

Egypt: In Deep Waters

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by Hafsa Halawa

In June 2020, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made a public visit to inspect the preparation of troops at the Sidi Barrani airbase in Egypt towards the Libyan border, announcing publicly that Egyptian troops were to be mobilised and deployed to Libya. For the first time in over 40 years, Egypt appeared to be organising and preparing its expeditionary forces for direct intervention into a military conflict, a neighbouring country at that. Egypt's call to war came two weeks after President al-Sisi had called for a ceasefire in Libya. These high profile shifts between peace and war by the Egyptian President not only illustrate the fluid dynamics in Libya and their impact on Egypt, but Libya's geo-political importance to Egypt and its willingness to overturn decades of established foreign policy as a result of developments across its border.

Egypt has played a critically important role in Libya's modern history. Over the course of the last century people and ideas have migrated across both sides of the desert border. During the Italian occupation of Libya in the early 20th century, thousands of Libyans sought refuge in Egypt, establishing a community of prominent political exiles who would return to Libya after its independence in 1951. Ideas travelled across borders too. Gaddafi himself, who arrived in power in 1969, took inspiration and modeled his early political thinking on Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab Nationalism.

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Relations between Egypt and Libya throughout Gaddafi's 42 year reign were complex, ranging from an attempted Pan Arab union - the Federation of Arab Republic (including Syria) in 1972 to a four day border war between the two in 1977. By the 1980's, despite early tensions with the Hosni Mubarak relations between Egypt and Libya were less erratic. Gaddafi had turned his back on his early Pan Arab ideas, and began instead to turn towards Pan Africanism in the late 1990s, and later a rapprochement with the West in 2003 following the Iraq war.



Hosni Mubarak, 1980s

The Arab Spring in 2011 would radically reshape the political trajectory of both countries. Egypt's January 25th revolution culminated with the toppling of its powerful long time leader in Hosni Mubarak on February 11th, days before Libya's own revolution was sparked in Benghazi. Egypt in this period, too consumed by managing the aftermath of its own revolution to shape the outcome of its neighbour resulted in its foreign policy towards Libya being on autopilot throughout 2011. Despite Cairo being a hub of anti Gaddafi dissidents and pro Gaddafi figures in 2011, Egypt waited until the fall of Tripoli on August 22nd 2011 to recognise Libya's newly established National Transitional Council. Following the election of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in 2012, Libya's authorities deposited 2 billion U.S. Dollars to the Egyptian central bank

in order to stave off an economic crisis, in addition to attempting to arrest Ahmad Gaddaf al Dam, Gaddafi's cousin and former special envoy to Egypt.

Egyptian Foreign Policy Since 2013

Cairo's aggressive foreign policy towards Libya began to take form following President al-Sisi's rise to power. An important component of its foreign policy and threat perception began to be shaped by its own experience with the Egyptian revolution and the military's takeover that followed in June 2013. The new tools of the Arab Spring such as popular protest, organised civil society, and a pervasive democratic discourse were viewed as an existential threat to the staying power of the Egyptian regime. It is within this context of a local consolidation of power in Egypt and the continued political transitions across the region, that focussed and hardened the foreign policy mindset of the military institution who began to respond and reshape Egypt's regional foreign policy accordingly.

Egypt's early foreign policy engagement in post Gaddafi Libya was primarily driven in a fear deeply rooted in the Arab Spring. At the heart of this is a fundamental rejection of 'Islamists', a term prior to the Arab Spring that almost singularly inferred the Muslim Brotherhood, but since 2013 has been deployed widely to define political actors and social movements of all stripes who favoured a democratic transition and challenged the model of 'authoritarian stability' Cairo seeks to promote at home.

This new authoritarian 'anti-islamist' narrative first became the anchor of President al-Sisi's domestic crackdown in 2013 but would later inspire his foreign policy agenda across the region, and in particular Libya. This foreign policy outlook has allowed President al-Sisi to find sympathy and support from Gulf neighbours who shared similar fears of the Arab Spring's democratising potential, in particular the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its de-facto leader Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ) who had supported the military's takeover in 2013.

