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The Palermo Conference on Libya

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It currently seems that the Conference on Libya scheduled in Palermo, Sicily, will finally be a predictable success for the Italian government.

General Haftar, the powerful man of Cyrenaica (and currently also of Sirte) arrived in Rome on October 28 last for an informal visit, which was extremely useful for both the Palermo Conference and for Italy's future strategy in Libya.

The Head of the old "Operation Dignity" will certainly be also in Palermo, while Russia will probably be represented by Medvedev or by the Deputy Foreign Minister, Bogdanov. Or even by Dimitri Peskov. Nevertheless, whoever of them will participate in the Conference will have Putin's personal instructions to follow. The Russian President will follow the Conference debate in Sicily with extreme care.

Russia's goal is to stabilize its presence in Libya, regardless of the political results reached by the Palermo Conference, and hence to start a strategic relationship also with Fayed al-Sarraj and Misrata's 7th Brigade, as well as with the major tribes of the Tripoli area. This can be achieved above all with the Italian support.

Nothing is more distant from the Russian interest than an exclusive bilateral relationship with General Haftar, of whom Russia has even minted the new coins with Colonel Gaddafi's profile.

Russia, however, could have Italy's good offices for establishing relations with Fayeze al-Sarraj, with Misrata's militias and, finally, the Fezzan areas, where Russia could establish itself as a major economic partner.

General Haftar's Cyrenaica is thus moving away from France, whose intelligence services still fight side by side with his own militias. Why? Because the powerful man of Cyrenaica knows that, having an exclusive relationship with France, he would remain isolated in Europe and, above all, vis-à-vis Egypt.

In fact, President El-Sisi has put pressure on General Haftar to be in Palermo and not trust completely France, which only wants ENI's oil wells – as at Sarkozy's time – and in the future would certainly not be sympathetic to the government of Cyrenaica, as it appears today.

Another decisive sign for the positive outcome of the Conference is the fact that General Haftar has also stated that Italian Ambassador Perrone can return to Tripoli.

Also Aguila Saleh Issa – the President of the Tobruk-based Parliament that recognizes al-Sarraj's government, but relies on General Haftar's forces – will be in Palermo.

He is an excellent and authoritative mediator.

Also Saleh, who has already come to Rome, is a prestigious personality that can possibly endeavor to reach an agreement

for a future unification of the country.

The problem of unification will be posed by Ahmed Mitig, the leader of Misrata – another figure that could take the lead of a new unitary project – as well as by Khaled al-Meshri and even Khalifa Gwell, now defeated by al-Sarraj's troops (and by Misrata's 7th Brigade led by Mitig), but always useful – or, indeed, necessary – to reach stable peace in Libya. It will be Italy – if capable to do so – to establish a new hierarchy and provide guarantees to the various leaders for a national, but widely regionalized power, as it was also the case at Gaddafi's time.

It should be noted that Mitig is al-Sarraj's No. 2 leader.

The United States has no particular interest in the Libyan dossier, which is outside their African sphere of interest, although recently some US "advisors" have secretly arrived in Sirte.

Nevertheless, the United States is strongly interested in the issue of Islamic terrorism – hence it will favor any credible solution that can stabilize Libya and stop the arrival of jihadists from sub-Saharan Africa in Europe and, possibly, in the United States itself.

France, led by President Macron – whom we do not yet know whether he will manage to participate in the Palermo Conference – is in an obviously difficult situation, also due to Macron's non-diplomatic illness.

Should the Palermo Conference fail, its only card to play would be to establish a stronger alliance with General Haftar and also with Russia – otherwise France will basically play

second fiddle in Libya and in the Maghreb region, with imaginable repercussions on its sub-Saharan and central *Françafrique*.

Moreover, the French intelligence services have long been operating in Fezzan to thwart the 2017 agreements signed in Rome by the various tribes of the region, with the support of the then Interior Minister, Marco Minniti (but also, fortunately, of the then Foreign Minister).

Sabotage actions, support to the French Armed Forces on the border with Niger, but also mass upheavals in Tripoli in September 2018, most likely triggered by French intelligence operatives and local Islamists.

Hence, the wider the attendance at the Conference, the greater Italy's chances of victory and, consequently, France's chances of defeat. France, isolated on the Libyan internal chessboard, will probably take its revenge in the area of Niger.

We shall also see what role will be played by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, who now lives in a Libyan secret location near Egypt.

