

16-18 November 2022: IRINI OPCDR visit to Tripoli

Meetings with PM Serraj, MFA Siala, MoI Bashaga, MoD Namroush as well as the Libyan Special Committee.

General overview

The visit to Libya was organised and led by the Head of EUDEL Libya, Ambassador José SABADEL, who addressed the main political issues during each meeting. The aim was to present, among other issues, the whole European contribution to the peace process in Libya in terms of security.

The visit took place at an extremely sensitive moment, where the interests pursued both by local actors and their international supporters need to re-position themselves within the frame of the ongoing Libyan Political Dialogue in Tunis.

In this context, the main objective of EUNAVFOR MED delegation was to support the EU political level in letting the GNA re-gain the trust toward the EU, after the negative stance that the GNA has been perpetrating since the starts of the most recent crisis (April 2019) and the EUNAVFOR MED IRINI inception, with the aim to resume the task to train and monitor the LCG&N as soon as possible. In this regards the purpose was also to meet the Libyan Special Committee (LSC).

During the visit, the delegation was hosted within EUBAM Libya premises in Palm City (west of Tripoli). EUBAM Libya hosting and support (very much appreciated) occurred within the framework of the Administrative Arrangement that was officially signed in this occasion, on the day of arrival in Tripoli, 16 November.

Activities carried out

The first day of the visit, the EU delegation had firstly the opportunity to meet UNHCR and IOM representatives that openly commended EUNAVFOR MED job as well as the impressive improvement of the LCG&N that is evidenced by the number of rescues carried out in the last two years in its Search and Rescue Region (SRR), despite the ongoing conflict, the COVID 19, the critical conditions of the detention centres ashore as well as very poor equipment available (small Patrol Vessels unsuitable to host more than 30 people onboard), inadequate salaries of the personnel and sometime lack of fuel to run their ships at sea. UNHCR and IOM representatives recognised the different performances between the LCG&N and the GACS (General Administration for Coastal Security) that operates under the Ministry of Interior. The LCG&N is well trained (thanks to EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA) but poorly equipped while the GACS has better ships at its disposal but not enough training to properly operate at sea.

The same day the delegation met also the Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and UN Resident and Humanitarian coordinator, Mr Yacoub EL HILLO, with whom it was possible to discuss about the perspectives of the ongoing Libyan Political Dialogue in Tunis, and on the humanitarian situation in the country.

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The meetings with the Libyan political Authorities were mainly held on 17 November with PM Serraj, MoD Namroush, MoI Bashaga, while on 18 November the delegation had the opportunity to meet MFA Siyala.

During the various meeting, IRINI OPCDR, Admiral AGOSTINI, mainly focussed on the mandate, role, boundaries and results of the Operation, highlighting its neutral, impartial and balanced nature in addition to the fact that IRINI is the only actor that is helping the UN in the implementation of the arms embargo on Libya.

The PM and MFA expressed their usual disappointment toward operation IRINI with a slightly moderate posture while recognising – to certain extent – the results achieved by the operation as a testimony of its impartiality but underlining – once more – the need to be more effective in the monitoring activities related to air and land arms trafficking routes.

The MoI received without commenting the information about IRINI, showing only interest in the activities on counter-terrorism and those carried out by EUBAM Libya.

The meeting with the MoD was held with the presence of the Chief of the Navy, Admiral AHBOULIA and the Chief of LCG Operation, Commodore MASAUD, who is also the Head of the LSC.

The MoD adopted a very assertive and vocal narrative in expressing strong criticism mainly against the EU [*“never supported the GNA when it was under aggression by the Haftar forces and additionally some EU member States provided support to the aggressor in terms of means and intelligence”*] and, to some point, also against IRINI [*“not enough impartial”*], despite the clear evidences proving the contrary, presented to him by the IRINI OPCDR.

