

Commentary, February 2, 2017

## EGYPT'S SECURITY AND HAFTAR: AL-SISI'S STRATEGY IN LIBYA

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The Egyptian military response through heavy air strikes on the cities of Darnah and Sirte – as a consequence of the kidnapping and beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts by a Libyan cell affiliated to the Islamic State (IS) in February 2015 – represents so far the peak of Egypt's involvement in the Libyan *affaire*.

Since Qaddafi's fall in 2011, insecurity in Libya – especially in the Eastern coastal region of Cyrenaica – has been perceived as a direct threat to Egyptian national security. Indeed, the precarious situation in Cyrenaica deteriorated by Jihadist attacks and the continuous flow of militants across the eastern border has threatened Egypt's stability and internal security. First, Libya's eastern border could become a relatively safe haven for Islamist militias, where illegal weapons and militants could flow freely from Libya to the Sinai Peninsula. Moreover, the presence of many Jihadist groups in both countries, such as Wilayat Sinai – considered the most dangerous and lethal organization in the Sinai Peninsula and in the Egypt mainland – Mohammed Jamal Network (MJN), Islamic Youth Shura Council or Jamaat al-Murabitoun has forced Egyptian authorities to use all necessary measures to secure their border, in order to prevent any spillover effects in Western Egypt.

For all of these reasons, the Egypt's intervention in Libya reflects a specific foreign and domestic security policy approach. The main objective of the Egyptian involvement in Libya is the containment of Islamist and Jihadist militias in the Sinai Peninsula to avoid their spread along the Western Desert. Moreover, these actions are aimed to eradicate a deeper proliferation of illicit traffics (illegal immigration, arms and drugs smuggling) through Libya to Egypt and vice versa.

In the last few years, the violence has exponentially increased in Cyrenaica and along the Libya-Egypt border. Many Egyptian Salafi-Jihadi groups joined radical Libyan organizations operating in these areas to lead combined attacks, such as the assault on the US consulate in Benghazi on September 2012, where MJN operating with not well identified Egyptian Salafi groups killed the US Ambassador Christopher Stevens<sup>1</sup>. This

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence published a bipartisan report on the Benghazi assaults that concluded: «*the attackers were a mix of local extremist groups, including the Benghazi-based Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb, and the Muhammad Jamal Network out of Egypt. Members of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaida in Iraq and Abu Ubaydah Ibn Jarah Battalion*

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strategy also led to an escalation in the number of attacks against military checkpoints in both sides of the eastern border (such as in al-Farafra, al-Wahat, Marsa Matrouh and al-Naqab, all occurred between July 2015 and January 2017). The extreme heterogeneity of these attacks has demonstrated once again the high risk posed by these Salafi-Jihadi groups and the resulting Egyptian fear for the growth of terrorist connections along the Egyptian-Libyan axis.

For the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in particular, the Libyan crisis represents a relevant challenge to domestic stability and political legitimacy. Despite his official declarations, in which al-Sisi defends the sovereignty of Libya and its territorial integrity, he is putting high pressure on international community to turn a blind eye on the Egypt's intervention in Libya, more likely in coordination with regional and international allies (United Arab Emirates, Russia and France). The aim of the intervention would be to create a sort of Egyptian protectorate in Cyrenaica against extremist groups and to contribute to the stabilization of Libya, having beneficial effects on the peace process. At this point, al-Sisi could also receive support from his Libyan allies inside the Tobruk Parliament (House of Representatives) and, in particular, from Libya's strongman Khalifa Haftar. Since his return to Libya and the launch of Operation Dignity (May 2014) against Islamist militias in Benghazi and Cyrenaica, Libya's renegade General has benefited from the support of the Egyptian leadership and its military force. In an interview released to the Egyptian newspaper al-Ahram Weekly, Haftar admitted his close cooperation with Egypt, especially on intelligence sharing and military assistance<sup>2</sup>

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*also participated*». See the report *Terrorist Attacks on US facilities in Benghazi, Libya, 11-12 September 2012*, in "Senate Select Committee on Intelligence", United States, 113th Congress, January 15, 2014, [http://stripes.com/polopoly\\_fs/1.416660.1467136574!/menu/standard/file/2%20Part%20I%20Redacted%20DR.pdf](http://stripes.com/polopoly_fs/1.416660.1467136574!/menu/standard/file/2%20Part%20I%20Redacted%20DR.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> A. Amer, *Cairo backs Libyan stance*, al-Ahram Weekly, September 21, 2016, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/17388/17/Cairo-backs-Libyan-stance.aspx>.

