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In Collusion with the “Syrian Government”, a Russian Security Company Recruits Thousands of Syrians as Mercenaries to Fight in Libya alongside “Haftar”

In Collusion with the “Syrian Government”, a Russian Security Company Recruits Thousands of Syrians as Mercenaries to Fight in Libya alongside “Haftar”

This special report complements the one addressing the recruitment of opposition-affiliated fighters as mercenaries by Turkey to fight alongside the Government of National Accord / GNA, headed by Fayez al-Sarraj

Executive Summary

A Syria-based Russian security company – in collusion with the Syrian government- recruited no fewer than 3000 Syrians, both civilians and fighters, from various provinces as mercenaries to transfer them to Libya, where they are to fight alongside the Libyan National Army / LNA, commanded by the Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, against the Turkey-backed Government of National Accord / GNA, headed by Fayez al-Sarraj.

The recruitment started in Suwaida province in December 2019, followed by Quneitra, Daraa, Damascus, its countryside, Homs, Hama, al-Hasaka, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, while it notably adopted an accelerated pace in May 2020. The field researchers of Syrians for Truth and Justice / STJ reported that the recruitment was yet in progress when the report was being composed —namely on 30 June 2020.

Spearheaded by Russia, the process of recruitment coincided with the Turkish government's enlistment of Syrian fighters and civilians as mercenaries, aided by Turkish security companies and the factions of the National Army, backed by and affiliated with the Syrian National Coalition, whom it transports to Libya to fight alongside the GNA against Haftar-led forces, as documented by a former STJ report.¹

In this extensive report, STJ provides overwhelming evidence backed by lengthy statements on the recruitment and transfer of rebels and civilians to fight in Libya, as well as detailed accounts on the transfer process.

The information obtained by STJ indicates that Syrian fighters were recruited under contracts providing each conscript with a salary of \$800 to \$1500, in addition to privileges, such as the vindication of persons involved in security issues, and are thus prosecuted by the Syrian government, or exemption from military service, reserve and mandatory, within the ranks of the Syrian regular army.

Also in this report, STJ discloses that several Syrian government-affiliated figures are involved in these recruitments, including "Sh. al-Sha'er", director of the government-licensed Syrian National Youth Party's Bureau, officials of the National Defense Forces in Suwaida province and commanders of the Russia-founded 5th Legion,² which operates in southern Syria and encompasses former armed opposition fighters in particular, who joined the forces of the Syrian government after sealing a settlement/reconciliation agreement.

According to a number of eyewitnesses, particularly fighters, civilians and fighters are transferred to Libya onboard civilian airplanes of Cham Wings Airlines or attack aircraft

¹ "Turkey's Recruitment of Syrian Mercenaries to Fight in Libya: Process and Legal Consequences", STJ, 11 May 2020, (Last visited: 11 July 2020), <https://stj-sy.org/en/turkeys-recruitment-of-syrian-mercenaries-to-fight-in-libya-process-and-legal-consequences/>

² Formed in late 2016, the legion is considered the striking force of the Russian army in Syria. After the settlement in southern Syria entered into force in July 2018, most of the Syrian armed opposition fighters joined the legion under the leadership of Ahmed al-Awdeh, a former commander of the Shabab al-Sunnah/ Youth of Sunnah Forces of the opposition.

departing from Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia. As for the landing, Syrian recruits reach one of the four following chief destinations in Libya: [Benina International Airport](#), [al-Khadim Air Base](#), [al-Jufra Air Base](#) and [Bani Walid Airport](#).

Further yet, STJ documented the enlistment of two boys, under the age of 18, who got recruited and transferred to Libya without the knowledge of their parents in May 2020. On this note, an informed source in Deir ez-Zor reported that three other children were recruited around the same time. Nonetheless, STJ could not obtain additional details concerning the last reported cases.

In Eastern Ghouta, rural Damascus, another local source provided STJ with details on the recruitment of 8 other children under the age of 17 in early May 2020, three of whom were identified. A Quneitra-based media activist, for his part, reported that 12 children from the town of Mumtane, rural Quneitra, 14 to 17 years old, were also recruited, but the field researcher has not yet been able to identify them.

Methodology

For the purpose of this report, STJ monitored news reporting the transfer of Syrian fighters to Libya by a Russian security company and conducted online interviews with (17) witnesses and sources informed of the matter. Of the witnesses, five are fighters who had been enlisted to fight in Libya, three of them were still in Libya when the report was being composed on 30 June 2020, a fighter recruited from Suwaida, who refused to travel later on, and another from Quneitra, who is still waiting to be transferred to Libya.

Four media activists informed of the situation in Daraa, Homs, rural Damascus, and Suwaida also provided testimonies, backed by the account offered by a woman from Daraa province, who witnessed the transfer of a number of fighters on the same plane she boarded to Libya.

STJ's field researchers also met a source from the Arab "Harb" Clan in al-Hasaka, for a number of the clan's men were recruited, in addition to two sources informed of the matter in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa.

Regarding child recruitment, STJ's field researchers interviewed the families of two enlisted children sent to fight in Libya from Deir ez-Zor province, along with two media activists from Eastern Ghouta and Quneitra.

Each of these interviews was conducted in a number of sessions via secure applications, starting in early May to late June 2020.

1. First reports on Syrian Fighters’ recruitment and transfer to Libya

As of February 2020, Syrian news networks started reporting the mobilization of Syrian fighters as mercenaries to Libya, where they are to fight alongside Haftar, including *Sawt al-Asema/Damascus Voice*,³ which mentioned that Russia has since early 2020 recruited dozens of men from Duma city, intending to send them to fight for Haftar-led forces in Libya. On its turn, *Suwayda 24 network* declared the involvement of a political party, authorized by the Syrian government, in the recruitment of mercenaries of Suwaida’s citizens and other provinces, backed by a Russian security company, also planning to send them to Libya.⁴ *Enab Baladi*, another media outlet, posted photos, circulated by media activists in southern Syria, which they captioned as buses carrying dozens of young men recruited by Russia to fight in Libya alongside Haftar’s forces.⁵

This was followed by an initial confirmation from the United Nations (UN) that Russian Wagner Group-affiliated mercenaries and Syrian fighters from Damascus travelled to Libya to back Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. UN experts, in a report presented to the Security Council on 24 April 2020, stated that they are incapable of identifying the parties responsible for recruiting and sponsoring the mercenaries sent to fight alongside Haftar-led forces. The report also pointed out that the Russian Wagner Group had enlisted 2000 Syrian combatants to fight for Haftar under three-month-contracts, sending them to Libya in 33 batches as of early 2020, through the Damascus-based Cham Wings Airlines.⁶

As the Syrian fighters’ mobilization to Libya went viral on social media and was extensively covered by media outlets, several Syrian clans and tribes in al-Hasaka province made statements in May 2020. They condemned the Russian company’s exploitation of the country’s deteriorating economic conditions to recruit fighters and send them to Libya, including the Arab Harb clan which in a statement, made on 28 May 2020, said that a first batch of the clan’s men and those of the Arab Tay clan, rural Qamishli, in collusion with agents,

³ “Exclusive: Russia Recruits Douma Youths to Fight in Libya”, *Sawt Al-Asema* website, 12 February 2020, (Last visit: 12 July 2020), <https://damascusv.com/archives/20685>

⁴ “Russia Continues Recruiting Syrians to Fight alongside Haftar’s Forces”, *Enab Baladi*, 19 April 2020, (Last visit: 12 July 2020), <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/377991>

⁵ “An Authorized Political Party Recruiting Syrians to Fight as Mercenaries in Libya, with Russian Support”, *Suwayda 24*, 15 February 2020, (Last visit: 12 July 2020), <https://suwayda24.com/?p=13043>

⁶ The document was not meant for publishing, but *France 24* obtained access to the report’s summary. “Libya: UN Report Confirms Russian and Syrian Mercenaries are Fighting alongside Field Marshal Haftar”, *France 24*, 16 May 2020, (Last visited: 12 July 2020), <https://www.france24.com/ar/20200507-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1>

was deployed to Libya, joining the ranks of the Wagner Group, warning that another batch is being enlisted.



Photo No. (1) – The statement made by the Harb clan in al-Hasaka province on 28 May 2020. Credit: [The clan's Facebook account.](#)

Another statement ensued, made by the "al-Sharabiyeen" clan in al-Hasaka province on 31 May 2020, in which it condemned the Russian company's recruitment of a group of the clan's men, allegedly to guard oil facilities, only to throw them into the conflict in Libya, tempting them with money or through subjecting them to security pressures.

قبيلة الشرايين العربية

خوة وضه

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
بيان إلى الرأي العام



نحن أحرار قبيلة الشرايين أخوان وضه في محافظة الحسكة

- ندين ما يقوم به بعض عملاء الأحتلال الروسي من أبناء القبيلة
العملاء والخونة بتجنيد شباب الشرايين للقتال معا روسيا
والذهاب بهم للقتال في ليبيا تحت مُسمى حرس المنشآت النفطية
- مستغلين في ذلك الظروف المعيشية الصعبة والغلاء المرتفع
تحت إغراءات مالية من جهة وضغوط أمنية من جهة أخرى
مع العلم إنه تم إرسال دفعة ويعملون لتجميع دفعات قادمة

وإننا احرار الشرايين نطلب من عمالنا عن ارسال الشباب وكما ندعوا

من أبناء القبيلة وأبناء القبائل والعشائر الأخرى للوقوف بوجه
هذه الحملة وغيرها من تشييع المنطقة وضياح صبغتها

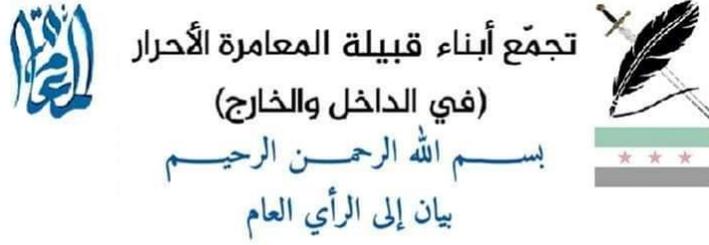
- الرحمة لشهداء الحرية والخزي والعار للشيوخ المتخاذلين

قبيلة الشرايين

31/5/2020

Photo No. (2) – The statement made by the Arab al-Sharabiyeen clan on 31 May 2020. Credit: Media activists, knowing that the statement has been verified as authentic by STJ's field researcher.

For its part, the Arab "al-Ma'amra al-Ahrar" clan in al-Hasaka province made a statement on 30 May 2020, denouncing the Russian forces' recruitment of its youths, taking an advantage of their financial conditions to coerce them into fighting in Libya.



نحن أحرار قبيلة المعامرة من محافظة الحسكة (في الداخل والخارج)

- ندين ما يقوم به بعض عملاء الاحتلال الروسي من أبناء القبيلة وعلى رأسهم فيصل العازل بتجنيد الشباب لصالح شركة (فاغنز الروسية) والذهاب بهم للقتال في ليبيا تحت مسمى حرس المنشآت النفطية - مستغلين في ذلك الظروف المعيشية الصعبة والغلاء المرتفع تحت إغراءات مالية من جهة وضغوط أمنية من جهة أخرى مع العلم إنه تم إرسال دفعة ويعملون لتجميع دفعات قادمة

- وإنا أحرار قبيلة المعامرة ندعوا الأحرار والشرفاء والمثقفين من أبناء القبيلة وأبناء القبائل والعشائر الأخرى للوقوف بوجه هذه الحملة وغيرها من تشييع المنطقة وضياح صبيحتها

- الرحمة لشهداء الحرية والحرزي والعار للشيوخ المتخاذلين

أحرار قبيلة المعامرة في سوريا
30/5/2020

Photo No. (3) – The statement made by the al-Ma'amra al-Harar clan on 30 May 2020. Credit: Media activists, knowing that the statement has been verified as authentic by STJ's field researcher.

