

THE RETURN OF THE STATE TO NORTHERN MALI

By Dr. Ashley N. Bybee

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In this photo taken on Thursday, February 23, 2017, Malian troops join with former rebels before a joint patrol in Gao, Mali. Malian soldiers and former Tuareg rebels have staged their first joint patrol in northern Mali, a key step in a 2015 peace agreement meant to help calm a region under threat from multiple extremist and other armed groups. (Source: AP Photo/Baba Ahmed.)

Dr. Ashley Bybee is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

RUSSIA IN LIBYA: CHOOSING TO SUPPORT A SIDE

By Richard J. Pera

During 2017, Moscow has taken sides in the ongoing rivalry between Libyan power centers by aligning itself with General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), thereby opposing the positions taken by the United States and the European Union (EU). Libya is a key Arab country on Europe's southern flank, which possesses the [largest oil reserves](#) in Africa. What are Libya's main centers of power, what is Russia's role in Libya, and how does this benefit Moscow? [more...](#)



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, right, welcomes Libyan militia commander General Khalifa Haftar, center, during their meeting in Moscow, Russia, on Monday, Aug. 14, 2017. (AP Photo/Ivan Sekretarev)

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On August 23, 2017, the governor of Mali's Kidal region, Sidi Mohamed Ag Ichrah, [traveled to Kidal](#) for the first time in three years to lay the groundwork for the return of his administration. He had been ousted from his region in 2014 when a visiting government delegation from Bamako came under fire from violent jihadists. Despite a [Peace and Reconciliation Agreement](#) signed in 2015 between Tuareg-led rebels and the Malian government, fighting between the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and the pro-government coalition known as the Platform (led by "*Le Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés*" or the GATIA militia) has persisted, resulting in fighting and casualties in the north. The re-entry of Kidal's governor follows the return of several other state authorities who resumed their duties as part of the implementation of the 2015 peace accord. Kidal has been particularly contested because it is a prized city claimed by both sides, so this development could be a significant step forward for the Malian state.



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Background

The current conflict in Northern Mali started in 2012 when ethnic Tuareg rebels began fighting against government forces in an effort to attain greater autonomy for Northern Mali, the region they call Azawad. Very quickly the rebellion was hijacked by Islamic militants with connections to al-Qaeda and recent combat experience in Libya. After the fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime, many Tuareg and Arab rebels returned to Mali heavily armed with [sophisticated weaponry](#) and inspired to revive the long history of rebellion in the region. The Malian military, unaccustomed to facing such well-equipped and well-trained fighters, requested support from France in 2013 and also received the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). These forces were able to regain ground lost by the Malian government, but as the [UN](#) has reported, maintaining peace among rival ethnic factions and jihadist groups has been a constant challenge because these "zones also serve as bases and transit points for non-state armed groups, including terrorist groups and criminal and drug trafficking networks with links to the wider Sahel region."

2015 Peace and Reconciliation Agreement

In the 2015 peace accord that was signed by the government and Tuareg rebels (but excluded jihadists), Mali's [leaders](#) rejected autonomy for the north but agreed to consider decentralized local powers. The agreement stipulated that a government presence would return to the country's five northern regions while also conceding a degree of autonomy by officially referring to the region by its Tuareg name, Azawad. Despite these concessions by the government, there is still considerable [opposition](#) to the terms of the agreement; even the notion that a temporary representative of the state be placed in the northern city of Gao generated a violent [protest](#) in 2016. The reforms contemplated in the peace accord are supposed to be implemented through changes in Mali's constitution, but significant public [opposition has arisen](#). Recently, thousands of Malians [protested](#) against the government's planned referendum on constitutional changes that would give President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita a number of new powers while also implementing some of the reforms stipulated in the peace agreement, including recognizing Azawad. Some of those new powers would include the President's right to remove the Prime Minister at his will, create a new Senate, and appoint a significant portion of seats. The limited popular support for these reforms reveals a divide between the ruling party and the opposition and suggests that implementing the measures described in the 2015 peace agreement will be difficult.

