

# Libyan kingpins meet in Sicily despite warlord's reluctance



Conte (L) greeted Haftar upon his arrival in Palermo for the conference

The main players in the Libya crisis met in Sicily on Tuesday for Italian-sponsored talks aimed at kickstarting a long-stalled political process and triggering elections despite searing enmities in the divided country.

Eastern Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar went into a meeting with his UN-backed rival Prime Minister Fayeza al-Sarraj and other leaders, an Italian official said, ahead of more inclusive roundtable talks after Haftar's office in Benghazi denied he was attending the actual conference.

Haftar arrived in the Sicilian capital of Palermo from his Benghazi stronghold on Monday evening after days of doubts over his crucial presence, but did not attend a working dinner with other leaders.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, UN envoy Ghassan Salame, European Council President Donald Tusk and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian were also at the Sarraj-Haftar meeting on the conference sidelines, hosted by Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

Italy is the latest country aiming to bring Libya's disparate and often warring factions together after a Paris summit in May saw the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and Haftar agree to hold national polls on December 10 -- a date which has fallen by the wayside.

Acknowledging the chaotic political situation since dictator Moamer Kadhafi was deposed in 2011, the United Nations last week conceded elections will not be viable at least before the spring of 2019.

Haftar, whose forces control all of northeastern Libya, refuses to sit down at the same table as the Islamist leaders he fiercely opposes, militarily and ideologically.

"Haftar is being difficult as he has done several times in the past," said Paris-based specialist Jalel Harchaoui.

"This attitude cuts both ways because it has a sensational effect that momentarily ups his value, but his interlocutors who are humiliated by this will always remember," he said.

Analysts say the Sicily summit risks being compromised not only by tensions between Libyan factions but also the competing agendas of foreign powers.

Just as in May, the key Libyan invitees are Haftar, the eastern parliament's speaker Aguila Salah, GNA head Sarraj and Khaled al-Mechri, speaker of a Tripoli-based upper chamber.

The GNA says it will use the Palermo talks to lobby for security reforms

that unify the army, a constitutionally rooted electoral process, economic reform and an end to "parallel institutions".

- 'A fundamental step' -

For Rome's populist government, a top priority is stemming the flow of migrants who exploit Libya's security vacuum in their quest to reach European shores, often via Italy.

UN envoy Salame told the Security Council on Thursday that a national conference in early 2019 would be organised to provide "a platform" for Libyans to spell out their vision for the future.

But diplomatic wrangling between Italy and France also hangs over this summit.

In September, Italy's defence minister and parliamentary speaker both partly blamed France for Libya's security crisis, which continues to simmer seven years after the NATO-backed uprising toppled Kadhafi.

The Italian swipes came as Tripoli was plagued by militia clashes that killed at least 117 people and wounded more than 400 between late August and late September.

Salame's deputy Stephanie Williams on Monday hailed the GNA's moves to secure Tripoli since then but said more must be done to "generate regular forces ready to assume security responsibilities in the capital".

Rome and Paris have for months been at loggerheads over Libya's election timetable. While France repeatedly endorsed the December date, Italy opposed it.

Italy has not been alone in pushing for elections to be delayed. December 10 was also viewed sceptically by Washington and Moscow.

One Italian diplomatic source said that no definitive poll date should be set at the summit and it is "not sure that there will be a final document" after the talks.

According to diplomats and analysts, Russia, France, Egypt and the UAE support Haftar, while Turkey and Qatar have thrown their weight behind rivals to the eastern strongman, especially Islamist groups.