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31 March 2021

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Shift of Egypt's Attitude towards the Libyan Issue

Noura El-Hafian & Mahmoud Gamal

The late quarter of 2020 and the early quarter of 2021 witnessed many changes in Egyptian attitude towards the Libyan issue due to Libyan internal reasons -both military and political- on the one hand, and to regional and international changes, on the other.

This paper will address aspects and causes of these shifts, and likely tracks of the Egyptian regime's future role in Libya, through the following axes:

First: Shift of Egyptian attitude

The past few months (specifically from early November 2020 to mid-March 2021) witnessed political, security and military moves by the Egyptian regime towards the Libyan issue, which seemed different from the regime's past stances in this regard. During this period, Cairo hosted meetings between conflicting Libyan parties to discuss significant files related to the political settlement track, most notably, meetings of the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission, as well as the meetings that address understandings on mechanisms of arranging a referendum on the draft constitution and general elections, both presidential and parliamentary, in December 2021.

Egypt's embrace of one of the Libyan political settlement tracks has contributed to occurrence of a qualitative shift in the Sisi regime's position toward the Libyan scene in terms of Cairo's openness to all Libyan parties, where its movement has no longer been restricted to eastern Libya that is controlled by Khalifa Haftar, but it has included western and southern Libya as well.

This manifested in the visit of an Egyptian government delegation, including officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the General Intelligence Service, to western Libya, the first visit of its kind since 2014 – the period that witnessed a rift between the Sisi regime and the Government of National Accord (GNA), due to the former's political and military support of Khalifa Haftar. Observers have unanimously agreed that the Egyptian delegation's visit to Tripoli had significant indications, especially that it coincided with Cairo's refusal to be directly involved in the Libyan civil war to avoid repetition of the military operation, known as Operation Flood of Dignity, that was launched by Haftar in April 2019. The visit came a few days after Haftar had threatened to return back to war. The visit of the

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Egyptian delegation to Tripoli also sends positive messages to the GNA to the effect that Egypt supports the political option and wants to keep an equal distance from all parties.

During the visit, the Egyptian delegation and the Libyan Government of National Accord discussed significant issues, most notably political, diplomatic and security files, with the aim of overcoming any likely difficulties that may arise in the way of the initial restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries, as follows¹:

- 1- Activating the political agreements concluded between the two countries, most prominently the Four Freedoms Agreement related to ownership, residence, work, and movement; which was signed in the 1990s in the absence of a complete execution of its provisions on the ground,
- 2- Reviewing the security situation for re-opening the Egyptian embassy in Tripoli,
- 3- Activating a number of bilateral security and trade agreements,
- 4- Re-opening air and sea routes between Tripoli and Cairo.

The Egyptian delegation held a series of meetings with some Libyan officials in Tripoli, including Minister of Interior Fathi Bashagha, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohamed Taher Siala, Minister of Defense Salah al-Namroush, as well as Vice President of Presidential Council Ahmed Maiteeq.

The Egyptian delegation headed by the Deputy Director of General Intelligence Service Nasser Fahmi held several important meetings with Libyan Minister of Interior Fathi Bashagha, in the presence of Head of Libyan Intelligence Service Emad Trabelsi. The meetings handled the security challenges facing the two neighboring countries and ways to enhance security cooperation to overcome obstacles facing the Libyan-Egyptian national security. The two sides also discussed the outputs of the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission and emphasized their support to the efforts exerted in political dialogue sessions under the auspices of the United Nations to find a way out of the Libyan crisis through peaceful political means.

¹ Arabi21, 'What is behind the Egyptian delegation's visit to Tripoli and meeting with GNA officials?', 28 December 2020, accessed 15 March 2021, [link](#)

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The Egyptian delegation also met with Foreign Minister Mohamed Al-Taher Siala, where the two sides reviewed mechanisms for boosting and developing Egyptian-Libyan relations in all fields in favor of the common interests of the two countries. During this meeting, a set of provisions were agreed upon, most prominently the Egyptian pledge to reopen the Egyptian embassy in Tripoli and restoration of its diplomatic activity there as soon as possible, while the Libyan side provided options for resuming the Egyptian Embassy services once again from the Libyan capital.

