

# Egypt's Security Paradox in Libya

Written by Kay Westenberger

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/08/egypts-security-paradox-in-libya/>

KAY WESTENBERGER, APR 8 2019

Since the fall of Ghaddafi in 2011, Libya experiences an ongoing struggle to establish statehood. The international community thereby focuses on easing tensions among rival political administrations which compete for authority in Libya to establish a unity government.[1] Nevertheless the Libyan political transition faces various obstacles besides rival political camps. A main spoiler for unity can be seen in the existence of various armed groups. Libya experiences an extreme degree of localized power division.[2] The complexity is increased by regional players using the absence of a central government to expand own influence in Libya through supporting selected armed groups.[3] One of these powers is Egypt as a particularly interesting case. As a neighbouring state, the insecurity in Libya poses a direct security threat to Egypt. Therefore Egypt would benefit from a stable Libya with a central government. On the other hand, Cairo fosters selected militias and political actors like General Khalifah Haftar, colliding with the UN-backed unity efforts and prolonging the conflict in Libya.[4] The paper aims at assessing why Egypt acts the way it does in Libya and its effects on the Libyan conflict against the background of the position of non-state armed actors in Libya.

Literature in the field often concentrates on the role of local armed actors in Libya. Several research centres offer a mapping of the various actors active in Libya for a better understanding of the conflict, including the European Council for Foreign Relations[5] and the Wilson Centre concentrating on the Islamist actors[6]. In their paper, Carboni and Moody focus on subnational governance and use of violence of armed groups across the different regions in Libya, depending on locally specific environments and interaction of national, regional and local political developments.[7] This interaction of local groups with national politics is also central to Philippe Droz-Vincent's 'Competitive Statehood in Libya'. Droz-Vincent understands the decentralization of power as a complicated form of governance but more realistic than a wishful top-down creation of a Weberian state.[8] In contrast, the Clingendael Survey on 'Local security governance in Libya' has a more critical stance towards armed groups and identifies them as 'main obstacle on the road to a unified and civilian-led state' after interviewing 144 citizens in various municipalities in Libya.[9] Other than internal developments, external powers and their influence on militias and the conflict in Libya is comparatively little analysed. When assessing the role of the international community and Western states, the focus is set on main political actors in Libya (side-lining local armed groups).[10] Also the effect of regional power interference lacks attention. Being at times incorporated in the analysis of the Libyan conflict[11], it is rarely granted a focus.

The paper is set within this research gap by concentrating on Egypt's policy towards Libya following the research question: "How can Egypt's contradicting Libya policy be explained and what effect does it have on the conflict in Libya?" The paper introduces the current situation in Libya and its main actors. Then Egypt's multiple interests in Libya are assessed and used to explain Egypt's policy in Libya and its effect on the Libyan conflict. It is argued that Egypt faces a security paradox. By securing its interests against other interfering powers and reacting to immediate security threats such as the danger of jihadist and Islamist spread to Egypt, Cairo feels compelled to engage in security measures which harm the preferable long-term goal of a stable, central-state Libya.

### The Security Paradox

Security measures are rarely a black and white matter, but derive from a complex net of multiple interests and intertwined mutually influenced factors. This complexity can lead to scenarios where a (state) actor implements

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security measures which serve some but harm other interests of the actor. In this paper, this phenomenon is termed 'security paradox'. A security paradox refers to situations, where immediate actions contradict a preferred long-term outcome. An actor is compelled to act in a certain way to assure short-time security provision and to protect against immediate threats but thereby creates a situation unfavourable for the actor himself.

Security paradoxes differ from so-called security dilemmas[12]. The latter is based on mutually perceived mistrust and uncertainty about the other actor's attention and thus leading to increased aggression on both sides, often *unwillingly* escalating a conflict. Core to a security dilemma is that 'both sides fail to realize their predicament' and 'are unaware that they are generating feelings of insecurity in the other.'<sup>[13]</sup> Whereas the security dilemma focuses on the dynamics between two or more actors, the security paradox can occur solely from the view of one actor. Thereby the actor can be fully aware of the situation and the paradox of its actions, however, lacks a better alternative and feels compelled to act as done. The situation can thus not be classified as a security dilemma but displays a security paradox.

