

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness



How the Kremlin's fingerprints escalated Libya's conflict, threatening a wider war in the Middle East

By **Sudarsan Raghavan**

Dec. 20, 2019 at 10:03 a.m. EST

CAIRO — When Russian mercenaries linked to the Kremlin emerged on the front lines of Libya's war in September, their military expertise and advanced weaponry changed the battlefield. That was only the beginning.

Their arrival, to help eastern warlord Khalifa Hifter, started a chain of events that has escalated a battle for the Libyan capital, Tripoli, and threatened to fuel a regional war over geography, ideology and lucrative oil and natural gas reserves. A U.N. arms embargo, already in tatters, is now toothless, raising the specter of more civilian casualties.

Now more than ever, the conflict in Libya is being driven by the Middle East's latest divide, pitting the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia against Turkey and Qatar. Over the past four months, Turkey, Egypt and the UAE have deepened their involvement, laying bare the region's rivalries and animosities.

The United States, after years of neglecting Libya, is now scrambling to find a way to blunt the Kremlin's reach. But in the absence of strong U.S. diplomacy and policies, Russia and Turkey appear poised to exploit the security and diplomatic vacuum and control the fate of Libya, as they have done in Syria.

Disseminated by Mercury Public Affairs, LLC, a registered foreign agent, on behalf of the Government of National Accord and its Office of the Prime Minister. More information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

More than 1,000 Russian mercenaries are said to be operating in Libya, according to U.S. and Western officials and top Libyan commanders. Most work for the Wagner Group, a shadowy private army linked to the Kremlin and Russian President Vladimir Putin. It has also fought in Syria, Ukraine and other nations that Moscow considers strategic to its interests.

The Kremlin denies any relationship with the mercenaries. Hifter's self-described Libyan National Army says it deploys only Libyan fighters, despite clear signs of the mercenaries' presence.

As the war has intensified, so has hate speech, disinformation and fake news as both sides seek to use propaganda as a weapon. It is dividing tribes and communities and fracturing efforts at reconciliation. Concerns are also growing about more refugees fleeing violence, spilling across borders and attempting dangerous sea journeys to Europe. And remnants of a once-defeated Islamic State affiliate are looking to take advantage of the instability.

The new tensions are hampering efforts by the United Nations and European countries to broker a cease-fire and peace deal, centered around a conference in Berlin that has been postponed several times.

"The tide has shifted on the ground, and that has reverberated diplomatically and geopolitically," said Frederic Wehrey, a Libya scholar with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "The Russians' newfound leverage is a further blow to the Europeans' approach to Libya and the Berlin process. There are just more chefs in the kitchen now."

Hifter's fortunes shift

As the 76-year-old Hifter, a dual U.S.-Libyan citizen who lived for years in Northern Virginia, marched across the country from his eastern stronghold, Moscow assisted diplomatically and financially. In addition to other aid, Russia printed billions of Libyan dinars for Hifter to pay his troops and co-opt tribes to support his advance, according to analysts.

Russia hopes to regain billions of dollars in oil and military contracts it lost when Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi was ousted and killed by rebel forces in the 2011 Arab Spring revolts and NATO intervention. To Moscow, Libya is also a part of a strategy to extend Russian influence across the Middle East and Africa.

Hifter, who is aligned with a rival eastern government, vowed in April to take over Tripoli swiftly and oust the U.N.-installed Government of National Accord. But pro-GNA militias across western Libya launched a counteroffensive, and by the end of the summer a military stalemate was entrenched, even as both sides deployed armed drones. Eastern tribes were no longer joining Hifter, and many brigades had returned home, analysts said.

“As of late August, the Hifter army was at a very perilous place,” said Jalel Harchaoui, a Libya research fellow at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague.

Then, the Russian mercenaries arrived on Tripoli’s front lines.

With their expert snipers, high-tech guns and combat discipline, the Russians inflicted a heavy toll on the pro-GNA militias, in casualties and morale, Libyan commanders and fighters said on a recent visit to the Tripoli front lines.

By late November, as the international community took no action against the Russian interference, the GNA turned to its main benefactor, Turkey, which has supplied it with weaponized drones, armored vehicles and military advisers.

The Tripoli government and Ankara signed an agreement to carve out gas drilling rights in the Mediterranean Sea. That angered Greece, Egypt, Cyprus and the European Union, which see the deal as an effort to block them from drilling. Earlier this month, Greece expelled Libya's ambassador and filed a complaint with the U.N. Security Council.

