

Russia's Military Activity in the East Mediterranean Echoes Its Approach to Syria

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Jun 17, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/nshatat-rwsya-alskryt-fy-shrq-almtwst-tkrr-nhjha-tjah-swrya\)](/ar/policy-analysis/nshatat-rwsya-alskryt-fy-shrq-almtwst-tkrr-nhjha-tjah-swrya)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

Although Moscow would face many challenges if it tries to establish permanent offensive and A2AD capabilities in Libya like it has in Syria, its covert actions thus far show a commitment to playing the long game against NATO in the East Mediterranean.

Despite domestic difficulties attributable to COVID-19, Russia has steadily increased its military profile in Syria, Libya, and the wider East Mediterranean over the past few months. This push has been driven in part by recent developments, especially Turkey's military expansion. But it also builds on Moscow's existing position in Syria and years of **quietly expanding influence (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-growing-interests-in-libya>)** in Libya, where Russian private military contractors (PMCs) have been operating **since perhaps 2018 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russian-private-military-companies-continuity-and-evolution-of-the-model>)**. The Kremlin's chief long-term interest is to counter perceived Western encirclement by expanding and entrenching its political and military presence to check NATO's southern flank.

ACTIVITIES IN SYRIA AND LIBYA

In the early days of the pandemic in late March, Moscow sent military ambulances to Syria in a show of support for Bashar al-Assad. In the weeks that followed, it also worked to increase its foothold in predominantly Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria. During this time, the Russian press published a brief flurry of articles critical of Assad, most of them issued by the federal news agency RIA FAN. This outlet is controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the infamous oligarch who also runs the shadowy PMC Wagner Group. Whatever the tactical messaging of RIA FAN's information campaign, however, state-run outlets did not reprint the articles, nor did Russian officials change their

rhetoric on Assad or the West (notwithstanding their presumed frustration with Damascus in private). On the contrary, the state-run press has ramped up anti-American rhetoric, emphasizing that Moscow is not giving up on Syria despite attempts to divide the two.

Since its 2015 military intervention, Russia has gained control of Syrian airspace by establishing an antiaccess/area-denial (A2AD) laydown, which includes S-400 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, advanced antiship cruise missiles, and electronic warfare equipment. The Russian Mediterranean fleet also provides support. Last month, it added several warships to this theater, including the missile cruiser *Moskva*, which NATO has termed a “carrier killer,” to support a force that already consisted of at least ten vessels armed with potent Kalibr missiles.

Building on its earlier entry into Raqqa following Trump’s late 2019 announcement of U.S. withdrawal from Syria, Moscow has reportedly been working in recent weeks to establish an air base in the province to be operated jointly with the Syrian army. The base could potentially help Russia push back against expansion by nearby Turkey, boost its own position in the country, and help Assad. In late May, Vladimir Putin asked his ministers of defense and foreign affairs to negotiate with Damascus on the transfer of additional naval access and real estate property to Russian military control, within the scope of the existing Tartus and Hmeimim agreements.

Moreover, Assad continues to see Idlib province as his last obstacle to retaking control of Syria, so Moscow has sent about a dozen advanced MiG-29 fighter jets to nearby Hmeimim in support of his army. It has also reportedly allowed Iranian forces to use Hmeimim’s military airfield after Israel targeted them elsewhere in Syria.

In addition, Syria has served as a Russian springboard for operations in Libya, including aircraft deployments in support of PMCs. The Wagner Group has been fighting for months in Libya’s western region to support Khalifa Haftar and counter Turkey, which backs the rival Government of National Accord (GNA). Their air cover has frequently used covert tactics—according to the U.S. military, fourteen MiG-29 and Su-24 planes have appeared there with all identifying marks painted over. And in January, Russia flew hundreds of PMCs, most likely on Cham Wings Airlines, from Damascus to Benghazi. Russian analyst Sergey Sukhankin has pointed out that Kremlin-backed PMCs in Libya may be fewer in number than those in Syria, but some of them may possess more advanced skills (e.g., pilots and trainers). According to a June 9 CNN report, these PMCs are still present in Libya, “with an extensive support operation, including surface-to-air missiles.” The report also noted that they “had begun practicing with barrel bombs,” in a chilling echo of the tactic used to kill countless Syrian civilians.

