



Oil, Fighters, Mercenaries, and Diplomats: Increasing Flows Between Libya and Syria

OE Watch Commentary: Political and military relations between Damascus and the Tobruk-based government in Libya, aligned with Khalifa Haftar who leads the Libyan National Army (LNA), are taking root. The timing is ripe, as they face a perceived common enemy (Turkey) and seek to break their diplomatic isolation; they have much to gain from bilateral trade, as Syria thirsts for oil and eastern Libya for agricultural and manufactured goods. In early March, a high-level Libyan delegation visited Damascus to formalize diplomatic relations. In statements surrounding the reopening of the Libyan embassy in Damascus, officials from both governments underlined their shared conflict with Turkey. The accompanying excerpt from the official Syrian news agency *SANA* argues that “what is taking place in Syria and Libya is the same” and is caused by “Erdoğan’s regime, whose policies have become based on using terrorism to achieve its political interests which are the main factor... destabilizing the region as a whole.”



Cham Wings Airbus A320 at Kharkiv.

Source: Bogdan Skotnikov via Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/65/Cham_Wings_Airbus_A320_at_Kharkiv.jpg, CC BY-SA 4.0

Last summer, the privately owned Syrian airline Cham Wings began charter flights from Damascus and Lattakia to Benghazi, Libya. Members of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) accused the airline of trafficking in mercenaries and oil, something the airline denied. In early January 2020, a report from *Ain Libya* accused Cham Wings of shuttling more than one thousand fighters from the Iranian-backed “Liwa Fatemiyoun” (Fatimid Brigade) from Lattakia to Benghazi, to be deployed in support of the LNA on the Tripoli front. Already, the LNA is said to command groups of contract fighters from Sudan, Niger, Mauritania and Russia. A recent report in France’s *Le Monde* claimed that 1,500 Syrian military special forces had also been deployed to Libya under the authority of Ali Mamlouk, one of the Syrian government’s key intelligence and security figures.

Forces from the Russian private military company, the Wagner Group, in government-controlled Syrian territory also appear to be increasingly involved in recruiting fighters to support the LNA in Libya. The accompanying excerpt from a Damascus news website points to Douma, a former rebel bastion on the outskirts of Damascus, as a site where the Wagner Group has, through Syrian intermediaries, focused their recruitment efforts. The article singles out fighters from a disbanded loyalist militia called the Desert Hawks as being targeted with promises of high salaries. A news website from the Druze-majority Suwayda Province, in turn, explains how a Syrian political party called the Syrian National Youth Party has been recruiting locally on behalf of the Russian PMC. The party offered salaries ranging from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per month and compensation in case of death, in exchange for fighting in Libya. The article adds that the National Youth Party had been recruiting for pro-Assad forces since 2014 and had, in at least one instance, not honored the commitments made to its recruits. Perhaps for that reason, its recruitment drive for Wagner in Libya does not appear to have gained much traction thus far. (Also see: “Deciphering Libya’s Crowded Battlefield (1): State Actors,” and “Deciphering Libya’s Crowded Battlefield (2): Proxy Forces,” in this issue of *OE Watch*) **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“What is taking place in Syria and Libya is the same...”



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Source: President al-Assad to Libyan delegation: War against terrorism isn't the battle of Syria and Libya only," SANA, 2 March 2020. <https://sana.sy/en/?p=187167>

The meeting affirmed that what is taking place in Syria and Libya is the same, and that the war against terrorism isn't the battle of two countries only, particularly as it will determine the fate of the region in the face of the projects which some states are trying to impose on it through their tools, on top Erdogan's regime whose policies have become based on using terrorism to achieve its political interests which are the main factor of destabilizing the region as a whole.

Source: حفتر مرتزقة قائمة في جديدة إضافة
"Shiite Fatemiyoun Brigade... New Addition to the List of Haftar's Mercenaries," *Ean Libya*, 27 January 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/r8uorwa>

Libyan political analyst Abdul Salam Al-Rajhi revealed that Khalifa Haftar had recruited a mercenary group from the Fatimid Brigade in Syria. In a television interview, he said that reliable sources and information indicate that the flights that leave from Latakia and land in Benghazi carry the fighters of the brigade, a militia with a religious orientation and ideology...

He explained that according to intelligence 1,300 of the brigade's mercenaries arrived in Libya.

Source: حصري: الروس يُجنِّدون أبناء دوما للقتال في ليبيا
"Exclusive: Russians Recruit in Douma to Fight in Libya," *Sawt al-Asima*, 12 February 2020. <https://damascusv.com/archives/20685> (translation via Syrian Observer: <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/56052/russia-conscripts-young-men-in-damascus-countryside-to-fight-in-libya.html>)

The local Sout al-Asima website said that the Russians had appointed city figures in Douma to conscript young men from the area and to send them to fight in Libya for large sums of money.

The site said that the mission included recruiting 50 young men from the city, on a salary of 800 dollars a month per fighter, to fight for three months and then one month of leave spent in his city. Russian issued the conscripted men with ID cards from the Hemeimeem military base called "Friend of Russia" cards, which ban any security agency from arresting or holding them, according to Sout al-Asima. A group of 25 young men from Douma left Syria through the Damascus International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi over the first week of February.

The site said that the Russians had conscripted former fighters from Saqour al-Sahara, from the central areas of Syria to fight in Libya alongside the Haftar militia for salaries of up to 1,000 dollars a month.

Source: حزب سياسي مرخص يعمل على تجنيد مرتزقة في سوريا للقتال في ليبيا بدعم جهة روسية
"Licensed Political Party Recruits Mercenaries in Syria to Fight in Libya With Russian Support..!" *Suwayda24*, 8 February 2020. <https://suwayda24.com/?p=13043>

An investigation conducted by local news networks in Suwayda revealed the involvement of a political party licensed by the Assad regime, with support from a Russian security company, to recruit mercenaries from Suwayda and other provinces in order to send them to fight in Libya. As-Suwayda 24 confirmed that it had obtained information and documents proving that since last January, the Syrian National Youth Party has recruited mercenaries from various Syrian regions, including Suwayda, to send to Libya with support from the Russian Wagner Group.