

INSIGHT BRIEF: ESCALATING MILITARY TENSIONS IN LIBYA

Incident: A Turkish-owned, Cameroon-flagged Ro-Ro vessel laden with Russian military KamAZ 6350 6x6 trucks departed from Novorossiysk, Russia, and sailed to Tobruk, Libya, via the port of Gemlik, Turkey. Still images of the vessel taken at Gemlik showed over 30 KamAZ trucks visible on its deck. The vessel passed through the Bosphorus, Turkey, and sailed to Libya using a coastal route, remaining strictly in Turkish territorial waters. The vessel arrived in Tobruk on the 3rd of August. Russian military deliveries to eastern Libya have been increasing in recent months. In 2024, Ambrey observed numerous instances of US-State Department aircraft performing reconnaissance flights off the coast of Libya, likely monitoring the weapons supply deliveries. Russian and Eastern Libyan leadership have increased their military cooperation, with the Russian private paramilitary group Africa Corps (formerly the Wagner Group) known to use Tobruk as their logistical entry point into Africa. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2578 in 2021, which renewed the Libya arms embargo and called for the full implementation of the arms embargo and other sanctions measures.

Context: Rival governments in Libya remain divided between two main administrations: the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli, led by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, and the eastern-based House of Representatives, supported by General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). Efforts to unify the country and hold elections have stalled, deepening the political deadlock. While the overall security situation in Libya has somewhat stabilized, the nature of the Libyan political divide and the external influences of Russia, China, and the EU add to the complex array of challenges facing the country. Russian influence in eastern Libya has grown significantly. Four high-ranking Russian officials visited eastern Libya in 2024. In breach of the UN sanctions, Russia used the port of Tobruk to ship military equipment from Tartus, Syria. The equipment may in part be used to sustain Russia's growing military presence in eastern Libya but are also likely destined for countries further south in Africa like Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso where Africa Corps (formally the Wagener Group) has ties to leaders of recent coups.

Analysis: On the 13th of August, the pro-Haftar Libyan House of Representatives unanimously decided to end the term of the Government of National Unity (GNU) and dismissed Prime Minister Dbeibeh. In recent days, General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) troops and Africa Corps units have been observed moving along the Libyan borders with Niger and Algeria. In response, the Dbeibeh government has raised the alert level in the southwest of the country "in preparation for a possible attack." On August 7, members of the Fezzan Anger Movement, a grassroots network in Libya's Fezzan region with known connections to Sadam Haftar, son of LNA leader Khalifa Haftar, breached the secure perimeter of the country's largest oil field, El Sharara. Consequently, the National Oil Corporation was forced to declare "Force Majeure." This latest disruption in Libya's oil production stems from the inability of the two Libyan governments to agree on oil revenue sharing. Additionally, the GNU, recognized as the legitimate government of Libya by the EU and the US, has signed oil exploration deals with European oil majors. However, the Tobruk-based government considers these deals illegitimate. The escalating tensions between the two governments are further evidenced by the recent presence of US State Department reconnaissance aircraft regularly monitoring Libya's coast. These developments indicate a heightened threat of a resurgence of the Libyan civil war. Ambrey assesses it as probable that in the coming weeks, LNA forces will conduct military operations in the Libyan southwest with the intent to take control of the oil fields. There is also a realistic possibility that the conflict could spill over into some western Libyan coastal cities. However, a full resurgence of the Libyan civil war encompassing the entire territory of Libya is considered unlikely at this stage.

Implications: Libya, currently Africa's largest oil producer, produces approximately 1.211 million barrels per day. During its first post-Gaddafi civil war, oil production was severely diminished due to significant damage to oil infrastructure and the closure of ports, causing a major disruption to maritime trade in the region. Additionally, to the distribution of the oil industry, a resurgence of the conflict could worsen the humanitarian situation in Libya and increase irregular maritime crossings to Europe. It would likely provide opportunities for extremist Islamic groups to establish a foothold in the south, increasing the risk of terrorist attacks on ports and oil infrastructure. Russia has a significant interest in supporting General Haftar in his efforts to control Libyan oil fields, as a conflict would put upward pressure on oil prices, benefiting the Russian economy amidst G7 sanctions. It would also allow Russia to establish a permanent military presence in the central Mediterranean, providing a stable logistical route to the rest of North and Central Africa. Africa Corps' modus operandi and a form of revenue aggregation encompass the protection of mines, oil fields and strategic infrastructure in numerous African countries. The group is well-placed to offer these services in Libya. In conclusion, the impact of the resurgence of the Libyan conflict, even if localised in Libya's south, would highly likely have a major impact on oil production and the wider maritime economy in the region.
