

A Convergence of Crises for Egypt: Libya, Ethiopia, and Northern Sinai

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Brief Analysis

For what may be the first time in modern Egyptian history, the country is facing three battlefronts simultaneously: the war in Libya with its threat from Turkey, the existential threat of the Grand Renaissance Dam, and the escalation of terrorist operations in the Sinai Peninsula. To the Egyptian regime's misfortune, this complex situation coincides with an economic crisis in the country further compounded by the pandemic. What makes matters worse is the domestic threat posed by a political faction, the Muslim Brotherhood, that does not hide its alignment with foreign governments hostile to Sisi, leaving him with several challenging options in how to manage the situation.

Sirte: A 'Red Line' in Libya

After a series of losses suffered by the Egyptian- and UAE-backed General Khalifa Haftar, during which troops from the Turkish-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) came close to capturing the city of Sirte, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi announced the Cairo Declaration in June as a proposal to end the Libyan conflict.

The proposal included a constitutional declaration, the dissolution of militias, and a ceasefire between the two sides. However, this declaration was rejected by the GNA, which persisted towards Sirte. The GNA's rejection of Egypt's initiative led Sisi to clearly suggest direct confrontation and military intervention by announcing that the axis of Sirte and Jufra was a "red line."

Now, though the two sides are engaged in a fragile ceasefire, the question of Sirte remains a major point of contention and of deep concern to Cairo and numerous other involved parties in Libya. GNA control of this territory would mean Turkish control over the "oil crescent" region and the al-Jufra Airbase, ultimately leading to the swallowing up of all eastern Libya. Turkey is able to profit from drilling, reconstruction, and the preservation of the maritime boundaries agreement signed by GNA Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj. GNA control of eastern Libya would also represent a threat to Egypt's national security along its 1200-kilometer western border, given its clear and open hostilities with Erdogan, the largest regional supporter of Islamist political groups. In this sense, Egypt's concerns align with those of the UAE as both are engaged in a broader regional conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, the UAE and Egypt have consistently supported the "Eastern Libya" camp including both General Khalifa

Haftar and Aguila Saleh, President of the House of Representatives in Eastern Libya's parallel government.

Aligning with Egypt, Russia supports General Haftar, finding in him a suitable partner to help it enter Libya's energy market and permit Russian use of Libya's Tobruk and Derna ports on the Mediterranean. Use of these ports would contribute to Russia's current presence in the Mediterranean already active in the Syrian port of Tartus. Russian control of the al-Jufra airbase as a permanent base would, along with attempts to establish a naval base in Sirte, firmly anchor Russian presence in North Africa.

Russia in particular involved itself in 2017 when Moscow provided care for wounded soldiers in Haftar's army and later sent hundreds of mercenaries from the **Wagner Group (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52571777>)**, a covert Russian military group, to Libya. Though Moscow has stated it has no relationship with the company, it has not denied the presence of these forces in Libya. An official statement from U.S. Army African Command on **Twitter (<https://twitter.com/USAfricaCommand/status/1265630878295785477?s=20>)** has further claimed that Russian combatants have traveled to Libya, stopping in Syria where they painted over their Russian camouflage.

Though also involved, the positions of France and Italy fluctuate between the two groups to varying degrees. The French oil giant Total owns 75 percent of the drilling rights in the Al-Jurf oilfield, in addition to shares in the Waha, El Sharara, and Murzuq Basin fields. France leans towards Haftar's camp, though not to the extent of cutting ties with the Sarraj camp. In contrast, Italy leans more towards the Sarraj camp, but sees Turkey's military intervention as weakening Italy's historic presence in Libya and prolonging the duration of the war. An ongoing conflict harms the interests of Italy's Eni oil company and increases the flow of migrants across the Mediterranean to Italy, a potential threat to Italian national security.

