

# Russia: From Retreat to Resurgence

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# Russia: From Retreat to Resurgence

by Samuel Ramani

In early February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pledged to work<sup>1</sup> with Libya's new political administration, as Russia quietly transferred<sup>2</sup> 310 new Syrian mercenaries to Libya. This contradiction encapsulated Russia's broader approach to the Libyan conflict. Russia is currently a leading military backer of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) chieftain Khalifa Haftar, an indispensable player in Libya's diplomatic process and a potentially vital stakeholder in Libya's post-conflict reconstruction. Russia's rising influence in Libya also bolsters its standing in the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa, which are critical theatres for its great power status ambitions.

Russia's leverage in Libya has deep historical roots, but it also reflects Moscow's opportunistic capitalization on Libya's post-2014 descent into civil war. During Gaddafi's 42-year tenure in power, relations between Moscow and Tripoli were generally cooperative. Libya was a vital purchaser of Soviet military equipment and following Gaddafi's 1976 visit<sup>3</sup> to Moscow, the Soviet Union deployed 1000 technical advisors to Libya. Due to their ideational support for socialism and adversarial relationships with the United States, the Soviet Union and Libya found common cause in conflicts ranging from Palestine to Nicaragua. This anti-American partnership cooled during Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin's tenure in power but returned to the fore with Vladimir Putin's 2008 visit to Tripoli. During Putin's trip, Russia cancelled<sup>4</sup> 4.5 billion U.S. Dollars in Soviet-era debt in exchange for arms deals and a 3.48 billion U.S. Dollars contract with Russian Railways.

The 2011 Arab Spring protests upended Russia's historic partnership with Libya. On March 9, Russia banned<sup>5</sup> arms sales to Libya, which cost Moscow at least 2 billion in U.S. Dollars revenues. Russia abstained from UNSC Resolution 1973, which imposed a no-fly zone on Libya for the purpose of protecting Libyan civilians. Russia's alignment with the international consensus on Gaddafi's illegitimacy created deep rifts within the Kremlin.

1 Sami Zaptia, 'Russia ready to work with new Libyan government' 10 February 2021, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2021/02/10/russia-ready-to-work-with-new-libyan-government/>

2 Burak Karacoğlu and Ahmet Karaahmet, 'Russia sends 310 more mercenaries to Libya' 5 February 2021 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/russia-sends-310-more-mercenaries-to-libya/2135156>

3 Federica Saini Fasanotti, 'Russia and Libya: A brief history of an on-again-off-again friendship' 1 September 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/09/01/russia-and-libya-a-brief-history-of-an-on-again-off-again-friendship/>

4 Oleg Shchedrov, 'Russia, Libya seal debt accord, eye arms deals' 17 April 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-libya-idUSSHC61895920080417>

5 'UPDATE 2-Russia announces ban on arms sales to Libya' 10 March 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-libya-sanctions-idAFLDE72905220110310>

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**Russia's leverage in Libya has deep historical roots.**

**The 2011 Arab Spring protests upended Russia's historic partnership with Libya**



*Russian President Vladimir Putin*

Vladimir Putin stated<sup>6</sup> that UNSC Resolution 1973 resembled “medieval calls for crusades,” while Russian President Dmitry Medvedev warned that such rhetoric could lead to a “clash of civilizations.” Russian policy towards Libya accommodated both perspectives. In September 2011, Russia recognized<sup>7</sup> the National Transitional Council (NTC) as Libya’s legitimate government. However, Russia also emerged<sup>8</sup> as the international community’s most strident critic of NATO’s military intervention in Libya.

Despite this balancing act, Russia’s influence in Libya plummeted after Gaddafi’s overthrow. In addition to Russia’s loss of arms deals with Libya, Russian Railways abandoned its Benghazi-to-Sirte railway project, which was a critical component of its economic presence in Libya. The NTC awarded reconstruction contracts to countries that backed Gaddafi’s removal from the outset. In October 2013, the Russia-Libya bilateral relationship reached a nadir<sup>9</sup>, as gunmen stormed the Russian embassy in Tripoli and Russian diplomats fled from Tripoli to Tunisia. Although Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin<sup>10</sup> asserted in February 2015 that U.S.-Russia cooperation against the Islamic State in Libya was possible, Moscow remained a peripheral player in Libya’s counterterrorism struggle.

