

Turkey's Intervention in Libya Disrupts the UAE but Opens the Door for Russia

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Brief Analysis

In a strong and extraordinary statement, the [Pentagon accused Moscow on Tuesday](#) (<http://www.dvidshub.net/image/6220910/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-libya>) of dispatching fighter jets to Libya to bolster Kremlin-linked mercenaries in support of the eastern based commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Khalifa Haftar. The move marks a dramatic escalation in Russia's role in the Libyan conflict and raises the question of what Russia hopes to achieve with its increased involvement.

In previous months, Turkey's intervention in Libya had turned the tide in Libya's ongoing civil war in favor of the Government of National Accord (GNA). Turkey's increased involvement is also shifting the role that powers supporting Haftar play in the war-torn country. Due to the setbacks suffered by the [UAE](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-united-arab-emirates-turkeys-new-rival>)'s ally, [Khalifa Haftar](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/egypt-haftar-and-the-u.s.-passive-interest-in-the-libyan-conflict>), Russia is poised to play a greater role in eastern Libya; Moscow's diplomatic strategy in Libya over the past few years has been to engage with all sides of the Libyan conflict while engaging militarily only with Haftar as commander of the LNA.

Yet Haftar himself has made a series of brash announcements in response to pressure from Turkey, ones that may have left Moscow wary. On April 27, he declared the UN-brokered [Libyan Political Agreement \(LPA\)](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-un-action-plan-for-libya-prospects-and-challenges>)—signed in December 2015—to be null. He also announced his intention of military takeover by popular mandate. This has been interpreted as a coup attempt against his own allies in eastern Libya, who have backed him since the launch of his military operation, dubbed operation dignity, in May 2014.

In order to make sense of Haftar's latest announcement, it is helpful to understand the drivers that are motivating him. Haftar is likely now acting out of weakness and fear; Turkey's direct intervention this year against his forces and supply lines in western Libya were weakened Haftar's previously undisputed military superiority. As a result, Haftar is facing the repercussions of a potential military defeat in Tripoli, including the impact it could have on his support base in eastern Libya.

Haftar is also concerned that his eastern allies—namely the internationally recognized House of Representatives (HoR) of eastern Libya and its president Agilah Saleh—might enter into political negotiations and dialogue with Tripoli under the auspices of the United Nations without Haftar's consent in order to make peace. Such a move could sideline Haftar and put an end to his plans to reach Tripoli militarily or politically.

Indeed, Haftar's declaration came just few days after Saleh presented an initiative for a political agreement and called for an end to the fighting in Tripoli. This did not sit well with Haftar and prompted him to make his latest move in a bid to prevent his own ambitious project to rule Libya from unravelling.

But Haftar is now also facing the challenge of wavering international support. Haftar launched his Tripoli offensive—supposed to last just a few weeks—more than a year ago. Yet Turkey's recent direct intervention in support of the UN-backed GNA has tipped the balance of power in Tripoli against Haftar, increasingly rendering the capture of Tripoli a futile exercise in the eyes of most of Haftar's foreign backers. The UAE has stood out as an exception, and is now engaged in an open war against Turkey and its political Islamist allies in the region who happen to be one of the dominant forces in the Tripoli government.

Though unlikely to back down, it is unclear if Abu Dhabi can continue the course without support from an advanced-military power that can match or supersede that of Turkey. If Abu Dhabi cannot provide enough support to tip the balance of power back in Haftar's favor, it is likely that Haftar will try to look elsewhere for support.

As such, Russia's increasing involvement in Libya comes at a pivotal time in the conflict. Russia may be a potential candidate for adopting a more active role given that the link between Haftar and Moscow already exists. However, Moscow may also see it in their interest to take advantage of a weakened and fearful Haftar so it can dictate its own terms. Indeed, Russia may even impose Saleh as Moscow's political partner for the next phase of its engagement with eastern Libya. This would not be the first time that Russia stages a successful intervention; their involvement in Syria helped save the Assad regime from complete collapse back in 2015, suggesting a future engagement may also prove effective.

Moscow still views Haftar and the LNA as their only military partner in today's Libya, and will have little to no option but to continue providing the LNA with adequate military support through its Kremlin-linked mercenaries, and by bolstering the relationship between Damascus and Benghazi. Such support would ensure that Turkey and the GNA do not achieve a decisive victory against the LNA in western and southern Libya, which could put an end to Russia's ambitions in Libya.