Meanwhile, the United States has had little involvement in Libya, restricting its concern in the matter to the elimination of terrorism, in large part accomplished after the failure of ISIS to establish an Islamic emirate in Sirte, and to preventing Russia from taking over in Libya as it did in Syria. This concern was expressed in no uncertain terms by General Stephen Townshend, the commander of US Africa Command, who said, "If Russia is allowed to effectively shape the ultimate result of the Libya conflict, the US will not like the outcome." The **White House (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-national-security-adviser-robert-c-obrien-regarding-libya/>)** released a statement on August 4 clearly indicating its rejection of the presence of foreign military forces on Libyan soil, calling for all sides to enable the Libyan National Oil Corporation to resume its vital work and the subsequent search for just political solutions. The demand has already been realized by two separate statements released by the Head of the Presidential Council of Libya (in Tripoli) Fayez al-Sarraj and the President of the Libyan House of Representatives (in the east) Aguila Saleh. The two parties announced a ceasefire and the resumption of pumping oil, as well as negotiations to make Sirte and al-Jufra demilitarized zones. It also put forward the idea of carrying out new presidential and parliamentary elections.

However, demonstrations quickly flared up in the capital, Tripoli, decrying the deterioration of economic conditions, quickly resulting in a return to the cycle of tension and exchanged accusations between the West and the East.

With such a complex landscape, it is difficult to predict the future of Libya. Several possibilities are equally likely, with the most important question for Egypt being the following: setting aside the economic cost of war, a large portion of which the UAE might cover, are the Egyptian military and Egyptian state in general prepared to enter into a direct war in Libya?

The answer is uncertain, but what is clear is that President Sisi is in a precarious position. On the one hand, he does not have the luxury of leaving Egypt's western borders to his adversaries. Yet becoming embroiled in a war in Libya would raise the specter of Egypt's bitter experience in the 1962 North Yemen Civil War. The prospect of another long and costly foreign engagement is enough to make Sisi think before going to war. Yet, even if war is avoided, Egypt's

interests in Libya, which clash, in a variety of ways, with the interests of other parties that include some of Sisi's strongest supporters and allies, will make Libya a continuing major concern for Cairo.

The Renaissance Dam

If the crisis in Libya represents a threat to Egypt's national security, the Grand Renaissance Dam crisis between Egypt and Ethiopia constitutes an existential threat to Egyptians in the truest sense. Ethiopia sees building a dam on its territory for development purposes as its right. Egypt also sees the dam as Ethiopia's right, but only so long as it does not cause a reduction in Egypt's share of the Nile waters. Thus far, the two countries have disagreed upon a great many points, but the most prominent and essential issue involves when the reservoir will be filled and how much water it will be allowed to pass as it fills. Ethiopia has made clear that it will unilaterally embark on filling the reservoir in about seven years, an approach the Egyptian regime has unequivocally condemned.

The Egyptian-Ethiopian negotiations have passed through numerous stages beginning with direct negotiations, proceeding with various intermediaries, then via negotiations under American sponsorship, and finally a return to negotiations under the African umbrella. After the United States and the World Bank failed to convince Ethiopia to sign an agreement with Egypt last February, Ethiopia called for negotiations to be held under the sponsorship of the African Union instead of the UN Security Council as Egypt had intended. This request is seen by some as nothing more than a stalling tactic on the part of Ethiopia.

Moreover, all of these efforts have failed to arrive at a satisfactory solution for both sides of the stalemate. No decision has yet been reached on the key question of filling the dam's reservoir and the amount of water that will continue to pass downstream to Sudan and Egypt. Cairo rejects Ethiopia's plan of a seven year fill, arguing that the consequences of the resultant limit to the flow will lead to the literal destruction of the country. The crisis takes on a personal dimension that pressures the Egyptian President in a direct way, as his opponents hold that the full responsibility rests on the Declaration of Principles' agreement. This 2015 agreement, signed between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan, is what the Egyptian government sees Ethiopia as breaching.

