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Libyan Dilemma and Egyptian National Security

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The recent mobilization of the political regime in Egypt against international interventions in Libya in favor of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) and its regional allies comes in the wake of the Turkish-Libyan memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in November 2019, including a military section and a section about the natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean region, on which both Egypt and Turkey have different views.

This paper explores the national security equations six years after the Egyptian intervention in Libya and the national interests targeted, refuting some of the fallacies that are used to promote this vision.

Egyptian view on the Libyan revolution

While it is rare to find in-depth Egyptian studies of the Libyan situation before 2014, you may find a stream of superficial analyses about the situation in Libya, sometimes describing it as a “civil war” and other times as “war against terrorism” allegedly waged by Khalifa Haftar, up to the Egyptian intervention and provision of military support to Haftar under the pretext of “defending Egyptian national security” in Libya.

However, when it comes to the Ethiopian threat to the Egyptians’ share of Nile water or the Israeli seizure of Egyptian natural gas reserves and re-exporting it to Cairo through intermediary companies affiliated with the regime’s sovereign bodies, talk about the Egyptian national security completely disappears.

The claim that Arab revolutions are nothing but a ‘conspiracy’ against Arab countries had a lot of momentum after the wave of counter revolutions in 2014, the deterioration of conditions in Egypt, and the escalation of the terrorist crisis in Iraq and Syria with the emergence and spread of ISIS, and then the international interventions and alliances to combat it. Meanwhile, Arab revolutions subsided in favor of the authoritarian regimes that used allegations of war on terror as a pretext to practice more repression on their peoples.

Many of these regimes have also exploited well-established scientific terms in political science such as “national security”, “state”, “power” and “legitimacy” only to serve their personal interests: while they believe that the provision of support to the legitimate government in Yemen is an established issue, they view provision of support to GNA, the legitimate government in Libya, as a relative question.

Roots of tension in Egypt-Libya relations

The tension in the Egyptian-Libyan relations dates back to the early days of the Libyan revolution, when the Egyptian recognition of the Transitional National Council as the sole representative of the Libyan people came very late. Moreover, the Egyptian regime hosted some former senior officials of the Gaddafi regime, such as Ahmed Gaddafi Al Dam, who had fled to Egypt to seek winning over the Awlad Ali tribes that inhabit the eastern Libyan border and the Egyptian Matrouh governorate and mobilize them against the Libyan revolutionaries in support of the Gaddafi regime.

The tension of Egyptian-Libyan relations increased after the July 3 military in Egypt (2013), where the counter-revolution in Egypt encouraged Khalifa Haftar to announce his first failed coup on February 14, 2014; then his second failed coup in June of the same year, both of which were supported by tribal alliances loyal to the former Gaddafi regime, the Madkhali-Salafist movement which is hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood, and some components of the civil (liberal) stream that do not recognize politics, elections, or parliaments as a means of change.

Libya has been a source of concern for the new Egyptian regime after 2014 in terms of its misreading of the scene there, considering it as ‘a conflict between national forces with a reliable military support on the one hand, and hostile political Islam forces with an armed backing on the other, which is a wrong reading of the Libyan situation with its developments and complications from the outbreak of the revolution against the Gaddafi regime until 2014.

The Libyan case, as of February 2014, was on the path of democratic transformation, perhaps much better than the Egyptian track, which has completely collapsed and moved away from the hopes of “bread, freedom and social justice”. Despite the armed struggle against the Gaddafi regime and international interventions to help bring it down, Libyans organized themselves in a Transitional National Council, formed a transitional government in March 2011, and accomplished the

transformation from the “Transitional National Council” as a transitional authority to the “General National Congress” as an elected authority, proceeded to elect a constitution-writing committee, and elected a parliament that was not dominated by any political current.

However, Khalifa Haftar soon emerged along with his loyal militias he later called “Libyan National Army”, supported by some allies at home, including the pro-Federalism in Libya, and some foreign allies that have interests in Libya, which completely turned the tables on the democratic transformation path, amid withdrawal of important national figures and abandonment of their responsibilities.

Following Al-Sisi's footsteps in Egypt, Haftar sought to gradually cover up his military coup using “war on terrorism” allegations to gain a kind of legitimacy and external support. He then used the dissolved parliament in Tobruk in the Libyan East and its government to classify many anti-battalions and figures, that were still in power until 2014, as “terrorists”, at a time when the international community sought integration of the revolutionary brigades in various cities and regions into the nascent Libyan army and security services as part of any stability bid, especially that these revolutionary brigades actually function as local police.

Egyptian national security to the Sisi regime

Many of those who promote the Egyptian official narrative do not realize that the Libyan people – that is denied the right to democracy, freedom, and decent living – participated extensively in the first elections held in Libya since 1965, elected active municipal councils that effectively exercise state power in their cities and municipalities up to date despite renewed fighting and worsening conditions. On the other side, Egypt has not held local elections since the dissolution of municipal councils in 2011, that is, nine years ago.

