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Russia Recruits Syrian Fighters to Armenia

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This report records the testimonies of Syrian fighters recruited by Russia to serve in Armenia, as well as testimonies about individual Syrian-Armenians who volunteered to fight in the second Nagorno-Karabakh War

This report was previously titled “To Nagorno-Karabakh, not Libya: How did Russian Forces Trick Dozens of Syrians into Mercenarism in Armenia?”. Following comments and additional testimonies, the report was renamed, revised, and updated March 2021.

Executive Summary

From the Russia-operated [Hmeimim Air Base](#), northeast of Jableh city in Latakia province, Syrian fighters affiliated with pro-Regime forces were shipped off to Armenia during the summer and fall of 2020. While the recruitment process resembles that conducted by Russia when it sent Syrian regime fighters [to Libya](#), it is unclear how these shipments are related to the 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh war, fought between Armenia and Azerbaijan between September and November 2020. The Russian military carried out the enlistments in collusion with the Syrian government, according to the testimonies and accounts that Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) obtained from witnesses and several credible sources. The recruits are almost exclusively members of the 5th Legion and are particularly from the provinces of Homs and Deir ez-Zor.

The testimonies delivered by STJ’s field researchers verified that the recruited fighters were presumably bound for Libya. However, at some point in late summer a decision was made to redirect these fighters to Armenia, a plan only disclosed to the recruits later.

At least five transfers of Syrian fighters contracted by Russia are documented in this report, in addition to an estimation of casualties. STJ recorded nearly 10 deaths, with only a few bodies delivered to families so far, and over 40 wounded. The injured recruits were returned from Armenia to a military hospital in Homs province.

Additionally, the report documents the travel of dozens of Syrian-Armenians from Beirut and Damascus airports to Armenia in order to volunteer in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. STJ emphasizes that this occurred on a strictly volunteer basis, in no way equivalent with the recruitment of Syrians as military contractors/mercenaries by Russia and Turkey, whether in Libya or Azerbaijan.

The following report is one part of STJ’s larger efforts to investigate the ongoing recruitment of thousands of Syrians, both militants and civilians, into warzones alien to them. These recruitments have so far been overseen by Turkey and Russia.¹

Methodology

For the purposes of this report, STJ conducted a total of 10 interviews, including personnel of the Syrian government forces recruited by Russia as contractors and volunteers from Syria’s Armenian community, as well as family members of recruits sent to Armenia during the

¹ “Government Policies Contributing to Growing Incidence of Using Syrians as Mercenary Fighters”, STJ, 22 November 2020, <https://stj-sy.org/en/government-policies-contributing-to-growing-incidence-of-using-syrians-as-mercenary-fighters/>, (Last visit: 24 November 2020).

covered period. The persons whose testimonies are listed herein were contacted either in person or online between September 2020 and January 2021.

STJ initially published this report under the title “To Nagorno-Karabakh, not Libya: How did Russian Forces Trick Dozens of Syrians into Mercenarism in Armenia?”. After the report’s publication, several activists, journalists, and human rights defenders reached out to STJ with comments and questions about the evidence included. In response, STJ revisited sources and removed any ambiguous testimonies from sources who the organization could not reestablish contact with. Furthermore, STJ interviewed additional sources and incorporated their testimonies.

While STJ was not able to acquire visual evidence relating to Russian-recruited non-Armenian Syrians travelling to Armenia, the testimonies included in this report were given by a number of individuals with no relation to one another and from different parts of Syria.

STJ’s digital forensics analyst tracked aircraft flights which carried fighters from Syria to Armenia, but was only able to confirm the mentioned flights relating to Syrian-Armenians. In relation to this, STJ would like to clarify that the Flightradar 24 website, which the organization frequently uses to track military flights, is not capable of providing conclusive data on all such flights that occur. While answering some of the most [frequently asked questions](#) on its website, Flightradar24 mentions that the tracking details of some aircraft might be “restricted or not displayed.” These flights often correspond to aircraft belonging to militaries, or to civilian operators whose owners request that they be blocked. Furthermore, some flights may be outside the service operator’s coverage or not equipped with a compatible transponder.

