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Egypt's Support of Khalifa Haftar: Forms and Motives

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Introduction

Since Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi came to power in Egypt after the military coup that he led against the first elected civilian president, Dr. Mohamed Morsi, on July 3, 2013, he has been working to change the doctrine of the Egyptian army. After the Zionist entity had been the first enemy of the Egyptian army, groups and movements, specifically political Islam movements, have become the primary and direct enemy of the Egyptian army. In addition, Al-Sisi has since been working to abort the Arab Spring revolutions in the region in general, lining up with the Saudi-Emirati axis that share the same goal, and this was one of the most important reasons that motivated the Sisi regime to adopt provision of full support to the Khalifa Haftar project in Libya.

In February 2018, Libyan renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar commented on his relationship with Sisi in an interview with "John Africa", a French magazine, saying: "Our positions are actually close, and the situation of his country when he came to power is similar to that of Libya today," adding: "Our great enemy, the Muslim Brotherhood, threatens our countries and our African and European neighbors alike."

First: The basic motives governing the Egyptian role in Libya

1) Countering political Islam and Arab revolutions

Al-Sisi's policy towards Libya comes in the context of strengthening pillars of his rule in Egypt through ensuring that the Islamists, whom he thinks are the real threat to his regime, do not reach power in Libya; in addition to the fact that

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since access to power in Egypt Al-Sisi has been working to abort the Arab Spring revolutions in the region in general, where the Emirati regime under Mohammed bin Zayed and the Saudi regime under Mohammed bin Salman line up with him in such attitude.

2) The functional role

The Egyptian military intervention in Libya comes within the framework of the functional role played by Egypt under Sisi in the international security strategies in the region; and the ruling military regime in Egypt is betting on the importance of the Egyptian role, specifically the Egyptian army, regardless of compliance or conflict with the Egyptian national interests, as it only cares about what serves the stability and survival of the regime; and in this sense, it is, for example, compatible with the French and Russian goals in Libya and plays roles within the framework of achieving these goals.

3) Supporting the military individual, not the democratic institution

One of the main determinants that motivated al-Sisi to support Khalifa Haftar in Libya is the “individual military ruler” policy that he adopts and has sought to establish in Egypt from the early moments of his access to power – not the rule of institutions that require participation of a number of State institutions in governance and decision-making – therefore, Sisi has sought to establish such model also in Libya through providing support to Khalifa Haftar, to facilitate controlling and guiding it to serve the required roles.

4) Facilitating access to petroleum products

One of the most important determinants that has driven Al-Sisi to support Khalifa Haftar is to secure access to petroleum products available in Libya with

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preferential prices on a continued basis in case of occurrence of any sudden fuel crisis or shortage in Egypt, given that the forces of Khalifa Haftar control the four most important ports that handle petroleum products (Sidra, Ras Lanuf, Zueitina and Brega) in the oil crescent region in eastern Libya. When the Saudi state-owned Aramco stopped supplying Egypt with oil products in early October 2016, the outgoing pro-Haftar parliament said Libya was ready to provide Egypt's oil needs, and MP Ziyad Deghaim announced that the parliament asked its affiliate (pro-Haftar) government to supply Egypt with necessary oil shipments free of charge.

5) The concept of conflict with Turkey instead of cooperation

Some believe that one of the determinants that have recently led the Egyptian regime to become more involved in the Libyan file is the direct entry of the Turkish side into the Libyan arena to support the legitimate Government of National Accord (GNA) of Fayeze al-Sarraj in Tripoli with Turkish military forces as well as supply of weapons, in addition to concluding an agreement to demarcate the maritime borders between the Turkish State and the legitimate GNA in Tripoli. The Abdel Fattah al-Sisi regime is part of the Saudi-Emirati alliance which aims primarily to confront the Turkish-Qatari alliance that supports Arab revolutions in general, considering it a threat to their strategic interests in the region. This concept comes as a substitute for joint cooperation with Turkey that is more likely to fulfill Egypt's interests. For example, the terms of the Turkish-Libyan agreement on demarcation of maritime borders are in favor of Egypt, where it allows restoring a significant amount of Egypt's economic waters.

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Therefore, the Egyptian regime has sought provision of all forms of support to Haftar during the past six years, which will be addressed hereunder.

