



— SPECIAL REPORT —

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**CIVIL WAR IN LIBYA  
RUSSIAN GOALS  
AND POLICY**



**MINISTER SERGEI SHOIGU AND COMMANDER OF THE NATIONAL ARMY LIBYA KALIF HAFTAR**  
**SOURCE: FUNCTION.MIL.RU**

- **Libya is considered the third most destabilized Arab country only to Syria and Yemen. The violent battle for the country's capital city of Tripoli erupted in early April, opening a new chapter in Libya's civil war that had broken out back in 2014. After a NATO-backed operation that removed the Gaddafi regime from power, the international community has yet wrongfully give Libya's further fate into the hands of its inhabitants.**
- **Libya's war axis thus consisted of a conflict between the Government of National Accord (GNA), endorsed jointly by the United Nations, the United States and most of EU Member States, and a competitive body, with its headquarters in eastern Libya, along with allied troops of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, backed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Russia. The civil war has fitted into the long-lasting rivalry between Libyan regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, fuelled by tribal divisions and rifts between Islamic fundamentalists and proponents of a secular state as well as those between radical supporters of the revolution and Gaddafi's loyalists.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin has recognized the go-ahead for ousting Muammar Gaddafi from power as one of Moscow's most dreadful mistakes over the last two decades. As a result of the armed intervention, Libya plunged into a civil war while Moscow lost colossal money and influence, both of**

which it used to enjoy in the past. Although humiliated in 2011, Putin long aspired to re-emerge as a key player in Libya. The country's present-day balance of power is yet doomed to fail as it comprises a set of actors, including first and foremost the Tripoli government, Haftar's forces stationed in Libya's Oil Crescent but also various local militia and Daesh jihadists. A new reshuffle needs, therefore, to take place, Putin will have an explicit intention to join such an undertaking.

- Moscow has so far taken the side of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, a Libyan military officer who can count on the Kremlin's discreet aid and protection in the international arena. This is a crucial asset for the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), given that the Tripoli government enjoys international legitimacy. However, Moscow's goal does not only consist in aiding Haftar; the Russians have also met the UN-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli.
- The Kremlin's optimal objective in Libya encompassed its pursuits to put an end to the civil war while enabling its protagonist to seize power over the country. Despite some restrictions, Haftar deems as the key candidate to assume this position. Under Russia's plan, such a person would give the go-ahead for establishing Russian military base(s) in the Mediterranean Sea region, allow Moscow's firms to enter local oil sector, purchase Russian-made weapons and serve, alongside Egypt and Syria, as a strong link in the pro-Kremlin axis in the Middle East.
- Yet it is now more likely to accomplish the minimum goal, that is to uphold Libya's current turmoil. This provides the Kremlin with an opportunity to maintain its present-day role of a helpful partner for all parties to the conflict while boosting Russian room for manoeuvre in potential trade deal talks and making Libya a „powder keg” for EU Mediterranean countries. In this respect, Moscow will be capable of using the issue of illegal refugees as a bargaining chip in its Middle East game. Whoever can seize power over the Libyan coast or at least exert an influence on the one who is in charge of this territory, gains an extra advantage of blackmailing countries such as Italy.

# Marching to Tripoli

On April 3, 2019, the Libyan National Army (LNA) moved westwards along Libya's coastal road through the Nafusa Mountains to the town of Gharyan, launching a grand military offensive in western Libya. On April 4, Libya's Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar ordered to begin a military attack to occupy the capital city of Tripoli. Shortly after, LNA troops advanced northwards toward the Tripoli international airport located in the southern part of the capital. Still on the same day, LNA forces took control points alongside the road linking Tripoli and the town of Zawiya, west of the capital. As a result, various armed groups concentrated their troops in the outskirts of the Libyan capital; among them were forces loyal to the Government of National Accord (GNA), including the Tripoli Defense Force, with links to Osama Al-Juwali, military branches in Zintan, backed by additional troops from the towns of Misrata and Zawiya. Fierce fighting gripped Libya, during which heavy weaponry was used and air strikes were performed. Despite initial rapid advances, LNA units were halted while the military offensive eventually turned into trench warfare. On April 11, the Libyan National Army issued an arrest warrant for Fayeza Mustafa Al-Sarraj, the head of the Government of National Accord along with a group of other cabinet officials. A week later, Libya's UN-backed government issued an arrest warrant against the army commander Khalifa Haftar and six of his officers, accusing them of ordering deadly air strikes against civilian and residential areas. Later that day, forces loyal to Haftar attacked the Tamanhint air base in southern Libya,

a facility that earlier had been occupied by the government army. Located near the city of Sabha, the base is of critical strategic importance for that part of Libya, over which Haftar's forces seized control earlier this year. The World Health Organization (WHO) said on April 19 that at least 213 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured in two weeks of fighting. Long-lasting bloody warfare is therefore expected to take place on Libyan soil. To Haftar's surprise, all armed forces in western Libya managed to respond quickly as well as unite their troops. Also, he overreached his capabilities while planning that at least some of local armed units will take his side after the Libyan National Army achieves its first successes in the region. If determined to seize authority over the capital, Haftar will need to call

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**Competition between the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Government of National Unity (GNA) is heading for a long, positional and bloody campaign. Haftar was surprised by the rapid reaction and unification of all armed groups in western Libya.**

for reinforcements from Libya's eastern province of Cyrenaica, yet risking unveiling the rear of its army. While assessing the current balance of power, one should not rely upon the territory. Although Haftar has won control over the vast majority of the country, the Libyan population inhabits primarily western parts of the country. Up to a third of Libya's inhabitants live in the capital. As of 2006, Tripolitania had twice as many residents as Cyrenaica, 3.6 million and 1.6 million respectively. Most of Libyans are currently under the authority of the Government of National Accord.

Not incidentally, the military offensive coincided with a visit of senior UN officials to Libya. Haftar purposefully chose to wage war just ahead of the reconciliation conference on Libya's future in the town of Ghadames, initially scheduled for April 14–16. Also, foreign actors seem to play a significant role in the Libyan civil war. Among Haftar's main allies are France and Saudi Arabia. Interestingly enough, his military offensive was launched after Haftar's visit to Riyadh, during which he held talks with the heir to the Saudi throne, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Also, the United Arab Emirates provides substantial financial and armaments support for its Libyan partner. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have

made efforts to annihilate Tripoli as the last stronghold of the „Arab Spring.” Attention should also be drawn to their rivalry with Doha and Ankara, both of which aid the UN-endorsed Government of National Accord. Haftar can also count on Egypt as armies of both states are united in their struggles against the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, Moscow has an appetite to play an increasingly important role in the Libyan game; officially, it holds a neutral position while maintaining contacts with both parties to the conflict yet the Kremlin has backed Haftar on the sidelines.