One example of a security paradox can be found in nuclear security, typically referred to as the security-insecurity paradox. Especially smaller states have an incentive to acquire nuclear weapons to increase their security by deterring conventional attacks. Acquiring nuclear weapons thereby increases conventional stability. At the same time, however, nuclear weapon use becomes more likely this way, decreasing nuclear stability. A nuclear war with its devastating consequences, however, is the least favourable outcome for all.<sup>[14]</sup> Regarding states with decisive conventional power, they might consider the complete disarmament of nuclear weapons as the theoretical best long-term solution.<sup>[15]</sup> To achieve this goal, own denuclearization would be key. Nevertheless, as long as only one other state owns nuclear weapons, states are compelled to keep their nuclear weapons as well to protect themselves and assure their negotiation power and the balance of power in general as the immediate consequence. This, in turn, renders a potential denuclearisation long-term less likely.

Security paradoxes can occur in various scenarios. Regarding the ongoing conflict in Libya, the Egyptian government can be seen as facing a security paradox in its Libya policy. Whereas the best long-term solution for Egypt would be a stable nation-state Libya for feasible border protection and an increase in trade, Egypt supports specific actors in the East of Libya, thereby actively acting against state-formation efforts. In the following, Egypt's security paradox will be assessed in more detail.

## The current situation in Libya

Since 2011, Libya is widely characterised as a failed state. The collapse of a central government, state institutions and law and order fostered the rise of various local actors. Today, Libya experiences an extreme degree of decentralized and horizontalized power division among tribes, militias, ethnic groups, neighbourhoods, cities and villages.<sup>[16]</sup> Distinct subnational political orders based on local interests have emerged. The various eastern, western and southern conflict environments offer different incentives and lead to various armed groups, rendering Libya a highly contested state.<sup>[17]</sup> Rather than consolidating power, armed groups compete for local leadership. Moreover, easy access to weapons and an increase in criminality negatively affect a potential social cohesion. Political aspirations of militias and a shift from inclusive politics to incorporate the power of some while excluding other groups divide Libya further.<sup>[18]</sup> This fragmentation of armed groups fosters conflict escalation and prevents a monopoly of force and functioning central authority.<sup>[19]</sup>

Since 2016, two main camps based on two main "governments" emerged. On one side, the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli. GNA has the support of revolutionary militias in western cities, Islamist militias of Tripoli neighbourhoods, Southern Tribes and the Muslim Brotherhood. Also, the international community backs GNA as the official government. On the other hand, Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army claims his military administration in Eastern Libya as the legitimate government. Haftar enjoys the support of wide parts of the army, Eastern tribes and single armed groups in the West and South. Furthermore, by announcing the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood, Haftar gained external backing from Egypt and the UAE. In a meeting in Paris in 2017, Haftar further received international legitimization from the French government for his fight against the Islamic State.<sup>[20]</sup>

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The UN and EU push for an inclusive political settlement between the two main warring factions. Thereby the EU specifically addressed the neighbouring states of Libya to foster the democratic process and restrain from actions which would expand the current divisions.[21] However, the decentralized and partial nature of post-revolutionary Libya hampers feasible negotiated settlements.[22] A major obstacle for a unified central government and peace in Libya is the fact that various armed groups and coalitions hold the de facto authority at the local level and follow own local interests rather than national or international agreements. Main armed groups are not tied by ideology to a certain side but out of pragmatism and economic gain. Both "governments" in Libya fully depend on the support of armed groups to assure their presence and exert their authority. Each side can hence not assert its power beyond the areas of its armed affiliates.[23] This dependency allowed armed actors to reinvent their role in society and integrate into the political dynamic and the state apparatus. They serve as major providers of security, governance and conflict resolution in their area of influence.[24]

From this point of view, non-state groups can be understood as assisting the government in keeping law and order. On the other hand, armed groups are typically characterised by a high degree of autonomy, a lack of accountability and violating human rights, thereby hindering the state's responsibility to provide social services and protection to its citizens.[25] Whereas Libyans see the need to address informal actors for the provision of basic needs given the weak and ineffective formal state structures, they at the same time view official institutions as most legitimate. Armed groups are widely seen as a main obstacle for a unified state and the biggest security threat in municipalities.[26]

Given their influence, militias must, however, be incorporated in any political settlement and brought to the negotiation table. Their distinct local interests, region-specific influence and external backing however not only divide the country further but serve as major disincentives for militias to join in any unity efforts.

