

## SECURITY ANALYSIS

# America's Opportunity to Quell Russian Meddling in Libya

Alexander St. Leger / [Joshua Meservey](#) / @JMeservey / March 13, 2020

Borscht, or beet soup, is a staple of Eastern European cuisine. Its dense, complex flavor derives in part from the sour cream that is often mixed in.

In the thick soup of the Libyan civil war, the shadowy group of Russian paramilitaries known as the Wagner Group is the sour cream. Its involvement has made the war—already a proxy struggle for regional powers such as Turkey, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates—even more complex.

Wagner's intrusion also reminds us what can happen when the U.S. declines to lead the diplomatic efforts to resolve a conflict that is important to American national interests.

Russian oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin finances the Wagner Group. Prigozhin is best known as the head of the Internet Research Agency, whose attempts to influence American elections prompted the U.S. to sanction Prigozhin and a number of his companies. Nicknamed "Putin's Chef" for his profitable catering contracts with the Russian government, Prigozhin's close friendship with Vladimir Putin, which extends back to the 1990s, enabled his rise to the ranks of Russia's elite.

---

In these trying times, we must turn to the greatest document in the history of the world to promise freedom and opportunity to its citizens for guidance. Find out more now >>

---

Wagner Group is Prigozhin's latest project. It operates at the behest of the Kremlin, and first appeared in 2014 supporting Russian separatists in the war in Ukraine. Its fighters also are active in a number of other countries: Last February, Wagner mercenaries engaged in a four-hour firefight with American troops in northern Syria.

The Russian government equips Wagner fighters with sophisticated weapons and gear and grants them access to Russian military facilities. Wagner also pays wages four times higher than the average Russian soldier earns, which enables it to attract Russians with military experience and few other ways to obtain a steady income.

Last April, Egyptian and Emirati-backed forces from eastern Libya, under the control of Gen. Khalifa Haftar, attacked the Libyan capital of Tripoli, seat of the U.N.-recognized Government of National Accord. Haftar is trying to deliver a knock-out blow in the civil war that has paralyzed the oil-rich nation since 2014.

Yet, by August 2019, Haftar's advance halted, creating a stalemate between his forces and the government. To break the deadlock, Haftar hired an estimated 2,000 well-equipped Wagner fighters to bolster his forces. The incursion prompted Turkey, which backs the Government of National Accord, to deploy 4,000 troops to Tripoli.

Wagner's intrusion into Libya is unlikely to be decisive, but it represents a trend in Russia's recent Africa policy. Moscow deploys the group to countries such as Mozambique and the Central African Republic to reap economic benefits: nations pay for Wagner's services and grant Russian firms access to their valuable natural resources.

Wagner also gives Moscow influence in strategic countries; its Libyan foray is likely designed in part to give Putin leverage over Europe. Finally, Wagner's status as a non-state actor allows Moscow to operate through the group with few restraints, and gives the Kremlin a fig leaf of deniability.

Russian meddling in Libya is yet another reminder of what is at stake in the conflict. The nation is a beehive of extremist activity and instability, and the spillover is harming American allies on three continents. Libya is currently a headache for the U.S. It easily could become a blinding migraine.

After multiple rounds of peace talks, the two sides remain no closer to a cease-fire. The United States, with its unparalleled diplomatic clout, is the country with the best—and perhaps only—chance to influence the combatants toward a negotiated settlement. It also is the country best positioned to persuade foreign powers to stop their counterproductive activities inside Libya.

Should Washington continue to demur, the Libyan soup would be left in a perilous place: simmering and waiting to boil over.

### **A Note for our Readers:**

This is a critical year in the history of our country. With the country polarized and divided on a number of issues and with roughly half of the country clamoring for increased

government control—over health care, socialism, increased regulations, and open borders—we must turn to America's founding for the answers on how best to proceed into the future.

The Heritage Foundation has compiled input from more than 100 constitutional scholars and legal experts into the country's most thorough and compelling review of the freedoms promised to us within the United States Constitution into a free digital guide called **Heritage's Guide to the Constitution**.



They're making this guide available to all readers of The Daily Signal for free today!

[GET ACCESS NOW! >>](#)

## Alexander St. Leger

Alexander St. Leger is a member of the Young Leaders Program at The Heritage Foundation.



@JMeservey

## Joshua Meservey

Joshua Meservey is a senior policy analyst for Africa and the Middle East within the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign and National Security Policy at The Heritage Foundation.