

# Italian intelligence faces new challenges in Libya and Iraq

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When Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi took office in 2014, he had to appoint an undersecretary for intelligence. Marco Minniti, already in that position during the previous administration, was sworn in. Despite being an old friend of former PM Massimo D'Alema (1998-2000), Renzi acknowledged his reliability. That is why in February 2015, Renzi chose Minniti to deliver a confidential message to Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi in Cairo, regarding the strategy against Daesh (Islamic State) in North Africa<sup>1</sup>.

## Critical interests in Libya

Another position to be filled was the director of the foreign intelligence agency (AISE). Prime Minister Renzi nominated Alberto Manenti, a senior officer from the organization's human intelligence and operations division. It is well-known that the Italian intelligence service, due to its historical connection, is probably the most experienced in Libya. In fact, Manenti was even born in Tarhuna near Tripoli (where his parents moved during the Italian colonization) and lived there for 17 years, until Colonel Gaddafi took power<sup>2</sup>. Manenti knows the current scenario pretty well.

Italian interests in Libya are critical, especially due to Eni oil plants, the migrant crisis and the Daesh presence in proximity to Sicily. Eni, the Italian oil and gas company, has much to lose in the Libyan chaos. It holds there 13,000 square kilometers of developed oil fields, which produce 300,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day<sup>3</sup>. Eni also continues to make significant offshore gas discoveries in Libya and Egypt.

During a meeting at the NATO base of Sigonella, U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter asked Defense Minister Roberta Pinotti to increase Rome's commitment in Libya and Iraq, with frontline troops and airstrikes against the terrorists. But the Italian government remains cautious and prefers to deploy only instructors. The urgency to support foreign intelligence with operatives pushed Renzi to order new provisions, which allow the military abroad to act occasionally under the direct command of the intelligence, with the legal immunity guaranteed to spies<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Libia, missione del governo italiano al Cairo: Minniti da al Sisi*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 19 February 2015

<sup>2</sup> E. Remondino, *Ministro e cadetto Gli albori di Manenti neo capo delle spie*, remocontro.it, 30 April 2014

<sup>3</sup> [www.eni.com/it\\_IT/eni-mondo/pdf/libia-attivita.pdf](http://www.eni.com/it_IT/eni-mondo/pdf/libia-attivita.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> M. Galluzzo, *Libia, missioni dirette dai servizi E sarà il premier a dare il via*, Corriere della Sera, 2 March 2016

Since February 2016, three teams from AISE, each numbering a dozen men, have been deployed in the Tripoli and Fezzan regions. According to Daniele Raineri, a journalist at daily newspaper *Il Foglio*, a small unit of Italian special forces from the 9th Parachutist Assault Regiment Col Moschin was committed in reconnaissance operations close to the Tunisian border, between the towns of Zuwara and Sabratha<sup>5</sup>. The reason is that the Mellitah Oil and Gas Complex stands in the middle. It is the main Eni facility in Western Libya.

Near Mellitah, on July 20, 2015, four Italian employees of the company Bonatti were kidnapped. On March 3, 2016, two of them were killed in Sabratha, during a shootout between the local militia and a Tunisian jihadist group<sup>6</sup>. A day later, the other two escaped and reached Tripoli. After that, Renzi formally authorized the deployment of 50 commandos from the Col Moschin and other special forces, some in Tripoli with the al-Sarraj government and others in Benghazi with General Haftar troops, as leaked by the daily *Repubblica*<sup>7</sup>. On May 30 Defence Minister Pinotti confirmed these units are under the command of AISE, allowed by the Renzi's decree.

Another Italian, the arms dealer Franco Giorgi, 72, was imprisoned one year ago, while delivering \$28.5 million of weapons to the Zintan militia, a violation of the UN embargo<sup>8</sup>. Giorgi is probably being held in the village of Gharyan, near Tripoli.

What is more, this short coastal section is also the hub for human trafficking to Europe. The Mellitah Complex has been attacked several times, most recently on January 12, 2016, by trucks with machine guns. Back in February 2015, during heavy clashes among rival militias, the warship San Giorgio was nearby, carrying Italian marines from the Comsubin special forces, ready to defend the facility<sup>9</sup>.

Daesh is expanding from the city of Sirte, but also at the crossroads of Libya, Tunisia and Algeria, the area under Italian surveillance. In January 2016 Abu Yusuf al-Anabi, a leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), threatened the West and “the Italian general who now rules in Tripoli”, referring to General Paolo Serra, the UN military advisor, in charge of planning a safety zone around Tripoli, which will be protected by Italian and British troops<sup>10</sup>. Actually on April 27 the Israeli website

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<sup>5</sup> D. Raineri, *Esclusiva: una manciata di Forze speciali italiane è in Libia*, *Il Foglio*, 3 December 2015

<sup>6</sup> G. Bianconi, *Sequestro degli italiani in Libia, le bugie e i depistaggi*, *Corriere della Sera*, 10 March 2016

<sup>7</sup> *Repubblica: soldati italiani in Libia con Haftar*, *Askaneews*, 24 May 2016

<sup>8</sup> *Timori per le sorti di un 72enne italiano prigioniero in Libia da un anno*, *La Stampa*, 11 March 2016

<sup>9</sup> I. Lombardo, *Gli incursori della Marina nelle acque vicino alla Libia*, *La Stampa*, 28 February 2015

<sup>10</sup> *Al Qaeda minaccia l'Italia: “Avete occupato Tripoli, ve ne pentirete”*, *La Stampa*, 14 January 2016

of intelligence Debkafile claimed that a convoy of Italian marines and British special forces was traveling along with Libyan militias from the city of Misrata toward Sirte, when it was ambushed by Daesh and suffered casualties<sup>11</sup>. No one else has corroborated this alleged clash and the Italian Defence Ministry has firmly denied it.