Second: Forms of Egyptian support to Khalifa Haftar

1) Arms Supplies

Since Khalifa Haftar launched Operation Dignity in mid-2014 in Libya, the extent of military cooperation and rapprochement between Egypt and the forces affiliated with Khalifa Haftar has become apparent. The Egyptian support varied from training and supply of weapons to participation of Egyptian forces in military operations on the ground, in addition to carrying out air strikes jointly with the Emirati forces on the Libyan territories in the eastern, western and southern regions.

In March 2015, a UN report revealed that there were arms smuggled to Libya by Egypt and the UAE, accusing the forces led by Khalifa Haftar of complicating the political transition and increasing security problems in the country. The long report spoke about arms smuggling, not only including the transfer of ammunition and weapons, but also the transfer of Egyptian combat aircraft to Libya as well. Regarding violations of the UN arms embargo, the report said that the UAE illegally exported weapons to Libya, including military equipment to the eastern city of Tobruk in late 2014. The report also confirmed transfer of warplanes owned by Egypt to the Libyan Air Force after deliberately hiding their appearance and original identity. The report also indicated that Egypt provided military support to Haftar's Operation Dignity and the dissolved Parliament in Tobruk.

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According to informed military sources from the Egyptian and Libyan sides, the Egyptian army has been transporting Egyptian-made and Emirati-made military equipment, including heavy and light equipment, to Khalifa Haftar's forces, since May 2014. Sometimes this equipment was transported by air and sometimes by land from the Egyptian western military zone adjacent to the Libyan-Egyptian border. One of the tasks of the commanders of the Egyptian western military zone was to secure and facilitate the process of moving military equipment to Libyan territory. Among the most important leaders who performed these tasks were:

- 1- Maj. General Staff Mohamed al-Masry, former commander of the western military zone, and current chief of operations of the armed forces.
- 2- Major General Staff Wahid Ezzat, the former western military zone commander.
- 3- Major General Staff Sharif Bishara, the former western military zone commander and current head of Nasser military academy.
- 4- Major General Staff Salah Saraya, the present commander of the western military zone.
- 5- Major-General Staff Mohamed Said al-Assar, former head of the Armament Authority and current Minister of Military Production.
- 6- Major General Staff Abdel Mohsen Mousa, former head of the Armament Authority.
- 7- Major General Staff Tariq Saad Zaghloul, head of the Armament Authority.

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2) Decisive Egyptian Role in Controlling the Libyan East

On October 15, 2014, and a few months after the beginning of Operation Dignity in Libya, the Associated Press (AP), reported involvement of Egyptian aircraft in the bombing of Islamist militias in Libya's second city, Benghazi. However, Egypt's presidential spokesperson denied the claims. The AP reported that two Egyptian government officials said their country's warplanes bombed positions of Islamist militias in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi. The two Egyptian officials, who have first-hand knowledge of the operation, said the use of the aircraft was part of an Egyptian-led operation against the militiamen that involved Libyan ground troops. The two officials spoke to the Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

The Associated Press pointed out that Libyan lawmaker Tareq al-Jorushi confirmed to the AP that Egyptian warplanes were taking part in the ongoing operation in Benghazi but added that they were being flown by Libyan pilots.

In August 2014, the New York Times quoted four senior American officials as saying that Egypt and the UAE "had secretly launched airstrikes against Islamist-allied militias battling for control of Tripoli... in a major escalation of a regional power struggle set off by Arab Spring revolts."

In addition, the Egyptian Air Force on February 16, 2015 conducted an airstrike against an Islamist stronghold in Libya in retaliation for the beheading of at least a dozen Egyptian Christians by a local franchise of the Islamic State. Sources said, the air strike was carried out according to a security and information coordination between Egypt and Libya, where the Egyptian Military

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Intelligence identified the IS sites and targets that were bombed by F-16 fighters that had taken off from Sidi Barani Airport, west of Cairo, and then arrived at Matrouh Airport, where they set off to the required targets, hitting Islamic State camps, training sites and weapons storage areas in Libya ISIS sites, weapons depots, and ammunition sites, as well as a farm where IS operatives used to gather, as well as an area called "Bo-Msafir Forest."

In another context, a military source from the Libya Dawn forces loyal to the Government of National Accord (GNA) revealed arrival of military reinforcements for Haftar's forces during 2014 as grants from Egypt, UAE and Jordan.

