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ITALY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN: BETWEEN TRADITION AND NEW CHALLENGES

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After the achievement of unification, one of the Italian political élite's main aims was recognition of the country as a "great power" by the members of the international system. Such ambitions sharply contrasted with Italy's political weakness, as well as with its economic and social backwardness. In spite of everything the Italian authorities began to dream of an African empire, on the model of the great European powers, which were involved in the "scramble for Africa". Rome's first target was Tunisia, not only as a consequence of its geographic proximity, but also of the presence of a numerous Italian colony. But Italy's ambitions were frustrated by France, which was able to impose its protectorate on the North African territory. Later on Italy's attention focused on the Horn of Africa, where the first colony of Eritrea was created, but in the 1890s Italy's expansion towards Ethiopia was stopped due to the severe military defeat suffered at Adowa. With the new century the Giolitti governments focused their attention on Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, at that time parts of the Ottoman Empire. Due to skillful dip-

lomatic preparation, in 1911 Rome declared war on the Ottoman Empire, which in 1912 was compelled to sue for peace and Italy imposed its sovereignty on Libya, although the Italian troops had to face strong resistance from the local Arab populations and Rome's control did not extend beyond the major towns along the coast. It was only with the Fascist régime between the 1920s and the 1930s that Italy, through brutal colonial campaigns, was able to exert its firm control over all the Libyan territory, where during the second half of the 1930s the Governor, Italo Balbo - one of the leading representatives of the Fascist movement and a former Minister of Aviation - launched an ambitious project to favor the settlement of about 20,000 Italian peasants. Control of the Mediterranean - the so-called "Mare Nostrum" of the Fascist propaganda - was one of the main goals of Mussolini's aggressive policy; in such a context, which would lead to an open clash with Britain's imperial interests, Italy developed a series of propagandist and subversive activities towards the Middle East, especially Egypt and Palestine. In 1937 Mussolini paid a

much-publicized visit to Libya, where he publicly boasted that he regarded himself as the “guardian” of the Islamic faith. Italy’s Mediterranean ambitions were among the reasons that led to Italy’s declaration of war on France and Britain in June 1940, but very quickly the nation revealed its military, economic and political weakness. In spite of that, Britain regarded the Italians as real enemies and control of Italy’s African empire became one of the main British war goals. Such a policy was confirmed during the negotiations which led to the Italian peace treaty and control of Libya was one of London’s particular main targets; at the same time, Italy’s new anti-Fascist political class aimed at a so-called “return to Africa”, as it was thought that recognition of such a role would demonstrate Italy’s ability to recover the status of a medium-size regional power with some influence to be exerted, not only in Europe, but also in the Mediterranean. However Italy’s hopes were doomed to failure: in 1949 Italy achieved only a ten-year UN trusteeship over Somalia, while in 1951 Libya became an independent state, strongly tied to the US and the UK.

By the mid-1950s Italy began to develop a new, more assertive Mediterranean policy - the outcome of the influence exerted mainly by left-wing sectors of the Christian Democrats - which was based on Italy’s support for the decolonization process and on its willingness to become a bridge between Europe and the southern shore of the Mediterranean, as well as to the Middle East. The major political representatives of such a “revolution” were Amintore Fanfani, Giovanni Gronchi and Giorgio La Pira. Rome’s Mediterranean policy had important economic implications as it aimed at strengthening the nation’s role in this part of the world. The symbol of such a commitment was Enrico Mattei, CEO of the state-controlled oil company, ENI, which tried to become a competitor of the so-called “Seven Sisters”. In this connection ENI signed agreements with some North African countries and Italy developed friendly relations with Nasser’s Egypt, an aspect which would become a constant in Italy’s Mediterranean strategy. Such a policy was reinforced during the 1960s

owing to the coming to power of centre-left coalition governments, which began to show an increasingly sympathetic attitude towards the Arab countries in regard to the Palestinian issue.

The 1970s are usually perceived as a period of internal turmoil, political instability and economic crisis in the country. In spite of that, Italy could not neglect the Mediterranean dimension of its foreign policy, especially after the 1973 oil shock. In such a context the Italian authorities further strengthened their ties with Egypt, as well as the relationship with Libya, in spite of the rise to power in 1969 of Colonel Qaddafi, whose early decision was the expulsion of all Italian citizens and confiscation of all their properties. In spite of that Tripoli developed strong economic bonds with Rome that led to numerous Italian investments in the North African country and to big Libyan investments in Italian businesses - in 1974 Tripoli held about 10% of FIAT capital. The most important aspect of Italy’s Mediterranean policy was its cautious but determined dialogue with Arafat’s PLO. In Italy’s opinion, only through the involvement of representatives of the Palestinian people would it be possible to achieve a lasting peace. Last but not least, Mediterranean stability was Rome’s main goal both from the political and economic viewpoints. Such a position led to some contrast with the US authorities, who on the contrary regarded the PLO as a terrorist group. Nonetheless the Italian authorities deliberately ignored the activities of Palestinian organizations in Italy in the hope that the nation could avoid any terrorist threat.

