

Italy Refocus on Africa to Control Migration Flows

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

In 2014, Italy opened its first external inter-service military installation since World War II, in Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa. This region is of strategic importance for Italy as a crossroads of maritime trade flows to and from the Mediterranean region. The stability of this region is also significant, even if indirectly, for the security of Italy and its neighbourhood. Recently, however, Italy's focus has shifted towards North Africa and the Sahel. With a strategic interest in Libya, revolving around migration and energy security, the parliament has approved an increase in Italy's military presence there, where it currently has a military hospital. It has also decided to send troops to Niger and Tunisia to prevent illegal trafficking and deal with threats to security. Whether the expanded focus on Africa will translate into additional Italian bases is yet to be seen.

THE HORN OF AFRICA

According to the 2015 Italian white paper on international security and defence, the Horn of Africa has traditionally been an area of Italian presence, facilitated by the local population's cultural proximity with Italy. This originates from Italy's colonial history. It ruled Eritrea and Somalia as colonies from the 1880s to 1940s, and occupied Ethiopia from 1935 to 1941.

The 2015 white paper states that the area is of strategic importance, as it is a crossroads for maritime trade flows to and from the Mediterranean region. Even if only indirectly, political and social stability in the Horn of Africa are significant for the security of the Mediterranean region. Stability there can contribute to preventing the resurgence of piracy,

reducing emigration to Europe, and averting the area from becoming fertile ground for the expansion of extremist religious terrorist groups.

The Italian military support base in Djibouti

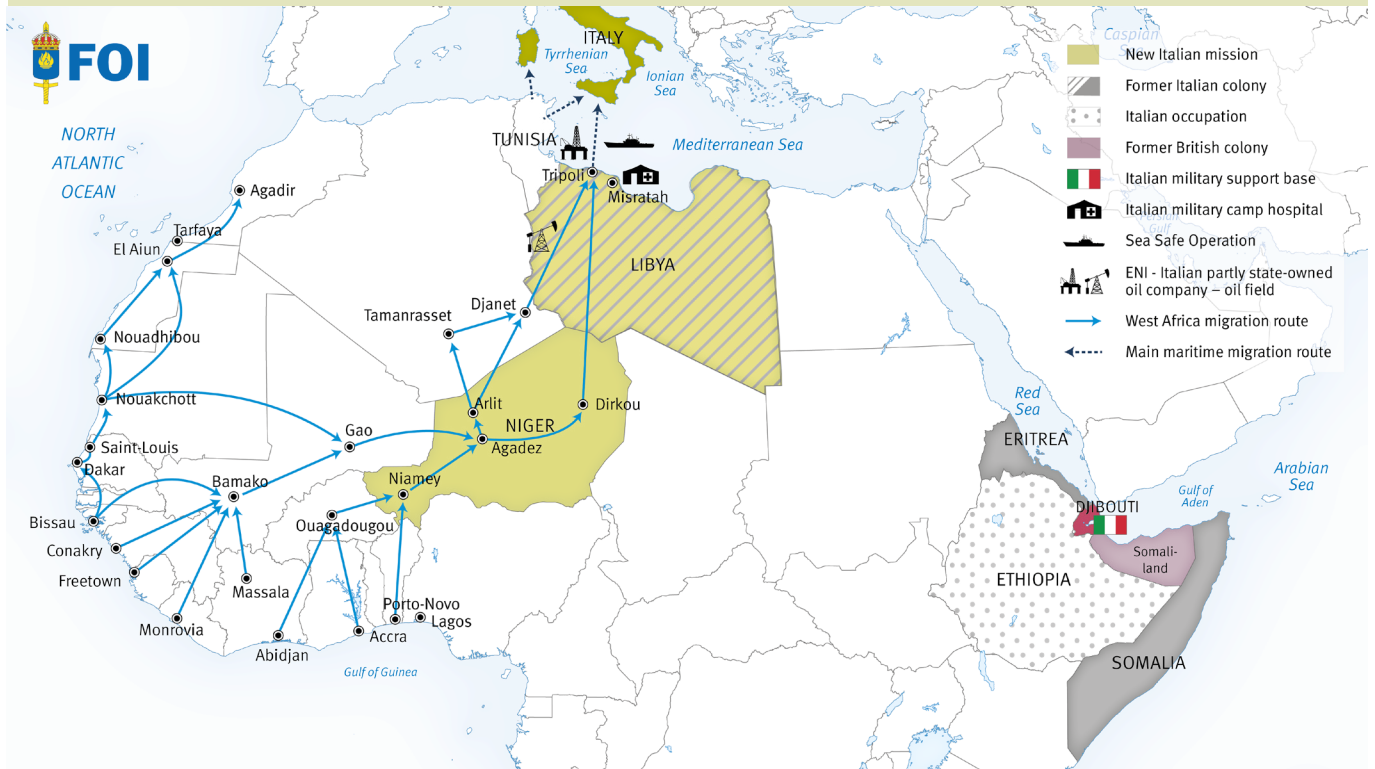
In 2011, Italy concluded that it needed a logistics base in the Horn of Africa, to support the two bilateral missions that it had established there. Djibouti's central location and sufficient stability led to its selection as the site for Italy's military support base (Italian: Base Militare Italiana di Supporto, BMIS). This base was inaugurated in 2013, and was Italy's first external inter-service military installation since World War II. Although the anti-piracy mission in the Indian Ocean (Italian: Nuclei Militari di Protezione) ended in 2015, the Italian Mission of Assistance in Somalia (MIADIT) has continued, and is now focusing on training Somali police forces.

