



Italy's deal to stem flow of people from Libya in danger of collapse

Number of people crossing Mediterranean rises again amid power struggle between rival factions in Libyan human-trafficking port

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A key pillar of the Italian government's effort to stem the politically toxic issue of people crossing the Mediterranean from Libya to southern Italy is in danger of collapse as a result of a bloody power struggle in the key Libyan port of Sabratha, the epicentre of human trafficking to Italy.

The Italian prime minister, Paolo Gentiloni, had hailed an 80% drop in the number of migrants reaching Italy in July and August, but the number of migrants suddenly started rising again last month as the Sabratha power struggle unfolded, suggesting rival gangs, fighting for control of the profitable business, may not prove reliable partners for the Italians.

The strategy to stem the flow of people from Libya - largely masterminded by the Italian interior minister, Marco Minniti - is seen by the governing Democratic party (PD) as critical to its fortunes in elections next spring.

The PD is under assault from an array of anti-migrant populist parties which, if victorious, would wreck pro-European leaders' plans for a stronger, more integrated EU.

The summer fall in migrants reaching Italy from Libya was attributed to many factors, including a better and more aggressive, Italian-trained Libyan coastguard turning back 60% of ships leaving the coastline.

But the Italians had also reached an understanding with militia to clamp down on smuggling in Sabratha, a town 40 miles (70km) west of Tripoli that is seen as the smugglers' main port of departure.



Members of a Libyan migration force man a checkpoint in Sabratha, Libya's main departure point for migrants hoping to reach Europe. Photograph: Mahmud Turkia/AFP/Getty Images

There have also been repeated reports of a clandestine deal struck by the interior minister with a powerful 500-strong smuggling gang in Sabratha, the Amu brigade, led by Abu Dabbashi, also known as the Uncle.

The Dabbashi clan, controlling three main detention camps for migrants in the area, reportedly agreed to shelve its profitable business in return for political status and cash. The Dabbashi militia has been repeatedly cited in UN and European government reports as one of the linchpins of the smuggling business.

But the deal appears to have sparked a wider power struggle in the city, notably between Dabbashi on one side and the counter Isis-operations room and rival al-Wabi militia on the other. Ironically, all the groups are on the payroll of ministries of Libya's UN-backed government in Tripoli.

In the past three weeks 26 people have been killed, 170 wounded and thousands displaced from the city centre. To the alarm of the Italian government, the number of migrants reaching Italy from Libya also suddenly started to creep up again, suggesting the deal was crumbling.

The agreement has also been criticised by Gen Khalifa Haftar, the increasingly powerful leader of the Libyan national army, a figure now courted in both Rome and Paris as they seek a political solution to end six years of chaos that has exhausted and impoverished Libyans. The west has tended to regard Haftar as anti-democratic and brutal, but he has recently been courted by the Italians despite allegations he has ordered his troops to commit war crimes.

Haftar is trying to present himself to the Italians as the man who can bring the trafficking under control, and said in a weekend interview with Corriere Della Sera: “For the control of the borders in the south, I can provide manpower, but the Europeans must send aid, drones, helicopters, night-vision goggles and vehicles.”

He said it was a mistake for the Italians to strike any deal with the militia to curb the flow of migrants, saying the Italian government was in danger of being deceived. “Paying them means entering a vicious circle. Tomorrow they will fight one another for the rewards and then ask for more money. It will lead to infinite blackmail.”

The Italian government insists it has only given aid to the UN-backed government in Tripoli or to the Sabratha council, but not directly to any militia.

Matteo Villa, the head of the migration programme at the Italian thinktank Ispi, said the recent upsurge in migrants may be caused either by the Dabbashi militia losing its grip on the city, or because of an attempt by the militia to send a message to Rome that it can turn the flow of migrants on and off like a tap.

Minniti is struggling to mollify Italian public opinion, which is furious that 600,000 migrants have reached Italy from north Africa since 2014. More than 12,000 have died trying. The latest figures show total arrivals in Italy to 21 September 2017 were 103,318, 21.5% lower than reported for the same period of 2016 (131,683).

The UNHCR estimates that 80% of those reaching Italy are economic migrants, and therefore due for deportation because they are not eligible for asylum.

An Ipsos poll this week showed 70% of Italians agree with the statement that immigration from Libya is too high, and has damaged public services.

Villa said there were concerns that a reduction in the number of boats leaving Libyan ports, combined with the successful blockade being mounted by the Libyan coastguard, is producing a backlog of migrants trapped in inhumane Libyan detention camps.

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