

US Ally Egypt Threatens Military Move into Libya against NATO Member Turkey

Featuring Emily Estelle



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Egypt is preparing a military intervention to prevent Turkish-backed forces from advancing into eastern Libya. The intervention raises the risk of direct conflict with Turkey, which could spread throughout the region. Meanwhile, Russia is positioned to benefit from rising tensions between Turkey and fellow NATO members. In this episode of Overwatch, Emily Estelle, Research Manager for the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, discusses these issues and others.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. Egypt is preparing for a military intervention to prevent Turkish backed forces from advancing into Eastern Libya. Egypt's direct involvement raises the risk of direct confrontation with Turkey, which could spark greater conflict throughout the region. Meanwhile, Russia is positioned to benefit from both the Egyptian intervention and rising tensions between Turkey and fellow NATO members over Turkey's ambitions in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Here with me today to discuss these issues is Emily Estelle, the Research Manager for the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute. Emily, thank you for being here today.

Emily Estelle:

Thanks for having me Jacob, happy to be here.

Jacob:

Let's start with Egypt. Why is Egypt preparing to send troops into Libya?

Emily:

Sure. So, president Sisi of Egypt said on Saturday the 20th, that Egypt has a legitimate right to intervene in Libya and he ordered the Egyptian military to start preparing for that. The reason for doing this is because Sisi's main partner in the Libyan civil war has been losing, has been on his back foot, and the forces against him were starting to get close to what you can consider critical Egyptian security interests in Eastern Libya. So, Sisi wanted to declare a red line at the current front line and make the threat to intervene so that he can try and stop those changes now and freeze the frontline where it is.

Jacob:

So, can we unpack Sisi's motivations a bit more? Why now, why this threat of intervention now?

Emily:

So, I'll go back in the history a little bit here. The key event to understand for this phase of the Libyan civil war actually goes back to May 2019. So first let me introduce the two main factions. The Egyptian side, the key figure to know about is a guy named Khalifa Haftar. Haftar is the leader of a Libyan militia coalition, mainly based in Eastern Libya, so on the Egyptian border. In May of last year, he began, actually in April of last year, he began an effort to seize Tripoli, which is Libya's capital in the West, relying on a lot of foreign backing. So, his key backers are Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia. And so, that effort has been ongoing for more than a year. Now, Haftar actually had to retreat from Tripoli in May. And the reason for that was a Turkish intervention on the side of Haftar's opponent, which is the Government of National Accord, which is the UN backed unity government that's based in Tripoli. And so, that Turkish intervention has been at least temporarily decisive as far as pushing Haftar's forces and those of his backers away from Tripoli back to the center of the country.

So, president Sisi of Egypt and a few Libyan leaders, including Haftar announced a unilateral ceasefire at the beginning of June on the sixth as a response to the losses in Tripoli. And so, Sisi's latest speech in which he threatened an intervention is a response to the fact that the Turkish backed forces had continued to advance after the ceasefire announcement earlier in June.

Jacob:

So the Libyan conflict is one of those conflicts that obviously has lots of different actors playing lots of different roles, dipping their hands and feet into the conflict. And you mentioned that Turkey recently caused a notable shift with a, it sounds like fairly sudden boost to their supported factions. So with that in mind, what does this potential Egyptian intervention look like? Tactically, what do we see happening?

Emily:

It's a good question. I think, you know when you say intervention, you can picture things of all sorts of different scale, whether it's limited air support and advisers all the way up to have a full scale invasion over the border. And I think what we'd actually see in this case is more likely to be a show of force on the Egyptian side. So moving of some troops, some ground forces into Eastern Libya, which is relatively easy to do over the long border. With Egypt, there's already some reports of Egyptian aircraft in Libyan airspace. And so, I think what the Egyptians would most likely want to do is show that they're serious and also challenge in this case the Turks on whether they really want to continue pushing forward.

