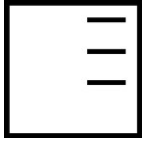


EU Monitor

The EU's military engagement in
Central Mediterranean: Migrant crisis
and arms embargo intertwined

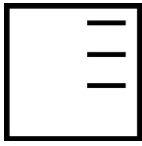
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The March visit of EU's High Representative Josep Borrell at Operation Irini's headquarters in Rome as well as at operation's airbase marked the first anniversary of an ongoing EU's military mission in the Central Mediterranean Sea. The main aim of the mission, officially-named as EUNAVFOR MED Irini, is to enforce an arms embargo on Libya, and the visit of Mr. Borrell had followed the recent bloc's decision to extend the mission for another two years.¹ This article attempts to overview the complex development that has taken place so far, critically reflect missions' functioning, and present two general recommendations to the issues that remain to be tackled.

Operation Sophia at a glance

Operation Irini is a direct successor of Operation Sophia which was active for almost five years, ending last spring 2020. In its essence, Sophia embodied the EU's attempts to address two interconnected issues that have worried member states for already a decade – a migrant crisis and instability in Libya. In order to tackle, or at least partly diminish, such intricate issues, Sophia had been equipped with arguably a broad mandate.²

¹ DIDILI, Zoe. EU set to extend Operation Irini until 2023. *New Europe* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/eu-set-to-extend-operation-irini-until-2023/>

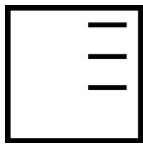
Firstly, and originally, the mission should have addressed only the migrant issue. EU forces had been in 2015 tasked to fight the networks of people-smugglers, by directly intercepting them at sea and by training Libyan coast guarding groups on the ground. Later on, in 2016, Sophia's mandate had been broadened to include also the enforcing of arms embargo imposed on Libya by UN Security Council. That meant inspecting suspicious vessels and their cargo on the high seas, and fending off any arms flowing into Libya. Since its establishment in 2011, the embargo has been largely dysfunctional with no actor actually enforcing it, and, by picking-up this task in 2016, EU became the only entity actively engaged.

'Taxi effect' and other criticisms

Notwithstanding EU's efforts, Sophia had not achieved the prevention of illicit arms flows. In fact, it could not possibly be successful as the sea is not the only entry point into the vast country. Failure of the embargo has been recently confirmed also by the UN expert panel on Libya, which claimed "*total ineffectiveness*".³ However, the termination of the operation was caused by concerns deemed of greater importance to the member-states than the arms embargo

² *Operation Sophia* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://www.operationsophia.eu/about-us/>

³ Libya arms embargo 'totally ineffective': UN report. *Arab News* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1827311/middle-east>



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– the question of rescuing and disembarking migrants, an aspect fitting into general EU’s immigration policy debate. Since the creation of the operation, the disagreements within the bloc had plagued its discussions about the mission and contributed to its controversial reputation among some member states.⁴

The most vocal opponent, Italy’s former government led by the far-right League party, heavily objected to the imbalances in distributing rescued migrants that in most instances were dropped off in the country and demanded ‘fair’ distribution. It was, nevertheless, not the only dissatisfied participant in the mission and also other member states, most notably Austria, Hungary, Greece had become considerably skeptical about the mission’s effects.⁵ Predominantly, the worries of a so-called ‘taxi effect’, i.e. that the presence of such mission and its capacities to search and rescue people at sea actually encourage migrants to attempt crossing the Mediterranean, were echoed across the EU. Since its creation in 2015, the mission saved

approximately 50 000 lives,⁶ and some viewed this number as a proof that the mission has counterproductive effects which only deepen the migration crisis, notably Austria’s Chancellor Kurz termed Operation Sophia a “*ticket to Europe*”.⁷

Yet, apart from criticism, member states could not agree on a compromise during 2019, and finally resorted to unilateral actions. Since January, Italy did not let the migrants disembark on its soil and ordered its ship to stay in port. In response, the other participating member states also withdrew their ships. As a result, Sophia had lost its crucial naval dimension over the year and became virtually ‘toothless’.⁸

Scaled-down ambitions and inherited problems

In this light, Operation Iriini, launched in March 2020, might be viewed as the compromise. Critical voices from Italy and other countries were heard and new mission, termed also as “*the Borrell solution*”, had been agreed upon.⁹ Its mandate had been

