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Egypt's Western Security Concerns

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Brief Analysis

Amid deterioration in Libya and militant attacks in Egypt's Western Desert, resuming U.S. military aid to Cairo is more crucial than ever.

While the international community has looked to Egypt to help achieve a ceasefire in Gaza, Cairo's security concerns are largely focused in the opposite direction. In recent weeks, growing instability and militancy in Libya have endangered the lives of Egyptian nationals who live and work there, and a deadly July 19 attack against border guards in the Western Desert has shifted Cairo's attention more firmly toward its porous frontier with Libya. In response, Egypt has launched a military campaign and expanded its diplomacy with Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. By helping Cairo address these threats, Washington could pursue its shared interest in countering terrorism and also move beyond the political disagreements that have plagued the bilateral relationship for the past year.

MILITANCY TO THE WEST

The 693-mile border with Libya has been a major area of concern for successive Egyptian governments. Following the ouster of longtime dictator Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, weapons, narcotics, and illegal migrants flowed freely into Egypt as emerging extremist groups battled for control in Libya and beyond. According to a 2013 UN report, the flow "of military materiel" from Libya (which has included anti-aircraft and cruise missiles) posed "a threat to [Egypt's] internal security." Earlier this week, in a joint press conference with the Italian prime minister in Cairo,

President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi called for "a serious approach to meet the reality of events on the ground in Libya."

Over the past year, the Egyptian government has worked on two levels to improve the situation, with limited success. First, it has forged a closer security relationship with Libya and its neighbors. In April 2013, a high-level Egyptian military delegation led by Defense Minister Sedki Sobhi visited Libya, where the two governments signed a military cooperation agreement. Last month, Libyan intelligence chief Salem Abdel Salam and army chief of staff Abdessalam Jadallah al-Salihin met with their counterparts in Cairo to discuss the border, among other issues. And during this week's U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, Egyptian prime minister Ibrahim Mehleb met with Libyan prime minister Abdullah al-Thani to discuss ways of better securing the Egyptian community in Libya. Egypt, Tunisia, and other North African countries have also formed an advisory committee to help Tripoli address its political and security concerns. Yet Libya has not implemented these agreements due to weaknesses in its central government.

Meanwhile, Sisi visited Algeria in late June to discuss boosting counterterrorism cooperation, and he met with the Moroccan foreign minister in Cairo in July. And despite lingering differences with Tunisia since President Muhammad Morsi's 2013 ouster, Cairo has worked closely with Tunis to evacuate Egyptians from Libya during the latest crisis, including over 4,000 in the past week alone. Indeed, the shared threat that Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt face from Libya's instability will likely enhance their coordination moving forward. And although Egypt has dismissed rumors that it is considering military action against militant groups operating in Libya, growing violence in the west could change its calculus.

Second, Cairo has sought the cooperation of Bedouin tribes in the Western Desert. During his stint as defense minister, Sisi visited tribal leaders on multiple occasions, convincing many of them to collect weapons in exchange for reexamining politicized government court cases against tribesmen, many of which were subsequently dropped. Cairo also paid restitution to tribal families whose children were killed in the crackdown that followed Morsi's ouster. Afterward, the Bedouin coordinated more closely with local military intelligence officials -- according to tribal leaders, Sisi's goal was to prevent the Western Desert from becoming "another Sinai." Yet the relationship was ultimately limited: the tribes were not asked to help guard the border and, in many cases, continued their involvement in weapons and drug trafficking.

THE FARAFRA ATTACK

In recent months, militants have intensified their attacks on military and police installations in the Western Desert, consistent with the violence that has proliferated throughout Egypt since Morsi's removal last summer.

Checkpoints along the Bahariya-Farafra road, which connects Cairo to the remote Farafra oasis in the expansive New Valley governorate, have suffered particularly deadly attacks. On June 1, smugglers killed five army conscripts and one officer at the road's 100-kilometer guard post, which is an important chokepoint for preventing the flow of smuggled goods from Libya. The assailants reportedly lured the soldiers to nearby mountains, where another group opened fire on them. Afterward, the military deployed more soldiers and weaponry to reinforce the area, but it has yet to completely resolve the security problems there.

The July 19 attack at the same checkpoint, in which twenty-two Egyptian border guards were killed, highlighted the military's ongoing vulnerabilities in the Western Desert. According to Egypt's military spokesman, a preliminary investigation revealed that approximately twenty militants participated in the attack. They were armed with rifles, hand grenades, and rocket-propelled grenades; the latter were used to blow up an armory, causing the bulk of the casualties.

In response, Egypt launched Operation Revenge One to kill or capture the perpetrators. While the military has not released any information on the operation, Egyptian media reported large-scale combing operations in New Valley, Minya, and Assiut, as well as the deployment of elite Thunderbolt (al-Saiqa) commandos and military aircraft to the

Western Desert. Moreover, reports indicate extensive coordination between the military and Interior Ministry -- some six agencies are participating in the Farafra investigation, including General Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Public Security, and Homeland Security.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Washington's discussion of military and counterterrorism aid to Egypt often focuses on Sinai because of the peninsula's centrality to Egyptian and Israeli security interests. Yet a more acute and destabilizing threat now emanates from Egypt's west. The state of affairs in Libya is so dire that the United States and other countries have withdrawn their embassy staff from Tripoli. The breakdown of the Libyan state, crumbling of border outposts, and rise of warring militant factions all threaten Egypt's tenuous internal stability, which is why the Sisi government has placed so much emphasis on working with other governments and improving its own defenses to address these mounting challenges.

In an August 6 joint statement, the U.S. government explicitly endorsed regional cooperation between Egypt and the Maghreb countries in response to events in Libya. The Obama administration should go further, however, by actively helping Cairo address the threat. It can start by engaging the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Libya -- which has worked to develop the country's border security infrastructure since May 2013 -- on which types of programs and tools might better prevent the flow of weapons and militants.

Meanwhile, the administration should work aggressively to lift the hold that Congress has placed on military aid to Egypt, so that Cairo has the tools it needs to conduct air surveillance along the Libyan border. An Egyptian defense official told the pan-Arab daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat* on August 5 that much of the border, specifically in the south, is too costly for Cairo to adequately secure, so the United States should provide better equipment or training to help control the border. Aiding Egypt will also enable Washington to transcend the political discord that has tarnished its relationship with Cairo since last summer and reinforce the shared strategic interests that have long defined bilateral relations. Should the deteriorating security situation in Libya force Egypt to consider a cross-border incursion, Washington will want the kind of relationship with Cairo that ensures fluid cooperation and consultation.

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