

The Libya stabilization conference in Sicily: A meddlesome affair

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Seven years after Moammar Gadhafi was hauled out of a drainage pipe in Sirte, his hometown in Libya, and killed by rebel militiamen, the concept of a reunified Libya remains just that – a concept. The Libyan desert expanse, the size of Alaska, remains deeply fragmented, lawless and violent as rival political groups and militias seek power and bounty.

It wasn't supposed to be that way. The Libyan revolution of 2011, inspired by the start of the Arab Spring uprisings in neighbouring Tunisia, turned into a highly destructive war that would see anti-Gadhafi rebel forces, backed by a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing campaign that included Canadian warplanes, reduce the dictator's strongholds to rubble. NATO declared victory and retreated.

Several efforts by the United Nations (UN) and France to bring lasting peace and unity to Libya have failed. What's left of the country has coalesced around two large rival factions: The UN-supported Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli in the west, and in the east, the Libyan Armed Forces (also known as the Libyan National Army) led by the self-styled "field marshal" and warlord Khalifa Haftar.

Now it's the turn of Italy, Libya's old colonial master, to take a crack. A bewildering array of moving geo-political pieces, both domestic and international – including Russia – might bog down Italy's strategy. Here is a look at what's at stake.

What's Italy planning?

On Monday and Tuesday, in Palermo, the capital of Sicily, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is hosting an international conference that will bring together Libya's main players – no small feat itself – including Mr. Haftar, GNA Leader Fayez al-Sarraj and the UN's special representative to Libya, Ghassan Salame, who has worked hard to bring Libya together under the official UN process. The leaders, or their representatives, of many European Union and North African countries are also coming; because Libya is the main staging point for Europe-bound migrants, and possibly some terrorists, the fallout from the collapsed state is not limited to North Africa and the Sahel. German Chancellor Angela Merkel is expected to attend, and possibly French President Emmanuel Macron, whose call earlier this year for Libyan elections in December proved wildly premature.

What is the goal of the Palermo event?

The Italians, unlike the French, do not want to attach a date to a national election. They want to draw up a road map to national reconciliation and the disarmament of the various militias before planning national elections, which could still be a long way off. Even if elections are approved, they could not go ahead without a new constitution and electoral law. The Italians, in other words, seem a bit more realistic about the dangers of setting quick goals.

There seems to be a lot of tension between France and Italy over Libya. Why is that?

It's partly historical, partly commercial and, now, partly to do with migrant flows. Italy and France have competed with each other since the late 19th century for influence in North Africa. Italy, enraged when France colonized Tunisia in the 1880s, grabbed neighbouring Libya in 1912, forming "Italian North Africa," which it held onto until its defeat in the Second World War in 1943. Italy later enjoyed fairly good relations with Mr. Gadhafi and became the main foreign investor in Libya's vast oilfields. Today, it fears

that France is trying to muscle into its territory by seizing the diplomatic initiative. France and Italy also have different views on how to restore order to Libya's lawless south, which is overrun by terrorists and human traffickers, and stem the flow of migrants from the Libyan coast to Europe. But there is no doubt the tiff between France and Italy is also personal. Mr. Macron has compared the rise of populism in Europe – that would be a reference to Italy, which formed a euroskeptic populist government in the spring – to “leprosy.” Italy's populist leaders were not amused and hurled insults back.

Doesn't Russia have designs on Libya too?

Yes, as if Libya needs more countries meddling in its broken affairs. Decades ago, when Mr. Gadhafi was dismissed as a “madman” and ostracized by the West, he pivoted to the Soviet Union and loaded up on Soviet weapons. The close relationship with Moscow extended into the era of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who offered to cancel some US\$4.5-billion of debt owed to Moscow in exchange for new trade deals, including weapons sales and a Russian contract to build a railway from Sirte to Benghazi. Federica Saini Fasanotti, an Italian military historian, Brookings Institute fellow and Pentagon adviser on Libya, said Mr. Putin would love a military base in eastern Libya and believes the Russians have sent special military forces to Libya. But in a recent Brookings article, she said “having a central role in Libya's reconstruction, both politically and economically, is the real prize [for Russia].”

Does the United States or Canada care about Libya?

U.S. President Donald Trump certainly does not, but his Defence Secretary, Jim Mattis, does, Ms. Fasanotti says, though Mr. Mattis is aware that there is no easy route to a peace plan. If Canada, which flew 10 per cent of the NATO bombing missions in 2011, cares about Libya, you wouldn't know that from the Palermo conference. When Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland took a pass on attending, Ahmed Hussen, Minister of

Immigration and Refugees, was supposed to go, but he bailed out too. Canada's representatives in Palermo will be Stéphane Dion, Canada's Special Envoy to the European Union, plus the ambassadors to Libya and Italy.

What are Canada's commercial interest in Libya?

Suncor, through its Libyan joint venture partner, is getting some oil production out of Libya and recently restarted exploration. Stability in Libya, whose oil reserves are the biggest in Africa, would allow the Canadian oil giant to greatly expand its Libyan operations. Canadian engineering companies like SNC-Lavalin, which considers the Middle East and Africa big growth areas, would no doubt bid on reconstruction work if peace breaks out in Libya. Since the Libyan civil war started in 2011, trade between Libya and Canada has fallen to virtually zero.