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## Civil War

In February 2011, a wave of anti-government protests, known as the Arab Spring, broke out in Libya. An uprising against the rule of Muammar Gaddafi rapidly took the form of a civil war. Further fate of the armed clash was determined by NATO's military response, launched after receiving a mandate from the UN Security Council. Back in October 2011, Muammar Gaddafi was captured and executed by rebel forces. Later in 2011, democratic elections were announced in Libya; among members of Libya's General National Congress (GNC), a legislative body elected back in 2012, were representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, a moderate government was appointed, headed by a liberal politician Alim Zeidan. Within the eighteen months, the Congress was expected to pave Libya's way for the democratic transition, mostly by drafting a new constitution, followed by the parliamentary elections to be held sometime later. Soon after, the decision not to dismantle the Revolution-era armed groups, but to incorporate them into the Libyan police, bore dramatically

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**The decision to not disarm the numerous armed groups from the revolution, but only formally incorporate them into the police, had disastrous consequences. These militias quickly began to fight each other (tribal and religious divisions), and the central government lost control over the situation.**

negative fruits as the militia rapidly began to fight one with another, mostly due to ethnic and religious rifts, making the central government unable to control the situation any further. The Congress's decision in late 2013 to extend its authorities, initially set to expire in February 2014, stirred up a revolt within the militia and groups. Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who at the time was stationed in the eastern region of Cyrenaica, emerged as the chief rival of the General National Congress, dubbing the institution „illegal” while calling on the „provisional government” to seize power in the country. On May 15, 2014, the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army under the guide of Haftar attacked Islamist militia

that backed the Congress, with the fiercest battles taking place in Benghazi. Heavy fighting broke out three days later in Tripoli when the Zintan-based Qaaqaa and Sawaaq brigades attacked on parliamentary facilities. After the incident, authorities holding links to the Congress proposed new elections, as a result of which members of the new House of Representatives were elected on June 25, 2014. Secular state proponents, most of whom were linked to the Gaddafi regime, declared their victory yet local clashes between militia and attempts to intimidate voters prevented polling stations in many Libyan regions from being opened. For the Congress, this served as a pretext for refusing to recognize the newly appointed parliament and extending its own legitimacy. On July 13, 2014, several groups and militias backing the previous GNC parliament launched the „Libyan Dawn” operation, declaring their support for the General National Congress and the then government. By the end of August 2014, Libyan Dawn forces had taken control of Tripoli, forcing the House of Representatives and the pro-Western government headed by Abdullah al-Thani to move to Tobruk while the Congress-related government of Prime Minister Omar al-Hassi, backed by Islamist militia and the Muslim Brotherhood, stayed in Tripoli.

This stage of Libya’s civil war did not cease until the end of 2015; in the aftermath of the peace talks held under the aegis of the United Nations, a final agreement was reached, under which both the Presidency Council and the Government of National Accord, headed by Fayez Mustafa al-Sarraj, a former official of the Gaddafi regime. The government was formally recognized by the international community. And yet a group of members of the House of

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**As a result of peace talks under the aegis of the UN, and rejection of their resolutions by some of the deputies, the division of Libya into two main areas has been consolidated. One loyal to the government in Tripoli, the other controlled by the „government in Tobruk,” and de facto Haftar’s troops. This state of continues to this day, although Haftar’s LNA gained an advantage in the military sense and territorial progress over the past year.**

Representatives rejected the claim, a step that upheld Libya’s polarization into two main areas, the former of which pledged loyalty to the Tripoli-based government while the latter, allegedly supervised by „the government in Tobruk”, remained under control of Haftar-led forces that had made a tactical decision to back those authorities. Generally speaking, such a state of matters has not changed ever since, though Haftar’s LNA and Libyan authorities based in the eastern part of the country have gained a definite military advantage over the past year.

## Libyan Map of Influence

Libya's House of Representatives, also referred to as Majlis al-Nuwwab, is recognized by most of the country's eastern (Cyrenaica) and southern (Fezzan) regions, alongside the central provinces. The „Tobruk government” has, however, long served as Haftar's „puppet.” The 60,000-person Libyan National Army is the country's most potent armed unit. Haftar has retained control over Cyrenaica, Libya's oil-rich region, as well as most oil deposits in the southwestern part of the country. Since September 2016, he has wielded authority over most oil terminals located along the Libyan Mediterranean coast, giving him access to most of Libyan oil output and export. Haftar is often compared to Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, an Egyptian politician and the army leader, who had toppled the Islamist regime in Cairo and became president of the country. Moreover, Egypt is a Haftar's key ally, alongside the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and France, the last of which has broken away from the Western camp to back the Tripoli-based government. Yet unofficially, Russia has emerged as Haftar's crucial ally.

Both Libya's „Tobruk government” and the Libyan National Army have experienced a fierce rivalry from the al-Sarraj-led Government of National Accord, headquartered in Tripoli. Although formally endorsed by the United States and other countries, the GNA has seized control over a small part of the western region of Tripolitania. Seen as militarily powerless, it also remains heavily dependent on aid from several armed groups, including that from Misrata. So far, the government has

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**The Libyan National Army is the strongest armed formation in Libya, with over 60,000 people. The formation under the command of Haftar controls most of the East (Cyrenaica), the south (Fezzan) and the center of the country, and thus also controls most of the country's oil resources.**

managed to resist due to tactical support from several influential local armed groups that have for various reasons recognized Haftar and his self-styled army as their archest enemy. The Fajr Libya (Libyan Dawn) coalition owes its name to the 2014 military operation launched back in the summer of 2014. Alongside Islamist fighters, it also involves radical military factions linked to particular Libyan regions, whose primary goal is to oust from public life all entities that are to be connected with the Gaddafi regime. Misrata's militia became a crucial component of this faction of the Libyan Dawn, amassing troops who performed a pivotal role in defeating the Libyan dictator.



