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*Out of the Stalemate:
Can Egypt and NATO Help Libya?*

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On the 23rd of March 2011, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) launched its Unified Protector Operation in Libya, enforcing the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973. Achieving its End State, the Operation has officially ended. But, did it? Libya remains in a state of distress where its governance is contested between various actors, namely, the Presidential Council headed by Fayeze Al-Sarraj and based in Tripoli, the Tobruk and Al-Bayda authorities controlled by General Khalifa Haftar, among numerous others. NATO has the advantage of being a partner with two of Libya's neighbours, Tunisia and Egypt. They, along with a number of other countries, are exploring further cooperation in the Sahel area. Meanwhile, NATO is trying to increase its involvement in the South as per Southern Member States' request. It is evident then that a rapprochement between NATO and Egypt aligns well with both parties' current ambitions in the region and the Libyan crisis presents an opportunity to strengthen their ties and coordinate their efforts in trying to solve the Libyan conflict – both desirable outcomes. While they have to surf the complex environment in the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region, Egypt and NATO can find grounds for cooperation on political and military levels. Politically, they share similar interests and a platform for dialogue. Militarily, they possess complementary expertise with some established means that can facilitate cooperation. The latter is bound to benefit all parties involved although there exist challenges.

On a Political Level – Common Interests

NATO and Egypt have common interests in aiding the resolution of the Libyan crisis. Firstly, the securing of Libyan borders is a strategic goal for the two entities. In principle, uncontrolled borders undermine Egyptian sovereignty and hamper the Egyptians' war against terrorism.¹ As Libya remains an arguably ungoverned land, it has become a homeland for many Jihadist movements who find the freedom to carry and transport arms, carry out terrorist attacks and recruit fighters.² Having these groups settle on Egypt's longest geographical border poses a considerable spill-over risk.³ While non-State Libyan actors did demonstrate resistance towards

¹ *Africa Research Bulletin: Political, Social and Cultural Series*. July 9, 2017. "Egypt - Libya".

² Ibid.

³ Mühlberger, Wolfgang. June 28, 2016. "Egypt's Foreign and Security Policy in Post-R2P Libya". *The International Spectator* 51 (2): 99-112.

terrorist groups such as ISIS⁴, they still continue to exist in a more fragmented fashion, posing a serious risk. The Egyptian Armed Forces have embarked on multiple missions in the past few years with the aim of eliminating and controlling terrorist groups, whether they are in the Western Desert or in Sinai. An uncontrolled border undermines these efforts by keeping the flow of terrorists steady. It is worth noting though, that the realities of the power struggle in Libya suggest a different course of action. Traditional military actions are inevitable, yet, for an effective control of borders, Egypt must be open to considering alternatives such as follow a more politically-oriented track. On the other hand, uncontrolled Libyan-Egyptian borders cause major turbulence to some NATO Member States, namely, Italy, Greece and indirectly Turkey. That is because some of the major illegal immigration routes cross them and of the circulation of terrorists. As the Alliance strives to strengthen its cohesion, aiding the Southern flank with what it is a threat to its security has become a priority.⁵ Some terminology has been spread around NATO circles to portray this: “29-for-29” and a “360°-approach”.⁶ The latter was even mentioned in the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration along with concerns about migration. Effective Libyan border control is a goal that Egypt and NATO should cooperate in order to achieve.

Secondly, Libyan economic stability is critical for some allied Member States and Egypt. Egyptian internal affairs are strongly intertwined with Libyan ones. Historically, both States have had similar stories: colonization, overthrowing of a king by a military coup and a group of soldiers assuming power.⁷ This has led to a level of understanding, comfort and common visions between them. Consequently, millions of Egyptians travelled to Libya for work and thousands of Libyans went to Egypt for education and training. When the Libyan economy collapsed, two million Egyptians returned to their homeland unemployed, which carried significant economic repercussions. The Egyptian government is currently seeking to shape a safer working environment in Libya so that workers may return there, reducing the burden on the State. In addition, there is a

⁴ Anderson, Lisa. Spring 2017. “ ‘They Defeated Us All’ : International Interests, Local Politics and Contested Sovereignty in Libya.” *The Middle East Journal* 71 (2): 229-247.