With the repeated failure of various mediations, Sisi has no choice but to bring the issue to the National Security Council, on the grounds that Ethiopia's unilateral decision will lead to Egypt's destruction. Thus, for Ethiopia to carry out its plans would threaten the stability of the region as a whole. In this case as well, the military option some are clamoring for would be an extremely difficult and complicated path, even if it cannot be entirely ruled out from Sisi's agenda.

The Threat of Domestic Terrorism and Opposition

Sisi faces yet another challenge domestically: the escalation of terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula. Terror operations in the Sinai have led to a breakdown of Egypt's tourism sector and a deterioration in economic and security conditions. North Sinai is also considered the source of a serious hemorrhage in the Egyptian military, both in terms of resources and personnel, as terrorist operations continue to target soldiers and officers. Though these operations have recently become less frequent, and the military has attained greater control of the region, North Sinai remains a region that is inflamed by its very nature; its intensity subsides slightly only flare up once more. Presently, with the drums of war beating along the Libyan front, terrorism has also flared up again in Sinai, a clear warning sign to Sisi that before he considers mobilizing in the west, he must remember that the east is not secure.

Just as el-Sisi is facing all of three crises at once, there is a further threat on the domestic front which cannot be ignored, represented by Sisi's most prominent opponents, the Muslim Brotherhood. While security crackdowns have forced the organization to suspend their activities, they retain a prominent presence on social media pages. This is seen in their outspoken support for the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and their constant derision of Egypt's stance in the Grand Renaissance dam issue, as broadcasted through their media outlets and on social media

sites.

That presence does not have a direct effect on the way events unfold and issues are handled, as it ultimately lies outside of power and decision-making circles. Yet the Muslim Brotherhood remains capable of influencing public opinion, especially among social media users. The potential for influence is increased by Egypt's adverse **economic situation** (<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/11/05/feature/economy/two-years-later-how-have-peoples-lives-been-impacted-by-the-flotation-of-the-egyptian-pound/>) and by enduring grievances among the middle and lower classes, encouraged by Sisi's opponents, about the way that hard economic choices made by the regime have negatively impacted their lives. Such choices range from the decision to float the Egyptian pound, which caused a dramatic increase in prices, the withdrawal of a large portion of subsidies, which has adversely affected many sectors of society, and the government decision to stop construction licenses and impose fines and demolish violating buildings where people have lived for decades .

Sisi's Options

In light of this complex situation both at home and abroad, the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi has two possible paths. The first is to take a step back and work on de-escalating the domestic front. This can be done by letting some of his opponents out of prison, opening up room for greater freedoms, and pausing his economic agenda until he overcomes the crises abroad. The second option is to "flee into danger" by further tightening his security grip and sticking to his economic agenda, heedless of the voices that oppose it, at the same time as he wages battles abroad.

Most likely, Sisi will take the latter path, opting to stay the course without offering his opponents any concessions, neither on the political level nor in terms of basic freedoms. Nor will he suspend the agenda of economic reform that he has been pursuing. On the contrary, he will take further steps towards what he sees as a correction of past, mistaken strategies and a radical solution for historical problems.

Sisi's logic is that if he merely starts to offer concessions, his opponents will begin to feel powerful and will greedily seek bigger gains, ultimately leading to a situation similar to the 2011 Revolution which, as Sisi put it, nearly destroyed the Egyptian state. It is fundamentally a security-based rationale; while it has its merits, the one problem is that this path means simultaneously waging all battles at home and abroad. This is a highly dangerous venture; it may build a legacy or lead to oblivion. ❖

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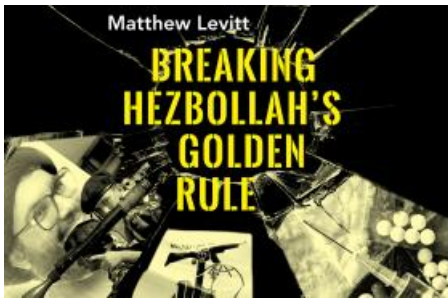
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