In addition to these two main military camps, there are also independent, small and medium-scale, armed groups or units that tend to join different front depending on a given situation. In southern parts of the country, a crucial role is played by tribal militia, with some ISIS terrorists that arrived in the area back in 2014. Jihadist fighters remain active along the Gulf of Sirte, where they took control over the large port of Sirte between 2015 and 2016. Having suffered consecutive defeats in 2017, they retreated southwards, seeking an opportunity to launch a counterattack. Established in June 2014 and located in eastern Libya, the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries emerged in the past as a significant military force to have waged battles against Haftar and the „Tobruk government.” In September 2012, a local Islamist militia, Ansar al-Sharia, allegedly stormed the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, killing the U.S. ambassador. After fierce and long-lasting battles, Haftar’s self-styled forces managed to defeat the Shura units whose last „survivors” still operate in the Benghazi region.

**The Government of National Unity in Tripoli, with Prime Minister Fayez Mustafa as-Sarraj in charge, is officially recognized by the UN and other states. It controls a smaller and smaller part of Trypolitania in the west of the country, is weak militarily and depends on the help of various armed groups, including those from Misrata.**

## External Players in Libya

When outlining the Libyan map of influences, along with main camps and dividing lines, one should not forget about a strategic role of external entities that, like in Syria, hold interest in attaining their own goals in Libya. Formally, the international community has recognized the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord as Libya’s legal authorities. Having close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, the faction enjoys broad support from Turkey and Qatar that yet cannot be compared to direct

help granted for the Tobruk government, along with Marshal Haftar. For example, Saudi Arabia bankrolls his self-styled Libyan National Army, the United Arab Emirates supplies weapon systems to the armed group while Egypt, due to its border with Libya’s Cyrenaica region, is committed to delivering reinforcements on land. Libyan National Army commander has also maintained friendly relations with Russia; though diplomatically Moscow has emerged as a neutral observer, it has long

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yet unofficially aided Haftar. Unlike its Arab peers, the Kremlin's help cannot be referred to as considerable or unconditional, due to slightly differing goals of both Moscow and Riyadh. So far, West's stance toward the Libyan civil war has proved somewhat muted, though all key players have pursued their own goals. For their part, Italy took the side of the Tripoli government, as exemplified by such domains as crude oil trade or illegal immigration, while France supports Haftar. The United Kingdom seeks to remain aloof from Haftar's activities, often warning against Moscow's military expansion in Libya. The current U.S. administration is, in turn, doing its utmost to stay away from the Libyan conflict, still having in mind a bitter pill of Obama's term in office and Clinton's diplomacy. Although Washington has officially recognized the Tripoli government and adopted a critical approach towards Haftar's new military offensive and Libya's bloodshed, another interesting fact is that Haftar holds a U.S. citizenship. Earlier, he lived on American soil for 20 years where he had worked for CIA to topple Gaddafi. The U.S. unambiguous attitude is yet evidenced by several events, including a telephone call held between Donald Trump and Khalifa Haftar shortly after a military assault was launched on Tripoli, or Washington's veto to a UK's UN Security Council draft resolution condemning

LNA activities in Libya. Interestingly, Russia also used its veto power to object to the document as the country has been playing an elaborate game in Libya.

Through its official diplomatic or presidential channels, Russia has repeatedly called on Libya to cease fighting while emphasizing the need to settle the armed dispute with the participation of all parties to the conflict. This has yet not translated into backing the latest failed peace process held under the auspices of the United Nations due to Haftar's advance to Tripoli. Even though, Moscow has not made a step towards criticizing Haftar while ignoring the fact that Libya's cruel bloodshed had been initiated by LNA commander. Notwithstanding that, on April 8, Kremlin spokesman

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Dmitry Peskov urged all sides to „avoid any actions that could provoke bloodshed and the death of civilians.” In recent years, Moscow has taken multiple efforts to guarantee worldwide protection for Haftar, mostly by obstructing the UN draft resolution obliging Haftar to cease the military offensive while announcing consequences for those who undermine peace efforts in Libya, or criticizing the government for scrambling air forces against the Libyan National Army, as stated by Russian Foreign Ministry Sergei Lavrov. The Kremlin has yet denied all accusations of having backed Marshall's activities in Libya as its spokesman said back on April 5 that Moscow „was not involved in current events.” On April 6, Mikhail Bogdanov, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Representative of the Russian President to the Middle East and African countries, held telephone conversations with Haftar and Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord Ahmed Maiteeq. Moscow has avoided expressing full support for Haftar's army, hoping instead to perform the role of a mediator and gain substantial advantages from

all parties to the conflict. The Libyan conundrum is just a part of the Kremlin's region strategy; Moscow's aid for Haftar may rely upon Saudi and Emirati support for the al-As-sad regime in Syria.

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## **Soviet-Educated Marshal**

Born in 1943, Khalifa Belqasim Haftar studied in Egypt and the Soviet Union, also at the M.V. Frunze Military Academy. He is a fluent Russian speaker. In 1969, Haftar took part in the coup that brought Muammar Gaddafi to power and overthrew the monarchy. In 1973, Haftar went to fight on the Yom Kippur war against Israel, where he served as a commander of Libyan units fighting alongside Egyptian troops in the Sinai. During the 1980s, Haftar

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**Haftar's cooperation with the CIA still raises some worries in Moscow about his true intentions. He lived in Virginia until 2011 and even obtained U.S. citizenship.**

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**COMMANDER OF THE NATIONAL ARMY LIBYA KHALIF HAFTAR**  
**SOURCE: FUNCTION.MIL.RU**

commanded Libyan forces during the Chadian–Libyan conflict, where he did not cease to conduct battles even after Libya formally withdrew from the conflict. He followed Gaddafi's order; after Haftar went into captivity in 1987, the Libyan leader disowned him. Once Haftar fell out with the dictator, he started working for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. He remained in exile in the United States where he was reportedly preparing a failed U.S.-backed armed opposition against his former boss. He then moved to Kenya and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). In 1990, Haftar, along with his 300 proponents, was granted asylum in the United States, where he lived in Virginia in 2011 and took U.S. citizenship. Haftar's cooperation with the CIA has raised serious concerns in Moscow whose senior officials seemed suspicious about the officer's true intentions. Haftar returned to

Libya in time to participate in the civil war that ended Gaddafi's regime. Soon after, he came into conflict with Islamist revolutionaries, after which he returned to the United States. He rose to prominence in Libya again in 2014, yet no longer cooperating with Washington as the latter was in hopes of backing a moderate Islamist government. In 2016, having incorporated a band of former government officers into his self-styled Libyan National Army, he became the commander of the armed formation. Most of Libya's military personnel pledged its support from Haftar, claiming the Tripoli-headquartered government powerless to bring to a halt Islamist militia, suspected of mass killings of senior army and intelligence officers in Benghazi. The House of Representatives awarded him with the title of „Field Marshal.”



