

The Threat of Russia's Growing Presence in Libya

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Brief Analysis

If U.S. officials continue to let Moscow keep Libyan factions divided while deepening the Russian military footprint, the result will be growing security threats to NATO and Africa.

As international attention remains focused elsewhere, Russia is quietly expanding its presence in Libya—a highly strategic location that offers access to oil resources, military bases, and a deep-water naval port in the East Mediterranean. If Moscow succeeds in consolidating its position there, it would gain a critical hub from which to project power in the Middle East and across NATO's southern flank, potentially interfering with the alliance's naval operations, overflights, and military readiness. Such a boost to Russia's Mediterranean infrastructure, capabilities, and presence could potentially constrain NATO air and maritime freedom of maneuver in the event of a NATO-Russia conflict. Moreover, Moscow's expansion in Libya may undermine U.S. efforts to stabilize and unify the fractured country, reversing years of international efforts to keep terrorists and strategic competitors out.

Arms Transfers and Security Agreements

After the fall of the Assad regime in 2024, Russia began moving large quantities of high-quality military assets from Syria to Libya. The first indication of its plans came through aircraft tracking data reported that December, which showed a major spike in flights from Syria to Libya. Among the [deliveries \(https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-air-defense-bases-syria-libya-25810db0\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-air-defense-bases-syria-libya-25810db0) were “air-defense equipment, including radars for S-400 and S-300 interceptor systems,” underscoring Moscow's intent to deploy sophisticated military assets to the country. Subsequent reports also confirmed the deployment of [at least \(https://adf-](https://adf-)

magazine.com/2024/07/russia-sends-1800-fighters-to-libya-with-eyes-on-greater-influence-across-africa/)

1,800 Russian military personnel to Libya, including regular soldiers and [members of the paramilitary Africa Corps](https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-march-31/) (formerly the Wagner Group). Tanks and other heavy equipment soon followed.

During a May 2025 parade in Benghazi, forces led by Gen. Khalifa Haftar—the warlord who controls eastern Libya—[displayed](https://defensemirror.com/news/39580/Huge_Display_of_Russian_Arms_in_Libyan_Parade) an impressive array of Russian equipment said to be delivered from Syria. This show of force was intended to signal the disparity in foreign support compared to the internationally recognized Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli, which has received minimal equipment. Combined with Russia’s expanded military footprint in the east, the parade also signaled that Moscow’s local influence was waxing rather than waning.

Russia has also sought to add a legal veneer to its presence. Just weeks before the Benghazi parade, one of Haftar’s sons, Gen. Khaled Haftar, reportedly [signed](https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/Libya-Khaled-Haftar-Signs-Strategic-Military-Cooperation-Pact-in-Russia/) an agreement in Moscow to “develop the strategic partnership and expand the areas of military and security cooperation and coordination.” In the past, [similar agreements](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/role-russian-private-military-contractors-africa) reached with authorities in Sudan, Madagascar, and the Central African Republic have been used to bolster expanded Russian military deployments and activity in these countries. Going forward, the Kremlin could point to this legal instrument as grounds for retaining its military positions in Libya—footholds that have proliferated significantly this year, as discussed below.

Direct Military Entrenchment and African Expansion

A ccording to findings by the U.S. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency reported this summer, Moscow is [accelerating the construction](https://adf-magazine.com/2026/08/africa-corps-work-at-libyan-air-bases-raises-concerns/) of Russian facilities at six Libyan air bases and deploying its forces and assets there. These assets include air-defense radars, MiG-29 fighter jets, and drones reportedly operated by Russian personnel, including Africa Corps personnel. Reports also [indicate](https://table.media/en/security/feature/libya-how-russia-is-expanding-its-military-presence-in-north-africa) Russian plans to develop the port of Tobruk, which would provide a deep-water facility capable of housing large navy and cargo ships. Combined with the port facilities that Moscow has retained in Tartus, Syria, an enduring presence in Tobruk could expand the Russian navy’s ability to challenge NATO maritime operations.

Libyan bases have also helped the Kremlin route military flights, weapons, and personnel to [other locations in Africa](https://www.tearline.mil/public_page/libya-russia-develops-air-base-infrastructure-likely-to-secure-military-foothold-in-sahel-region), particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The United States continues to deploy small numbers of training and strike forces in these areas to counter the high-priority Islamic State threat, so any expansion of Russian deployments nearby poses multiple risks—from compromising the safety of American service members to increasing the likelihood of Russian weapons falling into terrorist hands. Moreover, Moscow tends to support African regimes that use counterproductive tactics when cracking down on Islamist insurgencies, thereby contributing to further radicalization and undermining U.S. counterterrorism objectives.

Deepening Divisions in Libya

U nder the guidance of U.S. envoy Massad Boulos, the Trump administration’s primary objective in Libya over the past year has been to unify the economic, military, and political institutions of the Tripoli-based GNU and Haftar’s Benghazi faction, thereby facilitating increased national oil production. The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) recently [announced](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libya-rivals-agree-roadmap-elections-)

within-24-months-un-led-talks-2026-08-30/) an agreement calling for national elections within two years, complementing the U.S.-led process.