It was also agreed to overcome all obstacles for ensuring the creation of appropriate conditions for the communication between citizens of the two countries, especially with regard to resumption of flights from Libya to Cairo, in addition to scheduling meetings between experts and specialists from both countries to activate and accelerate the items agreed upon².

Commenting on the visit, the Libyan Foreign Ministry announced that the Egyptian delegation reacted positively during discussion of the outstanding issues between the two countries, which constituted the start of rebuilding trust bridges between the two parties following years of estrangement due to the Egyptian regime's support for Khalifa Haftar. The Egyptian side has also confirmed that Cairo was working to restore stability to the Libyan state so that it would not return to the circle of war. On its part, the Libyan side assured the Egyptian delegation that Egypt's interests will be better secured with the Libyan state institutions that enjoy legitimacy, not with certain individuals.

Following this visit, another Egyptian delegation visited Tripoli for arranging the reopening of the Egyptian embassy and operation of a regular airline between Tripoli and Cairo³. In fact, an Egyptian Consulate was actually opened to provide consular services to the Egyptian community in Libya as a preliminary step before the official reopening of the Egyptian Embassy in Tripoli after absence for more than six years. Libyan flights to Egypt were also resumed, after a halt for more than a year.

In a remarkable shift in the course of Egyptian-Libyan relations, Prime Minister of Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU) Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh visited Cairo as his first foreign trip, only two weeks

² Arabi21, 'Egyptian delegation's visit to Tripoli: Reconfiguration of relationship with the Libyan West', 28 December 2020, accessed 16 March 2021, [link](#)

³ Al-Hurra, 'First step for reopening of the embassy .. Egypt confirms reopening a consulate in Libya', 15 February 2021, accessed 17 March 2021, [link](#)

after announcement of the victory of his list at the Libyan Dialogue Forum in Geneva. During the visit, Dbeibeh held talks with Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, where the latter emphasized Egypt's support of Libyan transitional phase track, based on Egypt's keenness on maintaining stabilization of the foundations of peace and stability with the aim of preserving the Libyan potentials. Sisi also emphasized "Egypt's full readiness to provide all its expertise and experience for the benefit of Libyans in a way that contributes to putting Libya on the right track and preparing the country to move towards horizons of construction, development and stability".

In the same context, Sisi announced his full support for the new Libyan Government of National Unity (GNU) headed by Abdel Hamid Dbeibeh, as the Libyan House of Representatives had granted the GNU confidence by a majority of 132/133 votes. Sisi emphasized the significance of that step in the course of settling the Libyan crisis, via ability of the new government to manage the transitional phase, achieve comprehensive reconciliation, and unify Libyan institutions ... up to the December 2021 elections. He also expressed Egypt's readiness to provide its expertise in areas that would achieve political stability and development that the Libyan people aspire⁴.

The major change that has affected the position of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's regime on the Libyan scene appears clearly in the diplomatic moves between Cairo and Tripoli, especially with respect to Cairo's opening to the Libyan West and not confining its activity to eastern Libya as it used to happen in the past, and the Egyptian attempt to establish contacts with the GNA by virtue of various considerations imposed by interim circumstances, including field and political fluctuations in the Libyan scene, which prompted Cairo to open up to all Libyan parties.

