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Egyptian Foreign Policy in Libya, Dilemmas and Likely Review

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In light of the recent developments of the Libyan crisis, which traces back to 2014, and the inability of Khalifa Haftar that the current Egyptian regime and its regional allies have been backing, to resolve the crisis by military means for about six years – during which Haftar and his supporters have refused to engage in any kind of serious dialogue for reaching an agreement and execute it on the ground – a question arises about the ability of the Egyptian government's orientations to fulfil the strategic goals of Egypt's foreign policy, especially amid deterioration of the military situation in favor of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) over the last few months.

Dilemmas of approaches, goals, orientations and tools:

- There is a major dilemma in the current Egyptian foreign policy, as it is not based on any in-depth studies, approaches, or scientific and research analyses of the Libyan situation, given that the Egyptian official and academic institutions lack real specialists in this regard. Instead, it relies on personal estimates of researchers close to authorities, most of whom operate in UAE-related research centers and serve its vision. Such researchers are not aware of the economic dimensions of the Egyptian-Libyan relations and the strategic importance of Libya to Egypt in this regard, given its ability to absorb a significant amount of Egyptian labor abroad that may exceed that absorbed by most Gulf countries, other than Saudi Arabia.

In fact, this important economic dimension is absent from Egyptian foreign policy in Libya in favor of the fragile security dimension, amid lack of progress in the latter, as reports and studies indicate that most terrorist incidents launched from Libya against Egypt occurred during Haftar's control of the Libyan East, in addition to a significant deterioration in Egyptian-Libyan relations with respect to employment, trade and investment¹.

¹ Omar Samir, The Libyan Dilemma and Egyptian National Security: Equations and Priorities, Egyptian Institute for Studies, January 28, 2020, ([URL](#)).

- There is another dilemma in this policy, that is, it focuses on a single goal that is based on wrong estimates, the so-called war on terrorism. The Libyan population is estimated at six and a half million that reside in distant tribal and urban areas, most of whom are religiously and socially conservative. Libyan citizens possess approximately 30 million weapons; as battalions, revolutionary councils, and city commissions are distributed across the country – so one cannot describe everyone that has a weapon as a terrorist or belonging to an armed militia².

At the same time, the militias led by Haftar are almost dominated by the Madkhali-Salafi stream, which is the main feeder of terrorism. Therefore, the Haftar coalition has not achieved any success in the so-called war on terrorism, given that ISIS is active in areas under Haftar's control and most of its attacks were launched from there, which proves that he (Haftar) exploits Egypt in a purely power struggle in Libya, and relies on a fragile coalition with the remnants of the Gaddafi regime and some federalists and members of the previous General National Congress that had contributed to foiling the Libyan political track³.

The Egyptian regime did not have to describe anyone who does not support Haftar as a terrorist, nor to deliberately spread wrong allegations that the political Islam stream dominates power in Libya, because objective analyses indicate this is not true. In all elections that were held for choosing members of the General National Congress or municipalities, Islamists have been ranked third or second, at most⁴.

As for the Egyptian regime, it focuses on a single goal that harnesses all its potential, including running strong propaganda campaigns, such as those that took place in November and December of 2019, wrongly showing that the country is fighting a war to liberate Libya from the Ottomans and terrorism, accusing everyone who stands against Haftar to be a terrorist, which has led to escalation of waves of hostility against Egypt and Egyptians in Libya, and deprived any Egyptian mediation of

² Deutsche Welle channel, report on the most prominent armed forces fighting for influence in the Libyan scene, on 5 April 2019, ([URL](#))

³ Firas Fahham, Conflict Map in Libya: Components and Future, Josour for Studies, 20 April 2020, ([URL](#)).

⁴ Zuhair Hamdi, Three Years since the Libyan Revolution: Challenges and Prospects, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Arab Politics Magazine No. 7, pp. 88-95, March 2014, ([URL](#)).

any credibility and impartiality, at a time when Haftar's militias that are backed by Egypt and others have been defeated in the battles of the Libyan West over the past two months.

