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[Russia on the Libyan stage](#)



Russia intends to participate in conflict resolution talks alongside several Arab and Western countries with respect to the troubles in Libya. It is noteworthy that Libyan developments have faded into the background given the emergence of the Syrian crisis. However, North Africa constitutes a crucial region for European security as events which unfold there reverberate across the continent.

For instance, Algeria and Libya largely satisfied the oil and gas supply demand of the EU countries until 2011 and it was precisely the de-facto dismantling of the Libyan state after the overthrow of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 which led to the strengthening of the position of Russia's Gazprom on the European market. Imports of natural gas from Libya fell sharply at the very same time that gas supplies from Algeria plummeted due to a stagnation of the Algerian energy sector and an increase in domestic consumption.

Problems are not limited to matters of energy security though as Libya (along with Morocco and Turkey) has turned into a giant "migration gateway" since 2011, a route via which hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons swarm to Europe annually. The migrant flows mostly originate in troubled African countries.

Finally, the [trafficking of weapons from Libya](#) is a headache, too. Arms are smuggled not only to neighboring Algeria and Egypt, but also to the more distant African Sahel and even Syria.

All the above-mentioned issues are of significant importance to the European Union.

When it comes to Russia, its desire to have a presence in Libya is born out of slightly different interests which, nevertheless, partially resemble those held by the EU. On the one hand, Moscow strives to further promote its "Syrian success" on the North-African regional "flank" as part of its "return" to the Middle East and, on the other, presence in the region also opens up new opportunities for the Kremlin to establish partnerships with other major players in the region (Egypt, for example).

In addition to the fulfillment of geopolitical and geostrategic objectives, there are more tangible spoils to be had and a defeat of the West in the virtually abandoned Libyan "field" is seen as one of them by the Kremlin. The Russian Federation (RF) is also counting on new contracts ([military](#) contracts in particular), the prospective [establishment of naval bases](#) and the renewal of old agreements (losses of the Russian Railways alone amounted to [2.2 billion dollars](#) not to mention those borne by energy companies as well as unmet expectations concerning military-and-technical joint ventures).

Finally, one should not forget that Russia is not exactly falling over itself to elevate volumes of Libyan oil-and-gas exports to Europe to previous levels, especially since Moscow seeks to increase the price of "black gold" and maintain existing levels of commodity supplies to the EU as a worse case scenario. Given such circumstances, Russia might seek to gain control over the country's energy sector, although this does seem a bridge too far at the moment.

The talks with General Khalifa Haftar, who [has visited the Russian capital at least twice](#) over the last six months, attest to Russia's desire to take part in settlement talks regarding the Libyan conflict. Besides, the deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the RF Gennady Gatilov [expressed unequivocal support for the state official](#) in an interview he gave to Bloomberg on December 28, 2016. The degree and intensity of bilateral contacts is evidenced by the fact that the Haftar [personally visited](#) the flagship of the Russian Northern Fleet cruiser "Admiral Kuznetsov" on January 11th. According to official sources he has received medical supplies for his troops as a gift from Moscow. Furthermore, it was revealed that he had participated in a videoconference with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, discussing "issues of peace in the Middle East."

Khalifa Haftar is a former Colonel of Gaddafi's army who switched to the anti-Gaddafi opposition, moved to the US and became a CIA agent, [according to US sources](#). Haftar returned home to Benghazi in the aftermath of the uprising against the Libyan regime and played an active role in the civil war on the side of the opposition.

Appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Libya on March 3, 2015, Haftar defeated a number of militant Islamist groups, gained control over the eastern part of the country (Cyrenaica) and was subsequently rewarded with an appointment as Field Marshall by the parliament of Tobruk. At the same time, he issued threats to the government of Libya in Tripoli, recognized by the international community that he would conquer the territory under its control.

The West, international organizations including the UN and Algeria (to a certain extent) have been striving to force Haftar to agree to the Libyan agreement since December 17, 2015. Were he to do so, Haftar would be forced to recognize the supreme authority of the government in Tripoli which he does not regard as legitimate as evidenced by his actions of 2016 (among other things, Haftar believes that individuals considered "radical Islamists" are represented in the government).

In terms of intensification of communication between Russia and this Libyan general, nothing was left to chance. Russia [expressed its willingness](#) to contribute to the stabilization of the situation in Libya back in early 2016 during a visit by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Algeria. This initiative was welcomed wholeheartedly by the Libyan authorities.

Such initiatives are also viewed favorably by Algeria's leaders as Libya has become an incessant [headache since the overthrow](#) of Gaddafi's regime in 2011: jihadist groups regularly violate the territory of Algeria and smuggling of weapons and explosives continues.

Differences of opinion between parties to the peacekeeping process

A formula for stabilization of the situation in the country has to be found in order to achieve these objectives.

These initiatives should also enjoy support from strong, local leaders who are more predictable than Gaddafi. General Haftar, a former colonel in Gaddafi's army, is seen as a suitable partner.

Haftar is not a radical Islamist unlike numerous other Libyan leaders. His gravitas increased markedly in 2016 following military victories in eastern and central parts of the country. Apparently, [he controls more Libyan territory than any of his rivals](#).

Hence, Haftar has been welcomed in the capitals of the states who share an interest in settlement of the Libyan conflict. The problem with Haftar is that he is formulating a plan to seize power over the whole of Libya in the wake of his successes of 2016 (this includes [taking over of a number of strategically important](#) oil fields as well as key energy infrastructure by force).

