



7. Italy's Renewed Activism in the Wider Mediterranean: A Bet for the Future

by **Valeria Talbot**, **Lorenzo Fruganti**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has produced a shift in Italy's foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Over the last year and a half, Rome has significantly intensified its diplomatic activism within what is referred to, from an Italian vantage point, as the "wider Mediterranean" region. Indeed, the pressing need to reduce its dependence on Moscow's energy supplies pushed Italy to refocus on its Mediterranean neighbors, especially North African hydrocarbon producers, with renewed interest. Although the short-term objective of Rome's robust diplomacy is to secure alternative hydrocarbon resources, energy is only one dimension of a strategy that aims to relaunch Italy's role by combining long-standing security and economic interests with a novel, comprehensive approach.

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Since assuming her role as the new President of the Council of Ministers in October 2022, Giorgia Meloni has ardently articulated Italy's imperative to retake center stage in a geopolitically strategic region for its national interests,¹ after years of more inward-looking policies. How to do it remains a work in progress, with details set to be unveiled in early November at the fourth Italy-Africa summit in Rome. The element of novelty in Meloni's geopolitical vision for the southern neighborhood is the aspiration to link together three traditional dimensions of the Italian foreign policy in the wider Mediterranean: Italy's energy security and its aspiration to become an energy hub for Europe; the management of migration flows from Africa; and strengthened support for Africa's economic development. Although it may appear quite ambitious, the "Mattei Plan" – named after the founder of the Italian energy company, Enrico Mattei – has the merit of giving renewed centrality to this crucial region. Meloni and the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Antonio Tajani, have been proactively championing the Plan during their international visits, presenting it as "a virtuous model of cooperation and growth between the European Union and African nations",² one that proposes mutually beneficial partnerships. However, with its contents and instruments still undisclosed, the practical implementation of the Plan remains nebulous. Much will hinge on available financial resources and Italy's ability to act as a catalyst for a broader and concerted EU initiative in a region constantly marred by conflicts, authoritarianism, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and climate change.

PIVOTING ON ENERGY

In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, energy security has catalysed Italy's efforts in its foreign policy. In its search for alternative energy supplies, Rome has mainly leveraged consolidated economic relationships and pre-existing infrastructure, turning primarily to its traditional hydrocarbon suppliers in North Africa. Connected to Italy through the Trans-Mediterranean subsea gas pipeline, Algeria has emerged as the main pivot of the Italian government diversification strategy pursued by both former premier Mario Draghi and his successor Meloni. After the signature of several energy agreements between April and July 2022, Italy became Algeria's top gas customer. At the same time, the North African country replaced Russia as Rome's largest gas supplier, as it was in the period 1995-2012.³ Last year, Italy more than halved its Russian gas imports to 16% (plunging from 40% in 2021), while Algeria amplified its contribution to 34% of Italian gas imports, increasing further to 37% in the first quarter of 2023.⁴ Due to the expansion in hydrocarbon supplies (worth 18 billion euros), bilateral trade in 2022 reached 20.5 billion euros compared to 7.8 billion euros in 2021,⁵ positioning Algeria as Italy's second-largest trade partner in the wider Mediterranean after Turkey (25.6 billion euros).⁶

Following in Draghi's footsteps, Meloni strengthened the partnership with Algiers – making it the destination for her first bilateral mission in North Africa – through the signature of new agreements.⁷ These include the resumption of the Galsi project (a gas pipeline linking Algeria and Sardinia), a commitment to reducing



greenhouse gas emissions, and the launch of a feasibility study to build a new hydrogen pipeline. However, while Algeria has both the reserves and infrastructure to boost exports significantly, amplifying its production capacity will require substantial time and sizeable investment. In fact, the extra gas supply provided to Italy was not the result of an augmentation of domestic production but instead of the interruption of gas flows to Spain since October 2021. The start of production from Eni's South Berkine oil and gas project, announced in October 2022,⁸ to increase gas supply to Italy via the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline and LNG shipments represents a first, small step forward.