Although he wields control over most of Libya's territory, along with a considerable part of the country's oil sector, Haftar is yet unlikely to stabilize the internal situation in Libya through military-based rule, modeled on the Egyptian system. His 60,000-person Libyan National Army is neither national nor an army, though; it involves local militia that can by no means be referred to as a regular army. In western and southern regions of the country, LNA branches have assumed the role of tribal militia. Also, Haftar has enemies who have no intention to surrender, struggling to destabilize the country, even if the LNA manages to take Tripoli. Known for his fierce hostility towards Islamist fighters, Haftar makes however no distinction between their moderate factions, widely represented in the Libyan government elected after Gaddafi's demise and Islamic State jihadists. Also, Russia media tend to portray him as a Russian ally, whose close links to

Moscow are owed not only to his past but also to favoring hard-line rules over democracy, along with his hostility to Islamists.

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## Playing (with) Haftar

Russia began to seek best possible relations with Field Marshal Haftar after he became Libya's crucial strongman. Moscow's rapprochement with Haftar can be traced back to 2015 when the Kremlin made a decision to engage in the Libyan conflict after the NATO-backed intervention to thwart Gaddafi. Addressing his officers in October 2015, Haftar recalled Moscow's promise to back his army in its fight against Islamic terrorists. Later that year, an LNA delegation, headed by Haftar's son, paid a visit to Moscow while the marshal flew to the Russian capital in 2016. He held talks with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Se-

cretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev. In September 2016, Haftar's envoy went to Moscow to push Russia to help lift the UN arms embargo on Libya, enabling arms deliveries to be shipped to the Libyan National Army. In November 2016, also in Moscow, Haftar attended meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and several Russian defense ministry officials. In January 2017, Haftar was welcomed on board the aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, as it was en route from the coast off Syria. Once greeted by the ship's officers, the Libyan military commander spoke via vi-



deo-conference with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, „discussed pressing issues in the fight against international terrorist groups in the Middle East.” Moscow later denied reports that it had agreed to send to the Libyan National Army armaments and supplies worth the total of \$2 billion and to lift a UN arms embargo in exchange for Libya’s permit for building Russian military facilities in Cyrenaica. As allegedly reported, Haftar was to have inked the deal while visiting the Russian aircraft carrier while new military bases would be located near Tobruk and Benghazi. Information about injured LNA soldiers being admitted to Russian hospitals has yet been publicized by the Russians themselves. Without Moscow’s go-ahead, Belarus would never sell a batch of Mi-24 helicopters to the United Arab Emirates, the latter of which offered them to Haftar’s armed units.

The Libyan strongman paid yet another visit to Moscow in August 2017 where he was hosted by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. His trip took place shortly after Haftar and al-Sarraj negotiated a 10-point plan to restore peace in Libya in July 2017. Although Russian Foreign Ministry said it backed joint efforts made by Haftar and the head of the UN-backed government Fayez al-Sarraj in a bid to reach a peace agreement, Haftar’s meeting with Shoigu was of a less peaceful character as both officials discussed further prospects of tightening military partnership, as illustrated by the meetings that took place sometime later. In May 2018, LNA commander held talks with Shoigu and in an interview for Russian RIA Novosti news agency in August that year, spokesperson of Haftar’s self-styled army, Ahmed Al-Mismari, said it is impossible to put an end

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to the civil war in Libya without Putin’s involvement. Referring to the Syrian turmoil and Russian aid for the al-Assad regime, he said that „the same thing that happened in Syria happened in Libya too” while „the Libyan people are looking for a strong ally, just like Russia is.” In November 2018, Haftar paid another visit to Moscow; talks held between members of the Libyan delegation and representatives of Russian Defense Ministry were also attended by businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, known for what Moscow cannot officially do in the Middle East, namely sending mercenaries to help Russian allies in exchange for mining permits for oil, gas, gold, and diamonds.

Russia, which has maintained friendly ties with Haftar, is currently tightening cooperation yet remaining cautious, given intents of Libya’s other players, among which are Haftar’s allies. Moscow has no intention to play that game alone, preferring to stay in a second-row seat

when subsidizing the Tobruk-based government. On the sidelines, the Kremlin has simultaneously sought to speak with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to agree on a common standpoint towards the Libyan conflict. Such was the case of the January visit paid to Cairo by Nikolai Patrushev; two days later, Secretary of the Security Council traveled to Abu Dhabi where he met National Security Advisor of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Tahnoun Bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss the situation in Libya. Russian siloviki (veterans of the intelligence services), including Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Sergey Naryshkin who visited Riyadh, are most likely to cover the theme of the cooperation between Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to back Russian-sourced initiatives in Syria, which permits Moscow to grant Haftar greater military support. Not surprisingly, Russian diplomats are committed to using the Libyan army officer as a tool for destabilizing the country or making him an ally who would give the green light for Russian servicemen and oil

companies to enter the country if he emerged as a winning side in the Libyan civil war turmoil. Like any other skillful diplomacy, the Russian one is not aimed at fostering one option while expressing a spirit of openness to different approaches.

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**Russian diplomacy treats the LNA commander instrumentally - not only as an element of the trade with Cairo or Riyadh - but also as an effective tool to destabilize Libya and as a potential future ally who will let Russian military and oil companies into his country.**

## Flirting with Tripoli

At the recent Middle East Conference hosted by the Moscow-based Valdai Discussion Club, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Representative of the Russian President to the Middle East and African countries Mikhail Bogdanov said that Russia has not taken side in the Libyan conflict, yet declaring his country's readiness to enter into a dialogue aimed at finding a solution to the problem. This tendency emerged in 2015 when Russia made its political comeback to Libya, and a Moscow-ba-

sed contact group for intra-Libyan settlement was established. For its part, the Kremlin cannot ignore the fact that the Tripoli-headquartered government has been officially recognized by the international community and until Haftar does not possibly seize full power over the country's territory, making foreign players to hold talks with him, Russia is supposed to discuss its potential plans to invest in Libya with Haftar's self-styled GNA. At a given point, Moscow and Tripoli were even committed to

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addressing joint military cooperation. In December 2016, Russian Ambassador to Libya Ivan Molotkov met with Libya's Tripoli government's Defense Minister to debate this issue. On February 19, 2017, Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj voiced his hopes that Moscow would fulfill the role of an intermediary in talks between his cabinet and Haftar. On March 2, 2017, al-Sarraj flew to Moscow, where he was hosted by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. „We stand in solidarity with the Libyan people who are going through perhaps the most serious trial in their history. The unity of the Libyan people and the territorial integrity of Libya have been destroyed,” the latter politician said. Libya's Government of National Accord has made efforts to gain Moscow's support, yet not excluding its readiness to reco-

gnize at least some of Libyan-Russian deals that had been inked by the Gaddafi regime. Moscow and Tripoli have been involved in discussing resuming construction of the €2.2 billion Sirte-Benghazi railway. Libya is eager to buy 1 million tonnes of wheat from Russia for around \$700 million.