Restricted aircraft

Operators of private or sensitive aircraft may request their tracking details be restricted or not displayed. Generally, aircraft requesting that they not be displayed on Flightradar24 are military aircraft. Some military aircraft, such as various transport aircraft, are visible.

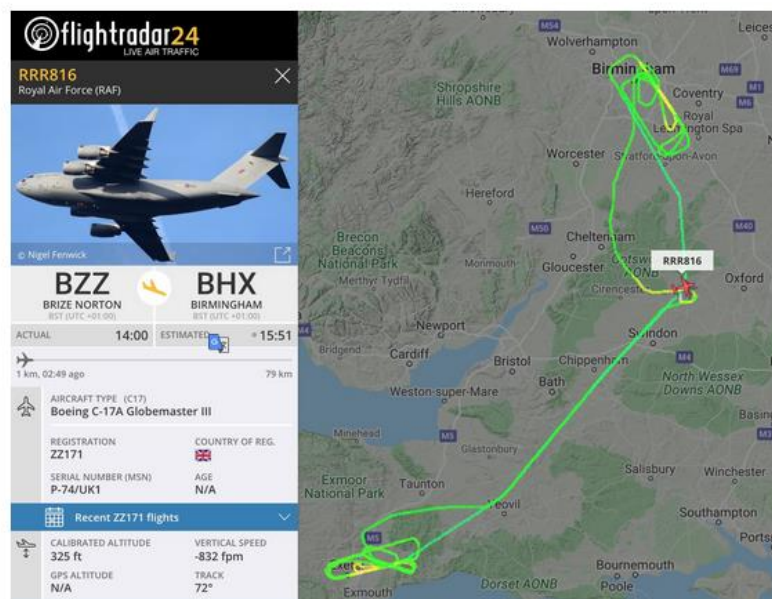


Image 1- Screenshot taken from [Flightradar24](#), particularly the section where the website explains why the tracking details of some aircraft are restricted.

STJ re-emphasizes that flight tracking data is only valuable in helping corroborate investigative work, and that such data or the lack thereof is not sufficient to either confirm or deny that a flight has taken place.

1. Syrians Hired as Contractors in Armenia

A. How were these enlistments brokered?

The reported recruitments were arranged at the direct request of the Russian forces, stationed in Hmeimim Air Base, who summoned the Syrian government forces to their aid. The latter played the role of mediator between closely affiliated clan dignitaries, brokers, and registrars, and Russian forces, according to the testimonies.

In Deir ez-Zor, military and civilian sources provided accounts indicating that clan notables and commanders of pro-government militias promoted enlistments among Syrian men, grabbed the attention of some, and then commended them to the Russian forces. Among the brokers complicit in the recruitments were S. al-Harbi, M. al-Fayadd, M. al-Hamoud, and F. al-Iraqiya.

In Homs province, particularly the eastern suburbs, renowned figures also facilitated the recruitments, including F. al-Haddar, a sheikh of Bani Khalid clan, and M. al-Fadou's, sheikh of al-Fawa'era clan, as well as M. al-Melehm and A. al-Nassif, who are leading figures of the al-Na'im clans.

A recruit of the 5th Legion, a legion founded by Russia and operating as part of the Syrian military, testified that two batches of fighters/mercenaries were flown to Armenia on 21 October 2020. The first batch was brokered by M. al-Hamoud included 23 recruits. The second batch was brokered by M. al-Fayadd and included 14 recruits. The recruits were first transported to Hmeimim Air Base, then shipped to Armenia.²

B. To Armenia instead of Libya

The enlistments of fighters to be mercenaries or contractors in Armenia were less straightforward than those intending to serve in Libya, the witnesses interviewed by STJ's field researchers emphasized. For example, the recruits, or their families, were not provided information as to the true destination of enlisters. Many families were shocked to hear that their sons are fighting in Armenia when they were supposedly attending to certain tasks in Libya.

