



From Intervention to Permanent Presence

From Wagner to Africa Corps:
The Evolution of Russia's Military Footprint in Libya

Executive Summary

The failure of Khalifa Haftar's offensive against Tripoli in 2020 did not produce a Russian military withdrawal from Libya. Instead, it marked a transition in the character of Moscow's involvement. Russian personnel, aircraft, air-defence systems and logistical assets were redistributed into a network of bases across central, eastern and southern Libya, allowing Wagner and its Russian state enablers to preserve military access while reducing exposure to a renewed large-scale offensive.

Between mid-2020 and 2023, the Russian presence evolved from direct support to a specific campaign into a more durable basing architecture. Al-Khadim increasingly functioned as the principal eastern logistics hub and point of entry for Russian airlift. Al-Jufra remained the key central operational node, providing access to Sirte, the oil crescent and the southern approaches.

Qardabiyah supported the central coastal axis, while Brak al-Shati and other southern locations expanded operational depth into the Fezzan. The importance of this transformation lies less in the number of personnel deployed than in the persistence of access. Russia retained secure airfields, storage areas, maintenance facilities, command infrastructure and protected space from which personnel and equipment could be moved, sustained and redistributed.

This reduced dependence on any single location and made the Russian posture increasingly resilient to political or military change. Available evidence indicates that Wagner remained the visible organisational framework for much of this period, but the logistical requirements of the network exceeded what a commercially independent private military company could sustain on its own. Russian military transport aviation, aircraft maintenance, air-defence systems, supply movements and secure basing demonstrate continuing dependence on state-controlled enablers.

Assessment: the period from mid-2020 to 2023 represents the consolidation phase of Russia's military presence in Libya. Moscow did not need to control Libya politically or win the Tripoli campaign to achieve a strategic foothold. By maintaining access to a distributed network of bases, it secured a persistent platform from which to influence the Libyan security environment and prepare for wider activity across North Africa and the Sahel.

Scope of the Analysis

This report examines the evolution of the Russian military presence in Libya from the end of the Tripoli campaign in mid-2020 through 2023, immediately before the formal transformation of the Wagner network into the Russian Ministry of Defence-controlled Africa Corps structure. The analysis focuses on basing, logistics, force disposition, sustainment, command relationships and the changing strategic function of the Russian presence. It does not attempt to reconstruct every Wagner commercial activity or every Libyan political development.

Events are included where they affected military access, force posture or the sustainability of Russian operations. The transition following the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin and the subsequent emergence of Africa Corps is examined separately in Special Analysis 3/4.

Key Analytical Judgments

High confidence	Russia did not disengage from Libya after the failure of the Tripoli offensive. Wagner personnel and Russian-supported military assets remained distributed across central and eastern Libya and continued to use established military infrastructure.
High confidence	Al-Khadim increasingly became the principal eastern logistics and reception hub for the Russian network, while Al-Jufra retained greater operational relevance because of its central location and access to Sirte, western Libya and the Fezzan.
High confidence	The Russian posture evolved into a distributed basing model rather than a single-base presence. This reduced vulnerability and allowed personnel, aircraft and supplies to be redistributed according to operational requirements.
Moderate-high confidence	Wagner retained substantial operational autonomy within Libya, but its logistics, aviation support and access to military infrastructure remained dependent on Russian state enabling and cooperation with Haftar-controlled forces.
Moderate confidence	By 2022-2023 the strategic purpose of the network was expanding beyond direct support to Haftar. The basing architecture increasingly provided options for movement toward the Sahel and other African theatres.
High confidence	The infrastructure consolidated during this period provided the physical foundation inherited by the Africa Corps after the restructuring of the Wagner system.

1. From Battlefield Withdrawal to Strategic Consolidation

The Russian withdrawal from the Tripoli front in 2020 was tactical rather than strategic. Wagner elements abandoned positions around the capital after the Turkish-supported Government of National Accord regained the initiative, but personnel and equipment were not evacuated from Libya. They moved toward locations where the Russian presence could be sustained with lower operational risk.

