

Shared Awareness and Deconfliction in the Mediterranean
SHADE MED 2021

**Sharing security, culture and values
for a shared prosperity in the Med**

Food for *thought*



US policy on the Mediterranean and the role of PMCs

Anna Borshchevskaya
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Introduction

AS US foreign policy rebalances towards China, President Biden described his approach to the Middle East in the interim national security strategic guidance as “right-sizing” American military presence “to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital US interests.”¹ While US policy to the Middle East is still being fleshed out, it’s clear the return to the nuclear deal negotiations with Iran will be a chief priority. Where does this leave the Mediterranean, a strategically vital region in NATO’s south? What does this mean for proxy forces, especially so-called Russian PMCs, private military companies that have instrumental especially in Libya? In part, these issues have to fall under the broader policy towards Russia.

Recent US steps

President Biden’s overall approach to the Mediterranean remains unclear. Tony Blinken told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in March that the US

will remain “fully engaged” on the Cyprus issue and expressed concern about Ankara’s behaviour towards Greece.² Greek Defense Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos recently described military ties with the US as being at an “all-time high”, adding that the US and Greece will likely update a bilateral security agreement this summer. This could lead to more American military missions in the region.³ Biden recognized the Armenian genocide of 1915 and delayed calling Turkish president Erdogan until late April; on June 14th the two leaders will meet to “discuss their differences”.⁴ Still, these steps fall short of a coherent policy.

US Syria policy remains under review, though early public messages suggest focussing on cross-border humanitarian aid. Yet as Biden ends the license for the Delta crescent energy company in northeast Syria, Russian energy companies are poised to gain more control over Syrian oil. Thus, the Kremlin is set to further increase its influence in Syria, and then, the Mediterranean.⁵ It is bad news on many fronts, including for Syria’s humanitarian situation.

1 President Joseph R. Biden Jr., Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

2 Tasos Kokkinidis, “Blinken Slams Turkey’s Provocative Actions Against Greece,” *Greekreporter.com*, March 11, 2021

<https://greekreporter.com/2021/03/11/blinken-slams-turkey-provocative-actions-against-greece/>

3 John Vandiver, “US and Greece Working on Deal to Expand Military Cooperation in the Mediterranean,” *Military.com* May 15 2021 <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/05/15/us-and-greece-working-deal-expand-military-cooperation-mediterranean.html>

4 Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey,” April 23, 2021 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/23/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-of-turkey/>

“Biden, Erdogan to discuss their differences next week - White House,” *Reuters* June 7, 2021

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/biden-erdogan-discuss-their-differences-next-week-white-house-2021-06-07/>

5 Kenneth R. Rosen, “How Delta Crescent Fell Short in Trump’s ‘Keep the Oil’ Plan in Syria,” *The Daily Beast*, May 31, 2021 <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-delta-crescent-fell-short-in-trumps-keep-the-oil-plan-in-syria>
 Aamer Madhani, *The Associated Press*, “Biden ending Trump OK for US oil company in Syria, says official,”

In July, the UN Security Council voted on humanitarian aid in Syria. While the worst fears of Western officials did not materialize – Moscow ultimately did not block the last remaining cross-border corridor despite earlier threats to do so – the Kremlin also came out the biggest winner. The language of the approved resolution advanced Moscow's strategic goals, while Russia will now get an opportunity to discuss cross-border aid again in six months. The West could not open any new crossings while Russia got to look as if it also compromised simply by not taking the most extreme position.

By comparison, engagement in Libya increased. In May, Biden named Richard Norland, US ambassador to Libya, as taking on an additional role as special envoy ahead of Libya's elections scheduled for this year's end. Norland for his part emphasized that "mercenaries" is one of the problems facing Libya's interim government. In a recent interview, he discussed details of his contacts with Russian officials about the Wagner group in Libya whom he said now acknowledge their presence; he also stressed that Turkey is ready to negotiate the withdrawal of the Syrian mercenaries they sent to Libya.⁶ His comments suggest an interest in seeing all para-military forces leaving Libya. An estimated 2,000 members of the Wagner, a Russian PMC (Private Military Company) owned by Yeginiy Prigozhin, an oligarch close to Putin, remain in Libya with advanced fighter aircraft in addition to Ankara-backed fighters.

Moscow and the Mediterranean

Moscow for its part remains focused on the region. For the first time since 1972, Russia now has a major military base on the Mediterranean as it continues

to upgrade its military posture and project power. As part of its global geopolitical efforts to reduce American and more broadly Western influence, Moscow seeks greater freedom of movement; it will continue to look for warm water port access in Libya to bolster its standing. Unsurprisingly, Moscow was unhappy with the increased American presence in the Mediterranean in late 2020, which Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova described as "anti-Russian nature".⁷ In the same vein, senior Russian officials protested US Air Force flying over the last year bomber task force missions in the high North, Baltic and the Black Sea. In the Kremlin mind these are kept from the Mediterranean, and that Moscow recently deployed nuclear-capable bombers to Syria shows it now has an extra platform it can use as both as tactical tit for tat reaction to activity in different theatres, but also on a strategic level a deterrent to NATO's southern flank, it fits ability to execute strategic operations on a regional level.

