



Mercenary Recruitment and PMC Growth in Syria

OE Watch Commentary: The recruitment of Syrians to fight in Libya and, more recently, Nagorno-Karabakh, has led to a growing number of commentaries in Arabic-language media reflecting on the phenomenon of “Syrian mercenaries.” The term, as explained in the accompanying article from the Syrian opposition news website *Enab Baladi*, was first used when fighters from Turkish-controlled areas were sent to fight in Libya. Its use in the media, the article argues, has “contributed to the formation of a stereotype within the Arab public that a large group of Syrians are ‘mercenaries’... In fact, the number of fighters who were transferred to Libya does not, at best expectations, exceed a few thousand.” While the contribution of Syrian mercenaries to foreign conflicts may be marginal, the recruitment of Syrians to fight in other countries is causing domestic consternation. The opposition Syrian Islamic Council, for instance, recently issued a statement prohibiting fighting outside of Syria, which it characterized as a “major sin” and “grave offense.” Similar statements have also been made by political and spiritual leaders in the Alawite and Druze communities.



Two destroyed tanks in front of a mosque in Azaz, Syria (2012).
Source: Christiaan Triebert, CC BY 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Azaz_Syria.jpg

The accompanying excerpt from an opinion published in *al-Araby al-Jadid*, a pan-Arab media source sympathetic to the Syrian opposition, explains how “Syria stands on the brink of death and starvation, with millions of homeless people, orphans and widows.” In contrast to other countries that have recovered from civil wars, the article’s author claims, there are no mechanisms in place for the reintegration of former combatants into civilian life in Syria, since “there is no infrastructure, no rehabilitation, no community reconciliation, and no political solution, so you manage your own affairs as best you can.” As a result, the author continues, fighter recruitment has turned into “a complete system of employment, a market in which there is supply and demand.”

In areas under Syrian government control, Russian PMCs such as the Wagner Group are reportedly recruiting through a variety of Syrian intermediaries (See: “Oil, Fighters and Diplomats: Increasing Flows Between Libya and Syria,” *OE Watch*, April 2020). The accompanying excerpt from the online news website *Arabi 21* claims that some of the Syrian PMCs created in government-controlled areas since 2017 are recruiting on behalf of Wagner. The article mentions the “Sanad Protection and Security Services Company,” which it claims is controlled by Russia and per the article used as a vehicle for “recruiting mercenaries in Syria to fight abroad.” The latest rumor on Syrian mercenaries is found in the final accompanying excerpt, from the opposition *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, which claims that “unknown parties” acting “on behalf of Russian companies” are “suspiciously active in Damascus, Homs, Tartous and Latakia,” recruiting men to “work as facility guards in Venezuela” in exchange for a \$4000/month salary and a residency permit. If true, such an offer would undoubtedly be appealing to many men in Syria. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“... In Syria, there is no infrastructure, no rehabilitation, no community reconciliation, and no political solution, so you manage your own affairs as best you can...”

Source: “Mercenarism... A Phenomenon Distorting the Image of Syrians,” *Enab Baladi*, 11 October 2020. <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/421855> (English version: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/10/mercenarism-tarnishes-syrians-image/>)

الارتزاق.. ظاهرة تشوه صورة السوريين

According to Mustafa, Syrian fighters go to fight in other countries for many reasons, the most important of which is “pressing subsistence needs.” For about ten years, these fighters have been earning their income through fighting or “pillage” and thefts. They no longer have the possibility to secure any material gain from this war. Whether enrolled with the Syrian regime or the Syrian opposition, the fighters have not learned a profession to enable them to work and earn a living. If they leave fighting with the militias they have joined, they will become unemployed. They will not be able to work because the financial matters need a political solution to create job opportunities for these young people on both sides...