Despite the extensive statements, the Syrian government has not officially commented on the issue, as it neither affirmed nor refuted the viral reports.

It is important to note that the Libyan embassy in Syria was reopened on 3 March 2020, after a two-year closure, marking the resumption of diplomatic representation in both states, for the *Syrian Arab News Agency / SANA* reported that the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed a memorandum of understanding with its counterpart of the Libyan Interim Government⁷ regarding the reopening of the headquarters of diplomatic and consular missions and the coordination of the two states' position in international and regional forums.⁸

⁷ It differs from the Government of National Accord recognized internationally. This government goes unrecognized, not even by the countries backing the Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar.

⁸ "Libyan embassy in Damascus reopened, marking the return of diplomatic representation between the two brotherly countries – video", Syrian Arab News Agency / SANA, 3 March 2020, (Last visited: 12 July 2020), <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1116600>

On 26 May 2020, the U.S. military command in Africa published photos of Russian attack aircraft it reported as arriving in Libya to back the Russian militants, which the state runs, leaving an air base in Russia after landing in Syria, where they got repainted and emerged with no national markings.⁹

US AFRICOM
@USAFricaCommand

NEWS: Russia deploys military fighter aircraft to Libya

"For too long, Russia has denied the full extent of its involvement in the ongoing Libyan conflict. Well, there is no denying it now." - Gen. Townsend
Release: go.usa.gov/xwah3
Photos: go.usa.gov/xwaSf

ترجمة التغريدة



Twitter Web App · ٢٠:١٨ م ٢٦ مايو ٢٠٢٠

Photo No. (4) – Posted by the [U.S. command in Africa](#) of Russian fighter aircraft, claiming that they arrived in Libya to support the Russian militants there.

On 18 June 2020, the U.S. command once again posted a photo album of Russian attack aircraft, claiming that they are deployed to Libya to back the state-sponsored private security companies, adding that these aircraft have been excessively flown to Libya in May 2020.¹⁰

⁹ For further information, refer to the following link: <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/6220925/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-libya>

¹⁰ For further information, refer to the following link: <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32941/new-evidence-of-russian-aircraft-active-in-li>



Photo No. (5)

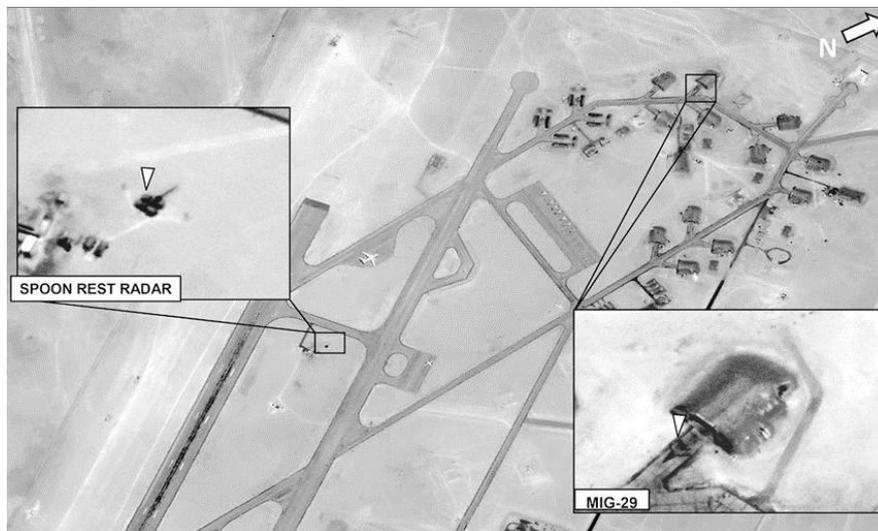


Photo No. (6) – The two photos were posted by [the U.S. command in Africa](#), reporting the deployment of Russian aircraft to Libya, where they are to support the state-sponsored private security companies.

On 7 June 2020, *Reuters* reported that a Russian drive for the recruitment of Syrians to fight in Libya alongside the Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar took a rapid pace in May 2020, as hundreds of mercenaries were signed up, adding that two chief sources of the Syrian opposition and a well-informed regional one stated that the private military contractor Wagner Group is running the hiring process supervised by the Russian army. Furthermore, *Reuters* said that the military contractor has sent Syrians to Libya in 2019 for the first time, pointing out that the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Wagner Group did not respond to questions from *Reuters*, while a spokesperson of the Haftar-led LNA denied it had recruited Syrian fighters.¹¹

¹¹ "Exclusive: Russian hiring of Syrians to fight in Libya accelerated in May", *Reuters*, 7 June, 2020, (Last visited: 12 July 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-syria-russia-exclusive/exclusive-russian-hiring-of-syrians-to-fight-in-libya-accelerated-in-may-idUSKBN23E06H>

Since late 2019, Russia has been refuting the U.S. claims concerning hiring hundreds of Russian mercenaries,¹² connected to the Wagner Group, to fight in Libya on behalf of Moscow, helping Haftar take hold of Tripoli, for back then, Russia considered the U.S. State Department statements,¹³ that Russia is aiming to destabilize the situation in Libya by operating its private military companies there, as fake news.

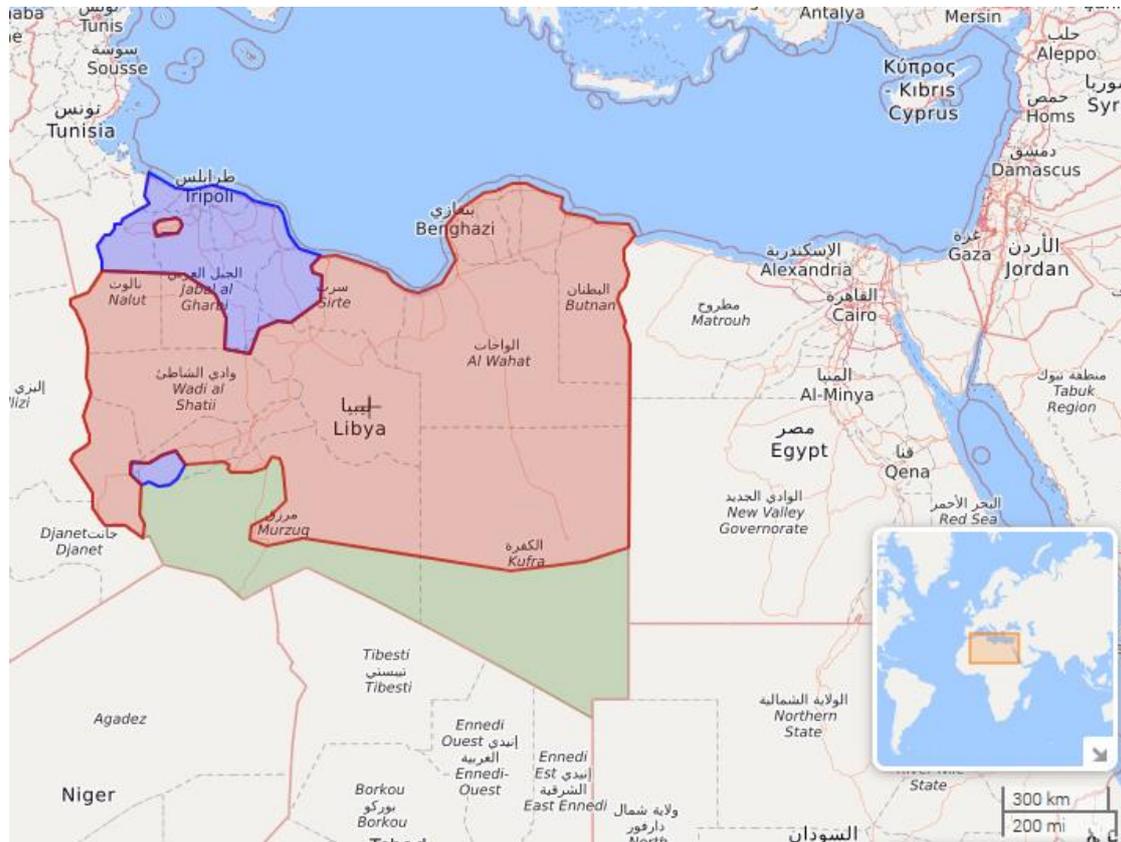


Photo No. (7) – The map shows control areas of parties to the conflict in Libya till 30 June 2020. The red patches indicate the posts of the LNA, led by the Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar; the blue patches, however, indicate those taken over by the GNA, under the leadership of Fayez al-Sarraj. Source:

liveuamap.com.

¹² "US says Russian troops are destabilizing Libya", CNN, 26 November 2019, (Last visited: 12 July 2020), <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/26/politics/us-russia-destabilizing-libya/index.html>

¹³ "Kremlin: U.S. State Department's Statements on Russia's Dispatch of Military Units to Destabilize Libya Groundless", Russia Today, 27 November 2019, (Last visited: 12 July 2020),

https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1063497-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A9/

2. Syrians recruited to fight in Libya

The information obtained by STJ indicates that the recruitment of Syrian fighters and transferring them to Libya are focused on current militants of the Syrian regular forces, including former armed opposition fighters who signed a settlement agreement with the Syrian government and joined its forces, in addition to untrained civilians and children, under the age of 18, while recruitment was still underway when the report was being composed on 30 June 2020.

a) Methods of recruitment

STJ's field researchers recorded acts of recruitment in several Syrian areas, including the provinces of Suwaida, Daraa, Quneitra, Hama, Homs, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and rural Damascus. Having interviewed a group of eyewitnesses and fighters, already transported to Libya, they came up with the following conclusions:

- Fighters, affiliated with the Syrian government, and others operating under various local military formations, such as the volunteers of Rijal al-Karama Movement / Men of Dignity in Suwaida,¹⁴ desiring to travel to Libya would register their names with the officials assigned the task in each of the target provinces. Following the registration process, fighters wait to be granted admission, after which the procedures to transfer them to Libya start. The enlistment is carried out by several sides, the key of which is the headquarters of the National Syrian Youth Party, licensed by the Syrian government, in Suwaida, in addition to figures associated with the Russia-formed 5th Legion in Homs and Quneitra and volunteers of the Military Security Branch in Daraa. In Raqqa, al-Hasaka and Deir ez-Zor recruitment is done by renowned clan personalities, famed for their loyalty to the Syrian government and Russian forces, and other figures within the National Defense Militia, an associate of the Syrian government.
- Speaking of the recruitment of civilians, uninvolved in the armed conflict, the person would usually head to any headquarter or official responsible for listing and transferring fighters to Libya, which spread throughout Syria. There, he applies in the same manner that fighters do.

¹⁴ One of the chief local factions in Suwaida, spreading almost throughout the area. It was founded by Sheikh Waheed Bal'ous in 2012, while driving religious guidance from Sheikhs Rakan al-Atrash and Yahya al-Hajjar. Of the major reasons that triggered its religious leaders and sheikhs to found the movement was their belief that the religious stance was losing its neutrality and has been leaning in to the Syrian government's position on several occasions. The movement's founder Waheed Bal'ous adopted the slogan: "The Syrian that who sheds the blood of a fellow Syrian is sinful". The movement repeatedly intervened to impose pressure on the Syrian government to release detainees of the Druze denomination. The founder was assassinated in September 2015, along with dozens of the movement's fighters, when an explosion made a target of his procession in Suwaida province. The assassination was blamed on the Syrian intelligence services, given that Bal'ous was reputed for having a strong opinion against enlisting Suwiada's youth for the mandatory military service. He died a few weeks after he said his famous phrase: "Our dignity is more worthy of Bashar al-Assad."

