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EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

Analyses

13 AUGUST 2020

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Abdel Rahman Al-Shaer



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TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org

August 13, 2020

From Sinai to Libya: Exhaustion of Egyptian Army

Abdel Rahman Al-Shaer

There are many threats targeting the Egyptian national security, most notably the militants in the Sinai Peninsula, the continued Israeli threat, the ongoing conflict over the Nile water, and the imminent threat posed by the conflict in Libya and the attempts to lure the Egyptian army to intervene there.

Some believe that Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi will not intervene militarily in Libya due to the objective conditions that Egypt is witnessing, namely: the challenges of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the military operations in Sinai, the spread of the coronavirus epidemic, and the stifling economic hardships that Egypt is experiencing. Although these reasons are logical, especially that Sisi's intervention in Libya is likely to be too costly for Egypt to bear, but there are common interests between the counter-revolution trio (Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Mohamed bin Zayed and Mohamed bin Salman) in smashing the political experience in Libya in pursuit of eradicating the current of political Islam there.

There is an important question that arises here: Is Sisi really interested in the Egyptian economy and the future of Egypt and the Egyptian army?! Does Sisi have an independent decision and free political will so that the interest of his country and its army, as well as its national security, can represent the main determinants in his decision-making?!

Sisi and failure in Sinai

Since Sisi demanded, after his coup in 2013, a mandate from the Egyptian people to confront what he then called "potential terrorism", Sinai has witnessed successive military operations by the Egyptian army aimed at eliminating that "terrorism", starting from Operation Eagle 1, followed by Operation Eagle 2, and through Operation Right of the Martyr, up to the comprehensive Operation Sinai-2018 which remains in effect until now. The Egyptian army's military operations in Sinai included Israeli air support, where even Israeli measures to confront similar circumstances were applied in Sinai, such as imposing curfews, setting up checkpoints, carrying out sweeping raids and destroying homes of the so-called "terrorists" or their accomplices, and setting "suspicious" villages on fire. However, these

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operations have not come to an end, and there are no harbingers for their end. Rather, all indications are pointing to their extension, but unfortunately to no avail.

These collective punishments of the Sinai people backfired contrary to what had been intended. With practice of violence, the army alienated the population and the Bedouins who started to side with the armed groups, taking into account that the army used transcendental doctrine and ineffective traditional methods in facing the Sinai insurgency. The army has been unable to excel in an area they do not know well, unlike the militants who have the advantage of knowing the field, as well as the passive support of the Sinai population who view the Egyptian national Army as an occupation army, which is an ideal recipe for the success of [guerrilla warfare](#), taking into mind the Sinai Peninsula's deserts, barren mountains, steep valleys, coastal cities, and the tribal communities: in short, an ideal ground for guerrilla warfare.

The arrival of the situation in Sinai to the current state of depletion of the Egyptian army is due to Sisi's flawed measures, without ruling out an Israeli role in this regard. Although it seems that Israel is the first to suffer from security threats on its border with Sinai, some researchers believe that such risks are considered affordable tactical threats to Israel that it can easily handle, given its weapons, technology and intelligence capabilities.

However, the key objectives that Israel may seek to achieve by exploiting Sisi's procedures and [military operations](#) in Sinai include:

- Exhausting the Egyptian army in Sinai and implicating it in a devastating conflict, thus depleting the Egyptian State and its resources that are already limited.
- Threatening the Suez Canal's shipping course: and it seems that Israel prepared itself for this a few years ago through the implementation of a major strategic project of building a railway linking the port of Eilat and the port of Ashdod to serve commercial freight between the Mediterranean Sea (city of Ashdod) and Red Sea (Eilat), which would compete with the role played by the Suez Canal.
- Israel believes that the security chaos in Sinai in case of becoming out of the control of the Egyptian army, and increasing threats to Israeli security through missile bursts or attacks would force the Egyptian State to accept the inclusion of Israel and the United States within a new security system to

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address the security threat in Sinai, where Israel is likely to be an active party. In other words, Sinai would turn into a border strip open to Israeli air and land security activity.

- Isolating or separating Sinai from the Egyptian State in preparation for establishment of a separate Sinai entity that would constitute a barrier between Egypt and Israel; and such entity might accept passing an Israeli plan to expand Gaza's borders in the Sinai direction to absorb Palestinian refugees and the human surplus in the Gaza Strip.

The continued state of attrition and exhaustion of the army in Sinai has coincided with the propaganda launched by the pro-regime media on Egyptian army's classification as the world's ninth most powerful army – according to the Global Fire Power website – but the continuing failure in Sinai plagues all these classifications and raises many questions about the army's ability to eliminate a few hundreds of militants, according to estimates of the regime's security services and military experts.