In 2014, Egypt found a willing partner in Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) to support politically and militarily in order to execute their foreign policy vision in Libya. Fresh from a failed power grab in Tripoli in February 2014, Haftar turned his attention to the East of the country and launched operation Dignity on May 15th 2014 in Benghazi, a military operation with clear ideational parallels to Egypt's narrative and foreign policy - 'a vow to purge Islamists across Libya'.¹ Egypt quietly offered Haftar military support in Benghazi, and conducted airstrikes alongside the UAE in Tripoli in August 2014 in support of armed groups allied to Haftar. The move sparked Libya's 2014 civil war, and though Haftar ultimately failed to capture Tripoli at his first attempt, with a clear anti-Islamist narrative ideologically in line with Egypt and their partner the UAE, Khalifa Haftar established himself as Egypt's focal point in Libya. Egypt's military furthered their cooperation with Haftar

¹ Khalid Mahmoud, 'Khalifa Haftar pledges to "purge" Libya of Muslim Brotherhood' 20 May 2014, <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/khalid-mahmoud/news-middle-east/khalifa-haftar-pledges-to-purge-libya-of-muslim-brotherhood>



Members of the LAAF gathering in Benghazi in June 2020

and their military involvement in Libya following the beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts by Islamic State in Sirte in 2015.² Despite not launching airstrikes on Sirte, Egypt assisted Haftar in capturing much of eastern Libya under the pretext of counter terrorism. This relationship would flourish during this period as Haftar was promoted to the position of Field Marshal in 2016, and later began to remodel the LAAF's structures around Egypt's military, including later establishing a military investment authority akin to the Egyptian military.

Egypt's engagement in Libya has transitioned in the time between Libya's last two civil wars, particularly since the establishment of the UN backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in 2015 but it's foreign policy objectives have remained the same, and it's engagement with the LAAF has only strengthened. Egypt welcomed the GNA in 2016 and used its soft power to encourage the GNA to unify with the LAAF after it was rejected by the House of Representatives in eastern Libya during three years of diplomatic negotiations between the LAAF and GNA. To this effect, Egypt held the Cairo security talks in 2018 intended to unify the rival armed forces on both sides of the conflict under the precondition they remain loyal to Khalifa Haftar.³ This strategy

² 'Bodies of 20 Egyptian Christians beheaded in Libya arrive in Egypt' 14 May 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-egypt-idUSKCN1IF0J4>

³ Amr Emam, 'Talks in Cairo focus on Libyan military unity, differences persist' 25 February 2018, <https://theArabweekly.com/talks-cairo-focus-libyan-military-unity-differences-persist>

would collapse as Haftar began to capture GNA territory moving swiftly from eastern Libya to southern Libya in February 2019 before, without warning he withdrew from UN brokered talks and launched an assault on Tripoli in April 2019, sparking Libya's second civil war.

Geopolitics Behind Egypt's Foreign Policy

Libya's latest war demonstrated the limitations of Egypt's hard power. Cairo's principal foreign policy interest since 2014 has been preserving the integrity of the LAAF and by extension maintaining Egypt's influence over eastern Libya, and the security of its western border. Egypt threatened to send its military into Libya in June 2020 as a result of Turkey's entry into Libya's civil war and Ankara's pursuit of its own foreign policy in Libya that have dramatically shaped Libya's conflict and Egypt's foreign policy ambitions. In November 2019, the GNA and Turkey established a military and maritime Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to repel Haftar's attempt to overthrow the GNA in exchange for the redrawing of maritime boundaries between Libya and Turkey that threatened Egypt's territorial waters in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's claim against Greece in the longstanding Continental Shelf dispute established a new geopolitical battline line in Libya and introduced an economic and and geo strategic dimension into Egypt's foreign policy towards Libya.

In the time since Egypt's foreign policy began to take shape in 2014, the geopolitical landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean has undergone a radical transformation. Egypt has been buoyed domestically by significant gas production, following the discoveries of the Zohr field in the Eastern Mediterranean and others in the Western Mediterranean since 2015. By 2018, these discoveries leant greater credence to Egypt's regional ambitions. President al-Sisi has moved significantly on these discoveries to market Egypt as a 'gas hub' for the European Union's (EU) southern Neighbourhood, and promote itself among its EU partners, specifically Greece and Cyprus as a gateway to the continent.⁴ Egypt has strengthened established ties with Israel and Jordan in relation to the logistical network and pipelines gas deliveries and undertaken plans to activate two dormant Liquefied Natural Gas plants in the country. Haftar's war and the resulting maritime and security MoU between Turkey and the GNA have essentially thrown Egypt's geo-economic ambitions off course.