- Regarding child recruitment, STJ's field researchers noted that some of these contracts are sealed without the parents' knowledge, for STJ has documented the enlistment and transfer of two children from Deir ez-Zor, in addition to eight from eastern Ghouta, three of whom were identified, and additional 12 from Quneitra province.
- According to eyewitnesses and the fighters, who have been recruited and transferred to Libya, the enlistments are carried out under three to six months renewable contracts in exchange for salaries ranging from 800 to \$1500, in addition to other privileges, such as vindicating people involved in security-related matters or exemption from both the mandatory and reserve military service within the ranks of the Syrian regular army.

On 27 June 2020, *Sawt al-Asema* media outlet reported that the Russian forces offered families of detainees from towns in Southern Damascus the release of their sons, held prisoners at the Adra Central Prison and Sednaya Military Prison, in return for fighting for Khalifa Haftar in Libya.¹⁵

b) Privileges and salaries

In this section, STJ includes six statements and accounts, including statements of two fighters, the first from Suwaida, who got recruited and transferred to the Libyan city of Benghazi, and another from Quneitra, who is yet waiting for his transfer, two media activists, based in rural Daraa and informed of the matter, and an exclusive testimony presented by a source from the Arab Harb clan in al-Hasaka province, backed by two further accounts delivered by informed sources in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, aiming to shed a light on the salaries and the means through which the Syrian government and the Russian forces are luring fighters into going to Libya.

The first statement is by "Rami M." who was born in Suwaida province in 1992, being one of the Rijal al-Karama Movement's recruits enlisted to be transferred to Libya in late December 2019. While he was yet in Libya, when this report was composed on 30 June 2020, he recounted the following:¹⁶

"I applied in late December 2019, at the headquarters of the Syrian National Youth Party in Suwaida province. The Party's Secretariat Sh. al-Sha'er held a meeting, attended by about 80 persons, mostly fighters and recruits of local factions, such as the Rijal al-Karama Movement. Each training program encompassed 150 young men. During the meeting al-Sha'er explained the details of the journey and fighting in Libya. He also informed us of the privileges we are to get, including the legalization of the status of the people involved in security-related issues and exemption from

¹⁵ "Russia prepares to transfer third batch of southern Damascus men to Libya", *Sawt al-Asema*, 27 June 2020, (Last visited: 12 July 2020), <https://damascusv.com/archives/26036>

¹⁶ The first eyewitness.

reserve military service. He told us that, in Libya, we will be fighting under the supervision of the Russian Wagner Company."

On the privileges and the salary, he added:

"The fighters heading to Libya get salaries varying between \$800 for volunteers tasked with guarding Libyan and Russian military facilities, such as oil fields, and \$1500 for fighters deployed to the fronts. In case of injury, the fighter will be treated, returned to Syria and offered a stable salary and a compensation. If dead, the compensation will be sent to the fighter's family."

From Quneitra, "Yousef A.", a 26 years old resident of the Mumtane town and a former fighter of the armed opposition who is still waiting to be transferred to Libya, also commented on the privileges and salaries. He said:¹⁷

"I operated within the ranks of the Free Army against the regime and like the majority of the fighters of Southern Syria's factions, I later on signed a settlement agreement. The regime, however, did not write off the security reports filed against me, not to mention the poor financial conditions I am enduring, given the price rise and lacking job opportunities, which turned life into hell. For this reason, I joined the ranks of the fighters in Libya, helped by the Russia-affiliated 5th Legion, because they promised to give a \$1000 salary and to cancel all the reports against me under Russian guarantees."

A third witness, "Lafi A.", a media activist based in the city of Nawa in Daraa province, informed STJ of the key privileges the fighters get in return for recruitment and fighting in Libya. He explained:

"Exempting all persons, both those who signed or refrained from signing a settlement agreement, from mandatory military service, in addition to scarping the security files against these persons, including charges of terrorism, and a salary of a million and 800 000 Syrian Pounds for three months under a contract that gets automatically renewed."

In Damascus province, a media activist from rural Damascus / based in Afrin,¹⁸ told STJ that a number of recruits, meant to fight in Libya, are prosecuted by security branches for cases related to the Court of Terrorism, while others are wanted for security and criminal charges. He added that Russia provided the recruits with in advance guarantees that their security files will be written off upon returning from Libya, indicating that the enlistment is carried out according to three-month-contracts, renewable for those wishing, in return for salaries amounting to \$1,000 per recruit, in addition to granting them the Khmeimim Air Base-issued "Friends of Russia Card".

¹⁷ The 2nd eyewitness.

¹⁸ The 4th eyewitness.

For his part, a source from Harb clan in al-Hasaka province, provided STJ with an exclusive statement,¹⁹ saying that the recruitment of fighters in al-Hasaka province is carried out under a five-month-contract, tasking them with either guarding oil facilities or fighting, adding that a \$1,000 is paid to the families of conscripts upon enrollment.

In Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, a source informed of the matter said that on 20 April 2020,²⁰ Russia's proxies, including a number of clan sheikhs and military officials affiliated with the Syrian government, in the two provinces, started to recruit young men, fighters and civilians, to transfer them to fight in Libya. To achieve the Russian recruitment drive's goals, these agents manipulate the economic, security and psychological conditions of the young men to lure them into signing up for a salary varying between 1,000 and \$1,500, given the slopping value of the Syrian Pound and the high unemployment rates, as well as the low per capita income in Syria. The recruits are also offered a legalization of status by security or military services of the Syrian government, especially young men residing in the areas of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and who wish to reconcile with the Syrian government to return to their areas without security harassment, as soon as they submit the required conscription documents.

The source added that the psychological factor plays a major role in these drives, as the recruits are assured that these privileges are not provided in return for their participation in the fight in Libya, but to bridge a security gap through providing protection to the state-owned oil facilities, airports and other vital centers. The reality, however, is strikingly different, for the recruits transferred to Libya are involved in hostile battles with the Turkey-backed GNA, the source added, pointing out that the strategic centers are being protected by Russia-affiliated special task forces and Haftar's combatants.

3. The Syrian government's role in recruitment

The Syrian government had neither confirmed nor refuted the news reporting the recruitment of Syrian fighters and their transfer to fight in Libya along Haftar's forces, while the Russian President Vladimir Putin has on 11 January 2020 denied any association between his state and the Russian Wagner Company,²¹ saying that: "If such [companies] do exist; they do not represent the state of Russia and are not sponsored by it." Nevertheless, the information obtained by STJ indicates that figures affiliated with the Syrian government and Russian forces are indeed playing a role in the process of recruitment through party and

¹⁹ The 5th eyewitness.

²⁰ The 6th eyewitness.

²¹ "Merkel steps up efforts to make the Berlin conference on Libya a success and meets Putin in Moscow", DW, 11 January 2020, (Last visited: 13 July 2020), <https://www.dw.com/ar/%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%87%D9%88%D8%AF-%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%83%D9%88/a-51967889>

security services' headquarters in several Syrian areas, in addition to former commanders of the armed opposition, who joined the ranks of the Syrian regular forces after signing a settlement agreement, including the 5th Legion.

In this section, STJ provides additional testimonies delivered by five eyewitnesses, including a fighter from Suwaida, who was recruited but refused to travel to Libya later on, and two fighters recruited from Quneitra, who were yet in Libya when the report was being composed on 30 June 2020.

Most of the fighters interviewed by STJ, particularly those who are yet in Libya, said that the battles there are being supervised by the Russian Wagner Group.²²

In Suwaida province, intersecting testimonies of two recruits, seventh and sixth witnesses, enlisted to fight in Libya from the province indicate that the so-called "Sh. al-Sha'er," head of the Syrian National Youth Party, affiliated with the Syrian government, is one of the key figures that supervise the recruitment of fighters in the province according to "Asem / a pseudonym of a witness", ²³born in Suwaida province in 1996. Asem was a fighter of Rijal al-Karama Movement and got his name registered for transfer to Libya in December 2019. Nevertheless, he refused to travel later on. Asem told STJ that he applied with other 150 fighters from Suwaida at the al-Sha'er's office, adding that:

"In early January 2020, we were transported by buses to the headquarters of the 18th division in the al-Furqlus area, eastern rural Homs, which is affiliated with the Syrian regular army. Arriving there, a 15-day-training program was supposed to take place, before we are transferred to Libya. There were Russian officers with us and a translator, a captain in the army of the regime forces known as 'A. Salim' from Homs. He told us that the duration of the contract is six months, but what we disagreed about was the salary, as they wanted to pay me \$800 in exchange for fighting not guarding Russian or Libyan facilities as al-Sha'er told us. So I, accompanied by other 25 men, went back to Suwaida. We refused the fight-based offer since al-Sha'er was insincere, for he confirmed that we are going to guard facilities, not fight. The rest of recruits, however, went to Libya 18 days later aboard a Russian plane, and their salaries were increased by \$200 to ensure they will not return."

In Quneitra province, the testimony of two fighters, recruited and transported to Libya, indicates that "M. al-'arr", known as Abu Ja'far Mumtane and "Y. al-Sari", both are former commanders of armed opposition factions who conducted a settlement agreement with the

²² Several sources indicate that the Russian Wagner Group is a para-military organization, allegedly connected to the Russian president and Kremlin while believed to be owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman with close ties to the Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In addition to Libya, the group's contractors have reportedly taken part in various conflicts, including Syria, Ukraine and other countries, while it is believed to have been established in 2014 by Dmitriy Utkin, a Brigadier-General of the Russian Army.

Observers believe that till 2016 there were about 2000 mercenaries in Syria, operating under the Wagner Group alongside the Syrian government, focusing in the past a few years on protecting oil facilities.

²³ The 6th witness.

Syrian government after it took over southern Syria in 2018, joining the ranks of the Russia-founded 5th Legion, are considered of the most prominent figures supervising the process of recruitment in the province.

Born in rural Quneitra in 1995, Basil / a pseudonym is a former fighter of the Southern Front of the armed opposition,²⁴ who signed a settlement agreement with the Syrian government and joined its ranks, and is also one of the fighters recruited and transported to Libya on 11 May 2020. Being in Libya when the report was being composed on 30 June 2020, Basil recounted the following to STJ:

"In early January 2020, Abu Ja'far Mumtane made a list with the names of the town's men wishing to fight in Libya, stressing that the names will be forwarded to the Military Intelligence in the town of Sa'sa' for approval. So I signed up with other 100 men under the command of Mumtane. Another group of conscripts, from Quneitra's villages left with the person called Yasin al-Sari, who once operated as a commander of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front."

He added:

"We were transferred to the 18th Division's headquarters in Homs onboard buses to get prepared and trained. We were supposed to serve for 6 months that will be deducted of the mandatory military service's period, with a compensation of \$20000-25000 according to the type of injury. On 11 May 2020, we were transferred to Libya and of the people that accompanied me were Yasin al-Sari al-Khawaled from Musahara town, Muhanad Abdulrazak al-Ahmad and Haza' Hassan Mohammad from Mumtane town, Hisham al-Khbi from al-Koum town, as well as Yasin al-Sari, former commander of the opposition's armed groups, Haytham Fa'our, Omar Ibrahim and Nidal Eid Ibrahim from Mumtane town."

