

French-Italian proxy war in Libya

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There are concrete material interests behind the sharp tensions between France and Italy, which in February led to France recalling its ambassador in Rome. In Libya, where dozens of rival militias have been fighting for supremacy since the 2011 NATO war, the two EU members are conducting a proxy war over control of Africa's largest oil and gas resources.

While Italy backs the Government of National Accord (GNA) of Fayeze al-Sarraj in Tripoli, which is also supported by Germany and the UN, France has sided with the National Army of Libya (LNA) of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who presides over its counterpart in Tobruk. Egypt and Russia also back Haftar.

That this war is about oil interests and strategic influence in Africa is an open secret.

The “national accord government” of Fayeze al-Sarraj, which has little influence outside the capital, controls the National Oil Company of Libya (NOC), in which the Italian energy group ENI has been involved for half a century. Italy has reopened its embassy in Tripoli and, together with the EU, is financing the GNA Libyan Coast Guard as Europe's proxy border force to keep migrants away from Europe.

Haftar's LNA had already brought the so-called oil crescent around Benghazi in the east of the country under its control last summer. In early February, it also took control of the oil fields in the southwest of the country, including the El Sharara oil field, considered the largest in the country.

The El Sharara field was occupied late last year by security personnel and local people protesting against the unity government in Tripoli and demanding higher wages and an adequate regional share of the oil revenues. It has been operated since 1994 by a joint venture of several international oil companies, in which, in addition to the Austrian OMV, France's Total also participates.

Haftar is supported militarily by France. A paper by the government-related German Foundation for Science and Politics (SWP) states that France has “lent political—and most likely other forms—of support to Haftar's operation in the south, and prevented its Western partners from issuing joint statements on the issue.”

Officially, Paris justifies its support for Haftar with the fight against Islamist militias in the Sahel zone. As part of Opération Barkhane, the former colonial power France has been involved for several years, with more than 4,000 troops, in the five Sahel countries of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad. The operation is also supported by Britain and Estonia, and works together with the German Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) in Mali.

A French government advisor had previously complained about the high cost of the operation and said that the only way to bring it to an end was to stabilize Libya. That is why the French government has opted for Haftar.

According to the Swiss daily *Tribune de Genève*, an army spokesman for Field Marshall Haftar also said, “We had a common interest, which is combating terrorism. France wanted to pursue terrorist groups in our neighbouring countries from the south, such as Chad, Mali and Niger, where these groups are heavily spread.”

However, many observers are convinced that France is primarily concerned with oil interests, and that the competition between Italy and France on this issue is the main reason for the ongoing civil war in Libya.

As Mohammed al-Diari, foreign minister in the Tobruk parliament from 2014 to 2018, explains in an interview with the *Tribune de Genève*, informed circles in Libya attributed the armed conflict to “the rivalries between the Italian group ENI and Total.” In general, “the question of oil resources is very sensitive.” Abdul

Hafiz Ghoga, a former member of the Transitional Council in 2011, told the newspaper, “There will be no peace and stability in Libya unless the international community reaches consensus.”

The NATO bombing campaign of 2011, which was mainly based on the initiative of France, was not about human rights, but about oil and gas, access to Africa and control of the Maghreb. The bloody price for this is still being paid today by the people of Libya, who, eight years on, are still suffering from the civil war between rival criminal militias armed and financed by their imperialist backers.

In the last bloody conflict over Tripoli at the end of August 2018, 115 people lost their lives and 25,000 people became homeless due to the destruction of entire neighbourhoods, according to official sources.

France and Italy are not the only neo-colonial actors in the region. Germany, the US and Britain are also trying to defend their respective interests and expand their influence.

The US has repeatedly tried to relocate its AFRICOM centre, previously based in Stuttgart, to Libya. Washington is primarily seeking to stop China’s economic advance in Africa. The United States also wants to consolidate its alliance with friendly Arab states in order to curb Iran’s growing influence. Flying from Sicily, US forces repeatedly carry out bombing attacks against Libyan cities, allegedly to destroy positions of ISIS or al-Qaeda.

The German government is determined to make up for the “mistakes” of its 2011 foreign policy, when it did not participate in the Libyan war, and wants to exert influence in Africa itself. The Bundeswehr is already involved in operations around Libya—in Mali, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, South Sudan and the Mediterranean.

In the hypocritical language of diplomacy, the already-cited study by the German Foundation for Politics and Science (SWP) recommends that Berlin cautiously distance itself from al-Sarraj, because Haftar is increasingly gaining influence. “Western states would also have to revisit their support to the GNA if the latter becomes engaged in an escalating struggle with Haftar.”

A central challenge in negotiating such a turnaround was the disunity of Western governments in Libya, in light of “the diplomatic spats between Italy and France, for which Libya is one arena; and the unilateral French

support for Haftar’s southern operation.”



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