The Egyptian-Emirati support focused from the beginning on Haftar's control of the entire eastern region, but the battles on the ground did not indicate that Haftar had been capable of achieving a military victory and in 2017; Haftar almost retreated significantly after his control of most of the eastern region, where only 25% of the Libyan population reside, unlike western Libya, where 75% of the population live. However, with more extensive military intervention from Egypt, UAE, and Russia, including Emirati-Russian-Egyptian aircraft's intense attacks on sites of anti-Haftar armed groups, this was a decisive factor for the forces of Haftar to control eastern Libya. It is worth noting that the Emirati and Egyptian air attacks are launched from the Egyptian Sidi Barani base located in the western military zone.

On July 6, 2017, Haftar announced the complete liberation of the city of Benghazi, three years after the launch of Operation Dignity in the eastern Libyan, adjacent to the Egyptian-Libyan border. Well-informed Libyan military

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sources said that about 15,000 of Haftar's forces were killed in those battles. It is worth noting that the number of forces that were facing Haftar's forces did not exceed 600 armed men. Haftar managed to win the Benghazi battle only through the air strikes carried out by the Egyptian air force along with the Emirati warplanes, setting off from the Egyptian airbase of Sidi Barani.

In this context, there are some important points as follows:

In April 2017, a few months before Haftar announced the liberation of the city of Benghazi, a report including satellite images showed "expansion" of an Egyptian military base adjacent to the Libyan border for supporting "Haftar". This airbase is built 45 km from the border with Libya, 45 km north of Siwa Oasis, with an area of 45 square kilometers, and is well protected with barriers surrounding it. Some details can be seen through satellite images, most notably its infrastructures which can "accommodate Egyptian military units as well as other forces." Besides the construction of roads and paths, the satellite photos taken on March 1, 2017 show at least three drones, while another photo dating back to February 23, 2017 did not show these drones, which raises the question of whether these drones were used to hit the anti-Haftar "Libya Brigades" forces and support the "Haftar" forces. At that time, the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council announced that a "foreign plane" had targeted its fighters in the "Qanfouda" area, and that other types of helicopters were flying over the areas of "Sabri" and "Al-Hout Market" in "Benghazi". A source fighting alongside the Benghazi Defense Brigades in "Al-Jafra" said that Egyptian aircraft participated in the attack to restore the oil facilities with Haftar's forces.

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Photo taken on March 1, 2017

Meanwhile, Haftar and his forces were suffering in the face of armed men in the Libyan city of Derna, in which groups of military factions were present, headed by the Mujahideen Shura Council.

The Egyptian regime took advantage of the event that occurred on Friday, May 26, 2017, after the killing of a group of Copts in the Minya Governorate while they were heading to the Monastery of St. Samuel, said to be at the hands of members of the Islamic State, where Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced that the Egyptian forces had struck one of the the camps in which these elements are trained in Derna, adding that Egypt would not hesitate to strike against terrorist camps anywhere, whether at home or abroad.

Immediately after Sisi finished his statement, the Egyptian Air Force announced that it had launched raids on what they called "terrorist camps in Libya" by Rafale aircraft, and added that the raids destroyed the main headquarters of the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna; and the Egyptian Ministry of Defense

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released pictures of warplanes taking off from one of the Egyptian air bases and said they had dealt a blow against “terrorist camps” in Libya. In the same context, the General Command of the “Haftar” militias announced that the Egyptian army’s strikes in Derna were in coordination with its air force led by Brigadier Sagr al-Jurushi, while sources confirmed that the intense raids launched by the Egyptian Air Force along with the Libyan Air Force, on the city of Derna in eastern Libya, were preparing for a broader Libyan ground operation against what they called “terrorist” groups there.

On the other hand, military sources in the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna, eastern Libya, said that warplanes bombed the Al-Fateh area east of Derna, and denounced the Egyptian Air Force’s shelling of populated sites in the city, confirming in its statement that it had nothing to do with what happened in Egypt of attacks against unarmed civilians in Minya, Upper Egypt.