Born in [Mumtane](#) town, rural Quneitra in 1992, "Raed B." also was a fighter of the Southern Front of the armed opposition,²⁵ who signed a settlement agreement with the Syrian government. He was one of the fighters transferred to Libya on 11 May 2020 and was still there when the report was being composed on 30 June 2020. He told STJ the following:

"On 11 May 2020, we traveled to Libya with Abu Ja'far Mumtane's group. We were fully aware that we are going to fight in Libya. Two weeks later, we were paid \$1500 each, with free food and drinks. We were also prohibited from contacting our families using Libyan numbers, but we had our Syrian ones, which we used to communicate with people at home. Of our group, about five people died in an air raid on Tarhunah. We got to know that a group from Duma city arrived a while ago, but no one is addressing this openly."

²⁴ The 8th eyewitness.

²⁵ The 9th eyewitness.



Photo No. (8).



Photo No. (9) – The tow photos feature fighters from Mumtane town, Quneitra province, transferred aboard buses before they are mobilized to fight in Libya. Taken in May 2020. Photo credit: [Local Facebook pages](#).



Photo No. (10) – showing a number of buses assigned to transport fighters recruited at [Mumtane](#) town, Quneitra province. Photo taken in May 2020. Photo credit: [Local Facebook pages](#).



Photo no. (11).



Photo no. (12).



Photo no. (13).

In Daraa province, the media activist Lafi,²⁶ a source who refused to reveal his name, said that the so-called "H. al-Nimri", from Nimr town, who conducted a settlement agreement with the Syrian government and volunteered for its affiliated Military Security Service after he operated within the ranks of the armed opposition in Daraa, is the one promoting for recruitment in the villages in western rural Daraa, holding gatherings to do so. He is the one making lists with the names of the people wishing to fight in Libya.

In Damascus province and its countryside, the recruitment is supervised by Russia, which started the process in early 2020, enlisting dozens of Duma city's men to send them to Libya, where they are to fight alongside Haftar's forces, according to *Sawt al-Asema*,²⁷ which reported that Russian officers stationed in Duma tasked the recruitment process to a number of the city's figures, who are closely related to the Russians and the State Security Branch in Duma. The outlet added that these figures tempt men to conscript through offering them massive amounts of money. STJ's field researcher verified the information from a source well-informed of the matter in rural Damascus.

Of the key figures assigned with recruiting fighters in rural Damascus is "A. Shoudab", commander of the 5th Legion's militia in Zakiyeh town and one of the loyalists of the Syrian government's Military Security Service. On this note, a media activist from rural Damascus,²⁸ based in Afrin today, commented thus:

"On 8 June 2020, we were informed that Russia has sent a new batch, encompassing 50 young men from the towns in southern Damascus, to Libya, where they are to fight alongside Haftar's forces. Russia paid the conscripts \$500 before they left to meet their families' demands. Another batch, consisting of 15 men from Zakiyeh town, western rural Damascus, have cancelled their contracts, providing for their fight in Libya along Russia-backed Haftar forces in late May, hours after their transfer to the center of the affiliated forces, established by the 5th Legion of the Russian forces in Homs city. They discovered the deceit of the official conducting the contracts in Zakiyeh, A. Shoudab after meeting with the Russian forces, who explained that the conscript's mission is to fight, not to guard the Russian facilities in Libya as Shoudab allegedly told them."

In the provinces of Hama and Homs, the recruitment is also carried out by the Russia-affiliated 5th Legion. Ahmad/ pseudonym,²⁹ a media activist from Houla town, told STJ that Russia transferred 200 men from southern rural Hama and rural Homs, the cities of Talbiseh, al-Za'faraniyeh and al-Rastan to the city of Latakia on the 8th and 11th of May 2020, from where they were to be sent to Libya aboard a cargo aircraft at the Khmeimim Air Base,

²⁶ Previously quoted eyewitness.

²⁷ "Exclusive: Russia Recruits Douma Youths to Fight in Libya", Sawt Al-Asema website, 12 February 2020, (Last visit: 12 July 2020), <https://damascusv.com/archives/20685>.

²⁸ Previously quoted eyewitness.

²⁹ 10th eyewitness.

brought from Hama Air Base, knowing that they received \$500 each before the flight kicked off.

The witness added:

"The fighters belong to the reconciliation committees and used to operate under the so-called Ansar al-Huda Division, affiliated with the armed opposition, commanded by Mohammad al-Aziziyeh from Quraimish town. They signed a reconciliation/settlement agreement with the regime under a Russian auspice in 2018. The fighters' convoy gathering point was at the Taqsis town, southern rural Hama, from where they headed to Latakia aboard the buses of the 5th Legion. Each fighter will be paid a salary amounting to a million Syrian pounds, the equivalent of \$700. Of the men who signed up were Qutiaba al-Khlaif, Ahmad al-Khlaif, Karmo al-Ali, Mahmoud al-Jad'an, Muhand al-Jad'an, Abdullah al-Mohammad, Bilal al-Mohammad, Mohammad Fayez al-Ali and Mohammad al-Khlaif from the town of al-Dmainiyeh, south of Hama province, in addition to Moayad Abdulkarim al-Shaikh, Mohammad Abdulkarim al-Shaikh, Ghazi al-Ali, Mohammad al-Ali and Mohammad al-Moussa from the town of Taqsis, western rural Hama."

The witness added that another batch, encompassing 35 young men, both fighters and civilians, from northern rural Homs, were recruited and transferred to the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia, particularly on 23 June 2020, of whom only Muji al-Hamadi and his son were identified.



Photo No. (14) – Features a number of the fighters from the al-Za'faraniyeh town in Homs, after their recruitment and transfer to Libya in May 2020. Photo credit: Activist Ahmad A.

In al-Hasaka province, the recruitment and transfer of fighters to Libya, according to an exclusive statement made by a source from the Harb Clan in al-Hasaka,³⁰ is carried out by clan dignitaries, known for their close ties to the Syrian government and the Russian forces, including "F. al-'azel" and "Kh. al-Khlaiif" from the Tay clan, as well as "F. Houran", a commander of Syrian government-affiliated National Defense Militia, and "A. al-A'akoub" from the Harb clan and the so-called "S. al-Hamadi".



Photo No. (15) – features a number of fighters recruited from al-Hasaka to be transferred to Libya, waiting at a gathering center at the al-Qamishli airport. Photo credit: Source from Harb Clan.



Photo No. (16) – The arrival of fighters from al-Hasaka province to Libya in May 2020, both belong to the al-'azel family, according to an exclusive statement made by a source from the Harb clan. Photo credit: Source from Harb clan.

³⁰ Previously quoted witness.

In Deir ez-Zor province, a source informed of the matter reported that the Russian forces are resorting to local agents to recruit fighters,³¹ a number of whom were identified, such as "S. al-Harbi Abu Hatem", a figure from the al-Harbi clan in the city of Al Bukamal and its countryside, who is the commander of the al-Harbi Legion of the Republican Guard of the Syrian Government. Al-Harbi is recruiting men from the clans of al-Harbi, al-'gaidat and al-Shu'etat, in the city of Al Bukamal and its countryside.

There is also "M. Bin Faiysal bin Ahmad al-Fayad", the sheikh of the al-Busaraya clan, who is a member of the People's Council of Syria since 2012. He recruited dozens of fighters starting with foreign military formations, Iranian and Iraqi, and then concentrated on enlisting young men from the al-Busaraya and al-Bulail clans, in addition to men from villages in northwest Deir ez-Zor.

"N. al-Bashir", a sheikh of the Bakara / Baggara, is considered one of the agents who recruited fighters in the areas of al-Salihiyeh, Khsham, Muratt, al-Husainiyeh and Httlah in eastern rural Deir ez-Zor.

From al-Jourah neighborhood, Deir ez-Zor city, "F. Jham", known as Firas al-Iraqiyeh, who is an official of the National Defense Forces, in mid-May dismantled the groups of Alawi al-Daham and Abu Amsha al-Saloum, also affiliated to the National Defense, both encompassing 50 fighters. The two groups were allegedly dissolved for the inability to pay the militants' salaries. However, it was then clear that Jham has recruited 35 of the fighters to be sent to Libya, while 15 refused to leave for health-related issues or others related to old age, some being more than 45 years old.

The same source commented on the recruitment of fighters at Deir ez-Zor. He told STJ the following:

"Since May 2020, from exclusive sources the transfer of four batches of fighters was confirmed, who were recruited from the mentioned areas. The buses, transporting the conscripts from Deir ez-Zor Air Base to the Khmeimim Air Base before their flight to Libya, were accompanied by military vehicles of the Russian police, with others affiliated with the Military Security of the Syrian government. Several sources added that the airplanes transferring fighters from the Khmeimim Air Base to Libya are Antonov An-32, which are also loaded with military and logistic gear."

The witness pointed out that:

1. The first batch included about 50 fighters, transferred on the 6th and 7th of May 2020, of whom were young men from Raqqa.
2. The second batch, including about 40-50 fighters, transferred on the 15th and 16th of May 2020.
3. The third batch included about 40 fighters, transferred on the 27th and 28th of May 2020, of whom were young men from Raqqa.

³¹ Previously quoted witness.

4. The fourth batch included about 35 fighters, transferred on the 9th and 10th of June 2020.

The witness, furthermore, said that the batches included two civilians from Deir ez-Zor and its countryside, reaching the Jufra Airbase and Bani Walid Airport in Libya.

In this regard, a media activist posted photos taken from *Deir Ezzor 24 Network* on 27 June 2020,³² featuring a group of militants from the Deir ez-Zor province, claiming that they have been recruited and deployed to Libya by Russian forces.



Photo No. (17) –taken from Deir Ezzor 24 Network, showing a number of fighters enlisted and transferred to Libya from Deir ez-Zor province.

In Raqqa province, an employee at the Civil Register Department of the Syrian Government,³³ east of Raqqa, whose testimony was crossed referenced with another's, told STJ that "T. M. al-Mar'i", nicknamed Turkey al-Buhamad, the commander of what is known as Jaysh al-'ashayer / The Army of Clans, a military formation loyalist to the Syrian regime, had along with

³² For further information, refer to the following link:
<https://twitter.com/OALD24/status/1276628536934219782/photo/1>

³³ The 11th eyewitness.

one of his assistants, the so-called Abu Jraig, recruited 25 civilians from eastern rural Raqqa, held by the Syrian government, particularly from the villages of al-Buhamad, al-Sabkha, al-Khamisiyeh, Ghanem al-Ali, Zour Shamar and Ma'dan. The conscripts were transferred as part of the third batch, reported by the former witness, which left for Libya on 27 May 202, moving from Deir ez-Zor, to Khmeimim Air Base and finally to Libya.

4. Means of transferring fighters from Syrian provinces to Libya

A. Within Syria

According to several eyewitnesses, particularly Syrian fighters recruited at Syrian government-controlled areas and taken to fight in Libya, the journey is conducted either by land or by air.

- By land

From the provinces of Quneitra, Daraa, Suwaida and Damascus fighters are first transported by buses to the headquarters of the 18th Division in the [al-Furqlus](#), eastern rural Homs, where they are trained and then transported by land to Damascus International Airport.