Cease-fire Following a Resurgence in Fighting

A new round of fighting in Kidal that began in [July 2017](#) resulted in significant swaths of territory being captured by the CMA from pro-government forces. MINUSMA confirmed at least [34 cases](#) of human rights abuses in the area, including mass graves and the “enforced disappearances” of minors, whom they suspect may have been recruited as fighters by rebels.

In central Mali, which has been considered to be relatively stable compared with the north, [peacekeepers](#), and [aid groups](#) in particular, have come under attack, raising concerns within those circles regarding the safety of their staffs. This resurgence of fighting resulted in a [reprimand](#) by the head of MINUSMA, suggesting continued violence could threaten the UN’s commitment in Mali.

On August 25, the CMA and Platform agreed to a 15-day [cease-fire](#), during which time the warring factions will seek to initiate a new timetable for the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement.

Looking Ahead

The resumption of fighting in Mali’s north and new insecurity in Mali’s central region show that efforts to contain instability associated with overlapping conflicts among rival Tuareg factions, jihadist groups, nomads, and transient criminals have not been successful. A regional approach to insecurity in the Sahel, including Mali, was [codified](#) in July when Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad agreed to launch a multinational military force with support from France. The [G5-Sahel](#) aims to become a [5,000](#)-strong force with an annual budget of about \$496 million. To date, only \$127 million has been pledged, suggesting that its goal to be operational by October 2017 may be ambitious.

Regardless of when the G5-Sahel becomes operational and whether it is an effective response in Mali’s troubled north, the socioeconomic, geopolitical, and environmental factors at the root of the conflict will continue to exist. Regional and ethnic grievances stemming from the belief by the Tuareg that Bamako has neglected them will endure until the government implements meaningful development programs in the north. The prolonged drought resulting in food insecurity and water scarcity continues to fuel inter-communal conflicts. The consolidation and continued strength of jihadist groups in the north, resourced through criminality, seems likely to exacerbate existing tensions. Whether in the face of these challenges the return of the state to northern Mali will result in increased security remains to be seen.

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Centers of Power in Libya

As *Africa Watch* has [reported](#), Libya's first civil war ended on October 20, 2011, when Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi was killed. Since the summer of 2014, fighting and political maneuvering—Libya's second civil war—have resulted in a country divided among three competing governments, up to [1,700 factions](#), and paramilitary groups. There are three competing governments in Libya:

- Presidential Council (PC). Based in Tripoli and headed by Fayeze al Sarraj, the PC was created by the United Nations (UN)-brokered [Libyan Political Agreement](#) (LPA) in December 2015. The LPA mandated that the PC preside over a Government of National Accord (GNA), also based in Tripoli. The United States and the EU favored establishment of the GNA, but that government has not been embraced by other key players, including authorities in eastern Libya.
- Government of National Salvation (GNS). Based in Tripoli and headed by [Khalifa Ghwell](#), the GNS is derived from the parliament elected in 2012, known as the General National Congress (GNC)—a group of disbanded lawmakers whose military arm, "Libya Dawn," took control of Tripoli in 2014. The [GNC has forged alliances](#) with various Islamist groups, including Ansar al Sharia, which Washington has accused of involvement in the attack on the U.S. diplomatic office in Benghazi in 2012.
- Authorities in eastern Libya, including the Tobruk-based Libyan House of Representatives (HoR), elected in 2014 and recognized by the UN-brokered LPA. The HoR has refused to endorse the GNA in Tripoli, instead recognizing a rival government ensconced in al Bayda. Tobruk and al Bayda authorities are under the control of anti-Islamist and former U.S. resident, [General Khalifa Haftar](#), commander of the LNA, who now controls about two-thirds of the country and the bulk of its oil resources.

Russia's Role in Libya

Libya was a major client of Russia during Qaddafi's long rule, especially for arms procurement. Russian authorities [acknowledged](#) they lost at least \$4 billion in potential revenues from arms deals after Qaddafi was killed. Moscow abstained on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011), which authorized NATO intervention in the Libyan civil war and imposed an arms embargo and no-fly zone. Russia has long resented NATO's "[barbaric](#)" operation, which led to Qaddafi's execution.

