



# IN THE LEOPARD'S FOOTSTEPS

*Despite the rise of the continent's first populist government, in its relations with the Middle East, Italy shows remarkable continuity with its recent past in its emphasis on migration and energy security*

*By Marco Pinfari*

**E**nergy security, migration, the promotion of private and public investment, and the fight against jihadism; at least for the past twenty years, these have been Italy's main areas of concern in its foreign policy toward the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The new government sworn in on June 1, 2018—built on the uneasy alliance between Matteo Salvini's right-wing League Party and the anti-establishment Five-Star Movement—is unlikely to upset these priorities. All indications point nevertheless to the management of migration and the development of preferential relations with all regional actors involved in these flows—especially as transit countries—being by far the most prominent item on the Mediterranean agenda of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and, especially, of Salvini, the new minister of interior and deputy prime minister.

Italy's foreign policy priorities are a reflection of the country: a middle power with a limited ability to shape its southern neighborhood and the wider region to its liking and yet still commanding a vast network of economic, political, and cultural links. Its foreign policy is a projection of its own internal political and social concerns rather being driven by a truly strategic vision for the region. In particular, the increased unease of the Italian population toward the flow of migrants to its southern shores—which began in earnest in the early 1990s in parallel with the demise of the Cold War system and of Italy's so-called First Republic—has led since the early 2000s to the development of reactive policies and ad hoc alliances often driven by the need to respond to the short-term worries of the Italian electorate. This contrasts with the larger, strategic, and oftentimes normative regional outlook, that had characterized Italy's "Levantine" policy during the 1980s as well as the ambitious present-day regional policy and industrial ventures pursued by Italy's oil giant Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI).

Italy's new coalition government has been widely described as the first populist government in a major European country and, as a result, both its internal

◀ A coastal guard watches as a rescue ship carrying 620 migrants docks in the Sicilian harbor of Messina, Italy, August 29, 2016. *Antonio Parrinello/Reuters*

and external policies are closely watched as a potential indication of how other cognate parties and movements in Europe might behave if in power. Its coalition agreement is based on an inward-looking and Eurosceptic political agenda in which foreign policy is relegated to a somewhat marginal position. However, the first official state visit by a member of Conte's government—Salvini's visit to Libya on June 25, 2018—already signaled the importance attached to cooperating with Libyan authorities to manage the southern migration route, even if the price is neglecting Libya's poor human rights record in dealing with transit migrants.

Italy has also repeatedly attempted to take the lead in bringing together the main actors in the Libyan crisis for talks. The fight against jihadist terrorism and the eventual resolution of the Syrian crisis are also part of the regional policy of Conte's government, but so far no coherent strategic vision has been developed to coordinate its activities on these fronts. In parallel with the pursuit of these agendas, the promotion of Italy's economic interests and energy policy (largely driven by ENI and its subsidiaries) is likely to continue. In this, Italy's energy policy for the Middle East and North Africa region seems to be caught in a hard place between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's attempts to act as the gatekeeper for the energy resources of the eastern Mediterranean and the opportunities posed by the looming conclusion of the Syrian civil war.

The substantial continuity that can be expected in Italy's regional policy therefore echoes the oft-quoted line proffered in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's famed historical novel *The Leopard*: "If we want everything to stay the same, everything has to change." Despite the hype, the regional outlook of Conte's government and the main items on his agenda do not signal any qualitative break with the recent past.

### **The Rise and Fall of Italy's "Levantine Policy"**

Italy's foreign policy in the Mediterranean region has traditionally been played out at several levels—including not only bilateral relations but also a significant contribution to UN-led peacekeeping forces and, more recently, the support for EU-wide initiatives—and by a vast array of state and non-state actors, such as private and state-owned companies and NGOs. Italy's relations with North Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf are, in fact, influenced by centuries of political, social, and economic exchanges, culminating in the first half of the twentieth century with the colonial

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occupation of Libya. In the second half of the century, and especially after the 1973 oil embargo, energy security figured high among the priorities of successive Italian governments. These governments actively supported the infrastructural

projects and joint ventures that ENI had been pursuing in the region since the 1950s, under the shrewd leadership of its visionary and charismatic founder Enrico Mattei.