The Egyptian official and even research and media vision is based on the fallacy that the Islamists, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood and its Justice and Construction Party, won the majority in the elections that were held prior to the launch of Operation Dignity by Haftar in 2014, a claim that is completely groundless. In these elections, the National Forces Alliance led by Mahmoud Jibril won 39 seats out of 80 seats allocated to political parties while the MB's Justice and Construction Party won only 17 seats allocated to parties.

Also, the influence of the Islamists that the Egyptian regime used to reduce to the Muslim Brotherhood has been severely diminished in the parliament elections that were held in May 2014. When the civil (liberal) current insisted on adopting the individual system in parliament elections, the tribal and federal tendencies deepened leading to a drop in the seats of the blocs of both the civil current and the political Islam trend on the one hand, and a rise in the seats of the regional, tribal, and anti-revolutionary conservative trends on the other, amid a remarkable low turnout: the number of registered voters in the electronic voter register reached 1,509,317, while only 630,000 voters participated in the election process, about nearly one-third of the previous elections turnout, where the MB's Justice and Construction Party won only 30 seats and the rest of the parliament seats went to supporters of federalism and local trends.

If these people argue that the Egyptian interference in the Libyan equation is to protect Egypt's national security, then why do these people not tell us about the results of this support six years after its inception? Why was there no evaluation of such move whether in the domesticated parliament whose members were chosen by the Egyptian sovereign bodies or within these sovereign bodies themselves, being responsible for these operations?

If semi-stable Libya lent Egypt three billion dollars in March 2013 (in the form of \$2 billion as deposit with the Central Bank of Egypt and one billion dollars in fuel as Egypt was going through a crushing funding and energy crisis, , then what has Haftar provided for Sisi's regime so far, especially that it has been supporting it over the past 5 years, under the pretext of defending Egypt's national security?

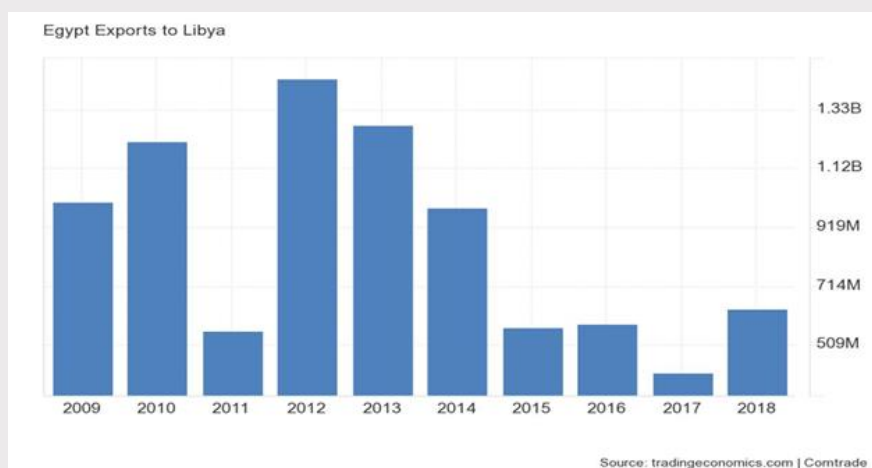
While Haftar and his militias were formally controlling eastern Libya adjacent to Egypt's western border, the worst penetration of borders and the largest terrorist operation targeting the Egyptian security forces have occurred, namely the al-Wahat al-Bahriya attack, about 135 kilometers (84 miles) from Cairo on October 20, 2017, where attackers reportedly came from the Libyan territory, leaving 16 Egyptian security forces dead and injuring 13 others, according to Egyptian official data. This attack was preceded by attacks in Minya, Upper Egypt, most recently the Minya bus attack that killed 29 and injured 23 others, an operation te Egyptian security sources said was planned with the help of Libyan groups embracing ISIS thought, including the entry and exit of these elements across Egypt's western border, at a time when Haftar was claiming that he has full control over the border with Egypt and protecting Egypt from terrorism.

The Sisi regime's intervention in Libya under the pretext of protecting Egypt's national security has undermined the faltering Egyptian efforts to mediate between various Libyan parties. Since the beginning of the legitimacy crisis in Libya and Sisi's support of Haftar, Egypt has lost the capacity of a fair mediator in the Libyan equation. Moreover, the Egyptian regime's reluctant recognition of the results of the international track and the Skhirat agreement did not prevent it from supporting Haftar despite the growing international discontent towards his repeated raids on Tripoli and Libyan cities, which foiled the intense diplomatic efforts addressing the Libyan crisis.

The Egyptian intervention in Libya is based on the idea of antagonizing the Arab revolutions that were behind the rise of the Islamic trend, considering the political Islam political forces its regional enemy that must be eliminated, which was behind failure of Libyan consensus without achieving any Egyptian national interest or even imposing stability in Libya at a time when the Sisi regime is promoting that the Egyptian intervention in Libya aims to protect the country's national security.

