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THE LIBYAN CRISIS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: CHARTING A PATH THROUGH INSTABILITY TOWARD LASTING PEACE

ABSTRACT: *The article provides an extensive review of the protracted crisis in Libya, triggered in 2011 by the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi and meanwhile grown into a multi-faceted conflict with all the classic characteristic features: political disunity and foreign interventions. It traces the line of historical development from the autocratic rule of Gaddafi through the development of rival governments, subsequent civil wars, and how the country has retained a locus of instability. Key themes explored include the role of internal divisions and external actors in perpetuating the conflict, such as the involvement of countries like Turkey, Egypt, the US or Russia, alongside their various strategic interests in the region. The article also argues that despite the limited success of the UN and EU in resolving the crisis, recent geopolitical shifts—such as the reorientation of Libya's traditional backers towards the Middle East—offer a new potential window for stabilization. Accordingly, the article reviews the prospects of the EU in playing an important role in shaping Libya's future, assessing the opportunities and constraints it may face in the current geopolitical context and analysing the EU's options for promoting political stability, economic recovery, and institutional reforms.*

KEYWORDS: Libyan Civil War, European Union, foreign intervention, migration, instability

1. Introduction

The Libyan crisis, which has been ongoing since 2011, represents one of the most complex and challenging conflicts to manage in recent history. The overthrow of Gaddafi, initially regarded as the advent of a new democratic era, instead marked the inception of an enduring power struggle, characterised by internal divisions, external interventions and a lack of coherent governance. These factors collectively undermined the initial optimism following the establishment of the National Transitional Council (NTC), precipitating a rapid descent into chaos. The uncontrolled proliferation of armed factions, political fragmentation, and recurring conflicts have resulted in a perpetual state of instability, despite the population's desire for stability and peace.

The power vacuum that emerged following Gaddafi's demise provided an opportunity for various domestic and international actors to compete for influence (internally, this included the Libya Shield Force, Libyan National Army, and the Islamic State, while externally, it involved Russia, Turkey, the UAE, and

Egypt). The resurgence of Islamism (Glenn, 2017) within the transitional government—initially the Government of National Accord (GNA) and subsequently the General National Council (GNC)—facilitated the formation of a new government in eastern Libya: the House of Representatives (HoR) (who later transferred its governing power to Government of National Stability—GNS). This event resulted in the emergence of a dual system of governance, which has greatly contributed to the instability of the state and polarization of society. Additionally, the repeated postponement of national elections, the rise of extremist groups, and the entrenched tribal division have made nation-building such a challenging endeavour that the prospect of reconciliation appears to be a mere fantasy.

On the global stage, the situation has been marked by a complex and often contradictory approach. Despite the UN's efforts to broker ceasefires and mitigate political transitions, the effectiveness of these interventions has been constrained by either inadequate implementation or international distrust (Herța and Corpădean, 2020). Meanwhile, the EU, situated in close geographical proximity to the region and with significant interests therein, has been reluctant to assume a more proactive role, but tended to focus on managing the symptoms of the crisis, rather than addressing its underlying causes (Marcuzzi, 2022).

As a result, the possibility of a peaceful resolution seems remote at present, especially considering the recent intensification of hostilities, including the deployment of Libyan National Army (LNA) forces in southern and western Libya and the dispute over the Central Bank's leadership, which has prompted renewed concerns about the potential for a resurgence of open conflict (Megerisi, 2024). Though, fortunately for the general Libyan population, the regional geopolitical landscape has also undergone a serious shift that currently facilitates an undetermined fragile peace: the traditional backers of the Libyan factions, such as Turkey and Egypt or Qatar and the UAE, have diverted their attention towards the escalating hostilities in the Middle East (Abdeen, 2024).

In this context, the question of whether the EU can, or should, assume a more active role in stabilizing Libya is particularly pertinent. The EU's efforts to date have been primarily reactive, aimed at containing the negative spillover effects of the conflict, such as irregular migration and terrorism, rather than attaining a sustainable and functional peace between the two warring sides. However, the increasing complexity of the crisis, coupled with recent geopolitical shifts, presents an opportunity for the EU to reassess its strategy. The only remaining questions pertain to the potential actions of the EU and the likelihood of its acting on them.

Thus, this article seeks to explore the evolution of the Libyan conflict, the roles played by various international actors, and the potential pathways towards stabilization that could or cannot be facilitated by the EU. Also, it tries to discover if the EU may be in a position to prevent a renewed outbreak of a civil war and if it can play a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for a durable peace inside Libya.

2. Theoretical Framework

Before diving into the events which put the North African country in the current position and how several efforts to resolve the crisis were conducted, it is crucial to understand the scenario on a theoretical level: an infrastructure that clarifies both the core reason of the conflict as well as the rationale of the conduct of the global actors within the crisis. Instead of a standalone internal conflict, the Libyan crisis reflects a reconfiguration of power in the North African and Mediterranean region, driven by competing geopolitical, strategic and economic interests. Therefore, the Libyan situation can be best understood through the longstanding debate between neorealism and neoliberalism.

Neorealism (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001) contends that states behave mainly to maximize their power and security in a post-Westphalian anarchic world, while neoliberalism (Keohane, 1984) asserts that cooperation, interdependence, and institutions can mitigate conflict and foster stability. This theoretical divide is crucial in explaining both the nature of the Libyan crisis and its potential resolution: while the conflict itself is driven by power struggles in a neorealist framework, any viable stabilization effort must rely on neoliberal institutionalism.