This comes as the Turkish backed forces are already past the edge of where they're able to easily marshal a lot of Turkish air support. They've slowed down as they've reached central Libya. And in part, because the support from Turkey, which includes air defense systems and drones is based further in the West, so it's difficult for them to continue with that far forward. So I think we're probably likely to see those forces stand off and we can talk more about best and worst cases a little bit later. That's what I would expect out of Egypt though, and that seems to be what the Egyptian military is already preparing for.

I'll just add the note that Sisi also spoke about potentially working with Libyan factions and tribes, which is a feature of the Libya conflict that we've seen. So we might also see groups within Libya working with arms for example, from Egypt or another supporter, which has been a common theme in order to achieve some of those effects on the ground without taking the larger risk that a more direct intervention could bring.

Jacob:

Even without this necessarily being a, well, a large scale military intervention, it does sound like from your description that Egypt is prepared to commit pretty significant resources to this political, diplomatic as well as military. From their perspective, is this just all about preserving their influence in Libya and that little part of the Mediterranean?

Emily:

Eastern Libya security to an extent is Egyptian security. If you look at the human networks that run through that area, people are connected across that border. And so, there is a fundamental and deep connection between the actual stability of Eastern Libya and what that means for Cairo. So, that's one piece of it. There are hard security interests that aren't really just about geopolitics, but Egypt also has complicated and multi-layered interests in Libya beyond the security interest and also its historical sphere of influence. You can look at this through a bunch of different lenses. One is counterbalancing across Africa.

So Egypt's role as a leader in that region, juxtaposed with Algeria, which would be the other big player in this

case. There's also a middle Eastern geopolitics piece, which we see playing out in other areas, you see the Egyptian relationship with Saudi Arabia, with the UAE, that's gone into Egyptian participation in the Saudi led coalition in Yemen, for example. That competition between that block with Egypt, Saudi, UAE versus Turkey, and also Qatar is also reflected in the Gulf rift between the GCC States in 2017, runs back earlier to the Arab Spring, especially in Egypt if you look at the back and forth over the role of the Muslim brotherhood. That conflict is still very much alive and plays a big role in the motivations for the different States involved in the Libya conflict as well.

The question of whether the Libyan government will have a role for political Islam or not, that's an important question for a lot of those involved. Egypt also has economic interests. A lot of Egyptians work in Libya, which is important for the economy. There's also an Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon piece, which I can talk about more, but that's one of the key Turkish interests also. And so the Turkish intervention for a variety of reasons threatens Egypt's interests in offshore energy resources. So, there are many overlapping pieces that Cairo is concerned about here, and you can see the importance in how President Sisi has responded because this is a border security issue, this is key. So Egypt's response is a little bit different than some of the other states who are involved, who don't have that immediate and obvious interest.

Jacob:

I would love to ask you up questions about at least a half dozen of the interconnected relationships that you just brought up centering on Egypt and its neighbors in the region and its historical connections and interests. But unfortunately, I think I have to ask you just, what do you think comes next? I think we need to talk about the future. So what do you predict Egypt will do in the coming weeks and months?

Emily:

I'll give you my most likely case and also the worst case that I'm worried about here. Just to center this in a broader trend, something that I've observed in Libya that also goes across definitely to Syria, to the Yemen conflict, is that these Middle Eastern wars that started relatively local. So civil war is rooted in the Arab Spring grievances, have over time become these bigger and bigger regional geopolitical conflagrations that ripple beyond their immediate area and are now starting to merge with each other.

So the Syria conflict and the Libya conflict have become intertwined in part because of the Russian and Turkish involvement in both, we've seen the movement of mercenaries from Syria into Libya on both sides of that war. So it also makes it difficult to unpack what will happen next because there are so many variables. My main point about that is that the more players you have involved and the more invested they get, you're raising the risks for small decisions to have even bigger impact. So the scary scenario that I'm concerned about in Libya is that, let's say the Egyptians and the Turks don't want to get into a direct conflict with each other and to add the Russians into the mix, the Russians and the Turks are at opposite sides in both Libya and Syria. And they have cycled through escalating and deescalating and negotiating. And they are trying not to have a direct conflict with each other for a variety of reasons, but sometimes things go badly.