⁴ PIETZ, Tobias. Operation Iriini is wrong, for Libya and for sea rescues. In: *EU Observer* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/148307>

⁵ NIELSEN, Nikolaj. Austria and Hungary derail EU naval plan on Libya arms. *EU Observer* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://euobserver.com/migration/147817>

⁶ SUNDERLAND, Judith. EU Turns Its Back on Migrants in Distress. *Human Rights Watch* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/18/eu-turns-its-back-migrants-distress>

⁷ GRÜLL, Philipp. Austria and Germany: A harmonious couple, at odds on EU issues. *Euractiv* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/austria-and-germany-a-harmonious-couple-at-odds-on-eu-issues/>

2021-04-01]. Retrieved at:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/austria-and-germany-a-harmonious-couple-at-odds-on-eu-issues/>

⁸ Operation ‘Sophia’ is Given Six More Months Without Ships. *European Council on Refugees and Exiles* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://www.ecre.org/operation-sophia-is-given-six-more-months-without-ships/>

⁹ VARVELLI, Arturo. Reboot time: Operation Sophia and Italy’s tortuous Libya policy. *European Council on Foreign Relations* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_reboot_time_operation_sophia_and_italys_tortuous_libya_policy/



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stripped of the search and rescue tasks and the new mission's focus was set entirely on the Libya's arms embargo, specifically on enforcing it by using its aerial, satellite and maritime assets to track and inspect vessels suspected from carrying weapons. Given that, Irini's mandate had been designed very similarly to Operation Atalanta, another EU naval mission off the coast with Somalia.

Still, despite its scaled-down ambitions and attempts to focus only on the arms embargo, the migrant issue did not disappear. In May 2020, Malta decided to withdraw its support for the mission and threatened to continue vetoing Irini's spending, if the question of distribution of migrants and asylum seekers is not being resolved.¹⁰ With this course of action, the Maltese government signaled that both objectives are significantly interrelated and any EU mission in the Mediterranean must include this question. In other words, Malta pointed out that Irini inevitably inherited Sophia's unresolved problems.

Libya as 'proxy' war and the interests of Turkey

As has been already touched upon, the UN-imposed arms embargo on Libya is far from being fully implemented or widely accepted.

Since the NATO-supported overthrow of Ghaddafi in 2011, the civil war has become increasingly 'proxy' with various foreign countries heavily involved. Against General Haftar's forces, relying on noteworthy support from Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Russia, stands the EU- and UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Since its creation, its main supporter has been Turkey, sending not only arms and equipment, but allegedly also mercenaries to empower the GNA.¹¹ In comparison, the EU's support to the GNA is very limited. Member-states have different approaches to the situation, from Italy being a strong supporter of GNA to France which has, according to some sources, ties with Haftar's forces¹². The result is, inevitably, an incoherent Libyan policy of the bloc as a whole, focusing only on the arms embargo and UN-facilitated peace process.

In this light, Turkey's staunch opposition to Operation Irini comes as no surprise. Haftar enjoys a porous border with its ally Egypt, allowing for relatively unproblematic arms transfers immune from any embargo-enforcing missions. On the other hand, the only way for Turkey to smuggle weapons to Tripoli-based GNA is by the sea and air, which makes the circumventing of the UN

¹⁰ VELLA, Matthew. Malta vetoes Irini spending after withdrawing from EU naval mission. *Malta Today* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/europe/102202/malta_withdraw_eu_naval_mission_irini_veto_spending#.YGW7ZuhLjIW

¹¹ DEBRE, Isabel. Pentagon report: Turkey sent up to 3,800 fighters to Libya. *AP News* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-

01]. Retrieved at: <https://apnews.com/article/c339f71bf029f36b1091ee31c9f0171a>

¹² MEGERISI, Tarek. Spoiler alert: How Europe can save diplomacy in Libya. *European Council on Foreign Relations* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/spoiler-alert-how-europe-can-save-diplomacy-in-libya/>



embargo much more difficult. Thus, Turkey inevitably views any mission in the Mediterranean as biased and unfair, frequently disputing the legitimacy of the EU forces searching its vessels.¹³ Operation Irini is, after disputes with Greece and Cyprus, another tension point between EU and Turkey in the Mediterranean region.