⁵ Lesser, Ian, Charlotte Brandsma, Laura Basagni, and Bruno Lété. July 20, 2018. *The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue: Perspectives on Security, Strategy and Partnership*. Study findings report, The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

⁶ Personal communication, Italian Delegation to NATO, NATO HQ, 2018.

⁷ Anderson, Lisa. Spring 2017. ““They Defeated Us All” : International Interests, Local Politics and Contested Sovereignty in Libya.” *The Middle East Journal* 71 (2): 229-247.

specific cross-border relationship embodied by some Bedouin groups straddling the common borderland. This link transcends conventional lines on a map. Known as *Awlad Ali*, the group is mostly known for the smuggling of weaponry, drugs and goods. However, within the context of this culture, it is not seen as a criminal offence '*tabrib*' as much as it is seen as trade '*tigara*'.⁸ This alternative economy, not only threatens Egyptian security with the provision of arms but also fuels Egypt's black market, destabilizing its formal one. While NATO is a collective defence alliance and is not interested in economic matters (exception for security of supply of energy), some of its Member States' economies were strongly affected by the decline of trade between the European Union (EU) and Libya as exemplified by gas prices.⁹ This fact further motivates some Member States to foster stability in Libya.

Thirdly, NATO and Egypt are looking to gain popular and international support. Locally, Egyptians are pleading the inflation of prices and the recurrence of terrorist acts. If Libyan stability will reduce these problems, then the population is likely to support such efforts. Internationally, Egypt prides itself as 'the' key mediator in the region. A cooperation with NATO would confirm this image and Egyptians would favour the role of their government. As for NATO, the possibility to support the stabilization in Libya would interest both a certain number of NATO Member States and NATO as a whole because it would give substance to its 360° approach.¹⁰ Furthermore, it would help in arguing that NATO's role in the management of the Libyan crisis has been less negative than portrayed until now.

On a Political Level – Common Platform

Egypt and NATO already have an ongoing conversation embodied in the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD). There is agreement that the Egypt-NATO partnership has potential and can be further developed.¹¹ To reiterate, it aligns with NATO's goals.¹² What is interesting is that if Egypt

⁸ Husken, Thomas. July 1, 2017. "The practice and culture of smuggling in the borderland of Egypt and Libya." *International Affairs* 93 (4): 897-915.

⁹ EU Commission. 2018. "Countries and Regions: Libya." *EU Commission - Policies, Information and Services*. May 25. Accessed November 9, 2018. <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/libya/>.

¹⁰ Lesser, Ian, Charlotte Brandsma, Laura Basagni, and Bruno L  t  . July, 20, 2018. *The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue: Perspectives on Security, Strategy and Partnership*. Study findings report, The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

¹¹ El-Adawy, Adel. November 2018. "Challenges and potential for NATO-Egypt Partnership." *NDC Policy Brief*.

and NATO cooperate within the context of Libya, many other doors will open. In the first place, it proposes a new type of cooperation within the MD. Currently, Jordan-NATO and Tunisia-NATO cooperation take on the same form in which NATO provides expertise to aid their partners' capacity-building. This model is effective in terms of equipping these nations and training their armed forces. Yet, it is quite subtle. In proposing an Egypt-NATO cooperation for Libya, both sides are partakers of an equivalent weight, proactive in the decision-making and they each contribute quasi-equal efforts. This framework can be an unprecedented kind of bilateral agreements within the MD. In the second place, while Libya's admission to the MD has been long delayed, Libya could be usefully involved in due time in this NATO-Egypt cooperation, should it occur. Lastly, the European Union can potentially play a crucial role in such a proposal. It is a stakeholder as a beneficiary of economic stability in Libya. In addition, NATO-EU relations look to be further advanced after years of a Turkish deadlock. Even when looking at the future of the MD, experts foresaw a NATO-EU involvement.¹³