Meanwhile, France and Italy, for example, have been giving priority to competing for winning a share for their companies in the Libyan oil extraction process, as a priority, while issues of Mediterranean security, asylum, and immigration, as well as their obligations to NATO and its previous operations in Libya came as a second priority⁵. Also, Turkey focuses on economy and trade and development of its sophisticated homemade weapons; and Russia focuses on playing a complex military, economic and security role in the southern and eastern Mediterranean⁶.

- There is another major problem in Egypt's policy towards Libya represented in hesitation, slowness and satisfaction with the role of the reserve, by echoing the statements of allies, such as repetition of the Russian statement that "NATO intervention in Libya was a fatal mistake".

In fact, this policy is the result of stimulation and provocation from regional and international financiers, which contributed to complicating the problem in Egypt's disadvantage. When the Egyptian initiative was announced on 6 June, it was an echo of the Aqilah Saleh initiative launched in late April 2020, including the same provisions. Also, it fully adopted the views of some Libyan federalists, being based on territorial quotas for political positions. Furthermore, even the name of the other party, i.e. the legitimate government, was not mentioned in the Cairo declaration but was rather treated as if it never existed, which led the internationally recognized GNA to immediately reject it on the same day⁷.

Is it possible to review such policies?

The process of reviewing foreign policy is intuitive in light of the rapid pace of domestic and international changes, and it is not a sign of weakness, decline or deterioration. There are many countries that have reviewed their foreign policy that had been stable a few years before. For

⁵ Ahmed Qassem Hussein, French-Italian competition for influence in Libya, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, assessment, 3 February 2019, ([URL](#)).

⁶ Anna Porchevskaya, Russia's Growing Interests in Libya, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 24 January 2020, ([URL](#)).

⁷ To read the Aqila Saleh initiative announced in April 2020, see ([URL](#)), and for the text of the Cairo Declaration, see ([URL](#)).

instance, the US administration under Obama reviewed its policy toward the Iranian nuclear file and showed greater flexibility that led to concluding a nuclear deal in 2015, known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPA), between Iran and the P5+1 (United States, China, France, Russia, United Kingdom – plus Germany). However, the US later reviewed its policy again during the era of Trump and pulled out of JCPA, a position that is still subject to criticism and review from different circles of US foreign policy making.

Germany, a European and a world superpower, carried out a comprehensive review of its foreign policy in 2014⁸. It is currently making progress in boosting its role in Europe and the Middle East issues, including the Libyan crisis, as it has recently boosted the presence of German oil refining and shipping companies in Libya and hosted an important international conference on the Libyan crisis in Berlin in January 2020.

Also, the attempts of the current Egyptian regime to play the role of mediator in the Libyan crisis – whether through the mechanism of the neighboring countries, through Egypt's presidency of the African Union, or through the axes that Cairo tried to form with Cyprus, Greece, France, and the UAE, in complete disregard of the Russian and Turkish actors and other important regional and international parties such as Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, and Italy – have all been unsuccessful.

The reason for the catastrophic failure of these attempts was that they proceeded from a complete alignment with Haftar, who refused to sign the draft Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement in January at the last moments and rejected Berlin's outputs less than a week later. Perhaps this is the reason for the recent GNA's immediate refusal of the Cairo declaration, which was born dead, because it was announced in the presence of only the party supported by Egypt, with complete ignorance of the GNA.

The failure to achieve progress in the primary goal of Egyptian foreign policy, that is the so-called war on terrorism, or even defiance of Turkish policies, requires a review of that policy. On the other hand, the parties backed by Egypt are involved in supporting the dangerous Madkhali-Salafi groups

⁸ Annegret Bendiek, The "2014 Review": Understanding the Pillars of German Foreign Policy and the Expectations of the rest of the World, Study Committee for Franco-German Relations, may 2015, ([URL](#)).

that feed terrorism. Therefore, the Egyptian government should review its foreign policy in Libya, especially after the failure of the parties that it supports to capture the Libyan capital, Tripoli, and all Libyan lands, as well as the decline of Egyptian labor and economic interests in Libya over the past six years⁹. This requires a comprehensive review of the Egyptian policy to reach a new assessment of the scene, as well as new directions, goals, and tools.