There have been some real hotspots in the Syria conflict involving for example, who's shooting at whose aircraft, whether it's intentional or not. And so, I'm worried about those kinds of interactions in the Libya space as well. Because if you look at the broader dynamic, you've now got Egypt is a major non-NATO ally of the United States and is also maintaining relationships with US and Russia. And then you've got them facing off against Turkey and NATO member, which has nonetheless caused a lot of tensions with NATO in part through this intervention. So you've got this really toxic mix of players all fighting trying not to be against each other directly in this same space.

So I'm very worried about the risk of miscalculation or mistakes that could bring a larger escalation between these

players. You could play out the scenario and get to nasty Mediterranean conflict involving US allies on both sides. And that's definitely the escalation pattern that I'm trying to think through more, and that I'm worried about. That said, the more likely path is a slower burn than that. I think the Egyptian threat to intervene may be sufficient to convince in this case the Tripoli government and Turkish backers that they can't continue moving forward in exactly the same way they have. So the front lines will probably freeze somewhere around where they are now with the question of central Libya being somewhat left up in the air.

In that case, we're looking at a repeat of the last, well pre 2019 and a couple of years of Libyan history where the conflict still existed, that the country was largely divided. You've got opposing military forces on each side, but they're not really fighting each other directly. Frontline stands as a no man's land. And you see all of these smaller sub conflicts happen and the political dysfunction carries on. I think we can settle back into that pattern where we avert the most dangerous outcomes for now, but don't move any closer to actually resolving the war, which leaves all of these, both internal and external players to reset, rearm, figure out how they can try and pursue their objectives again down the road. Which is also a destructive outcome in the long-term, but it does help us dodge the worst. My general concern though is that we've seen those different cycles over time in Libya and each time the stakes are a bit more dire, the investment from other players is a little bit higher. The effect on civilians is progressively worse. So I think we're seeing the next round in that spiral.

Jacob:

Thank you, that's great. Well, it's not great, but it's a great summary of what we might expect in the future. I did want to draw out something that you mentioned, which is the problem for the US and its allies in general of having allies within and outside NATO on opposite sides of a conflict. And regardless of the scale of the conflict that we see emerge, how bad are things getting within the NATO alliance, specifically with Turkey, who is a member of NATO, but who seems to be at odds with several other members at any given time?

Emily:

Yeah, so it's not great, to put it bluntly and this isn't a new issue. I think Libya is just bringing it to the fore. But the thing to watch right now is the Turkish-French relationship, which has gotten quite nasty, especially as the Turks have gotten more involved in Libya. The French position on Libya is complicated historically. They recognize, the UN recognize government in Tripoli, but they've had a long running relationship with Haftar including some support for particularly his counter-terrorism efforts. But those tend to be a smaller subset of his political ambitions. And the model that it seemed that the French were pursuing was that Haftar was the route to security in Libya and that was the way to deal with the most urgent issues, which were terrorism into Europe and mass migration. So this was very much a domestic issue for France and several other European countries.

Obviously, Haftar hasn't panned out the way many of his backers hoped as far as being able to take the country by force and unify. And so, now the French are in a bit of an awkward position, not helped by the fact that the Turks are seizing on this opportunity to pursue greater ambitions in the Mediterranean. So to draw out one main incident, Turkey in December of 2019, signed some agreements with the Libyan Government of National Accord, so the Tripoli government on military cooperation, but also on an economic exclusion zone through the Mediterranean that would establish a corridor between the two countries.

