

Russian presence in Libya more dangerous than ISIS, says US Africa Command

by Abraham Mahshie | April 29, 2020 12:01 AM

Gen. Khalifa Haftar, the rebel leader who controls Libya's oil-rich east, recently declared he has a popular mandate to rule all of the North African nation, a move that may give Russia the upper hand if he can succeed in taking Tripoli amid nearly a decade's worth of sectarian strife.

In the disarray since dictator Moammar Gadhafi was killed in 2011, a civil war has raged across Libya, and Islamic State remnants have secured a tenuous footing in the south. But more troubling, say defense officials and U.S. Africa Command, is that Russia has inserted a paramilitary group to support Haftar and position itself on the southern flank of NATO.

"They're acting out on U.S. strategic interests in North Africa, but at the same time, doing it at a low cost, and if they mess up, then the Kremlin has plausible deniability," a defense official told the *Washington Examiner*.

"They are likely banking on that if they come out on the winning side, that they'll have access to lucrative port and mineral extraction deals, as well as have influence over a future government of Libya," he added.

A senior defense official also explained that Russia could benefit from a whole host of economic and geopolitical advantages by siding with a successful Haftar.

"It's really about access in Libya for Russia, having access to the ports, to the oil, having a reason to be in the Eastern Med.," the official told the *Washington Examiner*.

"When we talk about Russia, we have to be specific that it's really the military contractors from Russia, the Wagner Group are there, and it's really not the Russian government, the Russian military, that is in Libya," he clarified. "When Russia is pressed by the United Nations on their influence and impact in Libya, they're quick to say that they are not really present there."

In April 2019, the deteriorating security situation in Libya led AFRICOM to [pull its remaining ground forces](#) out of the country.

The U.S. Africa Command mission in Libya had provided military support to diplomatic missions and counterterrorism activities.

Since the U.S. departure, Russia has been strengthening its military partnership in Libya, said Kimberly Marten, chairwoman of the political science department at Barnard College, speaking at a [Center for Strategic and International Studies forum](#) Tuesday.

"There have been reports that they are people who are sharpshooters," she said of the elite Wagner mercenaries operating on behalf of Haftar in Libya. "[They] have really been the pointy end of the stick, making a big difference in what Haftar is able to do."

Marten said the Wagner Group, which was started by former Russian GRU military spy and Putin associate Dmitry Utkin, is reportedly engaged in training and may be protecting oil fields.

"Libya is certainly a source of a lot of oil. A lot of that oil is located in locations where Haftar's troops are based," she said. "So, if we're looking at an underlying Russian economic interest, it may end up being similar to what appears to be the underlying economic interest in Syria. It's petroleum."

Another defense official told the *Washington Examiner* that the Russian private military contractor has been in Libya and other parts of the African continent since early 2018. In [one report](#), Saudi Arabia financed more than 2,000 Wagner mercenaries in a failed attempt by Haftar to take Tripoli in late 2019.

"The command sees Russia increasingly using private military contractors for military training and security assistance, which offers Moscow greater flexibility to achieve its geopolitical and economic goals," AFRICOM Navy Lt. Christina Gibson told the *Washington Examiner* in a statement Tuesday.

Russia capitalized on U.S. withdrawal from Libya

Defense officials admitted that the U.S. departure from Libya has harmed the U.S. capacity to contribute to the stability needed for the internationally recognized Government of National Accord in Tunis to succeed.

"By us not having a military presence in Libya, I mean, in a partner-building capacity or whatever, that does put us really far behind," the senior defense official said. "From a military perspective, going back in would allow us to be engaged in training, as well as some U.S. influence on the activities within the government of Libya, as well as allows us to keep track of ISIS Libya and other groups."

The senior defense official said that Russia's presence in Libya is even more dangerous than the threat posed by ISIS remnants operating in the south.

"We believe that there will be a need in the future, an opportunity for us to get back into Libya again, but it's a little difficult to answer that given the current crisis ongoing there and uncertainties that we're seeing in Libya," he said.

If U.S. troops were to return to Libya, Marten feared a repeat of the February 2018, four-hour-long firefight between the United States and Wagner troops in eastern Syria.

"What worries me the most is that these [paramilitary groups] are becoming deployed closer and closer to where the U.S. military does have interests," she said.

With Russia supporting Haftar's forces in eastern Libya and the U.S. supporting the U.N. recognized government in Tripoli, a military conflict between the U.S. and a thinly veiled Russian force depends on one man.

"That could be a place where U.S. and Russian forces come into conflict with each other," she said. "I think the big question here is, just how risk acceptant is Putin going to get?"