When it comes to understanding why the conflict persists, offensive realism offers the most compelling theoretical lens, as it emphasizes that states exist in a constant competition for influence and security in an anarchic international system. In contrast to Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism, states are not only interested in conserving their survival and position, but are also in a continuous search for new opportunities to increase that power (power-maximization) by achieving different levels of hegemony. Moreover, for economic and perception-related reasons, great powers or regional hegemons usually tend to favour a more indirect involvement into a conflict (buck-passing) over the classic approach of balancing when it comes to cases of multipolarity (Mearsheimer, 2001). From this perspective, foreign intervention in Libya is driven not by stabilization or democratization needs alone but also by glaring strategic considerations. The United States, for example, has been continuing to back pro-open-market governments in order to continue accessing Libyan hydrocarbon resources, but also to hinder Russia's military buildup in the Mediterranean Sea. Additionally, the European Union also has some interests which go beyond the humanitarian elements and focus on continued hegemonic influence in the Mediterranean region, having access to oil and gas fields in North Africa and curbing irregular migrations from the area. Concurrently, local players such as Turkey and Egypt are racing, each with their own concept of power order among Arab and Muslim worlds, while others such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar use the Libyan case as a type of laboratory experiment in their quest for strategic supremacy, each supporting differing sides with a desire to consolidate their place within regional politics. All

of these have resulted in a fragmented conflict in which no single actor can impose a definitive resolution.

Conversely, while neorealism explains the underlying dynamics of the conflict, certain instances of international cooperation regarding Libya's case exhibit elements of (neo)liberal institutionalism and a potential framework for stabilization. Institutionalism posits that even though the international system is anarchic, cooperation is not only possible, but also very prolific for mitigating anarchy and for peace. From Robert Keohane's perspective, interdependency is key to deterrence and essential for creating common objectives between great powers through intermediaries such as rules, norms and values (Keohane, 1984). However, these elements remain largely overshadowed by power competition in the Libyan crisis (as predicted by neorealism), because interdependency seems to be less relevant in proxy wars and due to the fact that even though the EU was able to impose sanctions and dispatch observation missions, it has not yet been capable of offering an integrated and coordinated strategy in a serious attempt to stabilize Libya. Neorealist self-interests of the Member States have contributed to the inefficiency of collective action, and, as a result, initiatives such as EUNAVFOR MED IRINI or support to Libyan security institutions failed. There is, however, a success story: the system for the management of oil resources through the National Bank of Libya. Thanks to it, the institution has managed to remain an independent one, operating to the economic benefit of all the parties involved and demonstrating that, in some cases, multilateralism can deliver long-term dividends.

Thus, this article argues that the Libyan crisis perfectly exemplifies the ongoing debate between neorealism and neoliberalism. While neorealism explains the persistence of war through power struggles, neoliberalism presents a necessary – yet currently unfulfilled – framework for stabilization.

3. From Gaddafi to Chaos: The Evolution of the Libyan Crisis

Following the 1969 coup d'état, Libya was placed under the control of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and the Free Officers Movement (FOM), an Arab nationalist group. Gaddafi seized power after the overthrow of King Idris I, a monarch who ruled a semi-democratic Libyan state that was heavily reliant on Western interests, particularly due to the inability of the administrative apparatus to effectively manage its oil resources. Subsequently, the 1951 constitution was promptly abolished on the grounds that it was a "neo-colonialist relic" and Libya then became an Arab Jamahiriya, a proclaimed "democratic" state, but one that was tightly controlled by Gaddafi and his acolytes.

In his initial years in power, Gaddafi endeavoured to enhance the country's industrial and oil extraction capabilities, achieving notable success in raising living standards and improving education and literacy, but in 1975, the publication of Gaddafi's "Green Book" signalled a pivotal shift in doctrinal orientation. Libya became a paralyzed state ran by a national congress, while in reality power remained concentrated in the hands

of Gaddafi and his loyalists. In theory, Gaddafi "revoked" his own political influence in 1977, but in practice he remained the dominant figure, retaining control over the main power structures.

In military terms, his regime has been extremely cautious, maintaining a relatively small army, composed largely of members of his tribe or loyalists, in order to avoid any form of foreign influence in the military ranks and to minimize the risk of him becoming the target of a coup.

General wealth related, despite Libya's substantial oil revenues and a growing economy, all that money was not equitably distributed due to widespread corruption (Emhemed et al., 2014), leading to a decline in living standards and public discontent. This issue is one of the key ones that slowly paved the way for the future uprisings.

Dissatisfaction with the Gaddafi regime began to emerge in the late 2000s, reaching a crescendo with the occurrence of extensive protests in 2011. The first major opposition movements commenced in August 2009 in the city of Az Zawiyah and gradually evolved until 2011 when, inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, protests rapidly proliferated to Al Bayda', Darnah and Benghazi. In the context of mounting discontent over the housing crisis, impoverishment, and pervasive corruption, the protests rapidly turned into a full-scale revolt.

The arrest of human rights lawyer Fathi Terbil in Benghazi on February 15, 2011, served to further exacerbate the situation, ultimately leading to a significant national uprising. The reaction of Gaddafi's regime was violent and the use of force against the demonstrators escalated the situation into open conflict between the government and the population. In the following weeks, several cities in eastern Libya fell under rebel control and by February 27, 2011, the National Transitional Council (NTC) had been formed, assuming the role of the primary political and diplomatic representative of the rebels.

Although the rebel movement was initially made up of civilians, an alliance was swiftly formed between them and Islamist groups, even though the latter did not necessarily espouse the same views, being united solely under the principle "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". Gaddafi, in an effort to manipulate public opinion, continued to portray himself as a victim, claiming that he was acting in the interests of the people, while his regime was secretly adopting a policy of brutal repression (Josua and Edel, 2021) against anyone who provided assistance to the rebels.

NATO's intervention in March 2011 on the basis of UN Resolution 1973 changed the dynamics of the conflict. Aerial bombardments and the arms embargo imposed on the Gaddafi regime saved the rebels from a crushing defeat (Garland, 2012) and allowed them to regain serious ground. Despite Gaddafi's offers of peace and promises to hold elections, the rebels remained unyielding in their stance and continued to advance towards Tripoli, seizing control of town after town.