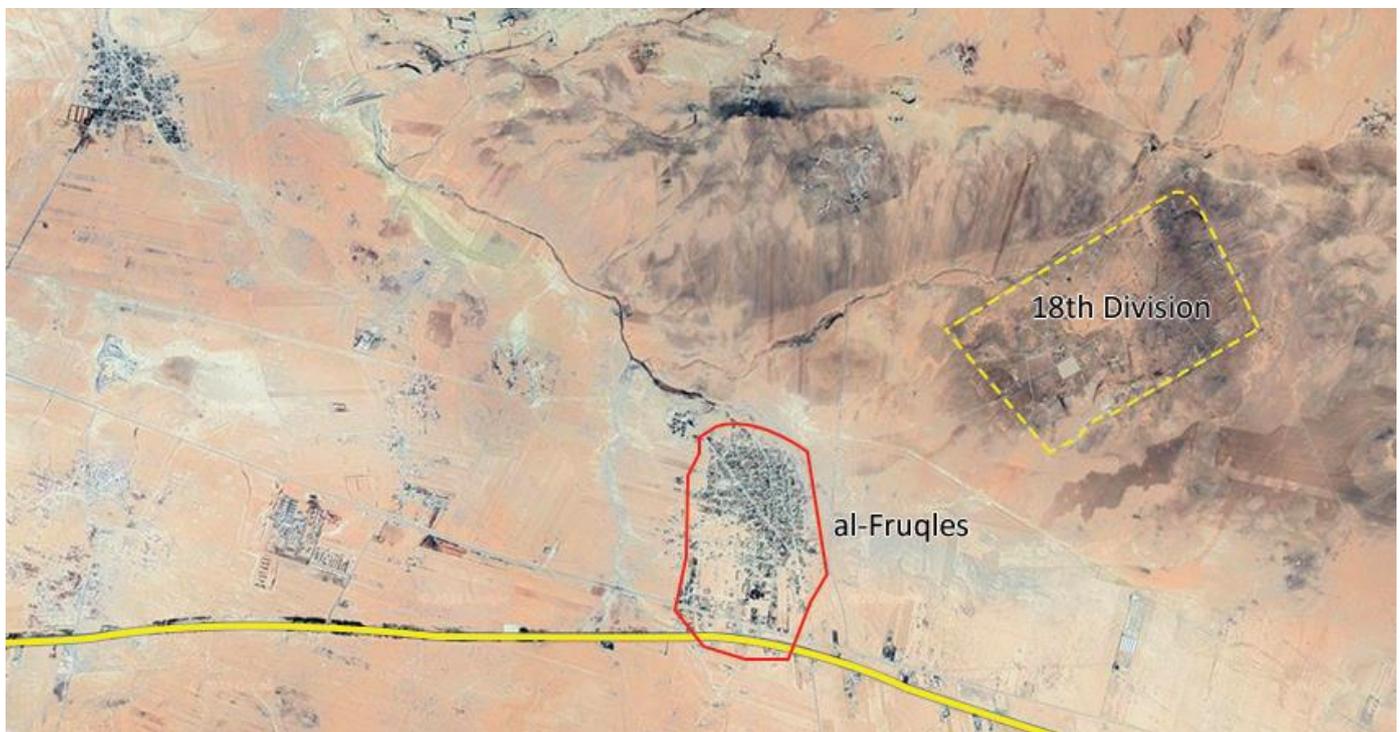


Photo No. (18)



Photo No. (19) – Satellite image showing the fighters’ gathering center in the al-Furqlus area, rural Homs, who are transported from the provinces of Suwaida, Daraa and Quneitra before they are transferred to Libya.

From al-Hasaka province, fighters are transported to Regiment 154, south of al-Qamishli (Tartab), who would later be transported by land to the al-Qamishli Airport, where fighters are divided into groups.



Photo No. (20) – Satellite image showing the location of Regiment 154, the gathering center of the al-Qamishli’s fighters.

- **By air**

After the fighters are transported by land from the provinces of **Daraa, Suwaida and Damascus**, they are transferred by air from Damascus International Airport aboard the Cham Wings Airlines, owned by a person known for being close to the Syrian president, to the Khmeimim Air Base, Latakia, to Latakia International Airport / Basel al-Assad Airport, and then to Libya.



Photo No. (21) –Satellite image showing the locations of the Damascus and Latakia international airports, as well as the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia, to which fighters are initially transported before they are transferred to Libya.

From the provinces of Homs and Hama, the fighters are transported by air from Hama Air Base to the Russian Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia and then to Libya.

Fighters recruited at the **provinces of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa** are transported by air from Deir ez-Zor Air Base to the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia, and then to Libya. The fighters at **al-Hasaka**, for their part, are transported by air from al-Qamishli Airport to Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia and then to Libya. According to eyewitnesses in al-Hasaka, the disqualified recruits are transported to training centers in Homs and Latakia, adding that the experienced ones are transported to the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia directly and then to Libya.



Photo No. (22) –Satellite image showing the location of the Hama Air Base, Deir ez-Zor Air Base and al-Qamishli Airport, from where fighters are transported by air to the Khmeimim Air Base, before they are transferred to Libya.

B. Outside Syria / Fighters transferred from Syria to Libya by air

As stated by eyewitnesses, including two of the fighters recruited to fight in Libya, one of whom was yet in Libya when this report was being composed on 30 June 2020, in addition to two testimonies delivered by media activists from rural Damascus and Suwaida and well informed of the matter, as well as the account of a woman, who witnessed the transfer of Syrian fighters aboard the same plane she booked to Libya, the transfer of fighters from Syria to Libya is done thus:

- Aboard the civilian airplanes of the Cham Wings Airline, which leave from Damascus International Airport and Latakia International Air Port / Bassel al-Assad International Airport.
- Aboard Russian attack aircraft, which leave from the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia.

The Benina International Airport in Benghazi city, Libya, the Jufra Air Base, Bani Walid Airport,³⁴ al-Khadim Air Base, west of Benghazi city, are considered the chief areas where Syrian fighters land.

³⁴ It was controlled by the Government of National Accord in early June 2020.

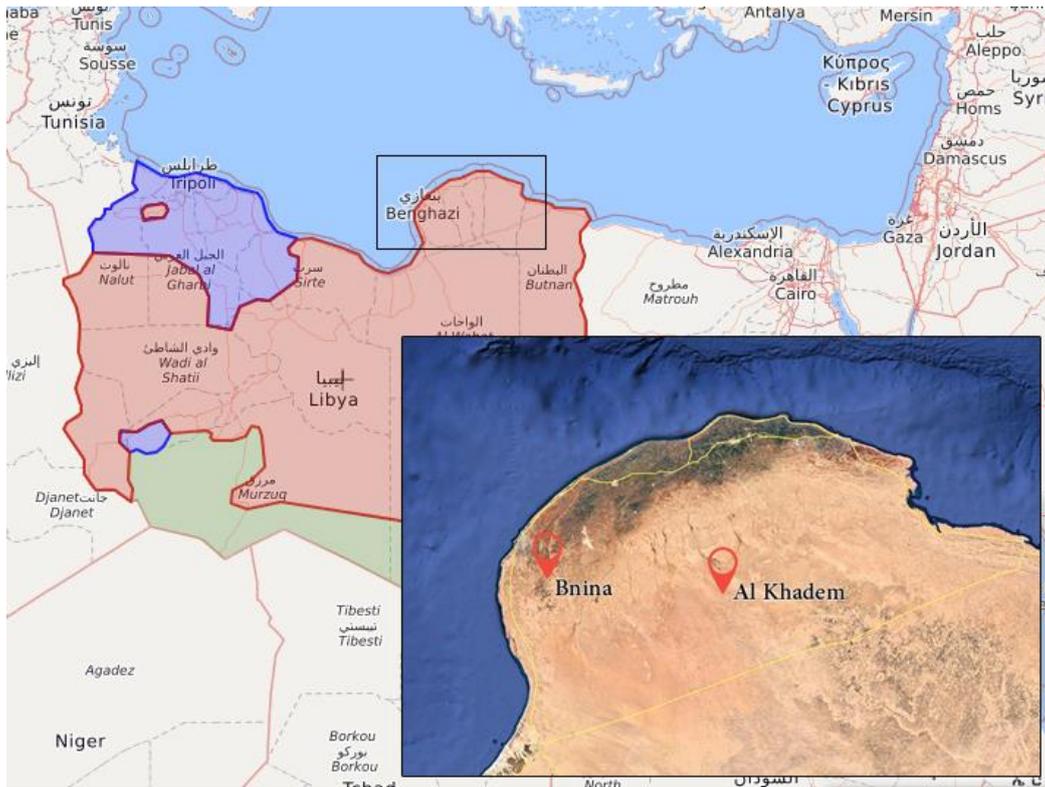


Photo No. (23) – Satellite image showing the location of the Benina International Airport and the al-Khadim Air Base in Libya, key locations where Syrian fighters land in Libya according to information obtained by STJ.



Photo No. (24) – satellite image showing the location of Bani Walid Airport and the Jufra Air Base in Libya, key locations where Syrian fighters land in Libya according to information obtained by STJ.

On 11 October 2019, the Cham Wings Airlines started direct flights from Damascus International Airport to the Benina International Airport in Benghazi city, Libya.³⁵

"Omar M.", whose testimony was listed above being one of the fighters who signed up and refused to leave to Libya later on, told STJ that a group of fellow fighters from Suwaida province were transferred to Libya on 11 January 2020 aboard a Russian attack aircraft from the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia to the city of Benghazi in Libya.

The information provided by the witness, on the flight's date and place of departure, intersects with the details posted by Flight Radar 24 on **11 January 2020**, showing that a Russian aircraft, type Tu-154M and numbered RFF7001, kicked off from Latakia to Libya, which makes it probable that this aircraft was carrying Syrian recruits onboard.

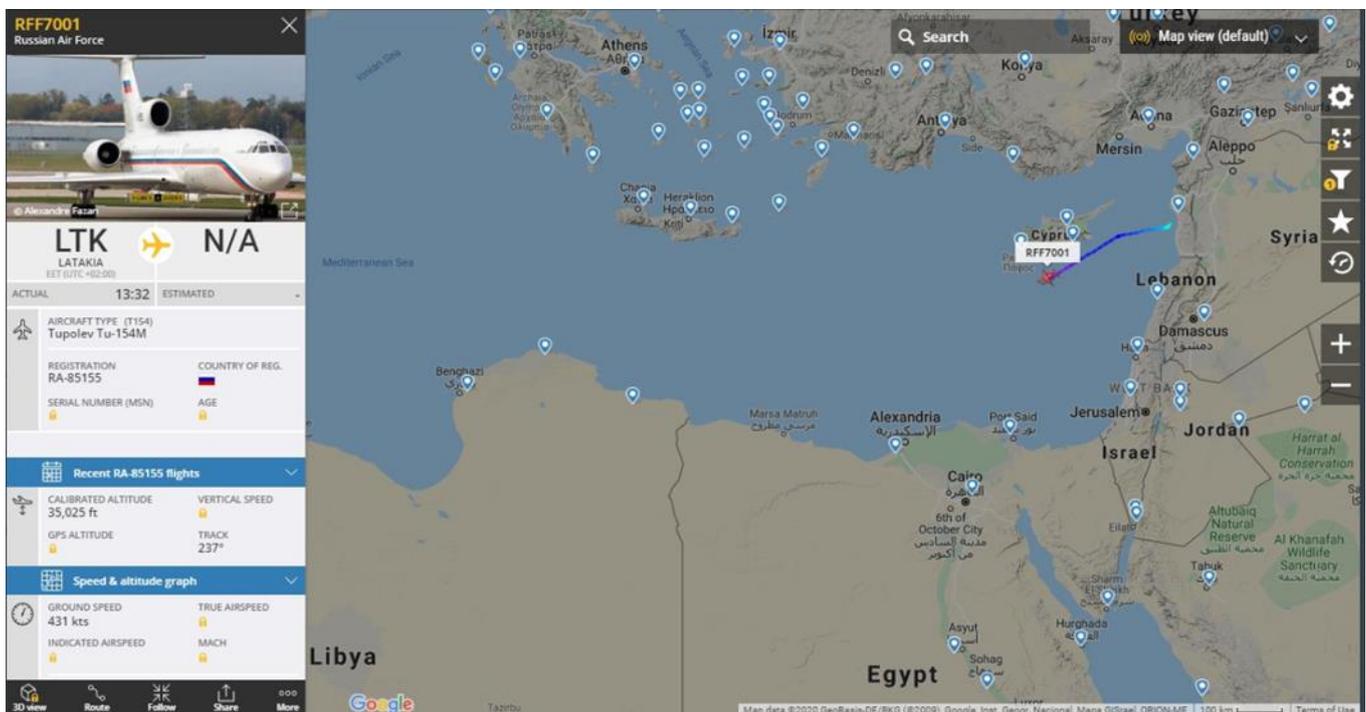


Photo No. (25) – Taken from Flight Radar 24, showing that a Russian attack aircraft type Tu-154M and numbered RFF7001, kicked off from Latakia and headed to Libya on 11 January 2020.

