A decade on since the Gaddafi-regime was deposed in 2011, the situation in Libya is still volatile and appears to be deteriorating. The instability in Libya poses significant challenges to its neighboring countries, including EU member states across the Mediterranean. At the same time, Libya remains a focal point of European interest, both in terms of its energy resources and through its central role in European efforts to externalize the management of migration, limiting cross-Mediterranean migrant crossings. This policy brief suggests how the EU could contribute more fruitfully towards a lasting peace in Libya through adopting a single, unified stance and engaging with the fractious Libyan actors through a concerted diplomatic push.

Mathias Hatleskog Tjønn  Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
The Libyan Aftermath of the Arab Spring

In the decade since the toppling of Libya’s long-time autocratic ruler Muammar Gaddafi in the Arab Uprisings of 2010–12 and the ensuing NATO intervention to unseat him, Libya has played a tumultuous role in regional politics. The subsequent civil war that erupted between rivaling power formations in the West, centered on Tripoli, and in the East, centered on Benghazi and Tobruk, drew in external actors from both regional and international orbits. These coalesced into two sides facing off each other: Turkey, Qatar, and Italy supporting Tripoli’s UN-recognized government in the West, versus Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and France giving their support to the self-declared Khalifa Haftar government in the East. The promise of involvement in Libyan reconstruction and resource extraction after an eventual end to hostilities was a motivating factor in their involvement. On October 23, 2020, a ceasefire stopped the most recent outbreak of hostilities. On October 23, 2020, a ceasefire stopped the most recent outbreak of hostilities. On October 23, 2020, a ceasefire stopped the most recent outbreak of hostilities.

Still Room Left for Migration Management Maneuvering

Despite the disarray and conflict in Libya, the country has remained at the center of European efforts to externalize the management of migration. These efforts picked up pace after the “Long Summer of Migration” in 2015–16, where a crisis-rhetoric, mixed with the actual challenges of accommodating an increase in migrant arrivals and the concurrent public anxiety, had far-reaching consequences. This charged political atmosphere resulted in the EU seeking ways to immediately limit migrant entries into the Union. This was the Valletta Memorandum between Italy and the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) (the deal was also supported and partially financed by the EU), which was signed on March 20, 2016. Meanwhile, in the Central Mediterranean, a new migration-related agreement was put into place, which built on previous Italian efforts vis-à-vis Libya. This was the Valletta Memorandum between Italy and the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) (the deal was also supported and partially financed by the EU), which was signed on February 2, 2017, and renewed for an additional three years in February 2020. This memorandum came to be after the then-Interior Minister and veteran of the Italian secret services Marco Minniti first negotiated a deal involving payments to the Awlad Salemeen, Tubruq, and the Tuareg – ethnic groups involved in organizing migrant treks across southern Libya towards the Mediterranean – to stop directing migrants northwards. At the same time, Rome offered the Libyan government in Tripoli financial assistance to secure their endorsement of this initiative.

The number of migrants making the crossing across the Central Mediterranean subsequently tumbled, but the Valletta Memorandum is disputed and much discussed in terms of its relationship to European commitments to both migrants’ rights and human rights in general. First, the migrants now “contained” in Libya were often kept in squalid conditions in an opaque network of camps and detention centers belonging to a range of different actors both governmental (keeping in mind that Libya has for most of the past decade had at least two competing governments) and non-governmental, meaning run by tribal factions, city-state militias, armed groups, or NGOs and IGOs from the international community. Additionally, the search and rescue capacity (SAR) of the Libyan Coast Guard – itself a much-disputed entity with ties to human trafficking across the Mediterranean and a frequently documented lack of respect for migrants’ rights – has been ramped up, as direct official European involvement in naval patrol and rescue operations have been scaled back. Finally, NGOs active in the Mediterranean in the initial years after the “Long Summer” have been curtailed and even criminalized for their activities. The result is a situation in which so-called “irregular” migrants in Libya are essentially prevented from both leaving Libya and entering the EU, with the renewed 2017 Valletta Memorandum giving highly debatable migration management externalization efforts a veneer of legality, where none should exist if the migration governance processes involved were instead viewed alongside European ideals and stated adherence to human rights standards.

