

# From NATO's war in Libya to Italy's courts: The imperialist web behind Al-Masri's release

**Marc Wells****10 February 2025**

The recent arrest and subsequent release of Libyan warlord Ossama Anjiem, also known as Ossama al-Masri, by Italian authorities have exposed the deep-seated complicity and criminality of various governments, particularly the United States and Italy, in perpetuating imperialist agendas. This incident is the direct product of the imperialist interventions that have plagued the nation since the 2011 NATO-led assault of the Maghreb, which has plunged Libya into a chaos.

On January 19, Italian police arrested al-Masri in Turin under a warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Al-Masri, the head of the Tripoli branch of the Reform and Rehabilitation Institution—a notorious network of detention centers run by the government-backed Special Deterrence Forces—was accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Mitiga prison since 2015.

Mitiga prison, under al-Masri's control, became infamous for systematic torture, extrajudicial killings, and the enforced disappearance of political dissidents, migrants, and suspected opponents of the dominant militias. Survivors have reported severe beatings, sexual violence, and prolonged detention without trial, all overseen or sanctioned by al-Masri. Reports from human rights organizations have detailed mass executions of detainees, often without any judicial process, reinforcing his role as one of the most brutal enforcers of post-Gaddafi Libya's fractured and lawless landscape.

However, claiming a procedural error in his arrest, an Italian tribunal refused to approve the detention, leading to al-Masri's release and expulsion back to Libya on January 21. The court cited that Justice Minister Carlo Nordio should have been informed ahead of time, as the ministry handles all relations with the ICC. Nordio's handling of the case was a glaring display of the Meloni government's nationalist priorities, from Italy seeking to maintain cooperative relations with Libya to curb migrant flows into Europe to Italy's historical economic interests in Libya.

Last week, the ICC filed a prima facie case against the Italian government, specifically the Minister of Justice Carlo Nordio and the Minister of the Interior Matteo Piantedosi, charging them for obstructing an investigation into crimes against humanity. Italy's decision has drawn severe criticism from jurisprudence authorities and international human rights organizations. Amnesty International condemned the move, emphasizing the missed opportunity to address impunity in Libya.

According to jurist Aniello Nappi, contrary to the ruling of the Rome Court of Appeal, the police could have arrested al-Masri without prior consultation with the Minister of Justice, as the minister has no formal role in this procedure. The responsibility for requesting pre-trial detention lay solely with the Attorney General at the Rome Court of Appeal, according to Law No. 237/2012.

Furthermore, the court's refusal to validate the arrest was based on a misinterpretation of the law, ignoring the fact that the ICC had requested a red notice from Interpol, thereby legitimizing the police's direct intervention. By failing to correct this legal error, the government purposely facilitated al-Masri's repatriation.

This underscores Italy's vested interests in Libya, particularly concerning migration control. Italy has long relied on the Libyan coast guard to manage migrant flows across the Mediterranean, turning a blind eye to the documented abuses in Libyan detention facilities. By releasing al-Masri, Italy not only shirked its responsibility to uphold international law but also reinforced its complicity in the mistreatment of migrants detained in Libyan facilities.

Importantly, Italy has significant economic interests in Libya, particularly in the energy sector. Libya, rich in oil and natural gas, has long been a key supplier to Italy, with Italian energy giant ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi) playing a dominant role in the extraction and export of these resources.

Following the fall of Gaddafi, Italian companies have sought to maintain and expand their presence in Libya's oil

sector, often forming partnerships with local militias and power brokers to secure operations. The Italian government's reluctance to confront figures like al-Masri reflects its broader strategy of preserving economic access to Libya's resources, even at the cost of enabling war crimes and instability.

By releasing al-Masri, Italy intended to avoid backlash from Libyan authorities, ensuring continued cooperation on oil, security, and migration. Meloni's fascist ultranationalist orientation views the ICC as a foreign entity imposing legal obligations on Italy, reinforcing her administration's broader flouting of international law and accountability.

Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that Italy may have had undisclosed security agreements with al-Masri's network, exchanging protection or repatriation for intelligence cooperation on militant activities. Corruption or backdoor negotiations cannot be ruled out, as past Italian governments have engaged in secret deals with Libyan actors to maintain influence.

The roots of this complicity trace back to the 2011 NATO-led military intervention in Libya, which resulted in the overthrow and killing of Muammar Gaddafi. The intervention, justified under the pretext of protecting civilians, was a sociocide perpetrated by U.S. and European imperialism aimed at destabilizing a sovereign nation to assert control over its resources and geopolitical positioning.

This military intervention took place in the context of the Arab Spring, a revolutionary wave of uprisings throughout North Africa's Maghreb, from Egypt to Tunisia. The mass protests posed a direct challenge to the decades-old autocratic regimes that had long been bolstered by imperialist powers. However, the NATO powers, led by the U.S., recognized the threat to capitalist rule by the uprisings and sought to control the situation to serve their own interests, with Libya being the most devastating example of this strategy.

In this context, the Obama administration was primarily responsible for coordinating an allied attack on Libya. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton played a particularly notorious role in advocating for military action, as she infamously celebrated Gaddafi's brutal murder by laughing and remarking, "We came, we saw, he died." This statement encapsulated the ruthless imperialist drive behind the intervention, demonstrating the sheer disregard for Libyan sovereignty and the lives of its people.

In the aftermath, Libya descended into chaos, with various militias vying for power, leading to widespread human rights abuses. Figures like al-Masri emerged during this power vacuum, capitalizing on the instability to establish control over detention centers notorious for torture, rape, and extrajudicial killings. The very forces that claimed to liberate

Libya from tyranny facilitated the rise of new and more brutal oppressors, highlighting the hypocrisy of imperialist interventions.

Al-Masri's rise to power must be understood within the historical context of Libya's disintegration following NATO's intervention. Initially a mid-level militia commander, he leveraged his brutal reputation and connections to foreign intelligence services, particularly through Italy and the United States, to gain political influence. By aligning himself with Tripoli-based factions that received tacit support from Western governments, he secured key positions within Libya's fragmented governance system, using his militia's control over detention centers as both a source of revenue and a tool of political intimidation.

His involvement in human trafficking, the extortion of migrants, and clandestine security arrangements with European powers further reinforced his standing. Western intelligence agencies, seeking to maintain some semblance of order in Libya, were willing to work with figures like al-Masri, who could suppress rival militias and control key migration routes. This pragmatic yet morally bankrupt approach allowed him to operate with near-total impunity, transforming him from a mere warlord into an influential political actor within Libya's lawless power structure.

The al-Masri case is emblematic of a broader pattern of governmental complicity in war crimes and human rights abuses. By prioritizing geopolitical interests and economic gains over human rights and justice, imperialist powers perpetuate cycles of violence and instability.

Italy's actions, in this case, are not isolated but are indicative of a systemic issue where legal technicalities are exploited to shield individuals who serve imperialist agendas. The procedural error cited for al-Masri's release is a convenient facade, masking the underlying motive of preserving strategic alliances, securing energy resources, and controlling migration flows.



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