Obviously, Colonel Gaddafi's most brilliant son will not be in Palermo, but it would be useful to consider him part of the game.

Saif would still be General Haftar's card to guide and direct a unified country after the crazy and stupid "Arab Spring" made by France and Great Britain, which are even more inept than the United States in the African foreign policy.

A US foreign policy which – only thanks to the fight against "terrorism" – is flooding Africa and the EU borders with drones,

satellite networks, and military bases to seal the EU itself, control the evolution and developments on its borders and turn the Russian Federation into a middle Asian regional power.

Moreover, should Italy's project fail, French President Macron could find a role to play in the stabilization of Libya, thus creating a new mediator's role precisely with al-Farraj, and rebuilding – probably at great cost – a new relationship with General Haftar, who let Russia know he is dissatisfied with France, which, as usual, believes it can dictate the military agenda for those it helps.

Russia, however, could also accept France's role if the Palermo Conference failed. Russia only wants to reach the intended result. It does not want to antagonize Italy, the oil power needed in Libya and the future destabilizer of the now disturbing EU, which has got in the way with Ukraine and the sanctions and tension with the countries of the old Warsaw Pact, which are now EU Member States. President Trump does not like Europe at all and has showed it everywhere. President Putin, however, who is more reserved and discreet, could be fed up with a European Union that – as a foolish servant – repeats the US propaganda and is no longer useful as business partner as it was in the past. Now, time has come for the Russian-Chinese axis, which ensures Russia's economic growth – an axis passing through the Mediterranean, not the Eurasian peninsula.

We also need to think about the outcome of the meetings held by the French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, in Paris on November 8.

These meetings were attended by some Misrata's and 7th Brigade's leaders, and by Abo Kassim Kozeit, member of the High Council of State, as well as by MPs Soleiman Elfaqih and Mohammed Erraid, and GNA advisors Ali Bousseta and Ettaher Elbaour, in addition to Haftar's military men Salha Juha and Mohammed Eddarat.

Preparation for a coup or for another government in exile?
This is the reason why Haftar is worried.

Hence, the Paris meetings were a sort of Palermo Conference – hosted in a cold weather location, with the second and third ranks of the various participants in the Sicilian Conference – to mobilize and anyway activate the French networks in Libya for elections in the near future, which may possibly be interesting for some participants, and for a "plan for Libya" by the French intelligence services which will not convince al-Sarraj, who does not want to die in an attack on his government's palace. This must be clearly said in Palermo.

Nevertheless, it will not even convince General Haftar, who now fears his arrogant allies and looks to Russia and also to Italy for putting an end to the conflict in a way that, however, does not humiliate him.

At the last Libyan elections, only 17% of people voted – certainly not a share of voters that would make us take them seriously.

Elections in the near future, by which the covert operations of the French intelligence services set great store, would only create the conditions for a new fratricidal war – and this must be clearly explained to all the Libyan parties participating in

the forthcoming Conference scheduled in Palermo.

For the Italian intelligence services, said Conference is a significant turning point.

As far as we know, the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (AISE), Alberto Manenti, who was born in Tarhouna, depends on the outcome of the Palermo Conference, while also the domestic intelligence agency (AISI) and the Department of Security Intelligence (DIS) are under very strong pressure.

Our American friends should also be pointed out that only the future unity of the Government of National Accord (GNA), Haftar's forces, the Tobruk-based government and other parties is the sole guarantee of a serious struggle against ISIS.

A repression of Libyan jihadism which is not at all a marginal goal, neither for Libya nor for Europe, considering the persisting tensions in Sirte, the reorganization of the so-called "radical" Islam in Fezzan (which could also benefit France, which would direct it towards the North) and the Caliphate's final penetration also along the coastal lines.

Let us imagine that the recent visit paid by the Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, to Doha, the capital of Qatar, protecting the Muslim Brotherhood and supporting al-Sarraj, together with Turkey, has created a credible pressure of this Emirate on the Government of National Accord (GNA) for a platform – which is allegedly already circulating within the Italian Government – on the gradual unification of the Libyan Armed Forces.

A platform which is also the new goal of El-Sisi's Egypt –

although we do not know to what extent this goal is credible. Egypt is probably finally fed up with funding and training General Haftar's expensive army that, however, is still targeting its own offensive on Derna, a jihadist city-state.

It should also be recalled that just the day before the beginning of the Palermo Conference, Donald J. Trump and Vladimir Putin will meet in Paris for the future revision of the INF Treaty regarding medium-range missiles, recently rejected by the USA.