The gradual resurgence of Russia’s influence in Libya since 2016 is driven by two principal aims. First, Russia views Libya as an easy-access theatre to build on the successes of its military intervention in Syria. In particular, Russia wishes to secure a naval base<sup>11</sup> in Benghazi or air base in Tobruk, which would connect with its facilities in Syria. Russia also wants to burnish its reputation as the diplomatic arbiter of choice in Middle Eastern conflicts. Second, Russia wishes to ensconce itself as a vital stakeholder in Libya’s post-conflict reconstruction. Rosneft’s February 2017 oil offtake deal<sup>12</sup> with Libya’s National Oil Company and the Wagner Group’s lead role in seizing the El Sharara oil field in the Murzuq Desert gives Russia an entry point<sup>13</sup> into Libya’s oil industry. The gradual erosion of international sanctions on the Tobruk-based government, which began with the removal<sup>14</sup> of EU sanctions against LAAF-aligned House of Representatives (HoR) speaker Aguila Saleh in October, could

6 ‘Medvedev rejects Putin ‘crusade’ remark over Libya’ 21 March 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12810566>

7 Tom Balmforth, ‘Russia Plays Damage Control In Last-Ditch Effort To Save Business Interests In Libya’ 2 September 2011, [https://www.rferl.org/a/russia\\_libya\\_rebels\\_recognition\\_ntc\\_contacts\\_lost/24316006.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/russia_libya_rebels_recognition_ntc_contacts_lost/24316006.html)

8 ‘NATO interference in Libya caused more casualties - Lavrov’ 6 October 2011, <https://www.rt.com/russia/lavrov-nato-libya-victims-201/>

9 Thomas Grove, ‘Russia says embassy staff in Libya evacuated after attack’ 3 October 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-libya-embassy-idUSBRE9920GU20131003>

10 Alexander Bratersky, ‘Together against ISIS’ 19 February 2015, [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/02/19\\_a\\_6418217.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/02/19_a_6418217.shtml)

11 Ravil Mustafin, ‘Does Russia need military bases in Libya’ 19 January 2017, [https://www.ng.ru/world/2017-01-19/1\\_6906\\_2livia.html](https://www.ng.ru/world/2017-01-19/1_6906_2livia.html)

12 Aidan Lewis, ‘UPDATE 1-Russia’s Rosneft, Libya’s NOC sign oil offtake deal’ 21 February 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/libya-oil-rosneft-oil-idUSL8N1G61XJ>

13 ‘Libya Oil Company: Russian Mercenaries Enter Major Oil Field’ 26 June 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/libya-oil-company-russian-mercenaries-enter-major-oil-field>

14 ‘EU removes Libya’s powerbroker Saleh from sanctions list’ 2 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-eu-idUSKBN26N2QI>



eventually translate into Russian arms contracts and lucrative infrastructure projects in eastern Libya.

Although Russia's ambitions in Libya are clearly defined and have remained consistent over time, Moscow has used a fluid array of tactics to achieve its ends. In contrast to its resolute support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Russia has eschewed hard alliance commitments in Libya. Russia sees the LAAF as helpful in its efforts to consolidate influence over eastern and southern Libya, but Moscow has periodically expressed<sup>15</sup> displeasure with Haftar's non-cooperative attitude during peace negotiations. These frustrations were especially pronounced after Haftar's walk-out<sup>16</sup> from the Moscow peace negotiations on Libya in January 2020. Russia has also maintained close relations<sup>17</sup> with Aguila Saleh, GNA-aligned President of Libya's High Council of State Khaled al-Mishri<sup>18</sup> and anti-systemic figures, such as Saif al-Islam Gaddafi.

