

RUSSIA'S STRATEGY IN LIBYA

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 Analysis

After the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011, a power struggle between various political and military forces began in Libya. This conflict resulted in a civil war, which continues to this day, and at the same time has given birth to a dual power in the country.

In Libya's capital Tripoli, the Government of National Accord (GNA) rules in the west of the country and is recognized by international forces, primarily the United Nations (UN); and in the east in Tobruk there is the House of Representatives, which controls a significant part of the country. The legitimate government of Tripoli, led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, enjoys support from the revolutionaries and conservative groups. Meanwhile, the actual head of the administration in Tobruk is the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA) Khalifa Haftar, in which the duties of the speaker of parliament is performed by Akila Saleh, and prime minister

of the transitional government is Abdullah al-Thinni. Haftar, which controls a significant part of the country, including several large oil fields, attacked Tripoli in April 2019 to overthrow the GNA.

Divided between two political centers, Libya also comes with various political and military entities at the local level. Nonetheless, one of the most important factors preventing the cessation of the on-going civil war in the country is the interference of international forces. After all, by balancing the forces of the two sides, this intervention is more likely to create an even greater prolongation of the military-political crisis in Libya than to contribute to a political solution to the problem.

While Turkey supports the legitimate government in Tripoli, states such as Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia provide all kinds of support to Haftar-led government in



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Tobruk. And the European Union (EU) does not have a unified stand on Libya. While France is on the same side as Russia in supporting Haftar, Italy, despite its efforts to build bridges with Haftar, has previously defended the government led by al-Sarraj. Even today, Paris and Rome are still divided when it comes to the future of Libya's energy sources.

Russia on the one hand, is trying to become an influential player in the energy market in the Mediterranean region, and on the other, seeks to gain various political dividends that will make its presence in Libya permanent. In addition, Moscow's current policies in Africa and its desire to expand its presence on the continent has made Libya, with a very long coastline and ports in the Mediterranean Sea as increasingly important for Russian foreign policy.

Libya in Russian Foreign Policy

The lengthy civil war in Libya has created an appropriate environment for the realization of Russia's abovementioned goals. On top of that, the United States (US) preference to intervene indirectly in the Libyan conflict through the UAE and Saudi Arabia in particular, as well as the EU's failure to develop a unified position, would only allow Moscow to act more freely. However, Turkey is the only force that takes a clear position in the Libyan crisis on the flank opposite from Russia. Nevertheless, with their experience on the Syrian conflict, the two states have learned to negotiate and to agree on joint actions, despite the fact that they are on different fronts. Thus, on January 13, 2020 in Moscow, Russia and Turkey held talks on a ceasefire between Haftar and al-Sarraj and demonstrated their readiness to act together in the Libyan crisis.

The West believes that Moscow provides not only political support to Haftar, but also sends weapons to the LNA and the military, and tries to change balances in the Eastern Mediterranean. Haftar received a military education in the USSR in the 1970's and knows the Russian language; hence the West sees a strong relationship between the two parties. In this regard, if Russia

achieves this goal in the Eastern Mediterranean, a "Russian ring" will emerge that will radically change the current security structure in the region and, above all, the energy sector.

During the last period of Muammar Gaddafi's rule in particular, bilateral relations between Russia and Libya received a positive impetus. However, it cannot be said that Libya, both under and after Gaddafi, was an important regional partner for Russia. This was indicated by Russia's passive position in 2011 regarding UN Security Council resolution number 1973, which introduced a ban on all flights over Libya. Moscow, which at that time had no serious economic and military interests in Libya, opted to stay away from the crisis with unpredictable consequences.

