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AL-SISI'S SECOND TERM: THE LIBYA QUESTION

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Later this month Egypt will witness its third presidential election since 2012. With only two candidates and very limited competition, there is no doubt that Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi is looking at a second term in office. The cornerstone of the Egyptian president's first term in office was countering terrorism and radicalization. It is fair to say that Egypt's war against terrorism and radical/jihadist Islam had an impact on numerous domestic policies as well as on Egypt's foreign policy. On numerous foreign policy issues, Egypt's position was not only shaped through its interests, but also through the anti-radicalization discourse that sees in organized Political Islam a security threat to the region; specifically in zones of conflict like Libya, Syria and Yemen.

The Libyan question in specific was of great importance to Egypt during Sisi's first term. The summer of 2014 witnessed the beginning of Sisi's term as well as the legislative elections that brought the House of Representatives to power in Libya with dire electoral

losses for the Muslim Brotherhood. The new composition of the House of Representatives came as good news to Egypt, especially since the General National Congress did not welcome ousting Mohamed Morsi from office and the Muslim Brotherhood from power. With the east-west division taking place in 2014, Egypt was very clear in its complete support for the House of Representatives and its government. Similarly, Egypt declared its support for Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity as soon as it was endorsed by the House of Representatives as the state's legitimate military arm.

Therefore, it is essential to realize that Egypt's position towards the Libya question over the past 4 years has been shaped within a specific context. A context that on the one hand posed a momentary national security problem for Egypt, and raised signals towards a long-term political elite conflict in Libya. The end result was an Egyptian position that openly supported all internationally recognized legitimacies in Libya, but at the same time covertly allied with one faction over the

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other. Egypt's position towards the Libyan question, and the fact that it was at odds with the Algerian position at some point in time, has stalled the process of political settlement in Libya and significantly delayed it.

However, as the Egyptian president approaches the beginning of his second term, will the Egyptian policy towards the Libyan question be different? In other words, over the past four years, did Egypt merely seek its immediate and political interests in Libya or did it develop an institutional vision of Egyptian interests in this crucial country? Several signs in Egyptian foreign policy towards Libya point to the fact that Egypt did manage to develop a long-term strategy towards Libya; and that Egypt will do its best to further pursue this strategy over the upcoming 4 years of President's Sisi's second term.

Primarily, Egypt is against foreign intervention in Libya, and it has made it clear more than once that Egypt is seeking a Libyan-Libyan solution to the crisis of multiple sovereignty taking place at the current moment in Libya. At the same time, Egypt did not waste a single opportunity at international conferences to ask for lifting the ban on buying weapons for the Libyan National Army under the leadership of Khalifa Haftar. Clearly, Egypt signaled out its allies very early on in the conflict, and the sum of its cumulative interests in Libya show that Egypt's current alliances will endure. Although Egypt repeatedly claims that it is in equal contact with various parties in Libya, it is clear to any Libya observer that Egypt is in deep cooperation with eastern Libya in general, and Khalifa Haftar in specific.

Egypt's tangible interests in Libya are unlikely to change any time soon. Egyptian border security will remain a priority and a crucially

determining dimension of Egypt's position. Similarly, Egypt's post June 30 government made its anti-terrorism discourse one of the pillars of the regime. Moreover, investing in mega infrastructure projects was another pillar that the regime has relied upon during Sisi's first term. Both those pillars are likely to continue throughout Sisi's second term, and both of them intersect with the Libyan question. On the one hand, countering terrorism and radicalization in the region requires close cooperation with Libyan authorities, especially since Egypt's Western Desert and southeast Libya have experienced terrorist attacks in recent years. On the other, Egypt has a long-term plan for economic cooperation with Libya as soon as the conflict ends. Egypt hopes that its 2.5 million official labor force that used to work in Libya returns to their jobs. At the same time, the economic opportunities that will be available by investing in the reconstruction of Libya is something that both the Egyptian state and Egypt's business elite passionately await.

Over the coming period, the regime in Egypt is expected to handle the Libyan question from two main perspectives, unifying the Libyan military and concluding the process of political settlement in the manner Egypt deems most appropriate for its allies and its interests. Egypt has adopted the case of unifying the Libyan military, and has held more than one meeting over the past year between representatives of the Libyan National Army and former military personnel who are currently occupying positions in western Libyan military organizations. Bringing back former military officers to the ranks of the Libyan National Army will have both military and political implications, ones that will eventually favor Egyptian interests.

Egypt has designated criteria for those who return to the official military corps. Those who received military education and were official members of the Libyan armed forces under Gaddafi will be reinstated into the ranks of the Libyan National Army. On the one hand, this will empty the military entities in western Libya of professional military cadres, creating a possible power vacuum within military leadership in the west. On the other, reinstating former officers will be a step forward in the direction of both attempting to instill military professionalism in the Libyan National Army and evaluating institutional capacity for political reconciliation.

Political settlement is the other dimension that Egypt focuses on, and will continue to focus on over the coming period, within the Libyan question. Egypt will not oppose the United Nations backed political agreement, and it has no intention of disposing of the Skhirat agreement and beginning coordinated efforts for a new framework for political settlement in Libya. However, introducing modifications and alterations to the Skhirat agreement, ones that reflect the current balance of power, is a target that Egypt will work thoroughly for during the coming period. Egypt is sincerely interested in political settlement in Libya, and it has been working with Algeria and Tunisia (the neighboring countries' axis) to facilitate east-west political negotiation. The interests of Egypt in Libya's political settlement are primarily concerned with securing the supremacy of the House of Representatives over political decisions in Libya. At the same time, Egyptian interests

would favor separation between political leadership and military leadership in Libya during the interim phase. As part of its foreign policy towards Libya, Egypt will work hard in the coming phase to guarantee that political settlement will maintain Khalifa Haftar's position at the head of military decisions in Libya. Along the same lines, Egypt will exert its hardest efforts to secure a consultative role for the high state council, and to exhibit its opposition to Islamized political institutions in Libya.

Finally, the Libyan question is one of the most crucial on the Egyptian foreign policy agenda. The transition from one presidential term to another will imply minor changes towards the Egyptian position regarding Libya, but institutional interests in Libya will dictate a specific policy that Egypt is expected to pursue during Sisi's second term. In Egyptian politics Libya remains a strategically crucial issue, but one that still cannot gather sufficient popular support behind it. Hence, the Libyan question will continue to be one of the essential cards that Egyptian foreign policy will resort to frequently over the coming period. In the presence of significant challenges to Egyptian interests in Africa and the Arab World, the Egyptian regime will expectedly capitalize on any gains secured within the Libyan question.

Regarding Libya, Sisi's second term will not introduce tangible changes to the Egyptian position. However, Egypt will face a foreign policy challenge within the context of the Libyan question to pursue its political and institutional interests until a process of political settlement is activated in Libya.