(i.e. Egypt is sending weapons to Libya in violation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1970/2011 on arms embargo). Another evidence of the strong relation between Haftar and al-Sisi, confirming the high priority that Egypt places on stability of the Western border, is represented by the three official visits of the Libyan General to Cairo during the past year.

Furthermore, Egypt has taken independent measures to counter the growing and asymmetrical threats along the 1.200 kilometers of shared border with Libya, such as the deployment of a third field army in support of the second field army in its counterterrorism mission<sup>3</sup> or the launch of a huge military exercise "Raad 24" in the Western Zone, near the Salloum checkpoint, at the end of October 2015<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, President al-Sisi visited the military Headquarters in Egypt's Western Region and along the Libyan border on different occasions during the last few months. All these political and military actions show not only that the border with Libya is one of Egypt's major security concerns, but also that the deterioration of security along the Libyan frontier could potentially leave Egypt vulnerable to attacks on multiple fronts.

Besides its military and security dimension, the relevant intervention of Egypt in Libyan affairs also relies on economic factors: first among all, the presence of several Egyptian workers living in Libya. It has been estimated that, before Qaddafi's fall in 2011, up to 1.5 million of Egyptians, mainly Copts, were working in Libya, for a total inflow remittance of around 33 million of US dollars per year. The reduction of the number of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya (750,000 people in 2015) and the loss of their remittances have provoked serious effects on the Egyptian economy, in terms of both bi-

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<sup>3</sup> N. Magdi, *Egyptian Special Forces deployed to borders with Libya after Qaddafi: Sisi*, NSNBC International, March 8, 2016, <https://nsnbc.me/2016/03/08/egyptian-special-forces-deployed-to-borders-with-libya-after-qaddafi-sisi/>.

<sup>4</sup> S. Shay, *Egypt's Annual Exercise and the Libyan Border*, Israel Defense, November 8, 2015, <http://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/content/egypts-annual-exercise-and-libyan-border>.



lateral trade (in 2015, the volume of Egyptian exports to the Libyan market fell by 75 percent) and an expected downgrading Egypt's GDP growth rate. This unfavorable economic condition threatens to explode under the blows of the already high national unemployment rate (12 percent and more than half are young people under the age of 25)<sup>5</sup>.

The energy-factor is not less important: starting from 2013, Egypt has become a net importer of energy and its debt with foreign energetic companies is at least 3.5 billion US dollars<sup>6</sup>. In this framework, once stabilized and placed under the government of its Libyan allies of Tobruk, Libya could potentially represent a solution for Egypt thanks to its oil and gas that could be sold to Egypt at a lower price than in the domestic market.

The Libyan crisis has a relevant impact on both the national and regional dynamics of Egypt and a broad spectrum of consequences. First of all, an Egyptian in-

volvement in Libya's affairs directed only at protecting its domestic interest would not be immune from counter-indications. The consequences of Cairo's support of Haftar could be unforeseeable. Moreover, the increase of radicalization of Islamist groups and the opening of another front of the War on Terror in Libya should be considered too, because they could drag Egypt into a long war against an unclear and not specific enemy. Lastly, because of the redefinition of the balance of power with the other regional actors – more specifically with the Gulf monarchies involved in the Libyan crisis – an unforeseen scenario may occur. The power *vacuum* in Libya and the growing insecurity in Western Egypt are posing a serious threat to the stability of Egypt and for this reason the Egyptian involvement in Libya could represent an important testing-ground for al-Sisi's foreign policy ambitions in North Africa and in the Arab Levant.

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<sup>5</sup> E. Miller, *Why Libya's Stability Matters to the Region*, MENASource, Atlantic Council, January 25, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/why-libya-s-stability-matters-to-the-region>.

<sup>6</sup> *Egypt debt to foreign oil companies at \$3.5 billion - official*, Reuters Africa, July 5, 2015, <http://af.reuters.com/article/idAFL8N0ZL05D20150705>.