Commenting on this, a Capitan of the 5th Legion said:

"The recruits transferred to fight in Armenia weren't entirely informed of the process' details. They initially signed up to fight in Libya for money, given that drives advocating such enlistments were already underway across several provinces back in those months. I believe that the recruits were sent to Armenia as combat escalated there,

² The full names of the persons complicit in those recruitments are withheld by STJ for security reasons.

while active fighting halted in Libya. It's a good thing, I would rather say, because they were on the waiting lists."

With respect to the so-called salaries the recruits are paid for fighting in Armenia, the Capitan added:

"Salaries often vary between 1000 and 2000 USD, depending on specialty and the skills demanded. The transferred recruits, however, are not entitled to compensation in cases of physical harm or injuries. We are also not obliged to search for missing recruits or conduct prisoner swap deals. Still, the recruits are free to receive the payments themselves, or delegate the matter to family members, who get paid by the brokers that signed up the recruits in the first place after deducting their own shares."

One recruit's mother, who was transferred to Armenia instead of Libya, said they were manipulated. Her son, J. S., was sent to Armenia without the slightest hint as to the destination. She recounted the following to STJ's researcher:

"We were in a dire need for money, so my son sought S. al-Harbi's office, intending to join his armed group—al-Harbi Brigade. There, they persuaded him into travelling to Libya, referring to a lucrative salary. He indeed registered his name, but was not signed up immediately. They called him on 15 September, saying a flight was heading to Libya soon. My son left home the next day. He called us from Hmeimim Air Base using an officer's cellphone on 18 September, saying he was tasked with protecting vital facilities in Libya. That was the last time we heard from him. Later, people from al-Harbi's office told us that my son and other young men were transferred to Armenia instead of Libya, claiming they were short on fighters there. We went to the office to inquire into his whereabouts, and there they told us he will return when his national duty is fulfilled. They assured us that he already received two months' salary, and was still in Armenia."

A relative of a recruit from Palmyra city, Homs province, said that M. A. was killed in action and his body was recently delivered to his family. M. A. signed up to work in Libya, but his destination changed without his knowledge or the knowledge of his peers, a relative of M.A. claimed. His relative added:

"In mid-August, M. A. registered his name to travel to Libya. The enlistment was brokered by A. Abdulmu'ti, a member of the National Defense Forces in Palmyra city. The registrar provided my relative with an advance of 500,000 Syrian pounds (SYP) on his 1000 USD salary. = 15 other men were also enlisted. They were all gathered at the Palmyra Air Base on 11 September, and spent the next two days there. From there, they were transferred to Hmeimim Air Base, and were eventually dispatched to Armenia. The recruits' cellphones, watches, and other personal belongings, were all withheld before they travelled."

GH., Raqqa-based fighter of the Army of Free Tribes, which operates under the command of Turkey al-Buhamad told STJ:

“In May 2020, I registered my name intending to go to Libya. Several months passed, but still I was not granted a permission to travel. In August, Abu Talal al-Shamari, commander of the division under which I fight, called me. He told me to prepare myself, with my cousins, because we were heading to Armenia. The task was guarding warehouses and security posts in exchange for a 1000 USD salary.”

The fighter added:

“I was prepared, so was my nephew S. al-Bandar. A week later, buses were sent to [the division’s] headquarters in Zour Shamer, east of Raqqa. We left the village; 17 fighters. We were transported to the Deir ez-Zor Airport, where we met other fighters. They too were heading to Armenia. From there, we were flown to the Hmeimim Air Base and were subjected to an extensive inspection. They took our cell phones and all other personal belongings, including wedding rings and silver bracelets, even the lighters we had. We spent three day there, before we were transferred to Armenia. It was nearly at the end of August, or in early September. It was already dark, when we arrived in Armenia, four buses and several military vehicles were waiting for us. We travelled all night; it was at dawn when we finally arrived at military barracks, surrounded by dense forest. We never knew the name of the location we were taken to.”