Besides Algeria, Italy's renewed activism extended to other key regional oil-producers, combining energy interests with an incisive diplomatic action that goes beyond immediate energy needs to encompass economic partnerships and cooperation on regional dossiers. In North Africa, Rome managed to secure additional LNG volumes from Egypt,⁹ capitalizing on Eni's longstanding presence in the country. The Italian energy company, involved in the offshore and onshore development of several hydrocarbon projects,¹⁰ discovered the super-giant offshore Zohr gas field in 2015 and holds a stake in Egypt's Damietta LNG plant. Eni's consolidated role was also crucial in Libya, where the protection of historical links and deep-rooted interests continues to rank high on the Italian foreign policy agenda, although Rome's diplomatic efforts towards stabilizing the country have yet to manifest tangible results. Last January, Eni and the Libyan

National Oil Corporation (NOC) signed a 25-year long gas contract worth \$8 billion to develop two new offshore gas fields.¹¹ This additional production, projected to commence in 2026, aims to mitigate the risk of volatility that has characterized energy supplies from Libya over the past decade. Nevertheless, the country's domestic political instability and precarious security environment pose a substantive challenge to the reinforcement of the Italian-Libyan partnership.¹²

Regarding Italy's engagement with the Gulf, Rome looked especially at the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. Sound economic relations have developed over time. Even in the Gulf, energy deals – signed by Eni with the Emirati National Oil Company (ADNOC), on one side, and with Qatar Energy, for the development of the North Field East project (the world's largest offshore natural gas field), on the other – form the backbone of bilateral cooperation that, ranging from energy transition to security and defense, has been upgraded to strategic partnerships. While immediate additional energy supplies from the Gulf to Italy are unlikely in the short-term, cooperation with the monarchies uncovers great potential for the longer term, particularly in sustainable development, considering Gulf governments' sizeable investment in green energy and low-carbon gases (such as green and blue hydrogen). Meloni's visit to the UAE last March mended fences with Abu Dhabi after years of tensions due to the Italian Parliament's decision to stop arms sales to the emirate in 2017. Today, the UAE¹³ stands as the primary destination for Italy's exports – amounting to

over 6 billion euros in 2022 – and is home to more than 600 Italian companies, both big groups and SMEs. For its part, Qatar¹⁴ is Rome's second-largest trade partner (after Saudi Arabia) within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with trade worth 9.3 billion euros in 2022, and is the largest recipient of Italian arms exports,¹⁵ followed by Egypt and Turkey. In addition to the energy, economic and defense fields, Meloni has drawn attention to the migration dossier in her meetings with Emirati and Qatari counterparts, highlighting another issue that firmly resides at the core of the Italian government's agenda. Significantly, the Italian prime minister is also eager to engage the wealthy Gulf monarchies in the economic development of African countries and the management of migration flows.

MIGRATION: IS ITALY ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

The Italian government has played an instrumental role in pushing through the negotiations that led to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by the EU and Tunisia in mid-July, which is meant to lay the groundwork for a strategic partnership in various fields, including macroeconomic stability, trade relations, and energy transition. Significantly, great emphasis was also put on the management of illegal migration. The North African country was the destination of a series of diplomatic visits of Prime Minister Meloni in little over a month, 6 June-16 July. This unprecedented engagement with Tunisia testifies to the renewed centrality of the Maghreb country for the Italian security interests in the wider Mediterranean region, although the timing of Rome's (and the EU's) endeavor does not appear to be optimal.

Headed towards an authoritarian regression since President Kaïs Saïed took power in the summer of 2021, hardly recovering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and struck by longstanding inflationary pressures worsened by the Russian war on Ukraine, Tunisia is today a country politically fragmented and on the brink of a financial collapse, as talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have been stalled for months. Since the outbreak of conflict in Eastern Europe, more than 120,000 migrants¹⁶ have arrived on Italian shores from Tunisia,¹⁷ making the Italian government particularly worried about a "powder keg" ready to explode.¹⁸ In September, the Italian Island of Lampedusa saw a record surge in migrant arrivals from North Africa, notably Tunisia.¹⁹