Yet the Russians seem to understand the value of Agilah Saleh's international recognition as the head of the HoR in the east. The HoR is a legislative democratically elected body and part of the government setup established by the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). As such, Moscow is increasingly making a point of stressing the importance of Saleh's role, Despite Haftar's recent announcement of control of the government through popular mandate.

So far, Russia has made a series of moves to increase its influence in eastern Libya. Moscow is helping to orchestrate the return of **key Qaddafi regime figures (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/world/middleeast/libya-russia-john-bolton.html>)** to eastern Libya. These figures are meant to join Haftar and act as Russia's interlocutor, as Moscow has always been skeptical about Haftar's past and his links with the CIA.

Agilah Saleh also claimed on April 29 that Russia had encouraged his decision to seek negotiations with Tripoli and to come out with his political initiative. During a tribal gathering at his hometown of al-Guba in eastern Libya, Saleh read **excerpts of letters (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky5qzC_wJs8)**, he claimed to have received from Russian officials, urging and advising him to announce a new political initiative that would help bring an end to the Tripoli based GNA. Abu Dhabi, in contrast, played a direct role in supporting Haftar's declaration to abolish the LPA, and announcement of military takeover in eastern Libya.

On May 19, Russia's permanent representative to the United Nations stressed the importance of Saleh's initiative for ceasefire with its proposal for the establishment of a new three-member Presidential Council to replace the current one in Tripoli and the formation of a new unity government. The new council would represent Libya's three historical regions, and it would oversee the drafting of a new constitution and elections. On May 26, the **Russian Foreign Minister, Sergy Lavrov, spoke at length with Saleh (https://tass.ru/politika/8568739?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=smm_social_share)** to exchange views on the military and political developments in Libya, with the former expressing his support for Saleh's political initiative.

In this context, Moscow seems to be trying to leverage Saleh's international recognition and use it as justification for its increased political and military engagement with the eastern Libyan camp. This is the same approach employed by Ankara with the internationally recognized GNA in Tripoli. Russia might even seek to sign an agreement with the eastern based HoR similar to the agreement signed by Turkey with the GNA. Such an agreement could be manipulated by Russia as a legal cover for increased future intervention in Libya.

Yet if Moscow does choose to follow this path, it will first need to ensure that the eastern Libya bloc is largely dependent on its military and political support to confront the Turkish incursion and that its role is not matched by any of the other foreign powers supporting both Haftar and Saleh. Russia does not like strong competition for influence over its proxies. So far, Haftar's diverse foreign support enabled him to play his foreign backers quite effectively; even embarrassing Russian diplomacy and President Vladimir Putin earlier this year when he walked out **without signing a ceasefire agreement (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51104846>)** brokered by presidents Putin and Erdogan. The UAE was accused of obstructing the signing of the agreement.

And aside from the complicated dynamics within Libya, there is also a strange dynamic between Turkey and Russia writ large likely to also play out in Libya. The two powers have several competing regional interests, perhaps most notably in Syria. Even so, Moscow and Ankara have also shown great ability and skill at managing their current rivalry against the backdrop of their long-term strategic partnership.

A new ceasefire in Libya would present yet another opportunity for Erdogan and Putin to work together and bolster their strategic partnership in the region. Indeed, both leaders tried to hijack international diplomacy on Libya by **announcing a ceasefire initiative (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-5103277>)** during their joint press conference in Istanbul in January 2020, after inaugurating a new pipeline carrying gas to Europe.

As Moscow seeks to strengthen its engagement with the eastern Libya bloc and Ankara builds its military footprint and influence in Tripoli, Erdogan and Putin could repeat their attempt to hijack international diplomacy on Libya with an Astana-like process, presumably favoring Turkish and Russian interests over Libyan ones where convenient. If there is no major shift in dynamic, it is these two countries that will dictate the future of Libya. So far, as the United States continues to exhibit lack of interest or serious engagement and Europe remains divided without a clear common policy on Libya, it remains likely that Turkey and Russia will continue to occupy their roles as shapers of Libya, especially if Russia continues to increase its military and political involvement at the same pace. ❖

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