Today, the BMIS hosts 90 soldiers and provides operational and logistics support to military and civil defence operations such as the EU NAVFOR Atalanta (European Naval Force Somalia, Operation Atalanta), EUCAP Somalia (European Union Capacity-building Mission in Somalia), mobile training teams, and special operations. Djibouti's strategic location has also been important for evacuation of Italian nationals from the region (Yemen in 2015 and South Sudan in 2016).

LIBYA – PREVENTING ILLEGAL MIGRATION AND ENSURING ENERGY SECURITY

The Italian island of Lampedusa is only 225 kilometres from the Libyan shore. Libya's proximity and the historical ties ensuing from its period as an Italian colony (from 1911 to 1943)

Assessment of Italian military bases and installations in Africa



Sources: Italian Ministry of Defence (2018), Italian Senate & Italian Chamber of Deputies (2018), Ben-Ghiat & Fuller (2005), ENI (2018), IOM (2018).

provide context to the current security situation. Today, Italy's strategic interests in Libya mainly revolve around migration and energy security.

From January 2015 to November 2018, Italy received 476,814 migrants; most of them had crossed the Mediterranean from Libya. Even though the migration flows from Libya decreased by 80 per cent during the first seven months of 2018, as compared to the same period the previous year, the new Italian government that took office in June 2018 has made reducing illegal migration its top priority.

Libya is a major supplier of Italy's oil and natural gas; in a hearing before the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies' Committees, the Italian defence minister, Elisabetta Trenta, stated that a stable Libya is fundamental for Italy's energy security. The Italian partly state-owned oil company, ENI, conducts production activities in the Mediterranean Sea, near Tripoli and the Libyan Desert. The gas produced from the operational fields is then distributed through sub-sea pipelines from Libya to Sicily and onwards through Italy's national network.

The Bilateral Mission of Assistance and Support in Libya

In March 2015, the Italian parliament launched Operation Safe Sea (Operazione Mare Sicur). Its air and naval components operate off the Libyan coast, in the central Mediterranean, both to protect national interests, including the security of maritime activities and strategic energy sources, and to conduct surveillance of possible movements of jihadist formations.

Rome considered a military option in Libya between 2015 and the beginning of 2016, but this was set aside due to the lack of a series of conditions. Instead, Italy deployed Operation Hippocrates (Operazione Ippocrate), an inter-service military camp hospital in Misratah, in September 2016. Operation Hippocrates comprises 300 military personnel, divided among a military hospital, a command and control and logistics operation component, and a unit assigned to protecting all the components of the medical structure. In August 2017, the tasks of the mission expanded and now include building up the capacity of Libya's coast guard and the Libyan navy. The aim is to strengthen their ability to control and combat illegal immigration, trafficking, and threats

to security. The training is conducted in both Libya and Italy.

In January 2018, Italy's parliament approved the combining of the two missions, Safe Sea and Hippocrates, into the Bilateral Mission of Assistance and Support in Libya (MIASIT), and the deployment of up to 400 military staff.

NIGER

Before leaving Libya's shores for Italy, many migrants pass through Niger. In January 2018, Italy's parliament approved a mission, the Bilateral Support Mission in Niger (Missione bilaterale di supporto nella Repubblica del Niger, MISIN). Its geographical area of intervention was also extended to Mauritania, Nigeria, and Benin. The objective of the mission is to increase the ability of the Republic of Niger to prevent illegal trafficking and protect against security threats. The Italian parliament approved the deployment of up to 470 troops, but the mission was stalled for months, due to opposition by the local government. During this period, about 40 Italian soldiers camped at the US base at Niamey airport. It was not until September 2018 that the Nigerien government indicated that the Italian parliament could officially proceed with the mission. In October 2018, MISIN carried out the first training course.

UNCLEAR FUTURE PRESENCE

On 1 June 2018, Italy's new government took office. The two new coalition partners, the Movimento Cinque Stelle and the Lega Nord, have no previous government experience and barely mentioned defence in their coalition agreement. This makes it more difficult to perceive Italy's ambitions concerning its bilateral military presence in Africa.

One major factor that will influence Italy's overseas commitments is the economic difficulties it has experienced in recent years. The 2019 budget proposal foresees that Italy's military expenses during the period 2019-2031 will be reduced by about 500 million EUR. Italy is currently engaged in 32 out-of-area operations in 22 countries. With the budget cuts, the government will have to prioritise among the missions. North Africa and the Sahel should be high on their list of prioritised areas, since the government has given priority to stemming migrant flows towards Italy and to protecting maritime activities and strategic energy sources.

The renewed focus on Africa is already noteworthy. In January 2018, the Italian parliament approved the relocation of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq to North Africa and the Sahel; later that year, Trenta

decided to start downsizing in Iraq. Consequently, of the total for all foreign missions, the amount allocated to the African continent has increased, from 9 per cent in 2017 to 17 per cent in 2018. In addition to MIADIT and MISIN, Italy and Tunisia have agreed to conduct 60 joint defence activities in 2019.

According to the Italian news magazine *Panorama*, a tiny settlement, Madama, on the border of southern Libya, has been chosen as the location for an eventual operational base for the Nigerien mission. Considering the difficulties in receiving authorisation for MISIN from the Nigerien government, the establishment of a military base in Niger nevertheless appears to be far off. In 2018, the then Italian ambassador to Libya, Giuseppe Perrone, denied that Italy was planning to establish a military base in southern Libya. Together with the high costs associated with military bases, it is uncertain whether Italy's increased military presence in Africa will translate into any military bases in addition to the BMIS, in Djibouti.

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