LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog: Short-termist and self-defeating: Assessing the EU's response to the crisis in Libya

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Short-termist and self-defeating: Assessing the EU's response to the crisis in Libya

Political instability in Libya is viewed as one of the key contributing factors to Europe's migration crisis, and the EU has taken an active role in addressing the problem. But how effective have the EU's efforts been in Libya? Based on new research, **Luca Raineri** *highlights some key failings in the EU's approach, noting that there has been a significant disjoint between the ambitious objectives highlighted by EU leaders and their capacity and willingness to achieve these goals in practice.*

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, speaking after Libya Quartet meeting, Credit: EEAS (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The outcome of the recent Italian election has confirmed a trend that is becoming prevalent across the whole of Europe: a rise of far-right parties, propelled by the (perception of a) migration crisis at Europe's borders. Borders that, insofar as migration is concerned, largely correspond to the Mediterranean Sea and Libya, especially since the EU-Turkey deal has clamped down on the flow of asylum seekers along the Balkan route.

Although populist politicians frequently claim that Brussels has done nothing to prevent the influx of migrants – or has simply made things worse – it is undeniable that the European Union has taken an active role in addressing the Libyan crisis. This crisis is complex and multi-faceted, and involves aspects far more intricate than migration alone, including energy security, strategic competition with Russia, and the struggle against terrorism, as well as subterranean hostilities among EU member states themselves. All of this, while Libyan state institutions have collapsed and there is no credible counterpart to negotiate with in sight, unlike in the case of Turkey.

What is much less clear, though, is the extent to which the EU crisis response in Libya is consistent with the commitments that, according to available strategic documents, should orient European action abroad. These include policy coherence and consistency, a comprehensive approach to security, conflict sensitivity, local ownership, human rights obligations, and humanitarian principles. Indeed, the European crisis response in Libya has exposed Brussels to unprecedented criticism, calling into question the EU's ambition to be perceived as a bulwark of liberal values inspired by "principled pragmatism" (as per the 2016 Global Strategy), let alone as a "force for good" (2003 European Security Strategy) in its foreign policy and in its neighbourhood.

Take for instance the exceptionally virulent statement issued by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, on the eve of last November's summit between the EU and the African Union: "the European Union's policy of assisting the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept and return migrants in the Mediterranean is inhuman… The increasing interventions of the EU and its member states have done nothing so far to reduce the level of abuses suffered by migrants". One could hardly find a greater discrepancy between this statement and the UNHCR's assertion that "EU leadership in responding to refugee crises is crucial" and that the UNHCR stands with the EU in "upholding the key European values of solidarity and cooperation".

Does this mean that EU leaders pay mere lip-service to the principles mentioned above, and that amidst the blood and dust of a real conflict what is written on paper is not actually relevant when it comes to putting into practice concrete policy measures? To answer this question, it is necessary to combine a top-down understanding of policy design with a bottom-up investigation of the implications and practicalities of crisis response on the ground. This is what I and my co-authors have attempted to do in a recent working paper which focuses on how the EU substantiates its crisis response in Libya, focusing on the security practices of practitioners connecting decision-makers in Brussels to final beneficiaries in Libya.

Our findings, which were based on a large set of interviews with key stakeholders in Tunis and Rome, are disturbing. A few examples are particularly illustrative of how the EU crisis response in Libya is falling short of fulfilling its normative commitments. Take the (much publicised) training of the Libyan Coast Guard, which was officially meant to contribute to saving migrants at sea and to help disrupt human smuggling. Our research uncovered that some individuals accused of being responsible for smuggling oil and trafficking human beings appear amongst the beneficiaries of EU training, thereby suggesting that the vetting procedure of the trainees has fallen short of appropriate standards of due diligence. As local sources put it: "criminal groups have already infiltrated everything as a result of thugs being turned into cops".

No matter how distasteful, this outcome is largely in line with the predictions of the literature on protection economies, which warns that the most likely result of purely security-oriented responses is the sucking of state actors into the gears of the business of irregular migration. Coupled with the disruption of Libya's institutional framework, the unwarranted legitimisation and co-option of highly controversial security actors can only lead to widespread impunity and a lack of access to legal remedies for the victims of abuses.

More generally, EU-sponsored humanitarian and development programmes in Libya are often subject to high politicisation and pressure from Brussels, carrying the risk of turning needs-driven projects into politically or funds-driven projects. The limited room for local stakeholders to provide input into the process reduces local ownership as well as context and conflict-sensitivity, while remote management amplifies the room for suboptimal project design and monitoring. These shortcomings also affect some of the projects funded by the EU Trust Fund (EUTF), a newly established (and again, much publicised) tool that should theoretically contribute to tackling the root causes of migration.

Our research suggests that there is a significant disjoint between the ambitious objectives and declarations of the EU's response in Libya, and the EU's capacity or willingness to achieve its stated goals. Distorted expectations among beneficiaries, local counterparts, and European audiences are the result of prioritising short-term objectives. EU leaders have sought quick-fix solutions in responding to the anxieties of their constituents, who allegedly perceive growing migrant flows from Libya as an existential threat. As migration has become securitised and framed as an emergency, EU leaders have appeared to address the needs of European audiences more than those of Libyan stakeholders and vulnerable groups.

However, this decoupling of rhetoric and practice could lead to EU external action and crisis responses being seen as little more than abstract wish-lists rather than serious policy strategies. And this, in turn, risks lending weight to those who cast doubt on the usefulness of the European Union, both for the wider world as well as for Europe itself. Overlooking EU core liberal values can only make anti-European sentiments more, not less, relevant.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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