Al-Jufra became the principal fallback location. Its central position provided distance from the western front while preserving access to Sirte and the main east-west axis. Aircraft, vehicles, personnel and air-defence systems could be concentrated there without relinquishing the ability to influence the ceasefire line.

The movement eastward and southward altered the logic of the Russian deployment. During the Tripoli offensive, bases existed primarily to support combat operations. After the offensive failed, the network itself became a strategic asset.

Maintaining access to secure airfields, protected compounds and logistics infrastructure created long-term military options even in the absence of active offensive operations. The ceasefire environment therefore favoured consolidation. Static front lines reduced the immediate pressure on Russian positions and created time to improve facilities, reorganise logistics and establish more predictable patterns of sustainment.

2. Al-Khadim: The Principal Eastern Hub

Al-Khadim Air Base emerged as the principal eastern node of the Russian military network. Its importance derived from geography, infrastructure and relative security rather than direct proximity to the main front. Located in eastern Libya within the broader area controlled by Haftar-aligned forces, Al-Khadim provided a secure reception point for personnel, aircraft and equipment arriving from the eastern Mediterranean and Syrian direction.

It offered access to Benghazi and the main eastern command structures while remaining sufficiently distant from western military pressure. The infrastructure developed at the airfield before and during the Russian deployment significantly expanded its military utility. Large aprons, hangars, permanent support buildings and logistical areas allowed the base to accommodate transport aircraft and combat aviation while providing protected space for maintenance and storage.

By 2020, imagery and institutional reporting showed Russian transport aviation, Su-24 aircraft and Pantsir air-defence vehicles operating at the facility. The presence of Il-76 transport aircraft is particularly significant. Strategic airlift provided the network with a sustainment capacity independent of Libyan tactical transport and allowed heavier equipment, personnel and spare parts to be moved directly into the eastern theatre.

During the following years, Al-Khadim's role became increasingly logistical. Rather than serving primarily as a launch base for operations around Tripoli, it functioned as a reception and redistribution hub. Material arriving in eastern Libya could be retained at the base or forwarded toward Jufra and other installations.

This distinction is central to the architecture of the Russian presence. Al-Khadim should not be interpreted simply as another Russian airfield. It was the principal eastern gateway through which the network could be sustained.

3. Al-Jufra: The Central Operational Node

If Al-Khadim provided logistical access, Al-Jufra provided operational geometry. The base occupies a central position within Libya and offers direct access to multiple strategic directions: north toward Sirte and the Mediterranean coast, west toward the Tripoli axis, east toward the oil crescent and south toward the Fezzan. During the Tripoli campaign, Al-Jufra served as the principal operational staging base for Russian and Haftar-aligned forces.

Following the withdrawal, it retained that role but within a more defensive and persistent posture. Russian combat aircraft remained associated with the base after 2020. MiG-29 and Su-24 aircraft provided potential air-to-air and strike capabilities, while radar and air-defence assets contributed to local protection and situational awareness.

The significance of these aircraft should not be measured solely by the number of sorties observed. Their continued presence imposed uncertainty on opposing forces and preserved escalation options. Even limited availability gave Russia the ability to reinforce deterrence around central Libya and complicate external military planning.

Al-Jufra also served as a logistics redistribution point. Personnel and equipment arriving from the east could be staged there before moving north, west or south. The base's value therefore derived from its combination of aviation, storage, command and geographic centrality.



