

Egypt's el-Sisi approves troop deployment to Libya against Turkish-backed forces

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Last week Egypt's parliament gave its backing to General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi's threat to send troops to Libya in support of warlord Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya. It could lead to a direct clash with Turkey, drawing in the imperialist and regional powers.

Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) controls the east and south of the war-torn country and is backed by Russia, France, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt. It is fighting to retain control of Sirte against Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj's United Nations-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in the capital Tripoli, which is backed by Turkey, Qatar and Italy.

The division of the country into two rival power centres, Tripoli and Benghazi, is the outcome of the bloody civil war for the control of the country's energy resources, the richest in Africa. It was precipitated by the NATO-led invasion of Libya and the assassination of long-time ruler Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. It also pits NATO allies, Turkey and Italy, against France.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's deployment of military experts—3,500 Syrian mercenaries belonging to rebel Syrian militias and ex-ISIS fighters for wages ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 a month, as well as armed drones—prevented Haftar's forces, which had been besieging Tripoli for 14 months, from taking the capital and have pushed back his forces eastwards. Turkey now wants GNA forces to press on to the coastal city of Sirte, close to the main export-orientated oilfields Haftar still controls and take the airbase in Jufra.

Haftar's withdrawal from the oil region would hand over the country's main oil facilities to Tripoli.

The Tripoli government condemned Egypt's decision as “a hostile act and direct interference, amounting to a declaration of war.”

El-Sisi, who seized power in a bloody military coup in 2013, said, “Egypt will not stand idle in the face of any moves that pose a direct threat to the national security, not only the Egyptian and Libyan, but also the Arab, regional and international ones.” In a closed-door session, the House of Representatives unanimously approved “the deployment of the Egyptian armed forces on combat missions outside Egypt's borders to defend Egyptian national security... against criminal

armed militias and foreign terrorist elements.” The deployment would be on a “western front,” meaning Libya.

On Saturday, Egypt's naval forces took part in joint maritime training exercises with French vessels in the southern Mediterranean, “in preparation for combat missions against hostile forces.” It follows similar exercises in French territorial waters in March 2019, joint air-sea exercises in the Mediterranean Sea in July, and further joint naval exercises in September.

El-Sisi has presented a Turkish-backed GNA attack on Sirte, 1,400 kilometres from Egypt, as a threat to Egypt's western border and national security. He cited the demand of tribal leaders and politicians from Haftar's base in the eastern port city of Benghazi for Cairo's military support “to protect Libyan sovereignty” to provide a fig leaf for Egypt's intervention.

His move is aimed at securing Egypt's geostrategic interests in the Levantine Basin in the eastern Mediterranean that contains newly discovered gas fields, of which by far the largest is Egypt's Zohr field with an estimated 30 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas), with other potential resources in the Nile Delta.

This has made Egypt one of the biggest producers in North Africa and the Middle East, exporting 172.8 billion cubic feet (bcf) of gas in 2019. Cairo is also seeking to become a vital link for energy trading between the Middle East, Africa and Europe, with its two large-scale gas export terminals at Iduku and Damietta, the only ones in the eastern Mediterranean, which cool gas into liquids for export by tankers.

But el-Sisi's plans for Egypt to become an export hub for Europe, after signing an agreement with Cyprus in 2018 to construct a pipeline to its Aphrodite field, have been stymied by Turkey's November 2019 agreement with the GNA in Tripoli. That agreement, in return for Ankara's military support, demarcated the maritime borders between the two countries, vastly expanding Turkey's territorial waters—also claimed by Greece and Cyprus—and denying the claims of Crete, Rhodes and other islands.

Since then, Ankara has expanded its gas exploration efforts to waters claimed by Greece. Last week, a Turkish naval expedition escorting oil-drilling vessels in the Aegean Sea off

the Greek island of Kastellórizo nearly escalated into war between Turkey and Greece, both members of the NATO alliance, that were on the verge of war in the 1990s.