Second: Motives behind shift of Egyptian attitude

1- Military developments

The operation launched by the GNA forces, known as Operation Volcano of Rage, in the face of Haftar's forces' attack on Tripoli, played a significant role in reversing the balance of power at the field level, due to Haftar's failure to win the bet of controlling the western region, defeating the GNA

⁴ Arabicpost, 'Dbeibeh visits Egypt on his first foreign trip ... Al-Sisi: Ready to offer all our expertise to Libya, 18 February 2021, accessed 18 March 2021, [link](#)

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forces, and achieving his ultimate goal of seizing the entire Libyan soil. Despite the military and logistical support that Haftar had received from regional and international powers, the reality on the ground highlighted superiority of the GNA forces, backed by Turkey under a military cooperation agreement concluded in November 2019. The GNA's Operation Volcano of Rage inflicted great losses on Haftar's militia and revealed the extent of its vulnerability due to its indiscriminate tactical plans despite the great support that Haftar has received for years, particularly during his attack on Tripoli 2019, where the goal behind this military operation, known as Operation Flood of Dignity, was success of Haftar's project -actually the project of the regional and international axis that supports him- by gaining power via the use of military force.

Despite Sisi's warnings related to the GNA forces' response to Haftar's attack on the Libyan West, including threats of intervention on the ground to protect and preserve Egyptian national security, both field and political reality imposed a new approach on the Egyptian policy in Libya, given the fact that Cairo had been opposed to the Tripoli war launched by Haftar for fear of confusing Sisi's plans in Libya – However, Sisi ultimately submitted to the fait accompli as a result of the UAE pressure that has been greatly supportive of Haftar in that campaign. The shift in the military scene in favor of the GNA forces, reaching a ceasefire between the conflicting forces, and the subsequent progress in the political settlement process, made Cairo change its strategy on two fronts; Militarily, by maintaining survival of its ally, Khalifa Haftar, in the Libyan scene; and politically, on tracks of dialogue between Libyan factions supported by the international community. This was manifested by meetings between representatives of the two countries, most recently the visit of the new Libyan prime minister of the GNU government, Abdel Hamid Dbeibeh, to Cairo.

This visit is also viewed as a victory for the vision adopted by some parties within the Egyptian regime that had been opposed to the military orientation and the Egyptian forces' participation in military operation on the ground. The vision of those parties that had questioned Haftar's ability to win the battle, was to achieve balance in the Egyptian behavior towards all Libyan conflicting parties, to serve Egypt's strategic interests.

Therefore, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's regime has become quite certain of the need to change its policy in Libya, as betting on the military factor alone and continuing to support Haftar with weapons and equipment (since 2014) is unlikely to lead to the success of Haftar's project that several regional and

international powers have bet on. Instead, it will ultimately lead to a complete loss of Egyptian influence inside Libya. This prompted Cairo to change its equations by relying on a military-political balance, based on the changes and fluctuations in the regional and international arena.

2- Political developments:

The political settlement process in Libya is the key factor that prompted Cairo to change its policies in the Libyan scene, given the fact that the progress that took place in the tracks of this process via the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), where some of the LPDF meetings were held in Egypt, such as hosting the constitutional track discussions of the Libyan Constitutional Committee as well as meetings of the 5+5 Libyan Military Committee - all this imposed significant changes on the Egyptian position toward the Libyan issue.

The statements of the Sisi regime have significantly changed from their past statements, the regime currently emphasizes Egypt's full support for the political process, which 'constitutes stability not only for Libya, but also for its regional neighborhood, particularly Egypt, due to the fact that Libya's security and stability is linked with the Egyptian national security. Thus, Cairo wants to maintain its presence as an influential, not a marginal actor in the Libyan scene, by making balance in its positions towards the military and political solutions to ensure a position for itself in the event that any of the two tracks succeeds. Also, Cairo wants its position to be in line with the visions of the majority of international and regional positions that view the political process as the only track for ending the years-long conflict in Libya.

The Egyptian regime has realized that it is not possible to impose a political authority in Libya through the military option alone, which was clearly evident during the visits of Egyptian delegations to western Libya and opening the way for restoration of diplomatic relations with the UN-backed government, which had been severed over 6 years. Also, this approach has been boosted with the advent of a new executive authority that had regional and international acceptance, and whose prime minister chose Egypt as his first external destination, which pushed the Egyptian regime to realize the need to accept the changes brought about by the Libyan reality, that are acceptable to international legitimacy and international community.