Italian concerns go hand in hand with other EU countries' disquiet over the Tunisian predicament, yet this common apprehension is, at this stage, far from turning into concrete convergence and collaborative efforts. The challenges in finding synergies at the European level seem to have emerged during the International Conference on Development and Migration held in Rome at the end of July.²⁰ Organized under the auspices of the Italian government, the summit culminated in the launch of the so-called "Rome Process",²¹ a "platform for collective action"²² to orchestrate a shared approach to migration policies. While the Conference brought together the leaders of almost all states on the southern shore of the wider Mediterranean, in addition to several EU member states, partners from the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, and heads of European institutions and international organizations (including the IMF), it did not see the participation of France



and Germany,²³ which are among the top EU destination countries for migrants arriving from Africa. Further proof of the dispersive nature of the EU action *vis-à-vis* the dossier on illegal migration is the range of initiatives that France and Germany, among the most active countries besides Italy on the diplomatic front to strengthen cooperation with Tunisia, have taken in recent months. Notably, the French and German Interior Ministers made a joint trip to the North African country in the second half of June,²⁴ just a few days after the visit of Prime Minister Meloni, the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and the President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen.

During a press statement held in Tunis after the MoU's signature,²⁵ Meloni argued that "the partnership with Tunisia has to be considered a model for building new relations with North African neighbors". The agreement has nonetheless drawn some criticism both domestically and at the international level. In addition to the size of the assistance package on migration envisioned by the MoU (€105 million, of which around €67 million²⁶ were disbursed recently),²⁷ major concerns²⁸ linger about the lack of strong conditions on the respect of the rule of law in Tunisia – where the situation has been steadily deteriorating since Saïed's power grab. Questions also arise around the fact that funding for migration management will improve Tunisia's ability (or eagerness) to handle the phenomenon as efficiently as humanely. The outright refusal of Saïed to make the country the "coast guard"²⁹ of Europe and his rejection of the first tranche of EU financial aid,³⁰ combined with the recent expulsions of sub-Saharan Africans

by Tunisian authorities, seem to highlight further the numerous hurdles in the emerging new framework of Italy's, and the EU's, cooperation with Tunisia and other North African countries. Besides, several experts and human rights organizations have argued that this partnership with Tunisia might risk replicating the problems that stemmed from similar agreements concluded with Libya in the past.³¹

In the wake of the MoU's signature, Meloni's government has relentlessly forged ahead with numerous attempts to put migration at the core of European attention, engaging as many EU member states as possible in the quest for convergence on the subject matter. For instance, during the 10th EU Med9 summit that took place in Malta at the end of September,³² the Italian prime minister emphasized the urgent need for a common European approach. A few days earlier, Meloni, Von der Leyen and the EU Commissioner responsible for migration, Ylva Johansson, carried out a diplomatic mission in Lampedusa, which culminated in the presentation of a 10-point plan to curb irregular flows and provide immediate EU assistance to Italian authorities.³³

THE MATTEI PLAN: A CORNERSTONE FOR A MORE CONCERTED EU ACTION?

While Italy has pioneered the negotiations that led to the signature of the recent MoU with Tunisia and taken the lead in the Rome Process, debates about a common EU migration policy and the balance between solidarity and sovereignty are still ongoing in Brussels. To date, migration remains one of the most divisive

issues within the EU. The High Representative for the EU, Josep Borrell,³⁴ recently stated that migration is “a bigger divide for the European Union. And it could be a dissolving force for the European Union.” It is true that without a response at the European level, there appears to be no solution to a structural issue that EU governments too often tend to deal with as an emergency.