On October 20, 2011, a few days after the rebels seized the capital, Gaddafi was captured and brutally

killed in Sirt, ending the first Libyan civil war. However, the fall of his regime did not bring the expected stability and freedom. The country continued to experience internal strife, with various armed factions and tribes engaged in ongoing conflicts, contributing to a state of political and military chaos.

In the aftermath of the regime's collapse, the cities of Bani Walid, Tripoli, and Benghazi became the site of intense clashes between the remaining loyalists and NTC forces. Nevertheless, the primary political objective remained to organize elections, and thus the inaugural elections following the fall of Gaddafi were held in July 2012. A total of 62% of eligible voters participated in the election, which saw the National Forces Alliance (NFA), a liberal and moderate grouping, emerge as the official winner, securing 39 of the 200 seats in the General National Congress (GNC). Still, the triumph was merely theoretical, as independents, predominantly tribal and Islamist representatives, exercised control over the majority.

The government's inability to effectively address both political challenges and the proliferation of arms resulted in territorial losses to different rebellious groups and a near-total paralysis of oil production. Libya became a fragmented state, with vast areas under the control of local militias, and to add more to the suffering, in 2013 the Islamists in the GNC formally took control of the legislature and imposed the Sharia law. As a result of the degrading situation and the imposition of Sharia, in May 2014, General Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive against the GNC and Islamist groups, kicking off the Second Civil War.

The start of the Second Civil War was marked by Haftar's military operation (backed by anti-Islamist organizations, including the NFA) against Islamist militias in Benghazi and Tripoli. A brief truce was observed in the context of the electoral process and despite attempts to facilitate mediation, the newly elected parliament, the House of Representatives (HoR), was perceived as illegitimate by Islamists, mainly due to the general turnout of less than 20%. Ultimately, the Islamists from GNC succeeded in assuming control of Tripoli through military force, compelling the HoR to relocate to Tobruk (it will move to Benghazi after 2020), accompanied by Haftar's military contingent.

From this point onward, the involvement of external powers has only served to exacerbate the conflict. On the one hand, Turkey and Qatar expressed support for the GNC, while the UAE, Egypt, and Russia indicated their backing for Haftar's forces, thus for the HoR. Besides, the Islamic State was also able to exploit the prevailing chaos and establish enclaves in regions such as Sirt and Darnah, thereby further complicating the situation. In 2015, the UN brokered the formation of a transitional government, the Government of National Accord (GNA), but this government faced strong opposition from the HoR and Haftar's forces, who refused to recognize it.

The ongoing conflict continued with little respite for nearly four years, and by 2019, supported by UAE-supplied aircraft and drones (The New Arab, 2020), Haftar had launched a major offensive on Tripoli. Despite massive military support for the LNA, the GNA managed to repel the attacks and maintain control of

the capital. However, the situation was becoming increasingly chaotic, especially given the involvement of mercenary groups, including Russia's Wagner Group (Al Bawaba, 2018) and Sudan's JEM (Howes-Ward, 2018), both of which have been accused of serious human rights violations.

In 2020, after years of violence, a permanent ceasefire was brokered by the UN, with support from Russia and Turkey, formally ending the Second Civil War. Yet, tensions remained high, and Libya continued to be a battleground for foreign interests.

Since the 2020 armistice, Libya has carried on as a state of chronic political instability. Although the UN successfully negotiated the formation of a new transitional government in 2021 (Government of National Unity—GNU), structural deficiencies persisted. The postponement of the December 2021 elections resulted in significant frustration among the population, and the lack of a clear constitutional framework led to the re-establishment of the dual system of government (HoR voted to create and recognize another government - GNS). In 2022, the tensions between the two rival governments led to violent clashes in Tripoli, though there was no official resumption of conflict.

From 2023 to October 2024, the situation was reminiscent of the interwar period between the first and second civil wars. Despite mounting international pressure, the two sides were unable to organize elections or reach a compromise. In August 2024, tensions over the control of the Central Bank and oil areas reached a temporary peak, thus, in September 2024, Khalifa Haftar began massing troops near Ghadames. His political and military support suggested that he or his son, Saddam Haftar, may have been preparing a new offensive to seize control of Tripoli. However, with the Central Bank issue resolved, tensions appear to have been relatively defused (Fenton-Harvey, 2024) for the time being.

4. International Involvement in the Libyan Crisis: Mediators or Marginal Players?

Throughout the entire post-Gaddafi period, many major regional actors or with political-economic interests have played a relatively marginal role in the efforts to reduce tensions and solve Libya's internal problems, preferring to maximize their regional influence by indirectly supporting local factions. Particularly, the US, the UK, France, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, and Algeria, in addition to the UN and the EU, have assumed more of a mediator role with the aim of achieving a frozen conflict between the two Libyan governments rather than seeking common grounds that would facilitate the organization of free elections.

The decisions taken at international level, the UN resolutions adopted and their implementation, as well as the financial aid offered have largely remained either mere political declarations or measures aimed strictly at ensuring the presence of Libyan oil on the international market.

The UN adopted a series of resolutions and implemented a range of measures with the goal of providing support for Libya's stabilization, particularly between the years 2014 and 2024. However, many of these measures have proven to be either ineffectual or not fully implemented due to external interference and poor compliance by member states (Herța, 2019). To illustrate, the arms embargo imposed in 2011 through Resolution 1970, which was later extended to the two rival Libyan governments, was, despite its necessity, successfully ignored by regionally influential states. Moreover, since 2014, a multitude of weapons and other items of military technology of Russian manufacture (Kington, 2024) have been identified on Libyan territory under Haftar's control, as well as a few Turkish ones (Al Jazeera, 2020) on Tripoli's side. Adding further, there are serious suspicions (from government and military sources) that several foreign aid packages received by Libya to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects actually contained weapons (Kington, 2024). As a (ridiculous) result, the UN adopted Resolution 2733 on May 31, 2024, which extended the embargo and introduced new regulations on reporting and monitoring of seized goods, after even Russia and China criticized the embargo control regime, claiming that the EU's Operation IRINI had not effectively halted the flow of arms to Libya.