Some fighters interviewed, however, said that they *were* aware of where they were being sent.

M. Sh., a 28-year-old Raqqa-based fighter of the National Defense, told STJ:

“I went to Armenia in September 2020. On 16 August, I left for the Deir ez-Zor Military Airport, from where I was transported via the bus to the Hmeimim Air Base, with other 65 persons. I spent nearly a week at the Russian base, trained with others on how to act in Armenia and the work there. They have confiscated all our personal belongings and banned us from communicating with anyone. However, the families of the recruits were contacted by specific people from the military base. During the training, they told us that our mission was to protect oil wells and military facilities. In Armenia, I was tasked with guard services at a facility where military vehicles were housed.”

A. B., a 28-year-old Syrian Palestinian volunteer conscript of the Liwa al-Quds/ al-Quds Brigade, within the Popular Committees in the Aleppo-based Handarat refugee camp, said:

“In total, there were 21 of us, including 18 Armenians from Aleppo, who volunteered within the popular committees at the Handarat Camp. The other three, including me, were Palestinians from the camp and volunteer conscripts within the al-Quds Brigade. We operated under the popular committees in Aleppo as guards at the checkpoints set up within the Handarat Camp. We were paid salaries of 100,000 Syrian Pounds. One day, an Armenian young man, Z. Y., told us about the conflict and the battles in Armenia. He said that we could have jobs there, not in fighting, but as guards in the

Artsakh region, adding that we will be paid 40 USD per day, with other needs, including food and drinks, all covered.”

The fighter added:

“On 17 October 2020, we travelled to Armenia through the Damascus International Airport, on board a Cham Wings aircraft. There were not too many battles there. After we arrived at the capital, we were given the Armenian Army’s outfits and held Armenian flags. We were accompanied by a translator and taken into a mountainous area, where guard posts were set up. There, we were tasked with listening to walkie-talkies and had to explain to them all they, [the mercenary fighters recruited by Turkey], said (in Arabic), because we were experienced in military action since Aleppo. On 7 December 2020, we returned to Damascus. They did not allow us to stay in Armenia or give us the Armenian nationality. However, they gave us 3000 USD each, which they called a reward.”

STJ was not able to uncover more information regarding how the travel of these several Palestinian fighters from the Handarat camp alongside Syrian-Armenians relates to the Russian recruitment conducted elsewhere.

C. Flights to Armenia

The Syrian fighters were flown from Hmeimim Air Base to Erebuni, in Armenia, aboard Russian military aircraft, a commander of the 5th Legion told STJ’s field researcher. The enlisted mercenaries were transferred on consecutive flights between 19 and 22 September. Others were transferred on 12, 21, and 27 October 2020.

STJ’s digital forensic analyst attempted to track the aforementioned flights, but none of their logs were available on the Flightradar24 website.

D. Deaths and injuries

STJ was unable to collect either official or unofficial statistics as to the exact number of Syrian fighters either recruited, injured, or killed in Armenia. However, we collected testimonies from fighters and families about Syrians killed, injured, or currently missing in Armenia.

Over September and October, Russian forces transported the bodies of at least 15 Syrian mercenary fighters who died in Armenia. Likewise, they transferred no less than 12 injured fighters from Hmeimim Air Base to the Homs Military Hospital.

As many as six batches of dead or injured recruits arrived in the military hospital, coming from Hmeimim Air Base, where they landed after being returned from Libya and Armenia in August, September, and October, a medical staffer of the Homs Military Hospital told STJ, stressing that the last two batches were undoubtedly brought back from Armenia. He said:

“Over the past three months, 35 bodies of fallen fighters and a larger number of wounded ones were deposited at the hospital, coming from Hmeimim Air Base. They

were fighting in Libya, or Armenia/Azerbaijan. Many bodies have not yet been taken by families.”