On a Security Level – Assets

NATO and Egypt possess complementary assets. On one hand, the Egyptian Armed and Security Forces have already been involved in Libya, possess strong military capability, have a remarkable awareness of the situation and are more likeable by the Libyans on a negotiation table due to Libya's colonial past. Even when the use of force would be required, Arab soldiers may be more accepted than foreigners, especially from countries who participated or acquiesced to the intervention in Libya or whose governments had a long standing animosity towards Qaddafi. As mediators, they have the advantage of sharing the same culture, although differences in national interests and standings can complicate the dialogue. On the other hand, under the present circumstances, NATO is not willing to exercise hard power. Therefore, NATO can contribute with what it knows best: transfer of knowledge. NATO has had a long experience with border control, counterterrorism and patrolling and can assist the institution of such capabilities.

¹² Lesser, Ian, Charlotte Brandsma, Laura Basagni, and Bruno L  t  . July 20, 2018. *The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue: Perspectives on Security, Strategy and Partnership*. Study findings report, The German Marshall Fund of the United States

¹³ Ibid.

Challenges

To start with, NATO Member States need to have a consensus for any action to be taken in regards to the Libyan crisis, as for any action. While the Southern States are likely to support cooperation, Washington and Ankara may oppose such a proposal for different reasons: they have different levels of engagement and different interests on Libya. Ankara wants to counterbalance by proxy the countries that support General Haftar. In regards to Washington, there has been a division within the administration of American foreign policies: President Trump has been pushing for more isolationist stances, especially when it comes to NATO. He does not find the organisation as profitable for America as it is for Europe and so he is unwilling pursue any further cooperation within its current context. In the meantime, other American politicians and decision-makers grant heightened importance to NATO and favour American involvement globally. Additionally, other Member States may not find the initiative worthy of consideration since it may not necessarily promote their own national interests; in other words, the costs may exceed the benefits from their view.

Next, the most obvious hurdle to this proposal is Egypt and NATO's different interpretation of the situation. Egypt backs up the authorities in Tobruk and Al-Bayda under General Haftar, while NATO follows the United Nations' lead, recognizing Al-Sarraj as the official leader of the country.¹⁴ To overcome this challenge, it is important to include all sides in the talks. There is already a multitude of benefits for all parties in fostering a stable environment in Libya. Therefore, it should not be seen as a platform to showcase each group's affiliation, but to exercise NATO's working mechanism – achieving consensus. A bad example is that of the “With Libya For Libya Summit”, which took place in Palermo, where Italy welcomed Libyan leaders, the Egyptian President, the Russian Prime Minister, EU's foreign policy chief, the UN Secretary-General, along with other representatives of States. Unfortunately the Turkish Vice-President withdrew mid-negotiations because his country was not invited in a closed meeting.¹⁵ The uncertainty about Haftar's attendance, Turkey's withdrawal and the absence of Trump have all contributed to a less

¹⁴ Azaola Piazza, Bárbara. March 22, 2018. “The foreign policy of post-Mubarak Egypt and the strengthening of relations with Saudi Arabia: balancing between economic vulnerability and regional and regime security.” *The Journal of North African Studies*.

¹⁵ Tondo, Lorenzo, and Patrick Wintour. 2018. “ Italian summit on Libya in disarray as Trump and Putin stay away.” *The Guardian*. November 12. Accessed November 15, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/12/italy-summit-palermo-future-libya-diplomats>.

than productive summit. While it has succeeded in bringing together different stakeholders, it has not yielded a final declaration with everyone's agreement. The one positive outcome is that parties have reaffirmed their commitment to the UN Action Plan and that there should be presidential elections during the spring of 2019.¹⁶ Should NATO undertake such a task, the organization should put into consideration the pitfalls of past initiatives in order to avoid their recurrence.

Continuing, a large portion of the population within Libya and Egypt misperceive NATO as a neo-colonial power, a 'US in disguise'. Given this negative outlook on NATO, governments, especially the Egyptian one, may be hesitant in committing to such a partnership. However, from past experiences, the Egyptians did proceed anyway because the benefits far exceeded the costs.

