

Russia Cultivates Libyan Ties

OE Watch Commentary: Since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and in particular over the past few years, Russia has gained influence in Libya by cultivating ties with key players involved in the ongoing struggle for power. According to the accompanying Arabic-language media excerpts, the Kremlin has become an essential ally to Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA) based in the country's eastern half; it has also maintained warm relations with Haftar's rivals in the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA); and most recently, it has reached out to Gaddafi loyalists.

Khalifa Haftar commands Libya's strongest single fighting force and favors a military solution to the Libyan conflict. According to the first two accompanying articles, from the Qatari daily *al-Araby al-Jadid*, this now puts him at odds with his main regional backers (Egypt and the UAE), who over the past several months have sought a political solution by reaching out to Haftar's rivals, including "officers and soldiers from Misrata and in the 'Bunyan al Marsous' forces." Their goal is to establish "a military council that includes officers representing all political factions, including those loyal to the previous regime." Haftar, according to these reports, "does not want to share power in the military institution" and disagrees with the proposed contours of a negotiated settlement. If his relations with Egypt and the UAE were to deteriorate, Haftar would be forced to rely on Russia, "which deals with him according to its own interests and has not directly stated support for him."

A key area where Russia and Haftar are closely aligned involves weapons transfers: Libya remains under an international arms embargo which both want lifted. According to the editor of a Russian military magazine, "[Russia] may circumvent the embargo by providing Haftar with weapons in accordance with contracts signed in the Gaddafi era, that is before the embargo was put in place." Rumors that they have covertly begun doing so abound. Haftar's relationship with the Russian military was punctuated by a surprise visit to Moscow shortly before the Palermo Conference on Libya in early November 2018, where he was shown meeting with top Russian military leaders.

Egypt's overtures to anti-Haftar militias and political leaders in western Libya are in line with Russia's overall approach to the conflict. As noted in the third article, also from *al-Araby al-Jadid*, "Official Russian policy toward Libya is based on the principle of being on the same field with all key players, in order to achieve a strategic objective." On the heels of the Palermo conference, the Kremlin's key operative in Libya, Lev Dengov, announced that Moscow is courting Muammar Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. Although Saif al-Islam is currently barred from participating in politics, Dengov believes that he could appoint a representative and should be involved in the process, since he has "political weight and importance in the country" and would represent "a specific group of people that support all that is related to Gaddafi and his family." **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**



Sergei Shoigu meeting with Khalifa Haftar, Commander of the Libyan National Army (2017).

Source: Russian Defense Ministry, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12137732@egNews, CC 4.0.

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Continued: Russia Cultivates Libyan Ties

“...Official Russian policy toward Libya is based on the principle of being on the same field with all key players...”

Source: تفاصيل مقترح مصري جديد لتوحيد مؤسسة الجيش في ليبيا
Osama Ali. “Details on New Egyptian Proposal to Unify Libyan Army,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 14 October 2018. <https://goo.gl/kKJE2a>

According to the anonymous source, the new proposal rests on creating a military council that includes officers representing all political factions, including those loyal to the previous regime. Haftar would be the council president without having absolute power, as the proposal calls for the military decisions to be taken by consensus... Last March, Egyptian sources in the presidential commission on Libyan affairs disclosed details on an Egyptian-Emirati proposal to unify political and military leadership in Libya... Mohhi al-Din Zakariya, a Libyan security specialist, said that “Egypt is growing closer to all parties in the country. The Cairo meetings allow it to become closer not just to the Sarraj government but also to officers and soldiers from Misrata and in the ‘Bunyan al Marsous’ forces.

Source: حفر منزعج من تراجع دعم حلفائه ويلوح بتهديد الأمن المصري
Osama Ali. “Haftar Bothered by Declining Support from Allies, Hints at Threatening Egyptian Security,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 10 November 2018. <https://goo.gl/veP4Uk>

... Haftar “began realizing that his regional and global allies do not want to eliminate him nor do they want to support his wishes to resolve the Libyan issue militarily. Haftar does not want to share power in the military institution, and his backers do not appear to support this position” ... “Haftar’s only remaining supporter is Moscow, which deals with him according to its own interests and has not directly stated support for him. He knows well that his former allies, such as the UAE, are no longer excited about him and prefer silence toward recent political events. Cairo wants to keep Haftar to protect its security interests along the border, but it does not see opposing the Government of National Accord (GNA) as being in its interests but rather seeks to negotiate with it and to convince Haftar to agree to become part of a military institution under his leadership but under the control of the GNA. Haftar has recently begun seeking a way out, including by opening communication with the African Union through a message conveyed by a military delegation last week, asking its president for support. He then resorted to Russia, in order to ease the brunt of the results of the upcoming Palermo Conference on his situation.”

Source: هل تعزز روسيا وجودها العسكري في ليبيا؟
Rami al-Qaliouni. “Is Russia Strengthening its Military Presence in Libya?” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 12 October 2018. <https://goo.gl/HGzUfa>

Over the past two years, Russia has sought to establish intensive communications with Libya’s various factions, seeking to regain the massive contracts it lost with the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. This is shown by the repeated visits made by both Haftar and the head of the government of national accord (GNA) Fayez al-Sarraj to Moscow, which seeks to mediate between the two. [Political Science Professor Gregory] Lukyanov explained that “Official Russian policy toward Libya is based on the principle of being on the same field with all key players, in order to achieve a strategic objective and reinstate political and economic channels to an acceptable level, in a way that benefits both parties on the medium and long term” ... Despite Haftar’s desire to obtain weapons from Russia, Moscow until now does not wish to violate the global embargo on weapons exports to Libya, at least openly. Andrey Frolov, the editor in chief of the magazine “Weapons Exports,” believes that Russia “may circumvent the embargo by providing Haftar with weapons in accordance with contracts signed in the Gaddafi era, that is before the embargo was put in place.”

Source: تواصل روسي مع نجل القذافي يثير ردود فعل ليبية متباينة
Jamal Jawhar. “Russian Communications with Gaddafi’s Son Elicits Diverse Reactions in Libya,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 15 November 2018. <https://goo.gl/CucPDS>

The head of the Russian contact group for resolving the Libyan crisis, Lev Dengov, disclosed the existence of communications between his country and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. He characterized Gaddafi as “having political weight and importance in the country, therefore he will be among the parties participating in the Libyan political process.” Dengov added, speaking to Russia’s Sputnik news agency the day before yesterday, “Saif al-Islam is extremely positive, and we may say he will be one of the parties to a political settlement for a simple reason, namely there is a specific group of people that support all that is related to Gaddafi and his family.” He added that “Saif al-Islam is very optimistic. He has a team that supports him. We should not forget, though, that there are sanctions against him and even if they are lifted, I don’t think his participation will be legitimate, since the elections will take place under UN auspices... I believe that in any case Saif al-Islam will need to name a candidate to represent him and the interests of the tribes, including the Qadhadhfa. Russia will never support someone whom the Libyan people do not support.”