He added:

“On 29 September, and 12 October, nine bodies were brought in, had fragmentation wounds all over the skin and displayed marks of gunshots. The dead were certainly transferred from Armenia, the injured assured us, not to mention the information we were provided by the officers who transported the bodies from Hmeimim Air Base to the hospital.”

In the same context, five bodies of Syrian mercenary fighters, killed in Armenia, were entered into Tartus Military Hospital in two batches on 12 and 27 October, a recruit of the 5th Legion told STJ's researcher. They were then transported from the hospital to the Deir ez-Zor Airport. There, families were asked to come and receive their dead sons' bodies. In one of the report's accounts, a medical source from the Homs Military Hospital reported that two batches of wounded and dead recruits arrived at the hospital from Armenia on 29 September and 12 October 2020. However, *these dates remain contentious*. After this report was initially published, one commentator pointed to the fact that the war in Nagorno-Karabakh started on 27 September 2020, suggesting it was improbable that Syrians would be killed and their bodies sent back to Syria within a two-day period. STJ attempted to contact the source again to verify the dates; however, these efforts failed for security reasons. STJ will continue to investigate the timeline and publish additional information as it becomes available.

There is information about an additional 14 wounded fighters, originally from Deir ez-Zor, who have not yet been transferred back from Armenia, the recruit added.

The parents of a mercenary fighter, recently killed in Armenia, were contacted by the 4th Division and asked to come and take their son's body, along with his injured relative. The family said:

“The 4th Division broke the news. H. A. was only wounded. M. A. was killed. They said he died while performing national duty abroad. They told us that we could take the body and the injured young man from Homs Military Hospital. We indeed went there in the second half of October, and understood that both the killed and the injured recruits were transported from Hmeimim Air Base to the hospital aboard a military aircraft.”

According to testimonies collected, some of these contractors may still be missing. One fighter, D. GH., said:

“Those who wished could apply for a leave. I did apply and indeed returned in early December. It was then that I learned that my nephew was missing. He is still missing. Regarding salaries and payments, I delegated the matter to the guarantor/broker Turkey al-Buhamad, the commander of my division, who gave the money to my family in Syria. Al-Buhamad used to deliver the salary to my family every month. I never came

across my nephew, [S. al-Bandar], there. He was transported to another location. I do not have the slightest idea as to his whereabouts.”

E. What was the purpose of this recruitment process?

STJ’s work is based on collecting and documenting data and testimonies, which in this case did not provide insight into Russian motivations for such activities. The degree to which Russian recruitment of Syrians was related to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, a conflict in which Russia did not play an active role, remains unclear. A number of the witnesses interviewed state that these contractors were sent to Armenia weeks prior to the outbreak of the war, which was prepared for and initiated by Azerbaijan rather than Armenia.

Testimony by the aforementioned D. GH. from Raqqa states that he was employed guarding a military facility:

“With other 17 people, I was tasked guarding a garage, where heavy military vehicles were brought for repair. We carried out 12-hour shifts. There was a Syrian man; he did the translation. We were prohibited from using any contact means and never reached out to any of our families for nearly three months. Over the course of the service, we have done nothing but guard tasks and shift changes. I stayed there for almost three months, after which they told me that I could return to Syria and that they were changing recruits periodically.”

Prior to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia maintained a relatively significant [permanent military presence](#) in Armenia, including a military base and garrison, an airbase, and several border guard outposts. It is possible that this recruitment process was initially related to this military presence rather than in direct response to the outbreak of the 2020 war.

