

Among the Syrian Militiamen of Turkey's Intervention in Libya

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Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images
 Fighters loyal to the Government of National Accord, which has been reinforced by Turkish-backed Syrian militia forces, at a lookout post near the front line, Tripoli, Libya, January 12, 2020

Tripoli, Libya—At a mud-caked intersection this month, some hundred-and-fifty feet from the front line, a lanky militia fighter approached and then abruptly turned around when he saw me, a Westerner. I've been covering Libya's conflicts for years and noticed some minor but distinctive details about his appearance: a do-rag tied around his head, an olive green tactical vest, and perhaps a certain military bearing. The Libyan commander I was with confirmed it, with a chuckle: "That's not a Libyan look."

Fifteen minutes later, I was inside a poured-concrete villa that served as the living quarters for a group of war-hardened Syrian fighters. Seated before me on a plush purple couch, behind a coffee table strewn with ash-trays and blown-glass decanters, was the Syrians' leader, a thirty-four-year-old former Syrian military officer named Ahmed, and two other Syrian fighters. Numbering roughly five hundred on this section of the front, they told me they'd been in Libya several days and were part of a larger contingent of roughly two thousand Syrian militiamen that started arriving a month ago, along with Turkish military personnel. There are plans, they said, for an additional six thousand Syrian fighters.

Turkey's military intervention in Libya, involving the deployment of Syrian fighters, is the latest chess move in a long-running civil war that followed the 2011 revolution, the NATO-led intervention, and the overthrow of the dictator Muammar Qaddafi. Since then, this oil-rich country has disintegrated into a patchwork of regions, towns, and militias sparring over power and wealth.

Foreign military support to the warring factions has only worsened the chaos. The latest round of fighting erupted on April 4 of last year, when militia forces under the Benghazi-based command of General Khalifa Haftar attacked the internationally recognized government in the capital Tripoli, the Government of National Accord, or GNA, sabotaging a UN-brokered dialogue to end the conflict in the country. Over two thousand people have died in the fighting so far, including hundreds of civilians, and hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced.

Drawn to Haftar's authoritarian and anti-Islamist leanings, a number of countries have provided him military aid: France, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and especially the United Arab Emirates, which has flown armed drones and fixed-wing aircraft on his behalf, often inflicting casualties on civilians. And in early September of last year, another potent foreign force arrived: hundreds of Russian fighters from the so-called Wagner Group, a shadowy military contracting company that is involved in several other conflicts around the globe and is reportedly linked to the Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, sometimes known as "Putin's chef" because he has provided catering services to the Kremlin. The Wagner fighters gave a formidable edge to Haftar's offensive against Tripoli through more precise artillery strikes and well-trained snipers.

Around this time, I saw firsthand how this Russian support had demoralized the GNA fighters on the front and enabled Haftar's forces to slowly gain territory. Faced with a potential rout, the Tripoli government has leaned even more on its longtime ally Turkey, its only foreign military sponsor. Since May of last year, Turkey has been secretly flying armed drones in support of GNA forces and has also provided small numbers of military advisers and technicians. Its reluctance to deploy ground troops, though, appeared to change in early January, when the Turkish parliament ratified a defense agreement with the Libyan GNA in Tripoli.

In pushing for a larger military role in Libya, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan cited historical ties between Libya and Turkey. But economic motives also underpin the move. Ankara signed a deal in November with the GNA that gives it exploration rights to offshore oil and gas fields in the Mediterranean. It is also eyeing infrastructure and arms contracts in Libya, which it would lose if Haftar seized power.

This is all part of a broader expansion of Turkey's geopolitical power under President Erdoğan. Yet it carries domestic political risks: a Turkish military adventure in Libya could embroil the country in a quagmire. The Syrian fighters are therefore a convenient way for Erdoğan to avoid these risks, while still exerting leverage over Libya's future. In some cases, these combatants are drawn from the same Syrian proxy forces that Erdoğan has sent into northern Syria. But reflecting Ankara's ambitions for regional influence, this new deployment in North Africa is far beyond Turkey's borders.



Mustafa Kaya/Xinhua via Getty Images

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan speaking after Turkey began sending militia forces to aid Libya's Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, Ankara, Turkey, January 16, 2020

Since late last year, the Turkish government has recruited these Syrian militiamen for service in Libya with promises of a generous monthly salary (reportedly, \$2,000 a month) and offers of Turkish citizenship (though Ahmed said he was granted this nationality more than five years ago). For him, and the other Syrians in the room, the affiliation with Turkey is deeply-rooted: ethnically, they are Syrian Turkmen, Syrian citizens with ancestral ties to Turkey. They are also part of a larger Turkish-backed Syrian militia called the Sultan Murad Division, named for an Ottoman ruler, which includes many Turkmen.

