



Brief n. 74/December 2025

*Italy and Türkiye in Libya: between  
pragmatism and cooperation*

*Dr. Mattia Giampaolo*

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di San Paolo

The trilateral summit held in August 2025 between Italy, Libya (the Tripoli-based government), and Türkiye has sparked intense debate among scholars and experts concerning the situation in, and prospects for the stabilization of, the North African country. The summit is part of a broader political and diplomatic process aimed at strengthening the commitment of the three actors involved within Libya.

For many experts and analysts, Türkiye's presence in Libya and Italy's engagement appear to reinforce the argument that Ankara has become one of the principal actors in the Mediterranean context. Discussions often revolve around notions of Turkish hegemony, the Islamization of Libya, and a return to the former grandeur of the Ottoman Empire. Yet such claims are largely overstated, if not entirely unfounded.

While it is undeniable that Türkiye was the only country to take concrete action during General Khalifa Haftar's attempted advance on Tripoli between 2019 and 2020<sup>1</sup>, it is equally true that countries such as Italy, France, the Gulf states, and the United States continue to play a fundamental role in Libya. This influence derives not only from historical ties and economic interests, but also from a transformed international environment shaped above all by the war in Ukraine and by evolving dynamics in Syria.

Both events have marked a significant shift in Russia's posture in Libya. Following the fall of al-Assad in Syria, Moscow effectively relocated its military installations to eastern Libya—a move that signals Russia's intended role in the region and its reliance on its ally, or perhaps vassal, Khalifa Haftar. However, the presence of Russian military bases in Libya has reactivated the United States' engagement in the country. In summer 2025, Washington reaffirmed its commitment through the visit of Advisor Massad Boulus, whose mission was to outline a roadmap for Libya's stabilization<sup>2</sup>.

In this regard, it appears increasingly urgent, from an analytical standpoint, to assess the actors involved, their respective spheres of influence, and the networks they maintain within the broader international context. Indeed, contrary to the prevailing narrative about Türkiye's dominant role in Libya and the subordinate position of Italy and other key players, what emerges in this new political phase is a heightened level of coordination among the various actors. With the exception of Russia—which remains one of the primary destabilizing forces in the country—the United States, the Gulf states, Türkiye and Italy appear to be pursuing a shared political agenda.

Within this broader process, although the situation inside Libya remains highly unstable, the trilateral summit held in Istanbul on 1 August 2025 represents a point of convergence among the different dimensions shaping the Libyan context. Türkiye and Italy seem not to be diverging, but rather converging toward a more structured and organic form of coordination within the political process<sup>3</sup>.

The official statements released by the three governments highlight the need to strengthen cooperation on the most sensitive Libyan dossiers: political stability, economic cooperation, investment, and the fight against irregular migration. These dossiers concern both countries directly and are of vital importance—particularly for Italy—not only in terms of foreign policy, but also domestic politics. At the same time, what appears fully aligned with the broader regional and international context is the

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<sup>1</sup> Giampaolo, M. (2021) "Italy: In Pursuit of a new Role", in "The great game", Sadeq Institute, available at: [https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/approfondimenti/articolo\\_mattia\\_giampaolo\\_italy\\_in\\_pursuit\\_of\\_a\\_new\\_role.pdf](https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/approfondimenti/articolo_mattia_giampaolo_italy_in_pursuit_of_a_new_role.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ali, W. (2025), "Is the United States Set to Re-Engage in Libya?", Afkar, Middle East Council, available at: [https://mecouncil.org/blog\\_posts/is-the-united-states-set-to-re-engage-in-libya/](https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/is-the-united-states-set-to-re-engage-in-libya/)

<sup>3</sup> Mezran, K.; talbot, F. (2025) "US, Italy, and Türkiye alignment could push the needle in Libya", Atlantic Council, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/us-italy-and-turkey-alignment-could-push-the-needle-in-libya/>

shared intention to pursue a pragmatic political approach aimed at the reunification of the country and at initiating negotiations with all actors within Libya.

### ***Lack of security and the disarticulation of the local powers in Libya***

One of the principal challenges currently facing the country is not so much the difficulty of direct dialogue between the Government of National Unity—supported by the international community and the United Nations—and the eastern administration led by General Haftar, but rather the need to dismantle the power structures that this division has brought to light during the fifteen years of political transition following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime.

To simplify the context as much as possible, Libya, in the aftermath of Gaddafi's downfall and especially from 2015 onward, has been divided into two poles of power where fragile political, economic, and security equilibria coexist. These two markedly different approaches to political governance have produced not only a pronounced political polarization—largely perceived and reinforced by political elites—but also the consolidation of power systems that today appear nearly impossible to challenge.