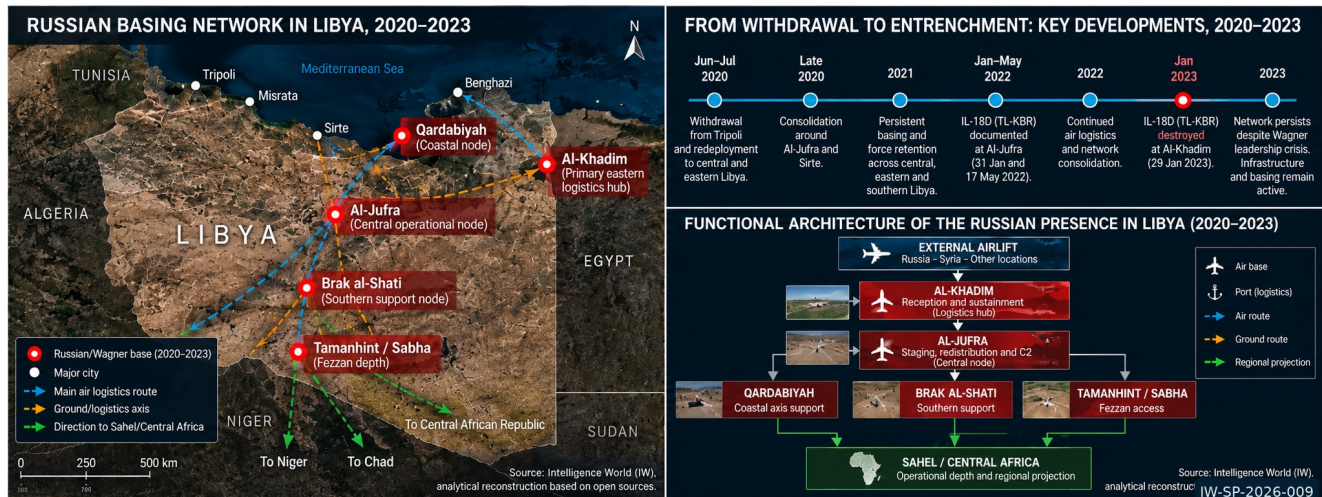
IL-18D (TL-KBR) documented at Al-Jufra on 31 January and 17 May 2022. Source: UN Panel of Experts on Libya, Annex 68.

4. Qardabiyah and the Sirte Axis

Qardabiyah Air Base became more relevant after the front stabilised around Sirte. The Sirte area represented the boundary between western and eastern military spheres following the 2020 ceasefire. Control of the surrounding infrastructure therefore carried importance beyond the tactical value of the airfield itself.

Qardabiyah provided access to the central coastal corridor and supported Russian ability to monitor and reinforce the Sirte axis. Its proximity to both the Mediterranean and the principal east-west road increased its relevance as a secondary operational node. The base did not replace Al-Jufra or Al-Khadim.

Instead, it formed part of the distributed architecture that allowed the Russian presence to avoid dependence on a single installation. The resulting structure was functionally layered: Al-Khadim provided eastern reception and sustainment; Al-Jufra provided central operational depth and redistribution; Qardabiyah supported the Sirte/coastal axis; and southern installations provided access to the Fezzan and routes toward sub-Saharan Africa.



Russian basing network and functional architecture in Libya, 2020–2023.

Source: Intelligence World (IW), analytical reconstruction based on open sources. Product ID: IW-SP-2026-009.

5. Southern Depth: Brak al-Shati and the Fezzan

Russian access to southern Libya expanded the strategic depth of the network. Brak al-Shati Air Base and other locations around Sabha and the Fezzan offered several advantages. They were geographically distant from the main political centres on the Mediterranean coast, located within territory under strong Haftar-family influence and positioned near routes connecting Libya with Chad, Niger and Sudan.

During the Tripoli campaign, southern bases remained secondary to the central operational axis. After 2020, their relative importance increased because Russia's requirements were changing. The issue was no longer simply how to sustain forces attacking Tripoli.

The emerging requirement was to maintain options across Libya while creating potential links to wider African operations. The Fezzan therefore became strategically relevant as depth territory. Aircraft or personnel located in the south could support internal Libyan movements, protect access to energy infrastructure and provide staging opportunities toward neighbouring states.

Evidence from later years indicates that the southern network would become increasingly important as Russian military activity expanded across the Sahel. The infrastructure consolidated during 2020–2023 created the geographical foundation for that later development.

6. A Distributed Basing Model

The Russian basing architecture should be analysed as a network rather than as a collection of independent installations. Distributed basing provided redundancy. If one airfield became politically constrained, operationally exposed or temporarily unavailable, aircraft and personnel could be moved to another site.

It also complicated external monitoring. A network in which transport aircraft, combat aircraft, personnel and equipment could move between multiple facilities generated ambiguity regarding force strength and operational intent. The model increased survivability.

