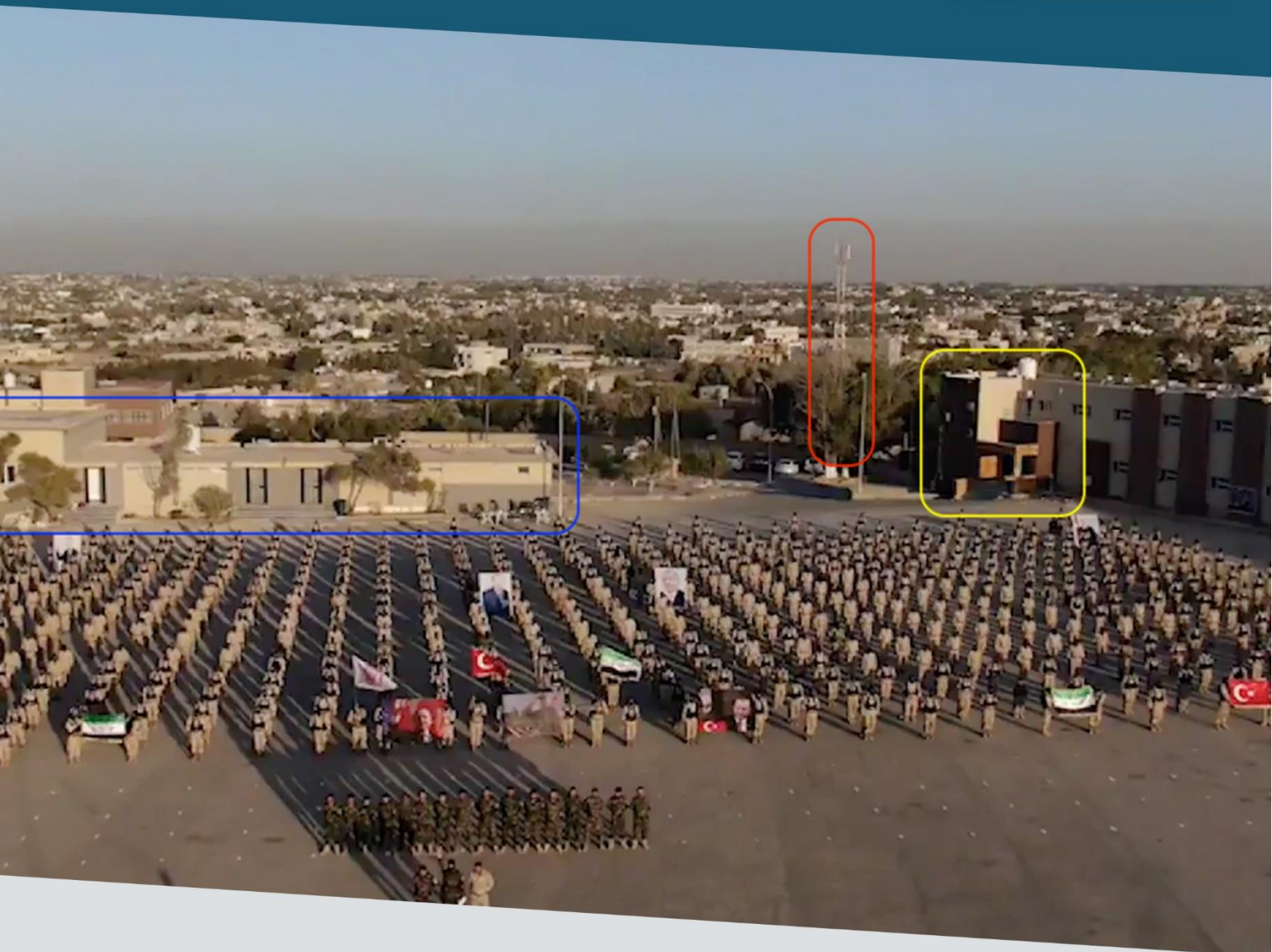


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An Uncertain Fate Awaits Thousands of Syrian Mercenaries in Libya

An Uncertain Fate Awaits Thousands of Syrian Mercenaries in Libya

This report provides details on how members of the Syrian Free Police obtained Libyan nationality, Ankara's efforts to entice defected Syrians to Libya, and the continued transfer of mercenaries to Libya between May and late 2020

1. Executive Summary

The present report addresses the phenomenon of recruiting Syrians from areas controlled by Turkey and the Syrian opposition to fight in Libya as mercenaries alongside the Government of National Accord (GNA) and its prime minister Fayez al-Sarraj, against General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). This kind of recruitment has become more prominent since April 2020 through to the end of the year.

The recruitment targeted fighters of the opposition's Syrian National Army (SNA) as well as members of the Free Police and the Security Forces, groups which Turkey recently established in its areas of influence in Syria. Many fighters have arrived in Libya with their families and acquired Libyan nationality, promised that they would be highly paid. In Libya, alongside their main duties, Syrian fighters were assigned to train Libyan Civil Police and Security Forces .

Moreover, at least 130 women have been deployed to Libya to undertake such tasks as the provision of training for women cadres in the civil police cadres as well as nursing and medical services to Syrian fighters there.

STJ field researchers observed how SNA groups have recently tended to send their fighters to Libya by force, contrary to their previous method of attracting fighters with money and privileges. In this report we cite many cases of fighters who were forced to go to Libya under threat of being discharged from the SNA if they refused to do so - a penalty which was indeed on some fighters.

This report also sheds light on the suffering that has been inflicted on fighters' families who remained in Syria to anxiously wait in the dark for news of their fate, adding to the burdens of the women in these families.

We also reveal information on the arrest of at least 180 fighters by the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Haftar. 28 of them, however, have been recently handed over to the Syrian government, and STJ managed to meet relatives of some of those fighters. Our report contains information about the several prisoner exchanges conducted between the governments of al-Sarraj and Haftar.

2. Background on the Recruitment of Syrian Mercenaries in Libya

Since December 2019, reports began to circulate about the transfer of thousands of fighters from the Turkish-backed SNA to Libya to fight alongside the GNA. Although these reports were categorically denied by both sides – the SNA and the GNA – the news was quickly verified by circulating photos and videos of Syrians fighting in Libya, the transfer of bodies of those who were killed there to Syria, and dozens of other pieces of evidence.

As part of the scope of its work, STJ has tracked the news of Syrian mercenaries being deployed to Libya from the very beginning. It published its first report on this subject on 24 January 2020, confirming that Haftar's LNA had arrested a Syrian fighter affiliated with the

Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) of the SNA.¹ STJ followed this on 11 May 2020 with an expanded report on the mechanisms for recruiting Syrian fighters (including children) for combat in Libya. Furthermore, the report detailed the ways that fighters had been transferred through civilian/commercial aviation services from Syria to Libya via Turkey.² This report was mentioned in the memorandum submitted by the UN Secretary General to the General Assembly, as well as in the report entitled: 'Use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination'.³

Since documenting violations by all parties is one of STJ's strategies, we published another expanded report on 28 June 2020. This revealed information about collusion between the Syrian government and a Russian security company to send thousands of Syrian mercenaries to Libya to fight alongside Haftar's LNA.⁴

3. Methodology

For this report, STJ interviewed 22 witnesses and sources, among them fighters in the SNA and members of the Free Police,⁵ in addition to two women who had been recruited recently, relatives of Syrian fighters in Libya, and two Libyan military officers.