Egypt's losses in Libya

At a time when the intervening countries have doubled their economic, military and security interests in Libya, Egypt is the only country that came out losing. Since 2014, the volume of the Egyptian-Libyan bilateral trade has deteriorated, and mutual investment has witnessed a dramatic decline, in addition to a sharp decline in Egyptian labor in Libya. Also, the divided Libya is no longer able to lend Egypt or support it financially, as it had done one year before the crisis flared up, when Libya lent Egypt \$2 billion in early 2013.

If Egypt had supported Libyans to reach a solution by backing the Skhirat agreement concluded in 2015 and the arrangements that followed it, before the exacerbation of international interventions, Libya would have achieved stability and maintained its political track, and the Libyan labor market would have been back again stronger than it was before 2011 – given that the Libyan government still has huge reserves in sovereign funds abroad that would enable it to immediately start the reconstruction process which could absorb double the number of Egyptian labor before the revolution, about 3-4 million workers (more than twice the total Egyptian labor in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the Emirates, and Oman combined).

Given that Egypt receives approximately \$30 billion as remittances from Egyptian expatriates (nearly 10 million, according to official data) on an annual basis, the likely transfers from Egyptian expatriates in Libya that Egypt has lost are estimated at more than \$10 billion annually, far exceeding what Egypt receives from transfers, loans and grants from the UAE and more than twice the Suez Canal annual

⁹ Maha Al-Lwati, Libyan authorities arrest 131 Egyptians .. and announce a smuggling network that recruits illegal migrants to join “armed groups”, Mada Masr, on 19 July 2018, ([URL](#)).

revenue. However, the Egyptian policy unfortunately ran counter to such trend, which led Egypt to retreat from the fourth to the sixth position in the global index of labor-exporting countries¹⁰.

Also, for reasons mainly related to that policy, Egypt has lost a large part of its trade with Libya, as the volume of trade exchange declined from \$2.5 billion in 2010 to about \$500 million in 2018, in addition to a sharp decline in Egyptian exports to Libya to less than 50% of exports in 2009 and about a third of the Egyptian exports in 2012 and 2013. Also, Egyptian investments in Libya declined to the limits of \$520 million; and the Libyan investments according to the index of number of companies in Egypt decreased by about 25%¹¹.

Finally,

There must be dividing lines between the strategic relations with the Gulf states and Egypt's relations with other countries, especially neighbors, so that we will not face new Gulf vetoes on Egypt's external relations similar to the Gulf veto on Egyptian-Iranian relations which have deprived Egypt of Iranian tourism for decades.

Unless the current Egyptian policy undergoes significant changes, it will lead to a loss of at least hundreds of thousands of job opportunities for Egyptians in Libya, in addition to a potential role in reconstruction at a time when the Egyptian economy and the Gulf economies hosting great numbers of Egyptian labor, are significantly suffering nowadays. In this regard, an urgent policy change can make Libya an alternative labor market for the Gulf destinations, as it did during the first and second Gulf wars.

The Egyptian foreign policy should be based on discussion of different scenarios away from arenas of political schemes, to reach a precise definition of the interest of Egyptians in each policy, and to consider the overall picture before adopting any potential policies, as well as paying attention to properly representing the economic and social interests of the Egyptian community in the country subject to a certain policy.

¹⁰ Mohamed Abdullah, Decline of Egyptian labor abroad .. Who is responsible ?, Al-Jazeera Net, on 2 March 2020, ([URL](#)).

¹¹ Omar Samir, The Libyan Dilemma and Egyptian National Security, Op. Cit.