Therefore, Sisi's regime has changed its policy in Libya at the political level by opening contact channels with all Libyan actors to ensure that it remains a party in the Libyan scene. Under the pretext of protecting the country's national security, the Egyptian regime targets achievement of its own interests manifested in provision of support to Haftar's project, albeit in a new way or under a new cover, given the fact that the Haftar project is in complete harmony with the policies of Sisi's Egypt that never accepts success of any democratic project in the region, because that constitutes a direct threat to the regime's existence that came through a coup against the nation's legitimate institutions.

3- Regional developments:

The regional factor has played a significant role in the shift of the Egyptian position toward the Libyan issue, via two tracks: the first track is linked to the UAE ally, and the second track is linked to the Turkish rival.

With respect to the first track, the Egyptian-Emirati interests have recently been in conflict, not only in Libya, but also in the whole region, especially with respect with Abu Dhabi's relationship with Addis Ababa regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the Tigray issue, in addition to the UAE's leading of the new wave of normalization with Israel, which appears to withdraw the rug from under the feet of the Egyptian regime that has monopolized this file for many years. Moreover, the UAE wants to establish itself as the decision-maker in all regional files, including the Libyan file, particularly its approach of adhering to the military solution of the issue and betting on resolving it through Haftar, at a time when Cairo believes in the need to change its strategy after the repeated losses of Haftar on the ground, which have greatly affected the Egyptian interests, given the fact that Egypt is geographically adjacent to Libya, which makes it the most affected party in the case of deterioration of the security situation there, unlike the UAE. In fact, not only the field and security situation that affected Egypt, but also the events in Libya had a great impact on the Egyptian economic file as well, due to the great effect of this situation on the Egyptian labor, as Libya was one of the most attractive markets for Egyptian labor, in addition to the great strategic and economic importance of Libya to Egypt regarding the oil file, as political stability in Libya (manifested in the presence of a Libyan government) will facilitate Cairo's import of Libyan oil at preferential prices.

Despite all this, the co-writers believe that the Sisi regime's dependency on the Abu Dhabi axis is unlikely to be affected, due to the fact that the relationship between the two parties is linked with

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files that are difficult to abandon, most prominently the fight against political Islam, in particular; and the Arab revolutions in general – a file that brought Bin Zayed, Sisi, and Bin Salman together in what can be called the counter-revolution alliance.

As for the second regional track, namely, the Turkish rival; since Turkey engaged in the Libyan issue, there were escalating statements from the Egyptian officials against the Turkish presence in Libya, where Sisi hinted at Egypt's likely military intervention in Libya, especially after the success of the GNA forces with Turkish backing based on a military cooperation agreement concluded between the two parties in November 2019, in resolving the military battle and ending the presence of Haftar and his militia in the West, which forced parties to the conflict to sit at the negotiating table after reaching a ceasefire agreement in August 2020. This made Cairo re-read the Libyan scene based on the Libyan changes on the ground, as well as the regional and international developments, which even affected the Egyptian-Turkish relations which have witnessed a lull over the past few months during which there were contacts between the two parties on security-intelligence coordination, a situation that has been imposed by several considerations, particularly the developments in the Libyan issue and the coordination in the Eastern Mediterranean, despite the fact that these understandings contradict the UAE plans that reject any coordination with Ankara in the Libyan file; but Egyptian-Turkish coordination has dramatically escalated over the past few days, which significantly reflected on the media file.

4- International developments:

There are several international variables that have imposed a new situation on the Libyan scene and also on the stances of international and regional powers, including Egypt, most prominently the departure of US President Donald Trump who used to consider Abdel Fattah al-Sisi his 'favorite dictator' and was supportive of the tripartite alliance of Mohammed bin Zayed, Abdel Fattah Sisi, and Mohammed bin Salman, including their vision of controlling Libya through military resolution manifested in Haftar's project. However, the equation has changed with the advent of the new US President Joe Biden who showed a tendency to practice pressures through the file of human rights and democracy. Also, he had used to stress in his speeches during his presidential election campaign the need to end some regional conflicts, including Libya, through which his administration seeks to limit the rise of the Russian influence there. Accordingly, Biden's rise immediately affected Haftar's supporters, especially Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who has attempted to preempt any likely US action by

changing his approach and role in Libya by opening up to the political process, opening contact channels with all Libyan parties, and emphasizing Egypt's support of the new civilian authority. Through these steps Sisi wants to present himself to the new US administration as an important partner in the Libyan dialogue process under the auspices of the United Nations.