Within these two systems, the intertwining of economic power and security structures has generated an almost symmetrical dual-power configuration, one that perpetuates a political stalemate effectively paralyzing the entire country. While the Tripoli-based government—long supported by the West and the United Nations—appears to embody the core of the Libyan state, the security architecture of state institutions has simultaneously enabled various militias to carve out autonomous spheres of influence. These groups, at different moments, continue to pose serious challenges to the very institutions they are nominally meant to uphold.

The presence of the powerful Rada militia, formally legitimized by the government and tasked with combating terrorism and illicit trafficking, exemplifies this dynamic. Although it officially answers to Prime Minister Dbaiha, Rada has on several occasions—most recently in the summer of 2025—launched armed actions that have significantly undermined stability in the western region<sup>4</sup>.

From a security standpoint, the western region of the country appears particularly exposed to these dynamics. Yet, at the economic level—despite persistent challenges—it benefits from governmental structures that allow it to retain a degree of influence within the economic sphere. Although it has never exercised full control over the country's key institutions, such as the NOC (National Oil Corporation) and the LCB (Libyan Central Bank), the Tripoli-based government has sought to leverage its authority to channel oil revenues and, given the country's extensive public sector, to exert influence over the Central Bank's decision-making processes. To this must be added the support of Tripoli's international partners who, aiming to preserve a degree of stability in the country, have over the years provided investments and financial flows directed toward the capital.

At the opposite end of the spectrum lies the East, home to the Libyan parliament (the House of Representatives) and, above all, the power base of the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army. Although not formally recognized at the international level, the LNA has benefited from significant regional and international backing. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and, most notably, Russia have ensured not only its continued control over large swathes of territory, but also the consolidation of a dense and resilient power network that is exceedingly difficult to dismantle.

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<sup>4</sup> “Libia: la Turchia media tra il governo e le forze Rada per evitare nuovi scontri a Tripoli”, Agenzia Nova, 1 dicembre 2025, available at: <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/libia-la-turchia-media-tra-il-governo-e-le-forze-rada-per-evitare-nuovi-scontri-a-tripoli/>

Haftar's model has been inspired by that of Egypt—also a key partner—in which militias form an integral part of the armed forces. In this context, power is entrenched through a high degree of repression and the gradual construction of an increasingly pervasive military economy.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, Haftar has sought to pursue a deliberately divisive strategy for the country, exploiting the leverage of oil blockades with the support of Russia<sup>6</sup>. Although formally dependent on the finances of the Tripoli-based government—which, through the LCB, continues to pay the salaries of both the army and civil servants—his power has increasingly expanded within his own family, reproducing a pattern common to several pre-2011 regimes (Mubarak, al-Assad, and Gaddafi himself). His legitimacy, particularly at the regional level, and especially his anti-Islamist posture, have effectively kept him in power. Today, despite leading an unrecognized administration, he has also managed to assert himself diplomatically.

This has resulted in a power structure that, on the one hand, makes him an actor that cannot be ignored and, on the other, endows him with significant para-state authority. His armed forces—despite internal divisions and their dependence on a dense network of corruption and pragmatic alliances—continue to maintain the country in a state of fragmentation.

This dynamic has enabled Haftar to secure a series of political victories over the Tripoli-based government—for instance, the appointment of a new governor of the Libyan Central Bank after protracted negotiations involving the United Nations and Tripoli, as well as the appointment of NOC governor Masud Sulaiman, who is widely considered to be closely aligned with Khalifa Haftar<sup>7</sup>.

Although these appointments form part of a compromise with the Tripoli government and could, according to some observers, signal positive steps toward the country's reunification, they also appear to reflect shifting power balances. This is not merely a matter of Haftar's ability to assert himself politically, but also of changing regional and international dynamics. Indeed, from a broader perspective, all major actors involved in Libya now seem to be leaning toward a political settlement. Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, together with the United States, Türkiye, and Italy, appear to have moved beyond the era of polarization. Whereas until recently the Tripoli government was regarded as a Muslim Brotherhood-aligned administration backed by Qatar and Türkiye, it now seems far less constrained by the ideological pressures that have shaped the region since 2011. Conversely, Haftar—though still supported by Russia and certain regional actors—now appears to have acquired the degree of legitimacy he had long sought<sup>8</sup>.