Furthermore, STJ's digital forensic expert tracked and verified open-source videos, images, and information related to the report's subject; and also tracked the flights which carried fighters to Libya.

This report was prepared between April 2020 and January 2021. The interviews contained herein were conducted in person or online through secure encrypted messaging applications; some of those interviewed provided us with exclusive photos of Syrian mercenaries in Libya.

It is worth mentioning that the transfer of mercenaries continued to take place after a [permanent agreement](#) to a ceasefire in Libya had been signed on 23 October 2020. The

¹ "Further Details on a Video Showing a Syrian Fighter Captured in Libya", STJ, 24 January 2020, <https://stj-sy.org/en/further-details-on-a-video-showing-a-syrian-fighter-captured-in-libya/>, (last visited: 25 January 2021).

² "Turkey's Recruitment of Syrian Mercenaries to Fight in Libya: Process and Legal Consequences", STJ, 11 May 2020, <https://stj-sy.org/en/turkeys-recruitment-of-syrian-mercenaries-to-fight-in-libya-process-and-legal-consequences/>, (last visited: 25 January 2021).

³ Seventy-fifth session Item 71 of the provisional agenda, right of peoples to self-determination, Use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, note by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly, 28 July 2020, <https://undocs.org/en/A/75/259> (last visited: 25 January 2021).

⁴ "In Collusion with the Syrian Government, a Russian Security Company Recruits Thousands of Syrians as Mercenaries to Fight in Libya alongside Haftar", STJ, 28 June 2020, <https://stj-sy.org/en/in-collusion-with-the-syrian-government-a-russian-security-company-recruits-thousands-of-syrians-as-mercenaries-to-fight-in-libya-alongside-haftar/> (last visited: 25 January 2021).

⁵ The Free Police/Police Force or the National Security Force was established in Afrin in May 2018. Its members underwent training inside Turkish territory and assumed their tasks in Afrin on 27 May 2017. It launched its official Facebook account on 4 June 2018.

agreement gave parties to the conflict a deadline to remove mercenaries and foreign forces from Libya, but the deadline passed without any action from Turkey.

4. Introduction

Contrary to expectations, the deployment of Syrian mercenaries to Libya to fight alongside the Turkish-backed forces of al-Sarraj against those of Russian-backed Haftar has expanded. Since April 2020, STJ has documented several transfers of SNA fighters as well as members of the Free Police and Security Forces – established by Turkey in its areas of influence in Syria – and their families to Libya. In return for enlisting, many of those fighters were granted Libyan nationality and promised to be well paid. Alongside their main duties, Syrian fighters in Libya were assigned to train Libyan Civil Police and Security Forces.

Moreover, STJ field researchers have recently witnessed numerous cases of the SNA forcibly recruiting fighters, whereas it used to use incentives to induce fighters to go to Libya. Some groups have even punished those who refused to enlist, up to the point of discharging them from the unit.

A SNA source revealed that no fewer than 180 of its fighters are being held captive by Haftar's LNA. 28 of them, however, have been handed over to the Syrian government recently, in the context of prisoner exchanges between al-Sarraj and Haftar that mostly included first-line officers of the SNA.

World leaders attending the Libya peace summit in Berlin agreed to uphold a UN arms embargo and end military backing for the North African country's warring factions.⁶

5. Seeking New Ranks for Recruitment: Using the Libyan Nationality as an Inducement

A remarkable development has recently taken place in the course of recruiting Syrian mercenaries to fight in Libya, with Turkish-backed GNA offering Libyan nationality, financial incentives, and several benefits to Syrians who agree to deploy to Libya and their families; and dozens of them have, indeed, acquired Libyan nationality. In parallel, the Turkish government used Libyan nationality and high salaries to induce officers who defected from the Syrian Army to deploy to Libya as consultants, experts, and trainers.

A. Granting Libyan Nationality to Members of the Free Police

STJ spoke to both an official in the Free Police of Afrin as well as a member of the body who was recruited for service in Libya and acquired Libyan nationality in return.

According to the official:

⁶ "Berlin: Libya peace summit agrees on commitment to UN arms embargo", DW, 19 January 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-libya-peace-summit-agrees-on-commitment-to-un-arms-embargo/a-52058307>, (last visited: 25 January 2021).

“The Free Police of Afrin is fully affiliated with the Turkish government, which sets the terms of its recruitment and the tasks and salaries of its members. We were offered to be sent to Libya under 6 months or one-year; or on permanent contracts, which stipulate that recruits serve as police officers in the GNA or as security officers in areas captured by the latter. In return for this work, we would be granted the Libyan nationality in return.”

He added:

“600 members of the Free Police – 60 of them accompanied with their families – were transferred to Libya in two batches, with the first leaving on 24 June 2020 and the second on 17 July. Those members were integrated into the Civilian Police, the Criminal Police, the Traffic Police, and the Security Forces there. The Libyan Ministry of Interior is directly responsible for those members, who undergo training at the Police Academy in Tripoli with the Libyan Police.”

The same source confirmed that those who wish to go to Libya are given a choice between going alone on a six-month contract, or with their families under a permanent contract which accords them Libyan nationality and other benefits.

“Those members who took their families with them obtained Libyan citizenship immediately. In addition, they earn a monthly salary of 5000 Libyan dinars (LYD) and were granted health insurance and free private education for their children.”

STJ spoke with a member of the Free Police – he asked anonymity for his safety – who arrived in Libya on 24 July 2020 and had recently obtained the Libyan nationality along with his all his family members. He said that:

“The 150 members of the civilian police who arrived in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, on 24 July have obtained Libyan nationality and received official documents proving that they had become Libyan citizens. They proceeded with their duties in training the Libyan civilian police.”

He added:

“They were offered free education for their children in private schools, housing, full-time jobs – eight hours a day, five days a week – a salary of 900 Libyan dinars for each of their children, and 6000 Libyan dinars for him and his wife in addition to getting Turkish food aid.”

On the procedures for granting Libyan nationality, the witness said:

“There is Libyan man entrusted with following the official procedures for naturalizing Syrian fighters arriving in Libya. The documents are first filed with the department of civil status in the presidential building in Tripoli and then forwarded to the civil registry in al-Hadabah area. Finally they go to the Ministry of Interior to be sealed by Fathi Bashagha, Minister of Interior of the GNA, along with passports issued for them.”

It is worth mentioning that the source was interviewed in mid-August 2020 and that Fathi Bashagha was [dismissed](#) on 28 August 2020 by al-Sarraj, who [reversed](#) his decision later.

The same source added that he resides in the Syrian residences in Salah al-Din district, in the neighborhood of Nukhbit al-Diyar, and that some of the Syrian fighters' children were enrolled in al-Manhaj al-Qadeem School.