PERCEIVED WESTERN AGGRESSION

Russia’s steadfast belief in a Western encirclement strategy continues to shape its vision and activities, including the current build-up in the Mediterranean. At a June 1 briefing, Sergei Rudskoy, chief of the main operational department for Russia’s General Staff, highlighted a “significant increase” in the number of NATO combat training activities along its borders, from the Baltics to the Caucasus, Kamchatka, and the Arctic. He claimed that these activities—especially the DEFENDER-Europe 20 exercise—have “a clear anti-Russian direction.” He noted a “sharp” increase in American air and naval activity as well: “Hiding behind a contrived threat of ‘Russian aggression,’ the U.S. and its allies continue to destroy the existing security system in Europe,” he declared. Rudskoy’s list of grievances also included American P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, which he said are “systematically approaching Russian military bases in Hmeimim and Tartus.”

The deeper problem underpinning Moscow’s distorted narrative is the fact that its perceptions of security are incompatible with Western ones. NATO is a collective security organization, but the Kremlin perceives it to be dominated by the United States. Indeed, in Putin’s view, few countries have true sovereignty; he famously told President George W. Bush that Ukraine is not a real country.

RUSSIAN A2AD IN LIBYA?

Given that Moscow's deployment of PMCs to Libya echoes its pre-2015 tactics in Syria, it may eventually aim to repeat its A2AD strategy there too. As Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian, the U.S. Air Force commander for Europe and Africa, stated in late May, "If Russia seizes basing on Libya's coast, the next logical step is they deploy permanent long-range...A2AD capabilities."

The implications of such a scenario are many. For one, it could give Moscow a geostrategic advantage over NATO through coercive deterrence, increasing Russian power projection and complicating Western military operations over a wider area. This has already been seen in Syria, where NATO freedom to maneuver is now more limited and electronic jamming has become common. An increased Russian military presence could also keep Turkey's air and naval advantage in check, block other countries from accessing Libya's energy resources, and interrupt U.S. efforts to conduct counterterrorism operations there or otherwise coordinate with the GNA.

Still, setting up A2AD in Libya would be a major expeditionary step, and Moscow is at more of a relative disadvantage in Libya than it was in Syria. Unlike the Assad regime, the recognized government in Libya never invited Russia to enter the country, compelling Putin to resort to more covert activities. Moscow also faces more formidable opposition in Libya. Ankara's assistance recently [turned the battlefield](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shifting-tides-in-libya-require-more-active-u.s.-involvement) [in favor of the GNA](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shifting-tides-in-libya-require-more-active-u.s.-involvement), and effectively countering the Turkish navy would require Russia to deploy longer-range systems (e.g., the SSC series of ground-launched cruise missiles).

In the past, Moscow maintained leverage over Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and used the threat of more Syrian refugees from Idlib to pressure him. Ultimately, however, neither Putin nor Erdogan wants a direct clash; instead, they continue to cooperate when possible and make ad hoc deals. Moscow is not wedded to Haftar the way it is to Assad, so it could drop him if pressure from Turkey or other actors becomes too great.

CONCLUSION

Neither imperial nor Soviet Russia succeeded at gaining a strategically vital position in the East Mediterranean or altering the regional balance of power, but both repeatedly tried. And when the Soviet navy deployed its 5th Eskadra (squadron) to the area, it held a number of advantages over the United States until the mid-1980s. In this sense, Putin's aspirations have deep roots. Counter-containment of the West is the deepest driver of his actions, in addition to immediate tensions with Turkey.

Thus, while Moscow is in a difficult position at the moment, the United States still has to think strategically about Russian activities in the area. Covert operations in Libya will not cease unless the United States makes a concerted effort to curtail the activities of PMCs—with force if necessary—and takes the leading role in ending the latest phase of the civil war. Although bringing SAM systems into Libya might be a major, logistically difficult step for Russia, such a move is not inconceivable given the Kremlin's actions in Syria. Moscow could invent a defensive reason for doing so—for instance, to protect its aircraft maintenance personnel inside Libya. Indeed, it claimed defensive reasons for bringing the S-400 into Syria.

In other words, this is a long game, and Russia will seek to gain influence by leveraging all sides and maintaining low-level instability. Before it annexed Crimea from Ukraine, Moscow first spread disinformation and engaged in covert activity, then presented the world with a fait accompli. It followed a similar pattern in Syria for years before it openly intervened, going public with its pro-Assad campaign only when it felt confident it would be unopposed. The West cannot risk another fait accompli years down the line, especially in the strategically vital East Mediterranean.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

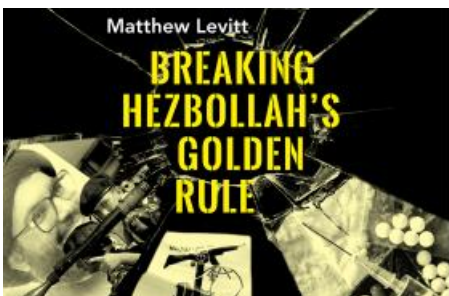
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)