Within this renewed, albeit still fragile, regional equilibrium, the trilateral meeting between Türkiye, Italy, and the Tripoli government must be understood within the context of this emerging landscape. While it is true that the participation of Tripoli rather than Benghazi signals a clear political alignment on the part of the two external actors, it is equally undeniable that Italy's and Türkiye's diplomatic initiatives increasingly point toward broader engagement<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Giampaolo M. (2020) "General Haftar and the Risks of Authoritarian "Stability" in Libya", IAI, available at: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/general-haftar-and-risks-authoritarian-stability-libya>

<sup>6</sup> "Haftar's lucrative oil blockade", Argus, 27/09/2024 available at: <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news-and-insights/latest-market-news/2612932-haftar-s-lucrative-oil-blockade>

<sup>7</sup> "Libya: Noc chief resigns, race to lead main oil company begins", Agenzia Nova, 17/01/2025, available at: <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/Libya%3A-Noc%27s-number-one-resigns%2C-race-to-lead-the-main-oil-company-begins/>

<sup>8</sup> Ali, "Is the United States Set to Re-Engage in Libya?", op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Asad, A. (2025) "Turkish Foreign Minister meets Saddam Haftar in Ankara", Libya Observer, available at: <https://libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/turkish-foreign-minister-meets-saddam-haftar-ankara>

Türkiye has shown signs of openness toward Haftar and played a decisive role in mediating between the Tripoli government and the Rada militia in the western region; similarly, Italy has taken steps toward a more assertive and inclusive diplomatic approach<sup>10</sup>.

### *Italy's Role in Libya: A Leading Position in Cooperation with Türkiye*

Despite alternating phases of crisis and diplomatic détente, Italy has consistently played a central role in Libya. The colonial past—often neglected in public discourse—remains not only an open wound but also the foundation upon which the historical relationship between the two countries has been built. From the moment Gaddafi came to power, Italy's presence, while at times an easy target for Libyan nationalism, was simultaneously instrumental for the regime, which safeguarded its national interests through cooperation with Italian industries. The energy sector, the banking system, and automobile imports were the three areas that remained largely untouched by the new regime's policies.

Although the current context differs significantly from the past, Italy continues to be an indispensable actor for Libya. ENI, along with a wide range of economic and commercial stakeholders, constitutes a core element of the structural dependencies linking the North African country to Italy. Extraction technologies, export infrastructures, and Libya's own importation of refined crude products are among the most significant dimensions binding the two countries together.

For the most part, this relationship consists of a commercial exchange that overwhelmingly benefits Italy, which exports high value-added goods to Libya.

According to ITA's data, the energy supply chain—most notably the long-established sector of refined petroleum products—remains central to Italy's export profile toward Libya. With export values reaching €1.25 billion, representing a 40.9% increase compared to the previous year, this sector accounts for 54.82% of Italy's total exports to Libya and holds a market share of 54.88%.

In second position is the broader machinery and industrial equipment sector. This includes general-purpose machinery, which registered exports of €175 million (a 19.3% increase), and electrical equipment, which reached €226 million—up 69% from 2023—together constituting roughly 10% of Italy's total exports to the country<sup>11</sup>.

Italy primarily imports unrefined petroleum products, amounting to approximately three billion euros, a sector in which ENI continues to play a central role within the country. Indeed, as outlined in the strategic framework of the Mattei Plan for Africa, drafted and promoted by the Italian government, Italy—through ENI—plans to undertake an investment program of roughly eight billion euros in Libya over the coming years. The objective is to strengthen Italy's energy policies, thereby positioning the country as one of the principal actors in the regional energy sector. The Italian energy giant is, in fact, responsible for nearly 80 percent of Libya's natural gas production and has, over the years, become an indispensable player in Italy's foreign policy.

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<sup>10</sup> “Libia: la Turchia media tra il governo e le forze Rada per evitare nuovi scontri a Tripoli”, Agenzia Nova, 1 december 2025, available at: <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/libia-la-turchia-media-tra-il-governo-e-le-forze-rada-per-evitare-nuovi-scontri-a-tripoli/>

<sup>11</sup> “INTERSCAMBIO COMMERCIALE ITALIA – LIBIA, GEN-DIC 2024”, ICE, rapporto Gennaio-dicembre 2024, available at: <https://www.ice.it/it/sites/default/files/inline-files/Interscambio%20GEN-DIC%202024.pdf>. It worths noting that the first semester of 2025 the interchange has decresed notably due to the decreasing of oil. See: “Cala l'interscambio tra Italia e Libia nel primo semestre 2025, flessione per petrolio e gas”, Agenzia Nova, available at: <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/cala-linterscambio-tra-italia-e-libia-nel-primo-semester-2025-flessione-per-petrolio-e-gas/>



It is precisely within the context of the Mattei Plan for Africa that the growing cooperation between Italy and Türkiye in Libya should be understood. Although many analysts and observers perceive Ankara's role—particularly on the political front—as a clear threat to Italian interests in the country, the two states do not, in fact, appear to diverge either economically or politically.

