The Washington Times
Russia is eating America's lunch in Libya
December 3, 2019
Adam Ereli

The United States used to be the dominant power in the Middle East. From Morocco to the Persian Gulf, American muscle and alliances shaped the region's political and economic landscape. That is no longer the case. The vacuum created by a failure of U.S. leadership has created opportunities that our adversaries have exploited to their advantage and at our expense.

America's withdrawal from Iraq paved the way for an even more disruptive Iranian presence. Our unwillingness to confront Bashar Assad and abandonment of the Syrian opposition allowed Iran, Russia and Turkey to seize control of that strategically significant territory. And the Trump administration's ambivalence toward Libyan warlord Khalifa al Haftar has now opened North Africa to Russian meddling.

Last April, the self-styled Generalissimo and former CIA asset Khalifa al Haftar launched a military campaign to overthrow Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). His forces now control 80 percent of the country and 1 million of Libya's 1.3 million barrels per day of oil production. His offensive has thrown into disarray the U.N.-led peace process that offers the best prospect for a politically sustainable resolution of Libya's long-running civil war.

Until recently, the United States not only refused to sanction Khalifa Haftar's offensive, but it went so far as to offer the warlord tacit support when President Trump praised his "significant role in fighting terrorism." Little wonder then that in the absence of decisive U.S. action, Russia has seized yet another opportunity to challenge U.S. primacy by inserting itself as a regional power-broker.

While America dithers, Russia has quietly but persistently employed the hybrid warfare tactics used in Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere to tip the balance in Khalifa Haftar's favor and to extend its influence in yet another conflict zone. According to knowledgeable sources, approximately 1,400 Russian private military contractors are fighting in Libya on behalf of Khalifa Haftar.

British intelligence reports that Russia has established bases in Benghazi and Tobruk, with dozens of Russian GRU officers and Spetsnaz special forces troops performing "training and liaison roles." Russia has printed and supplied to Khalifa Haftar billions of Libyan dinars. It has further gamed the system by reaching out to and advising a host of would-be Libyan leaders, including Saif al Gaddafi, the son of Libya's erstwhile dictator.

What all this means for U.S. interests is clear: Russia is supplanting American influence and establishing a beachhead in North Africa. The stakes could not be higher. According to Eugene Rumer, director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment, "Gaining a foothold in Libya and ultimately a say in any future settlement in that country could serve as a springboard to build up Russian influence in North Africa and the Mediterranean and position Russia as even more of a thorn in the side of the United States and its post-Cold War near monopoly on naval activities in the Mediterranean."

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Associated Press
Libyan officials collect evidence of Russian fighters in war
December 5, 2019
Maggie Michael

Officials in Libya's U.N.-supported government say they plan to confront Moscow over the alleged deployment of Russian mercenaries fighting alongside their opponents in the country's civil war.

Libyan and U.S. officials accuse Russia of deploying fighters through a private security contractor, the Wagner Group, to key battleground areas in Libya in the past months.

They say the Russian fighters are backing commander Khalifa Hifter, whose forces have been trying for months to capture the capital Tripoli. The U.N.-supported Government of National Accord is based in Tripoli.

The GNA has documented between 600 to 800 Russian fighters in Libya and is collecting their names in a list to present to the Russian government, according to Khaled al-Meshri, the head of the Tripoli-based government's Supreme Council of State.

"We are going to visit Russia after we collect all evidence and present to the authorities and see what they say," al-Meshri told The Associated Press last week. He did not say when that visit would take place.

Moscow has repeatedly denied playing any role in Libya's fighting.

Hifter's self-styled Libyan National Army — made up of army units, ultraconservative Salafists, and tribesmen — launched its offensive on Tripoli in April after seizing much of eastern Libya from Islamic militants and other rivals in recent years. Hifter is backed by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, as well as France and Russia, while the Tripoli-based government receives aid from Turkey, Qatar and Italy.

Libya was plunged into chaos when a NATO-backed uprising toppled longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi in 2011. The country is now split between a government in the east, allied with Hifter, and the GNA in Tripoli in the west. Both sides are bolstered by militias. Fighting has stalled in recent weeks, with both sides dug in and shelling one another along Tripoli's southern reaches.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs David Schenker told reporters last week that the State Department is working with European partners to impose sanctions on the Russian military contractor responsible for sending fighters to Tripoli.

"The way that this organization of Russians in particular has operated before raises the specter of large-scale casualties in civilian populations," he said.

Schenker's comments came shortly after U.S. officials met with Hifter to press for a cease-fire and "expressed serious concern" over Russia's intervention in the conflict.

But President Donald Trump has sent decidedly mixed messages to Hifter.

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Trump voiced support of Hifter when he launched his attempt to take over Tripoli, praising the commanders "anti-terrorism" efforts in a phone conversation. The call was a sharp break with the U.S. policy of supporting Libya's Tripoli-based Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj.

Hifter's offensive dealt a blow to U.N. efforts to bring warring parties together. Al-Meshri called for confidence-building measures and a push toward presidential and parliamentary elections.

"Since Gadhafi's ouster, there have been no presidential elections. People are fed up," he said.

The Russians' presence has further mired an already complex conflict.

Al-Meshri maintains his administration has strong evidence that there are Russians fighters on the ground.

He says that government forces have found cell phones, intercepted communications and seized personal belongings left behind in the chaos of battle. He said flight data show dates and names of Russians moving from Syria to Egypt and then the Jordanian capital of Amman before flying to the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, Hifter's seat of power. He didn't elaborate or present any of these documents or items to the AP.

Wagner Group is believed to have sent mercenaries to multiple conflicts, including Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere, raising accusations that Moscow is using it to spread its influence. The firm is a military contractor run by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman with close ties to the Kremlin. Russian officials have refused in the past to comment on the firm's activities.