By the early 1980s Italy was able to overcome its domestic plights and till the early 1990s it was characterized by political stability, economic growth and a renewed aspiration at playing a leading role in the international scenario. The apex of such an Italian “renaissance” was reached in the mid-1980s with the Craxi governments. Italy’s ambitious foreign policy ranged from the East-West confrontation to European construction, but the Mediterranean was one of the areas in which it was most active. In 1982/1983 Italy took part in

the Multi-National Force, led by the US, which tried to enforce a peace in a Lebanon torn by civil war and Israeli military intervention. It is of significance that the Rome government took a position different from that of its Western allies, as the Italian contingent showed a strict neutrality towards the various Lebanese factions, while the US, the UK and France supported the Christian right wing party. Moreover the Italians confirmed their sympathetic attitude towards Arafat and the PLO. In this period there were several meetings between Palestinian leaders and Italian ministers; the PLO opened a semi-official bureau in Rome and Arafat paid much-publicized visits to the Italian capital, where he met with Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti, who, with Craxi, was perceived as the main supporter of Italy's pro-Arab foreign policy. In 1985 the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship "Achille Lauro" by some Palestinian terrorists was resolved through the mediation of Egyptian President Mubarak, while well known is the Sigonella incident and Craxi refusal's to consign the "Achille Lauro" hijackers to the US authorities. The Italian government showed a cautious attitude towards Libya, which on the contrary was perceived by the US as a "rogue state"; in 1986 Craxi informed Qaddafi of the US plan to bomb Tripoli.

Actually, Italy's room for diplomatic manoeuvre in the Mediterranean was sharply reduced by the end of the Cold War, which diminished US interest in the Italian position as a pillar of the Western system, as well as by the domestic political and economic crisis that characterized the early 1990s. Moreover the Maastricht Treaty appeared to limit the area of Italy's foreign policy to the European scenario. Nevertheless Italy maintained good relations with its traditional Mediterranean partners, especially Egypt, and confirmed (usually in the context of the EU) its support for the new dialogue between the PLO and the Israeli authorities as the best way to achieve a peaceful and stable solution to the Palestinian question. Furthermore, Italy confirmed its willingness to participate in several peacekeeping operations under the flag of the UN.

The coming to power of the center-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi in 2001 marked some changes in Italy's Mediterranean policy, as, in spite of the failure of the Oslo peace process and as a consequence of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US, Italy became a steady supporter of the Israeli positions and was often critical of the PLO. Moreover, also owing to the radical "U-turn" in Libya's attitude on the issue of terrorism, the Italian government strengthened its economic and political ties with the Tripoli régime. Such a development was also the consequence of the emerging problem of illegal emigration, as Libya was regarded as an effective barrier to strong waves of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. On his part Qaddafi perceived such a question as a lever to extract economic concessions from Italy. On the contrary the Berlusconi government confirmed the traditional bond between Italy and Egypt and was in favor of Turkey's candidature to the EU. The brief parenthesis of the Prodi center-left government (2006-2008) led to a renewed pro-Arab policy, which appeared to be confirmed by Italy's participation in the European peacekeeping force, which was the consequence of a new Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon. Such a position was, however, reversed by the return to power of Berlusconi in 2008. The "Arab Spring" coincided with the end of Berlusconi's leadership and Italy's position appeared uncertain; especially as far as the Libyan civil war was concerned, at first Italy had doubts about the opportunity of supporting Qaddafi's enemies, then it changed its mind as a consequence of the decisions taken by some Western partners, such as Britain, France and the US, as well as because of the attitude of both the media and public opinion. The chaotic internal Libyan situation favored a new wave of immigrants, which the Letta government tried to deal with through the so-called "Mare Nostrum" operation. Although such a decision was usually praised for its humanitarian goals it did not solve the problem of emigration, nor the question of Libya's future, now threatened by the growing presence of IS forces. During the last two years the new government led by Matteo Renzi has tried to deal with both questions through an attempt at linking



Italy's policy to the decisions made by international organizations: as far as Libya is concerned, the Italian government thought that a clear-cut position by the UN was a goal to achieve prior to any military intervention and appears to be very cautious about Western military operations in the hope that in Libya may emerge a strong political actor, which can impose its sovereignty over the whole territory. Such an option would favor the solution of the immigration issue, which in any case has to be dealt with in a European framework. In the meantime the Regeni case has caused an unprecedented worsening in the relations with Al-Sisi's Egypt, although it is in the interest of both countries to maintain a

fruitful partnership. In conclusion, although some sort of bilateral relationship still appears to be an important aspect of Rome's Mediterranean policy, there is a growing tendency to regard such a policy as a part of a wider multi-lateral approach, mainly based on the UN and the EU.

In fact, those hopes would go unfulfilled when the Egyptians replaced in Libya the 15 thousand Italians that were ousted by Colonel Qaddafi. Recently al-Sisi stressed in an interview to the Italian newspaper La Repubblica that Haftar is still a viable option. And this remains, to date, a crucial point for Italy.