The Italian activism in the wider Mediterranean has brought renewed attention, both within the EU and internationally, to the migration dossier and the numerous challenges stemming from this highly volatile region. However, the efficacy and extent to which the Italian government will maximize its diplomatic efforts remain to be seen. The recent and unprecedented momentum in the relationships between Meloni and French President Emmanuel Macron on the migration issue may signify a preliminary stride towards a broader, although difficult, convergence among EU member states or the most like-minded among them. Indeed, for Italy to achieve geopolitical prominence in the wider Mediterranean, synergies with its European partners are crucial. In this respect, bolstering cooperation and exploring alternative flexible formats, such as the EU3/EU4 – modelled on the negotiating platform adopted for the Joint Comprehensive Action Plan (JCPOA) with Iran, could be valuable paths forward. This approach garners particular relevance when considering that, in the present changing geopolitical environment, global players like China and Russia are extending their influence in the region amidst an ongoing diversification

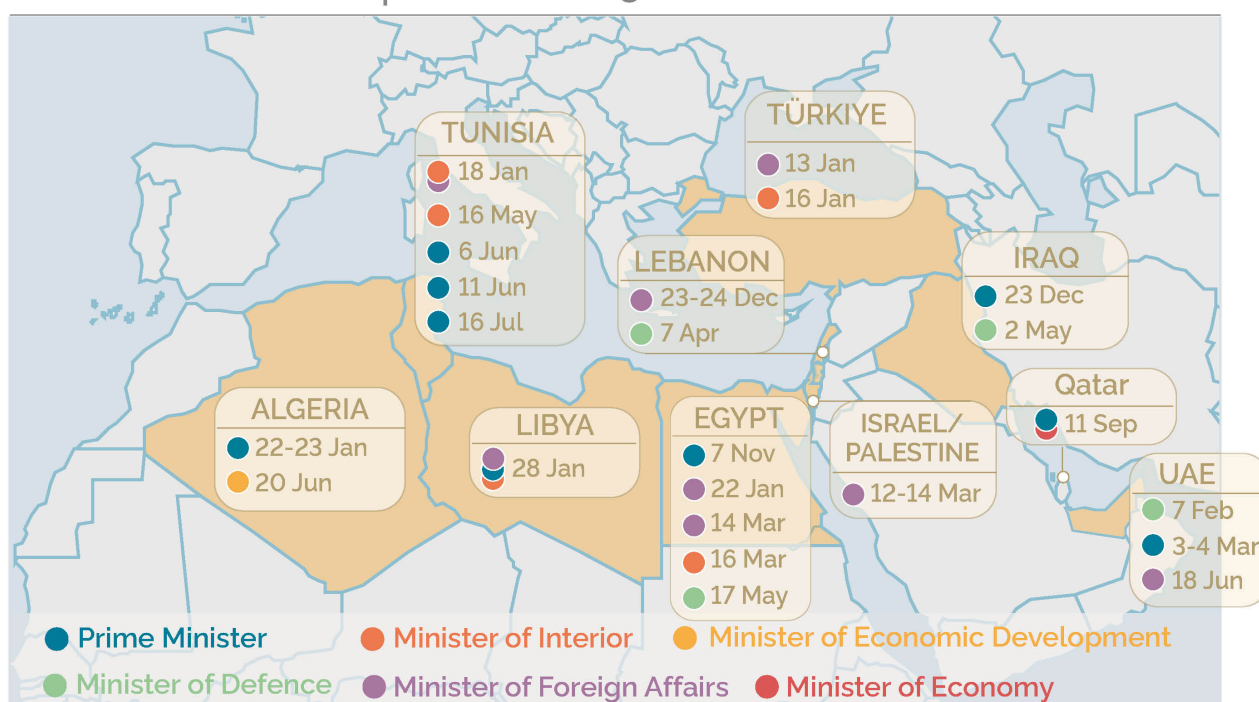
of partnerships by regional actors. Against such a complex backdrop, the European states might regain a competitive role by acting within common frameworks and policies. In this regard, could the Mattei Plan serve as the cornerstone of a more effective EU concerted action?

Beyond the EU and the region, the Italian government extended its diplomatic outreach to the United States. During her inaugural visit to Washington in late July, Meloni also managed to get US President Joe Biden’s support for the Mattei Plan.³⁵ In an era of reorientation of the US strategic interests, the White House backing for Italy’s “new look” could be an additional asset for Rome’s role in the affairs of the wider Mediterranean.³⁶



Italy's diplomatic activism in the wider Mediterranean

High-level missions of Meloni's government in the region
(November 2022-September 2023)



Source:
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