Following Turkey's military intervention in early 2020, military dynamics in Libya shifted dramatically culminating in the collapse of Haftar's assault on Tripoli in June 2020, and rapidly threatening to erode six years of Egypt's foreign policy investment. The GNA, emboldened by Turkish military support, forced the retreat of the LAAF, from Tripoli to Sirte, the regional frontier between West and East Libya. As a result, Egypt accelerated its soft power influence, and within days launched the Cairo initiative⁵ on June 7th 2020 aimed at establishing a permanent ceasefire at Sirte and stalling

⁴ Peter Stevenson, 'Egypt Gas Hub Ambitions Gather Pace' 5 October 2018, <https://www.mees.com/2018/10/5/oil-gas/egypt-gas-hub-ambitions-gather-pace/8c676fb0-c897-11e8-be83-45e5b809cbab>

⁵ 'Egypt announces new plan to end war in Libya as Haftar offensive loses ground' 6 June 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200606-egypt-announces-new-plan-to-end-war-in-libya-as-haftar-offensive-loses-ground>

Turkey and the GNA's advance into the East. The Cairo initiative was rejected⁶ by Turkey on June 10th 2020, leading to the belief Turkey and the GNA could be preparing a military offensive to move past Sirte into eastern Libya, territory Egypt had assisted the LAAF to capture in 2014 and a region Egypt considers its sphere of influence.

Egypt took several measures between June and July to ensure its 'redline policy' would alarm the U.S. into taking action to stop the war and enforce a ceasefire beginning with the June 20th 2020 claim that it would be willing to intervene militarily⁷ if Turkey and the GNA captured or crossed Sirte. Egypt took further significant steps and measures including inviting Libyan tribal elders⁸ in July 2020 to offer their support to Egyptian military intervention followed by Egyptian parliamentary approval⁹ for a military operation days later. Egypt's reiteration of its intention to intervene militarily was pivotal in alerting former U.S. President Donald Trump to the urgency of the situation in Libya, who called President al-Sisi on July 20th 2020 and agreed the need to establish a ceasefire in Sirte¹⁰ that would both stem Turkey's advance on Sirte and return Libya to a UN brokered political process. By August, this strategy had worked as the U.S. National Security Council published a statement claiming the "United States is pursuing a 360 degree diplomatic engagement with Libyan and external stakeholders",¹¹ the precursor to UN brokered military talks between the two rival Libyan factions that would be hosted by Egypt in September, before culminating in a permanent ceasefire agreement signed in Geneva in October 2020.

Egypt essentially used the threat of its hard power to induce U.S. diplomatic efforts to stop Turkey from advancing on Sirte, and return Libya to a diplomatic and political process under the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) where Egypt is well placed to use its soft power to influence the process and produce a favourable outcome. Egypt continues to host diplomatic talks between rival Libyan factions on behalf of the UN, sent a delegation to meet with the GNA in December 2020, has welcomed the result of the UN's political process and the resulting interim executive authority and is expected to reopen its embassy in Tripoli in the coming days. However Cairo will be monitoring Libya's transition over the next 10 months and is unlikely to deviate from its foreign policy goals in Libya since 2013, namely to establish the LAAF as the institutional cornerstone of Libya's post Gaddafi state through the UN's military track.

⁶ 'Turkey dismisses Egyptian proposal for Libya ceasefire: Hurriyet' 10 June 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-turkey/turkey-dismisses-egyptian-proposal-for-libya-ceasefire-hurriyet-idUSKBN-23H1OU?edition-redirect=uk>

⁷ Heba Saleh, 'Egypt threatens military action in Libya if Turkish-backed forces seize Sirte' 21 June 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/e6aa87b0-5e0b-477f-9b89-693f31c63919>

⁸ 'Egyptian president meets Libya's tribal leaders' 17 July 2020, <https://www.africanews.com/2020/07/17/egyptian-president-meets-libya-s-tribal-leaders/>

⁹ Mahmoud Mourad and Nadine Awadalla, 'Egypt's Sisi wins parliamentary approval for possible Libya intervention' 20 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-security-egypt/egypts-sisi-wins-parliamentary-approval-for-possible-libya-intervention-idUKKCN24L2BI>

¹⁰ 'Egypt says Sisi and Trump agree on need to maintain Libya ceasefire' 20 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-usa/egypt-says-sisi-and-trump-agree-on-need-to-maintain-libya-ceasefire-idUSKCN-24L1UK?edition-redirect=in>

¹¹ 'Statement from National Security Adviser Robert C. O'Brien Regarding Libya' 4 August 2020, <https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2020/08/04/statement-from-national-security-adviser-rob-ert-c-obrien-regarding-libya//index.html>

Cairo believes it can acquire more in its foreign policy engagement through negotiations that it can shape through its soft power as it navigates its priority interests rather than through complex geopolitical conflict that demonstrates the limits of its hard power. Egypt is keen to continue with the UN's military unification track that will result in the very same outcome as it had intended during the Cairo security talks in 2017; an internationally recognised LAAF. The question of Khalifa Haftar's future remains relevant over the short term, but its deeper investment in the LAAF as an institution with which to work with over the long term will remain the focus of Egypt's foreign policy.

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