



MAGHREB June 2019

Egypt looking for a plan B in Libya

The resumption of hostilities in Libya had important reverberations on the regional landscape. As the fighting between the Libyan National Army (LNA) and armed groups and militias affiliated to the Government of National Accord (GNA) dragged on the southern Tripoli frontline, regional powers have been drawing in the conflict, assisting their proxies. The 2014 polarisation was confirmed in the new outbreak of fighting, with a counterrevolutionary front including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) maintaining their support for the LNA; while Turkey and (to a lesser extent) Qatar continued to sustain armed groups and militias affiliated to the internationally-recognised GNA, supporting a pro-Islamist agenda.

Despite the appearances, the two regional fronts are not solid and developments on the ground can result in unpredictable changes. On the counterrevolutionary side, Haftar's inability to obtain a quick success in Tripoli must have raised concerns, especially in Egypt, the only meddling power of the list that shares a border with the war-ravaged Libya. The visit of the President of the House of Representatives (HoR) Agila Saleh in Cairo on 12-13 June suggested some serious reconsideration ongoing on the Egyptian side. It must be said that before meeting with the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Saleh rejected any negotiation with the GNA, saying that talks can resume only after the removal of militias and armed groups from the capital and reiterating his full support for the LNA's Operation Flood of Dignity.

On one hand Saleh's remark undoubtedly fell in line with Egypt's agenda for Libya, which can be broadly summarised as curbing the influence of Islamist groups and securing the shared border. However, a closer look indicates Egypt's uneasy position after Haftar's failed offensive on Tripoli, of which Cairo was not very fond since the beginning. After having warned Haftar against any move to the capital, the Egyptian government was forced to stick with the LNA, to avoid the risk of losing its main proxy and open the way for rival countries to increase their influence in Libya. In a context in which the LNA is starting to give ground to rival groups, Egypt could look at Saleh as a comfortable plan B, in case Haftar's position could become untenable. The General's nationalistic ambitions have always contrasted with the federalist pulses of the eastern-based and Saleh-led HoR, creating frequent disputes in eastern Libya. In the case

of a collapse of the Haftar's forces, Saleh (who is also Supreme Commander of the LNA) could still be instrumental in negotiating a federalist compromise with the GNA, representing a useful bulwark to prevent Islamist and revolutionary militias from getting closer to his eastern borders.

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