At the bilateral level, Italy developed a distinctive foreign policy approach toward the Middle East especially in the 1980s, during the tenure of Foreign Affairs Minister Giulio Andreotti (1983–1989). Despite his commitment to maintaining good working relations with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Andreotti's "Levantine" foreign policy was designed to delink Italy's foreign policy from that of Italy's traditional transatlantic allies and establish closer relations with the Arab World by directly

supporting the Palestinian cause. Italy's refusal to hand over to the United States the mastermind allegedly behind the hijacking of the *MS Achille Lauro*, a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) operative called Abu Abbas, during the 1985 incident in Sigonella, Sicily, was considered one of the few major diplomatic crises between Italy and the United States, and greatly enhanced Italy's reputation in the Arab World. Andreotti was later keen to portray his strategic choices as driven by

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principled concerns and a genuine sympathy toward the plight of the Palestinian people. In 2005, Andreotti famously claimed, "had I been born in a refugee camp in Lebanon, perhaps I would have become a terrorist myself." The realpolitik lesson of price hikes in Italy during the 1973 oil crisis, however, must have also played a role in Andreotti's showing a less adversarial face to the Arab World than several of Italy's transatlantic allies.

The end of the Cold War—and of the political and ideological alignments that had contributed to it—coincided with the first substantive wave of illegal immigration reaching Italy's shores, originating mostly from Albania and the lower Balkans. In August 1991, after a long standoff with the Italian authorities, the merchant ship *Vlora* docked in Bari with more than ten thousand Albanian migrants on board. Thousands more refugees and migrants reached Italy's southeastern beaches and harbors through the late 1990s. As such, the management of migration never left the top of the political agenda of Italy's Second Republic despite the new political setting that followed the fragmentation of two of Italy's strongest parties during the Cold War years—the Christian Democrats and the Italian Socialist Party—and the rebranding of the Italian Communist Party.

At the heart of the political landscape of the Second Republic lay Silvio Berlusconi, the business tycoon who founded the center-right party Forza Italia in January 1994 and, a few months later, won Italy's general elections. His attitude toward migration was, at least originally, ambivalent. Despite being

allied with the right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale and the Northern League (a political movement born in the early 1990s to voice the grievances of Italy's northern regions), Berlusconi's own party tried to attract part of the Catholic electorate after the fragmentation of the Christian Democrats and, therefore, expressed more moderate views on several key issues, including migration itself.

In 1997, for instance, Berlusconi shed public tears for the death at sea of eighty Albanian migrants and added that "58 million wealthy Italians cannot turn away poor people who are coming here seeking a taste of freedom." While migration from Albania fizzled out, however, his second cabinet cracked down on illegal migrants with a draconian law adopted in 2002 under the leadership of his two main allies. Berlusconi also made no secret of his support for Israel, repeatedly taking the latter's side during its attacks on the Gaza Strip and later admitting that he had a "dream" of Israel joining the European Union.

In the early 2000s, the migration route from Tunisia and Libya to Italy's southernmost islands, Lampedusa and the other islands of the Pelagie archipelago,

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began being exploited systematically by migrants from North Africa. Berlusconi agreed with Libya starting in 2003 on a series of measures to halt this new wave, which proved to be largely ineffective. After the 2006 crisis between Russia and Ukraine, which affected gas supplies to West Europe and exposed Italy's heavy dependence on foreign imports of oil and natural gas, Berlusconi engaged

directly with Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and negotiated a comprehensive treaty in Benghazi in August 2008.

The agreement included Libya's commitment to curb the migration flows to Italy and set the stage for ENI and other major Italian companies to further expand their activities in the North African country—which is connected with Italy via the Greenstream natural gas pipeline, operative since 2004—in exchange for several major investment projects in Libya to be financed directly by the Italian government. The agreement also allowed for Gaddafi's first state visit to Italy in 2009, during which he sported on his military uniform a photograph of the Libya's national hero Omar Mukhtar after his capture by the Italian colonial authorities in 1931.