Under formal diplomatic rules, Russia is yet committed to observing the rule of equal treatment of both parties to the conflict, as illustrated by a Moscow visit paid by representatives of two major camps fighting over restoring control over Libya, along with how the meeting was prepared and publicized in the media. In September 2017, the GNA vice-president Ahmed Maiteeq and LNA spokesman Ahmed al-Mismari arrived in Moscow for separate meetings with Russian officials, marking Moscow's attempt to become a mediator in the Libyan problem. The Kremlin's

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**Russians want to show that they are talking to both sides of the conflict. Libya is to be the next country (after Syria), where Russia wants to emerge as a constructive player capable of bringing peace. At the same time, the Kremlin protects itself against any political opportunity in post-war Libya.**

efforts seemed additionally amplified as UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé flew to Russia, where he met Lavrov. Unlike previous visits paid by Libyan officials, those of Maiteeq and al-Mismari were widely publicized as part of Moscow's efforts to hold talks with both Libyan camps while insisting on their common denominators, including readiness to restore the country's infrastructure and fight against terrorism. With its endeavors, Moscow showed it was committed to talking to everyone. Libya is the second state only to Syria hit by the Arab Spring uprisings where Russia has attempted to emerge as a constructive player capable of bringing peace back to the country. Also, the Kremlin seeks to cover any political eventuality in post-war Libya, pushing its authorities, whatever political camp they eventually represent, to pledge loyalty to Moscow and declare readiness to enter into cooperation. For its part, Russia used Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov to play the Libyan game, which is not a novelty given his commitment to Russian diplomacy directed towards the Islamic world. Libya's Maiteeq arrived in Russia at the invitation of Kadyrov; he first came to the Chechen capital Grozny and later traveled to Moscow, where he was hosted by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov. Attention should be drawn to a critical role of Russian diplomat and middleman between Russia and Libya Lev Dengov, the chairman of the Russian contact group on the intra-Libyan settlement. Speaking to Kommersant newspaper in August 2017, Dengov had no intention to hide Russian interest in renewing former contacts and regaining lucrative trade contracts concluded back when Gaddafi was in power. Dengov serves a Russian middleman between Russia and the Tripoli government, representing interests of the Ministry of Fore-

## Russian has interest in renewing former contacts and regaining lucrative trade contracts concluded back when Gaddafi was in power.

ign Affairs and the State Duma. He remained active on Libyan soil from 2008 to 2011, thus at the dusk of the Gaddafi regime. Following the Libyan revolution, he could use business contacts he had established back in those times. Dengov's steps in Libya are coordinated jointly by the Foreign Ministry, the State Duma and the Chechen authorities as the diplomat is a good friend to Ramzan Kadyrov.

Within the past year, bilateral ties between Russia and Libya's GNA visibly intensified. On May 3, 2018, Mohammed Siala, Foreign Minister in the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord held talks in Moscow with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev. Later on, Siala paid a second visit to Russia; he attended the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, taking part in discussion with the participation of Bogdanov and Dengov. In May 2018, a delegation of „Libyan security structures” arrived in Moscow as its representatives held interest in acquiring Russian-made military equipment and weapons. In addition to earlier meetings with Haftar and al-Sarraj, Moscow has become committed to establishing a dialogue with Libya's minor political players, including Misrata Brigades, whose people arrived in Moscow after having played a crucial

role in a victorious battle against the Islamic State and taken over the city of Sirte, ISIS's „capital” in Libya.

The Tripoli government seems perfectly aware of Russia's close ties to Haftar and might have even used the Russians as a tool for bringing the marshal's intentions to a halt. On March 17, 2019, Khaled al-Mishri, president of Libya's High Council of State (HCS), arrived in Moscow at the invitation of the Federal Council, Russia's upper house for talks with some Russian officials, including Bogdanov. Notably, Al-Mishri served as a long-time member of the Libyan faction of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that Russia labeled as a terrorist group. Though this detail was overshadowed by the background of his visit which coincided with successful military operations performed

by the Libyan National Army in Libya's south-western region of Fezzan, during which Haftar's forces captured the giant el-Sharara and el-Feel oil fields. Also, they seized control over major trans-Saharan trading routes of al-Ghat, Murzuq, and Sabha. In response, the heads of Libya's Government of National Accord fell back on Moscow. In late February 2019, Haftar and al-Sarraj held a meeting in Abu Dhabi. Notwithstanding these efforts, the Military Council of Misrata, seen as one of the vital military players in western Libya, rejected an initial agreement, whereas supporters of Grand Mufti of Libya Sadiq Al-Ghariani took to the streets to protest against al-Sarraj. While Haftar began preparations before hitting Tripoli in early March, Al-Mishri flew to Doha, seeking Qatar's support for GNA. Earlier, the Qatari capital had been visited by al-Sarraj.

## Pieces of Middle-East Jigsaw Puzzle

Libya emerged as a critical element of the Kremlin's strategy to return Russia to the Middle East, whose foundations had been laid by the late Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. Also, the Libyan issue is of personal importance for Vladimir Putin, and such factors play a crucial role in the Kremlin's decision-making steps. In 2011, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin publicly criticized President Dmitry Medvedev for not instructing Russian diplomats to veto a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Gaddafi regime. If adopted, the document would authorize a no-fly zone over Libya while paving the West's way for launching a joint military offensive alongside Gaddafi's enemies. The Libyan turmoil was one of the reasons

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**Libya is an important element of the Kremlin's strategy of „returning to the Middle East”. It is also an matter of ambition for Putin.**

behind Putin's return to the Kremlin; as Russian Prime Minister, Putin stayed away from foreign affairs, observing the constitution in this regard. Yet the Libyan conflict seemed to have been the last straw which pushed the



politician to the edge. When visiting the town of Votkinsk, where a large defense plant that produces missiles (including nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles) is located, Putin dubbed the said UN resolution „a medieval appeal for a crusade,” condemning Medvedev’s steps. „What worries me most is not an armed intervention itself – as such conflicts will unfortunately still break out,” he said, adding that his worries were motivated by „the recklessness with which decisions are being made these days to handle international affairs forcibly.” Shortly after, Putin decided not to let Medvedev stay in the Kremlin for the next term in office. Since that time, Moscow has repeatedly insisted on Western attempts to destabilize Libya and promote terrorism.