And if you look at that corridor on a map, it cuts right through some pretty well-established claims by other countries around the Eastern Mediterranean, including by Greece. So we're seeing yet another, in terms of history, yet another flare up between Greece and Turkey. And so France has been coming in on the Greek side in these disputes, including some rising tensions, confrontations between Greek, Turkish and French warships in the Eastern

Med, which is not what you want to see within the alliance, certainly. I think there are a few other threads to that Turkish-French relationship, including views towards political Islam, which tend to take opposite views on. So Turkish support for certain factions inside Libya runs against French interests as well.

And it's interesting to watch the response where the pushback on Turkey is shaping somewhat the EU's response to developments in Libya. So, there's a relatively new or revamped EU mission to interdict arms embargo violations to Libya. And that's a Naval operation, which means that it only affects Turkey because Turkey is bringing in weapons by that route, whereas Haftar's backers on the other side can go into Egypt and Overland, so they're not affected by that EU mission. So there's an unequal enforcement on that front, which reflects some of the tensions within NATO and between Turkey and France in particular.

Jacob:

So, correct me if I'm wrong, but if anyone benefits from discord within NATO, it's Russia. How might Russia take advantage of this situation?

Emily:

You're absolutely right about that. This situation is probably a good one for Russia. So to zoom out a little on Russia's perspective on Libya, the Kremlin's playing a pretty multifaceted game. They generally back Haftar, but he's not their only horse in the race, and they've maintained good relations with other factions in Eastern Libya and also a relationship with the GNA government in the West. So Russia is really seeking to be the broker here. We see the same pattern in Syria where the Russians and the Turks have established a parallel diplomatic channel. So they're looking to do the same thing in Libya. And so, there's still an opportunity for that, though there's been some bumps, the Russian and Turkish foreign and defense ministers canceled a meeting on Libya last weekend.

That's exactly why the entry of Egypt in a larger capacity might be good for the Russians. They've been cultivating their relationship with the Egyptians for the last couple of years. Their overarching objective is to try and pull Egypt out of the US sphere of influence. That's a pretty high bar, but they can still, the Russians can still muddy the waters a bit there. It's also useful for the Kremlin if Egypt can secure the objective of slowing the Turkish advance inside Libya, which is a Russian objective, but if the Egyptians can do that without Russia needing to put in a lot more resources or risk the relationship that they have with the Turks, then that's definitely good for them.

There is a version of the outcome where let's say the Egyptian play is extremely successful, then the Russians may lose some of the leverage that they have with the Egyptians by helping support Haftar. But I think that's fairly unlikely given that the Egyptians don't want to put in a huge number of resources, if they can help it and the Turks have been pretty steadfast. Zooming back further, yeah, the NATO dynamics at play here are definitely good for Russia in the longterm. One of Russia's larger long-term objectives is basically removing the effectiveness of NATO. And so the problems between Turkey and France for example are to the Russian benefit.

And for Libya, in particular, if you go back to 2011, it was a NATO intervention that helped remove Gaddafi, right? So that scared Putin and several other dictators, that's exactly what he does not want to happen to him. So demonstrating that NATO failed in Libya and made things worse is certainly towards Putin's benefit, and that's how he tries to play this and showing that Russia can be a more effective leader in North Africa and in the Middle East is also something that Russia has been pursuing on multiple fronts. So Libya hits a lot of different interests for the Russians. It's not their top priority by any means, but it is a useful place where they're able to keep a relatively low level of investment for a lot of returns.

Jacob:

As you say, those are some pretty lofty goals for Russia. Is there any way that this plan or this maybe plan is too specific, maybe this line of effort ends up backfiring for Russia?

Emily:

Possibly. Though, I'll say that the Russians have distanced themselves enough from Libya that they're also trying to mitigate that risk. For example, Russian private military contractors or mercenaries are the ones on the ground predominantly in Libya and the Russian state has never acknowledged their presence. So we know that those groups, the private military contractors, are not operating separately from the direction of the Kremlin. So if things go really South, there's a level of deniability that applies both to the Russian public and the international sphere.