By deploying fighters into Libya, Russia is embroiling itself in another conflict in the Middle East. Russia's military is involved in Syria's civil war, conducting airstrikes and deploying troops and military police. That operation successfully shored up Syrian President Bashar Assad's government and — at a relatively modest cost — helped Moscow expand its clout in the region.

Analysts believe that Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to find leverage with Western powers in oil-rich Libya. They say he also recognizes that the country is a gateway for many migrants trying to reach European shores.

"Most of this is smoke and mirrors designed to induce fear," said Anas Gamati, founder of the Tripoli-based Sadeq Institute. "Russian influence has done only two things: inflate their size and specter of their power in Libya. They're not positively engaged or trying to play a constructive role with diplomatic or political value."

Officially, Russia continues to maintain a dialogue with both sides. Hifter has visited Moscow several times the past years, and a delegation of the Tripoli-based government met with Putin during a Russia-Africa Economic Forum summit in Sochi in October.

The allegations of Russian interference come amid a renewed push for international players to reach a consensus on Libya.

Germany is working with the United Nations to host a conference on Libya by early 2020. Observers hope that international players could exert enough pressure to stop the fighting.

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But others worry that Hifter's appetite for territory and power might prove too large. Former GNA defense minister Mahdi al-Barghathi, who left in the government in July, says the only way toward peace is for Hifter to be left with no powerful friends, and no other options. Otherwise, al-Barghathi said Hifter will be set to become another Gadhafi.

"We don't want to go back to square one," he said.

As long as international powers remain divided, Libya's conflict risks continuing to play out as the world's latest proxy war, some observers warn.

"Putin would like nothing more than to keep Europe busy and divided over Libya, scared of illegal immigration, paralyzed by right-wing populism that threatens the very idea of the EU," said Mohammed Eljareh, an analyst who runs Libya Outlook, a consulting company on Libyan affairs.

"All of this is music to Putin's ears," he said.

Reuters
Exclusive: U.S. says drone shot down by Russian air defenses near Libyan capital
December 7, 2019
Phil Stewart & Aidan Lewis

The U.S. military believes that an unarmed American drone reported lost near Libya's capital last month was in fact shot down by Russian air defenses and it is demanding the return of the aircraft's wreckage, U.S. Africa Command says.

Such a shootdown would underscore Moscow's increasingly muscular role in the energy-rich nation, where Russian mercenaries are reportedly intervening on behalf of east Libya-based commander Khalifa Haftar in Libya's civil war.

Haftar has sought to take the capital Tripoli, now held by Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).

U.S. Army General Stephen Townsend, who leads Africa command, said he believed the operators of the air defenses at the time "didn't know it was a U.S. remotely piloted aircraft when they fired on it."

"But they certainly know who it belongs to now and they are refusing to return it. They say they don't know where it is but I am not buying it," Townsend told Reuters in a statement, without elaborating.

The U.S. assessment, which has not been previously disclosed, concludes that either Russian private military contractors or Haftar's so-called Libyan National Army were operating the air defenses at the time the drone was reported lost on Nov. 21, said Africa Command spokesman Air Force Colonel Christopher Karns.

Karns said the United States believed the air defense operators fired on the U.S. aircraft after "mistaking it for an opposition" drone.

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An official in Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) told Reuters that Russian mercenaries appeared to be responsible.

Russian authorities deny using military contractors in any foreign military theater and say any Russian civilians who may be fighting abroad are volunteers. The LNA denies it has foreign backing.

One current and one former Russian contractor told Reuters that since September the LNA had received ground support from several hundred private military contractors from a Russian group.

Military officials linked to the GNA and Western diplomats have also confirmed the presence of Russian contractors in Libya.

TIPPING THE BALANCE
Haftar, who claims to be fighting to rid Tripoli of Islamist-leaning armed groups, has received support from the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, and, most recently, from Russian mercenaries, according to diplomats and Tripoli officials

Frederic Wehrey, a senior fellow at the U.S.-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the Russians' contributions of advanced capabilities — everything from snipers to precision weaponry — could be felt on the battlefield, boosting the morale of Haftar's forces.

"It's giving Haftar a real technological edge," said Wehrey, who recently returned from Libya.

U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper, in an interview with Reuters earlier this week, declined to comment directly on the drone but said he believed Russia was trying to "put their finger on the scale" in Libya's civil war to create a situation that was advantageous to Moscow.

Townsend voiced deep concern about Russia's growing role in the country, including how it would affect Libya's "territorial sovereignty and AFRICOM's counter-terrorism mission."

"This highlights the malign influence of Russian mercenaries acting to influence the outcome of the civil war in Libya, and who are directly responsible for the recent and sharp increase in fighting, casualties and destruction around Tripoli," Townsend said.

Mohammed Ali Abdallah, advisor for U.S. affairs in Libya's GNA, said the U.S. drone had come down near the pro-LNA stronghold of Tarhuna, 65km (40 miles) south-east of Tripoli.

More than 1,400 Russian mercenaries were deployed with the LNA, he said.

"Only the Russians have that ability - and they were operating where it happened," Abdallah said, in written comments sent to Reuters.

"It's our understanding that Haftar was asked by his Russian partners to claim responsibility, despite not having the capability or equipment to shoot down a US drone."

More than 200 civilians have been killed and more than 128,000 displaced in the fighting since April, according to U.N. figures.

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Wolfram Lacher (@W_Lacher)
According to multiple local sources, this drone strike in Umm al-Araneb last night killed 9 children and two women of the same family. Another drone strike killed the driver of this water truck and his Sudanese assistant. No international reaction whatsoever.

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