

Position Paper

Risks of Egypt's Military Intervention in Libya

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Right: Screenshot from execution video of twenty-one Egyptian Copts
Left: Aftermath of Egyptian air force strikes on city of Darna, Libya
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Abstract

An armed group calling itself the Tripoli Province of the Islamic State executed twenty-one Egyptian Copts in the Libyan city of Sirte last week, sparking a global wave of anger. This provoked the Egyptian government to launch hasty air raids; however, these raids surprisingly did not target Sirte, where the executions took place, but rather the city of Darna, killing and wounding civilians. This paper argues that the Egyptian government's strikes were retaliatory and misguided by any standards. Not only did the air strikes clearly hit civilian targets, but the extent of damage, if any, inflicted on rebels belonging to the Darna Mujahideen Shura Council is still unclear. Also unclear are the whereabouts of the rebels and their camps, raising speculations about whether the air raids were just a prelude to wider Egyptian intervention, as well as the nature and extent of any such intervention.

Introduction

On 15 February 2015, an armed group, calling itself the Tripoli Province of the Islamic State and claiming affiliation with Daesh (the Islamic State or IS) in Libya, posted a video on the Internet showing the apparent execution of twenty-one Egyptian Copts. Independent observers believe the event took place on the shores of the city of Sirte based on their use of the Google Earth service. That evening, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi delivered a hasty speech in which he condemned the incident and reserved the right to respond. He also convened the Supreme Defence Council in a meeting that continued late into the night. On the following day, four Egyptian Air Force fighter jets

carried out two consecutive raids on targets in the city of Darna instead of Sirte, justifying the attacks by claiming Darna was in the hands of Daesh.

The Egyptian raids, which followed a massive inflammatory media campaign by pro-Egyptian regime media outlets, have ignited controversy and speculation in various quarters. Many are questioning whether Sisi's regime will use the heinous incident to justify a large-scale military intervention in Libya, with the excuse of resolving the ongoing conflict in its oil-rich neighbour while in reality pushing the outcomes in favour of its allies in Tobruk and forces loyal to Colonel Khalifa Haftar. This paper analyses what Egypt is capable of achieving in Libya, and the probabilities of an external intervention in the Libyan crisis.

Hasty response

Libya is host to a large Egyptian community of workers. Indications of the Sisi regime's support for the Tobruk government and General Haftar have prompted kidnappings and murders of Egyptians in Libya, especially Copts, after the Egyptian Coptic Church declared its support for the Egyptian regime. The specific group believed to have been executed at the hands of the Sirte militants was kidnapped two months ago, but there is no evidence that the Egyptian authorities have exerted real efforts to communicate with the kidnappers and ascertain their demands, or even to try to secure the lives of the abductees through official or unofficial channels. The other issue is that it is difficult to ascertain whether all the individuals who appeared in the video are Egyptians, or whether they are all Copts.

The video's publication greatly embarrassed the Egyptian regime, both because it had done so little over the past two months to secure the release of the abductees, and because the event targeted Egyptian Copts at a time when the Egyptian Church has become the strongest supporter of the coup regime. More importantly, the video was posted during a period when the regime is embroiled in crises and amid waning political support from those sectors that had initially welcomed it. The deepening economic crisis as well as the leaked recordings from al-Sisi's office when he was a commander of the army have negatively impacted his public image and his relations with allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Thus, the decision to respond to the Sirte incident had to be taken; otherwise Sisi would have paid a high political cost. The retaliation happened very quickly and within a few hours after the Supreme Defence Council's meeting ended.

However, the raids, carried out by four aircraft of the Egyptian Air Force, did not target the Tripoli Province group in Sirte, which is located on the west coast of Libya, but rather hit targets that cannot be easily identified as being under the group's jurisdiction, in the city of Darna, east of Benghazi. It is known that a group called 'Ansar al-Sharia' exists in

Darna, and there is some ambiguity about whether this group pledges allegiance to the Islamic State or to al-Qaeda.

Notwithstanding this, Ansar al-Sharia is part of the Darna Mujahideen Shura Council, and is committed to the panel's policies, known to be loyal to the General National Congress, the Tripoli Transitional Government and the Fajr Libya command (Libya Dawn) operation. On the other hand, little information is available about the surprising and sudden emergence of the Tripoli Province in the city of Sirte. It is not yet known whether the group consists of Libyans only or if it is a mixture of Libyans and foreign jihadis, and whether or not it has considerable military force.

The fact that the Egyptian raids targeted Darna and ignored Sirte indicates that Egyptian leadership had chosen an easy target, one closer to the Egyptian border than Sirte, which is relatively far away. Choosing this target also reflects Darna's significant status in the Libyan conflict. The city, which Colonel Haftar's forces failed to seize, constitutes a strategic block that impedes coastal communications between Tobruk and Benghazi. Haftar's forces are engaged in a bitter battle to take control of Libya's second largest city, and Haftar is obliged to use a long desert detour to send supplies to his troops in Benghazi.

Egyptian intervention: extent and conditions

Egypt has one of the largest armies in North Africa. The Egyptian army is also one of the few armies in the region with operational experience of fighting in a desert environment. Apart from Tobruk government's and Haftar forces' pleas for Egypt to intervene militarily, Libya represents a huge market for Egyptian labour and products, and can be a source of cheap oil for Egypt. It is not unlikely that Cairo has decided to intervene in Libya and that the United Arab Emirates, a close ally of the Egyptian regime which plays a major role in supporting Tobruk and Haftar's forces, will shoulder the financial costs of the operation. The regional and global sympathy with Egypt, engendered by the execution of the Egyptian captives, and the consequent outpourings of anger and disapproval in Egypt and Libya, and across the Arab region and the world, theoretically mean that the Sisi regime can indeed intervene militarily in Libya.