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**For the Kremlin, the Libyan area emerges as critically important becoming part of its policy towards Europe and element of Russian Middle East game. Libya was set to be employed as a tool in relations with Italy and France, while in the latter, aimed at building a Moscow-friendly alliance between Damascus, Cairo, and Tripoli.**

Russia kept a distance from Libya for several years but suspended this plan after the civil war in Libya broke out. Moscow felt encouraged to engage in a more significant military activity in Libya after its victories in Syria as it had turned out that the first open and armed operations in the Middle East since the Soviet era bore substantial fruits. Traditionally, Libya has arisen as Moscow’s another rivalry front with the West, especially the United States. For the Kremlin, the Libyan area emerges as critically important for two more reasons, becoming part of its policy towards Europe and element of Russian Middle East game. In the former case, Libya was set to be employed as a tool in relations with Italy and France, while in the latter, aimed at building a Moscow-friendly alliance between Damascus, Cairo, and Tripoli, with their „strong leaders”: al-Assad, al-Sisi, and Haftar. Russian pursuits are transparent when it comes to Syria, but Moscow is increasingly betting on a firm Egypt, with which it keeps maintaining close ties. Moscow-Cairo cooperation regarding Libya is conducive to both boosting mutual relations and solidifying Egypt’s position in the region.

Also, Russia has no choice than to bet on Haftar, backed by Egyptian decision-makers, if it strives for gaining influence over who will ultimately rule Libya after the war ends. Moscow’s endeavors have fitted into its broader strategy, aimed at building the Kremlin’s firm position in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and taking over areas in Syria and Egypt, from where Washington had withdrawn its forces under Obama’s rules. Russian plan encompasses both cooperation with locally based regimes, to which it could sell weaponry



SOURCE: STRUCTURE.MIL.RU

and deployment of military facilities in the region. If a Putin-friendly politician seizes authority over Libya, Tripoli's deals with the European Union will be put at risk. For the Russian head of state, it is a matter of honor to set such a Libyan leader who has still in mind hardships of the color revolution, followed by NATO's intervention in Libya.

Moscow's strategic goals on Libyan soil can be divided into geostrategic (military), political and economical, with a top priority of marking the Russian presence in the Mediterranean region, through constructing military bases in North Africa and the Levant. When Egyptian President Anwar Sadat expelled Soviet military advisors from the country in 1972, Moscow's only military facility was Syria's Tartus naval base. Over recent years, the Kremlin has striven for boosting its military presence in the area, mostly to observe NATO's steps and to gain a chance to engage, as a fully-fledged player, in regional issues, including internal disputes, battles against jihadists and developing oil and gas investments. The Mediterranean Sea is where cross

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major trade and strategic lanes of the three continents, also providing Moscow with an opportunity to go beyond its vast strategy base in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

If Moscow fails to make one of its allies the head of the government in Tripoli, it can still count on the political turmoil and instability. The longer it lasts, the higher the chance Russia has to become a top mediator in the conflict. Bearing in mind the Europe-related aspect, one should take into account that Libya, which is located near Italy, has emerged as one of the sources of the migrant influx to Europe. Once granted influence over further events in the country, the Kremlin could direct a massive wave of refugees to destabilize Europe. Under a „mild” scenario, Russia, as a strategic player in Libya, will be given another advantage in political negotiations with EU Mediterranean members, as the latter is holding interest in stabilizing the situation in Libya to stop a mass influx of refugees. By backing Haftar’s self-styled LNA, Moscow is in hopes of seizing control over a critical refugee transit route to Europe. Moscow’s stronghold in Libya may fulfill a top function in its European disintegration and destabilization policy. In January 2017, Maltese Foreign Minister George Bella said that Putin may start a new war in Libya to trigger another flow of refugees and migrants pouring into Europe, for whom Libya is the main route for Italy. In 2017, it was used by 90 percent of all illegal immigrants to enter the European territory. As estimated in March 2018, Libya hosted 180,000 internal refugees and 662,000 migrants from other African states, which arose as a considerable number given the fact that Libya’s population is only 7 million people. Most of the refugees reside closer to Libya’s west coast, which remains under the authority of the al-Sarraj government.

Also, Russia holds multiple economic goals, among which are its pursuits for securing or reviving investments projects that had been

agreed with the Gaddafi regime. Back then, Moscow wrote off billions of Libya’s debts dating back the Soviet times in exchange for giving the green light to Russian oil companies to enter the domestic energy sector. In late February 2017, the head of the Libyan national oil corporation (NOC) signed a cooperation agreement with Rosneft, the Russian oil giant, which paved Moscow’s way for returning to the Libyan oil market, from where it had been ousted after the fall of Gaddafi.

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**Strategic goals of Russia in Libya can be divided into three groups: military (geostrategic presence of Russian troops on the Mediterranean), political (control over the important transit route of refugees migration to Europe, as an important tool in the policy of destabilization and disintegration of the old continent) and economic (return to the Libyan oil market, from where they were denied after the overthrow of Gaddafi).**

## Oil and Arms

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### Most of Gaddafi's loyal officers trained in the Soviet Union.

Although Gaddafi's relations with the Soviets could not always be referred to as particularly cordial, Moscow and Tripoli back then considered one another in terms of a convenient business partner, especially when acquiring large batches of military equipment. In 1974, they signed the first major contract, which opened a new chapter in Russian-Libyan relations as Tripoli purchased Soviet-made weapons and military hardware while Libyan troops were instructed by Soviet military advisors and experts. Also, most of Gaddafi's loyal officers trained in the Soviet Union. From 1973 to 1992, up to 11,000 Soviet servicemen were stationed in Libya while Moscow's naval vessels often docked at Libyan seaports. Once the Cold War had ended, Moscow-Tripoli relations dramatically deteriorated. In 1992, Russia backed UN sanctions against Libya, which led to a long-lasting breakdown in their bilateral ties whereas Gaddafi was in no rush to pay off the debt. In hopes of restoring the Kremlin's Middle East policy, Putin was the first to reestablish relations with the Libyan dictator. When visiting Tripoli in April 2008, the Russian president agreed to write off Libya's \$4.5 billion debt in exchange for contracts for Russian companies worth several billions of dollars. Yet these investment projects failed to be implemented after the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Tripoli. The revolution brought

to a halt a dozen significant projects, including that related to oil, construction, nuclear energy, and health. The total worth of energy and armaments deals was estimated at 4–10 billion dollars, with Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport that lost itself 4 billion dollars. During a visit to Moscow in August 2017, Haftar declared his readiness to act as guarantor for all earlier Russian-Libyan arms contracts to be implemented. More interestingly for Russia, Haftar wields real authority over Libya's oil sector.