## **New appointments**

By the end of April, General Mario Parente was appointed as the new director of the domestic intelligence agency, AISI. Parente was AISI deputy director and previously the commander of Carabinieri Special Operations Group (ROS). Prime Minister Renzi and Manenti already started to dismiss other senior officials from their agencies. There is an unconfirmed report about the appointment into the foreign intelligence of Colonel Sergio De Caprio, who arrested the Mafia boss Toto Riina<sup>12</sup>.

Renzi also nominated his new military advisor, which was vacant since October 2015. The appointee is General Carmine Masiello, former commander of the special forces 185th Paratrooper RAO (Reconnaissance and Target Acquisition) Regiment<sup>13</sup>. In 2011 Masiello, while leading the Nato Regional Command West in Afghanistan, sent a controversial letter to the Italian Joint Staff to criticize the conduct of AISE operatives and accused them of ineptitude<sup>14</sup>. In fact, a series of failures occurred in the country. In 2007 the NCO and intelligence agent Lorenzo D'Auria was shot dead by friendly fire of British commandos while he was held hostage by Talibans<sup>15</sup>. In 2008 Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence dismantled the Italian network of informers in the tribal areas and in 2010 AISE no. 2 in Kabul, Pietro Antonio Colazzo, was killed in a hotel by insurgents<sup>16</sup>. Masiello's accusations might influence the relations with some of the current intelligence officers.

Prime Minister Renzi also planned to nominate the IT businessman Marco Carrai as responsible for cyber security, but it is unclear in which governmental body. The opposition criticized Renzi's decisions on special forces and cyber security, denouncing what they saw as a concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister.

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<sup>11</sup> *Italian-British force ambushed by IS in Libya*, debka.com, 29 April 2016

<sup>12</sup> *Guerra tra 007, interviste Gasparri: repulisti all'Aise*, globalist.it, 1 February 2016

<sup>13</sup> L. Ventura, *Carmine Masiello, ecco la biografia del nuovo consigliere militare di Palazzo Chigi*, formiche.net, 30 April 2016

<sup>14</sup> C. Antonini, *Afghanistan, dieci anni bastano. L'esercito accusa i 'suoi' servizi*, Liberazione, 7 October 2011

<sup>15</sup> *È morto Lorenzo D'Auria, l'agente del Sismi ferito in Afghanistan*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 4 October 2007

<sup>16</sup> *Colazzo è caduto da eroe con la pistola in pugno*, La Stampa, 20 February 2010

## Threats in Iraq

Iraq is another critical theater for Italian intelligence. Trevi, an Italian construction group, won a \$296 million contract to repair the Mosul Dam<sup>17</sup>. It is seriously damaged and in the event of collapse, a flood could hit Baghdad and the other cities downstream on the Tigris River, including Mosul. Renzi announced Italy will deploy 450 heavily armed troops (mostly from the Garibaldi Brigade) to defend the dam and the workers<sup>18</sup>. Few dozens of Italian operatives are already there to pave the way for the intervention and to build the facilities<sup>19</sup>.

Counting the troops to be sent to the dam, in addition to the instructors already in Baghdad and Erbil, Italy will end up deploying more than 1,000 soldiers in Iraq. The Trevi company estimated that it will take two years to renovate the dam<sup>20</sup>.

Daesh is not the only threat to Italian troops. A faction led by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr opposes Italian involvement in the repair of the dam. Hakim al-Zamili, chairman of the Security and Defense Committee in the Iraqi parliament, called the Italian presence unreasonable. Minister of Water Resources Mohsin Al-Shammari said there is no need for Italian forces<sup>21</sup>. Both politicians are members of the Sadrism movement.

Al-Sadr said he would not accept any “occupation forces of all nationalities” on the issue of the dam. The cleric warned Italy that it would be considered blatant interference and he threatened to end it “in our own way”<sup>22</sup>. This statement poses a serious threat, as in 2004, the Italian army confronted the Sadrism militias for 18 hours, in Nasiriyah, during the so-called “battle of the bridges”<sup>23</sup>.

Italy faces new challenges which entail new military and intelligence tools, such as a proactive role in counterterrorism with special forces and human intelligence. Italian national security concerns the common interest of EU and NATO partners, therefore Renzi will pursue the stability in the region with a leading role and a stronger intelligence effort.

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<sup>17</sup> *Diga di Mosul, firmato il contratto tra ditta Trevi e Iraq. Il valore è di 273 milioni di euro*, Huffington Post, 2 March 2016

<sup>18</sup> *Renzi: 450 soldati italiani a difesa della diga di Mosul*, La Stampa, 15 December 2015

<sup>19</sup> G. Gaiani, *Truppe italiane a difesa della diga di Mosul*, analisidifesa.it, 16 December 2015

<sup>20</sup> *Missione di due anni per gli italiani alla diga di Mosul*, analisidifesa.it, 9 May 2016

<sup>21</sup> G. Gaiani, *Dubbi e perplessità sulla missione italiana alla diga di Mosul*, analisidifesa.it, 29 December 2015

<sup>22</sup> *Italiani a Mosul? Ira di Muqtada al Sadr: Iraq violato da tutti*, Askaneews, 21 December 2015

<sup>23</sup> J. Cole, *Italians Battle Sadrists In Nasiriyah*, juancole.com, 6 August 2004