It is worth noting that on May 17, 2017 before the Egyptian bombing of Derna, former chief of staff of the Egyptian army and former head of the committee following up the Libyan affairs file Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi, made his first visit to the Libyan interior, where he visited Benghazi in eastern Libya, and met with Khalifa Haftar, according to the Libyan News Agency that reported that former director of the military intelligence Maj. General Mohamed al-Shahat and a senior military delegation came to offer congratulations on the occasion of the third anniversary of Operation Dignity. Therefore, some believe that the military strike by the Egyptian Air Force was prepared in advance and coordinated between the Egyptian side and Haftar militias.

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Meanwhile, the forces affiliated with Khalifa Haftar were trying to expand in southern Libya but were met with a fierce confrontation by forces affiliated with the Government of National Accord (GNA). At the beginning of May 2017, we saw that the GNA forces and some other armed groups had a strong and effective performance, specifically in southern Libya, achieving gains on the ground afflicting the Haftar militias significant losses, especially the attack against Barak al-Shati air base in southern Libya, carried out by the GNA Ministry of Defense's third force and other armed groups, which led to killing 141 of Haftar forces.

However, the Egyptian regime supported by Emirati warplanes took advantage of the Minya incident and directed strikes in southern Libya to serve as an air cover for the expansion of Haftar's forces in the southern regions. The Egyptian and Emirati warplanes also raided civilian sites in the city of Hoon, in Al-Jafra region, south of Libya, on Sunday, May 28, 2017, according to Libyan local sources.

After the air strike carried out by the Egyptian Air Force in May 2017, the Egyptian army sent Egyptian ground forces to the Libyan interior, where some military sources said that an Egyptian special forces unit had arrived at the camp of Lamlouda near the city of Derna and participated in the military operation that stormed the city. Other security sources announced arrival of special forces from the Egyptian parachute and military intelligence units to the Qubbah camps and also participated in the military operations launched by Khalifa Haftar's forces on the city of Derna.

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This also confirms reports of Essam Al-Zubeir, a Libyan political analyst, about the presence of Egyptian ground forces in the Libyan Lamlouda camp, that participated in the attack on Derna, citing figures close to Haftar.

It is also noteworthy that Aqilah Saleh, Speaker of the pro-Haftar parliament in Tobruk, revealed in an interview with Youm7 on February 12, 2018 that the Libyan city of Darna, located in the Libyan East, “would soon be liberated in coordination with the Egyptian authorities”.

It should also be noted that Khalifa Haftar participated in the ceremony of opening the Egyptian Mohammed Naguib military base located in the city of Hammam, west of Alexandria, held by Sisi on July 22, 2017. The Mohammed Naguib military base is considered the most important training base where Khalifa Haftar's forces receive advanced military training in Egypt.

3) Egyptian Role in the Libyan West Battles

In September 2014, just a few months after the beginning of Operation Dignity, the General National Congress (GNC) in Libya announced that the committee investigating the air bombing that hit the capital, Tripoli, in August 2014, submitted its report to the GNC, confirming the involvement of the UAE and Egypt in the bombing of Tripoli. In a related context, specifically on August 23, 2018, the Libya Dawn forces accused the UAE and Egypt of launching air strikes on Tripoli, “The UAE and Egypt are involved in this cowardly aggression,” the Libya Dawn forces spokesman said in a statement to reporters in Tripoli, referring to the air strikes on Tripoli, and accusing the pro-Haftar interim government and parliament of complicity in the raids.

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After Haftar fully controlled the lands of the Eastern region on April 4, 2019, he announced launch of Operation Flood of Dignity, to liberate the capital Tripoli from what he called "terrorists and extremists". The Egyptian regime was not far from that operation either, which only came after an Egyptian-Emirati-French decision and with full support of the three countries.

As for the current Egyptian role in the ongoing battles in the vicinity of the capital, Tripoli, the Egyptian air force conducts reconnaissance and monitoring of targets in addition to launching air strikes on some targets in the vicinity of Tripoli airport, jointly with Emirati warplanes, according to some reports.

It is worth noting that the Haftar's Military Information Division released a video in December 2019 showing new Egyptian armored vehicles in the possession of Khalifa Haftar's militias. These armored vehicles are of the "TAG Terrier LT 79" type, a product of the latest joint venture between Egypt's Arab Organization for Industrialization and the American "Armored Group".

