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## Policy Briefs

### **An Advance Line of Defense: Moscow's Objectives in Libya**

*\*Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*

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**Haftar's collapsing defences in western Libya raise another question: can Russia maintain its military presence in the east? [Anadolu Agency]**

In late May 2020, the United States declared that Russia had deployed 14 fighter planes, both SU-24s and MIG-29s, to the Jufra airbase, located some 650 km south of Tripoli and currently under the control of General Khalifa Haftar. The goal, the United States said, was to provide support to the Russian mercenaries allied with Haftar.

The move represented an important escalation in Russian intervention in Libya, raising several questions in the process: What occasioned this action and what military goals does Moscow hope to achieve? And why does Russia persist in its relationship with Haftar, an accused war criminal without legitimacy?

The escalation coincided with the national accord government's (GNA) recent string of victories over Haftar's forces. After losing several strategically important positions in the northwest, in mid-May, Haftar's forces, including the Russian mercenaries, began retreating, which was precisely when the Russian fighter planes arrived.

If the purpose of the planes and Russia's tactical objectives in Libya remain in dispute, its strategic goals are clear. It seeks to establish a permanent foothold in the country, giving it ample access to the eastern Mediterranean. In the event of any future confrontation with the West, such a position will be vital to its defence of the Black Sea, allowing Russia to set up its first line of naval defence in the Mediterranean. Following its failure to secure a naval base on Egypt's northern coast after 2013, the Libyan conflict offers Russia another opportunity. In setting the stage to achieve this goal, Moscow has gradually sought to carve out a role in the country that would give it a voice in any future political settlement.

This overriding consideration is likely to determine the trajectory of Russian military action in the coming weeks and months.

With this in mind, the most likely objective of the deployment of the planes and the withdrawal of the mercenary troops is to maintain Haftar's position in the east and southeast, including the oil triangle. Doing so will ensure that Haftar—and by extension, Russia—remains a party to negotiations between eastern and western Libya. While this seems like the most realistic objective, it does not preclude Russia using the aircraft to conduct strikes on GNA positions in Tripoli if the latter attempts to advance on eastern Libya (although it remains unclear who will pilot the Russian aircraft).

Haftar's collapsing defences in western Libya raise another question: can Russia maintain its military presence in the east? The answer ultimately depends on the US and NATO. With its backing limited to a few military advisors, drones, and other equipment, Turkey is not in a position to act as an effective counterweight to Russia and is no match for its land and air forces in the east. While the American military and security establishment is clearly aware of what a permanent Russian toehold in Libya would mean for its naval dominance in the Mediterranean and southern European security, the Trump administration is less so, showing no indication that it considers Libya an international priority.

It could be that the US believes that simply exposing and condemning Russian air forces in Libya will be sufficient in itself to force Russia out, particularly since there is no legitimate basis for its presence. Or it could turn to Haftar directly and demand that he and his Egyptian and Emirati allies eject Russian aerial forces to prevent Russia from establishing a permanent military presence.

If Haftar does not respond to US pressure, the only alternative is the provision of tangible US military support to the GNA and its Turkish ally, allowing them to advance on the east and southeast Libya with effective American cover. This, however, seems unlikely, given the Trump administration's aversion to involvement in any new conflict in the Middle East. As such, a number of outcomes are possible, and Russia's gambit is just as likely to succeed as fail.

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\*This is a summary of a policy brief originally written in Arabic, available here: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4689>