Russia has pursued an activist foreign policy [based on](#) "arms sales, disinformation, intelligence operations, diplomatic footwork and plain old hard power to further its agenda." Like Syria, Libya is an example of such activism. While officially supporting the UN-backed LPA as the basis for a negotiated settlement, Moscow has taken the following actions to support General Haftar's LNA:

- The Russian government hosted Haftar in Moscow several times in an "[unusually high profile](#)" manner. Sometimes [referred to](#) as "Putin's man in Libya," Haftar was a guest of the Russian Navy aboard the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov in January after the ship concluded combat operations off Syria.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, right, welcomes Libyan militia commander General Khalifa Haftar, center, during their meeting in Moscow, Russia, on Monday, Aug. 14, 2017. (AP Photo/Ivan Sekretarev)

- Russia supported Haftar financially when the [Kremlin mint](#) printed 4 billion dinars (about \$3 billion) worth of banknotes for the eastern Libya central bank. This solved a liquidity crisis and permitted authorities to pay salaries. It also lent legitimacy to Haftar's regime by rivaling the GNA-controlled central bank in Tripoli.
- In February, the Russian oil company, Rosneft, [reached agreement](#) with Libya's National Oil Company (NOC) to invest in Libyan infrastructure, exploration, and production. [Libyan oil production](#) fell from 1.6 million barrels per day (BPD) before Qaddafi was deposed, to a mere 60,000 BPD in August 2011. After the LNA captured large oil terminals at Ras Lanuf and as Sidr earlier this year, production increased to about 1 million BPD, and the NOC is seeking foreign investment to reach [2.1 million BPD by 2020](#).
- Although Moscow denies it is violating the UN arms embargo, [sources have reported](#) that Russia is supplying Haftar's forces with weapons. Using analysis of bureau numbers and roundel markings, [one observer claimed](#) that Russia provided at least one MIG-23/Flogger fixed-wing, ground-attack aircraft to the LNA. The plane reportedly was shipped in pieces and assembled in Libya. [According to Russian military experts](#), Russian arms are reaching eastern Libya via Moldovan companies, with logistic help from Egypt and financial assistance from the U.A.E, both of which are aligned with Haftar. Of note, the [UN has accused](#) the U.A.E. (but not Russia) of supplying weapons to eastern Libya, including Belarus-made attack helicopters.
- [Multiple sources](#) reported that a 22-member Russian special forces unit and unmanned aerial vehicles deployed to northwestern Egypt, near the border with Libya, to support the LNA before its successful effort to regain oil terminals in March. Russia denied the report and U.S. military officials [declined to comment](#) because "U.S. intelligence on Russian military activities is often complicated by . . . use of contractors or forces without uniforms." Russia has also sent [Arabic-speaking military officers](#) from Chechnya to train the LNA. Finally, a Russian military transport aircraft [flew about 70 wounded](#) LNA soldiers from Benghazi to Russia for treatment in February 2017. General Thomas Waldhauser, USMC, Commander, U.S. Africa Command, [noted the ties between Russia and Haftar](#): "They are on the ground, they are trying to influence . . . activities inside Libya . . . the Russians and Haftar, I think that linkage is undeniable."

How Does Haftar Benefit?

For Haftar, alliance with Russia provides political support to bolster his legitimacy internationally. Thanks to Russia and others, including the [U.A.E.](#), [Egypt](#), and [Saudi Arabia](#), Haftar's LNA is receiving weapons. Russian military assistance likely helped the LNA secure the oil terminals. With the GNA dependent on funding generated by revenues from oil, most of which is now controlled by the LNA, Haftar's negotiating position vis-à-vis the GNA has been enhanced.

How Does Russia Benefit?

First, Russia's activities in Libya come at the expense of the United States and the West, and, as experts opined in The Wall Street Journal, they are essentially [payback](#) for NATO operations that deposed its ally, Qaddafi. By supporting Haftar and making him stronger, Russia is in an excellent position to mediate between the centers of power, especially the United States and EU-backed GNA. Note that Russia is hedging its bets, [having met with PC Chairman, Fayez al Sarraj](#), in Moscow for in-depth discussions. On the commercial front, Russia is likely positioning itself to take advantage of a [future Libyan market](#).

Conclusion

Moscow likely will continue support to Haftar because it serves political, military, and commercial interests to do so. For now, such support is low cost and low risk and helps ensure that Russia will play a key role in a future peace settlement.

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