

# Russia's Policy in Libya from 2011 Onwards

Ferhat Polat



(Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)

**This policy outlook examines Russia's strategy towards Libya post- 2011. The Kremlin 's various interests in Libya are assessed and used to explain Russia's policy in Libya and its effect on the Libyan conflict. Russia's approach towards Libya is driven by numerous interests, which range from geostrategic, economic, political and military, with a priority of marking the Russian presence in the Mediterranean region. Russia has used Libya's conflict to increase its influence on Europe's southern flank and its access to Libya's natural resources. Russia has arguably been filling the vacuum left by NATO to further its interests regardless of the cost to international peace and stability.**

## Introduction

The current conflict in Libya can be traced back to the 2011 uprising against the country's long time ruler, Muammar Gaddafi, the subsequent NATO intervention in support of anti-Gaddafi revolutionary militias and Gaddafi's eventual toppling. [The overthrow of Gaddafi's regime failed](#) to create stable political structures. The country steadily fell into conflict fueled both by internal contradictions underlying the rivalry of various political-military forces, as well as external interference by regional and international actors pursuing their own economic and political-strategic interests.

In 2011 Russia avoided a direct military response in Libya unlike in Syria, where Russia has heavily supported Moscow's long-time ally, President Bashar al-Assad, since 2015. However, since 2015, Russia has been ramping up its engagement in Libya by lending support to Khalifa Haftar, a former general in Gaddafi's army and leader of the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), in his offensive against the UN-backed government in Tripoli.

Until December last year, Haftar's forces had the edge in the country's civil war due in no small part to support from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, and France. Since November 2019, when Turkey signed a military pact with UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), Ankara has given considerable military assistance to Haftar's opponents, including armed drones and air defence systems, which have shifted the balance of force on the ground.



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Turkey's Minister of Finance and Treasury, Berat Albayrak, Head of the Turkish Intelligence Organization Hakan Fidan and Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin are welcomed by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Libya Mohamed Taha Siala upon their arrival for an official visit, on June 17, 2020 in Tripoli, Libya. (Fatih Aktaş - Anadolu Agency)

With crucial support from Turkey, since April, forces aligned with the GNA have inflicted a string of defeats on Haftar's forces, leading to the eventual collapse of his militias in western Libya. As a result, hundreds of Russian and Syrian mercenaries, which had been deployed in support the LNA, have been pulled back from Tripoli's frontlines.

GNA forces are now fighting against Haftar's LNA militias in Sirte, a strategic coastal city and the gateway to the oil-fields and the east. Recently, Turkey made its position clear that solving the issue of Sirte and the al Jufra air base is a pre-requisite to any sustainable settlement to the ongoing conflict.

Even though Haftar has failed to capture Tripoli following a 14-month campaign, his foreign sponsors appear to be re-positioning themselves to be able to protect their commercial and political interests in eastern Libya and oil resources east of Sirte. As a result, Russia has [reportedly](#) sent 14 MiG 29 and Su-24 fighter jets to the Haftar-controlled al Jufra airbase. Furthermore, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi [warned](#) that Cairo would not allow forces fighting for the GNA to seize the coastal town of Sirte or the al-Jufra airbase in central Libya.

## What drives Russia's policies in Libya?

Russia's strategy towards Libya is driven by numerous interests, which range from geostrategic, economic, political and military, with a priority of marking the Russian presence in the Mediterranean region.

Umberto Profazio, Maghreb Analyst at NATO foundation, told TRT World Research Centre, that: "The main drivers of Russia's policy towards Libya are the Moscow's geopolitical ambitions and its economic interests, especially in the energy sector. After Russia's strong comeback in the Middle East, Moscow sensed an opportunity in North Africa, where the partial disinterest of the Trump administration paved the way for major overtures by the Russians in terms of investment, arms sales and military support for their allies. The faltering multilateral approach adopted by the EU and the divide among member countries, especially evident in the conflicting agendas of France and Italy in Libya in 2017-2018, favoured major inroads by Moscow".

Russia has used Libya's conflict to increase its influence on Europe's southern flank and its access to Libya's natural resources. Russia has arguably been filling the vacuum left by NATO to further its interests regardless of the cost to international peace and stability.

