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The Crisis in Libya Exposes a Litany of Failed EU Policies

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Two weeks after the start of Muammar Qadhafi's violent crackdown on his people, the European Union on Monday agreed to a set of sanctions to be applied against Libya. The sanctions include:

- A ban on 26 individuals, including Qadhafi and his closest family, from entering the EU;
- A freezing of Qadhafi's assets and those of his family and 10 other persons; and
- An arms embargo.¹

The sanctions, however, do not include a ban on the sales of Libyan oil to Europe, the proceeds of which fund Qadhafi's grip on power.

The EU's Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy, Stefan Fule, has launched an unprecedented attack on the EU's regional policy, stating that Brussels has not defended democracy in the region.² He has also stated that Brussels did not move fast enough to impose sanctions against Libya.³ Fule is right that the EU's slow response to yet another humanitarian crisis on its doorstep demonstrates the failure of several EU programs, and Qadhafi's continuing crackdown exposes the fallacy of a single EU foreign policy and has rendered hollow Brussels' assertions that the Lisbon Treaty has created a more able and competent EU.

David Cameron Leads the Way. Several national governments in Europe issued swift responses to the Libyan crisis. The United Kingdom, France, Finland, and Germany reacted strongly to Qadhafi's onslaught, announcing their support for demonstrators and placing restraints on the Libyan regime.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has emerged as Europe's unofficial leader on this issue and was among the first to call for Libya to be suspended from the U.N. Human Rights Council. He also ordered all Libyan assets held in the U.K. frozen and, together with Germany, is pushing the EU to implement a 60-day oil import embargo on Libya to cut off the regime's funds.

Other nations, however—most notably Italy—have soft-peddled their response to the Libyan crisis. Despite claims that the Lisbon Treaty would produce a single European foreign actor on the global stage, the EU does not have a clear voice when it comes to key foreign policy matters. Crucially, Brussels has also failed to produce clear policies on the issues of human rights and democracy promotion—areas where the EU should be succeeding.

Failing EU Programs. The EU has presided over a slew of failed policy initiatives to promote human rights and democratic reforms in Libya and other parts of North Africa and the Middle East. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), of which Libya is an observer member, was introduced to promote economic integration and democratic reform across southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.

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It has categorically failed to make progress in these areas. The UfM's secretary-general, Ahmad Khalef Masadeh, resigned unexpectedly on January 26.

The European Neighbourhood Policy, whose financial cooperation with Mediterranean countries stretches to €843 million in 2011, was designed for the purposes of “building upon a mutual commitment to common values (democracy and human rights, rule of law, good governance, market economy principles and sustainable development).”⁴ Libya-specific projects have received funding from a number of other EU programs as well, including the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, the AENEAS program, and the Thematic Program on Migration and Asylum. Under the EU's National Indicative Programme for Libya, the EU had allocated €60 million in aid for Tripoli for 2011–2013.

The Way Forward. Cameron has called on Brussels to cut off aid to countries that violate democratic values: “There are very few solid examples of progress. We have continued to pour money into Egypt and other countries in the region, with very little conditionality applied. We need radical change. The EU has got to be willing to turn the tap off if we don't see results.”⁵

There are too many EU external aid programs with too few positive results. In order to further isolate the Libyan regime and ensure that Brussels' democracy-promotion resources are not wasted in the future, the EU should:

- Enforce an indefinite economic embargo on Libya until Qadhafi steps down;

- Work with Italy, Malta, and other nations on a strategy to manage refugee flows that respects national sovereignty;
- Wind up the UfM and the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly;
- Simplify the EU budget so that all financial assistance programs for human rights and democracy promotion in individual recipient nations are transparent; and
- Reform the European Neighbourhood Programme, linking aid with verifiable improvements in human rights in recipient nations.

Root-and-Branch Review. The EU has presided over one of the least effective aid programs in recent years. Its bloated bureaucracy and convoluted budgets have proved ineffective in promoting human rights and have not resulted in positive engagement with Europe's neighbors. It is time for the EU to return to the drawing board.

When EU Foreign Minister Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Fule outline yet another Mediterranean strategy paper on March 16, they should announce a root-and-branch review of EU aid programs. The EU needs a new grand strategy for promoting democracy in its neighborhood—one that is both verifiable and cost-effective.

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