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**MUAMMAR GADDAFI DURING A VISIT TO LIBYA – 2008, TRIPOLI**  
**SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU**

Oil reserves in Libya are the largest in Africa; before 2011, its daily oil output of 1.65 million barrels, most of which were exported to Europe. After oil production collapsed as a result of the revolution and civil war, both output and export figures have recently been subject to gradual growth, with extensive Russian oil and gas companies voicing interest in returning to the Libyan market. In 2013, Russia's Tatneft attempted to resume oil exploration activities it had taken up in the Libyan regions of Ghadames and Sirte; yet, they had to suspend drilling operations in mid-2014 due to security reasons. Also, state-run Gazprom holds stakes in the German company Winterhall AG, operating in nine onshore oil fields. Yet Rosneft remains most active, as exemplified

by a deal inked by Sechin's oil firm and Libya's NOC, aimed at gaining Moscow free access to Libyan oil deposits. The head of the Russian Contact Group for intra-Libyan settlement Lev Dengov played a vital role in that undertaking. Also in 2017, Rosneft hammered out a deal with Libya to purchase small amounts of crude oil. When in Moscow, NOC Chairman Mustafa Sanalla discussed reviving contracts concluded back in the Gaddafi times with Gazprom and Tatneft officials.

Although NOC is officially controlled by the Tripoli government, Sanalla has declared neutrality in the Libyan civil war, hoping to maintain oil output at the unchanged level, regardless of who rules the country.



**Formally, the National Oil Corporation falls under the government in Tripoli, but its authorities have taken a neutral stance in the civil war, stressing that the most important thing for them is to maintain mining, regardless of who is in power in the country. This is a favorable situation for Russians who want to enter the Libyan oil sector.**

This fosters Moscow's further undertakings in the Libyan oil sector as Sanalla has unofficially promised Haftar, who has authority over most of the country's oil wealth, not to interfere with the export in the region. Once the El-Sharara oil deposit resumed production, Haftar moved towards Tripoli. The field's daily output is estimated at 280,000 barrels, with a total capacity of 315,000 barrels. In February 2019, El-Sharara and El-Feel fields, referred to as an oil hub in the southwestern part

of Libya, was taken by LNA fighters, allegedly to fight against smugglers and jihadists. After a few weeks of occupation, both deposits were handed over to the state-run NOC oil company in Tripoli. Though operated by the state-owned oil giant, the fields are being militarily controlled by Haftar as the Libyan strongman holds most of the country's output. He has no interest in storming the Zawiya oil terminal, linked to the El-Sharara field and located 45 kilometers west of Tripoli, but plans to offer El-Sharara employees to be repaid overdue wages and increases after he seizes control over Libya. „New York Times” reported in February 2018 that Russia is suspected of „attempted weapons-for-oil deals, attempted bribery and efforts to influence top government defense appointments, as well as printing money and stamping coinage for the Haftar-allied government.” In 2016, a total of 10 billion dinars banknotes were printed by the Haftar-controlled Eastern Bank of Libya, parallel to the Tripoli-based Central Bank of Libya. In addition to oil and gas cooperation, Moscow hopes for entering other Libyan economy sectors, including agriculture, armaments or infrastructure. One of the key priorities is to construct the Sirte-Benghazi high-speed railway. Vladimir Yakunin, then the head of the state-owned Russian Railways, „even offered what appeared to be a bribe to restart the project,” „New York Times” reported. This topic was covered in Moscow-Tripoli talks, yet as long as the war continues, such a project is doomed to fail because it links two antagonistic areas.

## Russia's Invisible Army

Allegations that Moscow has deployed its servicemen and military in Libya have arisen much controversy. In 2017, Moscow officially received a group of Haftar's two hundred soldiers wounded during battles but declined the Marshal's requests for supplying Russian-made military hardware. Within the past two years, media has reported about Moscow's unofficial military support for the Cyrenaica marshal.

Russian contractors arrived in Libya back in 2016. Founded by former GRU and FSB officers, a mysterious Moscow-based security company called RSB-Group concluded a deal with Libya's Haftar, under which up to 100 sappers came to Libyan soil to de-mine LNA-occupied oil facilities in Benghazi between late 2016 and February 2017. Also, Russian mercenaries were tasked with safeguarding ships and tankers. Private military companies are technically illegal in Russia while contracting mercenaries is a crime, which seems to explain why RSB-Group has been officially registered as a security agency. To perform foreign missions, the company has been registered in the British Virgin Islands. The chair of the FC Defense Committee, Victor Ozerov, told journalists: „We did not vote to send special forces to Libya or Egypt, so there are none. Private military companies are and will stay illegal in Russia. If they are registered offshore, Russia is not legally responsible for anything.”

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**In March 2017, British and Arabic press quoted government sources in the UK and U.S., saying that recruits from the Russian-based Wagner Group arrived in Libya to protect oil and seaport facilities.**

In March 2017, British and Arabic press quoted government sources in the United Kingdom and the United States as saying that recruits from the Russian-based Wagner Group arrived in Libya to protect oil and seaport facilities in the Haftar-controlled eastern part of the country and probably also to train LNA personnel. As informed in January 2017, while hosted by the military staff at the Russian aircraft carrier, Haftar was reported to sign an agreement enabling Russian servicemen to operate freely in LNA-controlled regions. In mid-March 2017, it was reported that some 22 Russian special forces „with drones” were spotted at the Egyptian airbase. A source in Egypt's security services informed that Russia was allegedly to deploy troops in the military base near the coastal Mediterranean city of Marsa Matrouh, located farther to the east. Reuters agency quoted a source in the U.S. administration as claiming that military

personnel was tasked with backing Haftar's troops. A contingent of Russian soldiers was reported to be stationed at Sid Barrani, about 100 kilometers from the Egypt-Libya border. According to unofficial reports, Russia intended to lease from Egypt a former Soviet base in Sid Barrani where the Soviets had until 1972 a maritime facility, from where it could monitor U.S. Navy steps in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. Naturally, Moscow denied information published by Reuters yet no one rebuffed the alleged presence of Russian mercenaries in military operations near Benghazi. The top U.S. military commander overseeing troops in Africa, Marine General Thomas Waldhauser, told the U.S. Senate on March 24, 2017, that he was concerned over Russia's „indisputable” links with Haftar. As he stated, „Russians are present there both on land and in the air,” adding that „Russia was trying to exert influence in Libya to strengthen its leverage over whoever ultimately holds power.”