## Egypt's interests in Libya

Libya's internal chaos is enforced by external interference and regional manoeuvrings. As a direct neighbour to Libya, Egypt is one of the major stakeholders.[27] Egypt's policy towards Libya is thereby driven by multiple interests reaching from pressing security concerns to economic considerations to ideological objectives and the fight against political Islam.[28]

The instability in Libya directly threatens Egypt's national security and own stability.[29] A major security challenge is the 1,150-km Egyptian-Libyan border. Since Ghaddafi's fall, violence along the border has exponentially increased. Given the instability in Libya and the length of the border, complete border security is seen as impossible from Egyptian official side. Despite tens of thousands of Egyptian troops in the western desert, landmines along the border and military fighter jets in the sky, the border remains a major smuggling hub for weapons, drugs and people, including extremists and hostile militants.[30] There is an increase in arms trafficking, with weapons reaching Islamist militants in the Sinai region,[31] where Egypt has been fighting an insurgency against IS-affiliates with hundreds of Egyptian soldiers being killed.[32] Egypt fears further spillovers of jihadist militias and criminals to its territory.[33]

Next to security concerns, economic interests play a major part in Egypt's Libya policy. Before 2011, around 1.5 million Egyptians lived and worked in Libya, generating remittance up to 33 million US dollars per year.[34] By 2015, the number of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya has halved with the reduction in remittance having severe effects on the Egyptian economy. Libya further served as a major trading partner for Egypt in the past. The civil war in Libya however negatively affects the bilateral trade with a reduction in Egyptian exports to Libya by 75%. [35] Egypt's ministry of foreign affairs claims the Libyan government will multiply its investments in Egyptian markets, increase economic cooperation and restore the trade volume as it was before the revolution plus supporting Egyptian companies in the reconstruction of Libya once the country is stabilized.[36] Closely connected to Egypt's economic interests is Cairo's hope to secure its energy interests in Libya.[37] Egypt today is a net importer of energy and accumulated over three billion US dollar of debt with foreign energy companies. A stable Libya being rich in oil and gas could allow Egypt to import Libya's energy sources for lower prices.[38]

A third core interest for Egypt is its ideological project to eradicate political Islam. A main objective of Cairo is to sideline the Muslim Brotherhood at home and abroad, which includes countering the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood

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in Libya. Counter-measures are especially important given that other regional powers like Turkey or Qatar support the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya.[39]

Regarding Egypt's most pressing interests, a stable Libya with a central government able to secure its borders, tackle internal Islamist and jihadist threats and engage in bilateral trade with Egypt seems like the preferable long-term solution. Whereas Egypt officially supports the unity efforts of the United Nations, it on the other hand backs Eastern tribes and militias in Libya and the Haftar government which repel the UN-backed negotiation process.[40]The multiple interests and security concerns of Egypt regarding Libya help understand its contradicting Libya policy.[41]

## **Egypt's intervention in Libya**

A main concern for Egypt is stability in Libya. Thus Cairo actively engages in international diplomacy to establish a political settlement.[42]Egypt officially states constructive national dialogue to be the only way for political reconciliation. Therefore Cairo backs the UN-led mediation and hosts meetings of the Egyptian National Committee on Libya to build consensus between the Libyan parties and foster unification of the military and other state institutions.[43]At the same time, Cairo blames the international community for Libya's slow political transition. Al Sisi's accusations are based on the international ousting of Ghaddafi and then 'not finish(ing) the job'.[44]Egypt officially calls on the international community 'to repair what it had spoiled' based on fostering institution building, reconstruction and a central consensus government in Libya.[45]This stresses Egypt's strive for stability and unity in Libya.

