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Italy's Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Keeping track of priorities, goals and alliances in the heart of Mediterranean

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Foreign policy orientations tend to be the last factor to change, if at all, following transitions from one government to another. However, as a result of the 2018 general elections, the new Italian government depends on the support of the populist Movimento 5 Stelle and the far right Lega Nord. Both parties vowed a radical change from the policies of past governments including with regards to foreign policy. The current government is likely to direct its foreign policy towards an anti-immigration agenda, approved by a considerable part of the electorate. However, it is difficult to predict whether other priorities or strategic challenges will force the government to shift towards traditional Italian positions. It is noteworthy that this government still has technocrats in key positions, including Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi and Economy's Minister Giovanni Tria, who might be steering towards a degree of continuity with the past. So far, generally speaking, Italy's government has preferred an approach which privileges hedging among the United States (US), the European Union (EU) as well as Russia over the traditional Italian support for Western multilateralism. Amid this dynamic, the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC), held a roundtable on September 6 with high-level Italian analysts to discuss the current and short-term trajectories of Italy's foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Speakers included (former Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs), Benedetto della Vedova, (Director of the NATO Defence College Foundation NDCF) Alessandro Politi, the (NDCF Libya expert) Umberto Profazio and Mitchell Belfer (EGIC's President).

Turkey

Immigration routes are a key factor contrasting members of Italy's new government and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey. Both Lega Nord and Movimento 5

Stelle have been outspoken critics of Brussels's decision to provide payments to Ankara, from the European common budget, in order for Turkey to block the eastern migration route towards the EU. Italy's current policymakers argue that the most urgent problem is the southern migration route from Libya which is, mistakenly, overlooked by other EU states who are, instead, more focused on financially supporting Ankara. Another political disagreement between the current Italian government and Turkey is centred around Ankara's support for Islamism. Lega's leader, Matteo Salvini, has been particularly outspoken in criticising Ankara for promoting radical Islam globally (and in Europe) and has endorsed Austria's decision to expel imams connected to the Turkish government. Salvini also proposed an EU-parliament resolution blocking all Turkish accession talks. Relations with Ankara are also affected by Turkey's current inclination to shift between camps. While remains a key NATO ally, Turkey also closely cooperates with Russia and Iran in ways that can threaten Italian and European geopolitical interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara-Rome relations, already strained following the Sapiem 12000 case, will be undoubtedly more difficult than in the past. However, government realism and the military contracts between Italy's Finmeccanica firm and Ankara are likely to prevent much of the rhetoric from turning into reality. Furthermore, the ongoing crisis of the Turkish lira and the significant exposure of Italy's UniCredit bank to Turkey's economy may force tighter cooperation between Italian and Turkish financial authorities. In such a complex picture, as (former) Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Benedetto della Vedova declared during the event: 'Future engagement with Ankara is likely to be driven by short terms objective mostly disconnected from a values-based approach.' In fact, Mitchell Belfer added, 'offering EU membership to Turkey while it is drifting towards an authoritarian, Islamist form of government, without taking into account its ongoing conflict with EU member Cyprus, can be dangerously counterproductive.'

Iran

In contrast, Italy's position on Iran is unlikely to shift 'unless the regional behaviours of Tehran and its proxies significantly endangers Italian and EU interests' as stated by Belfer. Iran's emerging market constitutes an opportunity for many Italian companies especially with regards to energy and infrastructural development. Despite the recent synergy between US President, Donald Trump, and Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, Italy is likely to side with Germany, France and the United Kingdom (UK) in supporting the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) despite US withdrawal. This is encouraged by the interests of Italian companies in Iran which can be protected by the EU Blocking Statute Process, meant to shield European businesses even after US sanctions on Tehran are re-imposed. However, 'the EU Blocking Statute Process is far from being an iron dome especially in the case of tough US secondary sanc-

tions,' Belfer said. With the new government in charge, Italy is less inclined to guarantee investments in risky or emerging markets through Cassa Depositi e Prestiti's owned SACE. As Italy looks for resources to finance the expensive tax relief and welfare measures which were promised during the election campaign, the new CEO of Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, Fabrizio Palermo, (appointed July 2018) is seeking to reduce SACE's ability to insure risky investments in emerging markets.

