

Featured Intelligence Report

Libya: Shifting Into a Stalemated Proxy War

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8th of January 2020



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KEY JUDGEMENTS

KJ-1. Russia's support for Haftar is based on the expectation that he will defeat the GNA and control Libya - backing a winner.

KJ-2. Inability to take Tripoli since April has greatly damaged Haftar's credibility among allies who backed him as the man who they thought would have taken Libya over by now.

KJ-3. Haftar is in a strong position and may wish to make further gains to remove the GNA entirely, or at least go to negotiations from a stronger position. He has little pressure to accede to a ceasefire.

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ANALYSIS

As Libya's complex civil war seems set to drag into a seventh calendar year, peace does not seem any closer to being achieved. One of the two rival governments, based in Tobruk, has the support of what some have termed a warlord – Field Marshal Haftar of the Libyan National Army (LNA). The UN backed government, the Government of National Accord (GNA), has been under pressure from Haftar since April, when he started his offensive with the goal of taking Tripoli. Haftar is backed not only by France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, but also by Russia. The GNA is backed by Qatar and Turkey, of which the latter has been exporting arms to Libya.

Russian Support for Haftar

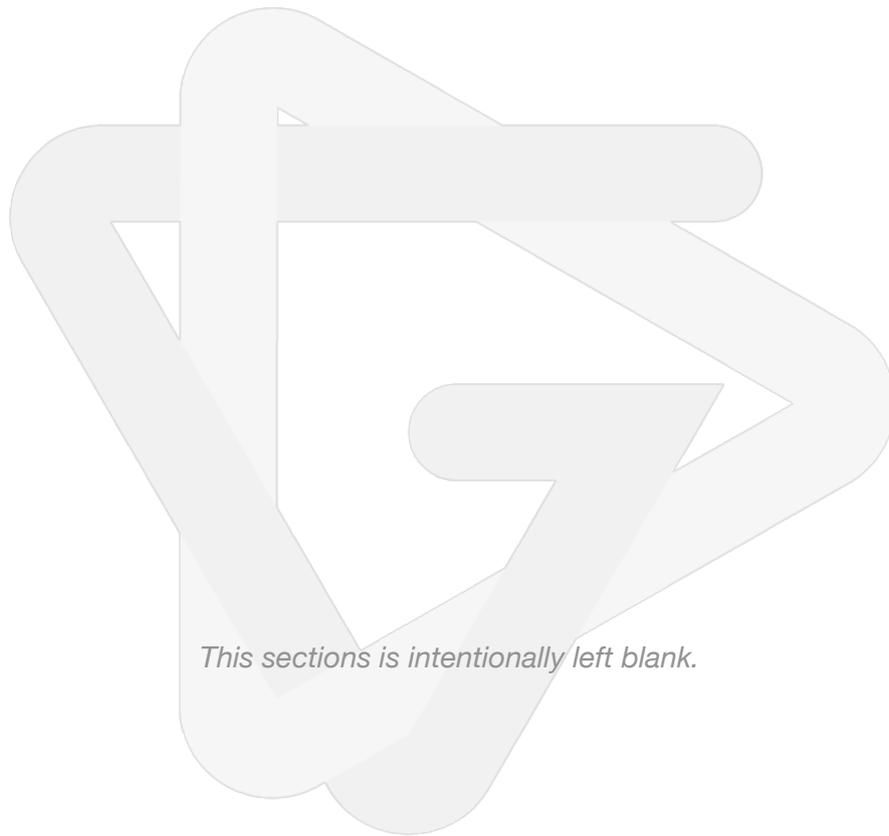
Russian support for Haftar has always been based on backing the winner – the Russian government expects that Haftar will be the man in charge of Libya and its precious oil resources after the war ends. Indeed, Haftar is already in control of most of the critical oil producing infrastructure of the country, that accounts for a huge chunk of Libyan GDP. A Russian company, Rosneft, which is owned by the Russian state, concluded a deal in 2017 that saw it promising to invest in the Libyan energy sector. This deal has been behind Russian will to protect its investment through diplomatic, and even military support. If Haftar gains complete control of Libya, he would be able to repay Russian support with generous oil and gas concessions. To this end, the infamous Wagner group deployed as many as 300 individuals to Libya to back Haftar since April, and because of this diplomatic and military support, the Russian state has a large influence over Haftar and whatever peace settlement will come.

Haftar fails to deliver Tripoli

In the months since April, Tripoli and the GNA have proved stubbornly resistant to being taken by Haftar's forces, who took large areas of the rest of the country with relatively fewer issues. This failure to win, or at least, win quickly, has damaged Haftar's credibility with his allies, especially Russia, who wished to have the GNA either dealt with, or forced to negotiate from a position of extreme weakness. The failure calls into question the competency of Haftar's forces, and shows his relative fragility. His may be a significant military power within Libya, but undertaking complex urban operations against a determined defender would be a challenge for the best of militaries. Despite aid from the Wagner group, there is no evidence that Haftar's forces will take Tripoli any time soon.

War of Attrition

A further, new development has taken place in the fight for Tripoli. While both Libyan governments seem unable to break a stalemate, they have been able to resort to usage of drone strikes against one another. Haftar's forces have been supported by Chinese-made drones from the UAE, and the GNA have been supported overtly by Turkey, and have bought Turkish drones. This has resulted in an unmanned air campaign taking place. Haftar may not have been able to win the quick victory he wishes to achieve, but if he is able to whittle down the GNA to gain a strong position before opening negotiations, that would certainly be to his benefit. Furthermore, with the Russian veto in the UN Security Council, he is under little pressure to abide by any UN-imposed cease-fire, and certainly has the luxury of time.



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