode of June 10, 2020, when the Greek frigate *Spetsai*, at that moment being the only naval unit assigned to the EU Irini operation, tried to initiate checks on suspicious cargo

³² *** CNN, *Trump administration won't call mass killing of Armenians a genocide despite congressional resolutions*, December 17th, 2019, in <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/17/politics/trump-administration-armenian-genocide/index.html>

³³ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-decries-illegal-search-of-vessel-by-eu-mission/2053260>

Cirkin, flying the flag of Tanzania but escorted by the Turkish military ships, which refused the inspection declaring that the ship enjoyed the immunity of Turkey. Moreover, Cirkin had previously landed Turkish M-60 tanks in Misurata on 28 May, being at that time also escorted by a Turkish military ship. Spetsai reportedly that it had been sent a warning signal to Cirkin but was unable to send a boarding team to inspect the cargo because, as European Commission spokesman Peter Stano answered journalists' questions said, Irini's ships can board and inspect suspicious vessels only with the consent of the vessels themselves.³⁴ Another similar incident with significant diplomatic repercussions involved a French military ship, operating as part of the NATO **Sea Guardian** Operation and Turkish Navy (Türk Deniz Kuvvetleri) vessels (including allegedly Barbaros-class frigate TCG *Oruçreis*). France said that the frigate *Courbet* was targeted three times by the Turkish vessel's fire control radars, which is a hostile act. The French frigate was trying to approach a Tanzanian-flagged civilian ship suspected of involvement in arms trafficking with Libya. The cargo ship was under the escort of three Turkish vessels. Turkey denied harassing the *Courbet*. As a result of this escalation, both countries being Nato members, France announced on July 1st, 2020 that suspending its involvement in NATO operation *Sea Guardian*, following tensions with Turkey.³⁵ By October 2020, the question

³⁴ ***Nessuno ferma Erdoğan nel Mediterraneo in <https://ytali.com/2020/06/15/nessuno-ferma-erdogan-nel-mediterraneo/?pdf=95776> ; la Repubblica, *Libia, incidente sfiorato tra missione Ue e navi turche*, in https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/06/10/news/libia_incidente_sfiorato_tra_missione_ue_e_navi_turche-258895448/

³⁵ Il Foglio, *Macron e Erdogan fanno a schiaffi nel mezzo di un'operazione Nato*, July 3, 2020 in <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2020/07/03/news/macron-e-erdogan-fanno-a-schiaffi-nel-mezzo-di-unoperazione-nato-321742/>; Naval News, *France Pulls Out Of NATO Operation Sea Guardian Amid Tensions With Turkey*, July 3, 2020, in

Courbet was resolved. The Alliance has developed an action plan to review the behavior of the Allies at sea, particularly in the use of NATO call signs and the means associated with a NATO operation, such as the relationship between the ships of the Alliance and the European operation EUNAVFOR Med Irini.³⁶

Italy

Italy was among the main supporters of the creation of the GNA in 2015-2016 but when it started to realize the possibility that Haftar could conquer the whole country, compromising Italian interests, especially in Tripolitania and Fezzan, Rome has gone from full support to the GNA to an attempt to get closer to Haftar. This strategy did not earn the favor of the general. Indeed, Rome couldn't offer Haftar much more than what Cairo, Abu Dhabi or Moscow weren't already giving it. In trying to get closer to Haftar, the Italian government had lost some of the influence it had previously on the GNA, and Libya in turn has begun to seek support and protection from Erdogan's Turkey. Italy has had a changing Libyan policy. The current position is to maintain the distance from both antagonists parts of the Libyan crisis. However, this approach did not particularly help Italy to achieve its strategic objectives, such as the management of migratory flows or facilitating access to the energy markets. The prospect of a resolution of the crisis by Russia, which would necessarily have also involved Turkey and that it would hardly have met European and Italian interests, was considered particularly worrying in Rome. For these reasons, Italy gladly supported Berlin's action when Germany decided to take the initiative to resolve

<https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/07/france-pulls-out-of-nato-operation-sea-guardian-amid-tensions-with-turkey/>

³⁶ Turkey-France. The *Courbet* incident is over. NATO tries to forget, October 22, 2020, in <https://www.bruxelles2.eu/en/2020/10/Turkey-France-The-Courbet-incident-is-over-Lotan-tries-to-forget/>;

the crisis. Rome was a junior partner in Berlin's arrangement, counteracting the French historical activism in the Libyan crisis. Moreover, Italy insisted that the United States re-engage in Libya, ensuring the cease-fire and return to having a primary role. Rome would have liked to recreate a new partnership with the United States that allowed the creation of the GNA in 2015-16 and in which Italy had played an important role thanks to a political delegation that the Obama administration accorded to Rome.³⁷

Conclusions

Unfortunately, the Berlin conference was unable to produce concrete results in terms of ending hostilities and initiating an effective process of pacification. Once again, the international community found itself facing difficulties in implementing effective measures to translate the signed declarations of Berlin's intent into concrete results, starting with the necessary enforcement of the embargo on the supplies of armaments destined for opposing Libyan factions. Even the government of Tripoli has contested for a long time, more or less instrumentally, that the Irini operation favored the opposing party, due to the geographical position of the mission in the procurement of weapons.³⁸

Currently, the maximum annual amount authorized by Italy for the national contingent employed in the mission is 406 soldiers, 1 naval unit, and 2 aircraft assets. The operation is supported by 24 European countries providing an Irini force consisting of two frigates, six maritime patrol aircraft, and 600 members of staff supported by the EU Satellite Center (SatCen) in Torrejón, Spain.

³⁷ Arturo Varvelli, *Interessi mutanti: alcune ipotesi di policy per il governo italiano*, in Eugenio Dacrema, Arturo Varvelli (eds) "Le relazioni tra l'Italia e Libia: interessi e rischi", ISPI, 2020, p. 57.

³⁸ Senato della Repubblica, *L'OPERAZIONE MILITARE DELL'UE NEL MEDITERRANEO EUNAVFOR MED IRINI*, <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01207628.pdf>