



DISCUSSION PAPER — WINTER 2020

# Should the EU deploy a military mission to Libya?

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# Foreword

## **Mary Fitzgerald**

Journalist and analyst specialising in the Euro-Mediterranean region with a particular focus on Libya, and Trustee at Friends of Europe

Libya has for years been wracked by conflict between the UN-recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli and forces aligned with Khalifa Haftar, a commander based in the country's east. Diplomatic efforts to forge a settlement were upended in April 2019 when Haftar plunged Libya into a fresh round of war by launching an offensive to capture Tripoli. Today a fragile ceasefire agreed in October holds. A new UN-mediated dialogue process aims to put in place a framework for elections next year but the challenges, not least the risk of a return to violence, are many.

The European Union's engagement with Libya has been undermined by the diverging interests of key member states, with France accused of backing Haftar. Despite the creation of Operation IRINI – an EU naval and aerial mission tasked with policing the much-violated arms embargo – in March 2020, Libya's belligerents continue to receive military support from their foreign benefactors. Both Turkey and Russia have increased their presence and influence in the country since Haftar's failed war on Tripoli.

Earlier this year, the EU drew up plans to deploy European military observers to Libya in the event of a more durable ceasefire.

The question of sending European boots to Libya looks very different when viewed from a Libyan perspective, as our contributors – hailing from Libyan politics, academia and civil society – demonstrate. In Europe, those who advocate for such a deployment tend to discuss it in terms of EU's geopolitical ambitions more than Libyan realities or needs. Libyan voices are rarely part of the public conversation in Europe about what the EU should do in Libya. That needs to change. It starts here.

**Emadeddin Badi**, Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Centre for the Middle East

The idea of militarily intervening in Libya is often floated by European policymakers that do not want to reckon with the real causes behind the failure to address the country's turmoil. While it is true that part of the European Union's initial failure in post-revolutionary Libya was attributable to its overly light footprint, what ultimately was the nail in the coffin of the EU's credibility in Libya was Europe's own internal divisions. Boots on Libya's ground never were, nor will they be, the panacea that some Europeans dream them to be.

Until April 4th 2019, all it would have taken on the EU's part to begin constructively addressing the Libyan conflict was for Europeans to present a unified front and devise a common policy. Until then, competitive bilateralism had consistently undermined efforts to formulate a collective policy towards Libya, with a multilateral EU framework growing increasingly incompatible with the bilateralism that drove independent European states' policies towards Libya.

Post-April 4th, the European Union's credibility in Libya was no longer exclusively the victim of competing internal European agendas, but the collective inaction of its member states. EU countries indolently spectated as the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Russia actively grew more overt and bellicose in their interventionism in the North African country. Libyans watched the growing devastation that

regional powers left in their wake and grew increasingly disillusioned with their neighbours across the Mediterranean. Frustration over the internationally-driven scrimmage galvanised Germany into hosting influential players and proxy powers involved in Libya in a conference where they essentially pinky-promised to cease intervening. Yet, after foreign meddlers expectedly broke their oaths, the EU doubled down on irrelevance, failing to act against those that paid lip service to its leaders.

The plan to deploy boots on the ground is now the latest iteration in a string of reactive - rather than prescriptive - European policies towards Libya's transition. Proponents of the idea appear to wilfully misdiagnose the reasons behind the EU's decaying problem-solving capabilities: there was never a problem with the soft-power toolbox that Europe could, in theory, use in Libya. Rather, the problem was that Europeans never jointly leveraged that toolbox's effectiveness - losing credibility as their political capital atrophied. Not only would sending boots on the ground not restore European interests in Libya, clumsily pursuing that policy as a means to deflect from internal divisions would very possibly deliver a self-inflicted *coup de grâce* on the block's relevance in the North African country.

**Hala Bugaighis**, Co-Founder of Jusoor and Friends of Europe MENA Young Leader alumna

The calls for sending EU boots on Libyan soil come at a time when Europe leads two important initiatives to end the conflict there: the Berlin Conference and Operation IRINI.

As a result of the UN's failure to prevent Security Council members from supporting belligerent parties, the Berlin Conference was convened by Germany in an attempt to end foreign entanglement in the country. Historically, Berlin conferences were organised to draw a conflict era to a close – that was the case for the Balkans in 1878 and Africa in 1885. However, neither of the Berlin conferences provided any voice for local populations over the partitioning of their homelands. Europe should avoid repeating this error in the Libyan conflict.

Operation IRINI, an arms embargo mission, has had many challenges as well. Given IRINI's strong focus on the naval dimension, its operations primarily affect the government in the west, which is supported by Turkey by sea. The operation has had little impact on the eastern region, which receives supplies by air and land across the Libya-Egypt border. Hence, IRINI could potentially risk the EU's credibility as a neutral peace broker in Libya, further marginalising its role in the conflict.