The importance of engagement

The engagement of the EU in the Mediterranean is a complex and far from straightforward matter. From the institutional perspective, EU military missions, such as Sophia or Irini, might be seen arguably as a positive development, which strengthens the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and deepen the integration in this area. Moreover, the chaos in Libya continues to present a significant problem for the EU, and stability in the country is going to remain a priority in its Mediterranean policy. Thus, from the neighborhood policy perspective, the EU has to stay engaged. Irini also fulfills its role in strengthening the identity of EU as it enforces UN-imposed arms embargo, such engagement might help the EU to be seen a responsible and multilaterally-oriented player.

¹³ GARCIA, Alberto. Turkey again blocks EU monitoring of Libya arms embargo. *Atalayar* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://atalayar.com/en/content/turkey-again-blocks-eu-monitoring-libya-arms-embargo>

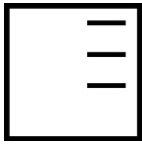
¹⁴ BRZOZOWSKI, Alexandra a Sarantis MICHALOPOULOS. Mandatory relocation still point of

The Migration Pact and realpolitik

However, there are multiple issues that continue to complicate effective engagement of the EU in the Mediterranean. This paragraph aims to present two recommendations that might help to alleviate them.

Firstly, internal divisions over the distribution of migrants remain at the core of any EU agreement on military engagement in this region. As has been shown with the case of Malta, the migrant cause is hard to sideline, and Irini, despite its best efforts to focus on arms embargo, continues to grapple with it. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, presented by the EU Commission last year and currently being discussed by the member-states, might remove this point of contention, or at least partly abate it. Despite the fact that the proposal rejects the controversial ‘quota’ relocation mechanism that Italy and other countries severely affected by migrant-crisis propose, it does introduce a certain tool for fairer migrant distribution – a mandatory solidarity clause. If accepted, it would mean that “*the countries that do not wish to host refugees, will take over the responsibility of returning migrants to their countries*”.¹⁴ Such agreement could reduce

contention in new EU migration pact. *Euractiv* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/mandatory-relocation-still-point-of-contention-in-new-eu-migration-pact/>



the enormous migrant burdens carried by the southern countries, and therefore make them less likely to oppose the EU missions in the Mediterranean and their inherent migrant-saving effects. In such scenario, Irini, or other military mission, could become a lot more effective and widely-accepted across the EU. To put it another way, the EU-wide agreement on the Pact can positively affect the discussion about Irini's unwanted 'taxi effect' and broaden the scope of possible action in the Mediterranean Sea.

Secondly, in this state of affairs, Turkey will remain a vocal opponent of any EU embargo-enforcing mission in foreseeable future. If both actors want to turn 'a fresh page' in their strained relationship, as officials from both sides has recently expressed, they will also need to cautiously address this issue in the negotiations and get closer to each other.¹⁵ For the EU, this means to act more strategically, or in other words, pursuit more actively its ultimate self-interest in Libya, i.e. the stability of country. The common support for GNA can serve as a stepping stone for both actors to cooperate more in Libya and possibly to improve their overall relationship as well. To achieve this, the EU should blend the multilaterally-oriented policy with more realpolitik approach reflecting the situation on the ground. This means acknowledging

the power position of Turkey in the Libyan civil war and formalizing its role in the post-conflict reconstruction. Such cooperative approach would give the EU a better control, give the EU more leverage over Turkey to stop its arms shipments, and generally keep Turkey's influence at bay. If such rapprochement is successful, the mandate of Irini will also need to be adjusted to cooperation with Turkey rather than to its containment.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the peace process in Libya, especially now after a fragile unity government has been approved, requires more attention from the international community, and particularly the EU, than before.¹⁶ This paper identifies two main aspects, an agreement on the Migration Pact and more realist foreign policy towards Turkey, which are essential to any successful mission in the Mediterranean. If pursued correctly, the EU engagement in the area can positively contribute to the peace process, help to stem the migrant crisis, and even improve the bloc's relations with Turkey.

¹⁵ AYDINTAŞBAŞ, Asli. Low expectations: A year of renewal for the EU-Turkey relationship. *European Council on Foreign Relations* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/low-expectations-a-year-of-renewal-for-the-eu-turkey-relationship/>

¹⁶ Libyan parliament approves unity government. *Deutsche Welle* [online]. [cit. 2021-04-01]. Retrieved at: <https://www.dw.com/en/libyan-parliament-approves-unity-government/a-56826306>



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