"The source also confirmed that the Free Police/Security Force has already started its work on the ground. The personnel have been split into groups to conduct patrols according to a weekly schedule, with some of them still in the training center/camp."

STJ compared the accounts of the two witnesses on the conferral of nationality with one provided by a commander in the Free Police in the city of Jarabulus, and found that they were consistent.



Image 1: a Syrian member of the Free Police, nicknamed Abu Saraqib, in uniform, with other members behind him in the same uniform and others in military fatigues. Taken on 13 July 2020.



Image 2: matching open-source visual evidence.



Image 3: Matching open-source visual evidence with Google Maps.

B. Enticing Syrian Officers with the Libyan Nationality

The information received from two sources – an officer in the Military Police and another in the Civilian Police – confirmed that the Turkish government turned to the recruitment of Syrian officers who defected from the Syrian Army to take military advisory positions in Libya and train Libyan officers, without directly participating in military operations. According to the two sources, the Turkish government communicates with the defected officers in displaced persons camps and those who joined the SNA. The officer in the Military Police explained that:

“The current strategy from the Turkish government is to rely on the military experience of officers who defected from the Syrian Army by granting them and their families Libyan nationality, as well as a monthly salary of 2000 USD.”

C. Recruiting Women

Witnesses confirmed to STJ that Turkey has recruited and trained at least 130 women displaced from different areas in Syria, and transferred them to Libya to undertake policing and medical tasks. Women who assumed medical tasks were offered a monthly salary of 2,500 USD, while those who joined the police were offered 2,000 USD per month.

In November 2020, a journalist working in cooperation with STJ, conducted online interviews with two Syrian women who arrived in Tripoli in May 2020; one had assumed a nurse job and the other joined the police.

The nurse, H. H., recounted how:

“I and 15 other women—variously single, divorced and widowed— received training in Turkey in order to be sent to Libya. We first underwent a two-month training in Antalya Governmental Hospital that was organized in cooperation with the Turkish Red Crescent, and then took a one-month field training course in a camp on the Turkish border. We were then transferred to Libya and put up in the nurses' building within the Tripoli Hospital.”

She added:

“Initially, we were told that we would be transferred with fighters of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, to whom we would be providing nursing services. However, we were actually transferred on a Turkish flight carrying medical aid, and gradually started to provide medical care to all patients. We took care of Syrians, Sudanese, and others coming from other African countries, including Libya of course. We were asked to go to the frontlines and combat zones to provide first aid to the injured but we refused to do so and stayed in the hospital instead.”

She added:

“We were offered a monthly salary of 2500 USD and had already been paid in advance for three months; on top of that, all our expenses are fully covered by the hospital. I don't ever plan on returning to Syria. The situation is much better here and I am thinking of bringing my family, as I heard from the [military] leadership that this would be possible and that after three years we could all obtain Libyan nationality.”

A witness identified as S. E. who joined the Women Police— an arm of the Libyan national security apparatus and with to the Civilian Police Service—recounted how:

“On 24 July 2020, I arrived in Tripoli with 30 other women, some of whom were civilians who came with their families and while others were members in the Civilian Police. As members of the Women Police, we have special residences and work five days a week, 12 hours per day. We train Libyan women police members for a monthly salary of 2000 USD and 120 Libyan dinars for every training session.”

She added:

“Things here are good and the living conditions are excellent compared to those in Syria. We were given the choice between staying here and obtaining Libyan nationality, or returning to Syria. My family and I are planning to go back to Syria to complete some pending matters and then come back to settle here.”

6. Sending Syrian Fighters to Libya by Force

Turkey first started recruiting Syrians to use them as mercenaries in Libya exclusively on a voluntary basis, as STJ explained in a recently published [report](#) on the mechanisms for

recruiting and transferring mercenaries to Libya. However, recently, according to information collected by STJ field researchers and the accounts of witnesses (including leaders in the SNA), Turkey has started forcing Syrian military factions to send their fighters to Libya. In addition, we confirmed that Turkey has initiated regular weapons transfers to Libya.

A. Continuous Transfers of Mercenaries

A high-ranking source in the SNA confirmed that Turkey flew 153 military aircrafts of different types between March 2020 and the end of the year. Those aircraft carried fighters, military equipment, weapons and military training specialists. The source added that, since the ceasefire took effect and hostilities slowed down, duties assigned to those fighters have been limited to guarding and conducting security patrols.

Fighters in the SNA confirmed that going to Libya has become compulsory rather than optional, with those who refused deployment being punished with dismissal from the SNA and expulsion from northern Syria - the SNA's area of influence. A fighter – he asked for anonymity – told STJ that he has been dismissed with 100 other fighters from the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) for failing to comply with their leader's order for going to Libya. He added that:

“After we refused to go to Libya, we were dismissed from the brigade and expelled outside the area of Shaykh al-Hadid in Afrin, which is the brigade's area of influence.”

It should be noted that the brigade used houses it seized from the Kurds to settle its fighters. This has been established in many reports, including the last report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (see paragraph 47 on page 13).⁷

An officer in the SNA explained to STJ how the responsibility for sending fighters to Libya was distributed among the groups affiliated to the Army:

“[Mohammad al-Jasim](#) (nicknamed Abu Amsha), leader of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat), was the one responsible for sending fighters from the 1st corps of the SNA to Libya; in return the Brigade was compensated with 100,000 USD. Fighters of the 2nd and 3rd corps were transferred through the Sultan Murad Division, the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and the Mu'tasim Division, which each got 100,000 USD in return. The Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, however, is no longer being funded as a result of its refusal to force its fighters to go to Libya.”

A military police commander in Afrin confirmed to STJ that, initially, going to Libya was optional. Later, however, Turkey told SNA factions to forcibly conduct recruitment because many of the fighters who had already been sent to Libya had returned after their three or six-month contracts expired.

⁷ Please see: <https://undocs.org/ar/A/HRC/45/31> (last visited: 25 January 2021).

On 3 July 2020, STJ met with a fighter from the al-Waqqas Brigade before his flight to Libya, scheduled on 7 July 2020. He told us that:

“I was displaced from Damascus countryside to Idlib and there worked with several military groups which were all overcome by the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). I then went to Afrin after it fell under the control of Turkey and the SNA and worked with the al-Waqqas Brigade for only 500 Turkish Lira (TL) a month. I resided in its zones of influence in the village of Senarê. At the time, the Brigade leader offered me to go to Libya for an upgrade of my position – I was promised to be a sector commander in Libya and in Syria if I returned – and a monthly salary of 2500 USD. I accepted the offer.”

B. An Entire Faction in Libya

A fighter in the Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd group of the SNA requested anonymity in describing how he went to Libya of his own accord to fight alongside the GNA for a monthly salary of 2000 USD, with 300 USD going to the faction. He added:

“You can say that all the 700 fighters of the Glory Corps are now in the Libyan city of Misrata.⁸ This corps is the only one that refused to recruit civilians to fight in Libya, and like all other SNA factions it has stopped recruiting children (those under 18) and people over 35.”

He added:

“We were transported by buses from Syria to Turkey’s Gaziantep, and from there they took us by plane to Istanbul; and from Istanbul we were flown to Libya.”