Having said all that, there are many reasons why boots on the ground would not be the right approach for the EU to take.

First: why would Libyans trust another foreign intervention? Although NATO played an essential role in the Libyan uprising, it abandoned the country to its fate afterwards. The presence

of uncontrolled weapons and several military actors led to a dystopian outcome. This is one of the main reasons Libyans have lost faith in the international community.

Second, the country already has many boots on the ground, mainly from Russia, Egypt and Turkey. These have been perceived as spoilers of peace. Adding Europeans troops on the ground would only strengthen the positions of the other troops and legitimise their unlawful presence.

Third, ISIS still poses a threat in Libya. Having an official foreign intervention on the ground could be used as a rallying cry to form alliances with other radical groups. This would only further complicate the situation on the ground.

Instead, EU member states should focus on having a collective and unified stance on Libya. Having certain member states, such as France, backing one side of the conflict over another will only serve to weaken the EU's role in Libya.

The EU should also focus on reforming its IRINI operation to enforce the arms embargo on rival parties. It should study the options available to introduce sanctions on countries who violate the arms embargo.

Finally, and most importantly, the EU must learn from past mistakes and ensure that the Libyan people's interests are represented in the Berlin Conference outcomes.

Combined, these measures will lead to a more meaningful and robust EU intervention in Libya.

**Anas El Gomati**, Founder of the Sadeq Institute, Libya's first post-Gaddafi think-tank

Much has changed in the nearly ten years since Libya's revolution. Revolutionaries were initially supported from the air by European powers under NATO's Operation 'Unified Protector'. At the time, this was lauded as a model for intervention, contrasting with 'boots on the ground' elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East.

Attention quickly turned to Libya's vast wealth, which was seen as a 'magic wand' to solve looming challenges. As the saying went, the goal was to have "Ferragamo heels on the ground instead of boots".

Today, Libya is on the cusp of a new political deal to end its second civil war. After the announcement of a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement, Europeans offered to deploy boots on the ground to monitor it. This is clearly a continuation of the 'magic wand' delusion.

European boots are not an adequate deterrent to conflict, nor will they incentivise constructive political engagement. The EU has a range of options in Libya that could induce constructive political engagement to end the conflict but has failed to use the most obvious: sanctions.

It's ambivalence towards actors who chose war over peaceful negotiations in April 2019 such as Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the self-styled Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), made a return to conflict a penalty-free choice, and peace seem optional.

Libyans have observed how international powers such as the United Arab Emirates, who supported Haftar's military campaigns since 2014, were ignored until Turkey intervened in late 2019 to support the Government of National Accord (GNA). This prompted the EU to act.

The luxury of regional powers to sustain conflict from the outside and threaten the stability of Europe's southern neighbourhood, without facing sanctions or condemnation, has caused irrevocable damage to the EU's reputation, relevance and respect for its rules. Its failure to apply sanctions may not only be interpreted as a sign of weakness, but also as a political double standard.

Despite the difficulty of achieving consensus amongst EU member states, sanctions are the most effective tool. They are costly to those who are targeted and deter foreign powers and Libyans alike from spoiling peace processes in the long term. The failure to use them when they are most relevant and needed could damage confidence in the EU and convince external regional powers that 'might is right'.

Dismissing this reality in favour of costly and ineffective peacekeepers not only fails to address Libya's problems, but may lead those with an appetite for war to draw the wrong conclusion: spoil, but make the right friends before you do.

**Majda Fallah**, Member of Libya's High State Council and participant in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum

With discussions about placing EU military boots in Libya flaring up again, it is worth re-examining its previous intervention in the country and the questions that must be answered before further action is taken:

1. Does the European Union have a consensus on policy towards the Libyan crisis?
2. Do any EU countries directly or indirectly fuel the Libyan conflict?
3. Do EU member states have contradicting policies towards Libya?
4. How will the EU be expected to carry out such a difficult and complicated task without a consistent policy regarding a resolution to the Libyan conflict?
5. How can the EU be expected to have non-biased peacekeeping boots on the ground whilst one member state has been directly involved in military support to militants attacking the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA)?
6. Will this decision be approved in the UN Security Council, where one of its members has been directly supporting the militants attacking the GNA?
7. How can we guarantee that the same bias shown in Operation IRINI will not be repeated in this process?

It is clear from the EU's previous presence that it does not have a common vision or policy regarding Libya. In a conflict fuelled by external actors, France has been directly involved in supplying technical assistance – and in some cases weapons – to General Haftar, an

unlawful party within this conflict. This bears a clear contradiction to the proposed unbiased peacekeeping process.

The evidence of this inconsistency and bias was clear from the beginning. Already, during IRINI, there had been delays due to disagreements between Greece and Italy over leadership of the operation. The same quarrel is happening now.

