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ROME'S FIGHT FOR LIBYAN GRAND BARGAIN

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Libya has always been among Italy's priorities in foreign policy, if not the main item on the country's agenda. The Vienna conference (16th May) was co-chaired by the United States and Italy. The Conference tried to give a new impulse to the solution of the Libyan crisis.

On 12 April of this year, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paolo Gentiloni made a visit to Tripoli. Gentiloni was the first high representative of a foreign government to visit Tripoli after the new UN-backed administration took office, and the first Western official to visit Libya since 2014. He met with the government's leader Fayeze Serraj, who had reached the capital by sea not without difficulty only two weeks earlier. More than any other country, Italy has supported Serraj and labored for his appointment. For the past three months Italy has worked behind the scenes to create the conditions that would clear the air of any hostility surrounding his arrival to Tripoli, in particular through the efforts of Gen. Paolo Serra, senior advisor to the UN envoy to Libya Martin Kobler.

Gentiloni's surprise visit aims to consolidate Italy's role in the crisis in Libya and to pledge the country's commitment to new efforts to stabilize the country politically, economically and from a humanitarian standpoint. It is certainly too early to claim that the mission has been accomplished – because in Libya instability appears to have become endemic, for a number of reasons – but this is undoubtedly a step forward for Rome's strategy, that in the past few months has struggled to take off. This was mainly due to the declarations made by some members of the Italian government, who incautiously announced the country's willingness to take part in a possible military action (going so far as to provide figures for troops allegedly to be deployed, but without much detail in terms of objectives and scope of the intervention). Furthermore, Italy has to face growing pressure from some of its partners, who are naturally more inclined to opt for a more muscular approach, either directly or indirectly, to Libya's political problems, which are certainly irksome but that do not preclude the possibility of a rational solution.

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The Italian position is rooted in two realistic considerations: 1) a peaceful and long-lasting future for Libya can be envisaged only by way of a political agreement among the parties, and not as a result of an external military action that would likely generate additional unrest. This is true also with regard to the fight against IS. Historically Libya has witnessed a piling up of failed state governments and a surge of jihadist groups, while at the same time all the actions undertaken in the Middle East (from Afghanistan to Iraq) in the past 15 years have failed to contribute to the stabilization of those areas; 2) Italy's political, economic-commercial and energy stakes in Libya (witness the recent investments by ENI in the country) are concentrated in Tripolitania. Here, the Mediterranean coast is a main departure point for migrants to Italy. It is therefore in Italy's best interest to maintain good relations with those in control of this part of the country by acting as a mediator and trying to facilitate a recomposition of the political and military scenario in Libya. In this sense the Italian position has appeared coherent, subordinating Italy's support to a preventive agreement among the parties and the recognition of the new government by the international community.

Critics against the Serraj operation maintain that the new government is nothing but a puppet operated by the UN: the vote of the parliament in Tobruk that would legitimize the government is still to come; the solution appears to some extent imposed by the UN; Serraj still lacks (and perhaps always will) territorial control over the whole country. It is true that Serraj's appointment is only the first step and that much remains to be done to create the conditions that would ensure some level of "autochthonous" stability. The bottom-up process needs to be fostered and encouraged, as a sort of Libyan "Shura" that would trigger an earnest nation-building process, something that has been postponed for too long.

A new legitimacy is not impossible and Gentiloni's arrival in the capital, followed by representatives of France's and Great Britain's Foreign Office, seems to

indicate that the safety of the new government is poised to become progressively stronger, also thanks to the quiet support of Italy and international partners and mostly thanks to the fact that once Serraj gains control of the country's finances, oil and gas exports – Libya's main sources of income - will resume. When it comes to legitimacy, where there is a will, there may be a way.

While the signs that come from Tripolitania are messages of hope for the reconstruction of a single national authority, in Cyrenaica a number of issues remain on the table. The pro-Egyptian general Khalifa Haftar has remained ambivalent towards Serraj, declaring that the methods adopted to bring the Presidential Council to office in Tripoli were reminiscent of a coup and that "part of the population demands the formation of a military council", while ensuring at the same time that he intends to "stay out of political matters." Haftar and Egypt are currently biding their time and trying to understand whether or not the new arrangement in Libya can prove effective for the country as a whole or if Cyrenaica will be "forced" into a secession. The French President François Hollande, who visited Cairo at the end of April, has expressed official support to the national unity government, while signing with Egypt deals worth billions for the supply of French weapons, some of which may end up in Haftar's hands, and he appears reluctant to dismiss the General as a possible option. In their final statement at the Vienna conference, the 21 participant nations said they would cease contacts and support to "parallel institutions," and said Serraj's government was "the sole legitimate recipient of international security assistance". This is a small victory for Italy. Nonetheless, at the same time, Haftar was recognized as legitimate political actor: the international community and UN mission will try to integrate Haftar in the government structures and avoid a split of the country.

The strained relations between Rome and Cairo over Giulio Regeni's murder further muddles the waters for the Italian diplomacy as it strives to put back together the Eastern and Western parts of the country. It was a

mistake to believe, in recent times, that Egypt would adopt a more conciliating stance towards the role of General Haftar and would stop supporting him. It may be a case of history repeating itself: in 1970 Aldo Moro hoped that Nasser would mediate with Qaddafi on behalf of Italy over the question of the Italian community.

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.

