



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Does the West have an answer to the relocation of the Russian Mediterranean fleet to Libya?



By cancelling a **contract** with a Russian company to manage the port of Tartus, Syria's new government is finalising the Russian military presence on its Mediterranean coast.

The Syrian government officially took over Syria's second-largest port on the Mediterranean, after Latakia. Officially, the handover occurred because the Russian leaseholder, STG Stroytransgaz, failed to fulfil its obligations regarding infrastructure investments.

While the new Syrian authorities have reported an increase in traffic at the port of Tartus and a significant reduction in tariffs, the cancelling of the contract with the Russian partners has wider implications, as it does not provide Moscow with a solution to its strategic military presence in the Middle East.

Russia certainly expected such a decision, and so its navy is rapidly leaving the base it established in 1971 in agreement with the then USSR and former Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad.

The fall of Hafez's son, Bashar al-Assad, two months ago was the latest sign for Russian forces to withdraw from their only bases in the Mediterranean, the naval base in Tartus and the airbase in Khmeim.

Furthermore, Russia bid farewell to its military presence in Syria, which is strategically crucial to its influence in the Middle East and Africa, after granting asylum to Bashar. Does Moscow have an alternative?

New Russian base in the Mediterranean

Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto is just one of those in the West who are warning that Russia is relocating military assets from Syria to Libya.

“Moscow is transferring resources from its Syrian base at Tartus to Libya. That is not a good thing. Russian ships and submarines in the Mediterranean are always a concern, and

even more so if instead of being 1,000 kilometres away they are two steps from us,” **said** the Italian Minister of Defence.

At the same time, the Wall Street Journal **reported** last month that modern Russian weapons, including radars for the S-300 and S-400 air defence systems, were being relocated from bases in Syria to Libya.

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The new Russian military base in the Mediterranean will be established in eastern Libya, in the part of the country controlled by General Khalifa Haftar, a Russian ally whom the Russians have supported in the internal Libyan fighting.

“Assad offered Moscow a foothold against NATO’s eastern flank and a stage to test military capabilities. Haftar presents a similar opportunity — a means to disrupt Western interests, exploit Libya’s fractured politics, and extend Moscow’s influence into Africa,” **said** Emadeddin Badi from the Atlantic Council.

Support for operations in Africa

Supporting their operations in Africa is an important feature of the relocation of the Russian homeless Mediterranean fleet to Libya. Its consolidation in eastern Libya, under the control of Russia's ally Haftar, would mean that supply routes for Russian paramilitary operations across Africa would be shortened.

“There are an estimated 2,000 Russian mercenary troops in Eastern Libya, and there is a well-established precedent for supporting wider Russian activity in Africa through Libya,” Commander Edward Black and Dr Sidharth Kaushal recently **wrote** for RUSI.

The possible deployment of Russian troops in eastern Libya would run counter to Turkish interests

Whether Moscow will be able to capitalise on the support of its Libyan proxy, General Khalifa Haftar, by deploying its Mediterranean fleet in the part of Libya he controls will depend to a large extent on other actors in Libya.

With its patronage of the new government in Syria, Turkey has undoubtedly influenced the pressure for the Russian forces to leave their Syrian bases. In this way, Ankara is reducing Russia's influence over maritime traffic in the Black Sea zone, an area of primary importance to Turkish security interests.

The possible deployment of Russian troops in eastern Libya would also run counter to Turkish interests, as it supports the rival forces controlled by the government in Tripoli.

A new circumstance for NATO

Moreover, the relocation of the Russian fleet on the Libyan coast would pose a new security threat to NATO member states in the Mediterranean, as Russian forces would be only 400 miles from the coasts of Greece and Italy.

Officials from the previous US presidential administration **pressured** General Haftar to refuse hospitality to Russian troops from the Wagner Group, which operates on behalf of the Kremlin in Africa.



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However, Donald Trump's administration's position on the complex situation in Libya is not yet clear enough, particularly given the expected stronger Russian military presence in the country.

Mike Waltz, Trump's national security adviser, while serving as a representative in the House, has been highly critical of the Biden administration's policies during a series of coups in the Sahel, including Niger, where Waltz served in the military.

However, Russia's efforts to maintain a military presence in the Mediterranean after the fiasco in Syria will pose a much greater security challenge for Trump's team than its overall approach to Africa.

“If they (Russians) do move into Tobruk, it would be seen as a brazen gesture by NATO and the U.S., and a sign that Haftar is no longer even pretending to listen to the West. The question is, will the U.S. and the U.K. then use coercion?” **said** Jalel Harchaoui, an analyst at the RUSI.