

Egypt's "Red Lines" in Libya

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Since 2014 Libya has been split between two rival administrations: the Tripoli-based "Government of National Accord" (GNA), led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, and the House of Representatives allied to General Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA). Tensions have been escalating in Libya between the two warring parties and between Egypt and Turkey the countries which back the warring parties.¹

On June 20, 2020, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi said that Egypt will not allow any threat to its western borders and threatened that "Libya's Sirte and Al-Jufra are considered the red line for Egyptian national security."² President El-Sisi warned forces loyal to the Government of National Accord (GNA) not to cross the current front line between them and forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar, whom Cairo backs.³

Sirte and Jufra are located at the center of Libya in between the political center of the capital Tripoli and the western part of Libya under the GNA control and Benghazi and the eastern part of the country controlled by the LNA. Sirte is the western gateway to the country's "oil crescent," that contains over 60 percent of Libya's oil, its main oil terminals and important military bases. Jufra province directly south of Sirte is home to the strategic al-Jufra air base, one of Libya's largest military bases.⁴

On July 16, 2020, President El Sisi said that Egypt will not stand still in the face of actions that pose a direct and strong threat not only for the Egyptian and Libyan national security but also for the Arab, regional and international national security. "The main objective of the Egyptian efforts

towards Libya on all levels is to support the free will of the Libyan people to achieve a better future for the country and its future generations." He reiterated Cairo's rejection of foreign interventions in Libya which aim to steal Libyan wealth.⁵

Libya's internationally recognized government (GNA) has denounced Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's threats of military intervention, saying his comments were akin to "beating the drums of war".⁶

Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavusoglu said on July 12, 2020 that Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya will only agree to a ceasefire if the Libyan National Army (LNA) withdraws from the Sirte and Jufra. He also hinted that Turkey could support a GNA offensive, saying that Ankara considers the GNA's "preconditions" for the ceasefire "legitimate and reasonable."⁷

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticized Egyptian support for LNA. Erdogan announced on July 17, 2020, that his country will sign a new deal with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), while slamming as "illegal" Egypt's meddling in Libya. He said Ankara will continue the responsibility it has undertaken in Libya and will not abandon the Libyan "brothers." He noted that Turkey had struck a military training deal with Libya and is in the process of drafting a new agreement with Tripoli, with the United Nations' support.⁸

The legal permission for military intervention in Libya

Egypt's parliament approved on July 20, 2020 sending troops on combat missions outside the borders to the Western strategic theater to defend Egypt's national security amid the expansion of the Turkey-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), which has moved fighters to capture the key coastal city of Sirte.⁹

Under Egypt's constitution, the president, who is the supreme commander of the Armed Forces, shall not declare war or deploy troops outside the country without seeking the opinion of the National Defense Council and the approval of a two-thirds majority of MPs. President El-Sisi has said he would take military action in Libya after securing the approval of the Egyptian parliament.¹⁰

The legitimacy for Egypt's military intervention in Libya

The Egyptian president stressed that "any direct interference from Egypt [in Libya] has now acquired international legitimacy, either with the right to self-defense or at the request of the only legitimate elected authority in Libya, which is the House of Representatives [Tobruk]."¹¹ President El-Sisi that Egypt had received "direct threats" from "terrorist militias and mercenaries" supported by foreign countries.¹²

Libyan parliament speaker, Akeela Saleh, said on June 24, 2020, that the Libyan people will request the military intervention of Egypt whenever needed. He said the Egyptian intervention "would be legitimate under the Libyan people's mandate." He added "We will request the intervention of the Egyptian armed forces to support the Libyan army in case of the capture of Sirte by armed militias."¹³

On June 20, 2020, a representative of the Libyan tribes called upon President El Sisi to protect Libya, saying, "On behalf of the Libyan tribes, we strongly request that you protect Libya and preserve its sovereignty and wealth for the benefit of the Libyan people."

President Sisi responded to the call and said that Egypt "is ready to support the Libyan brothers upon request," and expressed Egypt's readiness to train and arm the Libyan tribal youth under the supervision of leaders of the Libyan tribes. President Sisi explained that any intervention in Libya by Egyptian forces "would be led by the Libyan tribes," and stressed that "we only aspire for stability in Libya."¹⁴

On July 16, 2020, President El Sisi met a delegation of Libyan tribes. The meeting came days after the eastern-based Libyan parliament called on Egypt to intervene militarily to counter what it called "Turkish occupation". The meeting was held under the slogan "Egypt and Libya... one people, one fate."¹⁵ El-Sisi stated that "in case Egyptian forces enter Libya, you (the chiefs of tribes) will be on the head of the troops with the Libyan flag".¹⁶

Libya's tribal leaders mandated President El-Sisi and Egypt's Armed Forces to intervene to protect the sovereignty of Libya and to take the necessary

measures to secure the national security interests of Libya and Egypt and to face the common challenges.¹⁷

Arab countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have backed Egypt's right to defend its national security in neighboring Libya. The three gulf countries also backed Egypt's peace initiative for Libya as a move towards a ceasefire and political solution.¹⁸

The military readiness

Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi toured on June 20, 2020, the Matrouh airbase and inaugurated the Gargoub base in Egypt's Western Military Zone near Egypt's 1,200-kilometer-long western border with Libya. President El -Sisi also met with officials of the Egyptian army's signal corps and the Minister of Communications, to confirm technical readiness in the western region.