Samuel Ramani, a researcher at the University of Oxford's Department of Politics and International Relations, told TRT World Research Centre that: "Russia's policy in Libya is much more opportunistic than it is in Syria. Russia's policy in Libya is motivated by its desire for influence in the country and is not wedded to any particular regime structure or balance of power. Russia's support for Khalifa Haftar is due to its general preference for authoritarian rule and military dictatorship but is not a deeply rooted alliance like Moscow has with Bashar al-Assad's regime, and is chiefly a means of projecting influence in Libya. From a strategic

standpoint, Russia views Libya as a valuable market for future arms deals and energy-related reconstruction contracts, especially if sanctions against eastern Libya and the arms embargo are eventually lifted in the event of a peace deal. Russia also views eastern Libya, especially Benghazi, as a potential location to construct a Russian base, which would revive its Soviet-era superpower status in the Mediterranean and build on Putin's 2008 meeting with Gaddafi. Finally, Russia wants to insert itself as a diplomatic stakeholder in Libya to show that its status in Middle Eastern diplomacy extends beyond Syria to the broader MENA region".

## Political Interests

Under Gaddafi, Tripoli and Moscow enjoyed strong relations and significant economic and political ties, including arms deals and licensing agreements for Russian oil and gas companies. More significantly, Russian involvement in Libya has had a historical geopolitical dimension, particularly in its desire for access to Mediterranean ports. Libya is therefore important to Russia both economically and politically.

After the collapse of Gaddafi regime, Russia sought to position itself according to the shifting political scene in Libya. U.S. disengagement from the region encouraged Russia to expand its influence in the country.

Grzegorz Kuczyński, Director Eurasia Program at the Warsaw Institute, a Polish non-profit think tank, told TRT World Research Centre that: "Libya is a matter of prestige for Putin, he wishes to regain the influence Russia once had in Libya and wants to make up for its mistake of not blocking the 2011 NATO air operation in that country. Moscow views Libya as yet another case of the negative impact that the so-called Arab Spring had on the entire region (Putin is hostile towards all kinds of social revolutions). Furthermore, Russia views Libya as another important field for rivalry with the West and the different Middle Eastern players. A strong position in Libya would cement and even expand the Russian presence in the Mediterranean and North African regions. We should also remember that Libya is a "gateway to Europe" for a large majority of illegal immigration coming from Africa. Moscow would love to play a key role here in order to influence the migration processes to be able to use these for potential destabilisation of the EU".

[Peeling](#) Western partners away from the United States and into Moscow's orbit is a significant Russian ambition. Putin seeks to establish himself as a peacemaker. Thereby presents himself as a more reliable player. Reducing Western influence is a vital Russian objective in the region.

According to Profazio, "the importance of Libya in the Kremlin's plans must not be underestimated. It provides an opportunity for Russia's diplomacy to reverse the results of the NATO-backed intervention that toppled Muammar

Gaddafi in 2011, restoring Moscow's position and prestige in the region. At the same time, it provides a strategic link between a long-term ally in the Maghreb, Algeria, and Egypt, a new strategic partner to which Moscow wants to show the full extent of its reliability. By expanding its influence in Libya, with the aim of assuming a leading role in the peace process, the Kremlin also pursues its long-term strategic goal of posing a threat to the southern flank of NATO, sowing division in and undermining the alliance".

## Geostrategic (military) and Economic Interests

Libya [emerged as significant arms market](#) for the Soviet Union after World War II. In the 1970s, Muammar Gaddafi opened up to Moscow. Libya subsequently became one of Moscow's most significant arm buyers. Gaddafi also signed contracts to bring around a thousand Soviet engineers and military advisers to Libya to establish more modern missile bases. [Reportedly](#), since then, more than 11,000 Russian soldiers have been to Libya.