Furthermore, bias during IRINI was clear when embargoed shipments of weaponry were allowed to reach Haftar, who enjoys support from certain EU countries.

Until the EU works to have a consistent policy towards Libya, past experience raises doubts about the effectiveness of 'EU boots on Libyan soil'.

However, Libyan citizens do need support in three key areas which are important in building their country.

Firstly, there is great need for humanitarian support, including for the thousands of immigrants in the country. Secondly, political and national reconciliation must be facilitated, as well as support for good governance and local government. Thirdly, technical support is crucial for economic development, particularly towards youth and small and medium-sized enterprises.

**Mustafa Fetouri**, Libyan academic and journalist

Even in the worst of times, the majority of Libyans would not welcome, support, nor seek any foreign troops in their country, regardless of whether facts on the ground warrant such a move. If Libyans were ever to tolerate the idea, it would only be within a limited and clear mandate. However, it is very doubtful that any country would engage in such an endeavour, particularly European Union members.

Having experienced intervention in 2011, most Libyans believe a great part of their misery is the direct result of foreign intervention, political meddling and/or covert foreign activities.

Assuming boots on the ground becomes a prerequisite for stability and peace then the question becomes: can the EU fulfil this mandate?

In 2011, I regularly consulted with the EU ambassador in Tunisia. I asked him if the EU had any strategy or plan for the day after the regime is destroyed. He simply responded: "We have nothing."

The EU made two strategic errors in Libya: first, by rushing behind Nicolas Sarkozy to destroy the country under the pretext of 'humanitarian intervention', and second by signing, supporting, and blessing the Libyan Political Accord of 2015 that created the Government of National Accord (GNA).

The first error produced a lawless Libya whilst the second led to an attempt to 'legalise' that lawlessness in order to contain it. The repercussions of both strategic errors still echo across Libya and beyond.

The EU's approach towards the nation was largely about 'containment', until Erdoğan entered the scene. Turkey backed the GNA, in a desperate attempt to maintain the status quo. That brought the Russians in full gear. Now Ankara and Moscow have all but sidelined Brussels in every sense of the word.

Libyans feel betrayed by the EU and the USA who encouraged and 'helped' them topple the former regime, only to end up licking their wounds as a second decade of suffering begins.

The UN itself is increasingly left watching, particularly, after the Security Council's unified position on Libya started to crack from 2017 onward. Nine years on, the EU is more spectator than player.

It is hard to see the EU gaining the initiative again given the current *status-quo*.

**Youssef Mohammad Sawani**, Professor of Politics & International Relations at the University of Tripoli

A politically divided nation, Libya lacks the state institutions required to function in the Weberian sense of the word. Despite the work of the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya, Operation Sofia and Operation IRINI, Europe has failed to prevent the flow of migration, stop the circulation of arms into Libya, or avoid the potential threat of ISIS and al-Qaeda into EU territories.

Unfortunately, international mediation efforts have only brought about more division. Libya has now become a theatre for competing geopolitical interests, including those of the European Union. Thus, there are doubts about the feasibility of European military action and its benefits to Libya.

Even if mandated by the United Nations Security Council, any European military intervention is highly likely to backfire and be rejected, or minimally welcomed, by the local population. Libyans are fiercely patriotic and will not easily accept foreigners meddling in their affairs or occupying their soil.

Unhappy with removing a 'domestic' dictator through foreign 'infidel' colonisers' violent actions, major Libyan tribes refrained from supporting the rebels in 2011. Such sentiment became more pronounced as NATO targeted non-combatant military forces and infrastructure, costing - according to Human Rights Watch - at least 72 civilian lives in so-called 'collateral damage'.

Echoing a cultural antagonism to foreign rule, nationalists are not expected to be happy with any foreign military presence. The foreign fighters currently in Libya fear making their presence known as there are daily incidents of them being targeted by Libyans.

Hardline Islamists allied with the so-called 'True February Revolutionaries' would just exploit the EU's military action to portray the Government of National Accord as a 'puppet of foreign powers'. Jihadists would find an opportunity to stir up more violence. Libyans, otherwise identified as Gaddafi or September Revolution loyalists, would also consider any EU mission as proof that the February Revolution was a 'Western conspiracy'. Moreover, Europe's presence could pave the way for another cycle of civil war. Haftar-led Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) forces might seize the occasion to consolidate and resume their military campaign.

Given how nasty the situation has become since 2011, most Libyans now question the real intentions of the West. For the EU to prove its commitment to Libya, its members must stop pitting Libyan factions against one another, push for an effective arms embargo, and stop the flow of foreign fighters. An alternative approach is to facilitate inclusive national reconciliation that transcends power-sharing and initiates badly-needed state-building.



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