President El-Sisi was accompanied by Egyptian Minister of Defense and General Commander of the Armed Forces Mohamed Zaki, Chief-of-Staff Mohamed Farid, as well as commanders of the main branches of the Egyptian Armed Forces and leaders of Libyan tribes.¹⁹

On June 20, 2020, President El Sisi ordered his army to be ready to carry out any mission inside or outside the country to protect its national security.²⁰

President El-Sisi stated that Egypt was ready to train Libyan youth in Egyptian military academies so they would be the core of the Libyan army.

Exercise "Hasm 2020"

In July 2020, the Egyptian Army has carried out a military drill in the western military region near the Libyan border called "Hasm 2020". The drill, which included Egypt's Armed Forces' land, maritime, air, air defense and special forces was carried out over several days in July 2020 and was attended by the Minister of Defense and Military Production, Mohamed Zaki, and Army Chief of Staff, Mohamed Farid.²¹

The military maneuver included multi-task aircrafts, including helicopters that used live ammunition. "The exercises aim at eradicating elements of mercenaries, their gathering points, command centers as well as damaging all their logistics," Egypt's State Information Service said.²²

The drill came a day after the Turkish naval forces announced that they will carry out military exercises off the Libyan coast.²³

The beginning stage of the drills saw training to target enemy command posts with several intensive airstrikes in parallel with paratrooper drops to secure beachheads.²⁴

Naval units conducted several amphibious operations, including the firing by naval artillery of various calibers and the use of depth charges against enemy submarines.²⁵

Special naval forces trained to attack coastal targets by using speedboats dispatched from a Mistral helicopter carrier. Frigates launched several surface missiles in parallel with special forces units landing on the coast under aerial protection.²⁶

The peace initiatives

Since 2015, all significant peace negotiations have occurred outside Libya, under the direction of a foreign government. France, Italy, and the UAE have each hosted two high-level meetings. Additional high-level meetings have taken place in Cairo, Moscow and Berlin in 2019, but all these summits failed to achieve peace.

Two ceasefires have already been agreed this year, but both parties have accused one another of not adhering to such agreements while shelling and fighting continued. A January 2020 truce brokered by Turkey and Russia has been repeatedly violated and a military commission made up of five Haftar delegates and five GNA loyalists held talks in February 2020, but the dialogue was suspended.²⁷

On March 17, 2020, the UN and nine countries called on Libya's warring parties to cease hostilities to allow health authorities to fight against the new coronavirus. Peacemaking efforts became more complicated following the resignation of UN envoy Ghassan Salame in March 2020, while the Security Council has not yet agreed on a successor.²⁸

On May 4, 2020, the UN Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) appealed for a week-long truce starting to coincide with the beginning of Ramadan and warned of a new escalation in the conflict and urged pressure on countries backing the warring sides. However, diplomatic efforts to negotiate a political settlement have made little headway.²⁹

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in a phone call to Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj on May 23, 2020, called for an immediate halt to the fighting and return to political dialogue. He also criticized the continued level of weapons and munitions being brought into the country.³⁰

The United Nations' Libya mission (UNSMIL) said on June 2, 2020, the country's warring parties had agreed to the resumption of the Joint Military Commission 5+5 talks, aimed at reaching a lasting ceasefire, after a three-month suspension.³¹

The "Cairo Declaration" ³²

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, general Haftar, and Libya's parliament speaker Aguila Saleh announced on June 6, 2020, in Cairo a new joint political initiative to resolve the Libyan crisis ("Cairo Declaration"). The new initiative called for a ceasefire that would pave the way for electing a leadership council for Libya. The initiative also called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Libya. Several countries welcomed the proposal, including the United States, Russia, UAE and Saudi Arabia.

After GNA victories against Haftar the ceasefire, backed by Cairo, has been rejected by the GNA and its backer Ankara, which demanded that the LNA withdraw from Sirte.³³

Turkish Chief of Staff Yasar Guler and his Russian counterpart Valery Gerasimov discussed Libya on July 8, 2020, during a phone call. This followed a statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that Turkey and Russia are working on an immediate ceasefire in Libya.³⁴

Summary

The LNA launched an offensive in April 2019, in an attempt to extend Haftar's control into the western coastal areas, and especially the capital Tripoli. But Haftar's rapid advance on Tripoli stalled to a bloody stalemate on the edges of the capital.