The Resolution 2174 of 2014 which updated the sanctions on entities and individuals involved in obstructing or undermining the domestic political process, although, on the surface, a logical and well-intentioned measure, in practice had more of a detrimental impact on citizens, similar to the sanctions imposed on the Gaddafi regime: in order to guarantee their financial stability and maintain a lifestyle far above the average of the population, leaders resorted to corruption on both sides (Lowings, 2022), further lowering the living standards of the ordinary people. The population, weakened by the 2011 war, apathetic due to the disappointment following the first free elections and feeling abandoned by the government in the face of local factions, no longer had the strength, enthusiasm or external support to understand the purpose of these sanctions and demand the change of the newly established semi-dictatorial regime. For what is worth, probably even in the absence of these events, the current regime would not have been challenged in a manner even close to the 2011 revolution, given the lack of a common national cause. Society is currently so divided and polarized that one side winning the conflict or even the establishing of a more moderate government ideologically somewhere between Tripoli and Benghazi are unlikely to be perceived positively by the public (Cristiani, 2022).

The Berlin Process and the adoption of resolution 2510 in 2020 sought to establish a permanent cease-fire (which should have later turn into peace) and the withdrawal of mercenaries from Libyan territory. These developments were met with approval by the international community, with the UN characterizing the outcome of the negotiations between the LNA (supporting the HoR) and the LSF (supporting the GNA) as a real success and a major early step in resolving the conflict. Tough, the situation proved to be more complex than initially anticipated. Unfortunately, the truce was not the result of the two sides' desire for peace (as a result,

Libya is still ruled by two governments, and isolated conflicts between the armies of the two, though occurring rarely lately, are not uncommon) nor was it the result of the diplomatic dexterity of the UN, but the effect of Turkey's military intervention on the side of the GNU in the spring of 2020, which managed to put the GNU back in a negotiating position (on March 1, 2020 the GNU only controlled 7-8% of the total area of the country; by August 31, the occupied area of GNU increased to somewhere around 28-29%). The considerable loss of territorial and military advantage by the LNA, coupled with war fatigue and the initial spread of coronavirus on Libyan territory, eventually led to the armistice between the two governments. In addition, the UN resolution that called for the withdrawal of mercenaries from Libyan territory was only partially respected, with various Russian, Malian, and Sudanese mercenary groups returning after a year (locals from southern Libya asserted that some of them only retreated into the desert, never leaving the country) (Williams, 2024).

On April 16, 2021, the Security Council, through resolution 2570, reiterated the necessity for free, transparent and inclusive elections to be held by the end of the year and called for the formation of a new temporary transitional government, comprising by of members from both sides, in order to facilitate an electoral process that is as fair (or as unbiased) and democratic as possible. Initially, this measure not only seemed to be a promising strategy, given the willingness of both governments to collaborate and acknowledge the legitimacy of the GNA as the country's executive authority, but showed signs that it might even exceed the optimistic expectations: the GNA and HoR had agreed to transfer their power to the GNU, numerous political prisoners were released throughout the country, suggesting the need for national reconciliation, and leaders from both camps were announcing the setting of newly formed cabinet meetings in both Tripoli and Benghazi, as well as the organization of elections in December (although originally promised in late spring). Unfortunately, the initiative ultimately proved to be another failure due to mutual suspicions of betrayal: several armed supporters of Haftar (Aslan, 2021) prevented Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh from entering Benghazi (where a cabinet meeting was scheduled to take place) and the headquarters of the Presidential Council was attacked by an armed militia (no one was in the building at the time, but the GNU interpreted the event as a statement from the LNA), while the other side suspected that the US favoured former GNA members and close associates within the GNU (Aslan, 2021), and that the latter, wishing to retain power, deliberately did not make the necessary steps to organize elections until the agreed deadline. Consequently, the HoR formally accused the GNU at the end of September 2021 of hindering the electoral process, not only due to the fact that elections have not yet been organized, but also because the necessary legal and constitutional framework did not even exist. Furthermore, just two months after the elections were officially postponed, on February 10, 2022, HoR voted a no-confidence motion against the GNU, and then appointed its own prime minister and government (GNS), effectively reinstating the dual system.

Last but not least, on 30 October 2023, the Security Council extended the mandate of the UN Support

Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) until October 2024 (Resolution 2702), insisting on the need for an inclusive political process and the rapid organization of elections, but several of the mission's actions and proposals have met with the disapproval and disinterest of regionally influential states, amid the worsening situation in Ukraine, humanitarian crisis in Sudan and, above all, the escalation in the Middle East. Moreover, not only has UNSMIL been unable in the last year to prevent the gradual escalation of the conflict between the two governments, but on May 8, 2024, the mission announced that it was more than 2 million dollars in debt (Emad, 2024), which forced it to close the working offices. Even so, the mission has recently achieved some success, successfully concluding (at least temporarily) the National Bank crisis. Of course, most probably, the two governments and UNSMIL would not have reached a consensus on the appointment of a new Bank leadership without the intervention of the US and UK, exerting pressure on the leaders of both sides, and the promising process of repair between Turkey and Egypt (Abdeen, 2024), but it is still a positive result.