For his part, a media activist from rural Damascus and displaced to Afrin, said that a batch of the recruits sent to Libya from the towns of southern Damascus, were transferred to Libya on **18 February 2020**, onboard TUPOLEV attack aircraft that departed from the Khmeimim Air Base to the Libyan city of Benghazi.

³⁵ "Cham Wings Airlines starts direct flights between Damascus and Benghazi", Ean Libya, 9 October 2019, (Last visited: 15 July 2020), <https://www.eanlibya.com/%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D9%8F%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%82-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%8B%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%8B%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%B7/>

This information intersects with what a retired U.S. Air Force officer reported, quoting Flight Radar 24 at 12:12 GMT on 18 February 2020. He said that a Russian attack aircraft of the same type, indicated by the former witness, TUPOLEV, No. RFF8061, had taken off from the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia, then was out of the radar's scope until it returned to Syria after 12 hours, which makes it probable that this plane transported Syrian fighters, pointing out that two similar flights were monitored on 16/15 and 17/18 February 2020.

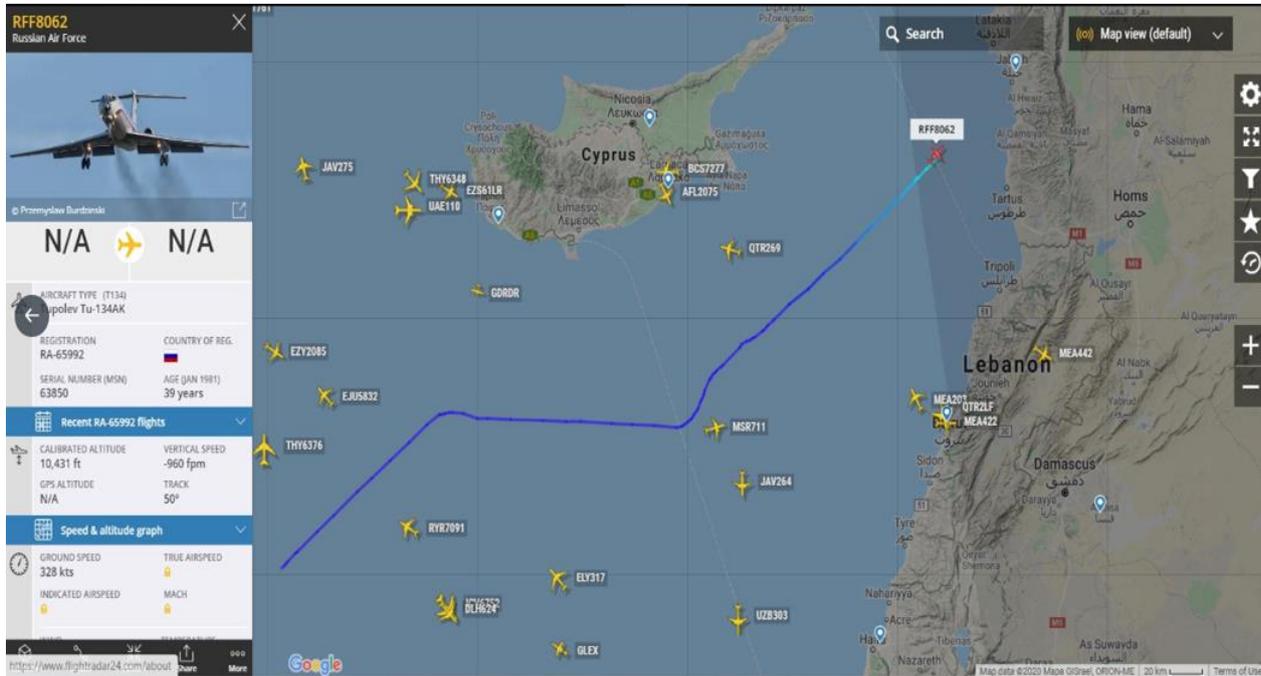


Photo No. (26)

Playback of flight RFF8062

GREAT CIRCLE DISTANCE: N/A
 AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: -
 ACTUAL FLIGHT TIME: -
 AVERAGE ARRIVAL DELAY: -

FROM: - TO: -

TIME: 3:12 PM UTC
 CALIBRATED ALTITUDE: 28,000 FT
 GROUND SPEED: 0 KTS
 VERTICAL SPEED: 0 FPM
 TRACK: 48°
 SQUAWK: 0000

AIRCRAFT: Tupolev Tu-134AK
 REGISTRATION: RA-65992
 SERIAL NUMBER (MSN): 63850

DATE	FROM	TO	FLIGHT	FLIGHT TIME	STD	ATD	STA	STATUS
18 Feb 2020	-	-	(RFF8062)	-	-	-	-	Scheduled
18 Feb 2020	Latakia (LTK)	-	(RFF8061)	-	-	3:22 AM	-	Scheduled
17 Feb 2020	Moscow (CKL)	-	(RFF7027)	-	-	11:04 PM	-	Scheduled
16 Feb 2020	Latakia (LTK)	Moscow (CKL)	(RFF7028)	4:05	-	7:22 PM	-	Landed 12:27 AM
16 Feb 2020	-	-	(RFF8062)	-	-	-	-	Unknown
16 Feb 2020	Latakia (LTK)	-	(RFF8061)	-	-	4:42 AM	-	Unknown
15 Feb 2020	Moscow (CKL)	-	(RFF7027)	-	-	10:32 PM	-	Unknown

Photo No. (27) – The two photos, taken from Flight Radar 24 on 18 February 2020, show a Russian attack aircraft that took off from Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia, disappearing of the radar's scope till 12 hour later, as it returned to Syria.

According to the witness "Raed B.",³⁶ one of the recruits from Quneitra enlisted to fight in Libya, who was yet there when the report was being composed on 30 June 2020, said that he was transferred to Libya on the evening of 11 May 2020 from Latakia International Airport aboard the Cham Wings Airlines to the Libyan city of Benghazi, noting that most of the Syrian fighters were gathered in a private camp in the city of Benghazi in two military units "319" and "36", and that "Mbrouk Ghazi", Commander of the Haftar-affiliated Operation Room of the Western Area, was in charge of them.

The information provided by witness "Raed" intersects with the details recorded by Flight Radar 24 on the same date, 11 May 2020, specifically at 7:57 pm GMT. Radar 24 recorded information of a plane of the Cham Wings Airlines that departed from Latakia (the same location indicated by the witness) and went to Libya, particularly the city of Benghazi (the same landing place the witness referred to), which makes it probable that the plane was transporting Syrian fighters.

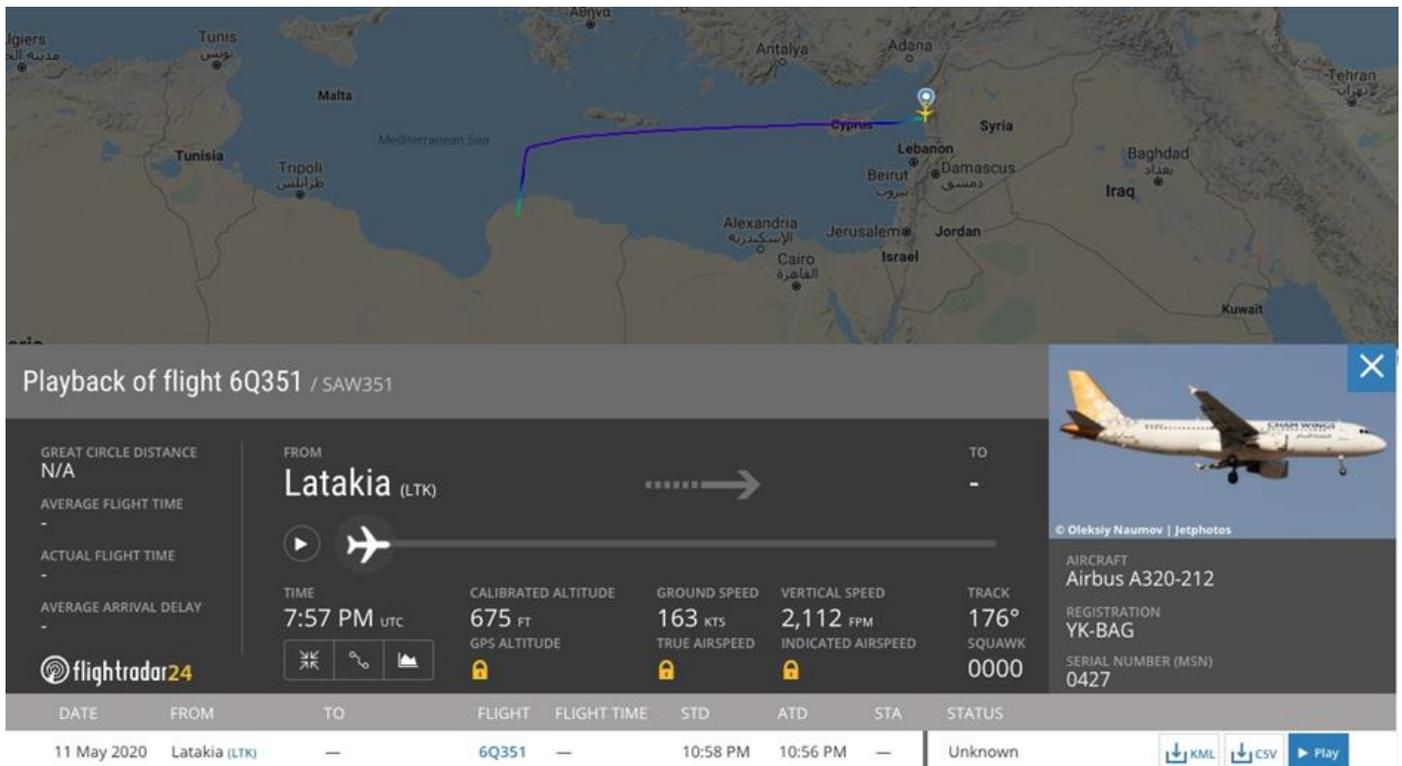


Photo No. (28) – Taken from Flight Radar 24, showing information related to a plane of the Cham Wings Airlines that took off from Latakia, heading to Libya on 11 May 2020. The registered flight details match those reported by the witness "Raed B."

³⁶ Previously quoted witness.

"Fadia M." from the city of Daraa who has been living in the city of Benghazi for thirty years since her husband works there,³⁷ witnessed the transfer of Syrian fighters to Libya onboard a civilian Syrian plane, which departed from Latakia International Airport / Basel al-Assad Airport on 12 May 2020, said:

"I was in Syria for a visit, and on 12 May 2020 I traveled from Latakia International Airport to Libya. When I boarded the plane there were about 30 civilians, mostly women and children. There was also a large number of young men talking about fighting in Libya; they were accompanied by three officers in military outfits. Most of the young men are from Southern Syria, considering their dialect. I also managed to identify two of them, as they both belong to the family of Yassin 'aqel al-Mahamid. However, I did not look at them and did not show them that I knew who they were."

