

The U.S. Must Blunt Russia's Adventurism in Libya

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The deployment of Kremlin-linked mercenaries will make a costly civil war even more difficult to end.

Until recently, very little had changed in Libya since April, when General Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the self-styled “Libya National Army,” attacked Tripoli. Now, two [high-profile stories](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arrival-of-russian-mercenaries-adds-deadlier-firepower-modern-tactics-to-libyas-civil-war/2019/11/05/f330820c-fa03-11e9-9534-e0dbcc9f5683_story.html) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arrival-of-russian-mercenaries-adds-deadlier-firepower-modern-tactics-to-libyas-civil-war/2019/11/05/f330820c-fa03-11e9-9534-e0dbcc9f5683_story.html) have highlighted the [presence of Russian mercenaries](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/russia-libya-mercenaries.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/russia-libya-mercenaries.html>) on the front lines of the war and their impact on the fight over Libya’s capital. For the first time, a spokesperson from the U.S. Africa Command confirmed the presence of “Russian private military companies” in the west of Libya (Russia’s presence in the east, away from the fighting, has long been suspect). And in an unusual step, a U.S.-Libya dialogue [decided](https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-u-s-libya-security-dialogue/) (<https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-u-s-libya-security-dialogue/>) “Russia’s attempts to exploit the conflict against the will of the Libyan people.”

After seven months of equivocating about Libya’s third civil war in nearly nine years, the Trump administration has an opportunity to play a meaningful role in stopping it. To do that, however, the administration would have to engage in uncharacteristically aggressive, and disruptive, regional diplomacy. Neither it nor the Obama administration before it has ever given Libya the U.S. attention it deserves.

The stakes are higher this time, with Russia threatening to tilt the balance of power and extend its presence on NATO’s southern flank. The administration can acquiesce to Russia’s spreading influence, or contest it by assembling like-minded states to give one last push to a political solution in Libya.

Libya’s latest civil war has left well over a thousand dead and tens of thousands internally displaced. It has also paralyzed a political process led by the United Nations that sought to bring the country closer to a durable political

settlement. Although the internationally recognized Government of National Accord's forces repelled Haftar's April assault, Tripoli has since suffered a mix of indiscriminate shelling and precision bombing, which has caused civilian casualties and extensive destruction to neighborhoods.

In addition to aid from Russia, Haftar has been helped by the [United Arab Emirates \(https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2019/05/02/uae-allegedly-using-chinese-drones-for-deadly-airstrikes-in-libya/\)](https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2019/05/02/uae-allegedly-using-chinese-drones-for-deadly-airstrikes-in-libya/), Egypt, and (to a lesser extent) France. The Government of National Accord has turned to Turkey (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-libyan-war-turkey-takes-sides-against-mideast-rivals-11562065082>) to provide its militias with drones, armed vehicles, and other weaponry. A long anticipated [UN report \(https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2019/11/08/world/middleeast/ap-un-uk-uae-united-nations-libya-experts-report.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2019/11/08/world/middleeast/ap-un-uk-uae-united-nations-libya-experts-report.html) is expected to detail such arms transfers, which violate sanctions dating back to 2011. Separately, [the UN Mission in Libya estimates \(https://unsmil.unmissions.org/srsg-ghassan-salame-briefing-security-council-18-november-2019\)](https://unsmil.unmissions.org/srsg-ghassan-salame-briefing-security-council-18-november-2019) that the LNA is responsible for well over 800 drone strikes, while the GNA-supported side is responsible for around 240.

The idea of permitting Russian interference in Libya contradicts the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the National Security Council's Africa Strategy, which all focus on great power rivalry and countering Russian (and Chinese) influence. Libya is a test case for these strategies. If Russia tilts the war in Haftar's favor, it will strip the West of influence in Libya either by ensuring pervasive instability or ending hopes of a peaceful political transition. The U.S. has managed to keep a [lid on terrorism emanating from Libya \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/world/africa/drone-strikes-isis-libya.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/world/africa/drone-strikes-isis-libya.html) after the 2016 defeat of ISIS in Sirte through targeted strikes against Al Qaeda and ISIS-affiliated groups. If the U.S. Africa Command is no longer able to strike targets in Libya and leaves counter-terrorism action to Russia, ISIS will likely reemerge. See Syria for Russia's track record.

The Nov. 14 statement issued by the State Department condemned the "LNA's offensive" and Russian interference. Yet skepticism remains about the administration's seriousness and willingness to act. Since the statement was released, Haftar's forces have perpetrated a mass-casualty attack on a civilian target in Tripoli and a suspected military target in Misrata.

To allay doubts of a renewed commitment to Libya, the White House needs to reiterate the Nov. 14 U.S. statement—and clarify its response to Russia's interference. First, the administration should shed more light on Russia's actions in Libya, to the extent that it can without compromising intelligence sources. Various Libyan and Western officials have cited [the presence of between 200 and 1,400 Russian \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-15/u-s-warns-against-growing-russian-role-in-libya-s-war\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-15/u-s-warns-against-growing-russian-role-in-libya-s-war) private military contractors, most belonging to the Wagner group linked to one of Vladimir Putin's close associates. The U.S. should provide an official estimate of the number, and share what it can about their deployment and impact. Russia benefits from the deniability of Wagner; the U.S. should take away that advantage.

Second, the U.S. should threaten to sanction all groups involved in providing arms to Libya, including arms suppliers, shipping companies and insurers. To date, the arms embargo continues to be violated with impunity. The administration has existing authorities to [sanction actors who \(https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/libya_eo_20160419.pdf\)](https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/libya_eo_20160419.pdf) "threaten the peace, security, or stability of Libya," and the House (<https://teddeutch.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=402686>) and Senate (<https://www.coons.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senators-coons-graham-murphy-rubio-introduce-bipartisan-legislation-to-support-peaceful-resolution-to-libyan-conflict>) have proposed legislation to support such sanctions, particularly against Russia. So far, these sanctions have been applied by both the Obama and Trump administrations only to internal Libyan actors.

Finally, the U.S. must vigorously back the Berlin Conference intended to unite international support for a ceasefire and reconvene a Libyan political dialogue. To do this, the U.S. must lean heavily on its partners in Abu Dhabi, Cairo, and Ankara to commit at least to a pause in arms shipments—or face potential sanctions.

Exposing and isolating Russia in its attempts to tilt the balance of power in Libya may be the best way to stop its attempts to increase its influence in North Africa. As the Trump administration itself acknowledges, that goal is profoundly in the U.S. strategic interest.

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