The term “Syrian mercenaries” began to widely circulate for the first time at the beginning of this year, after news of the transfer of fighters from the “Syrian National Army” (SNA) to Libya to fight alongside the Libyan “Accord” Government, which is supported by Turkey, against the retired Major General Khalifa Haftar. The circulation of this term through the media contributed to the formation of a stereotype within the Arab public that a large group of Syrians are “mercenaries,” according to what Enab Baladi monitored from the accounts of Arab activists on “Twitter.” In fact, the number of fighters who were transferred to Libya does not, at best expectations, exceed a few thousand. Following the outbreak of confrontations between Azerbaijan and Armenia at the end of last September, the term “Syrian mercenaries” has quickly re-emerged in the media. The media raced to announce the news, with some exaggeratedly focusing on the size of the news item and amplifying it, according to Enab Baladi, through its coverage of several media reports...



Continued: Mercenary Recruitment and PMC Growth in Syria

Source: المجلس الإسلامي السوري يُحرم قتال السوريين للارتزاق.. من الموبقات والكبائر
 “Syrian Islamic Council Forbids Syrians from Fighting as Mercenaries... Major Sins and Grave Offenses,” *Snack Syrian*, 4 October 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y2rbhxp6>

The Syrian Islamic Council considered the participation of Syrian fighters in the ongoing conflict in other countries such as Libya and Azerbaijan as “major sins and grave offenses.” It prohibited fighting outside Syria, according to a statement by the Council... It is worth noting that the Turkey-based Syrian Islamic Council is one of the most important religious bodies for the Syrian opposition.

Source: سوريون وخيار الارتزاق
 Ghazi Dahman. “Syrians and the Option to be a Mercenary,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 23 October 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yv44otr>

... Syria stands on the brink of death and starvation, with millions of homeless people, orphans and widows, facing the challenge of survival in the face of a tireless killing machine and a world who has turned its back on the Syrian tragedy... In all the countries that have witnessed internal conflicts and wars, Colombia, Honduras, Cambodia, etc., the issue of finding solutions and alternatives for the participants represents the most complex issue, as their rehabilitation for civilian life, inclusion in economic activities, and provision of job opportunities cost huge sums, given that the bulk of resources and aid are directed to infrastructure reforms. In Syria, there is no infrastructure, no rehabilitation, no community reconciliation, and no political solution, so you manage your own affairs as best you can. Perhaps the problem in this case is the transformation of the mercenary process into a complete system of employment, a market in which there is supply and demand, with the flourishing of geopolitical projects and regional wars, the presence of huge numbers of unemployed professional fighters, and the formation of networks to use these people and push them into wars and conflicts, from warlords to those with influence to state institutions and political and economic interests. All this makes it difficult to break this infernal mercenary cycle, amidst a state of frustration and a blocked horizon.

Source: عربي 21 ترصد أبرز 4 شركات أمنية محلية للتجنيد بسوريا
 “Arabi 21 tracks the for main local security companies used for recruitment in Syria,” *Arabi 21*, 18 October 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y5vhbmw2>

Recently, there has been talk of local security companies recruiting Syrians to fight for the Bashar al-Assad regime and the international forces supporting it, such as the “Wagner” Group... the phenomenon of recruitment in Syria is not new, but rather it began with local security companies affiliated with Iran and Russia that recruited locally before they started sending recruits outside Syria... The year 2017 is significant for local security companies in Syria, as most of them were established and opened that year... [Sanad Protection and Security Services Company] company is run under Russian supervision, especially from the well-known Wagner Group, which is suspected of recruiting mercenaries in Syria to fight abroad.

Source: جهات مجهولة تتحدث باسم شركات روسية لتجنيد سوريين في فنزويلا
 “Unidentified parties speaking on behalf of Russian companies to recruit Syrians in Venezuela,” *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 8 November 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yy5ejlhb>

The day before yesterday, Syrian journalist Tariq Ajeeb revealed on his Facebook page that “unknown parties who do not openly announce themselves, but deal with Syrian agents and people speaking on behalf of Russian companies, are suspiciously active in Damascus, Homs, Tartous and Latakia (and perhaps other governorates).” Their goal is to recruit men to work as facility guards in Venezuela, with a monthly salary of 4000 dollars and residency permit.