The GNA and Turkey also signed a security pact, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he would send Turkish troops to Libya if the GNA requested them. That has stirred up fears that other regional powers will send troops, touching off a regional war.

"Now, the battle lines have sharpened right across the Mediterranean," Wehrey said. "The gloves have come off."

Earlier this week, the tensions over Turkey's growing ties to the GNA prompted Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi to blast the deals. Egypt's Foreign Ministry denounced them as "illegitimate."

"We will not allow anyone to control Libya," Sissi told reporters. "It is a matter of Egyptian national security."

Turkey has close to \$18 billion in outstanding construction and other contracts in Libya. But the contest for Libya also reflects, to a degree, different views of political Islam. Turkey and Qatar supported Egypt's elected Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi, and his Muslim Brotherhood movement. Sissi ousted Morsi in a 2013 coup.

Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, along with Hifter, view the Brotherhood, which they have branded a terrorist group, as dominating the Tripoli government and the militias supporting it. Islamists are fighting on both sides, although their influence appears limited, according to analysts.

“Moderate political Islam wielding some power in a wealthy North African country acts as a symbol for a populist form of participatory politics, which the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt would like to eradicate from the Middle East and North Africa region altogether,” Harchaoui said. “Those regimes prefer a strict form of dictatorship.”

The U.S. on the back foot

The arrival of the Russian mercenaries startled U.S. diplomats and politicians.

Since April, the Trump administration has sent mixed signals. While the State Department urged both sides to halt their hostilities, President Trump spoke with Hifter by phone, endorsing his military campaign.

But in November, after news reports about the Russian mercenaries, the U.S. government and the GNA released a joint statement calling for Hifter to end his Tripoli offensive. The United States said it expressed support “for Libya’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia’s attempts to exploit the conflict against the will of the Libyan people.”

Senior U.S. officials then met with Hifter in Amman, Jordan, in an effort to persuade him to accept a cease-fire. A bipartisan bill is moving through the U.S. Congress seeking to impose sanctions on Russia for the deployment of the mercenaries in Libya.

This week, a Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said Moscow was surprised by the bill over “some alleged Russian military presence in Libya,” adding that Russia sees dialogue as the only way of ending the war, according to Russia’s state news agency Tass.

She noted that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters this month that the United States was willing to work with Moscow to negotiate an end to the hostilities. Pompeo also warned countries against sending arms to Libya, in violation of the U.N. weapons embargo.

But weapons have continued to flow from outside to both sides. The UAE, a key U.S. ally, is deploying armed drones and now working with the Russian mercenaries to back Hifter. On Dec. 12, emboldened by his backing from Russia, Hifter announced a decisive “zero hour” battle for Tripoli.

Showdown in Tripoli

“We’ve seen many expressions of concern from the U.S. over the increased Russian involvement but no real engagement to do anything about it,” said Wolfram Lacher, a Libya analyst at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

“Hifter’s offensive and associated UAE drone strikes actually intensified after the recent meeting of U.S. officials with Hifter in Amman.”

This is Hifter’s fourth “zero hour” declaration to take over Tripoli — but the first one with the presence of the Russians. Intense clashes have been reported on several front lines. The city of Misurata, whose militias form the bulk of pro-GNA forces, declared a mass mobilization of its fighters to send more to Tripoli to fend off Hifter.

Reports are also emerging that Libyan refugees fleeing the battles are flocking to the western border to cross into neighboring Tunisia.

Also escalating is the level of disinformation through social media and local and Arab news outlets, especially anti-Islamist ones, analysts said.

“The goal is to instill disarray into an enemy who has been already quite demoralized and exhausted this autumn,” Harchaoui said. “Another purpose is to try and project in the Western world this perception that the GNA is completely isolated and really should be abandoned by the U.N. and Western powers.”

Hate speech, too, has ratcheted up. On Facebook, Twitter and other social media, pro-Hifter tribal and political leaders have denounced Misurata residents as lackeys of the Turks — and have called for their extermination.

“Whole streets will be wiped out,” declared one eastern pro-Hifter figure in a widely tweeted video this month. “We will burn and crush Misurata.”

Pro-GNA figures have denigrated eastern communities with demeaning slurs, describing them as barbarians or uncivilized.

“The dangerous pattern of hate speech in Libya has recently gone from bad to worse,” said Mohamed Dayri, a former foreign minister for the eastern government. “National reconciliation will be of paramount importance to rebuild the Libya that our people fundamentally aspire to.”