### *Turkish-Italian convergences in Libya and the renewed role of the US*

Debates surrounding Türkiye's role in Libya constitute a central element in the analyses of Italy's position in North Africa. While Ankara's political influence in Libya is undeniable, a balanced assessment of areas of convergence and friction between Italy and Türkiye is essential for understanding the broader context. Türkiye does not exercise full control over the Tripoli-based government; however, it played a decisive role in legitimizing Libyan authorities following Haftar's offensive and in countering Russian influence, even without direct escalation into open conflict. By defending a government recognized by the EU and the UN, Ankara secured a primary position in Libya's security and economic spheres.

In security terms, Türkiye has deployed military personnel, established bases, and supported figures close to Ankara—such as Deputy Defence Minister Abd al-Salam Zubi—while cultivating ties with key actors in both western and eastern Libya. Turkish diplomacy has notably maintained high-level dialogue with the eastern camp, including Haftar, as illustrated by his son Saddam Haftar's participation in Istanbul's International Defence Fair.

Türkiye's pragmatism positions it as a critical counterweight to Russian involvement, aligning with U.S. preferences for regional stability without deep engagement. Ankara's rising political-diplomatic profile has also facilitated expanded economic activity, particularly in infrastructure, prompting perceptions of competition with Italy across Libya's western and eastern regions.

However, within this context Italy appears firmly committed to safeguarding its interests in the country. Neither its strategic energy assets nor its exports of machinery and high value-added goods are, in any sense, jeopardized. The Mattei Plan, on the contrary, seems to function as a highly attractive instrument, both for energy-transition projects and for the expansion of raw-material exports. In this regard, Ankara's political influence may prove not only functional but appears to generate no significant friction.

Italian technological exports, as well as ENI's central role in the Libyan energy landscape, are not at risk from Turkish initiatives, given that Türkiye lacks both the technological capabilities and competitive tools available to Italy. Rather, Ankara seems to occupy sectors—such as infrastructure—that, while potentially competing with Italian interests, currently exhibit more convergence than divergence. Italy's strategy in Libya remains clearly focused on hydrocarbons and on the ambition to become a key energy hub for the entire Mediterranean.

Areas of convergence with Türkiye emerge primarily in the field of security, particularly concerning migration management. Libya's fragile internal equilibrium renders migration a critical issue not only for Italian foreign policy but also domestically, especially under the current government, which has made the “fight against irregular migration” a central policy priority. It is therefore unsurprising that Italy is increasingly cooperating with Turkish authorities on irregular-migration control in Libya, and that border management and security were central topics at the recent trilateral summit.

From this perspective, the Italian government has adopted a pragmatic and realist political approach toward Libya. Although Italy formally supports the Tripoli-based government, contacts with the

eastern leadership have intensified with the aim of maintaining diplomatic channels conducive to sustained political dialogue and eventual reunification of the country.

These developments—aligned with Türkiye’s posture, as well as with the renewed engagement of the United States and the efforts of the United Nations—nonetheless leave unresolved several critical issues that transcend the actions of both external stakeholders and local actors.

### ***Which Transition for Stability?***

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, Libya effectively became a failed state. Its weakened institutions and deep internal instability have enabled external actors to sustain a status quo that has disproportionately harmed civil society and the impoverished segments of the population, who have endured more than fifteen years of civil conflict.

The country’s centrality to European energy security and its pivotal role in migratory dynamics have led many external actors to privilege short-term measures rather than the pursuit of long-term strategies. The political transition—now pushed to its limits—has been steered by actors largely delegitimized in the eyes of the population, both in the East and the West. The entrenched power of armed militias, together with the absence of a genuinely inclusive political process, has produced a structurally unstable environment.

Within this realist and pragmatic approach, it is the Libyan population—and migrants residing in the country—who bear the consequences, subjected to top-down political dynamics. The transition, or rather the various transition projects, appear to exclude the majority of the population, while development initiatives disproportionately benefit networks surrounding the main power centers instead of ensuring a redistribution of revenues, especially—needless to say—those generated by energy resources.

As repeatedly emphasized, stability cannot be conceived as a short-term phenomenon, often authoritarian and exclusionary in nature. This holds especially true for the Libyan people, who now confront fifteen years of suffering brought about by political instability, compounded by the preceding decades under Gaddafi’s dictatorship.

*Mattia Giampaolo, CeSPI researcher*