### Soviet Arms to Selected African Countries, 1986-1990

| Country            | Total Arms Imports (\$ million) | Arms Imports from the USSR (\$ million) | Soviet Share (%) |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------|
| Angola             | 3,592                           | 3,475                                   | 96,7             |
| Cent. African Rep. | 6                               | 6                                       | 100,0            |
| Ethiopia           | 629                             | 378                                     | 60,1             |
| Guinea             | 85                              | 84                                      | 98,8             |
| Libya              | 2,247                           | 1,947                                   | 86,6             |
| Mali               | 26                              | 26                                      | 100,0            |
| Mozambique         | 19                              | 2                                       | 10,5             |
| Seychelles         | 9                               | 8                                       | 88,8             |
| Uganda             | 33                              | 12                                      | 36,4             |

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Yearbook, 1991, pp. 208-211

Anna Borshchevskaya, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, [commented](#) that "The zero-sum struggle with the West over geostrategic positioning and access to energy resources and ports continues to guide the Kremlin's thinking today. Putin began reviving ties with Libya soon after becoming president in 2000, and relations improved significantly after he met with Gaddafi in Tripoli in 2008. Soon afterwards, Moscow wrote off most of Libya's nearly \$5 billion debt in exchange for contracts on oil, gas, weaponry, and railways".



In 2011, the [NATO-led operation in Libya](#) cost Moscow its long-term access to Libya and billions of dollars in contracts. When Gaddafi was toppled, Russia seemed concerned that the country could fall under the orbit of NATO. As a result, the Kremlin has sought to win back access to Libya while simultaneously increasing Russia's comprehensive naval capabilities. For instance, in 2013, Moscow [announced](#) a permanent Mediterranean naval presence.

Russia also seems to be interested in reconstruction projects. After years of conflict, Libya requires major reconstruction, particularly with regards to infrastructure such as roads, railways, and ports.

In Kuczyński's opinion, "as a large crude oil producer, Libya is an attractive market for investments by Russian oil companies that need to look for new oil deposits, especially due to the expected depletion of currently exploited sources in mainland Russia. Further to just crude oil, Libya is also a potentially large outlet for Russian armaments contracts as well as very profitable infrastructure projects (e.g. construction of railways). Just like in Syria, the Russians want access contracts for the reconstruction of a war-ravaged country funded by the Gulf monarchies or the West. In recent months Libya has increased in economic importance due to plans for the exploitation of its large gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean – bringing the idea of the EastMed gas pipeline one step closer to existence see Turkey's maritime agreement with the government in Tripoli".

### **Moscow's ties with Haftar**

The Kremlin, under Vladimir Putin, has sought to increase its influence in Libya through its backing of Haftar's war against the Tripoli-based GNA. Russia's rapprochement with Haftar can be traced back to 2015 when Moscow engaged in the Libyan civil war after the NATO-backed intervention to oust Gaddafi.

According to media [reports](#), Putin wants to make the war-torn North African country "his new Syria". From 2015 to 2019, Moscow provided financial and diplomatic support for Haftar but since 2019 Russia has intervened far more directly to shape the outcome of Libya's chaotic civil war. [Reportedly](#), it has brought in advanced fighter jets, air defence systems, mercenaries, and precision-guided artillery, the same playbook that made the Kremlin a principal player in the Syrian civil war.

Since 2015, Russia's diplomatic engagement with Haftar has intensified. Haftar has [met](#) with Russian ministers on several occasions. It was claimed that Russia and the LNA signed a \$2 billion arms deal in exchange for allowing Russia to establish a military facility in eastern Libya.

According to media [reports](#), Haftar reached out to the Kremlin for military and financial support in 2015. In return, Haftar [promised](#) lucrative oil exports to Russia if he could



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (R) meets with Khalifa Haftar at the Russian Foreign Ministry's Reception House in Moscow, Russia on January 13, 2020. (Russian Foreign Ministry / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

take control of the Sharara and El Fil oil fields. Allegedly, Russia accepted the offer and started giving Haftar's forces military advice and diplomatic support at the UN. Russia has even been [accused](#) of printing money for the parallel central bank in eastern Libya. It is claimed the money has been used to fuel the war on Tripoli.

Since 2015, Russia has been ramping up its engagement in Libya, where it sees an opportunity and a chance to expand its influence. Therefore, the Kremlin has been supporting Haftar in order to preserve the sites for exploration and production of oil, which are located largely in the east and southeast of Libya, currently controlled by Haftar's forces.

The Central Bank of Libya headquartered in Tripoli is Libya's only internationally recognised central bank. However, Russian state-owned company [Goznak](#) has been accused of [printing](#) Libyan dinars and delivering them to the eastern-based Central Bank of Libya (CBL) which is not recognised by the international community. For instance, Malta recently [seized](#) US\$ 1.1 billion worth of Libyan dinars notes printed in Russia and bound for eastern Libya.

