

Egypt, UAE conducted joint air strikes in Libya

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US officials have confirmed that Egypt and the United Arab Emirates combined forces to carry out air strikes in Libya, according to a report Tuesday in the *New York Times*. The extraordinary intervention was aimed at Islamist militias fighting for control of the international airport outside of Tripoli, the Libyan capital.

Air strikes on the militia from Misurata, Libya's third largest city, fighting near Tripoli took place on August 18 and again on August 23, according to local reports that were unable to identify the origin of the warplanes conducting the raids.

The first air attack hit a weapons depot in Tripoli, killing six men. The second caused more damage, hitting the Interior Ministry building in Tripoli, which was under the control of the Misurata forces, killing 15 fighters and wounding 30.

General Khalifa Hiftar, the CIA-backed commander who launched an offensive against Islamist forces in Benghazi earlier this year, initially took responsibility, but his claims were dubious since no Libyan faction has access to the air power displayed in the attacks.

It now appears that Hiftar was merely the intended beneficiary of the air strikes, not their agent. The UAE provided planes and pilots, while Egypt offered access to air bases where the planes could refuel on the long journey from the Persian Gulf to the central Mediterranean coast.

As a military measure, the air strikes appear to have been unsuccessful. The Misuratan militias continued their offensive and have seized control of the airport, held for the last two years by a militia from Zintan, in western Libya, which is allied with Hiftar's forces.

The conflict within Libya has been building ever since the US-NATO war in 2011 that overthrew the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and led to his

murder. Myriad local militias have filled the vacuum of power, some Islamist, some tribal, some linked to ethnic minorities like the Berbers.

Low-grade, localized violence erupted into more general civil war earlier this year when Hiftar, who lived in Langley, Virginia near CIA headquarters for nearly three decades before returning to Libya in 2011, announced he was leading a national revolt against the Islamists, beginning with a seizure of power in Benghazi, Libya's second largest city.

Hiftar explicitly modeled his efforts on the coup carried out by the Egyptian military, which culminated in the installation of the top commander, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, as the country's president. However, Hiftar has nothing like the military apparatus that placed al-Sisi in power.

The fortunes of his makeshift army have ebbed and flowed, with serious setbacks recently. Around Tripoli, in the west, Hiftar's allies from Zintan have been thrown back. In the east, the Islamist Ansar al-Islam has counterattacked and taken control of Benghazi.

Earlier this month, the Libyan parliament, elected in nationwide polls June 25 and having an anti-Islamist majority, convened in the eastern port city of Tobruk, under Hiftar's protection. The impotence of the parliament is expressed by the fact that the country's three largest cities, Tripoli, Benghazi and Misurata, where more than half the population resides, are controlled by its opponents.

The Egyptian government has officially disavowed any role in the air strikes, but there seems little doubt that it at least facilitated the attacks, since otherwise UAE jets could not possibly have reached Tripoli. A senior figure in the Egyptian security establishment, former foreign minister and Arab League chairman Amr Moussa, called August 3 for Egyptian intervention

in Libya.

Moussa, a longtime adviser to the Egyptian military regime, said, “Statelets, sects and extremist factions in Libya directly threaten Egypt’s national security. I call for a broad public debate to sensitise public opinion to the risks, and to build the necessary support in case we have to exercise our right to self-defence.”

The subsequent front page of *al-Masry al-Youm*, one of the major Egyptian newspapers, also aligned with the military, carried the headline, “Libya burns, and Egypt approaches a military solution.”

In an effort to distance the US government from this latest outside intervention in Libya, the officials who spoke with the *New York Times* claimed the Obama administration had been caught by surprise. “Egypt and the Emirates, both close allies and military partners, acted without informing Washington or seeking its consent, leaving the Obama administration on the sidelines,” the newspaper reported.

This is highly unlikely, to put it mildly. The US government supplies half the warplanes used by the UAE air force, with France providing the balance. UAE pilots flying F-16 fighters, the planes likely used in the attacks in Libya, are trained by the US air force. Any use of these jets would be coordinated with the Pentagon.

The US Air Force maintains a huge airbase in neighboring Qatar, from which it monitors all air traffic over and around the Persian Gulf. Moreover, there is a large French airbase in the UAE, which would certainly have tracked any dispatch of UAE jet fighters so far out of their normal patrol area.

There are political as well as technical reasons to disbelieve the US disclaimer. The joint Egyptian-UAE operation began within two weeks of a similar US operation against the forces of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in northern Iraq, and it was directed against a similar target, Islamist militias linked at least indirectly to Al Qaeda.

That said, it is quite possible that Washington has reservations about the Egyptian-UAE air raid, feeling that its client states in the region are taking action that may undermine its policies, or create a wider instability.

The *Times* noted the broader implications of the UAE-Egyptian action, writing: “Since the military ouster of the Islamist president in Egypt one year ago, the new

Egyptian government, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have formed a bloc exerting influence in countries around the region to roll back what they see as a competing threat from Islamists. Arrayed against them are the Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, backed by friendly governments in Turkey and Qatar, that sprang forward amid the Arab Spring revolts. Libya is the latest, and hottest, battleground.”

It is remarkable that over the past month military violence has erupted in a virtually continuous line from Tripoli to Baghdad—across Libya, the Gaza Strip, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

More and more, the entire region resembles the Balkan Peninsula before World War I, or eastern Europe before World War II, as local and national conflicts combine into a broader, interconnected conflagration with the potential to set the entire world ablaze.



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