Nor has the EU (as an entity separate from its member states) had a more substantial impact on the Libyan political-military crisis, focusing rather on assisting the civilian population situated in a precarious situation (€46 million in 2017 for migrants and refugees in Libya and €500 million in 2024 for Sudanese refugees on Libyan soil, for example) and on considerably reducing the flow of migrants. For instance, on March 23, 2015, the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) Libya was launched to secure the Libyan borders, which had been frequently violated by mercenary and paramilitary groups. The mission was largely unsuccessful, as member states, lacking a dominant capable and leading actor, were reluctant to deploy their own military personnel in a high-risk environment and thus maintained a minimal and constant presence only in Tunisia. Therefore, the modest and transient teams operating within Libyan territory were largely incapable of providing assistance or enforcement to local authorities in the implementation of the recommendations set forth by the Commission or the UN Security Council. Also, the mechanism to monitor Libya's southern borders, in collaboration with Niger and Chad proved ineffective as well (Tinti, 2024), as the two states lacked the necessary capabilities (and often will, considering their significant internal turmoil) to control crossing points and combat people and arms trafficking.

Operation EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA, also launched in 2015, with the objective of combating human trafficking and illegal immigration in the Mediterranean Sea, was completely overwhelmed by the situation, having the Maltese state requesting international assistance to either "share" some of the migrants with other states or deport them back to Libya, due to the sheer numbers of people arriving on its territory and the alarming increase in crime rates. Nevertheless, despite the failure to achieve the primary objective, the mission at least was able to save the lives of thousands of individuals (Kirtzman, 2020).

Subsequently, beginning in 2017, the EU acknowledged the ineffectiveness of the operation and redirected its attention and resources to the Libyan Coast Guard with the goal of addressing the migrant issue

directly. In theory, this initiative had the potential to be more successful than the previous ones and aimed to train and equip the Libyan Coast Guard (with Italian assistance) to halt illegal migration, smuggling and human trafficking. It is, however, unfortunate that the pervasive poverty, even in urban areas, coupled with the prevalent perception of the use of violence, have resulted in a multitude of abuses (both legal and physical) and numerous instances of corruption (Salah, 2023). Despite the EU's efforts to condition funding on respect for human rights (2022) the situation has not improved much, so that although the migratory wave has been partially stemmed, the immorality of the measures taken by the coast guards and the inability of European actors to limit the abuses have drawn negative reactions from the international community (Salah, 2023).

It is also noteworthy that both the EUNAVFOR MED IRINI operation and the sanctions applied to leaders or entities supporting armed groups in southern Libya were largely symbolic. As previously stated, Operation IRINI was seriously limited by the absence of a robust mandate, with numerous arms shipments continuing to reach both sides, particularly from Russia, Egypt and the UAE. As for the sanctions, they were so lenient (Williams, 2023) that the pivotal sources of funding for the armed groups experienced minimal disruption.

To comprehend this hesitancy and inconstancy from international organizations and regionally influential states, it is essential to contextualize the interests of each actor involved.

The US aims in Libya are multifaceted. Primarily, they seek to reinforce NATO's southern European position, enhance its global image in the wake of the 2011 revolution, curtail Turkey's regional influence, counterbalance Russia's unofficial intervention, and, most crucially, guarantee the continued viability of the Libyan state in the global oil market. While the US does not necessarily need Libyan oil per se, ensuring a stable flow on international markets remains crucial to avoid unwanted fluctuations on the global energy market. With regard to the question of support for the Tripoli-based government, the GNA, this can be justified on the basis of ideological opposition to the GNS. Although the GNA is an Islamist government, which is incompatible with the values of the UN Charter, the US continues to support it due to its purported pursuit of a more liberal economic policy, while Haftar's ultra-nationalist ideology evokes memories of Gaddafi's era of economic isolationism. An eventual total control of Libya by the GNS could lead to a considerable reduction in access to Libyan oil by the US and its allies and that is obviously unacceptable.

In addition to the goals of access to oil, countering Turkish influence and preserving its image as a global power, Russia has two other important objectives: gaining access to one or more Libyan ports and air bases (Kington, 2024) and fragmenting NATO's attention in several directions. At the moment, considering the situation on the Ukrainian front, it seems probable that the primary objective of the Russian Federation in Libya, as well as in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan, the entire Sahel region, and Yemen (allegedly), is to foster division among Western publics regarding these aforementioned conflicts and to divide financial and military

aid into multiple portions, thereby weakening the Ukrainian position. The choice of GNS in this conflict seems a logical one (even though HoR members are mostly moderates and liberals) because not only does Haftar's political discourse run along similar lines to Kremlin's, but the personality of the marshal is very common in Vladimir Putin's entourage.

Turkey and Egypt, in terms of economic and military interests, are very similar: a Libyan government friendly to their cause would offer preferential access to oil resources, facilitate the entrance on the Libyan market for their national companies in the future post-conflict era for state reconstruction, expand energy cooperation through gas extraction and processing, attract a new ally in maritime disputes, and ensure a permanent military presence on Libyan territory (pre-emptive in Turkey's case and to form a strategic buffer in the case of Egypt). Nevertheless, the most significant distinction between the two can be observed with regard to their principal objective: the consolidation of their respective regional leadership images. Turkey has aligned itself with the GNA because the Tripoli government is closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, and under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership, Turkey has sought to project an image of protector when it comes to moderate Islamist factions and allied governments, supporting Islamist movements in North Africa and the Middle East. Located under the wing of NATO's security sphere, Erdoğan appears to have been plotting for several years to cultivate the depiction of a caliph in relation to neighbouring Muslim states, playing the role of the Islamic world leader (MENA only) and suggesting the formation of a new regional order. Conversely, Egypt goes along with the GNS and Haftar due to its perception of Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood as the main sources of instability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), posing a significant threat to Egyptian national security. In return, Egypt also aspires to play the role of a regional leader, but it is going for the card of uniting the secular Arab world.