According to a Wall Street Journal [report](#), there have been a series of cash infusions that have helped fund Haftar's operations. In April this year, 100 tonnes of Russian manufactured Libyan bank notes were delivered to the eastern-based CBL. The inflow of Russian-printed Libyan dinars over the years has [aggravated](#) Libya's economic challenges.

For Ramani, "Russia wants Haftar to have de facto control over eastern and southern Libya, so Moscow can get preferential access to oil fields under his control and maintain a sphere of influence in Libya. Russia's aim in supporting his offensive on Tripoli was to bolster Haftar's diplomatic bargaining position, so this dovetails closely with Moscow's broader strategy".

Russia's involvement in Libya takes place primarily through the 'private' security firm Wagner, a company with [reported](#) ties to the Kremlin. According to a [UN report](#), since September 2019, hundreds of mercenaries from Wagner Group have been operating in Libya. Fighting alongside Haftar's militias bolstered their efforts to seize the capital from the UN-backed government. [Reportedly](#), Russia has also supplied Haftar's militias with anti-tank missiles and laser-guided artillery. Supported by a number of countries, Haftar's militias made some slow territorial gains in the capital and pushed the war into a more dangerous phase until December 2019.

In November 2019, Turkey [signed](#) a military pact with UN-backed GNA. Since then Turkey has provided vital military support, including armed drones and air defence systems which have shifted the balance on the ground. In early June, GNA forces pushed Haftar's militias out of Tripoli's international airport. The following day, they re-captured Tarhuna, a city 90 km to the southeast. A day after, the oil fields in Sharara were back in the GNA's controls and were pumping for the first time since January. At the time of writing, GNA forces were advancing on Sirte, the gateway to the east of the country and Libya's oil fields.

As a result, hundreds of Russian and Syrian mercenaries supporting Haftar have been [pulled back](#) from Tripoli's frontlines. In the meantime, Russia has been [accused](#) of sending 14 MiG 29 and Su-24 fighter jets into Haftar-controlled al Jufra airbase, a key military base that has been used as the primary air and logistics hub for Haftar's LNA into western Libya and launching point for the offensive against UN-backed government in Tripoli.

## Will Moscow continue to support Haftar?

At the end of April, Haftar sought to [rule out](#) the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) and pledged that he would move toward installing a new government. Many interpreted his actions as being a means to prevent a bigger role for Aguila Saleh, the Speaker of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) during any negotiations that might take place. Russia did not appear to [endorse](#) Haftar's power grab in Libya. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [said](#) that Moscow did not approve of Haftar's move to seize control of the country.

In the past few weeks, the Kremlin seems to have been reaching out to other Libyan political leaders, the most notable of which is the aforementioned Aguila Saleh. Haftar's heavy losses in western Libya have caused fractures within his eastern camp. His recent rejection of the political settlement and declaration of full control over eastern Libya, which angered many of his political allies, including Aguila Saleh and dominant tribes such as al-Ubaidat, have been



Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu (R) meets with Khalifa Haftar at the Russian Foreign Ministry's Reception House in Moscow, Russia on January 13, 2020. ( Russian Foreign Ministry / Handout-Anadolu Agency)

fanning the flames of discord. As a result, Haftar may increasingly face challenges to his position.

On 30 April, Aguila Saleh [declared](#) that he had worked with [Russian advisers](#) in drafting a political road map that called for an end to aggressions, the establishment of a three-member presidential council representing Libya's three main regions and a new government of national unity while proposing only a military position for the LNA.

For Profazio, "The withdrawal of the Wagner company's mercenaries from the southern Tripoli frontline in early June was a strong sign of Russia's progressive and ineluctable disengagement from Haftar. The series of defeats in western Libya and the loss of the strategic base of al-Watiya represented a significant blow to the Libyan National Army and its ambition of taking control of Tripoli. From this point of view, Moscow became fully aware of the impossibility for Haftar to implement its nationalistic project and seize power in the entire country".