Players in the Libyan sphere express differences of opinion when it comes to the situation in the country, even though they remain allies as Russia and Algeria do. The position of the latter is undergoing change, incidentally. Earlier, [some amongst Algeria's elite](#) (security forces and representatives of the DRS state intelligence service in particular) approved of the existence of different loci of power in Libya (for example, the Tripoli government and the Parliament of Tobruk in Cyrenaica). Such an arrangement could mean a temporary "freezing" of the conflict and may lead to a division of the country's territory. However, Algeria's political leaders are currently attempting to align the stances of contending forces.

Should the country ultimately collapse, this would guarantee that Libya would refrain from causing trouble similar to that seen in Gaddafi's days, who had very little desire to confine his ambitions to the boundaries of his own country (suffice it to mention the deeply symbolic "erasure" of the Algerian-Libyan border). Gaddafi's policies did not always sit well with Algeria's interests. For example, the Colonel's regime supported several terrorist groups in Africa which were disloyal to Algeria.

From a different point of view, shared by the Algerian elite and by and large by the "civilian politicians" grouped around the incumbent President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the re-establishment of a unified Libya could be seen as legitimate only in the case of its unanimous recognition by all parties. For Haftar, this would mean he would become part of an enlarged Libyan government seated in Tripoli and recognized by the international community.

This scenario is viewed as preferential among the Algerian elite now that the role of the "security bloc" has been [weakened following the dismissal](#) of the former head of the DRS, General Mohamed Mediene. It is noteworthy that these reshuffles have become possible due to errors made by Mediene's subordinates in relation to arms trafficking from Libya.

By the way, the incumbent Tripoli government could move to Libya from Tunisia in the aftermath of these changes and [thanks to Algeria's direct support](#).

However, in the case of a failure to mold representatives of Tripoli and Benghazi into a unified structure, the former stance might prevail.

Meanwhile, Algeria is trying to approximate the stances of Libyan players and prevent large-scale clashes encouraged by the December defeat of their common enemy - Islamic State. A weakening of the threat posed by ISIS has already triggered an escalation of the conflict between Haftar's forces and units of the Misrata brigade at the disposal of the Tripoli government.

Moscow, in turn, adopts a slightly different approach: It favors a return to a unified Libya under the leadership of General Haftar, which would serve as a guarantee that the interests of the Russian authorities are respected.

Prospects for Russia's relations with Haftar

As regards the re-appearance of General Khalifa Haftar in Moscow (November -December 2016), Algeria, [one of the main guarantors of the Libyan conflict settlement](#), interpreted it as a sign of support expressed by Russia. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that Moscow will stake its wager on Haftar as a leader capable of fulfilling its expectations and might even go so far as offering him a leg up for a price.

Speaking of Haftar's future, it should be noted that his military-political stock is rising: aside from Algeria, he is overtly supported by [Egypt](#), the [United Arab Emirates](#) and Chad all of whom have a major impact on Libyan developments. Should differences of opinion be expunged, such an influential "support group" with the inclusion of Russia could lead to more actions undertaken against Tripoli on Haftar's behalf.

[According to Algerian sources](#), the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently pushing for bilateral recognition from Haftar and the national Libyan government. In practice, this means that the above-mentioned general will be installed as Minister of Defense at the very least. However, Tripoli authorities do not agree to this as they fear that he could end up well-placed to organize a coup d'état.

In other words, it seems that Russia puts forward unrealistic demands which cannot be met by the government of Fayed al-Sarraj and sees Haftar as a "reincarnated Gaddafi". This interpretation is backed up by the statement of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Gennady Gatilov [who stated](#): "Khalifa Haftar is a leading political and military figure who has been fighting Islamic State in Libya for two years and [...] the Libyans have to find a compromise with respect to his participation in the new Libyan leadership" during an interview given to Bloomberg.

Moreover, Lavrov's deputy criticized the policy of the UN special representative Martin Kobler as he supports other political forces in Libya, according to Gatilov, who hinted at the insignificance of these forces. According to Lavrov, the government of Fayed al-Sarraj is incapable of running the country and adequately fulfilling its remit, although Moscow does maintain relations with it: "The territory under its control is too small and international recognition can do nothing to change that".

Apparently, this is the difference between the Russian and Algerian approach. Algeria has not yet written the Tripoli authorities off. It is noteworthy that Fayed al-Sarraj, head of the Tripoli government, [visited Algeria](#) after Haftar's visit in December 2016.

Should the incumbent government in Tripoli remain in power, Moscow's prospects in Libya will remain bleak. This is especially true when it comes to the prospect of signing lucrative energy contracts. The growing number of stakeholders including Russia to join the negotiation process makes the situation even more complex, especially given the contrasting views held concerning Libya's future.

This leads many to doubt that the participation of Moscow in a dialogue of this format can help shape the future of the country in line with the agreement of December 17, 2015, as called for by the United Nations and several Western countries (although [the US attitude towards Haftar for example is incongruent](#)). Moreover, challenges include differences of opinion among representatives of Tripoli, Zintan, Tobruk, Fezzan, Misrata and Haftar himself (especially since talks between western Libya and the Tobruk parliament have virtually reached an impasse).

Given such starkly different interests, Russia's involvement in Libyan affairs will naturally prompt reactions from a number of countries both in the West and on the Arabian Peninsula aimed at preventing the augmentation of Moscow's role in the strategically important region. Moreover, since Russian troops might appear in Libya for one reason or another, which cannot be completely ruled out given that Moscow has already expressed its intention to establish naval bases there, Russia could engineer a situation whereby vital oil-and-gas traffic *en route* to Europe via the Suez Canal falls under its control.

All the aforementioned factors combined can only serve to further complicate matters in the future not only as regards Libya, but also North Africa as a region which could spark a new wave of confrontation.

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