In recent months the GNA, with extensive Turkish military backing, pushed LNA forces back from its foothold in southern Tripoli and other parts of the northwest and prepared a military operation, "Path of Victory", to capture the city of Sirte.³⁵

The GNA and the LNA have remained locked in a conflict that has drawn in several foreign powers. Libya is increasingly becoming a battlefield for

a geopolitical contest among regional and international powers. Turkey is a key ally of the GNA and Russia, UAE and Egypt are the main supporters of Haftar and the LNA.

The LNA forces' setbacks underscore the shifting dynamics of the conflict since Turkey intensified its intervention in January 2020, to help the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) to fight off Haftar's assault.³⁶

The capture of the al-Watiya airbase, the Tripoli international airport and the strategic coastal cities is a significant blow to Haftar's year-long campaign to seize the capital Tripoli from the GNA. It also means the GNA has changed its strategy from "defensive to offensive mode."

Amid growing tensions in the region Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said that Egypt has been coordinating with international and regional players in Libya, stressing that a military move would be Cairo's "last option to preserve its security." Shoukry explained "We refuse Turkey's attempt to expand in Libya," adding that Ankara's expansion in Syria, Iraq and Libya is in violation of international legitimacy.³⁷

Neither Russia nor Turkey are willing to give up their gains in Libya. But even with Turkish backing to the GNA and limited Russian support to the LNA, neither side seems capable of decisive victory. Direct Egyptian military involvement in the war can be the game changer in favor of the LNA forces.

Notes

¹ Haftar forces suffer string of defeats in battle for Tripoli, Al Jazeera, April 14, 2020.

² Sisi: Army Can Defend Egypt Security within its Borders and Beyond, Asharq Al Awsat, June 20, 2020.

³ Libyan official: Egypt's president 'beating the drums of war', Al Jazeera, June 21, 2020.

⁴ Libya conflict: Sirte-Jufra 'red line' set to be next major flashpoint, Al Arabiya, June 22, 2020.

⁵ Updated: Egypt can change the military scene in Libya, Sisi tells Libyan tribal leaders, Ahram online, July 16, 2020.

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- ⁶ Libyan official: Egypt's president 'beating the drums of war', Al Jazeera, June 21, 2020.
- ⁷ Turkish FM says Libya's GNA will only agree to ceasefire after taking Sirte, Jufra, Al Arabiya, July 12, 2020.
- ⁸ Erdogan Slams as 'Illegal' Egypt's Intervention in Libya, Asharq Al Awsat, July 18, 2020.
- ⁹ Egypt's parliament approves sending troops abroad to defend national security, Ahram online, July 20, 2020.
- ¹⁰ President El-Sisi has said he would take military action in Libya after securing the approval of the Egyptian parliament.
- ¹¹ Egypt carries out military drill near Libya border, Arab news, July 10, 2020.
- ¹² Egypt will not stand idle in face of threats to national security: Al-Sisi, Al Arabiya, July 16, 2020.
- ¹³ Libyan people will officially request Egyptian military intervention whenever needed: Parliament speaker, Ahram online, June 24, 2020.
- ¹⁴ Sisi: army can defend Egypt security within its borders and beyond, Asharq Al Awsat, June 20, 2020.
- ¹⁵ Updated: Egypt can change the military scene in Libya, Sisi tells Libyan tribal leaders, Ahram online, July 16, 2020.
- ¹⁶ President El-Sisi has said he would take military action in Libya after securing the approval of the Egyptian parliament.
- ¹⁷ Updated: Egypt can change the military scene in Libya, Sisi tells Libyan tribal leaders, Ahram online, July 16, 2020.
- ¹⁸ Arab countries support Egypt's right to protect its security and border with Libya, Ahram online, June 21, 2020.
- ¹⁹ Sisi says any Egyptian intervention in Libya now has international legitimacy, Ahram online, June 20, 2020.
- ²⁰ Sisi says any Egyptian intervention in Libya now has international legitimacy.
- ²¹ Egypt carries out military drill near Libya border, Arab news, July 10, 2020.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Egyptian army continues Hasm 2020 military drills, Ahram online, July 11, 2020.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.

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- ²⁷ UN Welcomes Libyan Warring Parties' Agreement to Restart Talks, Asharq Al Awsat, June 2, 2020.
- ²⁸ Haftar forces suffer string of defeats in battle for Tripoli, Al Jazeera, April 14, 2020.
- ²⁹ Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.
- ³⁰ Pompeo urges Libya's Turkish-backed GNA to accept ceasefire, end fighting, Al Arabiya, May 23, 2020.
- ³¹ UN Welcomes Libyan Warring Parties' Agreement to Restart Talks, Asharq Al Awsat, June 2, 2020.
- ³² Sisi says any Egyptian intervention in Libya now has international legitimacy.
- ³³ Libyan official: Egypt's president 'beating the drums of war'.
- ³⁴ Turkey Escalates in Libya with Naval, Air Maneuvers, Asharq Al Awsat, July 9, 2020.
- ³⁵ Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.
- ³⁶ Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.
- ³⁷ Egypt says military solution in Libya is 'last option' to preserve security, Ahram online, June 21, 2020.