So, why is the army's failure there persisting? Why didn't Sisi's strategy based on the use of "brute force" achieve its objectives? How did several hundreds of militants inflict all these losses and casualties on the ninth most powerful army in the world? Why has the comprehensive Operation Sinai-2018 – in addition to six large-scale military operations preceding it – fail to eliminate the [insurgency in Sinai](#)?

The Islamic State's affiliate "Wilayat Sinai" or Sinai Province organization and the party that stands behind it have already managed to drag the Egyptian army into a widespread attrition process during the past few years, where the army has lost many of its commanders, officers, personnel, and equipment, which affected its reputation and prestige. Moreover, the widespread violations committed by the regular Egyptian forces against civilians and the forced displacement of the Sinai people added a popular incubator to militants there.

The reasons for army's failure to resolve the conflict and eliminate the insurgency in Sinai, despite the limited number of militants, can be attributed to several factors, including:

- Adoption of only the military solution and brute force with the continued marginalization of Sinai and its people, in addition to the grave violations committed by Sisi's forces against the Sinai people.

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- Decline of the fighting efficiency of the Egyptian army, despite its global ranking as the world's ninth most powerful army, due to the army leaders' preoccupation with the monopoly of political power and pursuit of power, influence, and sensitive positions in the regime, in addition to the business projects of army companies that dominate everything in Egypt, and the arms deals brokerage.
- Practically speaking, Sinai militants who are good at guerrilla wars face only junior officers and soldiers who are not trained on this kind of irregular warfare that is based on hit, run and hide. The militants carry out lightning attacks and disappear like ghosts, where the planes, tanks and soldiers would not be able to find them. The failure to resolve this insurgency for years, despite the limited capabilities and numbers of militants, is a reflection of the deterioration in the combat capabilities of the army and the decline in the combat competence of its personnel.

Trap of luring the army into the Libyan swamp

The Libyan crisis witnessed a remarkable escalation in the military and political sphere since the early 2020, when Turkey increased its military influence and moved from supplying weapons and fighters to the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) to becoming a military partner on the ground, which led to the achievement of successes on the ground in favor of the legitimate Government of National Accord. At the same time, the Libyan crisis occupied a prominent place in the political rhetoric in Turkey in general and in President Erdogan's discourse in particular.

Since early 2020, Egypt began to achieve a strategic shift in relation to the Libyan crisis, characterized by a high level of mobilization at the political, media and military levels. Sisi's speech at the Sidi Barani base near the border with Libya, when he announced his "red line" doctrine, which means Egypt will not allow in any way transcending the cities of Sirte and al-Jafra, in what appears to be a pre-meditated decision that Egypt would have a military response in this regard.

The new Egyptian discourse on Libya targets several changes in the way of addressing the Libyan crisis and contributes to imposing a new reality on the ground, including legitimizing the military support and assistance Cairo has provided to Haftar militias over the past years with preparations for intensifying it during the coming period.

The cities of Sirte and al-Jafra are of great importance and a strategic location in Libya. Sirte (450 km east of Tripoli) comes between the two largest cities in Libya, that is the country's capital, Tripoli, and the capital of the Cyrenaica province in the east, Benghazi (one thousand km east of Tripoli).

The strategic importance of Sirte lies in the fact that it is located north of the al-Jafra air base (650 km southeast of Tripoli), and only an open road that does not exceed 300 km separates Sirte from the base, which is not very long by desert standards. Controlling Sirte makes the road open to control the oil ports, as the nearest oil port (Sidra) is only 150 km away.

As for the al-Jafra region, it is of great importance and a strategic location, as it is located in the center of Libya and connects the south with the north and a number of cities to each other through a major road network, with [oil fields](#) near it and not far from the industrial river system.

In coincidence with this remarkable change in the political rhetoric and the accompanying diplomatic moves on the ground, Egypt announced a number of military exercises in the western strategic direction along the Egyptian-Libyan borders, which are inseparable from being a preparation for a similar battle in Libya or the eastern Mediterranean, On Monday, 20 July 2020, the Egyptian parliament ratified a resolution authorizing the army to carry out "[combat missions](#)" abroad, which means a possible military intervention in Libya, a few days after Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi spoke about possible military operations in the country's western neighbor.

The Libyan situation is related to both geography and demography, as well as many variables controlling the difficult and volatile Libyan situation. The geography of Libya predicts that a military victory on the ground in this vast desert country is not possible for external military forces.

In addition, the fragile military resolution that is dependent on the outside and on the air strikes does not establish peace nor lead to stability, in a society in which tribal affiliations are still strong and dominating. Libya not only suffers from the fragility of its sociological depth, which appears in the form of a great division of the elites, and a continuity of the tribal dimension, which is periodically stimulated by crises of all kinds, but it also suffers from [human demographic weakness](#), with all resulting consequences and ambitions in a geographical region that has many challenges.