The situation between Qatar and the UAE is analogous, though on a smaller scale. In addition to economic motives, gaining strategic military "strongholds" in Libya and positioning themselves as important regional actors, Qataris want the Muslim Brotherhood to have greater influence in the region, while the Emiratis prefer the establishment in Tripoli of an anti-Islamist, authoritarian regime that is economically and, above all, militarily dependent on the UAE (Badi, 2022).

France and Italy, although both part of NATO and EU, find themselves in a somewhat more complex position in this case, given their divergent interests. The French state is not necessarily interested in the possible economic benefits it could gain (although recent diplomatic rapprochement with Egypt and the UAE may suggest a possible deal in this regard), but rather in establishing an anti-Islamist iron fist at Libya's helm, who will allow the French quick access to the Sahel (where France has military initiatives) and will be able to control or eliminate terrorism and arms trafficking. On the other hand, Italy (which shares an almost identical position with the EU) is not so much concerned about the political regime as long as it guarantees Italy the

ability to participate in the prevention of illegal immigration and the continuation of ENI's contract in operating the oil and natural gas exploitation in southern and western Libya. Given the GNA's willingness to accept external assistance in enhancing the Coast Guard and its decision to permit ENI to retain its concessions and access to energy resources, it is understandable why Italy has chosen to align with them.

With regard to Sudan, the situation remains opaque, although the involvement in Libya of different groups internally engaged in the civil war is obvious. In addition to the presence of numerous mercenaries, both Arab and Furian, on either side of the conflict, there have been notable diplomatic ties between RSF leader Mohamed Dagalo (also known as Hemedti) and Haftar, at least in the last year. Some Sudanese military sources even indicated the existence of an agreement (Libyan Express, 2024) between the two to supply each other with arms in case of necessity. The position of the SAF can only be assumed to be pro-GNA, as there is no statement from leader al-Burhan about this. However, considering that the SAF-backed government includes individuals who have had or are suspected of still having links to the Muslim Brotherhood (Bociaga, 2023), it makes sense for SAF to back GNA.

Algeria's perspective on the conflict is distinct, as it does not align with either the Tripoli or Benghazi governments. Its interests lie in preventing instability and ensuring a non-violent Libyan government that does not threaten the regional balance. Thus, the Maghreb state has traditionally positioned itself as a neutral actor and supported an internal Libyan reconciliation process without major external intervention. Algeria refuses to support either side, citing concerns that both represent a threat to its national security: a GNA leadership could potentially allow various Islamist groups to cross into Algeria and would increase the regional influence of Turkey and France; in the event of a GNS leadership, Algeria is concerned about the emergence of strong Russian influence in the region, a likely lack of cooperation from Libya in the energy sector and a possible political and military ambition of the Haftar family in the region.

So, as we can see, it's no wonder that international actors and neighbours can't and won't cooperate properly to resolve the Libyan crisis, when everyone has different interests in the region and the supporters of both sides put together look like a melting pot of ideologies. Additionally, the realistic offensive vision of the states involved and the failure to implement liberal institutional measures and cooperation have further complicated the situation. States maximize their influence (and try to reduce others) by indirectly supporting local factions and apply the strategy of buck-passing rather than engaging in direct military actions, minimizing the risks and costs for themselves. On the other hand, the failures of UN and EU actions highlight the limits of liberal institutionalism in the Libyan context. The lack of a dominant actor capable of enforcing compliance makes these sanctions remain rather symbolic.

5. Avoiding Civil War or Ensuring Stability? The EU's Options in Libya

Libya is currently in a political and diplomatic stalemate, akin to a frozen conflict between the two governments. The recent unofficial territorial recaptures by the LNA in the western regions of the country, the onset of a new civil war in Sudan, and the entire National Bank crisis have prompted the international community, particularly the EU, to contemplate the potential for the conflict to intensify and for official hostilities to resume between Tripoli and Benghazi.

So far, as we have already discussed, the primary international actor engaged in the political and military stabilization of the country, as well as in the pursuit of common grounds between the two governments in order to organize free elections and form a new legitimate government, has been the UN, despite the countless failures it has recorded in its efforts. The EU has preferred to focus either on limiting the adverse effects of destabilization on its economy or on acting as a secondary partner, rather than spearheading ambitious initiatives with the potential to alter (at least in theory) the Libyan status quo for the better. The question thus arises as to whether the EU could, in the current circumstances, assume the role of a main actor in preventing the outbreak of a new civil war and/or in the future to stabilize the state, considering its proximity and interest in the Libyan resources.

In light of the prevailing circumstances in Libya and the irreconcilable differences between the two existing governments, it is clear that the only viable path to reunification and functional stability in the country is through the organization of new free and democratic elections, so that the legitimacy of the new government would no longer be a matter of national and tribal dispute. Evidently, this cannot be achieved by the current governmental and military configuration, so any actor seeking to play a pivotal role in the country's reconstruction must negotiate and guarantee peace throughout Libya with its own troops and military techniques during the electoral process, plus control of border points to minimize criminal activity and mercenary presence. As the EU currently lacks a common army and even an official consensus among its members regarding the direction in which it should act in the Libyan crisis seems quite far, it is therefore impossible for it to guarantee the management and success of such process. Moreover, the EU, as we have previously discussed, is experiencing significant challenges even only in managing the migrant issue (for example, ensuring non-abusive practices in the case of the coastguards that are part of the European training project) and keeping both local military leaders and mercenaries on a short leash.

Furthermore, the current likelihood need of the EU intervening to prevent a military escalation is low in light of recent geopolitical developments. To be more precise, Libya has been a theatre of regional assertiveness for many years, with Turkey and Qatar on one side and Egypt and the UAE on the other, but the start

of the Gaza War and the intensification of conflicts between Israel and pro-Iranian formations in the region have fundamentally changed the paradigm, compelling these states, heavily involved in supporting one side or the other, to turn their attention back to the Middle East.