### **The Arab Revolts and Italy's Own Political Crisis**

The Treaty of Benghazi led to a momentary slowing down of migration flows through the Libyan route. The events of the Arab Spring in early 2011, however, dramatically changed the nature of Italy's relations with Libya, with Berlusconi's fourth government reluctantly agreeing to the NATO-led airstrikes. As a result, the stream of migrants has gradually risen since 2013, peaking at more than

180,000 arrivals on Italian shores in 2016—twenty times the number in 2009.

Similar to the rest of Europe and most international powers, Italy was caught by surprise by the Arab Spring and was essentially unable to formulate a coherent strategic vision to deal not only with challenges but also the opportunities posed by the events that have unfolded in the region since 2010. This lack of strategic depth was partly due to the political and economic crises that led to the downfall of Berlusconi's government in late 2011, and its replacement by a technocratic government led by Mario Monti until 2013 and then, after an indecisive general election, by three successive cabinets supported by a grand coalition led by the center-left Democratic Party. As a result, between 2011 and 2018, six different prime ministers and seven ministers of foreign affairs held office. In the process, Monti included in his cabinet Andrea Riccardi (the founder and leader of the influential Catholic NGO *Comunità di Sant'Egidio*) as junior minister for international cooperation—a position that was designed to capitalize on Riccardi's high international profile but did not live up to expectations, and was eventually reabsorbed into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the following government.

The severity of the deadlock that followed the 2013 election, and the prospect of a recrudescence of the 2008–2009 crisis that had hit Italy more harshly than other major European countries, also led Italy's President Giorgio Napolitano to take the unusual decision of running for a second term in office when his first term ended in 2013—a move that is formally allowed by the Italian constitution but which had never been taken by any of his predecessors since 1948. Napolitano—a former Communist Party member whose forceful leadership style often acted as a counterbalance to Berlusconi's—was probably instrumental in convincing the latter to support the airstrikes on Libya in 2011. His eventual resignation in 2015 made way for the election of Sergio Mattarella, a longtime member of the Christian Democrats who had left active politics in 2008.

This unsettled political environment made the approach of successive Italian governments to the region increasingly erratic. Franco Frattini—the foreign minister of Berlusconi's fourth government who was at the helm of Italy's diplomacy until November 2011—timidly attempted to develop a normative pitch by repeatedly encouraging Europe to be “braver” in supporting democratization in the Middle East and prioritizing the protection of Christian communities in the region in Italy's foreign policy. Similarly, during his brief tenure as minister for international cooperation, Riccardi voiced his hope that the Mediterranean would become “the sea of democracy.” The zenith of Italy's normative commitment to the region was probably reached by Enrico Letta's government, the first of the three successive governments led by center-left prime ministers between 2013 and 2018. Letta's executive set in place a major naval and air operation called “*Mare Nostrum*”—the Latin expression (translated as “our

sea”) used by the Romans to refer to the Mediterranean—whose search-and-rescue component is usually credited with saving thousands of lives at sea.

On the other hand, Matteo Renzi’s government (February 2014–December 2016) prioritized immediate foreign policy interests, including the promotion of foreign investment and control of the Libyan migration route. Despite hailing from the same center-left party as Letta, he did not renew Operation Mare Nostrum when it reached the end of its one-year mandate, partly because it had become increasingly unpopular among the Italian electorate as it inevitably led to a rise in the number of migrant arrivals.

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Renzi was also the first Western leader to meet with Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in Cairo in August 2014; on that occasion, he glossed over the concerns of several prominent members of his own party about the human rights record of El-Sisi’s regime, calling instead for Egypt to play a “strong role” in the Mediterranean region and later describing El-Sisi as a “great leader.” The increased fragmentation of Libya and the rise of General Khalifa Haftar’s militias in Cyrenaica since early 2014 were also at the heart of Renzi’s early attempt to develop a privileged relationship with El-Sisi; while Italy put its weight behind Fayez Al-Sarraj and what would later become known as the Government of National Accord, El-Sisi was then—as he is to this day—one of Haftar’s stronger backers.