Egypt, however, has multiple interests regarding its neighbouring state. Besides long-term stability, a main aspect of Cairo's current Libya policy is its security-centric approach.[46]The volatile border and need to tackle Islamists as one of the main security risks to Egypt compels Cairo to cooperate with tribal leaders in the Libyan-Egyptian border region.[47]Traditionally, tribes of Eastern Libya and Egyptian Western desert are aligned through intermarriages and lineages and can offer intelligence and mediation for cross-border quarrels. Egypt hence realigned with tribes in the border region like the influential Awlad Ali tribe and several Matrouhi tribes as a short-term solution to combat cross-border trafficking and arms smuggling. This co-opting of tribal elites, however, fails to address underlying grievances in the region and lacks long-term solutions for existing border issues.[48]

Egypt further found a main ally in Haftar, who heads a coalition of federalist militias, Eastern tribes and military units in East Libya.[49]Cairo supports Haftar and aligned militias by offering intelligence, logistical support and supplying weapons, thereby violating the UN arms embargo. For Egypt, Haftar combines various security interests in his person. For one, Egypt's support of Haftar stresses the importance of border stability to Egypt.[50]Moreover, Haftar actively engages in the fight against jihadists and Islamists, taking a clear stance against the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya. Another important similarity between Egypt's president al-Sisi and Haftar is the shared belief in a strong military rule to establish stability and national identity.[51]Framing Libya in light of security concerns allows Cairo to legitimate its security-approach towards Libya and its intervention. By portraying Haftar as a strong man for restoring stability and fighting Islamist control, the Egyptian government shows a clear stance towards Libya.[52]

Haftar and his Libyan National Army, however, oppose the UN-backed GNA.[53]Moreover the strict anti-Islamist stance polarizes the country. Islamist militias are compelled to join together to one coalition undermining more practical Islamist factions and external patrons of Islamists like Qatar are pushed to expand the support.[54]At the same time Haftar lacks the capacities to expand its power and send forces to Tripoli.[55]Therefore, instead of fostering unity and stability, experts claim Egypt's one-sided support for Haftar to create further division in Libya.[56]The ongoing clashes among the two competing sides and the various incorporated armed militias already jeopardized hopes for holding elections end of 2018.[57]Furthermore, being too closely linked to Haftar impedes efforts of Egypt to act as a neutral mediator to achieve unity.[58]

Egypt's conflicting Libya policy displays a security paradox. From a security point of view, supporting Haftar prevents a vacuum in Libya's east as a fertile ground for jihadists and Islamists and hence serves as a logical immediate security measure. At the same time, however, Egypt's Libya policy prolongs the conflict and hinders opportunities for

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a settlement between the warring Libyan parties.[59] This way, the long-term objective of a stable Libya for better security and economic cooperation with Egypt is hindered. As long as Libya is unstable however with other external powers backing Islamist militias and the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt as well is pushed to support certain militias and Haftar to secure own interests in Libya and avoid hostile spillovers, even if that means prolonging the conflict.

## Conclusion

Militias and local armed groups in Libya enjoy far spread influence with the two main governing sides depending on their support and security provision. Even the UN relied on militias to provide security for official institutions and UN facilities instead of pushing them out of government roles.[60] By following own agendas, competing among each other rather than consolidate power and contesting the legitimacy of a central government in Libya however, armed groups are a main factor prolonging and complicating a political transition.[61] One-sided external support of respective armed groups thereby increases Libya's divide further, counteracting unity efforts.

Looking at Egypt in detail, the government faces a security paradox. On one hand, Egypt would strongly benefit from a stable Libya with a unified central government to foster bilateral trade and security. On the other hand, Cairo competes with other regional powers about influence in Libya, such as Qatar and Turkey supporting Islamist groups[62] while Egypt places importance on containing the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam. Especially given immediate security concerns such as the volatile Libyan-Egyptian border and the risk of jihadist or Islamist spillovers to Egypt pushes Cairo into supporting affiliated militias and granting one-sided support to Haftar in the East of Libya, even though this contradicts UN unity efforts.

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*Date written: January 2019*