

# Egypt, Haftar, and U.S. Passive Interest in the Libyan Conflict

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## Brief Analysis

Though Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar promised a short battle for Tripoli, his Libyan National Army (LNA) forces are still engaged in a months-long siege of the city against the forces of the Islamist-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj. In the midst of Libya's civil war, Cairo is playing a major role inside Libya through its continued backing of Haftar's government.

Egypt's role in Libya may not seem ideal, given that its ultimate aim is to enable the Libyan strongman Haftar to exercise control of the Libyan political landscape and presumably establish a new authoritarian regime. But given the alternative of ongoing fragmentation and further chaos in Libya, Haftar may present the only possible solution to stabilizing the country. The complete absence of a state in the western part of the country has created a safe haven for terrorists and extremist groups from inside Libya and abroad, giving rise to a major regional threat in North Africa. Thus, it may be in other states' and particularly U.S. interests to allow Egypt to continue its efforts to support Haftar and, ultimately, prevent North Africa from becoming the next major stronghold of extremist groups.

Egyptian involvement in Libyan politics has a long and fraught history. In July 1977, Anwar Al-Sadat's peace negotiations with Israel laid the groundwork for Muammar Gaddafi's aggressive propaganda campaign against Egypt, souring relations between Cairo and Tripoli. Soon after, Sadat targeted Libya through a short and divisive military campaign. Egyptian forces were able to occupy eastern Libya and threatened to bring down the Gaddafi regime, but international and Arab mediators eventually pressured Egypt to withdraw.

The Egyptian military's 1977 operation in Libya represented just one instance of Egyptian involvement in Libyan politics. During the nearly 35 years of Italian occupation of Libya during the first half of the 20th century, Egypt was the main source of arms for the Libyan resistance. And in February 2015, an [Egyptian aircraft](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/egypt-air-strikes-target-isis-weapons-stockpiles-libya) conducted several raids on positions belonging to extremist groups inside Libya in response to the slaughter of 21 Egyptian Copts at the hands of ISIS.

The latter instance demonstrates how following Gaddafi's overthrow, Libya became an acute security threat to its neighbors—including Egypt. As the Libyan state crumbled, terrorist groups adopted the rugged Libyan desert as a base to launch attacks against Egypt and Tunisia. The collapse of a central government had other major repercussions: Libya's 1,850 kilometers of Mediterranean coastline contributed to unprecedented waves of illegal

migration to Europe, while the American ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens was tragically assassinated in the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi.

Despite a subsequent attitude of passive neutrality on the part of the United States, U.S. diplomats have become slightly more active in recent months. However, these movements have seemed to implicitly accept Egypt's much more active involvement in Libya. In early August, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry **discussed (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-egypt-pompeo/pompeo-in-call-with-egypts-shoukry-urges-political-solution-in-libya-idUSKCN1V91RB>)** the situation in Libya, agreeing on the need to find a political solution to the conflict. This meeting suggested to Egyptians an American desire to potentially coordinate its Libya policy with Egypt in the future.

This new strategy may in part reflect a shift in expectations for other international efforts at ending the conflict. Hope had rested on the **United Nations-sponsored (<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/68116/Exclusive-UN-brokered-Ghadames-dialogue-postponed-due-to-escalation-in>)** political process until this past April, when a national dialogue conference was scheduled to take place in the historic city of Ghadames. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss holding new elections and a constitutional referendum as part of the political solution planned by Ghassan Salamé, the UN's envoy to Libya. But the operation launched by the LNA against armed militias in Tripoli torpedoed any opportunity for a political solution after it was confirmed that the al-Sarraj government would not, in the context of plans for a political solution, propose disarming the militias on which it relies.

However, the act of supporting Haftar is complicated by the fact that it goes against the international process that has established his opponent as the legitimate political leader of Libya. While the Haftar-led LNA has the full support of the popularly elected Libyan parliament in Tobruk, the al-Sarraj GNA government derives its legitimacy from international recognition and a political process that stalled in 2014.

Nevertheless, realities on the ground will not wait for a slow political process to establish a new government. The Egyptian-Libya border, stretching nearly 1,200 kilometers and mostly barren desert, has become an extremely complex security matter for Egypt. The Wahat and Farafra deserts on the Libyan border with Egypt have already been the site of several tragic terrorist acts. Terrorist cells have targeted Egyptian military and security forces, along with Coptic civilians in that remote area. These extremist groups have conducted countless cross-border operations and can subsequently escape into the Libyan desert. Most notably, Hesham Ashmawy—a terrorist and former **Egyptian Army officer (<https://ara.reuters.com/article/idARAKCN1SY2LJ>)** accused of conducting terrorist operations targeting army and police forces inside Egypt—was arrested in Libya a few months ago after using these areas as a safe haven.

Egypt also sees this region as directly contributing to domestic terrorism. Egyptian authorities claim Libya is the main source of weapons for terrorist groups in North Sinai, and the Egyptian Prosecutor General recently referred **eleven defendants (<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/73637/11-Islamic-State-elements-referred-to-court-for-crimes-in>)**, including four Libyans, to trial for allegedly collaborating with ISIS in Libya.

But Cairo's interest in Libya does not lie solely within national security. Cairo has publicly expressed its support for sovereign governments in the face of the unrest that gripped the region following the upheavals of the Arab Spring—especially with Islamists' ascension in the region. The true danger of the Islamist project in the region is its ability to extend beyond borders. Therefore, the idea of Islamist rule remains a delicate subject in Libya and is seen as an existential threat to Egypt.

Washington has reportedly distanced itself from any sort of involvement in the conflict in Libya. This might be part of President Trump's plan to reduce American intervention in the Middle East and leave problems to other countries in the region and around the world, especially with the disastrous assassination of U.S. Ambassador Christopher

Stevens in Benghazi still fresh in American minds. However, [Trump's call to Haftar](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-trump/white-house-says-trump-spoke-to-libyan-commander-haftar-on-monday-idUSKCN1RV0WW) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-trump/white-house-says-trump-spoke-to-libyan-commander-haftar-on-monday-idUSKCN1RV0WW>) is undoubtedly a sign of American presidential support, albeit superficial, for the LNA's military operation to free Tripoli from the militias' grip. However, it would be beneficial for the United States to take a step back and refrain from throwing blind support behind any party in a deeply complex crisis. American intervention, unless decisive in a way that is unlikely given the United States' past policy on Libya, will only complicate matters further.

Maintaining Washington's policy of active neutrality in Libya provides an opening for other countries, such as Egypt, to put their support behind a unified state with a single central government and a single army on Libya's western border. Given the numerous countries now supporting Haftar, waiting for Libya's political landscape to clear up would provide the United States with additional room for maneuver if the United States does wish to adjust its policy in Libya. This passive approach will ultimately safeguard U.S. interests, while avoiding substantial political blows in response to backing Haftar. ❖

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