Later, however, the discovery of Cambridge doctoral student Giulio Regeni’s disfigured body on February 3, 2016 (while Renzi’s Minister for Economic Development Federica Guidi was in Cairo for a business mission) created enormous pressure on Renzi to take a harsher stance against the Egyptian government, especially since Egyptian state security members were widely believed to have been involved in Regeni’s disappearance and death. Soon after these tragic events, Italy recalled its ambassador and Renzi repeatedly stated that he would not accept an “artificial or hastily gathered truth” on the circumstances of Regeni’s death. Despite the absence of any significant progress in the investigations, political and economic relations between Italy and Egypt continued to develop and were later normalized in September 2017 during the tenure of Renzi’s successor Paolo Gentiloni, who was serving as Renzi’s foreign minister at the time of Regeni’s murder.

In the same month in which Regeni’s body was found, ENI decided to develop the Shorouk Block with its Zohr gas field—the largest in the Mediterranean Sea. ENI had discovered the Zohr gas field in Egyptian territorial waters off Port Said. In June 2015, with a move that has few precedents in the recent history of Italy’s diplomacy, Deputy Foreign Minister Lapo Pistelli resigned both from government and parliament in order to join ENI as senior vice president

for strategic analysis for business development support and be promoted to executive vice president of international affairs less than two years later. ENI's aggressive recruitment strategy was reflected in an equally ambitious expansion of its business interests in the eastern Mediterranean, which included the development of the EastMed gas pipeline to connect the gas fields that ENI controls in Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon to Italy via Cyprus and Greece. The Eastmed pipeline is expected to go into service in 2025.

### **Self-reflection . . . Or A New Beginning?**

The government led by Renzi's latest foreign minister, Gentiloni, filled the gap between the resignation of Renzi's government in December 2016 and the general elections due in Spring 2018. During Gentiloni's tenure as prime minister, while center-right politician Angelino Alfano was serving as minister of foreign affairs, an explicit attempt was made by the foreign ministry to pull the strings of Italy's policy toward the Mediterranean region—and the Middle East at large—which took shape in a document titled "The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean," issued in November 2017.

This document identified six main priorities for Italy's engagement in the Mediterranean—security, migration, economy, energy, culture and science, and cooperation. While the exact scope and nature of these six priorities remains unclear, this fifty-two-page document provides several interesting insights. Unsurprisingly, the longest and most detailed section on regional security is devoted to the Libyan crisis, wherein the document highlights the importance of "find[ing] a political solution." It also states how Italy has supported both "the institutions validated by the Libyan Political Agreement" and "the UN actions to promote an inclusive process of national reconciliation with respect to Libyan ownership," repeatedly stressing the importance of a direct and inclusive dialogue between Libyan stakeholders.

Most interestingly, however, the section on security opened with a (short) paragraph on the Syrian crisis, which is described as "a top priority in Italy's foreign and security policy." For the solution of this crisis, engagement with Russia—to be "inspired by the values of dialogue and realism"—is presented as essential. Other paragraphs in these sections present the role played by Italian armed forces in training Iraqi military units engaged in the war against Daesh, otherwise known as ISIS, and Italy's substantial contribution to several peacekeeping forces, especially the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

With the exception of some widely covered interventions for securing the liberation of Italian hostages in the first part of the war, and despite the appointment in 2014 of one of its most seasoned diplomats, Staffan de Mistura as United Nations and Arab League envoy to Syria, Italy's diplomatic interventions



on the Syrian crisis have been few and cautious. Nevertheless, Italy's interest in remarking its contribution to the fight against Daesh (its largest international mission in the Mediterranean region, with almost 1,400 units involved) can be seen as instrumental to positioning Italy among Syria's main partners in the post-conflict phase, also in light of the long history of close economic and political relations between Italy and the Levant.