Yet Russia's deepening involvement threatens to keep the country divided. Actors in the east and west have resisted (<https://libyaobserver.ly/news/takala-reviews-44-agreement-outcomes-hcs-committee-heads-rejects-imposed-initiatives>) the UN agreement, and Moscow has been fueling their opposition. For instance, its state-controlled news outlet RT Arabic has been promoting (https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1830923-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9/) a narrative of division to justify continued Russian interference, publishing rejectionist articles (https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1830913-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%84%D9%80%D8%B9%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%84-6-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-44/) within minutes after Libyan factions issue complaints or counter-initiatives against UNSMIL's proposal. If the agreement is not signed, the matter could be turned over (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/09/1168302>) to the UN Security Council, where Russia could use its veto power to further thwart unification efforts.

Without more active allied efforts to counter Moscow's divisive tactics, the outcome will be a weak, internally split Libya that remains a source of mass migration, transnational crime, terrorism, and other issues of deep concern to Europe, Africa, and the United States. In response to these problems, the international community would have to invest more resources and attention in treating what amount to symptoms rather than causes, while Russia focuses on its broader goals in the Sahel region—including efforts to undermine NATO and the United States.

Policy Recommendations

As Russia continues to struggle in Ukraine, its current strategy abroad centers on testing European and NATO unity, weakening the alliance, and building inroads in vulnerable countries where it retains options for asymmetric escalation, to be deployed at a time of its choosing. Libya is a poster child for this approach, posing a significant vulnerability on NATO's southern flank unless more is done to unify the country.

As things currently stand, Russia is well-positioned to interfere in any Libyan elections (if they take place), run disinformation campaigns, fuel waves of migration into southern Europe, and undermine U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel and beyond. Moscow's gains in Libya could also enable it to develop economic and energy alternatives in the region.

Because Russia's goals are both internal and external to Libya, the U.S. response should be organized in similar fashion, focusing on measures that counter Moscow's internal interference while also mitigating its efforts to use the country as a base for wider power projection.

Unify Libyan security forces. The U.S. political track has faced criticism for appearing to secure existing Libyan powerbrokers' grip on the country rather than enabling the formation of truly inclusive institutions. Yet internal actors and external observers have cautiously welcomed (<https://alwasat.ly/news/libya/528357>) the U.S. military

track, highlighted by joint exercises in Sirte this year. Washington should therefore continue pressing for gradual unification of eastern and western military elements through meetings, joint exercises, and trainings—though any Libyan access to U.S. military programs should be conditioned on excluding Russian defense equipment and capabilities. U.S. officials should also work to incorporate groups from Libya’s south, who may be opposed to Russia’s presence.

Back the UNSMIL roadmap. Libya’s current context presents a long-awaited opportunity for the West to once again promote a Libyan-led roadmap centered on holding elections within two years. To prevent Russia from thwarting this initiative, the United States should take the lead (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/will-washington-back-the-uns-libya-roadmap-with-more-than-just-rhetoric/>) in uniting like-minded countries behind the roadmap, while also pressuring countries that have previously supported Haftar and eastern authorities to participate constructively.

Peel the Haftars away from Moscow. Following past meetings with U.S. officials, Gen. Haftar and his sons have repeatedly engaged (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2026/08/russias-putin-hosts-saddam-hifter-amid-instability-libya-what-know>) with high-level Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin. The United States should therefore condition further engagement with them—including meetings, military assistance, and economic investments—on limiting their cooperation with Moscow.

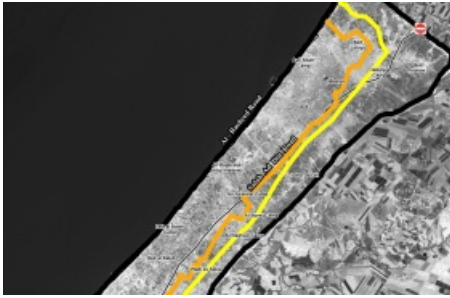
Support Ukrainian initiatives in Libya. Kyiv understands that in order to effectively counter the Russians, it must connect its actions across multiple theaters, just as Moscow is doing. Accordingly, Washington should look for ways to support Ukrainian operations (<https://apnews.com/article/libya-ukraine-russia-tanker-drones-4b9ec378ea1bf064d13cfe4ea026d2d4>) in western Libya aimed at countering Russia’s “ghost fleet” oil smuggling efforts in the Mediterranean. In addition, U.S. officials should help Kyiv craft and project its narrative in Libya, which necessarily includes countering the heavy disinformation that Moscow issues through outlets like RT Arabic. They should also work with Ukrainian embassy staff (who remain based next door in Tunisia for security reasons) on ways to bolster Kyiv’s diplomatic presence and outreach in Libya.

Do more to project the U.S. narrative. Russia has suffered many failures in Africa in recent years, such as an ineffective counterinsurgency campaign in Mali that worsened the country’s turmoil. After years of war and extremist violence, Libyans do not want to see a repeat of this cycle on their soil. U.S. public information programming and diplomatic engagement should therefore focus on connecting Russia’s security failures to the Libyan context; the same approach should be taken with its long track record of human rights abuses via the “Africa Corps.”

Sanction Russian aircraft. Russia is using a network (<https://www.euractiv.com/news/russia-uses-air-shadow-fleet-to-sustain-forces-in-africa/>) of military and private aircraft to sustain its forces in the Sahel, and Libya is a frequent launchpad for these operations. The United States and its partners can curtail this growing air fleet by adding to the sanctions they have already imposed in the past for activities such as supporting the Africa Corps/Wagner Group, abetting Russian arms proliferation in Africa, and so forth. These sanctions should be enforced through denial of overflight and refueling efforts, to make this tactic more expensive and time-consuming.

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