2. Syrian-Armenians volunteered and traveled from abroad to fight in Armenia

Based on accounts from five Syrian-Armenian sources, STJ documented that dozens of Armenians, based in Syria and other countries where they obtained asylum, travelled to fight alongside the Armenian military. This phenomenon occurred on an entirely volunteer basis and is part of a broader story in which members of Armenian diaspora communities from around the world, such as Canada, the USA, and France, went to fight in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. As was the case in these other countries, such actions were not arranged in coordination with any official entities in Syria, but were rather subject to arrangements between the persons in question and military entities in Armenia. Several of these individuals were killed while fighting.

STJ interviewed a source, Rafi Ghazarian, who stated:

“Some Armenians travelled from Syria and Lebanon to fight in Armenia. There were also campaigns to collect donations and assistance from Armenian residents in both countries to send them there, particularly to Syrian Armenians who sought refuge in

Nagorno-Karabakh, escaping the war in Syria. As Armenians, we will not allow a repetition of the 1915 massacre.”

A source claimed that an estimated 200 Syrian-Armenian young men are today present in Armenia for combat-related purposes. Most of these headed there to fight and to eventually receive the Armenian nationality.³ [Garo Manjikian](#), [a prominent member](#) of the Armenian community of Kesab in Latakia, referenced who was behind the volunteer-recruit process. He told STJ:

“The population of the Armenian villages in Kesab, Latakia province, almost entirely resettled in Lebanon. When the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh broke out, a member of the Lebanese Free Patriotic Movement, T. A., played an essential role in organizing Armenian young men, both Syrians and Lebanese, and sending them to the battlefield there. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (also known as Dashnaktsutyun), the largest Armenian political party in Lebanon, sent some of its recruits to fight there as well.

Manjikian told STJ that two batches of fighters travelled from Syria and Lebanon to participate in the combat in Armenia. He added:

“The first batch travelled through Beirut Airport on 6 October 2020. The second batch, however, left through the Damascus International Airport, flown by the Cham Wings Airlines on 17 October 2020. The second group included Armenian volunteers, and others who are members of the Iranian-backed Liwa’ al-Quds [al-Quds Brigade].”⁴

Tracking the information provided by Garo Manjikian, STJ’s digital forensic analyst spotted the two flights below.

³ Members of the Armenian diaspora, including from the Syrian community, are able to acquire Armenian citizenship through a [simplified process](#) that does not require legal residence within the country. Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Armenia has [prioritized Syrian-Armenian applicants](#) leading to an application processing time as short as half a year.

⁴ While the fighters had been previously affiliated with the al-Quds Brigade, they did not go to Armenia affiliated with the brigade but instead as individuals. For more on the background of the Iranian-backed Liwa’ al-Quds, see this [report](#). Since 2015, they have become [close with Russia](#).