Concentrating Russian assets at a single location would have created a clear target and a single point of failure. Distribution reduced that vulnerability. It also improved operational reach.

Different bases supported different geographic sectors while remaining connected through air and ground logistics. This networked model was more valuable strategically than the possession of any one individual base.

7. Logistics and Sustainment

Persistent military presence requires more than access to runways. Russian forces required fuel, spare parts, munitions, food, communications equipment, maintenance capability, medical support and personnel rotation. Air transport played a central role.

Russian-associated transport aircraft continued to connect Libya with external logistics nodes. The use of IL-76 and other transport platforms provided strategic lift, while smaller aircraft supported personnel and lighter cargo movements. Institutional reporting from the 2022–2023 period indicates continuing Wagner-associated aviation activity involving Al-Khadim and Al-Jufra.

This demonstrates that the network remained active after the high-intensity phase of the Tripoli campaign had ended. The logistical system therefore combined external airlift with internal redistribution. Al-Khadim received and supported incoming movements.

Jufra provided central staging. Secondary airfields extended reach and provided redundancy. This architecture allowed Russia to sustain a force whose physical footprint was modest relative to a conventional expeditionary deployment but whose strategic effect was considerably larger.

INTELLIGENCE WORLD | SPECIAL ANALYTICAL SERIES — RUSSIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN LIBYA

FROM WAGNER TO AFRICA CORPS: THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S MILITARY FOOTPRINT IN LIBYA
SPECIAL ANALYSIS 2/4

From Withdrawal to Entrenchment : 2020–2023

Key phases in the consolidation of the Russian military presence in Libya

*From Withdrawal to Entrenchment, 2020–2023.**Source: Intelligence World (IW), analytical reconstruction based on open sources. Product ID: IW-SP-2026-009.*

8. Force Composition after the Tripoli Campaign

The Russian presence after 2020 became less focused on frontline combat and more oriented toward protection, technical support, aviation, logistics and control of key installations. Wagner personnel continued to provide security and specialist military functions. Russian and foreign personnel associated with the network remained present at airfields and strategic sites.

Syrian fighters also formed part of the broader manpower structure. Their role differed from that of Russian specialists. Syrian personnel were generally more suitable for static security and manpower-intensive tasks, while Russian personnel retained higher-value technical, command, aviation and specialist functions.

This division of labour reduced the requirement to deploy large numbers of Russian personnel while preserving control over critical military capabilities. The resulting force was not a conventional Russian expeditionary brigade. It was a layered military ecosystem comprising Russian specialists, Wagner personnel, foreign auxiliaries, Libyan partners and state-provided enablers.



Wagner-associated armoured vehicle in Libya. Source: open-source imagery.



Russian/Wagner Tigr utility trucks, personnel formation and MRAP documented near Sirte, 14 July 2020. Source: U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

9. Wagner, Haftar and Mutual Dependence

The relationship between Wagner and Haftar-aligned forces was based on mutual utility rather than complete command integration. Haftar provided territorial access, political protection and control over military infrastructure in eastern and southern Libya. Russia provided capabilities that Haftar could not reliably generate independently: specialist personnel, aviation, air defence, logistics, technical maintenance and international military support.

Neither side completely subordinated itself to the other. The Russians retained operational autonomy inside their compounds and military facilities. Haftar's forces retained political and territorial authority over the broader areas in which those installations were located.

This arrangement served both sides. Haftar benefited from Russian military backing without formally transferring sovereignty over the installations. Russia obtained persistent access without assuming the administrative and security burden associated with a declared permanent overseas base.

This ambiguity was strategically useful.

10. From Libyan Campaign Support to Regional Platform

By 2022-2023, the function of the Russian network was beginning to extend beyond the immediate Libyan conflict. The front lines had stabilised. No renewed offensive against Tripoli comparable to 2019 was under way.