On Thursday, French President Emmanuel Macron upped the ante against Turkey, posting a Facebook message in Greek expressing his “full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus against Turkey’s violation of their sovereign rights,” adding “We must not accept threats to the sea area of an EU member state.”

He has called for sanctions against Turkey over the issue and pulled out of NATO’s planned exercises in the Mediterranean over Ankara’s role in supporting the LNA against Haftar, its proxy in Libya, and allegations that Turkish vessels were harassing its ships.

Macron’s increasingly close military relations with the butcher of Cairo is aimed at securing Egypt as France’s local proxy to provide the necessary boots on the ground to protect Haftar and thus French oil and gas interests against the rival Turkish, Qatari and Italian-backed forces.

For Egypt, the key issue is that the new maritime border blocks the route of its proposed pipeline, gives Ankara an increasing role in the eastern Mediterranean and forces the major powers, Russia, the US and the European Union, to view it as a key player in the region.

Cairo’s hostility to Turkey stems from Erdogan’s warm relations with former President Mohammed Mursi’s Muslim Brotherhood-led government, elected in 2012 after Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign by the Egyptian masses. El-Sisi’s ouster of Mursi, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s support in 2013, blocked Turkey’s efforts to build diplomatic, economic and military relationships with Egypt. Ankara refused to recognize him, viewing his seizure of power as illegal and his regime illegitimate.

El-Sisi’s concern is that Turkey’s presence and support for al-Sarraj’s GNA could consolidate the power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, turning the country into a militant base against Egypt. While Riyadh and Abu Dhabi share Cairo’s antipathy to Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood, their purpose in backing Haftar’s LNA is to isolate Qatar, which has close links with Iran and supports the Brotherhood and the GNA in Tripoli.

The eastern Mediterranean, including North Africa, has become the focus of ever widening conflicts, with all the imperialist and regional powers pursuing their own rapacious demands for control over the region’s wealth, resources and transport routes.

El-Sisi’s proposed war against Turkey in Libya is profoundly unpopular with the Egyptian people, who have launched the Arabic hashtag “I did not delegate,” opposing parliament’s authorization for el-Sisi to intervene on the basis of “preserving national security,” calling it an attempt to deflect criticism of his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic fallout.

Egypt officially has more than 92,000 cases and 4,606

deaths—the highest in the region—although one government minister has repeatedly warned that the real number could be five or even 10 times higher. According to Baseera, the Egyptian Centre for Public Opinion Research, at least 616,000 people have been infected with the virus.

According to the Egyptian Medical Syndicate, more than 3,000 medical workers have caught the disease and at least 117 doctors have died. In May, it warned that the health care system was on the point of collapse and blamed the government for failing to provide the necessary drugs or beds, adequate personal protective equipment or enough tests for medical workers who came into contact with those known to be infected. The government’s response has been to crackdown on health care workers who dared to criticise the government’s handling of the crisis, with increasing numbers being threatened or detained by the security services.

Even before the pandemic, around a third of the 100 million population were living below the poverty line. According to the country’s statistics agency, more than a quarter of those with a job were not working due to lockdown measures that have condemned millions to destitution, while more than half of those working were on reduced hours or days.

Tourism, which accounts for nearly 5 percent of GDP, has evaporated, while remittances from Egyptians working in the Gulf states have plummeted from the usual \$27 billion per year (at least 10 percent of GDP) as foreign workers have been laid off, with many returning to Egypt, adding to the growing numbers of unemployed. Revenues from the newly expanded Suez Canal have fallen due to the world recession.

As its foreign currency reserves fell to just \$31 billion, Egypt turned to the International Monetary Fund for a \$2.8 billion loan in May to combat COVID-19. It has just received approval for another \$5.2 billion loan that will require even greater austerity measures at the expense of the Egyptian working class.

It is these conditions that prompted el-Sisi to approve the recent amendments to Egypt’s emergency laws granting himself and the armed forces additional powers laying the basis for a military dictatorship and banning all political opposition to the domination of the corporate, financial and military elite over economic and political life.



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