The following sections in the document provide an overview of several strategic themes related especially to the management of migration and to energy security. One of the most distinctive policies of Gentiloni's government was to develop a strict protocol for the activities of rescue boats run by NGOs in the Strait of Sicily, spearheaded by his Minister of Interior Marco Minniti, which was expected to substantially reduce the arrivals of migrants through the Libyan route by making it riskier for migrants and human traffickers. However, in this report the emphasis is put on Italy's efforts in developing a "dialogue with transit countries" and in stimulating economic development in sub-Saharan Africa and Africa as a whole—an ambitious vision that is regularly mentioned in Italian politics as the true antidote to mass migration to Europe, but that has never been adequately funded. In relation to energy security, it identifies Italy's two main strategic goals as diversifying supply routes and sources and gradually transitioning to natural gas, placing specific emphasis on the exploitation of the "enormous potential of offshore deposits in the eastern Mediterranean."

Several items in this strategic document prefigured the policy changes that would become effective after the 2018 general election and the inauguration of Conte's government in June 2018. In the fifty-eight-page coalition agreement, less than a page is devoted to foreign policy. A section begins by stating explicitly that the foreign policy of the coalition government will be based "on the centrality of national interest"—a remark that pays lip service to the souverainiste vision of Salvini's League but which, as amply discussed above, does not seem to contradict the trends that emerged in Italy's main foreign policy engagements at least since the 1990s, especially in the Mediterranean region. The following paragraphs confirm Italy's alliance with the United States as its "privileged ally" but also—echoing the tones of the strategy document issued under Gentiloni's government—prefigure an "opening" toward Russia. The removal of the trade sanctions against Russia, which this document commits the coalition government to pursue, is stated explicitly as a programmatic objective of Conte's government and had been part of Salvini's positioning throughout the electoral campaign.

While the plan to improve Italy's relations toward Vladimir Putin's Russia is also connected in the coalition's agreement with Russia's role in "resolving regional crises" in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the main reasons for this move appear eminently economic. Russia is described primarily as an important

“economic partner” for Italy and, since the imposition of the sanctions in 2013, the value of Italy’s exports to Russia declined by one-fourth with an annual loss of approximately 3 billion euros. This loss mostly hit businesses based in Italy’s northern regions—the traditional electoral ground of Salvini’s Northern League Party.

The following sections of the coalition agreement highlight how, especially if Russia is not considered a military threat, Italy should instead see its southern neighbors and the Mediterranean as the source of most “instability factors.” These factors are “Islamic extremism” and “migration flows that are out of control.” The document therefore states that it is to this region that Italy should “refocus its attention,” by intensifying its cooperation with countries that are “committed to fighting terrorism.”

The approach of Conte’s government to migration has been so far, at least when taken at face value, draconian and uncompromising. The change in policies already initiated by Gentiloni’s government for making third-party search-and-rescue missions more difficult have been further accelerated, with NGO boats being regularly denied access to Italian harbors. An agreement with the Libyan authorities for the provision of twelve patrol boats was also finalized in early August.

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On the other hand, except for a flurry of state visits to Egypt by Salvini himself, the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Five-Star Movement Luigi Di Maio, and Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi, Italy’s commitment to supporting countries involved in fighting “Islamic extremism” remains mostly confined to Operation Prima Parthica (Inherent Resolve) in support of Iraqi security forces fighting against Daesh operatives. The fact that Italy, in contrast to most other major European partners, has never been the target of major jihadist operations makes the fight against such movements less electorally salient in Italy than in its European neighbors—an aspect of which two politically savvy leaders like Salvini and Di Maio are well aware.

### **Open Questions**

At the end of the first hundred days of Conte’s coalition government, apart from Salvini’s high-pitched anti-migrant rhetoric, Italy’s approach to the Mediterranean and the Middle East remains in flux.

What is clear, however, is that Italy’s regional policy for the coming years will depend primarily on the evolution of the Libyan crisis. As Haftar’s power and influence seem to be on the rise, Italy’s foreign ministry is increasingly keen on

engaging with him directly, even if this may worsen its relations with Al-Sarraj's government. An important question if these efforts are successful is whether the tone and content of Italy's relations with other regional actors will also be affected.