C. Transferring Weapons from Turkey to Libya

STJ’s digital forensics expert tracked heavy aircrafts departing from Turkey and landing in Libya, which represents the first time Turkey uses such flights for weapons transfers. STJ verified that at least three flights of these carried weapons, military hardware, a few Turkish de-mining specialists, and members of the Free Police. STJ spoke to two Libyan officers further about this, and obtained more information about the cargo on board those three flights.

STJ’s digital forensics expert tracked the following flights carrying mercenaries and weapons.

- **The First Flight:**

⁸ The Glory Corps was formed in 2017 by Yaman Talju. At that time it had only 200 fighters according to reports, and today it falls under the SNA's 3rd Legion. Its first military operation was in Operation Olive Branch, which led to the occupation of Syria’s Kurdish-majority city of Afrin. It also participated in Operation Peace Spring alongside Turkey, from which it receives support.

On 8 July 2020, an A400M plane took off from Istanbul airport and landed at Mitiga airport in Tripoli. According to one of the Libyan officers who met with STJ, the plane was carrying Turkish T-122 Sakarya MLRS missiles and a Hisar air defense system, to be transported to al-Watiya Airbase.

On the same day, a Turkish C-130E plane loaded with military equipment landed at the same airport. According to the same source, the two planes were registered as civilian aircraft, not military aircraft.

STJ tracked the two flights on the Flight Radar 24 website, based on the information provided by the source, and indeed detected two flights on the aforementioned dates: the first by a C130 aircraft and the other by a A400 aircraft.

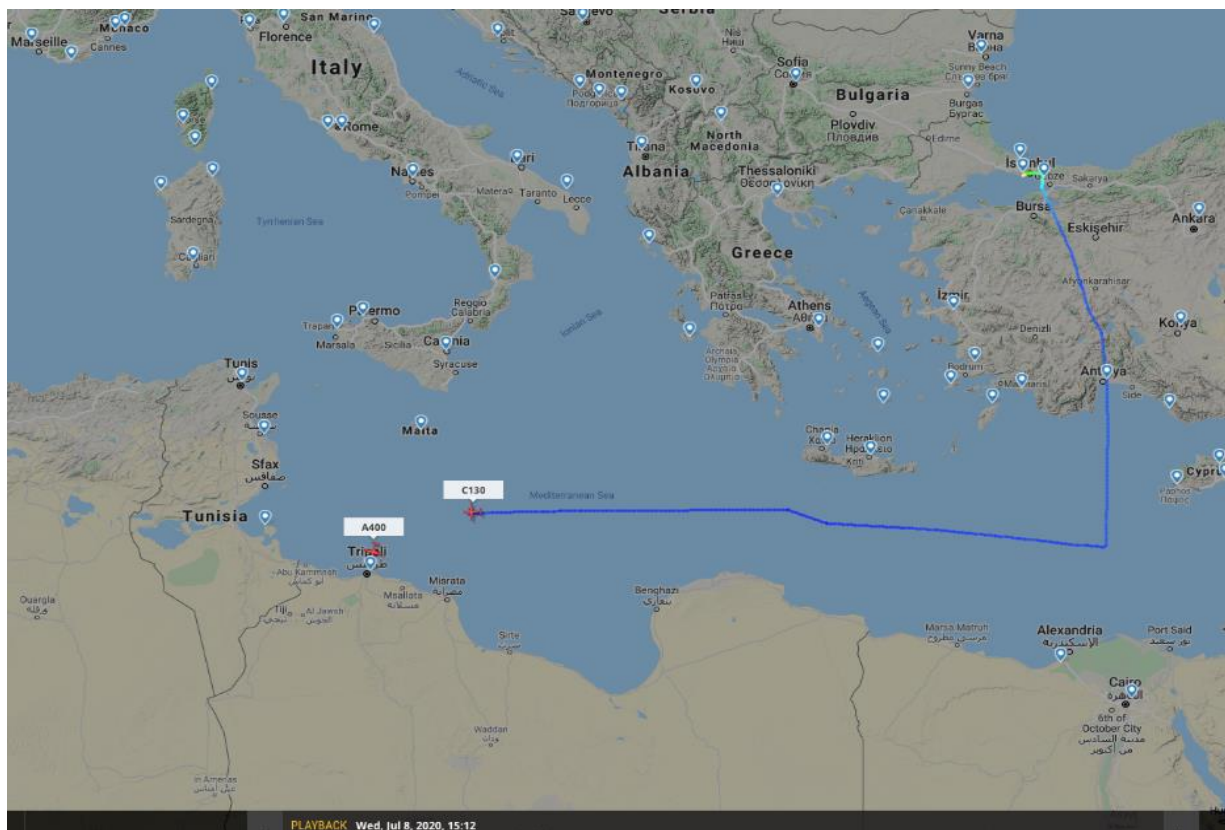


Image 4: on 8 July 2020, the Flight Radar 24 website captured information about a A400M flight that took off from Istanbul Airport, bound for Mitiga Airport and (according to a Libyan officer) carrying weapons and military equipment.

- **The Second Flight:**

On 25 July 2020, an A400M aircraft took off from Gaziantep Airport, Turkey, and landed at Misrata Airport. According to a Libyan officer, the aircraft carried a Turkish de-mining team, as well as Kirpi 2 mine-resistant armored vehicles, M101 howitzer K cannons, and MIM-23 Hawk surface-to-air missiles.

