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**Italy and its former colonies:
Recent developments through a historical perspective**

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Italy has historically had a difficult relationship with its four former colonies: Eritrea, Somalia, Libya and Ethiopia. In early 2016, the relations between Italy and its former African territories once again became a hot topic. For instance, the Italian government dealt with the killing of two Italian hostages in Libya and the liberation of another two, all of them were technicians of an Italian company. Recently, Italy struggled with whether to lead a military operation in Libya, more than 100 years after the conquest of that colony and five years after the NATO intervention that toppled Muammar al-Qaddafi, to stop refugees and jihadists from reaching Europe.

While Libya receives more attention in the Italian and European press because of its geographical proximity to Italy and because of the ISIS threat, the Horn of Africa has increasing relevance for Italy. For example, during March 2016, the Italian President Sergio Mattarella visited Ethiopia, met Ethiopian partisans (veterans of the war against Italy, who occupied Ethiopia during 1936-1941)¹ and thanked them for having fought fascism. During this visit, a 22-year-old Somali imam was arrested in Italy for plotting a terrorist attack at

¹ Dino Martirano, "Etiopia, l'omaggio di Mattarella ai partigiani scampati al raid del '37," *Corriere della Sera*, 16 March 2016.

Rome's main train station.² These events serve as a reminder that Italy must once again face its past in order to develop future foreign policy, both in the political and economic realms.

Italy and its colonies in the twentieth century

Italian conquest was characterized by massive violence. Italians did not make the effort to create inclusive administrative systems in their colonies and they were consequently met with armed resistance by the local population. Between 1922 and 1943, fascists imposed political uniformity upon the colonies and adopted a more aggressive stance toward rebellions. Somalia and Eritrea were considered the starting point from which to conquer Ethiopia and create the Italian Oriental Africa. Libya was considered the first step towards the Mediterranean Sea as "*Mare nostrum*", "Our Sea".³

The termination of the Italian trusteeship administration in Somalia (1950-1960), the Somali democracy (1960-1969) and the Kingdom of Idris in Libya (1951-1969) had a short life. They failed to establish stable and impartial administrations for many reasons, such as the strong local tribal links. The Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I was also toppled in 1974 and the Derg leader Mengistu Haile Mariam took control of the country.

Siad Barre (1969-1991), Muammar al-Qaddafi (1969-2011) and Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-1991) were military figures who ruled their countries through censorship, arrests and political violence against the opposition. In addition, they tried to contain political Islam and radical Islam, which they saw as a threat to their power.⁴ Italy's relations with these strongmen were ambiguous; Italy supported them with cooperation agreements while most of the international community denounced their massive violations of human rights.

²The young extremist was hosted in refugee quarters, but was arrested after his escape and subsequent attempt to set up a bomb. Clarida Salvatori "Terrorismo: progettava attentato a Roma a Termini, fermato imam," *Corriere della Sera*, 16 March 2016.

³ Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, [1] *Dall'Unità alla marcia su Roma*, (Roma-Bari: A. Mondadori, 1992).

⁴ Alex De Waal, *Islamism and its enemies in the horn of Africa* (London: Hurst, 2004), pp. 21-22.

The beginning of the 1990s did not mark only the fall of the Soviet Union but also an earthquake in the political situation of the Horn of Africa. Eritrea became independent, Somalia collapsed and Mengistu fled Ethiopia after facing a counter-revolution, while al-Qaddafi managed to stay in power thanks to oil revenues. The UN and US interventions in the Horn of Africa failed; they were unable to stop the violence in Somalia or to successfully carry out authentic social and political agendas.⁵

Somalia, for a long period of time, relied heavily on international aid and Libya on oil revenue. In both cases, this meant an increase in inequality, corruption and a lack of taxation by the government, which led to low public trust in state bureaucracy and institutions. Italy was one of the main sponsors of international aid to Somalia and was the main client of Libyan oil and natural gas extraction facilities.

Italy and its colonies in the twenty-first century

The 2000s marked the return of the Islamist issue in Libya and Somalia, which concerned both Italy and Ethiopia. In 2006, thanks to the Ethiopian army, the Islamic Courts that took control over parts of Somalia were defeated, but the radical movement of Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen (Al-Shabab) was born. Despite the creation of a Transitional Federal Government (TFG) supported by the US, Europe and UN, al-Shabab is still a very powerful political actor in West Africa.

In 2011, following Tunisia and Egypt, the “Arab Springs” reached Libya, even if the rebellion seemed to focus more on political-sharing than about socioeconomic concerns. Al-Qaddafi seemed to be moving toward crushing the revolts, but a NATO intervention led to him being toppled and killed.⁶

⁵ Andrew Scott Duffield, "When Do Rebels Become State-Builders?: A Comparative Case Study of Somaliland, Puntland, and South-Central Somalia," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*: Vol. 13, no. 5, (2014): 19.