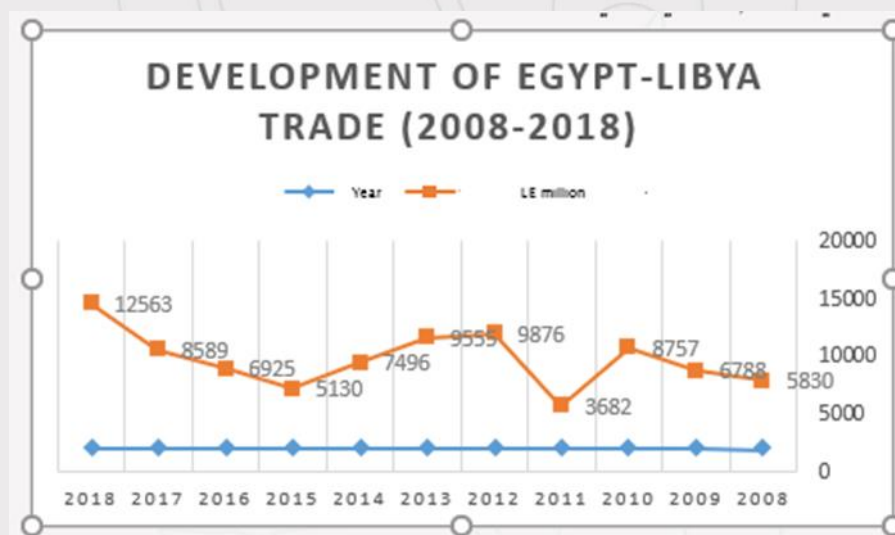
The economic dimension of national security

While Turkey has much more economic and commercial interests in Libya than Egypt, Libya's direct neighboring country. Also, while Turkey plans to raise Turkish exports to Libya by more than 571 percent, to reach 10 billion dollars, compared to about 1.49 billion dollars in 2018, according to the Turkish Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MUSIAD), there are no Egyptian plans in this regard; instead, there is a remarkable decline in Egyptian investments in Libya (\$520 million) which led the Egyptian-Libyan Business Forum to express dissatisfaction over this decline as well as the decline in Libyan investments in Egypt by about 25%.



Available data on trade show a sharp decline in indicators of Egyptian exports to Libya to less than 50% of the exports in 2009 and about a third of the exports in 2012 and 2013, where the Egyptian-Libyan relations significantly developed due to the relative stability of power in both countries. At that time, Libya played an important role in solving the fuel crisis and the decline in international funding. In April 2013, the Libyan government loaned Egypt \$2 billion without interest, to be repaid over five years, with a grace period of three years, to support the Egyptian economy, the state's general budget and foreign exchange reserves. In contrast, what has Haftar and his fragile alliance in the Libyan East offered to Egypt after six years of provision of significant support, including armament, training, and direct intervention?

The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMS) is trying to circumvent these numbers by converting these figures to the local currency, so that CAPMAS data would show that there is a steady increase in the value of trade in the Egyptian pound, while the value of the Egyptian currency decreased by 50% after the flotation decision in November 2016, which does not change the fact that there has been a sharp decline in trade with Libya since 2013 as we can see in the following graph:



Graph prepared by the researcher based on CAPMS data

Also, Egypt State Information Service (SIS) recognizes that there has been a decline in indicators of cooperation and trade between the two countries in recent years, as the volume of trade decreased from \$2.5 billion in 2010 to about \$500 million in 2018, and that there are obstacles to activating the joint trade agreement signed in 1990 between them.

On the other hand, the Turkish side strengthens its relations with Libya as home to its investments and trade and as a transit point for this trade to the rest of the Central African countries.

Meanwhile, the regime in Egypt has a fundamental water problem threatening its environmental, economic, food and water security as well as the country's food sovereignty, as the water crisis will contribute to the decline of the cultivated area and the decrease of Egypt's ability to meet its food needs as well as the deterioration of its agricultural exports, which would certainly affect the trade balance. In addition, the scarcity of water is likely to affect the movement of people, their internal and external migration, and indicators of unemployment and poverty.

Conclusion

There is an international conclusion about Libya that no military solution is possible there. Also, the party supported by Egypt is not recognized internationally, and after six years of support it was unable to control a fixed area of the Libyan territory and that its control is only formal.

Egypt should rethink its plans, move away from the political schemes with Turkey, and return to the position of the mediating party to reach a settlement of the Libyan crisis on the basis of the Skhirat agreement and the international efforts, for Libya's stability means an immediate start of the process of reconstruction; and a positive role for Egypt in such settlement may lead to a greater share for the Egyptian contracting companies in the reconstruction pie.

With regard to the Turkish-Libyan security, military, and maritime agreement, at least the part of the agreement related to demarcating the maritime borders between Libya and Turkey does not harm Egyptian interests, but it rather adds to Egypt wider maritime spaces and rights than the Egyptian-Greek-Israeli maritime border demarcation, which requires a review by the Egyptian regime of its previous maritime demarcations with Israel, Greece and Cyprus.