Syria and Lebanon

The Lega, the minority stakeholder in government, has repeatedly demonstrated its sympathy for Russia's Syria agenda in support of the Assad regime. Lega's leader, Salvini, has condemned Western air and naval strikes against Syria's military and chemical research facilities, and development and production centres. However, this was strongly criticised by the Movimento 5 Stelle—the majority stakeholder in both government and parliament. The political leader of the Movimento 5 Stelle and Minister of Economic Development, Luigi Di Maio, declared that the Syrian crisis will not cause any disagreement between Rome and its western allies and that as far as foreign affairs are concerned, Italy belongs in the Western camp and in NATO. This does not prevent Italy's administration to wave the Russia card when negotiating intra-EU budget issues with Brussels, Berlin and Paris as well as advocating dialogue with Moscow on MENA dossiers. However, regarding Syria, 'the two ruling parties—now, no longer in opposition—are likely to toe the line set by the previous administrations, based on avoiding active involvement on the ground while refraining to alienate either the US and Europe or Russia' according to Alessandro Politi. Stability in Syria is also crucial to prevent the escalation of an Israel-Hezbollah conflict where Italy has deployed more than 1000 troops and leads the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL).

North Africa

Rome's main concern in North Africa is the clash with Paris regarding the management of regional affairs. Libya is the most striking case exemplifying such opposition. Umberto Profazio noted that 'France's prominent position in Italy's former colony (Lybia) is a result of Paris' ability to engage local players from Tripoli, Tobruk and Misurata while Rome strongly privileges relations with the Tripoli based GNA. The Italian response to the situation on the ground was also hindered by the long time it took to form the new coalition government'. From the Italian perspective – shared between the previous and current governments, France's unilateral moves to become the "broker" among Libya's warring factions is seen as an attempt to undermine Italy's energy interests in the country. The interests of Italy's energy giant, ENI, which has heavily invested in Libya's Tripolitania region, and the interests of France's energy giant, Total, which is

heavily investing in Cyrenaica are likely to influence policymakers' decision with regard to Libya in both Paris and Rome.

Libya is a main point of departure for migrants travelling towards Europe and the country is key for any present or future anti-immigration strategy that Rome intends to implement. As such, Italy's government successfully sought the endorsement of the US to take the lead on the Libya file and to organise a peace conference in Rome, 'However, the solidity of the American support to Italy in the Mediterranean is anything but sure', Profazio added. In addition, the presence of two rival administrations, one based in Tripoli and the other in Tobruk, a variety of different militias coupled with and France's reluctance to cede to Italy renders Rome's reconciliation efforts extremely complex. This complexity is further evidenced by the fighting around Tripoli among rival militias which had pledged their loyalty to the Government of National Accord. Countries such as Egypt and Libya are also strategic as they constitute some of Italy's main trading partners outside the EU. In particular, the relations between Italy and Egypt were affected by the torture and murder of Italian PhD researcher, Giulio Regeni, in Cairo (in 2016). Despite a short period of time in which Italy's embassy in Cairo was left without an ambassador and the fact that both Regeni's family and Rome's prosecutors accuse Egypt of not doing enough to bring the perpetrators to justice, the new government has signalled its willingness to normalise and strengthen Rome-Cairo relations. Italy's Ministers of the Interior, Foreign and the Welfare Minister have all recently travelled to Egypt to illicit President Al-Sisi's cooperation in Libya, where Egypt's support is essential to influence the Tobruk-based administration.

Conclusions

In the short term, the most important foreign policy announcements of the new government are likely to be related to the issue of migration from Africa towards Europe. Despite the temptation, by at least a section of the administration, to use such issue to build a strong anti-EU consensus and to flirt with EU-hostile leaders, Italy will remain constrained by its historical legacy, firmly within the EU and the Western camp. In the long term, foreign policy tensions with France must be carefully monitored and mechanisms of dialogue put in place. Overall, Italy's involvement abroad and relations with the country's major international partners will be shaped by the government's need to ensure financial stability amid the new expensive fiscal policy it is currently planning.

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