Russian PMCs and Turkey-backed fighters

PMCs have been one of Moscow's tools in military operations as part of strategic competition and conflict. Indeed, increased use of PMCs overlapped with changes in Russian military doctrine and strategy concerning the use of non-state actors in the conflict.⁸ According to a recent FMSO (Foreign Military Studies Office at Ft. Leavenworth) report, "PMCs can operate across the conflict continuum and present the U.S. Army with dilemmas at all levels of war." The most dangerous scenario the report identifies is in Syria, where thanks to a high level of state support, a Russian

(militarytimes.com) <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/05/27/biden-ending-trump-ok-for-us-oil-company-in-syria-says-official/>

- 6 "Norland: Turkey is Ready to Negotiate Withdrawal of Syrian Mercenaries from Libya," Al Marsad, April 25, 2021 <https://almarsad.co/en/2021/04/25/norland-turkey-is-ready-to-negotiate-withdrawal-of-syrian-mercenaries-from-libya/>
- 7 "Russia concerned by US military buildup in Eastern Mediterranean — foreign ministry," TASS, October 1, 2020 <https://tass.com/defense/1207627>
- 8 "Private Military Companies (PMCs)," Congressional Research Service, September 16 2020 <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11650/8>



1 – The imagery details the extent of equipment being supplied to Wagner. Russian military cargo aircraft, including IL-76s, continue to supply Wagner fighters. Russian air defense equipment, including SA-22s, are present in Libya and preoperated by Russia, the Wagner Group or their proxies. Photo by U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs.

PMC in Syria was able to function – more or less – as a battalion tactical group.⁹

PMCs also engage in a wide range of clandestine activities. Moreover, their behaviour follows a pattern that allows the Russian state to cement greater state influence in a country, even as sometimes PMCs encounter significant setbacks.¹⁰ Left unchecked, PMCs have the potential to can bring the Russian government closer to its strategic aims of securing greater access in the

Mediterranean by operating under the radar to avoid provoking a response and then presenting the West a fait accompli.

In the West, the debate about the definition of PMCs is ongoing.¹¹ This ongoing debate complicates the formulation of a clear-cut approach in how to address them. To date, sanctions have been one tool (i.e. US Treasury department has sanctioned Prigozhin in September 2019 in connection with interference in the US election and

9 *Russian Private Military Companies: Their Use and How to Consider Them in Operations, Competition, and Conflict (Asymmetric Warfare Group)*, Foreign Military Studies Office, US Army, April 2020

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/p/fmso-bookshelf>

10 Anna Borshchevskaya, “The Role of Russian Private Military Contractors in Africa,” Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), August 2020. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/08/the-role-of-russian-private-military-contractors-in-africa/>

11 For a detailed discussion on PMC definition, see the Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, March 26, 2019 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142>

further sanctioned him in April 2021 in connection with his malign Africa activities).¹² However, sanctions targeted Prigozhin's acts, not because he operates a PMC. Exposure to malign PMC activities has been another instrument. Last year U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) increased publicity of Russian PMC activities in Libya. For example, it released imagery of deployment of at least 14 combat aircraft from Russian and Syrian bases to Libya's Al Khadhim and Al Jufra airbases.¹³ Yet it remains unclear whether the US and the West more broadly has a plan to impose sufficient costs and raises risks for Moscow to continue using them.

Turkey does not appear to copy the Russian PMC model, but Ankara also has used foreign fighters. Last year, U.S. Defense Department's inspector general concluded that Ankara sent 3,500-3,800 paid Syrian fighters into Libya. It is noteworthy that most recently the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that it has a bilateral agreement with the internationally-recognized Libyan government (Tripoli-based Government of National Accord - GNA). This agreement covers military training and support. Ankara agrees "mercenaries" should leave Libya. Indeed, Turkish elements are in Libya on an official invitation of the Libyan government, unlike Russian PMCs.¹⁴ While technically true, there is a hint of irony to this as the Russian government claimed the same legality of state presence in Syria. Regardless neither

Turkey nor Russia will bring stability to Libya, there is no substitute for American leadership here.

Conclusion

Although Biden routinely criticizes Putin, he ultimately aims for a "stable and predictable" relationship with him,¹⁵ so he can focus more on China. It looks like the Russian President has a different vision. Indeed, he is not searching for stability. Kremlin interests do not align with those of the West. Most significantly, Biden recent decision to waive sanctions on Nordstream 2 and Putin main geopolitical project in Europe reduces Western leverage over Russia. Indeed, Putin gloated at the annual St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June that Ukraine will have to show "goodwill" if it wants Russian gas transit. Nordstream2 will give Russia more influence in Europe and, therefore, the Mediterranean. In the absence of an effective American leadership in this region, backed by a credible threat of use of military force, when necessary, Moscow could fill the vacuum and in time establish a naval base in Benghazi or an airbase in Tobruk, which will help Moscow expand further not only into the Middle East but also Africa while gaining greater leverage over Europe. Biden may not see Russia as the top priority but Putin sees the US as such, and his ongoing enhancement of Russian military posture in the Mediterranean is ultimately about eroding US global influence.

12 Treasury Targets Assets of Russian Financier who Attempted to Influence 2018 U.S. Elections | U.S. Department of the Treasury <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm787>

Treasury Escalates Sanctions Against the Russian Government's Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections

<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0126e>

Russian Government's Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections | U.S. Department of the Treasury

13 "Russia deploys military fighter aircraft to Libya," May 2020

<https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32887/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-to-l>

"Russian aircraft active in Libya, AFRICOM says," Reuters, June 18, 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/russian-aircraft-active-in-libya-africom-says-idUSKBN23P2RA>

14 "Turkey says mercenaries should leave Libya, but it has military pact with government," Reuters, May 6, 2021

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-foreign-mercenaries-should-leave-libya-it-has-agreement-with-libyan-2021-05-06/>

Isabel Debre, "Pentagon report: Turkey sent up to 3,800 fighters to Libya," *Apnews.com*, July 17, 2020 <https://apnews.com/article/c339f71bf029f36b1091ee31c9f0171a>

15 Franco Ordoñez, "Biden's Russia Policy Is Complicated By Domestic Pressures," *NPR*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/21/999196021/biden-wants-a-stable-predictable-relationship-with-russia-thats-complicated>