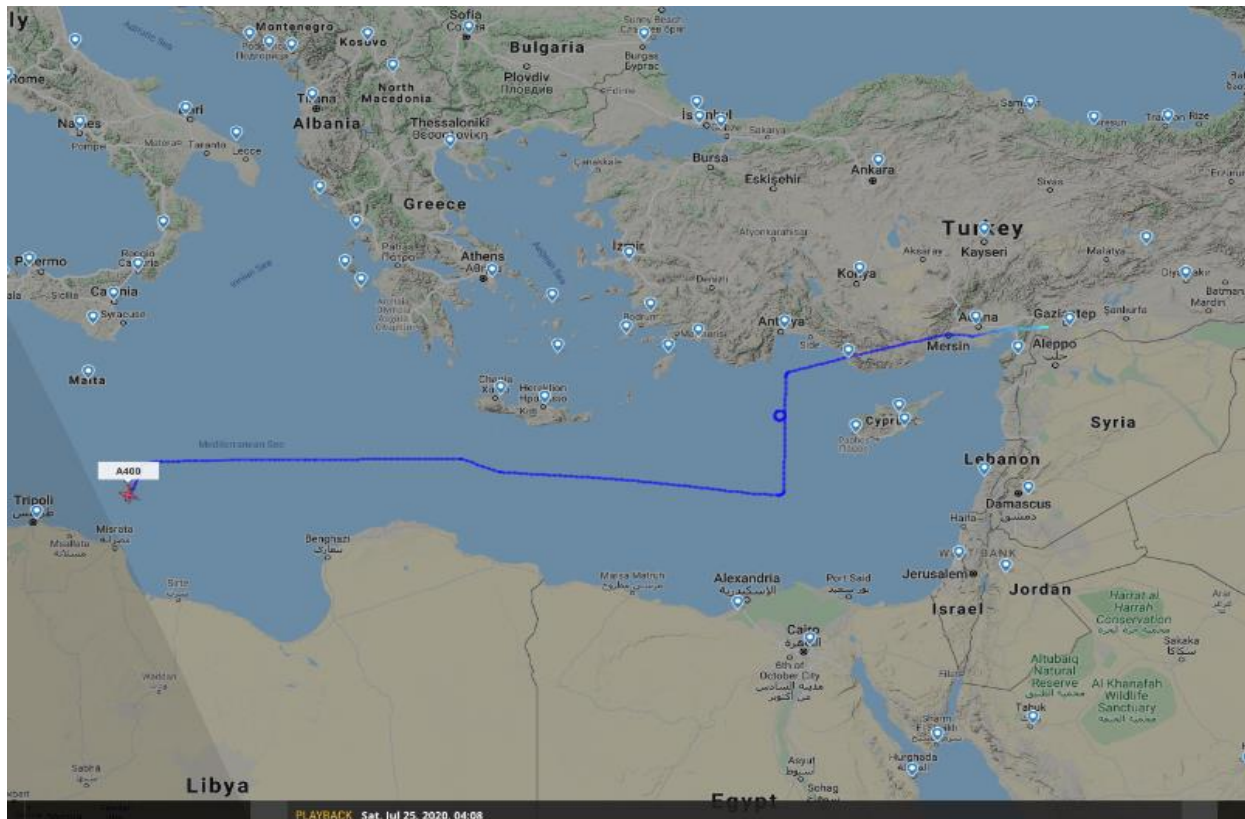


Image 5: on 25 July 2020, Flight Radar 24 captured information of a Turkish-operated A400M military plane departing from the Turkish Gaziantep airport and landing at Misrata Airport.

According to one of the Libyan officers we met, it was carrying weapons and military equipment.

- **The Third Flight:**

On 24 June 2020, an A400M plane took off from Istanbul airport and landed at Misrata airport carrying Syrian police officers—not military factions. They were transferred to the al-Tikbali camp in Salah al-Din region, according to one of the Libyan officers we met.

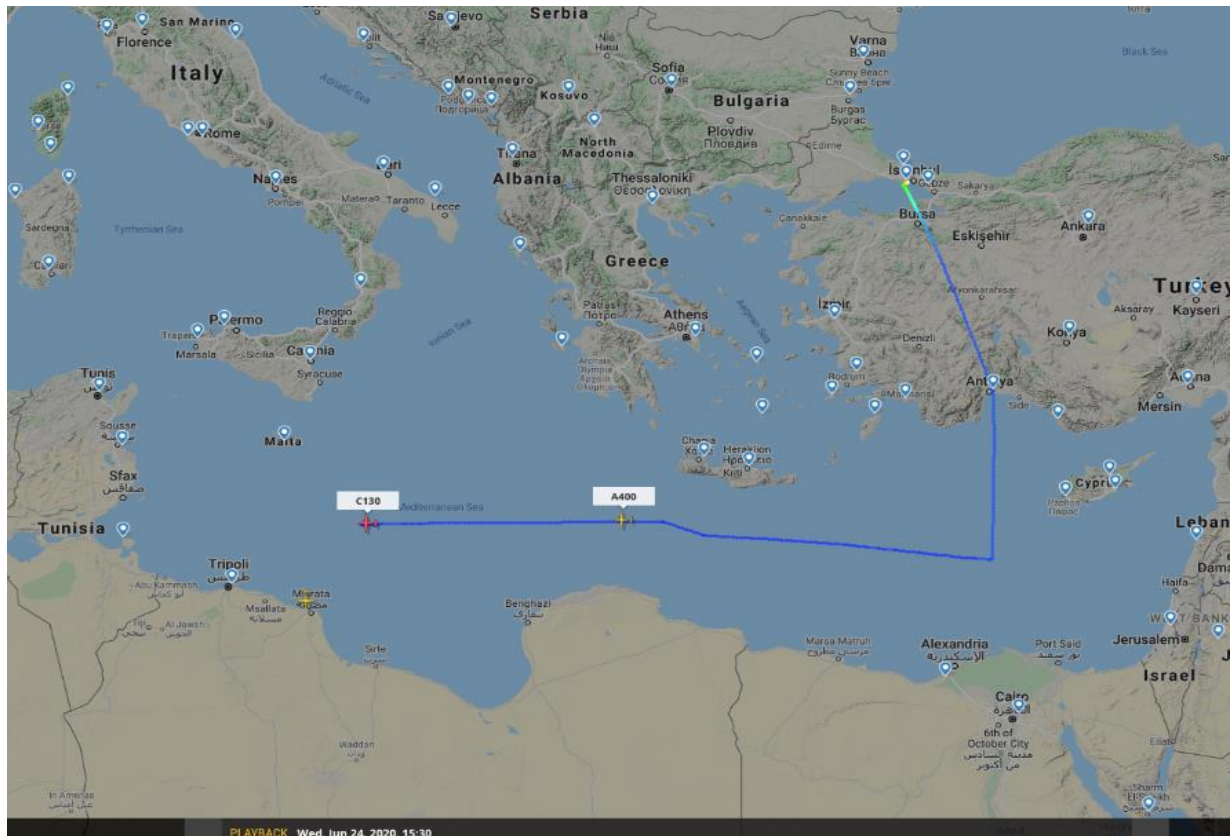


Image 6: on 24 June 2020, Flight Radar 24 managed to capture information on a Turkish-operated A400 military flight that took off from Istanbul Airport bound for Misrata Airport in Libya. The same website tracked a flight launched by a C130 plane.

On Flight Radar 24 and other publicly available sources, our digital forensics expert tracked several other flights that took place in 2020. The last two of those flights were conducted on 25 December from Turkey to Libya by an A400M. The latter, as well as other types of military aircraft, were used in the preceding flights on 16 July, 30 September, and 5 November (see the next image).



Image 7



Image 8

Images 7 & 8: On the morning of 16 July 2020, Twitter analyst [@YorukIsik](#) tracked two Turkish Air Force transport planes flying from Turkey to Libya. The first was an A400M that flew from Istanbul to Misrata, while the second was a C130B which flew from Konya to al-Watiyah Airbase near the Tunisian border.



