Libya: The strategy that wasn't
Toby Vogel

As a failed state in the European Union's immediate neighbourhood that serves as a base camp for terrorists and a conduit for irregular migration to Europe, Libya is precisely the kind of place for which the EU's foreign policy instruments were designed, or so one might think. Since the NATO intervention that helped oust Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the EU has deployed most of its crisis response approaches and instruments in the country, including new procedures set out in the 2013 review of the European External Action Service (EEAS), most notably a Political Framework for a Crisis Approach (PFCA).

Yet, almost nothing in Libya has followed the liberal peacebuilding playbook, which assumes an improving security situation followed by reconstruction and sustained democratic political transformation. Instead, the EU has struggled to make any impact while the ongoing chaos in the country has deepened divisions among member states, with migration control emerging as the lowest common denominator for EU action.

Even with this narrower, migration-focused approach, EU action has bumped up against its limits. The Central Mediterranean route into Europe saw a record number of crossings in 2016, with more than 180,000 migrants intercepted. And this route is also by far the deadliest; there were a record 5,000 deaths at sea last year.

At the end of 2015, the United Nations managed to broker a deal for a government of national unity in Libya, known as the Presidency Council. Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj is seeking some €800 million in military equipment from the Europeans, ostensibly to curb migration. But al-Serraj is a figurehead struggling to assert his authority against a rival government in the east and various power centres across the country. As long as this situation persists, any foreign assistance is bound to be ineffective, and possibly counterproductive should military equipment fall into the wrong hands. For now, the EU has limited itself to training Libya's coastguard as part of Operation Sophia – a maritime mission to intercept migrants on the Mediterranean.

Security vacuum

Following the ousting of Colonel Gaddafi and the jostling for power among the various militias that sprung up during the civil war, the European powers that spearheaded the military intervention (France and the UK) entered a security vacuum but have done little to stabilise the country. In 2014, attempts to establish a political process broke down and fighting erupted again, splitting the country in two and prompting the departure of most international actors, including the EU Delegation to Libya. But the government in Tripoli has failed to bring the west of the country under unified control and to co-opt or push aside a rival government in the east, Tobruq, propped up by Khalifa Haftar, a local military leader. As a result, recent weeks have seen the worst fighting in Libya since 2014.

The events of 2014 forced the EU to rethink its approach. Italy, the former colonial power which held the rotating presidency of the EU's Council of Ministers in the second half of the year, led a policy shift that in effect abandoned institution-building efforts and replaced them with a policy of containment and conflict management. Italy recently stepped up its crisis diplomacy, notably by trying to find a role in the UN-backed government for Haftar, who is backed by Egypt and, somewhat half-heartedly, by Russia, in a bid to formalise but also restrain his power. Above all, the EU has focused on border control – although the EU's Border Assistance Mission was unable to continue operating in the country. To cite a new study on the EU's crisis responses:

> As the crisis became increasingly complicated, and Islamic State terror seized terrain in Libya, the migration question captured much of the agenda on the European side.[1]

The Neighbourhood policy

The crisis in Libya tracks, but also reinforces, tendencies in the EU that came to the fore in the November 2015 review of its European Neighbourhood Policy. The ENP was not supposed to be a crisis management policy but meant to set out the EU's overall approach to the neighbourhood, which in recent years has seen wars in Syria, Ukraine and Libya. As a result, the ENP's focus has now shifted. "The ENP is a long-term engagement with the EU's neighbours, but it also needs to take account of the most pressing needs," stated the Communication on the review. "In the next three to five years, the most urgent challenge in many parts of the neighbourhood is stabilisation."[2]

While the review gave a nod to broader concerns such as resilience, its main focus was on security and stabilisation. This seemed to mark a departure from the ENP's previous rhetoric about the transformative power of EU policies in the neighbourhood – but in reality may simply have been a case of stated policy catching up with implemented policy.

The authors of a recent CEPS study on the ENP concluded that

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[1] See the study comparing the EU's crisis responses in Libya and Ukraine, forthcoming: www.eunpack.eu.
[2] See: http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf

The EU has been consistent in prioritising its security interests over 'shared prosperity' and democracy promotion, and created structured, institutionalised and securitised relations with its southern neighbours, which are not easy to alter and are not conducive to supporting Arab reformers.[3]

This, the authors point out, comes with its own dangers:

The Arab Spring…has shown that a 'security and stability first' approach has not prevented the region from falling prey to political turmoil.[4]

There is no reason to believe that Libya will prove an exception.

Federica Mogherini, the EU's foreign policy chief, seems to recognise this in principle. At a news conference following the Foreign Affairs Council in February, she stated:

But today the message that comes out of the Foreign Affairs Council is that our work with Libya, for Libyans and with Libyans mainly is going much beyond the issue of migration and the main focus is our political work. First of all, to guarantee inclusiveness, to support the Government of National Accord and the Libyan Political Agreement; the delivery of services to the Libyans starting with health and social measures.

While all these are necessary ingredients for a solution to the Libyan crisis, they do not make for a strategy. And should the EU continue in practice to put the fight against irregular migration above all else, any solution will remain elusive.

The situation in Libya is unquestionably difficult; but this makes developing a comprehensive strategy more imperative, not less. Isolated activities undertaken by the EU or individual member states are less likely to improve conditions on the ground, especially if they respond more to domestic concerns than Libya's needs and do not constitute an integrated strategy. The attempt by Italy's government on April 1-2 to strike a deal with tribal leaders from Libya's south gathered in Rome is a good example of assistance being designed to suit Europe's needs, not Libya's.[5] The question now is whether a European Union fixated on migration is able to muster the political will to support any strategy.

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[3] *Assessing the European Neighbourhood Policy: Perspectives from the literature* (2017), H. Kostanyan (ed.), CEPS paperback, p.46.

[4] Ibid. p.48.

[5] The elements of such a strategy were outlined in a CEPS Policy Brief: ([https://www.ceps.eu/publications/stable-libya-would-close-door-daesh)](https://www.ceps.eu/publications/stable-libya-would-close-door-daesh), by Giovanni Faleg, March 2016.