Yet Russian personnel, aircraft and logistics infrastructure remained. The persistence of the network despite the absence of a major Libyan offensive indicates that its strategic value had become independent of Haftar's original campaign objective. Libya offered several advantages for wider Russian activity: its Mediterranean location provided access to maritime and air routes; its eastern territory was politically permissive toward Russian military activity; its central and southern airfields provided geographic access toward the Sahel; and its infrastructure was already established and protected.

The emerging architecture therefore connected Mediterranean access with African operational depth. At this stage, Libya was becoming not only a theatre of Russian intervention but also a potential support platform for Russian activity elsewhere on the continent.

11. Command, Control and State Enabling

The persistence of Wagner as the visible organisational structure did not imply logistical independence from the Russian state. Strategic airlift, combat aircraft, air-defence systems, maintenance support and access to Russian-origin equipment required capabilities beyond those normally available to a private security organisation. The distinction between Wagner and the Russian state therefore remained organisationally useful but operationally porous.

Open-source evidence does not provide a complete command diagram linking every Wagner unit in Libya to Russian military headquarters. However, the scale and technical complexity of the supporting infrastructure strongly indicate continuing state enabling. This relationship became increasingly important as Russia prepared to restructure its overseas private military system after 2023.

The infrastructure existed before the organisational transformation. Africa Corps would inherit a network that had already been built.

12. Information Gaps and Alternative Explanations

Several uncertainties remain. The precise number of Russian and Wagner personnel present at individual bases varied over time and cannot be established reliably from public sources. Aircraft observed at a base were not necessarily continuously operational.

Presence should not automatically be equated with serviceability or sortie generation. Responsibility for individual systems may also be difficult to separate between Russian, Wagner, Emirati and Libyan operators because different actors used overlapping facilities and equipment. The development of southern installations requires particular caution.

Access to a base does not necessarily demonstrate permanent Russian occupation or exclusive control. Alternative explanations for infrastructure activity include Libyan military requirements, Emirati investment and pre-existing construction programmes. For this reason, this assessment gives greater weight to persistent patterns of Russian personnel presence, aviation activity, logistics movements and repeated use than to single satellite observations.

13. Assessment: The Creation of a Permanent Military Footprint

Between 2020 and 2023 Russia converted the infrastructure created during the Tripoli campaign into a durable military network. The transition did not require formal basing agreements or declared Russian garrisons. It depended instead on persistent physical access, local political protection, logistics connectivity and the ability to move personnel and equipment among several installations.

Al-Khadim provided the principal eastern logistics hub. Al-Jufra retained its role as the central operational node. Qardabiyah supported the strategic Sirte corridor.

Brak al-Shati and the southern network expanded operational depth. Taken together, these installations created a distributed architecture capable of surviving the failure of the original military campaign. The central analytical conclusion is therefore that Russia's most important gain from the Libyan intervention was not the attempted seizure of Tripoli.

It was access. Once established, that access created a military presence capable of persisting independently of the immediate battlefield outcome. The period also demonstrates a broader Russian model of military influence.

Moscow did not require full political control over a partner state. It required permissive local actors, protected infrastructure, reliable logistics and sufficient military capability to make removal politically and operationally costly. By 2023, these conditions existed in Libya.

The Russian presence had therefore moved beyond intervention. It had become structurally embedded.

Analytical Focus

The key development between mid-2020 and 2023 was the transformation of Russian military access from a campaign-support mechanism into a persistent basing architecture. The strategic value of the network lay in its distribution and functional differentiation. Al-Khadim, Jufra, Qardabiyah and the southern installations performed complementary roles rather than duplicating one another.

This architecture increased resilience, reduced dependence on any single base and expanded Russian options beyond the Libyan conflict itself. The network would become particularly important after the disruption of the Wagner leadership in 2023. Rather than building a new military presence from the beginning, the Russian Ministry of Defence inherited an existing system of access, infrastructure, logistics and local relationships.

That transition is the subject of the next report.

Next in the Series

Special Analysis 3/4 - From Wagner to Africa Corps The next edition will examine the organisational transformation that followed the collapse of the Prigozhin-led Wagner structure, the growing role of the Russian Ministry of Defence and the emergence of Africa Corps as the principal framework for Russia's military presence in Libya and across Africa.