"Additionally, at the same time, the re-deployment of the Wagner mercenaries in al Jufra and, more importantly, the delivery of a dozen fighter jets from Moscow to the same airbase via the Khmeimim Air Base, shed light on the complex strategy adopted by Russia in Libya. Given the inability of Haftar to take control of Tripoli, the presence of the Russian forces in al Jufra talks represents a red line, an indication of Russia's interest in freezing the front and trying to preserve the unity of the eastern camp facing the GNA's counteroffensive. In this perspective, the resumption of

talks and the calls for a ceasefire on 6 June in Cairo shifted the focus from the military to the political dimensions, in which the importance of the President of the House of Representatives (HoR) Aguila Saleh is furtherly stressed", Profazio said.

For Kuczynski, "this will likely depend on the stance of Haftar himself - whether and to what extent, is he ready to make concessions after his recent defeats. His current position has been weakened, and it is difficult to imagine a repetition of the situation that took place in January in Moscow, when Haftar refused to sign the truce, humiliating his Russian hosts. Importantly, Haftar may also have problems on his own territory - the presence of the President of the House of Representatives from Tobruk, Aguila Saleh, in Cairo at a joint conference of President Sisi and Haftar might have been an attempt by Egypt and Russia to put pressure on the LNA commander. Moscow now seeks a truce and will want to force Haftar to accept it - the problem is that Tripoli and Turkey will not necessarily agree on all points".

Haftar started his assault on the capital, expected to last just a few days, more than a year ago. While Turkey's recent intervention in support of the UN-backed government has tipped the balance of power on the ground in favour of the GNA, Haftar's foreign backers, including Russia, are likely to place Aguila Saleh as the Kremlin's new political ally for the next phase of its engagement in eastern Libya.

### ***Will the U.S. act to confront Russia's military moves in Libya?***

Russia and the U.S. appear to be heading for some kind of confrontation in Libya, as tensions increase on both sides. The Pentagon has been [highlighting](#) Russia's increasing involvement in Libya.

Until now, the U.S. has been reluctant to intervene in Libya. The Trump administration has long seen the Libyan conflict as a European problem of little strategic importance. This has arguably provided Russia more room to manoeuvre and exploit a vacuum where Moscow sees economic opportunities and a chance to expand its influence at the expense of Western powers.

Libya seems to increasingly be on Washington's radar largely because Russia has stepped up its involvement by sending fighter jets, mercenaries and is reportedly aiming to set up a military base. Thus, the United State Africa Command (AFRICOM) recently [sounded the alarm](#) by releasing details of arms transfers.

AFRICOM [said](#) it is considering deploying a Security Force Assistance Brigade in Tunisia to confront Russia's aggressive military moves in Libya. In a statement, AFRICOM [said](#) that "Russia is clearly trying to tip the scales in its favour in Libya".

On June 8, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan phoned President Trump to discuss Libya. The two countries have [reached](#) "some agreements" that might open a "new era" in the war-torn country, Erdogan said in an interview with state broadcaster TRT.

Profazio argues that "the US military is certainly raising the alarm about Russian conduct in Libya, and containing Russia is undoubtedly behind its strengthened support for the GNA, dialogue with Turkey and NATO's similar policies. The US believes that Russia's policy in Libya is much like Syria or Ukraine and seems to overestimate the leverage Moscow possesses relative to the UAE, which gets little scrutiny in Washington, except from some Democrats in Congress. In practice though, the US is detached from the Libyan military developments and peace process and will not intervene to counter Russia in a material way. Russia knows that US rhetoric is unlikely to lead to intervention, so it is pushing Washington's limits through military escalations and assertiveness in the diplomatic sphere".

For his part, Kuczyński contends that "for now, Russia has limited its military movements in Libya. Mercenaries were withdrawn from the front, and the issue of aircraft that arrived in al Jufra and the subsequent AFRICOM message remains debatable - it will be extremally difficult to prove that the fighters were a form of Russian military assistance to Haftar. In my opinion, you should not expect US military involvement - the reason is, among other things, that Trump will not want another US military intervention abroad during the election year".

Recently, Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General, [held](#) a phone call with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al Sarraj to discuss the latest developments in the country. The NATO chief confirmed the military alliance's readiness to support Libya by building defence and security capacities. In addition, the NATO secretary also spoke with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and discussed the possibility of a NATO capacity building mission in Libya. NATO's offer of support for the UN-backed government is especially notable in that it may bring the GNA closer to NATO.

Given the circumstances in Libya, the US may provide support to the GNA under a NATO flag and in close coordination with Turkey and with other international efforts, including those of the UN and the European Union to confront Russia's influence in the country.





Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) within the Berlin Conference on Libyan peace in Berlin, Germany on January 19, 2020. (Turkish Presidency/Murat Cetinmuhurdar - Anadolu Agency)

## Can Russia and Turkey mediate a just and permanent peace in Libya?

Ankara and Moscow also back opposite sides in Syria, where they have experience in co-ordinating military operations to avoid serious escalation. Through this, they have demonstrated their ability to, at least partly, be able to balance their differences. For example, Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu recently [stated](#) that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin have "agreed to continue working together to establish a lasting cease-fire in Libya".

The increasing number of mercenaries from Wagner, who are mobilising to support Haftar's LNA in Sirte, indicates that Moscow is repositioning itself and enhancing its position in the city. For its part, Turkey [demands](#) all mercenaries, including Haftar's militias, withdraw from the strategic city before a comprehensive ceasefire can be reached. Turkish backed-GNA forces seem determined to [re-take](#) the city. Control of the city by GNA forces would serve to reduce the influence of mercenaries whose presence in the country serves nothing but to fuel more conflict and cause greater destruction.

The disagreement over Sirte and the al Jufra air base is likely to deepen the differences between Turkey and Russia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu were [scheduled](#) to meet their Turkish counterparts in Istanbul, however, the visit was postponed at the last minute.

Kuczyński further observed that "this is unlikely at the current stage of the Libyan war. First, it would have to be linked to the resolving of the Syrian case. Secondly, Libya - more than Syria - is now the state where the interests of other countries, such as Egypt and the Emirates, are constantly growing. Last but certainly not least, a just and lasting peace will not possible as long as Haftar remains ahead of one of the warring parties - he is much too independent from Moscow, and at the same time very conflicted with Prime Minister Sarraj making peace impossible".

Profazio has a nuanced standpoint. For him, "considering the diverging agendas of their local proxies, their regional alliances and the intense competition to defend and advance their interest in Libya, it is highly unlikely that Russia and Turkey would find a common understanding and mediate a just and permanent peace in Libya. By indicating Aguila Saleh as the most credible interlocutor to resume talks, Turkey made a choice towards a political solution to the crisis. However, Aguila Saleh has frequently accused Turkey for its intervention in Libya and is very close to the Egyptian leadership, which, since the start of the attack on Tripoli in 2019, has seen him as a useful alternative to Haftar".

According to Ramani, "Russia and Turkey can, in theory, mediate a de-escalation in Libya. They had those intentions in January and have, in spite of its imperfections, reached an understanding in northern Syria. Whether they can mediate a lasting peace is unclear for two reasons. First, Khalifa Haftar is a rogue actor. He is not beholden to Moscow. Even if Russia wants to de-escalate, his rivalry with Aguila Saleh and personal ambition could derail anything Moscow brings forward. Second, there are more players than just Russia and Turkey involved in Libya. Turkey can wield influence over the GNA and France is showing some signs of scaling back its alliance with Haftar, as is Egypt, but the UAE is something of a wild card, which could derail peace. And the UAE has much more influence over Haftar than Russia does. So, converting goodwill into a practical peace settlement involving Russia and Turkey is a difficult process".

Turkey and Russia have proven to be the two most prominent external players on the ground in Libya. Although Haftar and his LNA have suffered a series of battlefield setbacks in the west, Russia appears determined to enhance its presence in eastern Libya where most of the oil fields are located. Recently, Moscow was [accused](#) of sending eleven cargo planes to Ghardabiya airport with Syrian mercenaries, weapons and ammunition. Moscow also deployed six Pantsir air defence systems to the strategic city Sirte. These developments indicate that Russia seeks to bolster its presence in the oil crescent, including the Sharara oilfield.

Turkey [stresses](#) that any potential agreement in Libya can only be sustained once Sirte and al Jufra airbase are freed from Haftar's militias. Thus, at this stage, it is unlikely that Ankara and Moscow will reach the required common ground to be able to mediate a sustainable peace in Libya. Even if Turkey and Russia reach an agreement, other Haftar backers including France, Egypt and the UAE may undermine the agreement in the hopes of limiting Turkey's role in the country. Considering this and the multitude of players involved, what comes next will more likely take the form of conflict management than a permanent ceasefire.