Not only the four states have demonstrated a lack of willingness to provide funding for the two Libyan governments at levels commensurate with those existing prior to October 7, 2023 (Inanc, 2024), but the advent of hostilities between Israel and Iran and its associated entities (Hezbollah and the Houthis), has prompted Ankara and Cairo to reaffirm their diplomatic relations, now facing a bigger problem and a common enemy: Iran (Inanc, 2024). Even if both Turkey and Cairo want to become the main regional player in the future, based on different ideas and principles, the two agree, along with the other Sunni states in the region, that Iran is a real threat to all of them as long as the fundamentalist regime is in power and possibility of it becoming a nuclear power exists.

The proxy conflict between the US and Russia in Libya is not really present at the moment either, as the US, like Muslim countries, is paying close attention to the conflict in the Middle East, while Russia has much bigger problems in Ukraine and Kursk and obliges the mercenaries in Africa to relocate on the Eastern European fronts (Njie, 2024). Therefore, even if Haftar or the GNA were to entertain the idea of acting militarily against the other, they would be swiftly dissuaded, given that all their allies are unequivocally opposed to such a scenario.

Though, the EU may possess the capacity to ensure stability and progress towards peace in the Libyan space in the future, but only through liberal institutionalist approaches. Examining the somewhat successful institutional model of the National Bank, the EU could promote the formation of new independent institutions within Libya to ensure a non-partisan, democratic and equitable transition of the country.

For clarity's sake, the National Bank of Libya (Central Bank) manages the financial resources of the country, especially the revenues from oil and gas exports. It also oversees the foreign exchange reserves, pays the salaries of civil servants and armed forces, controls the distribution of government funds (making it a crucial player in the Libyan state) and exerts considerable influence over the country's economic policy. This significant power has given the institution a degree of independence (Michelin, 2024), as both the GNA and the GNS need access to funds to function, and they do not desire civil unrest over non-payment of salaries and pensions (especially from the force institutions). Therefore, it is not feasible for any government to jeopardize the stability of this institution from pursuing solely the national interests.

Coming back, the EU could (by constraining the governments with economic standstills) support the formation of new institutions on this model, where both governments would confer formal legitimacy upon the institution, transfer power to it and respect its decisions. Moreover, there are already several institutions

that could readily be adapted to align with the aforementioned model, requiring only a few structural modifications.

One of these companies is the National Oil Corporation (NOC), a state-owned enterprise that manages oil resources not only before they are exported through the Central Bank, but also during extraction and transportation. It is currently operating somewhat (unofficially) independently and is itself a vital institution in the oil economic chain, but it benefits neither from bilateral appointments (the GNA is making board appointments), nor from neutral activity protection from the international community (partner states only impose the use of this company for extraction and management, not its general neutrality). To solve this, the EU could initiate a renegotiation of the economic partnership with Libya, conditioning trade on reforming the NOC and guaranteeing its neutrality. This could also considerably diminish the GNS's inclination to explore alternatives for oil extraction and export (Kennedy, 2021).

In order to ensure the seamless operation and autonomy of other institutions that are indispensable for the functioning of the Libyan state, the EU, in collaboration with its partners and regional states with a vested interest in Libya's stability, could establish a fund to rebuild the country's critical infrastructure. Such a fund could be utilized to finance infrastructure projects in Libya, including those related to roads, oil, health, education, electricity, and water, which have suffered significantly since 2011. Besides, the aforementioned fund could also facilitate the resumption of essential national projects, such as the Great Man-Made River, which has been entirely neglected since 2011, despite its vital necessity.

Under the guarantee of this reconstruction and development fund, the EU could propose the establishment of a National Council of Transport and Port Administration which would have the purpose and capacity (receiving training and support from European counterparts) to ensure the operational functioning of trade, both internally and externally, regardless of the political tensions. This institution could also work directly with the Coast Guard to mitigate the trans-Mediterranean crime rate. Of course, it must be acknowledged that this measure would not eradicate the abuses perpetrated by the Coast Guard; however, it would introduce a more rigorous monitoring system to prevent such occurrences.

In the event of the formation of a European army or the alignment of strategies among EU members regarding the Libyan crisis, European states could also impose the demilitarization of Sirte, the creation of a technocratic government, and the establishment of a National Reconciliation Council there. Despite the severe damage or destruction of Sirt's infrastructure by the preceding dispute between the LNA, LSF, and terrorist groups, the town's location on the border between GNA and GNS-controlled territories makes it a symbolic location for national reconciliation. Unlike other "border" towns, Sirt has access to the coast, which facilitates the provision of supplies and logistical support for the transitional government, and in case of necessity, peacekeepers could quickly step in, just as quickly as the government leadership could be evacuated unharmed. In

addition, despite having been controlled by Haftar's forces before, Sirt is not a traditional centre of power for either faction, which could render the town a more acceptable candidate for a technocratic transitional government from both sides and locals.

The primary objective of the technocratic transitional government would be to stabilize the Libyan economy and organize fair elections with the assistance of peacekeepers. Conversely, the National Reconciliation Council would include members of the governments, representatives of the military groups that support them, and local/tribal leaders. This council should, in conjunction with the EUNAVFOR MED IRINI mission, monitor Libya's borders and ensure the permanent expulsion of mercenaries and foreign tribal militias.

Finally, another potential mean of achieving the objective of stabilizing the state would be to enhance the EUNAVFOR MED IRINI mission, both in terms of increased funding and number of vessels and aircraft monitoring Libya's sea and air traffic. Its activity must also be expanded by working with Egypt and Algeria, with the target of ensuring the optimal protection of Libya's borders and a notable reduction in regional criminal activity.