Image 9

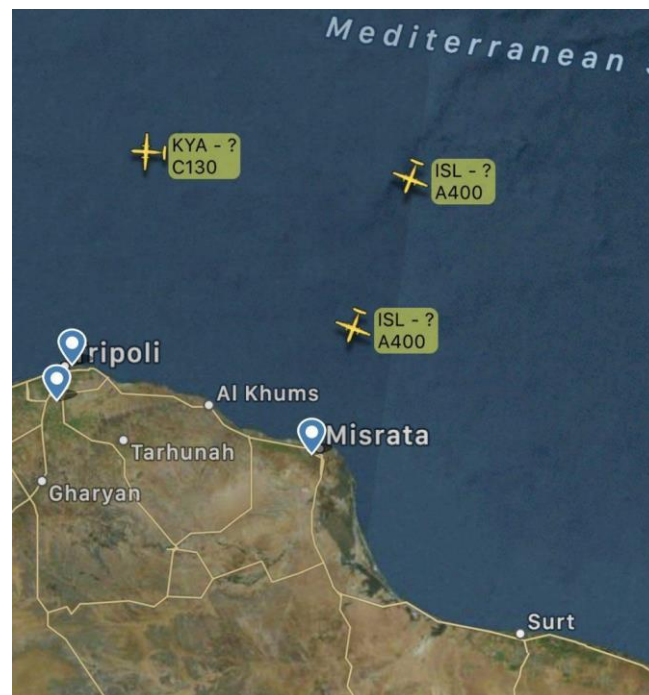


Image 10

Images 9 & 10: Early in the morning of 1 October 2020, [@YorukIsik tracked](#) three Turkish military transport planes flying from Turkey to Libya. These included a C130B which flew from Konya to al-Watiyah airbase, and two A400Ms which both travelled from Istanbul to Misrata.

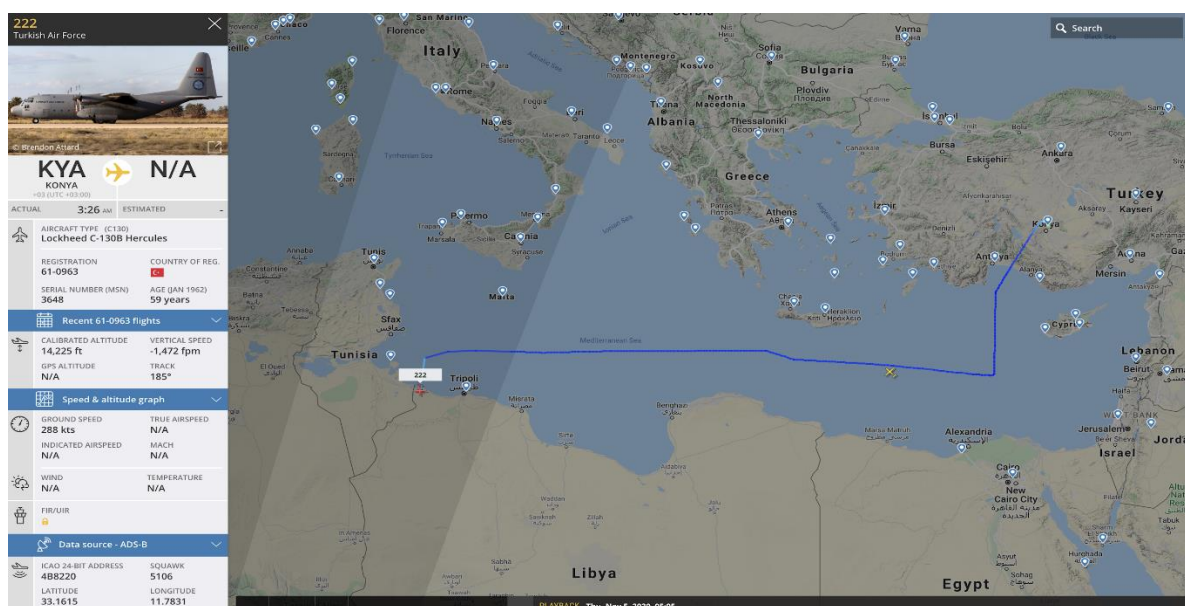


Image 11

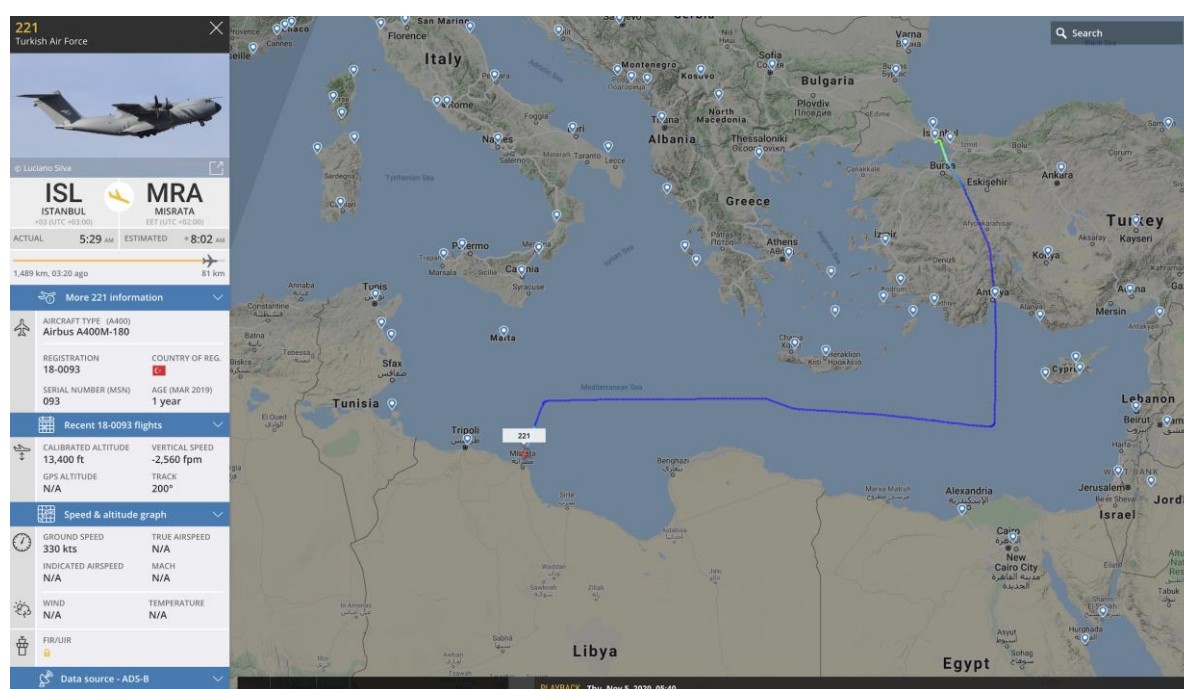


Image 12

Images 11 & 12: STJ tracked two flights undertaken by Turkish Air Force transport planes on 5 November 2020. The first, a C130 which took off from Konya, landed in al-Watiyah airbase at around 5:15AM (UTC). The second, an A400m taking off from Istanbul arrived in Mistrata at approximately 6:00AM (UTC).