However, the constraints to any Egyptian intervention in Libya are not insignificant. Despite the size of the Egyptian armed forces, there is considerable doubt about the efficiency of the Egyptian army and its ability to conduct a major military operation outside the borders of its own country. The Egyptian army has not engaged in a real battle since 1973, and it is widely believed that the economic activities of the military institution have corrupted large segments of the officer class. Furthermore, the Egyptian army lacks any significant experience in fighting against paramilitary armed groups, or

fighting inside cities and residential communities. In fact, the Sinai armed groups, whose members do not exceed hundreds, have inflicted significant losses on Egypt's military forces during their operations in northern Sinai over the past eighteen months. Equally important, the majority of Libyans, despite their repudiation of jihadi groups, would reject any Egyptian military intervention in Libyan affairs.

Furthermore, the Egyptian army's operations abroad (in the modern era) do not instill much confidence. Indeed, the Egyptian army suffered large losses and painful defeats during the Palestine War at the end of the 1940s, and the Yemen Civil War in the early 1960s. The defeat in Palestine was one of the reasons that led to the July 1952 coup. Similarly, Yemen war losses had exorbitant and profound impacts on Egyptians' support for Nasser's regime. In fact, it is believed that the Egyptian intervention in Yemen contributed to the weakening of its army and its grave failure in the third Arab-Israeli War during June 1967.

Politically speaking, Algeria and Cairo are competing for influence in Libya, and Sisi is aware that a direct large-scale military intervention without Algeria's approval will generate reactions in Algeria, and may lead Algiers to extend support to the rebels and the Tripoli government. Among the condemnatory statements about the hostage killings issued by most Arab countries and a number of Western ones expressing sympathy with Egypt, Algeria's official statement clearly included an emphasis on the need for continuous concerted efforts to reach a 'political solution' to the Libyan crisis.

It is most therefore likely that Egyptian direct intervention will be limited to the two retaliatory raids, carried out on 16 February, and that the Egyptian Air Force will not strike again unless the Tripoli Province group undertakes new provocative actions. At the indirect level, it was no secret that Cairo provided military aid to Haftar's forces over a year ago, including training programs and military equipment, believed to be funded by the United Arab Emirates. The extent of such indirect intervention may become larger and somewhat higher in the next few months.

Probability of Arab, international intervention

Cairo's growing concern over the Libyan situation, the inability of Haftar's forces to achieve tangible progress to resolve the dispute, and the difficulty of Egypt's solo intervention raise two other possibilities: a collective Arab intervention, or an international intervention involving Egyptian or other Arab forces.

An Arab intervention would require an Arab League resolution and wide Arab support. The Sisi regime was expected to appeal to the Arab League and seek such a resolution after the Sirte incident. It did not do so mainly because it was probably aware that

Algeria would not support an Arab military intervention. Despite the fact that some GCC states may back an Arab intervention, it is not certain that Qatar and even Saudi Arabia, Oman and Sudan would approve it. In addition, the countries likely to support such intervention lack the military capabilities to do so.

The only other solution is an international intervention requiring a resolution from the UN Security Council (UNSC), and the willingness of a number of major western countries to participate. The Council held an emergency meeting on the Libyan situation following the Sirte incident; however, no member country of the Council has yet announced that it will submit a new draft resolution on Libya. If a member state submits a draft resolution to provide international legitimacy cover for military intervention, the draft resolution could be limited or expansive, the former limited to fighting the Tripoli Province group, or the latter for large-scale intervention focused on forcefully rebuilding a unified Libyan state. Such a draft resolution may not secure enough support, especially given Russia's traditional rejection of western military intervention in the affairs of other countries.

Whatever the UNSC's position on international military intervention in Libya, an interference of this kind is difficult to accomplish without US participation. There are indications that Italy and France have become more willing to intervene in Libya, but 2011 western intervention provided sufficient evidence that European countries cannot, without US participation, bear the burden of a large-scale and long-term military operation, particularly a willingness to stay in the country for the long-term to reinforce peace and re-build the state. In the statement issued by the western countries and the US on Tuesday, 17 February, in response to the Sirte executions, they renewed their commitment to the peaceful resolution of the Libya issue, which probably means a rejection of foreign military solutions.

Intervention risks

During the first months of 2015, the UN Envoy to Libya, Bernardino Leon succeeded in engaging most of the parties to the Libyan crisis. In a move that shows progress of the dialogue efforts, Libyans agreed to move the venue of their dialogue from Switzerland to Libya. The first dialogue session has already been held in Libya, with participants expected to begin debating core dispute issues in subsequent sessions. However, the Sirte incident, the Egyptian air strikes, and increasing calls for foreign intervention from the Tobruk government and from Haftar personally, have cast doubt on the dialogue's future and whether it will resume soon.

After long months of fighting on more than one front between the various parties, and the decline in Libya's financial capabilities, which is considered one of the richest oil-exporting countries, as well as the increasing number of refugees, there is no longer

disagreement that the solution to the Libyan crisis must be reached through negotiations. Foreign military interventions, be they Egyptian, Arab or western, will increase the complexity of the crisis and the pain of the Libyan populace and deepen their losses. Such interventions could also cause significant harm to the Egyptian army, and to any other intervening military forces, which in turn would provide more fertile ground for the growth of militant groups, and aggravate the crises instead of solving them.

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