President Trump speaks about the Russian missiles, but he actually means the Chinese ones: should the new INF Treaty be reworded as desired by the US Administration, it would lead to the destruction of 95% of Chinese missiles.

And the United States strategically holds China only from the Pacific, from South Korea and from the bases in Japan.

Hence, President Macron probably wants to be credited for success in the negotiation – even only for media purposes – but it is much more likely that the Paris agreement on the new INF Treaty would ultimately be just a list of fine words.

Nevertheless, it would count to overshadow the Sicilian Conference and marginalize the Italian government and its image vis-à-vis Libya and the allies.

We do not yet know what Chancellor Merkel will say. She will be in Palermo representing a country that has not participated – except for a small e-warfare brigade – in the Western struggle to support the jihadists of Cyrenaica that led to the collapse of Gaddafi's regime. In all likelihood, she will also devise a role as mediator, but politically weakened at a

national level and without a clear strategic direction in Africa, which would lead her to support – for want of anything better – the French assumptions and options.

Are we sure, however, that President Macron – so rhetorically pro-European – wants to deal with a German ally he has already antagonized on public accounts and the endless mass of irremovable civil servants? In no case President Macron wants to get involved, in Africa, with the German Armed Forces in disarray and with a primary goal in mind, which is still the Eurasian East?

Certainly, France has invited the second and third ranks of the two major Libyan groups, led by al-Sarraj and Haftar, with a view to imitating the inclusion strategy that has characterized the Italian preparatory work for the Palermo Conference scheduled at Villa Igea.

Moreover, thirteen small groups invited by President Macron have already decided not to attend the Paris meeting.

In fact, Prime Minister Conte's government has involved all the participants in the Libyan game, including the apparently minor ones.

Also in view of weakening al-Sarraj, Khalifa Haftar would like to have – and probably already has – a good relationship with Misrata's militias which, together with the other 250 autonomous militias, make up the unsafe, insecure and expensive (also for others) military basis of al-Sarraj's government.

As already noted, Ahmed Mitig is the powerful man of Misrata and al-Sarraj's No. 2 leader.

Last year, Mitig had also been to Agrigento, Sicily, for the first Italian-Libyan Forum. Meanwhile, the Conference was being prepared.

The Palermo Conference will also be attended by Khaled Meshri, the President of Libya's Supreme Council of State and No. 3 leader who, upon precise orders, will probably leave the Paris quasi-Summit on Libya and give up its elusive "elections."

As already noted, the Conference will also be attended by Aguila Saleh Issa, the President of the GNA Parliament, with excellent relations with the Tobruk-based Parliament.

He is certainly a decisive figure in Libya's current and future setup.

Moreover, there are already jihadist infiltrations also in Tripoli and Ghassan Salamè, the UN Special Representative in Libya, has publicly accused al-Sarraj of being weak.

Therefore, Al-Sarraj is no longer as powerful within the Tripoli government as he was a year ago and General Haftar does not fail to let it know that he still wants to get to Tripoli.

We need to ensure a honorable role to al-Sarraj; to let General Haftar know he can now stabilize his conquests, but must also have the support of Tripoli's and Misrata's forces, as well as of many Fezzan tribes, with whom the Italian intelligence services have always been in contact; to make it clear also for the old Head of "Operation Dignity" that it is useless to defeat and humiliate his enemies in Tripoli – a harshness that will unleash other tribal wars.

There is also another decisive factor, namely finance. Some of Gaddafi's assets in the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA) and in other related investment companies have not yet been requisitioned by the United Nations, which had forgotten to make banking requisition mandatory for governments.

LIA's division between Libya and Malta is ineffective and has led some Libyan financial transactions to come close to very dangerous environments.

General Haftar controlled the Oil Crescent's wells, but eventually agreed to reach a reasonable arrangement on the oil sale proceeds.

All the money made or the returns on investment – currently limited – of the funds of Gaddafi's regime in the EU and abroad must return to the new Libya.

This is the reason why – starting from the Palermo Conference – an Organization for the Financial Autonomy of the whole Libya could be set up which, in view of the future reunification of the area, should establish an equitable and even stable distribution of income between the regions, as well as enlarged representation between tribes and local governments, and the EU protection, with a delegation of powers to Italy, which already controls – with ENI and fully respecting all parties – the oil-related assets.