

## Russia looks to long term while navigating Libya chaos

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Like other actors, Russia is in Libya for self-serving reasons and claims neutrality despite picking a side

The United States imposed additional sanctions on the Russian mercenary Wagner Group on July 15, after saying it had solid evidence the unit had planted landmines "indiscriminately" around the Libyan capital, Tripoli. Moscow stresses its commitment to a diplomatic solution in Libya while building local alliances, currently with mixed success: the eastern forces it backs have retreated from Tripoli, faced by Turkish military support for the opposing UN-recognised government.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (R) welcomes Libyan military leader Khalifa Haftar (L) in Moscow, August 2017 (Reuters/Sergei Karpukhin)

### What next

Moscow will continue re-stating its commitment to a diplomatic outcome, although it would probably prefer a delay that 'freezes' the current situation to a settlement that weakens its sphere of influence. A sustained Russian presence in Libya is a longer-term and uncertain ambition. Current tactics are to react and adapt to evolving military circumstances.

### Subsidiary Impacts

- As with Syria, Libya offers Russia opportunities to gain a geopolitical advantage over the West.
- The United States may feel impelled to involve itself more in Libya to counter Russia.
- Moscow will struggle to identify new partners in eastern Libya.

### Analysis

Russia has built ties with Prime Minister Fayed Serraj and his UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) but concentrates mainly on partnerships with eastern forces and the external actors aligned with them: Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates. It is also talking to Turkey, even though that country's intervention on the GNA's side is a setback for Russian interests.

Moscow's broader goals have been consistent since it reshaped its Libya policy after the shock of the 2011 uprising. Its actions may look like last-minute improvisation -- for example to deal with Turkey's inconvenient entry into the conflict -- but are probably a combination of fixed goals and adaptations to evolving realities.

### Long-term forward position?

One view is that Moscow is less interested in the intricacies of Libyan politics than the opportunity to establish a military presence further west on NATO's southern flank than ever possible before.

Access to Libyan ports would extend Russia's Mediterranean naval presence, built up during operations in Syria.

If Russia entrenched its presence in Libya sufficiently, it could potentially deploy sophisticated weapons and monitoring systems to establish an 'anti-access/area denial' (A2AD) zone looking out onto the Mediterranean.

At this stage, the conflict is far from over and its outcome unknown, and there are multiple external players, not just Russia. Some, such as Egypt, have clear, limited interests they see as vital and have articulated the terms on which they would defend them (see [EGYPT: Cairo will retrench to 'buffer' aim in Libya - June 25, 2020](#)). Nevertheless, Russia and Turkey are emerging as two major decision-makers, in the absence of greater US involvement.

### Repeating the Syria effect

Libya does not carry the same meaning as Syria for Russia. President Vladimir Putin has yet to discuss Libya in public (apart from a January denial that the Kremlin was running mercenaries there). By contrast, he has talked about Syria repeatedly -- before and since the 2015 military intervention.

The Libyan uprising of 2011 hardened Moscow's backing for Syrian President Bashir al-Assad, although it took four years for Russian jets to deploy in the country, when Damascus appeared on the brink of defeat and it was clear Western states would not become more heavily involved.

Supporting Assad fits the oft-repeated Kremlin preference for undivided state sovereignty over 'Western -instigated' uprisings. Yet backing eastern commander Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA) looks more like a repeat of Russian support for unrecognised entities subverting the sovereignty of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

### Moscow is allergic to regime change but backs separatism when convenient

The Tartous naval base gave Russia a practical reason to keep Assad in power at all costs. There is no pre-existing asset nor analogous political leadership worth fighting for in Libya, especially if this risks the kind of multi-actor regional strife that Russia has been prepared to manage over Syria.

#### Fainter footprint than in Syria

Russia's military investment in Syria has involved combat aircraft, air-defence systems, warships and supply convoys, plus deliveries of armour and artillery to Assad's army, although it has stopped short of using regular combat troops.

None of this is evident in Libya. Instead, private military companies, most visibly the Wagner Group, have been sent in to back Haftar, especially to bolster his (failed) siege of Tripoli. This sends a message of Russian foreign policy daring while maintaining deniability and prioritising diplomacy (see [RUSSIA: Mercenary deployments are ad hoc opportunism - December 16, 2019](#)).

The arrival of 14 MiG 29 fighters and several Su-24 bombers at an airbase in the central town of Jufra in late May also sent ambiguous messages (see [LIBYA: Haftar's defeats may divide his foreign backers - May 27, 2020](#)). Despite official denials they were Russian planes, they were tracked from Russian airbases via Syria (and new paint jobs) to Jufra.

Some observers read this as a warning to Turkish-backed GNA forces not to cross a notional new 'front line' running north-south from Sirte to Jufra. The deniability of the deployment means it cannot be used to articulate clearer Kremlin messages, and makes it look less convincing than Russian air force action in Syria.

#### Practical plans

The surprise eastward advance by GNA forces will make Moscow reassess its assumptions and tailor its aspirations accordingly (see [LIBYA: Turning tide of war has wide repercussions - June 10, 2020](#)).

Moscow backs eastern-based authorities that claim to govern Libya, even supplying them with printed banknotes. Above, all it engaged closely with Haftar, the kind of strongman Russian officials can deal with and, in principle, would be happy to see in power.

Yet Haftar is not a client like Assad; he appears to have various allegiances and none, and has proven intractable in Moscow-led peace initiatives.

His defeat at the gates of Tripoli has further reduced confidence in him by driving home the point that he cannot 'win' the war in any real sense.

## For Moscow, Haftar has strongman potential but is unpredictable

Lavrov has publicly criticised Haftar in recent weeks, something he has never done to Assad.

Russian diplomats have reached out to other eastern figures. Meeting Agila Saleh, speaker of the House of Representatives (the Tobruk-based parliament) on July 3, Lavrov stressed Russia's desire for dialogue and a cessation of hostilities.

### Mixed strategy for now

Formally, Moscow positions itself as a neutral, reasonable mediating force (see [RUSSIA/LIBYA: Moscow seeks active mediating role - January 31, 2020](#)). Lavrov even used a June 17 press briefing to suggest that US engagement could be helpful to "reinforce efforts by Russia and other external players in favour of an immediate ceasefire".

Russian involvement with Libyan negotiations will continue, but its real preference is probably for low-level instability that maintains the east-west divide. It is unlikely to want a rapid peace deal between the LNA and GNA. This would disadvantage Russia, since -- unlike the Damascus government -- the GNA has never invited it to intervene and would not welcome a lasting military presence.

In practice, Russia does not wholly acknowledge the GNA's authority: officials and analysts speak vaguely about a "duality of power"(see [RUSSIA/LIBYA: Moscow's alliances may go beyond Haftar - June 1, 2020](#)).

That leaves Russian interests split between long-term goals and ongoing crisis management. There is little chance of rapidly identifying a new champion among Russia's Libyan clients capable of reversing the tide of conflict (see [LIBYA: Incentives favour conflict in Sirte - July 9, 2020](#)). Moscow will therefore continue working with difficult partners and navigating through chaos using diplomacy and covert activities; open military involvement is currently too risky.