On the possibility to resume the training and monitoring of the LCG&N, drawing from his negative stance against the EU and IRINI, the MoD stated that *“this will be very difficult unless the EU shows a clear change of attitude with concrete step forwards in favour of the GNA”*. While not closing completely the doors for such development, the MoD made a strong link between the provision of equipment for the LCG&N (mainly more performing patrol vessels and aircraft for SAR) with the resuming of the training activity. He alluded to the fact that *“it is relatively easy to get training by someone”* more difficult is to receive concrete support in terms of equipping. In his stance, the MoD underlined the fact that the Patrol Vessels currently available to the LCG&N (referring to those provided in the past years by the Italian Guardia di Finanza and Coast Guard) are old, in need of thorough maintenance and mostly conceived for Law Enforcement tasks rather than SAR. Additionally, stressing the fact that the LCG&N has always done its utmost to fulfil its legal obligation in the Libyan SRR, he lamented the fact that LCG&N risk to be prosecuted in case of serious incidents when rescuing hundreds of people at sea with Patrol Vessels that can barely host 20 or 30 people onboard. To avoid future incidents, he evoked the possibility to halt the LCG&N activity in case of massive migration flows from Libya unless they receive more appropriate Vessels.

The MoD referred also to the potential EU support in solving the situation related to one Libyan Frigate (Al Hani) that has been blocked in Malta since 2013 due to the UN arms

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embargo. This ship could be very useful for Law Enforcement activities but also for SAR, the MoD said.

Finally, the MoD also lamented the slow pace of progression of the setting up of the Libyan MRCC promoted by the EU (an interim solution should be provided by Italy in few months within SIBMIL initiative).

The Mod in conclusion stated that *“LCG&N have different possibility to be trained by EU MSs or other “entities” so, for the moment, if the training does not come with an EU real commitment there is no need to receive it from IRINP”*.

Meetings with the LSC

The two meetings – more technical – with the LSC (appointed by the MoD on 6 September 2020 specifically to deal with Operation IRINI and led by the LCG&N Commodore MASAUD), held on the 17 and 18, showed the usual dichotomy between the Libyan political and military levels as the latter confirmed its openness and will to continue the training of the LCG&N under the same successful framework undertaken during the former Operation SOPHIA. In doing so, however, the need to overcome the current political stalemate in place was underlined in order to reach the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding, necessary to resume the training activity. The MoU itself was briefly discussed since, despite the fact that it had been sent two weeks earlier, no in depth analysis had been conducted by the LSC. In this regard, the LSC engaged in providing their comments within the next few weeks. During the exchanges, EUNAVFOR MED proposed a possible way forward to start some urgent training activities even without the signature of the MoU (waiting for it) and relying on the same legal framework in place during Operation SOPHIA. This was proposed, for instance, to support the LCG&N need of having trained MRCC operators when the aforementioned MRCC interim solution will be provided. The LSC seemed to be interested to this possible option.

During the meetings, Commodore MASAUD underlined the vital importance to receive more appropriate Vessels. Specifically, he mentioned the possibility of receiving naval units of adequate size and respectful of international safety standards for rescues at sea, already destined for decommissioning by some European Coast Guards. These units may be available before the massive flow of migrants resumes during the summer season with just a few months of maintenance and upgrades.

However, he added, a future plan for acquisition of new vessels is necessary anyhow to grand the LCG&N the capability to patrol and conduct law enforcement activities 24/24 within their waters of responsibilities.

Conclusion

All in all, it can be assessed that from a political point of view the visit to Tripoli was quite positive. First face to face contacts with the GNA leadership and the LSC were established in a frank and open atmosphere. And this is not little, considering the peculiarity of the interlocutors.

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It goes without saying however that the situation is far from being solved but – at least – some step forwards were achieved. It appears now more evident than ever that to achieve the desired goal of the resumption of the training and monitoring of the LCG&N, the EU should engage more not only politically but also within the overall capacity building initiatives (e.g. provision of equipment through EU actions, such as the European Peace Facility when adopted, and/or through Member States bilateral initiatives).