Third: Scenarios of likely Egyptian role in Libya:

Within the framework of the above considerations, it can be said that the future tracks of the Egyptian regime's role in Libya include the following:

1- Scenario of abandoning Haftar:

Although this scenario is difficult and unlikely to achieve, it remains an option due to regional and international considerations and change of balances in the Libyan scene. However, this scenario remains dependent on a set of conditions and determinants, including:

a- Achievement of a settlement and political consensus through a comprehensive national reconciliation between various Libyan factions in the western and eastern Libya, provided that Haftar is not a part of this reconciliation, based on an internal, regional and international consensus. In this case, Sisi will be forced to abandon Haftar to be in line with the options of the international powers in ending the Libyan conflict that has been raging for years, especially the United States under the Biden administration that announced its endeavor to end many conflicts in the region, including the Libyan conflict and the war in Yemen. Sisi will then present himself as having had a major role in resolving the Libyan crisis, especially in light of Egypt's embrace of several Libyan dialogue meetings, whether in the political aspect related to the constitutional referendum and elections or in the military aspect related to the 5+5 joint Libyan military commission meetings to stabilize ceasefire. Thus, in case of the international community's agreement on the need to resolve the Libyan file through a political solution and not a military one, the Sisi regime will find itself prompted to obey decisions and directions of the international community.

b- Intensification of the UAE-Egyptian dispute in light of their conflicting interests over arrangement of conditions in the Libyan scene, as well as their differences in many other regional issues, affecting Egypt's regional interests, as happens in the UAE role with regard to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the its normalization of relations with Israel while overlooking Cairo in this concern,

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in addition to Haftar's choice of alliance with Abu Dhabi at the expense of Cairo, in light of the increasing military and financial and logistical support that the UAE provides to Haftar on a continued basis. In this case, the Sisi regime will consider itself the only loser in this equation in light of the increasing risks and threats of the adjacent Libyan quagmire, taking into account that these dangers and threats do not harm the security of the UAE that is geographically far from Libya.

c- The ongoing developments in the Turkish-Egyptian relations manifested in easing tension between the two countries, opening channels of dialogue and joint coordination between the two sides in several files, most notably the Libyan file, and in light of the two parties' keenness not to involve in a direct military conflict that could have dangerous repercussions, especially on the Egyptian side, which is directly adjacent to Libya, where any direct military confrontation could push Sisi into an undesired war in light of his regime's indulgence in many other crises that are more dangerous than the Libyan crisis, such as the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and Eastern Mediterranean Gas crises.

d- Haftar has been exposed to many losses and field setbacks, which means failure of his project in Libya; and this exactly what increases pressures on the Sisi regime in the event of maintaining provision of support to Khalifa Haftar, especially as his attack on Tripoli demonstrated weakness of Haftar's military capabilities, especially in light of the lightning field defeat that he was exposed to during the GNA's Operation Volcano of Rage, considered to be a great loss for the Sisi regime in light of Cairo's dissatisfaction with Haftar's attack on the Libyan West, known as Operation Flood of Dignity, which he led in April 2019, ignoring Cairo's warnings against taking that step due to its serious implications on the security situation and Sisi's political and military interests in Libya. This put Sisi in a difficult situation and subjected him a fait accompli that was not part of the plans of the targeted role of the Egyptian regime in the Libyan scene. Accordingly, the likeliness of Egypt's blocking of its support for Haftar will increase in light of his adherence to the military option, especially since that option has become a real threat to Egypt's border security.