She added:

"It was night, when we arrived in the Libyan city of Benghazi. Even at Latakia International Airport, we had to stay for four hours at the waiting hall, for the flight office asked us to come early. When we got on the plane, all the fighters were already seated. We were surprised that the airport did not ask us to pay a fine for overweight as usual."

The information provided by the former witness intersects with the a flight's details recorded by Flight Radar 24 on 12 May 2020, which indicate that a plane belonging to the Cham Wings Airlines departed from Latakia International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi. In this regard, STJ's digital-fact-checking expert said that this plane had landed at an air base in the Libyan city of Benghazi, which makes it probable that this plane was carrying Syrian fighters transferred to Libya.

A reliable source told STJ that he believes this flight had landed at the Benina International Airport, which shares an airstrip with an airbase near it, designated for takeoff and landing.

³⁷ The 12th eyewitness.

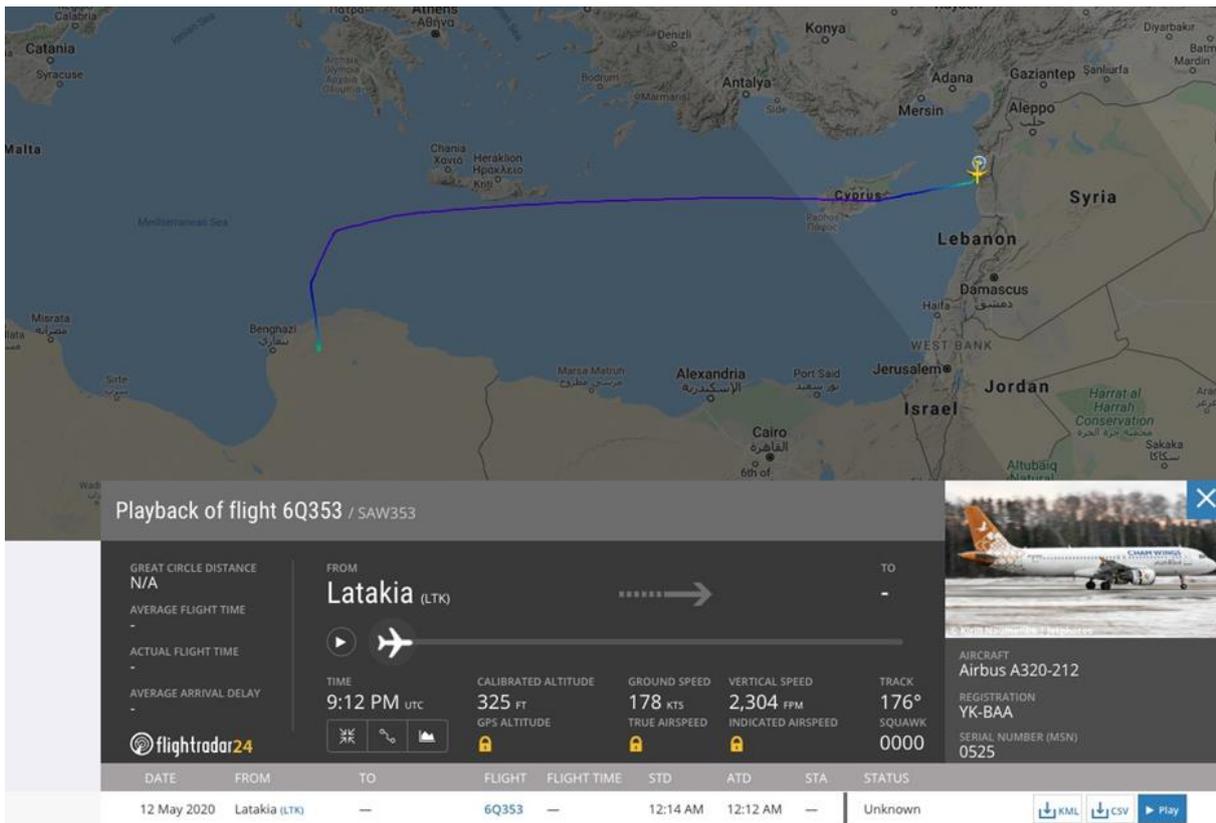


Photo No. (29) - taken from Flight Radar 24 shows that the tracked plane departed from Latakia to Libya on 12 May 2020, at 9:12 GMT.

For his part, a media activist in Suwaida said that two of his cousins,³⁸ fighters of the Rijal al-Karama Movement, were recruited and transferred to Libya along with other fighters on 9 April 2020, pointing out that they were transported onboard a Russian attack aircraft, after Russian soldiers confiscated their phones to prevent them from filming the transfer process or the military facilities at the airport, for they were taken to [the Ghardabiya Air Base](#), located in the city of Sirte, central Libya, and is known as the Sirte Air Base, which was a gathering point. Then, they were given protection tasks and assigned combating attacks on the airport, the witness said, adding that the number of fighters recruited from Suwaida alone amounted to 600 fighters on 29 June 2020.

Flight Radar 24 tracked a length of a flight conducted by a Russian aircraft, type TUPOLEV, with the serial number RFF8061. Commenting on this, STJ's digital-fact-checking expert said that the aircraft left from Latakia, passing through Beirut, Lebanon, in the early morning of the same day reported by the witness, adding that it headed towards southwest Libya. A reliable source, contacted by STJ, said it is likely that the aircraft has landed in the Tamanhint Airbase, near Sabhā city, southwest Libya.

³⁸ The 13th eyewitness.

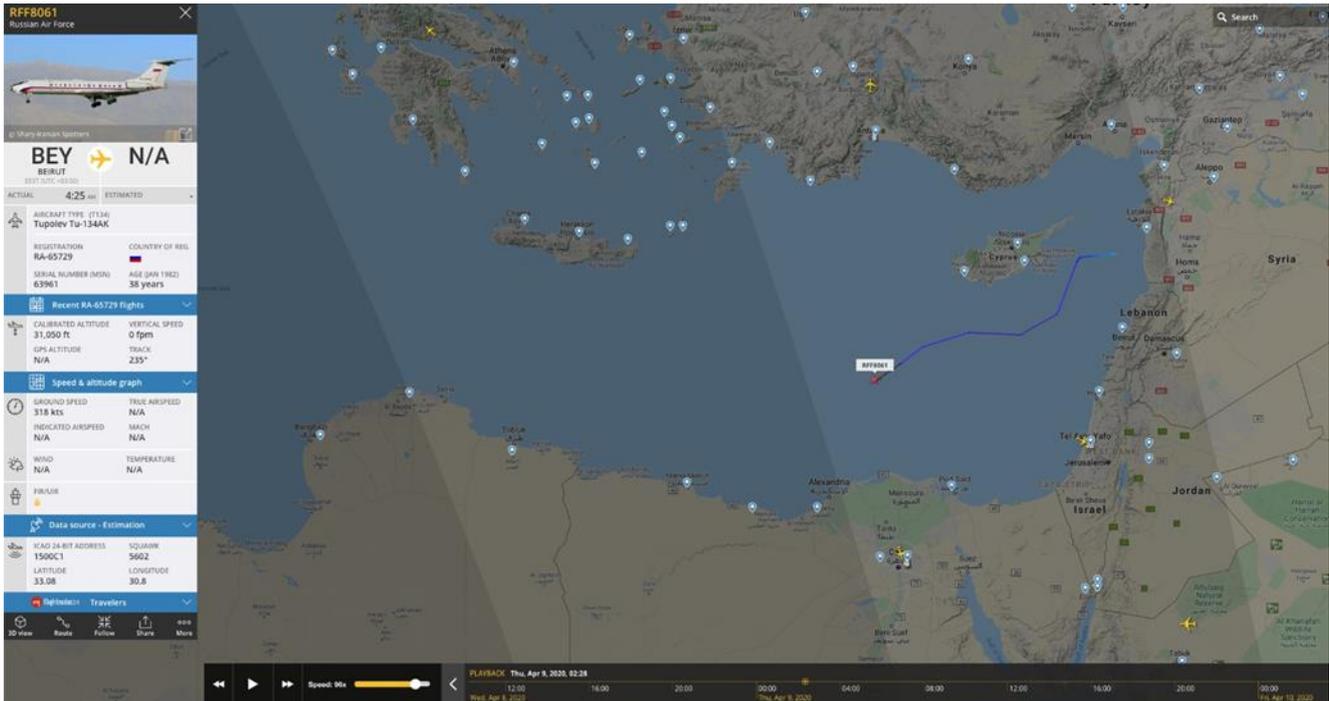


Photo No. (30) – Taken from Flight Radar 24, showing a length of a flight carried out by a Russian aircraft, which has possibly taken off from Latakia to Libya on 9 April 2020, particularly at 4:25 GMT.

On the evening of the same day, 9 April 2020, Flight Radar 24 recorded a length of the flight conducted by the same Russian aircraft, of the same type, that returned from Libya to Latakia, according to STJ’s digital-fact-check expert.



Photo No. (31) – taken from Flight Radar 24, showing a length of the return flight of the same Russian aircraft, which seems to have headed from Latakia to Libya on the evening of 9 April 2020.

It is worth mentioning that STJ's digital-fact-checking expert has tried to track the departure schedules of the previously mentioned flights, reported by the witnesses, particularly the ones conducted through Damascus and Latakia international airports, searching through the websites and the official pages of the two airports, finding none of their timetables. He also failed to find the arrival schedules of those flights through the website and pages of the Benina International Airport in the Libyan city of Benghazi, unlike the fashion of international airports which post their flight schedules and routes on their websites.

An informed Libyan source told STJ that the Benina International Airport suspended local and international flights on 19 March 2020, and resumed its activities on 4 May 2020 allowing the return of Libyans stuck abroad only.

5. Fighting in Libya and the death of two Syrian recruits

On 22 May 2020, media activists,³⁹ quoting the pages *Salamyah Now* and *Salamiyah Mubashar*, reported the death of Jamil al-A'raj, one of the fighters recruited and transferred to Libya from rural Salamyah by the Syrian government and Russian forces. STJ's field researcher, on his turn, managed to verify the news, saying that the deceased was a fighter of the Syrian regular forces, adding that it is most likely that he operated within the ranks of the 4th Division, led by the brother of the Syrian president Maher al-Assad.



Photo No. (32) – showing Jamil al-A'raj, a Syrian fighter who died after being recruited to fight in Libya, as reported by Salamyah Now and Mubashar.

³⁹ For further information, refer to the following link:

<https://www.facebook.com/maher.sharafeddine/photos/a.447192615424842/1990812197729535/?type=1&heater>

On 26 April 2020, a source reported that a formation,⁴⁰ backed by both the Russian state and forces, nicknamed ISIS Hunters, was sent on a mission to fight in Libya. The ISIS Hunters, the source added, was founded about two years ago, in sync with the Syrian government and its allies' largest campaign against the Islamic State / ISIS /Daesh in the eastern areas, adding that the Hunters are from various Syrian areas, such as the coast and rural Hama, including the city of Suqaylabiyah, northern rural Hama, and the city of Salamyah, southeast Hama city.⁴¹

This information, mentioned by the previous source, intersects with what was reported by the *Suwayda 24 Network* on 17 June 2020,⁴² which said that a security company named Al-Sayyad/ Hunter, formerly called "ISIS Hunters" for security and protection services, based in Suqaylabiyah city in Hama province, is one of the key entities that supervised the recruitment efforts in the province of Suwaida. The company is run by a person called Fawaz Michael Gerges, one of the leading officials supervising the recruitment of mercenaries in Syria and sending them to Libya, in cooperation with the Wagner Company. Gerges maintains strong ties with Russian forces in Syria, the network added and published photos of the copies which the recruited fighters sign when applying to fight in Libya.