Interestingly, in the aftermath of earlier pushbacks of migrants by Italy in 2009, Italy was in 2012 condemned for this practice by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The Valletta Memorandum and related policies and practices are arguably a roundabout way of securing the same goal of pushing migrants back to Libya, this time in a much larger capacity. In 2020 alone, 12,000 migrants were pulled back to Libya by the Libyan Coast Guard, partially equipped and trained by the EU and European countries like the UK and Italy. Why this is now allowed to happen on the ECHR’s watch remains unclear.
only affirmed this lacking US appetite for military interventions. The failure of planning for the aftermath of the 2011 NATO operation has been described by Obama as the “worst mistake” of his presidency, though the lack of strong US diplomatic engagement in Libya by his two successors could arguably be viewed as compounding that mistake, rather than countering it.8

It would not be out of place to expect European engagement in securing peace in Libya to be more concerted, forceful and urgent considering that Libya is “right next door”. The EU has deployed multi-track diplomacy (MTD) previously in the crises in Ukraine, Georgia, Mali, and Yemen, and indeed, this may be a possible solution to Libya’s crisis.9 This has so far not happened, with more short-term goals of limiting migration and securing continuing resource access taking precedence. Despite lacking a stable and unified partner in Libya, the past decade has shown that the EU, almost counter-intuitively, has been able to accomplish these short-term goals.

The “success” – albeit a morally questionable one – of European migration policies in Libya has, as we have seen, not been repeated in European efforts to secure peace in the country. One possible explanation for this is the competition between centrally placed European Mediterranean powers like France and Italy, which, if they were working in concert, could instead have played a more constructive role. The latter has long-standing economic interests in Libya, chiefly through Italian State majority ownership of the oil and gas company ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, or National Hydrocarbons Authority) and its predecessor AGIP (Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli, or General Italian Oil Company). While ENI started extracting Libyan oil in 1959 and hence officially only aided the newly independent state, a less-mentioned aspect of the company history is the colonial-era petroleum prospecting done by AGIP in the decade preceding World War II, indicating promise in the very same area where ENI would strike black gold in the 1950s, and which to this day is one of the most important Libyan oil fields.10 ENI is of no small importance to either Italy or Libya, being one of the seven largest oil companies in the world (part of an exclusive club called the “supermajors”) and the largest foreign operators in both the oil and gas sectors of Libya.
France, for its part, has competing interests in Libya, where another French supermajor, Total, has been vying for influence. Total is presently a much smaller operator in Libya than ENI, though French support for the aforementioned warlord Haftar, who has been in direct and at times open conflict with the recognized government in the Libyan capital of Tripoli, has indeed been linked to Haftar’s potential takeover of national power acting as a breach-opener for French rather than long-standing Italian economic interests in the country.\(^\text{11}\) Indeed, the two European countries’ competition over Libyan spoils has at times spilled into the open, with France and Italy in recent years exchanging insults and accusations over who has the most colonial mindset in North Africa, an area where neither country can be said to have had an im- maculate track record historically speaking.\(^\text{12}\)

### The EU’s Potential Role in Resolving the Libyan Conflict

The EU and its member-states’ self-image and ideals dictate that any accords with third parties require stable and dependable partners, not only to safeguard the durability of the accords’ goals, but also to uphold the Union’s adherence to international norms and human rights standards. In addition, this serves to distinguish the EU and European countries from other more “unruly” actors in the Middle East, such as Iran, Russia and Turkey. Libya, however, is unique in that its decade-long instability has not hindered Italy and the EU in establishing a restrictive and disputed migration regime but has rather enabled and permitted this development. This is seemingly a case of short-term – meaning migration- and resource access-related – goals taking the driver’s seat, to the detriment of the longer-term goal of a stable and peaceful Libya. This has happened despite these goals being related: a stable and peaceful Libya could mean less outbound migration and greater potential for developing energy resources. But this would require a concerted EU effort, as described above.

If the EU, including its most important member states, could speak more with one voice and work towards a shared goal of stabilizing its Mediterranean neighbouring country, we would start to see meaningful engagement and change for the better. Additionally, if the EU and central European actors started to bring Libyan interests into the equation, instead of focusing more on their own immediate goals of migration management and resource extraction, perhaps finally a lasting peace in Libya could be secured. \(^\text{12}\)

### Notes


3. Ibid: 362;

4. Ibid: 362;


### THE AUTHOR

Mathias Hatleskog Tjønn worked as a Research Assistant at PRIO, where he researched migration issues, particularly in the Mediterranean. He holds an MPhil in Modern International and Transnational History (MiTRA) from the University of Oslo and commenced a doctorate position at the Institute for Social Research (ISF) in spring 2022.

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### PRIO

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