On top of that, major and regional powers are heavily involved and exercise great influence on decision-making. Russian-Egyptian bonds are strong and prospering.¹⁷ Particularly in the military realm, Russia has been supplying the Egyptians with much armament such as fighter jets, fighter helicopters and missiles. It is reported that Egypt spent \$1,111 billion on Russian arms in 2017.¹⁸ For this, it is of strategic importance for Egypt to maintain good relationships with Russia. If the latter perceives such a cooperation negatively, the Egyptians may not be willing to go along with this collaboration as they try to balance ties with both Russia and the Western countries.¹⁹ Moreover, there is also a division between the Gulf States about non-involvement, who to support, and, again, NATO as a "western" power. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar are all involved yet in substantially different ways. The UAE backed up General Haftar financially and

¹⁶ Nigro, Vincenzo. November 13, 2018. "Libia, Haftar diserta il summit di Palermo e la Turchia va via." *Repubblica.it*. https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2018/11/13/news/libia_la_turchia_haftar_lascia_il_summit_profondamente_delusi_-211546923/.

El-Fekki, Amira. November 18, 2018. "Palermo summit on Libya yields uncertainty over joint effort for solution." *Daily News Egypt*. <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2018/11/18/palermo-summit-on-libya-yields-uncertainty-over-joint-effort-for-solution/>.

Municipal elections are foreseen for March 2019 in some more 60 Libyan municipalities. Zaptia Sami, "Salame calls on Libya's political elite to meet people's daily demands", *Libya Herald*, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2019/01/19/118424/>.

¹⁷ Barnes-Dacey, Julien, Dimitar Bechev, Timofey Borisov, Dmitriy Frolovskiy, Florence Gaub, Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, Mark N. Katz, et al. July 2018. "Russia's return to the Middle East: building sandcastles?" Edited by Stanislaw Secieru and Nicu Popescu. Chaillot Papers (Print) N° 146. Luxembourg: Publications office - European Union.

¹⁸ Brown, Daniel. October 6, 2018. "The top 10 countries that bought Russia's most powerful weapons in 2017." *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-weapons-sales-top-countries-2018-4?IR=T#2-egypt-9>.

¹⁹ El-Adawy, Adel. November 2018. "Challenges and potential for NATO-Egypt Partnership." *NDC Policy Brief*.

militarily, Qatar is on Turkey's team being an Al-Sarraj supporter and Saudi Arabia, working behind the scenes, is financing Emirati and Egyptian efforts in Libya. If this cooperation is to harm Egypt's reputation, it likely will not take place. China instead, at this time, has most of its foreign policies geared towards the facilitation of the Belt and Road Initiative. There have been negotiations between China and the Libyan State, but it is not clear where China would stand about this matter. However, what one can assert is that China will do what it takes to keep its business growth unaffected.

Conclusion

Can NATO and Egypt help Libya? In short, yes. The basis for such cooperation exists. Both entities possess common interests from security, political and economic perspectives. They also have compatible capabilities. Over and above, this proposal opens doors for new prospects of cooperation for the MENA region in general. Although facing various challenges such as achieving consensus, popular opinions and the influence of major powers, it is worth manoeuvring and overcoming them. Conclusively, Libya's stability is worth pursuing. NATO Member States already possess the advantage of a unique partnership with the MENA region. They must actively assess the impact of this crisis on their own Nations and find the urgency in acting on it sooner rather than later. In such a fast-evolving environment, there is no room for delays, for what is correct during negotiations today is bound to change tomorrow. The continuity of the effort is essential. As Egypt highlights itself as an important stakeholder and a competent mediator, NATO should include the State in their plan. Given the current means available to the Alliance and to Egypt, cooperation is achievable and is likely to bring forth good fruits. Of course, all efforts should be compliant with the UN Action Plan for Libya but, as it has not achieved much progress to date, this initiative could aid its advancement. Libya's main problems can be summarized in three words: disunity, insecurity and instability; and a NATO-Egypt effort is able to ameliorate all three.

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