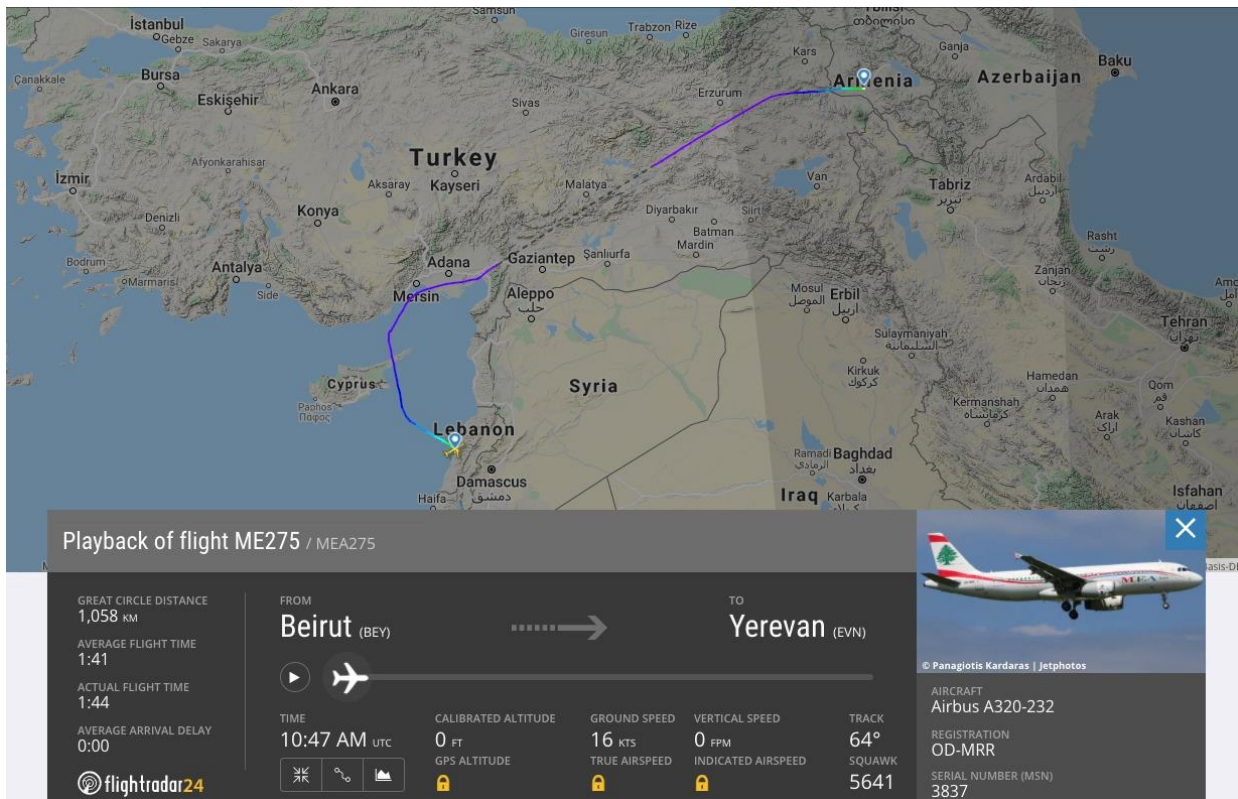


Image 1: Screenshot taken from Flightradar24 website in the evening and at dawn, respectively on 5 and 6 October 2020. It demonstrates the details of the flight reported by our source.