This balancing strategy reflects Russia's event-driven approach to the Libyan conflict. Once the LAAF ensconced its hegemony over the historic eastern region of Libya Cyrenaica and secured Libya's critical oil-producing ports in September 2016, Russia provided<sup>19</sup> material and diplomatic support for Khalifa Haftar's goals. Russia supplied 4 billion Dinars to the Tobruk-based government, which helped the LAAF skirt international sanctions. In November 2016, Moscow dispatched<sup>20</sup> technical experts to eastern Libya. As Haftar's staying power was uncertain and Russia did not want the GNA to view it as an aggressor, Wagner Group private military contractors (PMCs) primarily operated<sup>21</sup> as stationary forces in Benghazi and Tobruk until 2019 and were marginal players in the LAAF's triumph in Sabha oil field.

The LAAF's April 2019 offensive on Tripoli gave Russia an opportunity to expand its military involvement in Libya. Although Russian officials were skeptical of Haftar's ability to achieve a decisive victory over the GNA, Russia was quietly optimistic that a successful LAAF offensive would bolster his bargaining power in future peace negotiations. Russian PMCs enhanced<sup>22</sup> the effectiveness of LAAF snipers, mortar and artillery crews, operated Pantsir S-1 missile defence systems and provided defensive cover for advancing LAAF forces. Turkey's January 2020 military intervention in Libya stalled the LAAF's momentum and caused Russia to embrace a hybrid military

15 Elena Teslova, 'Russia warns against call to war by Libya's Haftar' 31 December 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/russia-warns-against-call-to-war-by-libyas-haftar/2094136>

16 'Libya conflict: Haftar 'leaves' Moscow ceasefire talks without deal' 14 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-51104846>

17 'Aguila Saleh: Russia will play an important, pivotal role in the post-conflict reconstruction of Libya' 25 November 2020, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/50115/>

18 Kirill Semenov, 'Whose side is Russia on in Libya?' 22 March 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/russia-libya-hifter-sarraj-mishri.html>

19 Tarek Megerisi and Mattia Toaldo, 'Russia in Libya, A Driver for Escalation?' 8 December 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/66391>

20 'Russian experts support Haftar's forces under Egyptian-Emirati sponsorship' November 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/>

21 'Putin Plants Troops, Weapons in Libya to Boost Strategic Hold' 9 October 2018, <https://www.albawaba.com/news/putin-plants-troops-weapons-libya-boost-strategic-hold-1197206>

22 Kirill Semyonov, 'Libyan Theater: Will Field Marshal Haftar quarrel between Russia and Turkey' 12 December 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/12/12/2019/5df1f9439a7947354e2adc6d>

and diplomatic approach to the Libyan war. Through the recruitment of Syrian mercenaries and deployment of MiG-25 jets, Russia tried to stall the GNA's military advance and expand its diplomatic profile in Libya. Russia's synthesized approach to power projection in Libya allowed it to remain largely immune to the conflict's shifting balance of forces. While Russia's balancing strategy benefits its post-conflict reconstruction and diplomatic aspirations, it is also shaped by domestic considerations. Russia's approach to the Libyan civil war accommodates rival perspectives within the Russian political establishment. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and the Main Intelligence Director (GRU), which oversees the Wagner Group PMCs, view Khalifa Haftar as a secular authoritarian bulwark against the Muslim Brotherhood



*Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Khalifa Haftar*

and Turkey's rising influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov views Aguila Saleh's greater pragmatism<sup>23</sup> as an appealing strength. Russian state-owned corporations regard a balancing strategy as the most effective means of safeguarding their future reconstruction revenues. Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who is a close ally of Vladimir Putin and serves as Russia's informal envoy to the Arab world, supports businessman<sup>24</sup> Lev Dengov's Contact Group on the Intra-Libyan settlement. This contact group acts<sup>25</sup> as a bridge between Russia and GNA officials. Russia's fluid tactics aim to avoid a repetition of the overt intra-Kremlin rifts, which surfaced during the 2011 civil war.