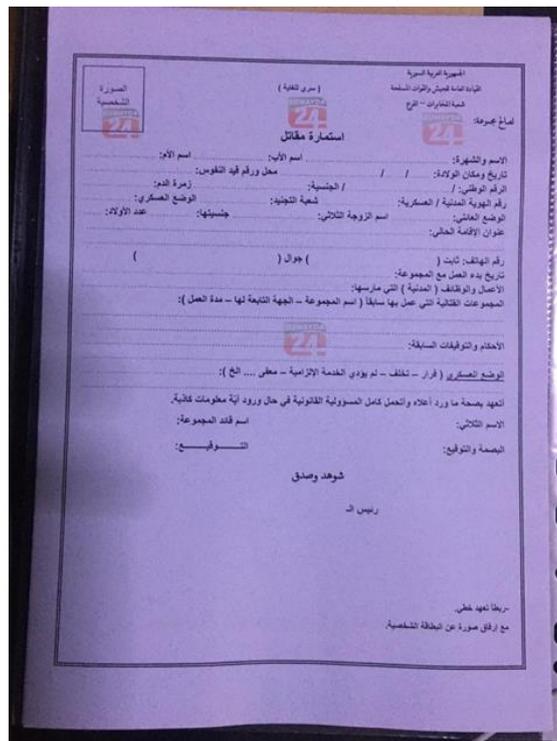


Photo No. (33) – posted by Suwayda 24 of a fighter’s application form, headed with a note of caution, “classified,” offered to men wishing to fight in Libya.

⁴⁰ For further information, refer to the following link:

<https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/1254472065312317446>

⁴¹ For further information, refer to the following article: Jawad Tamimi, “ISIS Hunters”, 14 April 2020, (Last visited: 16 July 2020), <http://www.aymennjawad.org/22565/>

⁴² “Putin and Assad throw hundreds of Syrian youths as mercenaries into the Libyan furnace, dozens of whom are from Suwaida”, Suwayda 24, 17 June 2020, (Last visited: 16 July 2020), <https://suwayda24.com/?p=14322>

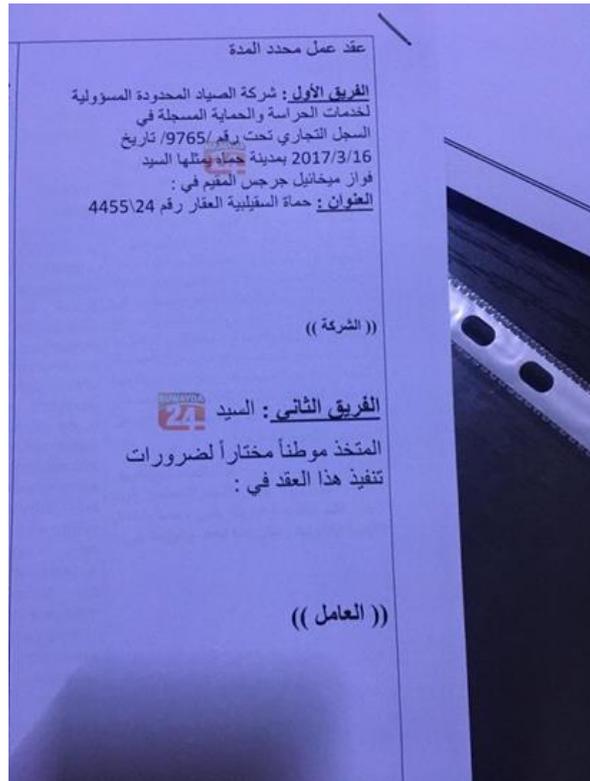


Photo No. (34) – A copy of the contract with the al-Sayyad/ISIS Hunters, one of the companies supervising the recruitment of fighters in Suwaida and transferring them to Libya, according to Suwayda 24 Network.

6. Syrian children recruited and transferred to Libya

Several of the eyewitnesses, interviewed by STJ, stressed that children also had been recruited and deployed to Libya, particularly from Deir ez-Zor, rural Damascus and Quneitra.

“Mohammad M.”, born in Deir ez-Zor in 2004, is one of the children under the age of 16, who has been recruited and mobilized to Libya in May 2020. Mohammad’s brother recounted the following to STJ:⁴³

“When my father died, my brother was coerced to work. He repaired tires on the Myadin Sharqi road. Given the nature of his work and his interaction with people, Mohammad was introduced to two young men from the Saleh al-Harbi Legion — Nayef al-Harbi and Hamad al-Harbi,⁴⁴ the cousins of Saleh al-Harbi and also recruits of his legion. The two young men managed to get close to my brother and exploited his young age. They made him leave his job and get in the car with them, roaming the area's streets. It was their attempt to attract him. My brother’s behavior changed. He was not the same, going absent from home for long hours and from his

⁴³ The 14th eyewitness.

⁴⁴ A brigade affiliated with the Republican Guard, formed by Saleh al-Harbi, a notable of the Bani Harb clan, and commanded by him in the Al Bukamal area.

job as well. This made me search for him. I discovered that he was sleeping at a military facility in the city of Al Bukamal, affiliated with Saleh al-Harbi. A few days later, on 24 April 2020, he showed up at home with his colleagues. He was wearing a military outfit and bearing arms, we could not question him anymore."

He added:

"On May 14, my brother called us. He told us that he was attending a military training. We contacted Saleh al-Harbi in no time, telling him that Mohammad is a mere child, who is yet 16 years old. Saleh al-Harbi assured us that it was a regular training. However, news of my brother went lacking. A few days later, I received verified information from militants of the 4th Division in Deir ez-Zor Air Base that Mohammad, with a number of his friends, is in the Sbaikhan village. They were transported from Deir ez-Zor Air Base to Khmeimim Air Base. It was then when I sensed the catastrophe we are doomed to suffer. I headed to Deir ez-Zor Air Base, seeking a confirmation of the news and to know my brother's whereabouts, but it was all to no avail. I then approached the Saleh Al-Harbi's posts in Al Bukamal. I talked to him and blamed him for the matter. He, for his part, denied the news that my brother and others were transported to the Khmeimim Air Base."

When a number of the clans' dignitaries interfered, al-Saleh confessed that he sent Mohammad and dozens of young men to Libya on the demand of the Russian forces, where he is to operate as a guard of the oil and government facilities and that they will be paid a lot of money in return, the witness added.

A reliable Libyan source, contacted by STJ, said it is likely that the children are being deployed to protect oil facilities in the Oil Crescent, according to verified information obtained in May 2020, where Sudanese recruits that guarded the facilities in the Oil Crescent were substituted by Syrian ones.

"Karim M.", also born in Deir ez-Zor in 2003, is another child recruited to be transported to Libya in May 2020. His sister told STJ the following:

"My brother used to work for a restaurant in al-Joura neighborhood, central Deir ez-Zor city. He regularly visited our paternal cousins, both militants of the National Defense in Deir ez-Zor and tightly connected with Firas al-Iraqiyeh. Last February, Karim called our elder brother, who travelled to Lebanon five years ago with his wife, where he works in the field of construction, and told him that he will be joining the National Defense like his cousins, to protect himself from the mandatory conscription and to gain some money. We all protested his wishes in the beginning, for he is a child unaware of life's dangers. However, when we listened to him, we approved his decision, but still feared for him. Later on, my brother was subjected to a 20-day military training. Upon his return, he committed himself to carrying out patrols with other National Defense recruits within the neighborhoods and streets of Deir ez-Zor."

She added:

"In April 2020, my brother informed us that he was attending another military training, this time supervised by the Russian forces, along with his cousins and friends. The training was to last for no more than two months, after which he will make money and get closer to his commanders. This is what they told him and what they instilled in his mind, for he was still a teenager that could easily be carried away with dreams. Despite our refusal of the alleged training, which his cousins convinced him into, Karim insisted on attending it, thinking that he has grown up into an adult. He had to leave for the training on 6 May 2020, the day on which they were supposed to gather and then depart for the training. We heard nothing of Karim since then."

When news about Karim went totally lacking, the family decided to go to the National Defense headquarters at the al-'umal neighborhood in the city of Deir ez-Zor, where they sought to know Karim's whereabouts, but the officer there denied any knowledge of the matter. On the way out of the facility, a militant, who pitied Karim's mother, told her that her son was recruited to be transferred to Libya with his cousins and other young men, the witness said, adding that:

"My mother lost her temper and headed to the place of residence of Firas al-Iraqiyeh, commander of the National Defense in Deir ez-Zor. As usual, the guards denied us access, but my mother's screams brought Firas out. Recognizing us, he let us in. We inquired into Karim's conditions. He told us that his cousins have taken him with them to Libya, and that they were transported to Deir ez-Zor Air Base first, next to Khmeimim Air Base and finally to Libya."

One of the sources,⁴⁵ informed of the matter in Deir ez-Zor, said that of the recruits sent to Libya in May and June 2020 were "Mohammad L.", 16 years old, "Assa'ad A.", 17 years old and a breadwinner, and "Luwai A.", 16 years old. In Eastern Ghouta, rural Damascus, STJ was informed by a local source that no fewer than eight children,⁴⁶ all under the age of 17, were recruited to be transferred to Libya in early May 2020, two of whom were identified as "Haytham S." and "Khalid A."

In Qunietra, a media activist pointed out that no fewer than 12 children,⁴⁷ who are between 14 and 17 years old, were recruited at the Mumtane town in Quneitra, to be transported to Libya. STJ's field researcher, nonetheless, could not get the personal information of the recruited children.

⁴⁵ Previously quoted eyewitness.

⁴⁶ The 16th eyewitness.

⁴⁷ The 17th eyewitness.

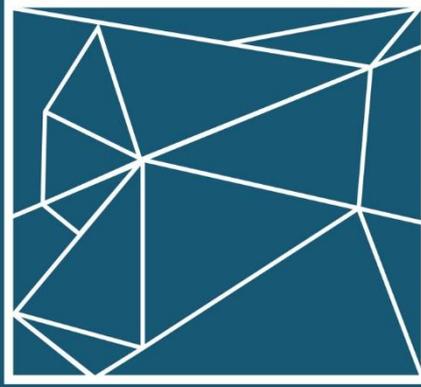
In Suwaida, the *Suwayad 24 Network* reported the recruitment of a child,⁴⁸ under the age of 18, called "Amjad A." to fight in Libya, after he was lured with money, travelling to Libya without his parents' knowledge.

The network also reported that a source, close to Amjad's family, has told the outlet that he was born in 21 December 2002, according to the family register, which means that he was still six months away from being 18, adding that he gave his parents a surprising call informing them that he was at the Khmeimim Air Base. Two days from the first call, he again contacted them using a foreign number, saying that he arrived in Libya and that he would not be capable of calling them until a week later.

While the report was being finalized, trusted Libyan sources reported information indicating that three passenger buses, used for transporting employees by Libyan oil companies, arrived full of Syrian fighters, who reached the El Sharara Oil Field, southern Libya (Awbari city) on Tuesday, 14 July 2020. The source stressed that this was not the first time, for Syrian fighters arrived in the area aboard four buses in mid-June 2020.

⁴⁸ "Child from Suwaida surprises his parents calling them from Libya", *Suwayda 24 Network*, 30 June 2020, (Last visited: 16 July 2020), <https://suwayda24.com/?p=14454&fbclid=IwAR3wccgzFoUdmKO5FkDxJrKanFtmc5-JmLdlAsUHHIMj2pRXRt83WMal6A>

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History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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