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State of play in the Libyan Civil War

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THE RECENT DEPLOYMENT OF RUSSIAN FIGHTER JETS TO LIBYA IS A DANGEROUS ESCALATION OF AN ALREADY COMPLICATED AND BLOODY CONFLICT, WITH A SURGE IN CIVILIAN CAUSALITIES. THE CIVIL WAR RAGING IN LIBYA HAS, IN EFFECT, CREATED A SITUATION WHERE OUTSIDE POWERS (MAINLY RUSSIA AND TURKEY) ARE VYING FOR CONTROL OF LIBYA'S FUTURE AND TRYING TO EXPAND THEIR FOOTHOLDS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN. THIS ESCALATION NOT ONLY AFFECTS LIBYA, BUT IT IS ALSO IMPEDING ON THE EFFORT OF SOLVING OTHER REGIONAL ISSUES SUCH AS ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING OF BOTH PEOPLE AND DRUGS, TERRORISM, AND BORDER DISPUTES IN THE MAGHREB AND SAHEL REGIONS.

On 26 May, the head of US Africa Command, General Stephen Townsend, stated in a [press release](#) that Russia sent fighter jets to support the forces of warlord Khalifa Haftar (Libyan National Army, LNA) in his struggle to unseat the UN-recognized Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA).

Officials in Russia denied the [allegations](#), calling them 'untrue'. Yet reports of Russian involvement in support of Haftar (a former General) and LNA are not new, and General Townsend noted that the Russian planes had been under observation since they left Russia, including the transit in Syria where they were repainted to camouflage their origins.

The fighter jets are believed to be deployed in the Libyan civil war to assist the Russian state-

sponsored mercenary Wagner Group, a Private Military Company (PMC) used by Russia to [support Haftar](#). The Wagner group was also deployed in Syria to help Russian ally, President Bashar al-Assad.

In effect, as General Townsend also stated, this constitutes a serious escalation in the war and means that Russian pilots, working as mercenaries, will bomb and kill Libyan nationals. The planes, including Mig-29s and SU-24s, are considered fourth-generation, and there is no way that any militia—LNA or otherwise—could operate and maintain such sophisticated aircraft without Russian support.

The State of Play

The civil war in Libya has stalled, with two sides vying for power: The UN-supported GNA based in Tripoli, and Haftar's administration based in Benghazi in Eastern Libya, and the war has already seen an uptick in casualties. A [report](#) jointly published by the New America Foundation and Airwars in early June shows not only that civilian casualties have risen, but also that the LNA and its allies are responsible for most of these deaths. Both sides are also receiving help from outside Libya, with Russia (supporting Haftar) and Turkey (supporting the GNA) as the major external powers. This complicates the process of a peaceful resolution to the conflict, making the civil war increasingly resemble a proxy war between Russia and Turkey. Furthermore, the UN arms embargo is blatantly ignored by all the warring parties, exemplified by the Russian fighter jets, the Wagner mercenaries, and, on the other side, [by Turkish drones and troops](#).

It is rare for any regional Command to issue press releases in relation to incidents as specific as this one, showing the seriousness with which the Pentagon takes the escalation. The current administration in Washington has not had Libya high on its radar, but this escalation means Russia is intent on enhancing its position in the Eastern Mediterranean, hence the rather poignant and clear statement from Africom. [According to other military sources](#), it is likely that Russia is looking for basing rights in Libya, which could give Russia what is called, in military parlance, “permanent long-range Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities”, which would constitute real security concerns on Europe’s Southern flank.

Added to the security situation is the fact that Russian moves in Libya will further destabilise the region as a whole, adversely affecting the struggle to combat terrorism, illegal migration, and drug trafficking.

This is all very troubling and adds to the problems of solving the Libyan crisis peacefully. But what makes the Russian escalation even more problematic is the fact that a peace process was already launched several years ago. Signed in December 2015 as the Libyan Political Agreement, it is an accord that was signed by participants elected to begin the first tentative steps towards a more stable and peaceful Libya. The General National Congress (predecessor to the GNA) and the National Transitional Council led Libya, initially after the downfall of Gaddafi and before the civil war broke out, when various militants and Islamists rushed in to take advantage of the volatile situation.

The accord was signed in the Moroccan capital of Rabat and is a testimony to the long and arduous work done behind the scenes by the Moroccans before the accord was agreed upon. This is worth mentioning, since Morocco, with its position as a bridge between Africa and Europe, is well suited to play a significant role in peace-making in the region. It is also worth noting that when the groundwork was laid out by Morocco, a key role was played by the Moroccan External Intelligence Agency (DGED). The Agency, obviously working discreetly, has, for years, been instrumental in counter-terrorism work and in preventing and obstructing human and drug-trafficking into Europe.

This work, and the connections, intelligence, and networks created as a result, could be drawn upon by Moroccan authorities to facilitate and lay the groundwork for the process leading up to the accord. This is especially important since the war in Libya cannot be analysed without considering the regional context of the Maghreb and the Sahel. Here as well, Morocco (and the DGED in particular) has played a major role in combatting radical Islamist movements and illegal trafficking.

Conclusion

With this recent Russian escalation, much of this preventive work risks being critically affected. As stated, this is a grave problem, not only for the prospects of a peaceful resolution to the Libyan conflict, but it will also affect other volatile areas in the region. Of particular concern, as mentioned above, is the fact that the Southern flank of Europe will be exposed in a way it has not been before. European concern lies not only in Russia and Turkey vying for potential naval basing rights (EU members Greece and Cyprus have already raised the alarm over Turkish expansionism in the Eastern Mediterranean), but also in the fact that the escalation makes it much more difficult for the EU to combat and prevent the long list of problems affecting Europe and emanating from the southern rim of the Mediterranean.

What is needed is a much stronger and more coherent response from Brussels in calling out both Russian and Turkish breaches of the UN-sanctioned arms embargo. This must include not only strongly-worded statements (which have proven rather worthless in dealing with Russian aggression), but also concrete suggestions for sanctions (for example concerning trade, movement of people, and current and projected joint ventures), should all else fail to scale down the fighting in Libya.

In addition, to be effective, this obviously needs to be an initiative extending beyond the directly concerned EU countries, Italy, and France. A common EU policy towards the Libyan conflict is, in any case, necessary to have a real impact on different warring parties and their respective external allies. This is, of course, notoriously difficult to achieve, as seen on many other occasions. Without underestimating the difficulties here – with different countries pulling in

different directions – it can be argued that the war in Libya is presenting a very clear and present security threat to the EU as a whole. This goes beyond the immediate fighting inside Libya (which is in itself threatening), due to the fact that other geographical areas, and other volatile topics relevant to the EU, such as illegal immigration and trafficking, are affected. Therefore, a possible way forward in moulding a common EU approach to the Libyan quandary would be to emphasise the wider meaning and relevance of the ongoing war in Libya.

Thus, since these other issues, apart from the actual fighting, are already of concern for the whole EU, with a range of policy proposals conceived over the years, it ought to be possible to develop a common policy here. Issues that have been on the table for several years are all becoming even harder to solve due to the war in Libya. Again, emphasising this fact could be an effective tool to get a unified policy adopted by Brussels.

Finally, such a unified political offensive from the EU would greatly boost the Moroccan initiative in renewing the peace process and the accords. It would also show that the EU could actually get behind a serious diplomatic process and overcome internal disagreements to push for a political solution to a difficult and complex conflict. A conflict that, if not tackled head-on, has the genuine potential to negatively affect a number of EU members for a significant period of time.

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