These Egyptian-made armored vehicles appeared for the first time in the exhibition "IDEX-2018", which was held in Egypt but appeared in Libya in December 2019 during a military parade of Haftar militias. The "TAG Terrier LT 79" armored vehicle did not enter the arming of the Egyptian army because it is new and is still in the process of production, within Egyptian projects to produce homemade armored vehicles.

In a related context, the Israeli "DebkaFile" website reported that the Egyptian army transported T-72 tanks and armored personnel carriers to Libya in December 2019, and placed the Egyptian Air Force on alert to stop Turkish

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military intervention in the city of Tripoli. The Israeli website said that the arms transfers came upon orders from Sisi on Thursday, December 19, with the aim of supporting the Khalifa Haftar militias that are launching an attack on the capital, Tripoli after Ankara announced that Turkey was considering transferring Turkish military forces to Tripoli to support the legitimate Government of National Accord.

In fact, Khalifa Haftar's recent visit to Cairo and his meeting with Sisi was to coordinate the air operations carried out by the Egyptian warplanes on some targets in the capital, Tripoli, in addition to threatening specific targets jointly with Emirati warplanes.

The Egyptian regime has not yet decided on participation of the ground forces present in the Libyan West in the ongoing battles in the capital, Tripoli, but prolonging the battle may lead the Egyptian regime to make such decision, as happened in the eastern region three years after the start of fighting there. However, according to the functional role played by the Egyptian army, it is awaiting an international and regional decision in this regard.

Conclusion

The Egyptian military intervention in Libya comes within the framework of the functional role played by Egypt under Sisi in the international security strategies in the region; and the ruling military regime in Egypt is betting on the importance of the Egyptian role, specifically the Egyptian army, with its capabilities, regardless of compliance or conflict with Egyptian national interests, as it only cares about what serves the stability and survival of the regime.

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Al-Sisi promotes that his policy towards Libya is a strategic policy aimed at strengthening Egyptian national security and ensuring that militants do not infiltrate into Egypt from the western border for carrying out operations inside the Egyptian State that might pose threats to his rule. However, Al-Sisi's policy towards Libya comes in the context of strengthening pillars of his rule in Egypt through ensuring that the Islamists, whom he thinks are the real threat to his regime, do not reach power in Libya; where the Emirati regime under Mohammed bin Zayed and the Saudi regime under Mohammed bin Salman line up with him in such attitude.

Therefore, Al-Sisi and the Saudi, French, Emirati axis are working on ending the military situation in favor of Khalifa Haftar. They do not want any political process that would allow the Government of National Accord any presence within the Libyan State.

The situation in Libya in 2020 is witnessing important military developments on the ground. As Haftar militias backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Russia and France are advancing towards the capital, Tripoli, in attempt to surround the capital from all sides, amid frequent "hit-and-run" battles on the Tripoli airport road, Fayez al-Sarraj's forces on the other hand appear to be holding up and steady; if this attack is repelled, developments on the ground will certainly differ. In my view, the GNA forces must shift from defense to attack, as the best way to force the Haftar militias to return to the eastern region again.

The Turkish intervention has so far been limited, as the Turkish State has sent only dozens of its soldiers to the Libyan interior, along with some military aid. It is clear that there is no prospect for a political solution, and Haftar's recent

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“escape” from Russia ceasefire talks before signing a political agreement is an indication of this, particularly amid Haftar militias’ violation of the cease-fire agreement announced on 12 January even while Haftar was in Russia. Therefore, the situation is likely to witness further escalation between the militia of Khalifa Haftar and the Presidential Council forces.

The timing is now of utmost importance in Libya; and if the actual intervention in the manner appropriate for the Turkish side is delayed, Al-Sarraj and his forces may fall into a major impasse; especially that the Egyptian army and the Emirati side are now transferring more military aid to the Haftar militias. In addition, the Egyptian army during January 2019 conducted a major military exercise in the northern and western strategic directions, “Qadir 2020”, while massing forces intensively now within the scope of these two strategic directions close to the Libyan border, which indicates likeliness of further ground military intervention of the Egyptian forces in Libya in the coming period; and perhaps the statement of Aqilah Saleh, the speaker of the dissolved “Libyan parliament” in Tobruk ,which he announced during his recent visit to Egypt, that they might call on the Egyptian army to intervene in Libya – is an indication of this likeliness.