

Egypt's Security and the Libyan Civil War

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On the periphery of international concern, the situation in Libya continues to disintegrate. Yet Libya's eastern neighbor Egypt has consistently exercised its influence in determining the diplomatic outcomes of the five year-long crisis. Recently, Cairo hosted talks between U.N. special representative to Libya Martin Kobler and Libyan tribal leaders. And both President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry have emphasized that Western powers should support the creation of a strong unity government prior to a military intervention against ISIS. Egypt sees its own role as even more involved: it has bombed ISIS outposts in Libya twice in the past two years.

Despite advocating for international diplomacy, evidence suggests that the Egyptian government has found a strong man in Libya's General Khalifa Hiftar to bring security, if not peace, to the area. Though once serving under Muammar Gaddafi, Hiftar fell out of favor over a military expedition in Chad, which pushed him into two decades of exile in northern Virginia. After returning in 2011 when the Libyan political situation unraveled, Hiftar now serves as commander of the so-called National Army, which is loyal to the internationally recognized government based in Tobruk.

The capability of Hiftar's forces to fight the array of Libyan oppositionist forces involved has likely suffered from the international ban on arms shipments to the country. During tours of Egypt, Jordan, and Russia last year, Hiftar called to have this ban lifted. Shoukry and Egyptian General Talat Moussa have echoed this statement, even as Egypt has begun shipping weapons to the National Army. According to a recent United Nations (UN) report, Egypt violated the arms embargo in both 2014 and 2015. Pictures have also circulated online of containers marked "The Arab Republic of Egypt" that were allegedly confiscated from Hiftar's forces by an Islamist opposition group. Moreover, Hiftar himself recently admitted in an interview with Egyptian media that he was working in close cooperation with Egypt, especially on intelligence sharing.

Arabic media reports from outside of Egypt also indicated that Hiftar has visited Egypt at least three times in the past year. In one case, Hiftar potentially met with Sisi himself, demonstrating the high priority that Egypt places on stability in Egypt's western borders.

While Egypt's interest in stability to its west is clear, Egypt's support of Hiftar may have unintended repercussions in Libya itself. Hiftar is a man U.S. defense officials view with "deep distrust," and Egyptian alignment with the General

could negatively impact U.S.-Egypt coordination in an airstrike campaign against ISIS in Libya.

Egypt has also taken independent measures to handle the growing threat along its nearly 700 mile border with Libya. Egypt's State Information Service have outlined the threat posed by its unsecured border, noting the spread of "large quantities of arms" and militias which are planning to execute terror attacks on the boundary. And violence on the border has been slowly building since reports first appeared of Egyptian aid to Hiftar: more than a year after an alleged-ISIS affiliate group perpetrated the "Farafra massacre" in 2014—killing twenty-two border guards at a remote checkpoint—ISIS itself claimed its first attack in Egypt's expansive Western Desert in September 2015. The terrorist group attacked an army patrol and executing an alleged spy. This deterioration is in concert with the military's ongoing fight against insurgent groups in North Sinai, leaving Egypt potentially vulnerable to attack on multiple fronts.

President Sisi visited military headquarters in Egypt's Western Region and the Libyan border to emphasize the state's dedication to following up on airstrikes conducted on ISIS strongholds inside Libya shortly after ISIS militants murdered twenty-one Copts in early 2015. Sisi's stay marked the first time an Egyptian president has visited the borderlands, further demonstrating Libya's growing impact on Egyptian national security. Afterwards, media coverage highlighted the air, land, and sea training currently being conducted to combat border threats.

However, the extent of independent Egyptian operations against terrorists in the Western Desert remains obscured. Information on the armed forces' operations is extremely limited, often mediated exclusively through the military spokesperson. Windows into the operations have opened only briefly, including when Egyptian authorities admitted that military Apache helicopters had fired on a convoy of Mexican tourists, killing twelve, after apparently confusing the tourist vehicles with terrorist units.

Information on military expenditures is similarly scarce. According to Egyptian defense officials, a portion of the \$1.3 billion in U.S. aid to Egypt is allocated to purchasing an equipment package that would help better patrol the Libyan border. Al-Arabiya has also reported that Egypt will buy portable watchtowers, monitoring sensors, and communications equipment worth \$100 million to specifically address the issue by providing early threat detection. As part of the agreement, the United States would train Egyptian servicemen on how to use the equipment,.

These media reports and official statements both suggest that Egypt is shoring up its security interests in the West. While Egypt's comprehensive actions may secure its own safety, the combination of its military secrecy and support for Hiftar may cause friction if Western powers decide to undertake an airstrike campaign against ISIS targets in Libya. And if Egypt and other international efforts cannot coordinate, Libya itself may continue to deteriorate.

Erica Wenig is a research assistant at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. She formerly worked as a journalist and studied Arabic in Egypt and Jordan. This item was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=9173&lang=en#.VxGcC_krLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=9173&lang=en#.VxGcC_krLIU). ❖

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