As far as things, versions of this that really don't work out well for Russia. If they have really messed up their relationship with Turkey, that has an effect on Syria also, which is a higher priority theater and their also shared Russian and Turkish energy interests, their Turk stream pipeline, for example, that would rank higher as well. I could imagine a case where the Kremlin overstepped in Libya, they might end up uniting some of the European states against them a bit, but again, the European states have been quite divided on Libya, and the Kremlin has had a seat at the table as one of the power brokers. So I don't think that's incredibly likely, it's one way to think of it as in cases of extreme success or extreme failure for Russia or any of its partners in Libya, it might have a problem, but those cases are pretty unlikely. And so in that in-between space, I think the Russians have calculated their risks fairly well.

Jacob:

Understood. Obviously, we've talked about already how this is a very complicated conflict space with a lot of actors. Are there any actors that we haven't talked about already that might become involved as a result of these developments?

Emily:

Yeah. So one country that's in an interesting spot here that I mentioned, I think just off-hand, but didn't talk about in detail is Algeria, which is often missing. Algeria is often missing from the discussions on Libya, even though it has this huge border with Libya and obviously has serious concerns about Libyan security as well as the balance of power in North Africa. There are a few reasons for that. One is, Algeria's posture historically is explicitly non-interventionist and opposed to foreign intervention and influence in its own borders and also taking that role beyond its borders, though, at the same time, there's for example, historic Algerian influence in Mali that's significant and things like that.

Another reason more recently why Algeria has been fairly quiet on the Libya file is that over the course of 2019, the country had been gripped by protests. Technically still ongoing, though they've evolved in form due to the pandemic, but those protests led to the ouster of the long-term president and subsequent reshuffling in the government, which is still going on. And the outcome of that year of peaceful protest has not really settled in Algeria yet. So, it remains to be seen how that plays out. But, the new government have settled in more towards the end of 2019 and has started to get much more vocal on foreign policy again, including on Libya.

The Algerians had framed Tripoli. So after Haftar started the Tripoli Offensive, Tripoli was framed as a red line by the Algerians, and they stepped in diplomatically to try and head off that Offensive and also to balance some of the regional relationships like the Turkish relationship to Tunisia, for example, which concerned Algeria because of Algeria's own close ties to its neighbor Tunisia. The interesting piece now is that the Algerian government is redrafting its constitution and reconsidering the non-interference policy to allow the deployment of peacekeeping

forces. That would be a big sea change for Algerian policy generally. And it's worth thinking through what the implications across Northern Africa are. And also what that would mean for the Algerian-Morocco relationship, which is testy of course.

It's also interesting in the context of Libya, depending on how, if in the future a peacekeeping force comes on the table, what that would mean for what the composition is and how regional actors play out. I think it's worth considering, but also still pretty unlikely that the Algerians would take a more muscular approach to Libya sooner. It would be unpopular domestically, and I don't think they've really spun up to the level where they're prepared to do something like what the Egyptians would do on the border, but it is worth watching this evolution in Algeria, which could bring them into the playing field in a way that they have not been involved before. And the GNA has a ongoing relationship with Algeria president or sorry, prime minister, Sarraj of the GNA met with the Algerian president on the 20th, I think. So the same day that Sisi, President Sisi of Egypt, made his most recent announcement.

So, Algiers is definitely in the mix diplomatically and it's worth watching the North African countries negotiating amongst themselves as well. They generally have the perception, understandably that they should be the ones helping determine Libya's fate rather than some of their more far-flung peers in the Arab world. So we have to look at those as two separate levels of influence as well.

Jacob:

Got it. And what about non-state actors, militias or groups like ISIS, do they stand to gain or lose in Libya based on the current trends and trajectories that you are tracking?

Emily:

Sure. I'll split that into two parts like you did in your question. For militias generally, yeah. I mean the power in Libya is with the militias and has been for a long time. A key thing to understand about the conflict is that the political players are very dependent on the guys with the guns. And those two groups are not always the same people. Watching the evolution of the GNA over time, it still does not really have its own armed force. When we talk about the forces of the GNA, it's really militias that they've built mutually beneficial relationships with, and that that can be a very tense relationship.