Italy's renewed relationship with Egypt seems to be a key case in point. If Egypt ceases to be Haftar's gatekeeper, the political urge that has already led three senior members of Conte's government to travel to Egypt may fizzle out, and other items on Italy's agenda—including the lack of progress in the search for Regeni's killers—may be pursued more decisively. ENI's energy investments in Egypt are also in a much safer position now than at the time of Regeni's death—a fact that further reduces the negotiating power of the Egyptian regime vis-à-vis its Italian counterparts. The development schedule of the Zohr field was sped up so that it began producing natural gas in early 2018 (one year ahead of schedule) and ENI has already cashed in on the Shorouk Block by selling 50 percent of its stakes to other non-Egyptian energy corporations.

As the regional scenario, especially in the Levant and the Gulf, is also expected to evolve rapidly over the coming year, Turkey's power struggle in the eastern Mediterranean is being followed closely by the Italian authorities. In February 2018, Erdoğan, on a state visit in Rome, described the bilateral relations between Italy and Turkey as excellent and Italy as a friend with whom Turkey shares “a common vision for the problems of the region.” Furthermore, even if Italy is not a final destination point of the eastern Mediterranean migration route to Europe, Turkey's role as the key buffer state of this route remains the elephant in the room in its foreign relations with all European countries. One may wonder, however, how far Italy would be willing to go—and whether it would be ready to potentially lose some of its lucrative economic interests in Turkey—if Erdoğan's positioning stood in the way of the implementation of major infrastructural projects like the EastMed gas pipeline. In February 2018, Erdoğan warned the European companies involved in offshore gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean not to “step out of line.” Bellicose statements like this, added to the open Turkish–Cypriot dispute over the demarcation of maritime borders, inevitably call into question the future viability of projects like EastMed upon which much of Italy's energy security will depend.

Finally, the internal dynamics within Conte's government also leads onlookers and pundits to speculate whether Salvini's right-wing policies, including his emphasis on fighting migration, will eventually face explicit opposition at least from some sections of the Five-Star Movement. This challenge within the government could result in either a remodulation of Italy's regional policy or, more likely, in other foreign policy issues being introduced in Conte's agenda, perhaps with a stronger normative focus. In particular, Roberto Fico—the current speaker of the Lower House and a former member of the policy directorate of

the Movement—has repeatedly and publicly challenged Salvini's positions, for instance by expressing his concerns on the human rights conditions of migrant camps in Libya.

While foreign policy has never been among priorities of the Movement, its position on the Palestinian issue—including its support for Palestinian statehood—has repeatedly stood out, as opposed to Salvini's explicit support for Israel and its policies. In 2014, Alessandro Di Battista—one of the most vocal members of the Movement and widely popular among its activists—described the attacks on Gaza as “genocide” and asked the Italian government to recall its ambassador to Israel. In 2016, a high-profile political delegation led by the future leader Di Maio (then deputy speaker of the Lower House) was denied access to the Gaza Strip and promised that a future government led by the Movement would have pushed for the official recognition of the state of Palestine and for the implementation of a two-state solution that would have also included Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

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Time will tell if these promises will lead to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—now notably far from the top of Italy's foreign policy agenda—regaining a central position in Italy's strategic vision of the region. For the time being, what is clear is that the times of Operation Mare Nostrum—and the short-lived hope that Italy would lead the efforts for a more humane management of migration influx, and possibly for a new phase of norm-driven cooperation across the two shores of the Mediterranean—are only a distant memory. The political views of Salvini and Di Maio make new normative openings extremely unlikely, and Italy's now well-established reluctance to engage in proactive and forward-looking policies toward the Mediterranean and Middle East seems to be confirmed by the marginal role assigned to foreign policy in the coalition agreement currently in force. As a result, no major reorientation of Italy's regional outlook seems to be in sight; if anything, it will be the domestic concerns of the Italian electorate that will continue to drive Italy's foreign and European policy for the months and years to come. 