2- Scenario of maintaining support to Haftar:

This scenario of maintaining support to Haftar by the Egyptian regime remains the most likely option, but such support may be provided directly or indirectly, where the latter remains the closest to the reality on the ground:

A- Direct support: This scenario may be likely in the event of failure of the political settlement as a result of Haftar's adherence to the military option with the expansion of field operations and continuation of the Russian role via the Wagner militias, in addition to continuing regional support from the UAE and international support from Russia and France, as the only way for Haftar to remain within the Libyan scene in light of his exclusion from the settlement equation and the political scene after the December 2021 elections. In such situation, Sisi's vision is likely to be provision of direct support to Khalifa Haftar and intervention in Libya militarily under the pretext of protecting the Egyptian national security against threats, while, in fact, he would be seeking to protect his regime from any shakeup that might befall it in case of failure of the project of Haftar that he has been betting on for resolving the conflict in Libya in his favor.

The likelihood of this scenario rises in the event of continuation of Bin Zayed's alliance with Sisi and settling the outstanding problems between them. Despite the points of contention between the two parties, the alliance between them, especially in Libya, is unlikely to be affected. While Bin Zayed prefers the military option in Libya, considering it the most decisive factor for success of his project there through Haftar, Sisi believes that his stay in bin Zayed's alliance will protect his regime from any likely consequences, especially that Bin Zayed was at the forefront of the regimes that have strongly supported the Sisi regime, in addition to considering Sisi himself the UAE's project within the framework of its leadership of the counter-revolutions axis.

B- Indirect support: This scenario may be the most likely track that the Egyptian regime will take within the framework of handling the Libyan file, where the Sisi regime will not completely abandon provision of support to the Khalifa Haftar project, but this will be within a long-term plan, by adopting a deception tactic and monitoring the situation to see what developments in Libya will lead to. Accordingly, Sisi may seek to restore his relations with the Libyan West, especially under the new interim government, and to embrace key forums of Libyan dialogue, so that his regime will secure a position within the political and military circles to ensure his continuity as a strong actor in the Libyan scene, thus opening the way for Haftar to be included within the political scene after the general elections in December 2021, and control the most powerful institution in the country, that is the military institution, and thus implement Haftar's project with UAE and Egyptian support as well as international support from one of the most powerful international actors, namely, Russia, leading to Haftar's access to power. The Sisi regime still views the success of Haftar's project as success and

extension of his own project that he established in Egypt with the help of the UAE that brought him to power in 2013 after planning Sisi's coup against Egypt's first elected civilian president.

Conclusion:

Reviewing developments of the Egyptian attitude toward the Libyan issue, there are several findings, including:

- 1- The Egyptian regime has changed its strategy in handling the Libyan issue and has become more open to all forces and actors in the Libyan scene, especially after failure of the military resolution in favor of Khalifa Haftar, through engagement in both political and military tracks at the same time, with the aim of avoiding a loss of strings of influence in the Libyan file.
- 2- Despite the interim changes in the Egyptian position on Libya, Cairo is still working with Abu Dhabi despite the outstanding differences between the two allies on tasks and roles, and both of them seek keeping Haftar as part of the Libyan scene and prevent a complete exclusion of him from the upcoming political settlement that all parties are working at the regional and international levels, because they believe that Haftar's absence from the scene is likely to bring the Libyan file back to ground zero and return to continuation of the conflict by means of force and arms. Therefore, it is unlikely that Cairo will completely give up Haftar's card in light of the lack of a clear vision on the final political scene so far.
- 3- The developments of the Libyan scene on the ground and at the political level, as well as the regional and international transformations, were among the key factors that led Cairo to changing its approach towards the Libyan issue, with the aim of securing an influential position in the Libyan scene in the event of success of the political settlement scenario.
- 4- The security and intelligence coordination between Turkey and Egypt in the Libyan file may have reached an advanced degree of rapprochement or understanding at the political level, which is likely to lead to a greater understanding between the two countries in other files.