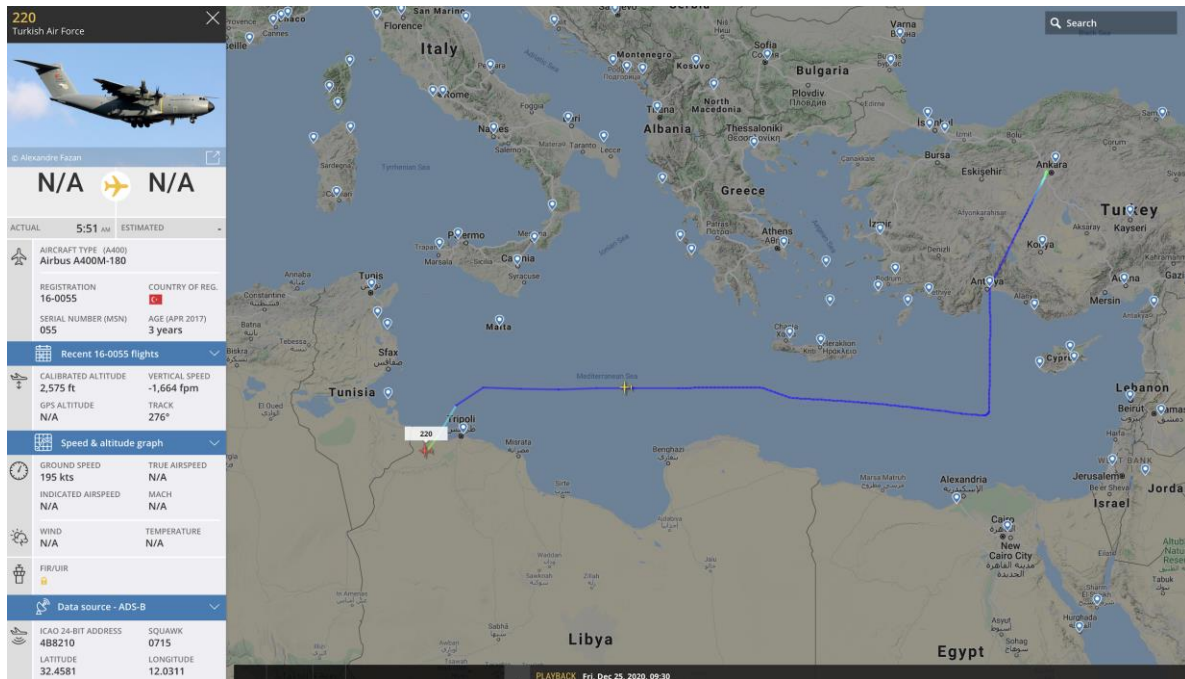


Image 13

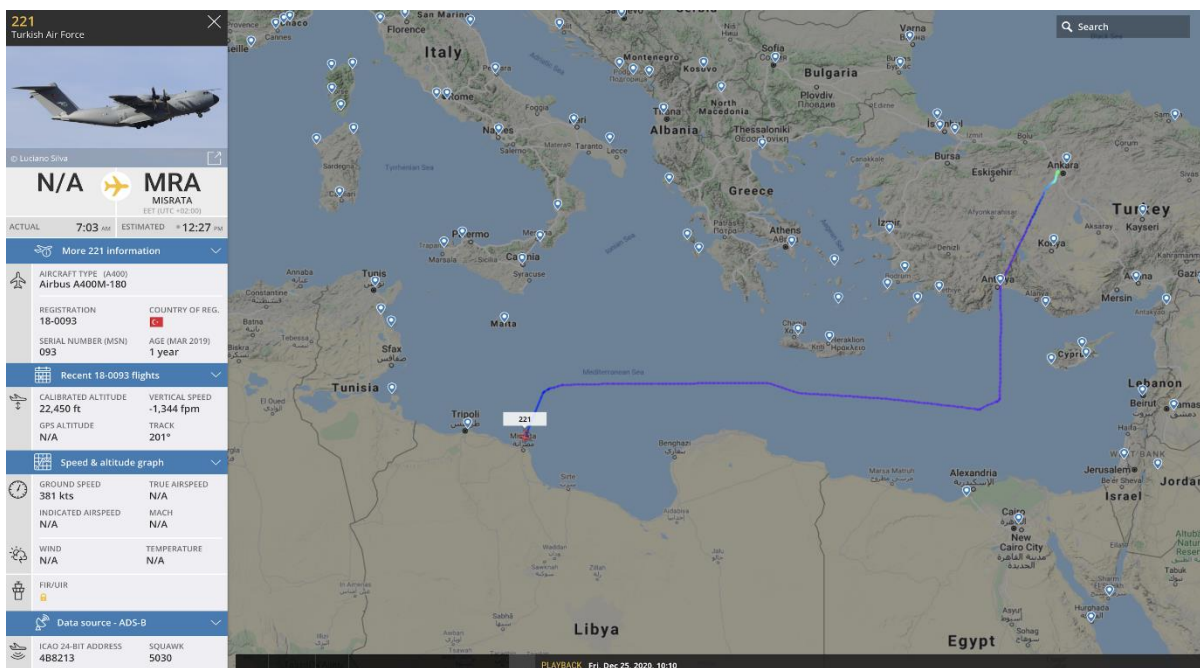


Image 14

Images 13 & 14: STJ tracked two flights undertaken by Turkish Air Force A-400Ms on 25 December 2020. While both these planes departed from Ankara, the first landed at al-Watiyah airbase at approximately 9:30AM (UTC), while the second landed in Misrata at around 10:30AM (UTC).

7. An Overview of the Distribution of Mercenaries and Ensuing Security Threats in Libya

The Syrian mercenaries are distributed throughout in most parts of the Libyan capital of Tripoli and its outskirts, and headquartered in civilian buildings and military camps. Their individual factions are headed by Syrian leaders who are directly affiliated with a Libyan superior. The widespread deployment of Syrian mercenaries in Tripoli has led to conflicting interests and thus clashes among them. Moreover, Syrian mercenaries have, alongside Libyan fighters, stormed civilian houses of civilians and pillaged their properties under the pretext that they supported Haftar's LNA.

A. Areas of Mercenary Deployment in Tripoli

Reliable Libyan sources, including Libyan officers, identified the following locations of Syrian mercenaries in Tripoli:

- 1- Al Assah camp, at the border with Tunisia.
- 2- Mitiga military base.
- 3- Al-Naam camp in Tajoura.
- 4- Al Nasr Forest.
- 5- The World Islamic Call Society
- 6- Tawergha displaced persons camp in Al-Falah.
- 7- The Banana Project in al-Farnaj.
- 8- Al-Hadabah Project.
- 9- Subsidiary operating room in a hotel building under construction in the area of Qasr Al Diyafah.
- 10- A ceremony hall of the electricity company for public events near the Hussein cemetery. Mercenaries have also set up observatories over the al-Safwa Hospital in the same area.
- 11- Al-Swani/al-Zahra area in Tripoli.
- 12- Houses belonging to the al-Marghani family along the axis of the Al-Suwaihl Mosque. They have set up observatories over the Holy Quran Academy in the area.
- 13- The farm and home of Abdel Rahman al-Seid, a former Libyan official, and in the Sidra area, south of Tripoli.
- 14- The diplomatic club near Ain Zara.
- 15- A military headquarters in the Center for Disease Control.
- 16- A military headquarters in a farm behind the al-Qarqni health complex.
- 17- Salah al-Din area.
- 18- The Mother and Child clinic.



Image 15: deployment locations of Syrian mercenaries in Tripoli.

On 27 July 2020, a [video](#) was circulated showing fighters of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) in a military training camp near Sidi Bilal port west of Tripoli, conducting a military parade with a masked leader delivering a speech in Turkish. The video was published online by a man named Khider al-Ahdab, and it was [analyzed and geolocated](#) by researchers.