“I belong to the Turkish army,” Ahmed said. “And we all have houses in Istanbul or Gaziantep [a major city in southern Turkey].”

Before coming to Libya, Ahmed and his fellow Syrians fought in the Free Syrian Army against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad in that country’s bloody civil war. Ahmed knows the Assad regime well. Born in the Aleppo countryside to a Turkish father and Syrian mother, he was a lieutenant in the Syrian special forces before defecting from the government forces in 2011, at the start of the Syrian revolution.

Years of combat followed: Aleppo, Homs, Qusayr, Idlib, he said, flipping through graphic cell phone videos. He mentioned American “friends” named “John and Josh”—presumably CIA personnel—who trained and armed the Free Syrian Army. It was a brutal, unceasing war marked by shifting alliances and betrayals: he once spent nine months imprisoned by a rival rebel group, the al-Qaeda-affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. Along with other Turkish-backed Syrian groups, the Sultan Murad Division has itself been accused of committing human rights abuses, most recently in 2019 during a Turkish-led incursion into northeastern Syria.

The Syrian fighters in Libya said that they’d arrived there via Tripoli’s only functioning airport on a Turkish military plane

from Istanbul. They reported to an operations room at that airport, which includes a cadre of Turkish officers working closely with Syrian and Libyan militia commanders. One of these Libyan commanders was my host on the front, a former engineer named Muhammad al-Darrat, who's led fighters in multiple battles since 2011.

I accompanied al-Darrat in 2016 when he was fighting the Islamic State in the Libyan city of Sirte, then assisted by American airstrikes and intelligence. Now, he says, the US has withdrawn even the small military contingent that was working with GNA forces in the capital after Haftar's assault began last year. Not long after, President Trump telephoned the general to endorse his operation. And while some US military and intelligence personnel have returned to GNA-held western Libya, American policy on Libya remains equivocal. The wavering US commitment in part explains why the embattled GNA was forced to rely on Turkish support in the form of these Syrian fighters, who've met with a mixed reception in Libya.

The Turkish-Syrian intervention in Libya has succeeded in boosting the GNA's sagging morale in the face of Haftar's more numerous foreign allies. "We feel more confident now," al-Darrat told me, describing how the Syrians had quickly integrated with the Libyan militias, sharing battlefield tasks and filling personnel gaps across the front line that arcs around the capital. Once they got to know the local terrain, he explained, they'd participate in a counter-attack with the existing GNA militias.

"We are completely mixed together," said the Syrian commander Ahmed, interlocking the fingers of his hands. He acknowledged that while some of the Syrians are veterans drawn from the ranks of Assad's armed forces, others are civilians with years of combat experience in the Syrian civil war but no formal military training. Presumably to forestall any repetition of the human rights abuse allegations against Turkey's proxy militias in northern Syria, here in Libya an internal police force has accompanied the fighters to enforce discipline. A Libyan humanitarian worker later told me that his organization had to date received no reports from Libyan civilians of harassment by the Syrian fighters.



Abdullah Doma/AFP via Getty Images

A woman brandishing a rifle at a protest of Libyans and Syrians who support General Khalifa Haftar's forces against Turkey's intervention on behalf of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, Benghazi, eastern Libya, January 3, 2020

But not all Libyans are happy with the Syrian presence. To some, their arrival at the front is an affront to Libyan national pride and fighting prowess, and a source of embarrassment for the GNA government as Haftar's camp turns that resentment into a propaganda point. A senior official in the Tripoli administration, Khalid al-Mishri, told me that there were no Syrians per se, only Turkmen, and they were serving only as logisticians and translators, not combat troops—an assertion that contradicts what the Syrian fighters and Libyan commanders told me at the front.

Moreover, some Libyan militia commanders say that what the GNA forces really need is not more infantry, but technical assistance and advanced weaponry: more armed drones, drone jammers, artillery, and air-defense systems. This equipment has already started to arrive from Turkey and is shifting the balance of power on the battlefield—more than the Syrian presence has done, according to some Libyan commanders.

Compared to conditions in their war-torn homeland, the Syrians' deployment to Libya seems relatively easy—for now. Sporting a cardigan sweater and gelled hair, Ahmed appeared relaxed—he even has time to run on the villa's treadmill. Ahmed claimed there had been just a single Syrian fatality in Libya to date, though Syrian opposition sources put the figure higher, at twenty-eight. Although a fragile truce between the GNA and Haftar's forces has been in place for several weeks, there is still sporadic shelling, airstrikes, and sniper fire.

One of Ahmed's fighters got up to serve us another cup of instant coffee.

"Isn't there any sugar to go with this?" al-Darrat asked the Syrians sardonically.