<sup>23</sup> Marianna Belenkaya, 'The Speaker of the House of Representatives of Libya said that his peace initiatives were prepared by the "Russians"' 5 January 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4335501>

<sup>24</sup> Alla Hurska, 'Lev Dengov: Ramzan Kadyrov's Middleman in Libya' 29 October 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/lev-dengov-ramzan-kadyrovs-middleman-in-libya/>

<sup>25</sup> Abdullah Ben Ibrahim, 'Russian official: GNA seeking military-technical cooperation agreements with Russia' 24 October 2019, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/russian-official-gna-seeking-military-technical-co-operation-agreements-russia>

Although major Russian polling agencies, such as the Levada Center or VtSIOM, have not surveyed public opinion on Russia's policy in Libya, Moscow's actions in Libya could also strengthen popular support for Russian foreign policy. As Vladimir Putin has denied links<sup>26</sup> between the Wagner Group and the Russian state, public awareness of the pernicious conduct of PMCs, such as the use of landmines and chemical weapons, is limited. Russia's efforts to frame itself as a stabilizing force in Libya which counters the aftershocks of NATO's military intervention complements its counter-revolutionary actions in Syria. This reinforces the Kremlin's efforts to consolidate Russia's foreign policy identity around anti-Western norms.

While the domestic political benefits of Russia's strategy in Libya are apparent, the impact of Moscow's actions on its international partnerships is more ambiguous. The United States and European Union have both imposed sanctions<sup>27</sup> on the Wagner Group's lead figure Yevgeny Prigozhin for the conduct of PMCs in Libya. Western powers also view Russia's base ambitions as a threat<sup>28</sup> to the freedom of navigation in the Mediterranean.

The detachment of the United States from Libya and the willingness of European powers, such as France and Italy, to engage with Russia in Libya dilutes the impact of these condemnations. President Joe Biden might increase<sup>29</sup> US diplomatic involvement on the GNA's behalf, but Libya is unlikely to feature prominently in his Middle East strategy. Turkey has also chosen to diplomatically engage with Russia on ending the Libyan conflict. However, Turkish media outlets scathingly criticize the Wagner Group's conduct and the trajectory of Russia-Turkey negotiations on Libya is periodically intermeshed with their disagreements over Syria.

Russia's engagement with other crucial backers of the LAAF, such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, has also yielded mixed results. Due to Russia's strident opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and support for authoritarian stability in Libya, Moscow has established close ideational synergies with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Russia's treatment of these regional powers as equals is also appealing. However, the failure of the LAAF's offensive against Tripoli has exposed strategic disagreements between Russia, Egypt and the UAE. Although Russia enthusiastically supported the Cairo Declaration, Moscow was alarmed<sup>30</sup> by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's threat to militarily intervene in eastern Libya. Russia and the UAE regularly consult each other on developments in Libya, and Abu Dhabi is reportedly the Wagner Group's leading financier. However, the UAE Embassy in

26 'Russia's Putin: Russians fighting in Libya do not represent the state' 11 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-russia-idUSKBN1ZA0N4>

27 Michael O'Kane, 'EU designates Yevgeniy Prigozhin for violating Libya arms embargo' 15 October 2020, <https://www.europeansanctions.com/2020/10/eu-designates-yevgeniy-prigozhin-for-violating-libya-arms-embargo/>

28 Colin P. Clarke, William Courtney, Bradley Martin, Bruce McClintock, 'Russia Is Eyeing the Mediterranean. The U.S. and NATO Must Be Prepared' 30 June 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/06/russia-is-eyeing-the-mediterranean-the-us-and-nato.html>

29 Federica Saini Fasanotti, 'The Biden administration inherits a rapidly deteriorating Libya' 19 January 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/19/the-biden-administration-inherits-a-rapidly-deteriorating-libya/>

30 'Brotherhood war: Libya awaits invasion by Egyptian army' 7 April 2020, [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/07/14\\_a\\_13152697.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/07/14_a_13152697.shtml)

Moscow's obstruction<sup>31</sup> of the January 12, 2020 Russia-backed peace talks reveals that its Libya strategy is much more Haftar-dependent than Russia's. This could create tensions<sup>32</sup> between Russia and the UAE if Moscow ultimately distances itself from Haftar and aligns more firmly with Aguila Saleh.

