

Italy claims it's found a solution to Europe's migrant problem. Here's why Italy's wrong.

By Matthew Herbert and Jalel Harchaoui September 26 at 6:00 AM

The seas off western Libya have been quiet since late July. Before that, they swarmed with smugglers' boats overfilled with migrants, mostly sub-Saharan Africans heading for Europe. From 23,000 migrants per month, the flow of arrivals has slowed to a trickle.

The migrants are accumulating on Libya's coast and many are incarcerated in opaque circumstances. Their movement has been stymied by militias, who have turned on the northbound flow of migrants they once profited from. Deep in the southern desert, emergent militia groups evince the goal of closing the border with Niger and Chad to migrants moving north — attempting to patrol areas that none of Libya's three rival governments ever secured.

Motivating the Libyan militias' newfound zeal for blocking migrant movement is a new policy spearheaded by the Italian government and embraced by the European Union. The approach relies on payment to militias willing to act as migrant deterrent forces. Italian government representatives use intermediaries such as mayors and other local leaders to negotiate terms of the agreements with the armed groups. They also build local support in the targeted areas by distributing humanitarian aid.

There are two channels for compensating the militias. First, multiple reports detail direct cash gifts. Second, a more politically consequential flow of money moves via the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The E.U. is a major donor to the GNA, and Rome is apparently in a position to earmark some funds for entities that it wishes to reward. This official process allows Rome to claim it doesn't remunerate the militias directly and the GNA to maintain that it stopped the flow of migrants.

Migration has emerged as one of the most politically charged issues in Europe in recent years. Since 2014, 1.7 million irregular migrants have arrived on the continent. In this context, the E.U. has sought to offshore migration enforcement, incentivizing its neighbors to halt the migrant flow by offering economic aid and political concessions.

To this end, in 2016, the E.U. struck a deal with Turkey, which significantly cut the flow of departing migrants. The E.U.'s attention then turned to Libya, with a view to duplicating the Turkish bargain. However, efforts to shut the migrant

corridor — now the primary one into the E.U. — were impeded by Libya’s fractured political and security landscape. As it became clear that the vast majority of migrants now arrived, and stayed, in Italy, the E.U. rallied behind Italy’s approach.

While a narrow tactical success, the E.U.’s policy pushes the goal of a stable, united Libya farther out of reach for three principal reasons.

The policy empowers nonstate armed groups

The pay-them-to-stop scheme has introduced a novel way for amoral, uncontrolled armed groups to carry on extracting rents from the still-raging migrant crisis. Previously, migrants and smugglers paid militias a tax to depart for Europe. Now, the E.U. — coordinated by Italy — in effect pays a tax to the same groups to keep the migrants in place.

The payments also offer militias an imprimatur of legitimacy. That makes it easier for local power brokers to build political capital while continuing to profit handsomely. And if the funds stop, the armed formations can resume and tax migrant smuggling at any point.

Italy’s interior minister says that this policy assists in a “reconversion” of Libya’s militias into legitimate economic pursuits. This is fanciful. Militias leaders, and fighters beneath them, have the leeway to engage in other facets of Libya’s war economy — including smuggling of subsidized fuel and other commodities.

In 2015, an Italian oil company hired militias in western Libya to protect hydrocarbon installations. The militias gladly accepted the protection mission even as they continued profiting from human smuggling. This underscores that purchasing services from militias does not “reconvert” or reform them. The additional revenue only empowers them.

The policy stunts efforts to build a credible security apparatus in the near term

As a result of the arrangement promoted by Italy, Libya’s militias are now considered part of the GNA’s official security forces. This is a textbook case of hybrid security: A weak government claims that it has co-opted independent militias by offering them money. Armed groups in such situations continue pursuing their agenda and shun political compromise.

Libya is already deeply challenged by a hybrid security sector. Eighty percent of the country’s border guards derive from militia units. The guards’ continued militia ties and involvement in illicit activity hobble the effectiveness of the force. In interviews, Libyan security officials stress that one of their biggest concerns is how to handle and professionalize these hybrid forces so that they become genuinely integrated. By rewarding militias without scattering or reshuffling them, the Italian approach delays that integration process.

Italy’s strategy may breed conflict

The numerous armed actors not yet included in these deals are unlikely to watch passively as their enemies benefit. Some will seek to seize territory made more valuable by the new situation. Others may improvise alternative migration routes. In still other cases, militias will fragment, as fighters repudiate the commitments made by their leaders. Violent clashes in the city of Sabratha in mid-September are an illustration of this.

Moreover, factions aligned with Libyan National Army leader Khalifa Hifter, opponents of the GNA, will be tempted to intervene militarily to stop their rival from deriving political legitimacy from E.U.'s migrant strategy. An array of violent ripple effects across western Libya and beyond are thus to be expected.

For the moment, migration flows from Libya are down. However, migration routes were always just a symptom of state fragility. That fragility — and the vast challenges that remain to security and state consolidation — is the real crisis in Libya. The E.U.'s policy, instead of ameliorating the latter, sacrifices institutional strengthening in the pursuit of expediency.

By concentrating power into the hands of unaccountable actors, it undercuts the development of statutory security forces. Put bluntly, it weakens an already-weak state. Any approach that preferences short-term gains against migration while undercutting efforts to stabilize Libya is one with long-term strategic risks.

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