It is therefore evident that the EU is unable to halt a potential new civil war in Libya unilaterally (and is unlikely to be required to do so), but it can play a key role in stabilizing the country by promoting neutral governance, economic reconstruction and the strengthening of national institutions, with the aim of preventing the complete fragmentation of the state and fostering a peaceful transition. Nevertheless, this would necessitate a considerable degree of professionalism, conscientiousness and a mobilization capacity which neither the EU, its allies, nor the states in the region possess yet.

6. Conclusion

The Libyan crisis, a decade-long struggle that emerged from the ashes of Gaddafi's regime, remains an intricate conflict characterized by internal fragmentation and the influence of regional and global powers. The initial promise of democracy and stability that accompanied the 2011 revolution has faded into a reality dominated by competing governments, armed factions, and recurring episodes of violence. After years of fighting, the power hunger and the dual political structures in Tripoli and Benghazi have only perpetuated delays in organizing elections, crimes against humanity, poverty and institutional paralysis.

Internationally, efforts to stabilize Libya have yielded only limited success. The UN has played a central role in attempting to mediate peace and implement ceasefires, but these initiatives have been consistently hampered by violations of arms embargoes, rival foreign interventions, and a lack of compliance from key stakeholders. For instance, the arms embargo imposed in 2011 has often been disregarded, with military

support continuing to flow to both sides from external backers, rendering many diplomatic efforts symbolic rather than transformative. As a result, the Berlin Process, UN resolutions, and various ceasefire agreements have, despite some progress, failed to deliver a sustainable political solution that could unify the country and pave the way for legitimate governance.

On the other hand, the EU's engagement in Libya has been predominantly reactive, oriented towards the mitigation of immediate concerns such as migration and terrorism, rather than the resolution of the underlying causes of instability. While the EU has provided humanitarian assistance and financial support, as well as contributed to the monitoring of arms embargoes through operations like EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, its impact has been constrained by the absence of a unified military force and a coherent long-term strategy. Furthermore, the EU's initiatives, including the training of the Libyan Coast Guard and efforts to secure the country's borders, have been marred by reports of abuses and have not substantially reduced the influence of armed groups or prevented illicit activities (Salah, 2023).

Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, the Libyan crisis exemplifies the tension between neorealism and neoliberalism, as both perspectives are necessary to fully grasp its dynamics and potential resolution. Neorealism, particularly Mearsheimer's offensive realism, explains the logic of competition for influence among international actors and their tendency to favour indirect interference (buck-passing) in order to avoid the costs of direct military intervention. This trend has been evident in the cases of regional actors such as Turkey and Egypt, but also in those of international powers such as the US and Russia. Conversely, neoliberal institutionalism provides a credible model of stabilization through the creation of independent institutions similar to the National Bank of Libya. Nonetheless, the usability of this model is constrained by political fragmentation and the absence of effective implementation frameworks. Thus, Libya's trajectory will be shaped by the extent to which the international actors can navigate between the strategic competition required by Mearsheimer's realism and the vision of structural cooperation hoped for by liberal institutionalism.

Given the unpredictable geopolitical landscape, any future initiative will need to transition from power-driven competition to institutionalized cooperation if Libya is to achieve sustainable peace and functionality. Thus, Libya's trajectory will ultimately depend on whether international actors remain trapped in neorealist power struggles or transition towards the institutional cooperation envisioned by neoliberalism.

The ongoing tension between neorealism and neoliberalism in Libya also defines the European Union's strategic options in the region, with recent geopolitical shifts presenting both risks and opportunities. Amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics, particularly the redirection of attention from traditional Libyan backers towards new crises in the Middle East, the potential for a renewed outbreak of civil war remains medium-low (Fetouri, 2024). However, this shift presents a chance for the EU to reassess its role in the region and assert a more proactive approach in the region. The temporary diplomatic thaw between Egypt and Turkey, coupled

with the reallocation of Russian and Western resources towards conflicts elsewhere, creates a strategic opening for the EU to facilitate negotiations and support the implementation of a more robust peace process. To prove it, the recent resolution of the Central Bank crisis, albeit temporary, demonstrates that external pressure, when strategically applied, can yield results.

In order for the EU to make an effective contribution to the stabilization of Libya, it is essential that it prioritize the establishment of resilient institutions that are capable of functioning independently of political factions. The example of the National Bank, which has managed to maintain a degree of neutrality due to its critical economic role, provides a model for the potential restructuring of other key institutions such as the NOC. By linking economic partnerships with the reform of these institutions and ensuring transparency in their governance, the EU can foster an environment that encourages political inclusivity and reduces the motivation for armed conflict.

Moreover, the EU should consider expanding its involvement in the reconstruction of Libya's infrastructure, by establishing a fund dedicated to rebuilding the country's vital sectors, such as transportation, healthcare, energy, and education. Such an approach would not only address the immediate needs of the population but also enhance the legitimacy of any future government that is open to cooperation. Then, initiating the creation of a National Council of Transport and Port Administration, with international support, could assist in the de-politicization of economic recovery efforts and guarantee that resources are utilized for the benefit of the entire nation and not only for one government or the other.

Ultimately, while the EU is not in a position to guarantee the prevention of a new civil war, it can influence Libya's trajectory toward a more stable and democratic state, by adopting a proactive approach that extends beyond crisis management, addressing both the immediate symptoms and the underlying structural causes of instability. This requires not only diplomatic engagement but also a willingness to deploy resources and expertise toward building a non-partisan, functional state. By renewing its commitment to supporting institutional reforms, promoting economic development, and fostering dialogue among Libyan factions, the EU can play a pivotal role in shaping a future where Libya moves beyond its current stalemate towards a sustainable peace.

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