At the tenth anniversary of the Libyan revolution, Russia's policy towards Libya is at a crossroads. Russia publicly supported UN-backed ceasefire negotiations and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has publicly called<sup>33</sup> for an intensification of intra-Libyan dialogue. However, its commitment to these peace initiatives is unclear. UN efforts to expel foreign forces<sup>34</sup> from Libya require the removal of Wagner Group private military contractors. As Turkey does not wish to withdraw its own foreign fighters, Russia will likely circumvent new Libyan Prime Minister Mohamed Menfi's efforts to expel Wagner Group PMCs from Libya. Russia has also maintained its relationships with anti-systemic groups by blocking UN sanctions<sup>35</sup> against Mohammed al-Kani's al-Kaniyat militia and supporting the inclusion of Gaddafi loyalists<sup>36</sup> in Libya's political process. These actions and Khalifa Haftar's continued mobilization of troops in eastern Libya suggests that Russia could remain a spoiler of peace in Libya.

In the short to medium term, we should monitor three dimensions of Russia's conduct in Libya. The first is Russia's response to national democratic elections in Libya, which are expected<sup>37</sup> to be held on 24 December 2021. In July 2019, the GNA arrested Russian political operatives aligned with Prigozhin's Fabrika Trollei organization, as they were artificially inflating<sup>38</sup> support for Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi in published polls.

Given this trend, Russia could use Wagner Group personnel to interfere on behalf of its preferred candidates and leverage the popularity of its Arabic-language media outlets, such as RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic, to spread disinformation.

The second is Russia's potential support for an informal partition of Libya between GNA and LAAF-controlled spheres of influence. This outcome could be optimal for Russia's balancing strategy in Libya. The third is Russia's partial divestment from the Wagner Group in favour of using a more diverse array of PMCs.

31 Ali H. M. Abo Rezeg, 'UAE embassy in Moscow obstructed Libya cease-fire' 15 January 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/uae-embassy-in-moscow-obstructed-libya-cease-fire/1703346>

32 Samuel Ramani, 'Putin, Mohamed bin Zayed seek to reclaim common ground on Libya' 15 July 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/russia-uae-libya-policy-hifter-egypt.html>

33 'Russia says efforts to reach Libya peace settlement should be stepped up - RIA' 23 December 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/libya-security-russia-int-idUSKBN28X14N>

34 Patrick Wintour, 20 January 2021, 'Kleptocrats' will try to block Libya elections, says UN envoy' <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/20/kleptocrats-will-try-to-block-libya-elections-says-un-envoy>

35 Michelle Nichols, 'Russia stops U.N. blacklisting of Libya militia, leader' 21 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-un-idUSKBN28101P>

36 'Russia: Gaddafi loyalists should participate in Libyan dialogue' 5 January 2021, <https://www.middleeast-monitor.com/20210105-russia-gaddafi-loyalists-should-participate-in-libyan-dialogue/>

37 'Russia: Gaddafi loyalists should participate in Libyan dialogue' 5 January 2021, <https://www.middleeast-monitor.com/20210105-russia-gaddafi-loyalists-should-participate-in-libyan-dialogue/>

38 Kirill Semenov, 'New challenges for Moscow with arrest of 'Russian trolls' in Libya' 12 July 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/russia-libya-troll-factory-prigozhin-hifter.html#ixzz6m0iiqQKi>



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**At the tenth anniversary of the Libyan revolution, Russia's policy towards Libya is at a crossroads.**

The deployment of PMCs, such as Shield, which has battlefield experience in Syria; Patriot, which has experience in other African conflict theatres, and the de-mining focused RSB Group, could enhance Russia's ability to intervene in a deniable fashion. It could also rectify increasingly apparent shortcomings of Wagner Group personnel and help Russia withstand a potential U.S. pressure campaign against the UAE's financing of the Wagner Group. Although Russia's short-term objectives in Libya remain in flux, Moscow's focus on indispensability over consolidating hard alliances and synthesized use of economic, political influence, military and diplomatic means of power projection will continue for the foreseeable future.



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