⁶ Yahia H. Zoubir and Erzsébet N Rózsa, "The end of the Libyan dictatorship: The uncertain transition," *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 7 (August 2012): 1267-1283.

The 1992-3 Western interventions in Somalia and the 2011 intervention in Libya had totally different purposes, but resulted in similar effects and both of them were supported by Italy. They did not create the necessary basis for democracy or a reliable state apparatus. NATO bombings in 2011 did not create a stable and unified Libya, but instead led to tribal and religious conflicts between various militias that have devastated the country. Italy lost important economic benefits that had obtained through agreements with the Colonel al-Qaddafi regime and had to betray the 2008 “Treaty of Friendship” with him. That deal set a €5 billion compensation for colonial crimes and economic collaboration, but also stated that Italy and Libya would not use military force against each other.⁷

This protracted period of political instability caused an economic crisis and an increase in illegal activities. Piracy in Somalia represents a significant threat to world commerce, while human trafficking from Africa to Italy through Libya has reached terrifying levels in recent years, with thousands of people dying in the Mediterranean Sea.

Recent developments

Indeed, the idea of new military action in Libya is related to the arrival of an increasing number of refugees, together with the birth of the Islamic State and its control over some cities of central Libya. While Italian public opinion and political parties are divided on the issue of the intervention, some international allies and NATO are pushing Italy to take action together with them.

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has taken a cautious approach toward foreign intervention, since its aim is not clearly defined. Would such an initiative back the new UN-supported Government of National Accord of Fayez al-Serraj⁸ among the various tribes and militias or would it directly fight the Islamic State? A Western military presence in North Africa, with a UN mandate, could be useful in stemming the flow of refugees to Italy and to

⁷ Trattato di amicizia, partenariato e cooperazione tra la Repubblica Italiana e la Grande Giamariria Araba Libica Popolare Socialista (Repubblica 2008).

⁸ The government was formed in Tunis on January 19 2016, after lengthy negotiations between the Islamist government of Tripoli and the UN-recognized government of Tobruk. Nevertheless, many militias and tribes do not support Serraj and General Khalifa Haftar, who is supported by Egypt and controls part of Cyrenaica, did not take part in negotiations.

make the Mediterranean Sea safer. However, many Western interventions in Africa have failed both in “exporting” democracy and in protecting human rights. Somalia is a strong case study in illustrating Western-sponsored governments’ difficulty in achieving control of territory without enjoying popular support on the ground.⁹

The Italian government does not want to get involved again in a military operation that would create even more chaos in North Africa, but it cannot ignore economic opportunities in the region. Political stability in Libya would significantly benefit Italian energy policies and companies. Italy used to be the main importer of oil and gas from Libya and since the 2011 revolution the production has shrunk from 1,740,000 barrels per day to only 350,000.¹⁰ Moreover, the National Libyan Fund also owns significant shares of many important Italian firms.

This is likely the reason why Italy has taken a soft approach, avoiding showing a direct involvement in the Libyan political framework. During the first days of April 2016, the Italian navy, together with the British and the French navies, carefully monitored the arrival of the boats of the new Libyan government of Serraj to Tripoli, but did not escort them.¹¹

Equally important to Italy are the economic advantages in the Horn of Africa. On one hand, there is a clear will to move beyond its colonialist and fascist past with Ethiopia, a country that enjoys very high growth (around 10% each year), but where Chinese competition is very strong. Another question related to Italy's former colonies is how long Italy (and Europe) can ignore the Eritrean dictatorship that caused dozens of thousands of refugees that eventually try to get to Europe passing through Libya. In Somalia, after more than 25

⁹ Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, *The Libyan revolution and its aftermath* (London, Hurst & Company, 2015), 222.

¹⁰ Francesco Battistini, “Il petrolio, poi le banche Il premier mette le mani sulle casseforti della Libia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 16 April 2016.

¹¹ Marco Galluzzo, “Tripoli-Sfax, operazione rientro: la spola per trasportare i 7 ministri e il guasto durante il percorso,” *Corriere della Sera*, 16 March 2016.

years of tribal feuds, instability continues, followed by booming population growth, devastating droughts and famine are foreseen for 2016.

In conclusion, the Italian government has realized the advantages of stabilizing its former colonies and improving economic relations with them. Nevertheless, while some progress was made with Ethiopia and there are new attempts to unify Libya, Eritrea and Somalia are almost ignored. This could pose a threat not only to Italian interests, but also to the stability of West and North Africa and, through future refugees from these areas, to Europe.

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