"This is Nescafé," the Syrian replied matter-of-factly.

"I can't drink this," the Libyan confided to me, with a laugh. The thin, burnt-tasting beverage was an affront to the Libyans' affection for proper, frothy Italian coffee, a legacy of Italian colonial rule.

Ahmed emphasized the legitimacy of the Syrians' role in Libya. "We're not mercenaries," he said. "We were invited by the Libyan army and Libyan people, and we oppose dictatorship." Yet this altruistic narrative is not entirely borne out by other Syrian sources. They complain that the Turkish intervention in Libya is a distraction from the battle against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, especially around one of the last rebel strongholds, the city of Idlib. Reached by phone this week, an analyst in Turkey close to the Syrian opposition told me that "this [Libya] operation caused a clear rift between opposition factions... it came at a time when Idlib was suffering and needed the [Syrian fighters]." Moreover, some accounts suggest that the economic deprivation in Syria and Turkey's provision of lavish salaries and benefits were leading factors behind the Syrians' agreeing to go to Libya.

I asked the Syrians how long they expected to stay.

"As long as we are needed," Ahmed replied. "We don't want Libya to be destroyed like Syria." Preventing this outcome, he said, meant confronting the foreign state that had tipped the scales of the Tripoli battle in Haftar's favor late last year—a bitter foe they know all too well.

"For us, Russia is the biggest enemy," he said. Just two days earlier, he asserted, his fighters had killed a Russian sniper not far from the villa (though he offered no proof except for a photo of a rifle they'd recovered). It was a form of payback for these Syrians, who had watched their cities being destroyed by Russian bombs.

"They have a score to settle here in Libya," a Western diplomat later told me, "and they're being paid handsomely for it."

Yet the battle against Russia's intervention on these Mediterranean shores contains a paradox. Several weeks ago, according to Libyan fighters and foreign diplomats, the Wagner troops started reducing their combat support for Haftar's forces on the front, leaving only snipers like the one Ahmed's men claimed to have killed. The partial withdrawal followed a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and President Erdoğan in Istanbul in early January, which produced a provisional ceasefire agreement in Libya on January 12. The shaky halt to hostilities has mostly held, even though Haftar walked away from signing the accord—reportedly at the behest of his main longtime ally, the United Arab Emirates.

Being outflanked by the Turkish–Russian deal was a humiliating blow to the EU’s peacemaking efforts, which have long been stymied by European disunity. A much-anticipated international summit on Libya, hosted by the German government in Berlin, finally took place a week later, on January 19, but it failed even to engineer a meeting between General Haftar and the GNA prime minister, let alone formalize a ceasefire. And the general’s foreign backers, chiefly the UAE, Egypt, and France, have signaled that they still believe he is capable of capturing Tripoli by force. A crucial unknown remains Russia’s willingness to back Haftar in another round of war. If that happens, President Erdoğan might send more Turkish and Syrian forces into Libya—though, in this chess game of regional power play, he could just as easily withdraw them in return for concessions from Russia.

Ahmed seemed untroubled at being a pawn in this game. The Turkish–Russian talks, he said, were “just for the media,” and “just between presidents.” Still, he was painfully aware of how blithely the great powers can sell out local allies. “The world gave Idlib to the Russians,” he told me, overlooking Turkey’s complicity in this supposed betrayal.

Walking outside the villa in the fresh morning air, we heard desultory gunfire from the nearby front, a cluster of grey buildings flanked by fir trees. Two weeks ago, not far from here, Haftar’s snipers killed several displaced Libyan civilians who were trying to check on their homes. A young volunteer with a local humanitarian organization later told me that he and his colleagues have tried repeatedly to retrieve the corpses but have been prevented from doing so because of persistent gunfire from Haftar’s side.

Ahmed himself scoffed at the notion of there being a ceasefire. Indeed, in recent days, Haftar’s forces have bombed the GNA-controlled Tripoli airport, citing its use as an entry point for the Syrian forces. Ahmed predicted that fighting against the Russians would intensify if, as he expects, Putin recommits the Wagner forces to help Haftar.

As we said our goodbyes, I asked the Syrian commander about his family. He had three daughters back home, he replied. Yet, with surprising candor, he admitted that he’d continue to fight—not just in Libya, but “wherever I am needed.”

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An earlier version of this report misstated that Russian-supplied barrel bombs have been dropped on rebel-held areas in Syria; Russia has used conventional ordnance, not barrel bombs. The article has been updated.

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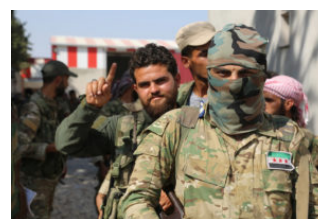
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