## How will Moscow act moving forward?

Russia continues to maintain mercenaries in central Libya and has also recently stationed fighter jets in the east. Kremlin military assistance remains fundamental to the LNA's survival by preventing GNA forces from advancing toward the oil crescent.

According to Ramani, "Russia will likely convince Egypt and the UAE to de-escalate in this scenario, as that benefits its interests. Russia wants to transition towards asserting power in the diplomatic sphere. It enthusiastically backed Egypt's Cairo Declaration, and if Aguila Saleh, the head of HoR is believed, Moscow was partially behind Haftar's



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (R) meets with Libya's House of Representatives President Aguila Saleh (L) in Moscow, Russia on July 03, 2020. (Russian Foreign Ministry / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

truce offer in late April. As of now, Egypt might be more amenable to Russia's calls for de-escalation, though we should take a serious look at its mobilisations on the Libyan border. The UAE will be less convinced, and reportedly helped derail the January talks in Moscow. Until a de-escalation is achieved, Russia will keep some degree of military involvement to stall Turkey and slow the GNA's counter-offensive and will provide Syrian pro-government mercenaries to complement the UAE's Sudanese recruits, and provide an overall security umbrella for UAE-orchestrated drone strikes in Libya".

According to Kuczyński, "Putin may want to play the Libyan card for his own political benefit - but he will only do so if he is confident of success. Haftar's military success is improbable, so one must count on diplomacy. Undoubtedly, an agreement with Turkey regarding Libya would be such a long-sought-after diplomatic success".

For Profazio, "the US could push for a multilateral approach to the crisis in Libya, making the efforts of UNSMIL more credible and reassuring EU allies about the seriousness of Washington's diplomatic efforts. A return to the leading role for the US in Libya would force Moscow to reconsider its policy, which has so far been met with some degree of complacency in some sectors of the current administration."

Russia's strategic and military moves in Libya indicate that Moscow wants to be at the negotiation table and seeks to play a major role in structuring Libya's political future. As it stands, Aguila Saleh could represent Russia's best chance to exert its influence. While it is likely that the Kremlin never believed that Haftar would come to control all of Libya, his assault on the capital nevertheless helped Russia to strengthen its position vis-à-vis diplomatic efforts to bring the conflict to a close.





People gather at Martyrs' Square to celebrate the 9th anniversary of Libya's 17 February Revolution in Tripoli, Libya on February 17, 2020. (Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)

## Conclusion

Russia's engagement in Libya has enabled Moscow to effectively counter Western influence in the region and emphasise that Moscow can play a decisive role in the country's future, particularly as NATO and EU support has mainly been rhetorical. This has arguably provided Russia more room to manoeuvre to expand its influence at the expense of Western powers.

The fighting has now moved from Tripoli to Sirte and south-central Libya. GNA forces are fighting the LNA in Sirte, the gateway to the east of the country and oil fields.

Sirte is strategic for Tripoli-based GNA for two main reasons. First, Sirte has considerable commercial importance as a gateway to Libya's oil crescent region. Secondly, taking Sirte would allow the GNA to seize control of the Libyan coastline stretching from the capital to the west and Benghazi to the east.

Moscow has reportedly increased the number of mercenaries, who are mobilising to support Haftar's LNA in Sirte in order to protect its economic and political interests in eastern Libya. As a result, the fighting in Sirte is expected to continue.

Talk of a challenge to Haftar's authority in the east has become widespread. Even his external supporters, including Russia, appear to be growing tired of his failure to take Tripoli. Russia and other external backers of Haftar, who have long supported the LNA, are now attempting to shore up their hold in the east. Despite growing reservations, Russia seems to view the LNA as their only military ally in today's Libya and will have little to no option but to continue providing the LNA with key military aid, particularly through the presence of Wagner mercenaries. Such support is being given on the expectation that it will prevent GNA forces from achieving a decisive victory against the LNA in eastern Libya. The loss of Sirte, in particular, to GNA Forces would severely hamper Russia's strategic objectives in the country.

The situation in Libya remains unstable and the presence of Russian warplanes and mercenaries raises the prospect of the intensification of the conflict. It seems that Moscow aims to expand its footprint in Libya by diffusing Wagner mercenaries' presence across the south and east, including around critical oil fields and airbases. Such a posture also gives the Kremlin more leverage ahead of any future negotiations, whether bilateral or multilateral.