Yet since 2011, the most important cooperation between Russia and Libya developed in the military-technical sphere. In this period, in addition to arms and equipment exports, Moscow also invested in other sectors of the Libyan economy. For example, the \$ 2.5 billion project for the Sirt-Benghazi high-speed railway line, which the Russian Railways took over. With the onset of the political crisis in Libya, the project was stopped. According to estimates by the main Russian military-export company Rosoboronexport, the Russian defence industry lost about \$ 4 billion due to the Libyan crisis. About the same amount was Libya's debt to Russia, which remained outstanding from Soviet times. Moscow, which hoped to receive tenders in the future not only in the military sphere, but also in energy, construction and other fields, wrote off this debt in 2008. In addition, during the reign of Gaddafi, various Russian oil and gas companies, primarily Gazprom, Lukoil and Tatneft, also had investments in the Libyan energy sector. But after a political crisis erupted in the country, all these projects were also suspended. Therefore today, Russia, having taken an active role in the Libyan crisis, is trying to make up for these past economic losses.

At the same time, it would be wrong to link Russia's presence in Libya solely with economic

interests. In other words neither Moscow's economic interests in the Mediterranean, nor its security concerns, can fully reveal the place and significance of the Libyan crisis in Russian foreign policy. Moreover, the settlement of the Libyan crisis is not a vital issue for Moscow.

First of all, Russia, playing an active role in political and military crises in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, seeks to develop cooperation with the states of the region.¹ Over the past five years, Moscow's policy in the region, especially with the launch of the Syrian campaign, has forced regional states to sit down at the negotiating table with Russia. By demonstrating a proactive approach to the Libyan problem, Moscow is trying to build a more serious political and economic interaction with the Persian-Gulf countries and Egypt. So thanks to its fresh policies, Russia has begun to be perceived as a significant force that can influence the Haftar administration in Libya, the Syrian regime, Iran, and even the Houthi in Yemen. And another important point is that with the gradual advancement of the Syrian crisis towards a settlement, Russia will begin to lose its instruments of influence on the Middle East. With this realization, Moscow is trying to gain various political and economic benefits in the region, including Libya.

Second, by increasing its activity in the Mediterranean through Libya, Russia seeks to strengthen its negotiating position with the West. Many experts in the region note that being an emerging force that drives the Libyan crisis, Moscow is essentially trying to give a signal that its "successes" in Ukraine and Syria are not accidental, and at the same time, Russia does not intend to stop there. In other words Russia makes it clear that its expansion, beginning with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, did not end with the Syrian campaign launched in 2015. Ultimately, Russia is trying to show that it is one step ahead of the West; despite the 2014 sanction imposed by the US and the EU.

With Russia's growing influence in the Mediterranean, the EU, which is trying to swiftly solve the Libyan crisis that has led to

an influx of refugees from North Africa, is somehow forced to negotiate with Moscow. Yet the protracted Libyan crisis does no harm to Russia. On the contrary, Moscow profits from the sale of weapons to this country. Of course the weapons are not supplied by Russian companies. According to the information received from the battlefield, these weapons are sent through intermediary companies in some neighboring countries, particularly Belarus. Thus, Russia kills two birds with one stone: helps Haftar with weapons, and earns on export.

Another reason Russia attaches such importance to the Libyan issue in its foreign policy is because Libya is an important supplier of energy resources in the Mediterranean. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that Russia's main goal is to control the Libyan oil and gas sector. Moscow is trying not so much to control Libya's entire energy production as to impede the activities of other external forces. In this regard, Russian energy companies began to act in the direction of reviving projects suspended since 2011.

Russian Parallel Diplomacy and Military Operations in Libya

Following Russia's intervention in the Syrian crisis on the side of the Bashar al-Assad regime, some changes have occurred in Russian foreign policy.² Faced with a large number of non-state actors on the battlefield, Moscow saw the inefficiency of state institutions responsible in managing Russian foreign policy, and as a result began to implement "parallel diplomacy". Another important event was the competition that arose between the Russian ministries of foreign affairs and defence immediately after the start of the Syrian campaign. Although officially both ministries work closely together, in reality the army and intelligence are struggling to push diplomats into the background. The Russian Ministry of Defence, whose role in the country's foreign policy over the past few years has grown gradually, profiteers most from prolonging the crises in Syria and Libya. Indeed, over time, Moscow, which directly or indirectly

participates in these wars, has to increase its military spending, and this is most of all to the benefit of its Ministry of Defence.