And a lot of the Libya conflict has been framed or has been shaped, I would say by how militias come together against certain common enemies and then diverge for other interests. Yeah, so the militias are a core issue. I don't see them becoming any less powerful anytime soon. In fact, some of them are more powerful than ever because they're absorbing more and more support from outside or relying on external air power that makes them a lot more capable than they would otherwise be on their own. So, yeah, the militias are going to keep benefiting from this as long as the foreign players are working through militias, which has been their primary mode of getting things done.

On the Salafi-Jihadi group issues, so ISIS, Al-Qaeda and the like, yeah, so I've been forecasting for awhile that as the Libyan war continues and the country keeps fragmenting, we're going to see another iteration, some iteration of ISIS in Libya 2.0, whatever you want to call it. To go backwards a little bit, or I guess almost a decade now, there was an initial burst of activity by groups linked to Al-Qaeda after Gaddafi fell, because the chaos of the collapse of the state created opportunities for them, the lifting of the pressure of security forces, et cetera. So, there was an initial wave with some of those groups trying to draw legitimacy from participating in the revolution. They gained predominance in some areas.

What got a lot of attention was once Libya's transition really faltered, and once you hit 2014, when the country really split into the first stage of the civil war that we're seeing play out now, that's when the Islamic state was also rising globally at the same time. And that falling apart into warring factions created a lot of opportunities for Salafi Jihadi groups, so ISIS and Al-Qaeda linked groups to be very active. One thing that we saw come through in that time was ISIS taking control of Sirte, which is the city and central Libya that's the focus of the red line conversations right now. So it tends to fall between the two main factions of East and West, but it's fought over the gateway to other important things. It's otherwise fairly neglected. It was Gaddafi's hometown and there are some long running issues there.

And, what happens, at least what happened with ISIS is that the group was able to exploit that seam between warring sides, and no one was going to focus on fighting ISIS when their predominant objective was fighting each other, at least not until ISIS grew to the point that it was threatening core interests. That was the height of ISIS in Libya, and the group is much, much weaker now. There is a coalition of Libyan groups backed by the US and others drove them out of that city and they're in the remote South now, much weaker, running guerrilla attacks, not controlling the city, not governing the city as they were. But, they've survived and they've gotten more active over the last couple of years. So I would say they're still climbing up from a low point, and depending on the trajectory of the war, I think there are plenty of openings for groups like that to flourish in Libya. Luckily, we have not seen that yet, but all of the conditions are set, we see this in conflict after conflict. These extremist groups are very, very resilient when they can retain some support of base when they have space to operate because of the political insecurity dysfunction of the area, where they are. So, I expect to see, for example, ISIS resuming spoiler attacks, which they had been doing in the lead-up to UN based negotiations throughout that process before the battle for Tripoli started, attacks on the election commission on the oil corporation, kinds of attacks intended to disrupt the formation of a functioning Libyan state, which would be a problem for ISIS because it would help remove their support that they do have.

So, I would say it's a balance. I don't think that we're at risk for the return of an ISIS governed city in the way that we've seen it in Libya before, at least not in anywhere near the near future, but we shouldn't be surprised if in 2021 there's a fairly significant ISIS presence that's starting to throw off attacks into neighboring countries again, because they're at a low point in the cycle, but there's nothing acting against them sufficient to remove their base of support and keep them from operating in the open space that there is.

Jacob:

Well, Emily, basically everything you've brought up is quite troubling, but I want to thank you for being here today to talk about these issues. Thank you so much for sharing your knowledge with us.

Emily:

My pleasure, Jacob, and yeah, I'm sorry about the cause of doom, I get that a lot. But, thanks for the opportunity for the conversation and I'm happy I got to be here.

Jacob:

Thank you.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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