The Egyptian army knows its true capabilities well, and it is fully aware of the danger of interfering with its forces in Libya on the cohesion and strength of the army. The Egyptian army had previously intervened in Yemen, and the situation ended there with more than 25,000 dead in the rugged mountains of Yemen, and the Yemen war turned into an open and cruel war of attrition not only for the Egyptian economy but also for its armed forces, as the Egyptian armed forces forgot the fighting of armies and the well-known arts of wars to indulge for a full six years in guerrilla warfare :fight/flight, attack, track, capture, investigate, and torture that is not appropriate for a regular army. These losses and exhaustion were a prelude to the humiliating defeat in the so-called [setback of 1967](#), and thus the Egyptian army lost its military competence and combat ability and was in urgent need to re-training and rehabilitation for real wars and tactics against armies.

Also, the talk about recruiting tribes of Libyan origins appears as an ill-considered approach to intervention in Libya, being a sensitive issue as this threatens the Egyptian regime itself with a likely internal insurgency in light of the suffering and marginalization of those tribes in Egypt.

There are [many risks](#) for the direct Egyptian military intervention in the Libyan interior, especially in the Sirte and al-Jafra regions, which may lead to:

- Long-term implication of the Egyptian army that may result in military losses and casualties, which may threaten the cohesion and reputation of the Egyptian army.
- The Egyptian army cannot fight two battles at the same time, one in the east against the Sinai Province militants and the second in the west, in Libya, which could lead to its exhaustion.
- Depletion of the Egyptian forces by involving them in a complex Libyan civil war, with likely many victims similar to what happened during the Egyptian military intervention in Yemen in the early 1960s.
- Sisi will enter into a direct clash with the GNA and its supporters, especially Turkey. Thus, Cairo would lose its complete credibility as a mediator between the different Libyan parties in any future political process.

There is a difference between the national security of Egypt, as a state and people, and the private security of the political regime led by Sisi. Threats in Sinai, especially from extremist groups and

organizations, and the dangers surrounding the Nile River waters are real and serious threats to Egypt, while the potential threat coming from the western border is only linked to Sisi's fears for the security of his regime and its survival in power.

Therefore, it is not surprising that many Egyptians compare Sisi's tense speech about the likeliness of military intervention in Libya, and his weakness and hesitation regarding the Nile water issue related to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. In this way, Sisi is trying to redefine national security according to his own interests, not according to the interests of the Egyptian people.

It is true that the Egyptian army is able to achieve a rapid ground advance in the Libyan territories, due to availability of tanks, armored vehicles and air cover. But, despite its power, the Egyptian army remains a conventional army that will face the GNA forces that combine the regular organizational army and the guerrilla forces. Unlike what is going on in Sinai in terms of confronting militants who have rifles and conventional explosives, the Egyptian army in Libya may face armed fighters using qualitative weapons that Turkey and others may have supplied them with.

In this context, there are a number of caveats that the [Egyptian army](#) should not be drawn into, including:

- Fighting the insurgencies at home and the military intervention in an Arab land is not at all similar to fighting enemies in terms of its repercussions on the morale of soldiers.
- The Egyptian army is a conventional regular army that may face forces that combine both the organizational army and guerrilla forces, with ability to maneuver, tactic, camouflage and hiding.
- Whenever civilians and their livelihoods are harmed by the military intervention, local and international popular anger against Egypt will increase.
- The war in large desert areas and difficult terrain may turn it into a long, exhausting war of attrition for the army that drains its material and armament capabilities, drains its morale, and may open a bloody wound in its body, as it may be a proxy war of attrition aimed at draining and dismantling the Egyptian army.

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- The Egyptian army may find itself lost in the deserts of Libya and Sinai, pushing it from campaign to campaign in search of a victory that it may not be able to achieve, which may cost it the remaining respect and trust of the Egyptian people.
- The Western countries in general, the United States in particular, as well as Israel, are likely to work to prolong the war in Libya, as it is the case in Syria, Iraq and Yemen; and in this case, Egypt will be drained from several fronts. In addition to Libya and Sinai, there is a threat coming from Ethiopia, where Addis Ababa is strengthening its relations with Israel.

Amid the ongoing battles in Sinai, the ongoing luring of the army into the Libyan swamp, the failure to manage the Renaissance Dam crisis and protect Egypt's water security, and after Sisi has become a tool in the hands of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as well as the Israeli role in exploiting the situation as usual and working behind the scenes, all this undoubtedly confirms that the exhaustion and depletion of the Egyptian army if it intervened in Libya is certain, especially that the current military leadership that has failed to achieve resolution in Sinai, is lining up behind Sisi to protect its own interests and survival in power.