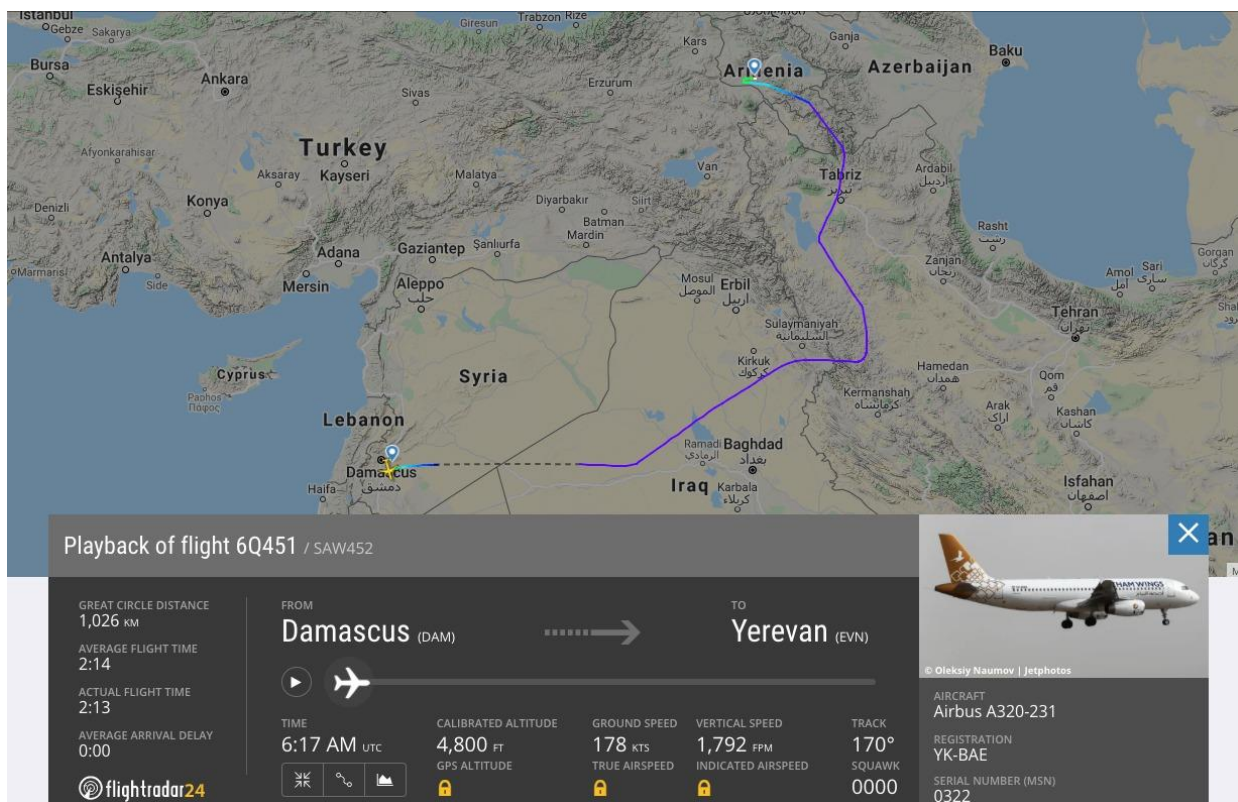


Image 2: Screenshot taken from Flightradar24 website on 17 October 2020. It demonstrates the details of the flight reported by our source.

STJ contacted a member of the Liwa al-Quds/al-Quds brigade who travelled to Armenia. A. B., a 28-year-old Syrian Palestinian volunteer conscript of the Liwa al-Quds/ al-Quds Brigade, within the Popular Committees in the Aleppo-based Handarat refugee camp, told STJ:

“In total, there were 21 of us, including 18 Armenians from Aleppo, who volunteered within the popular committees at the Handarat Camp. The other three, including me, were Palestinians from the camp and volunteer conscripts within the al-Quds Brigade. We operated under the popular committees in Aleppo as guards at the checkpoints set up within the Handarat Camp. We were paid salaries of 100,000 Syrian Pounds. One day, an Armenian young man, Z. Y., told us about the conflict and the battles in Armenia. He said that we could have jobs there, not in fighting, but as guards in the Artsakh region, adding that we will be paid 40 USD per day, with other needs, including food and drinks, all covered.”

The fighter added:

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For his part, Hagop Pakradounian, a leader of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), a political party also known as Dashnak, told STJ’s field researcher that the federation maintains no relations with the Armenian fighters, who left Syria and Lebanon for Armenia. The federation neither coordinated with fighters, nor arranged, their transfer, he said, adding that:

“All the fighters in question have been travelling individually and of their own accord. After all, we cannot prevent anyone from performing their duties.”

Investigating the reported deaths among fighters in Armenia, STJ interviewed an Aleppo-based Syrian-Armenian young woman, who said that several Armenian young men from the city travelled to Armenia after they registered their names with the Lebanese ARF. She added:

“We were informed that three died in Shushi province, Nagorno-Karabakh—Harut Banuyan, a resident of the Sulaimaniyah neighborhood, Musik Siklimian, a resident of the al-Azizieh neighborhood, and Hakob Stragian, a resident al-Slaibeh al-Jdeideh

neighborhood. All three were returned and buried in Syria. We were also told that 18 other Armenians from Aleppo city were wounded.”

However, we later corrected her testimony. According to the [Armenians of Syria Facebook page](#), the three fighters were actually buried in Armenia, not Syria, following a funeral service held at Saint Sargis Church in the city of Yerevan.



Image 3 – Screenshot taken from the link above, with the names of the three Armenian fighters from Aleppo city who died in combat in Armenia.



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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