Reports on Russian military assistance for Libya re-emerged on October 9, 2018, when Daily Mail quoted sources in a British intelligence service, saying that Moscow intended to plant troops and missiles in eastern Libya in bid to seize control of the immigration route to Europe. Two military bases were as a result set up in the towns of Benghazi and Tobruk under cover of Wagner Group. Earlier, a Panamanian-flagged cargo ship Ural was halted in Tunis. Reportedly with a civil cargo onboard, the ship was revealed to have carried arms, armored personnel carriers, military trucks, diesel power generators, sanitary machines, communications equipment, and ammunition. According to Daily Mail, dozens of GRU secret service personnel and

Spetsnaz special forces officers were reportedly training in Libya, with Kalibr missiles and S-300 air defense systems also believed to have been deployed in Libyan soil. The latter news was, however, more likely to turn out a cheap sensation as Haftar's army did not need S-300 systems because of its enemy's poorly developed aviation, while Kalibr cruise missiles could by no means be lent to LNA as they are only to be fired from Russian-flagged warships though not all of them. On October 10, 2018, most of Daily Mail reports were confirmed by the reliable Russian RBK newspaper, whose journalists said that Russia had channeled its troops to Libya, including those from elite airborne units based near Moscow. RBK quoted sources in Russian Defense Ministry and the Tobruk-based authorities in Libya, according to whom Russian servicemen were to arrive in Libya in late August 2018 after Tripoli was tormented by heavy battles. A delegation from the Russian Defense Ministry was reported to have come to Libya to see potential locations for constructing a possible

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**Commander of U.S. Forces in Africa, General Thomas Waldhauser, stated that „Russians are present there both on land and in the air.” In his opinion, „Russia is trying to influence the final decision on what the composition of the government in Libya will be.”**

military base in Tobruk, modeled on a similar facility in the Syrian town of Tartus. Moscow officials yet declined information contained in Daily Mail and RBK articles. Deputy head of Russian State Duma's defense department Yuri Shvitkin said that „Russia is not militarily present in Libya.” His stance was upheld by Lev Dengov, which shows Moscow's consistency in denying that Russian troops or mercenaries were deployed in Libya. Notwithstanding the approach, during Haftar's meeting with representatives for Russia Defense Ministry in Moscow in November 2018, Yevgeny Prigozhin was noticed as he participated in talks, which may prompt his intention to perform same activities in Libya as he had previously done in Syria, Sudan or the Central African Republic. „Putin's chef” probably aims to meddle in Moscow's agreement with the authorities of a given country, sending unofficial military assistance and acting as an intermediary in military cooperation with Russia while hoping to get substantial stakes in the local mining sector to extract oil, gas, gold or diamonds.

In late January 2019, media reported that Russian contractors from the Wagner Group are helping to train the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the southwestern region of Fezzan in southwestern Libya and they were involved in another offensive of Haftar's units in Sabha. On March 4, 2019, British The Telegraph wrote that Wagner Group has been supporting Khalifa Haftar with 300 personnel in Libya. The newspaper quoted a source in the UK government as saying that all Russian mercenaries are based in Benghazi. A source close to the „Libyan Russian oil and gas company” told The Telegraph that „lots of Wagner fighters went to Libya,” tasked with protecting the seaports of Tobruk and Darna. If the news

**Prigozhin's presence at the meeting with Haftar meant that „Putin's chef” was planning to do the same in Libya as in Syria, the Central African Republic or Sudan. In exchange for an agreement on military cooperation between Libya and Russia, he co-opts on shares in the local mining sector: oil, gas, gold and diamonds.**

of Wagner's involvement in Libya was accurate, it would mean that Russia had sent its military advisors and equipment to Haftar under the agreements signed between 2017 and 2018. Boosting Haftar's military potential was aimed at promoting a faster offensive on Tripoli before international peace talks kicked off. There is, however, no firm evidence that Russian mercenaries remained active in Libya or they formed a regular army there. Provided that they are on Libyan ground, they are unlikely to participate in fighting but rather to protect Libyan oil infrastructure. Russian liaison officers may have been deployed in Tobruk, alongside with military advisors.

Russian military presence and support for Haftar are yet symbolic nor can it be compared to that of Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Moscow's strategy of making Field Marshal a „Libyan version” of al-Assad and drawing parallel with

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## Moscow's caution regarding Libya is due to the lack of an open invitation from the legal government (as in Syria), an arms embargo and a ban on the presence of foreign troops or, finally, distrust of Haftar himself.

the Syrian regime, seems rather unlikely to be implemented. Russia's courting of Haftar cannot go any further as, unlike in Syria, Moscow has not been granted an official invitation from Libya's legitimate government. Any deals sealed with the unrecognized worldwide Tobruk government or Haftar are uncertain. Also, Russia struggles with the embargo on arms supplies and ban on the presence on foreign troops on Libyan soil (though it is widely known that an Emirati

military facility has operated in the area), with the 2011 UN Security Council arms embargo being still in force. Last but not least, Moscow has not put full trust in Haftar, who for 20 years lived in the United States after he had betrayed Gaddafi in the early 1990s. Rumor has it that Haftar has still close ties to the CIA. Also, Moscow is increasingly worried about the UAE's growing influence on the Tobruk government. If to bear in mind all the above reports, Moscow's cautiousness is understandable, especially given the recent events in Tripolitania when Haftar, probably encouraged by his Arab allies, stormed Tripoli, yet a planned „blitzkrieg” eventually turned into bloody trench warfare. This corroborated the LNA's inability to seize authority over the country and to rule it successfully. Moscow's intention is now to bet on several players, with time playing on its favor.

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## Moscow's intention is now to bet on several players, with time playing on its favor.

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