However, after 2015, another new player appeared in Russian politics in the Middle East. Since then, the Putin administration has begun to actively use various Muslim groups living in the Russian Federation by way of deploying them to Middle Eastern countries, primarily Syria, Libya and the UAE. And at the head of Moscow's new "parallel diplomacy", undoubtedly, is the administration of Ramzan Kadyrov. Today, among the presidents of the republics within Russia, Kadyrov is the only leader who officially acts as Russia's representative in the Middle East.³ In addition, the head of the Libyan settlement contact group Lev Dengov is known as a person close to Kadyrov. In this context, Moscow effectively uses Kadyrov's authority in its policy in the Middle East.

For example, in September 2017, while Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence held talks with LNA official representative Ahmed al-Mismari in Moscow, in Chechnya's capital Grozny, Kadyrov negotiated with Deputy Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya under the PNS Ahmed Maiteeq. This "parallel diplomacy", which Russia practices in its foreign policy, also reflects the Putin administration's internal structure. The main strength of the Putin administration, which at first glance seems to have a rigid and authoritarian structure, is based on a balance built between the interests of different elite groups in the Russian leadership. In this regard, and in politics in the Middle East, Putin is creating a competition between the ministries of foreign affairs and defence; thereby preventing the strengthening of any of them, making himself as the authority with the final decision.

When it comes to Moscow's policy in Libya, another principle that draws attention aside from its parallel diplomacy is the activity with the

participation of paramilitary groups. Since 2018, the international media has been talking about the presence of Russian mercenaries in Libya. Nevertheless, there is no official information about Russian military operations in Libya. Still, investigations show that the activities of the paramilitary forces in this country belong to the Wagner private military company (Wagner Group). Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman known for his proximity to Putin, has been linked to the Wagner Group.

Even though Moscow denied any ties to the Wagner Group, correspondence between members of this organization and Russian authorities, leaked to Russia's opposition media in 2019, confirms these allegations.⁴ In addition, it becomes clear that members of the Wagner Group send reports on events in Libya to the Russian Ministry of Defence at certain intervals. In addition, this correspondence refutes Moscow's denial of even a single member of the Russian army present in Libya. The Russian army conducts various operations in Libya, albeit on a small scale. These operations are led by the commander of the Russian airborne troops Andrei Kholzakov.⁵ The headquarters of the Russian military under Kholzakov's command is located in the port city of Benghazi. Therefore it becomes clear from the above correspondence that the Wagner group carries out all its activities with the blessing of the Russian Ministry of Defence.

It is then evident that Russia, which has increased its presence in Libya especially in recent years, aims not so much to realize its economic and security interests there as to become a player with a voting right in a geopolitical competition that runs both between global and regional forces in the Mediterranean region. Therefore, Moscow, which in the current course of events is unsure of who will be the victor in the Libyan war, not only helps the Haftar administration, but at the same time continues to communicate with its rivals.

Endnotes

- ¹ Leonid İsaev, “Why Might Russia Need Libya?”, <https://www.ridl.io/ru/zachem-rossii-livija/>
- ² Anton Mardasov and Leonid İsaev, “The Fragmentation of Russia’s Middle East Policies”, <https://www.ridl.io/en/the-fragmentation-of-russia-s-middle-east-policies/>
- ³ Olga Shamina and Ekaterina Savina, “Kadyrov’s Friends: Why Does the Middle East Sponsor Chechnya?”, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-42496353>
- ⁴ Anton Mardasov and Kirill Semenov, “Russia is Returning to Libya, With or Without Haftar”, <https://www.ridl.io/ru/vernutsja-v-liviju-s-haftarom-ili-bez/>
- ⁵ Roman Badanin and Olga Churakova, “An Investigation Into How Russia is Participating in the Civil War in Libya”, <https://www.proekt.media/investigation/prigozhin-libya/>