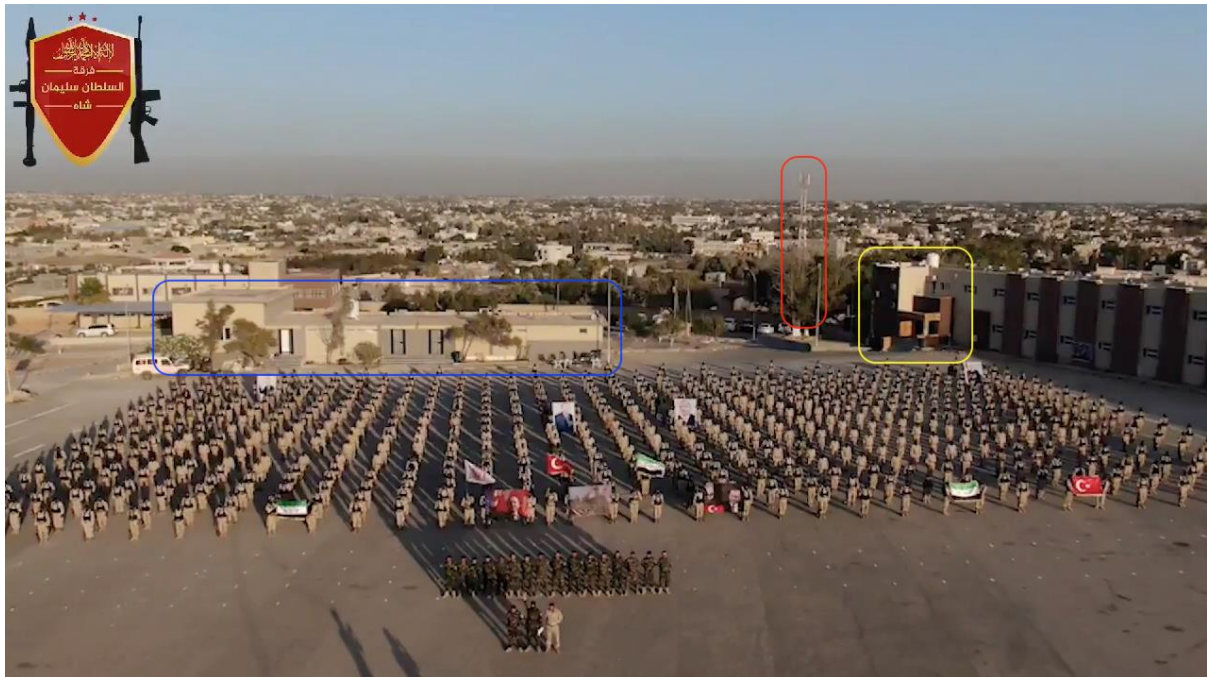


Image 16: A screenshot from a video shows a training camp of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) near Sidi Bilal port west of Tripoli.



Image 17: Matching open-source visual evidence with Google Maps.

B. Mercenary Practices in Libya

Information given to STJ confirmed that several clashes have occurred between SNA factions in Libya over pillaged loot and the exchange rate for converting money. Furthermore, sources informed STJ that some groups exploit mercenaries and deduct from their salaries.

STJ field researcher spoke to a Syrian fighter who requested to speak anonymously, and was affiliated with the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade/Liwa Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh but went to Libya to fight in the ranks of the Sultan Murad Division alongside the GNA against the Haftar's LNA, he recounted:

"After things calmed down in Libya, the Sultan Murad Division leaders attempted to embezzle salaries of the Syrian fighters under their command. They did not pay us for three months, and when we asked for an advance of 300 USD, they only gave us 100 USD. They were able to take the 200 USD because salaries and advances are received by them first, not given directly to us. The leaders who were behind this are Sami Abu Abdo, the deputy commander Faheem Issa, and the leader Hameedo al-Jheeshi."

The fighter confirmed that clashes had occurred between the Syrian groups in Libya over the division of plunder and salaries and exchange rates. He mentioned that on 17 July 2020, two fighters from the Northern Hawks Brigade were killed in clashes that erupted between members from the same brigade. A month prior, a leader in the Sultan Murad Division named Abu Hammoud Al-Azizi was killed in fights following disputes over currency exchange rates.

Another Syrian fighter in Libya provided STJ with details on violations committed by Syrian mercenaries in Libya, including looting, the seizure of homes and properties, and prostitution. STJ is not publishing sensitive details that may endanger the witness, who said:

"Some of the Syrians who arrived in Libya joined the Public Order police force, while others took part in combat. The leaders of almost all the individual factions are Syrians, but linked to a Libyan leader. As for looting and banditry, they prevailed widely - even selling plunder and weapons became normal. The leader of the Mu'tasim Division in Libya A.Kh.A., is the most known for selling weapons, while A.J. the commander in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division is known as the one who sells ammunition. In addition, some leaders of Libyan armed groups use the Syrians to storm and pillage civilian homes, under the pretext that their owners are collaborators, and the loot is effectively spoils of war."

The witness added:

"The Syrian mercenaries are supposed to remain in camps and not interact with civilians, but most of them do not abide by this rule. This has led to numerous coronavirus infections, especially among those in Misrata, the epicenter of the pandemic in Libya."

He added:

“The security situation in Tripoli is worse than that in Idlib, as there are extremist Islamist groups – led by Abu Emad al-Tarabulsi and another nicknamed al-Zntani – which always attack Libyan forces, along with another armed group led by Osama al-Huwaili.”

8. Mercenary Prisoner Exchanges Between Parties to the Conflict

Dozens of Syrian mercenaries fighting alongside both sides of the Libyan conflict, were arrested during hostilities. However, a prisoner exchange conducted between the parties and there are detainees handed over to the Syrian government.

A. Syrian Prisoner Exchanges on Libyan territory

According to fighters present in Libya and others who returned to Syrian recently, since the conflict erupted in Libya dozens have been arrested from both sides of the conflict. As such, almost weekly prisoner exchanges have taken place. It is worth mentioning that we received information confirming that the prisoners from both sides were subjected to beatings and torture. In this regard, the fighter A. A., who is affiliated with the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade/Liwa Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh and went to Libya with a group from the Sultan Murad Division, said that:

“The leaders in Libya told us that we are not considered prisoners of war based on the Geneva Convention, but we were considered as such in the custody of Haftar’s forces when we underwent severe beatings. Prisoner exchanges are conducted frequently after short periods of time, but if one of the parties captures Russians the exchange is conducted immediately.”

He added:

“As I recall, during April a commander in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division called Osama al-Jarad was arrested, but only two days later he was released in an exchange. The detainees usually stay in custody for almost a week.”

B. Handing over Syrian fighters to the Syrian government

On 12 May 2020, international and local media outlets circulated news that Haftar’s government handed Syrians detained in combat alongside the GNA over to the Syrian government. This was denied by senior leaders in the SNA, however, as was reported by the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%89-%D9%85/) on 14 May 2020.⁹ Nevertheless, STJ obtained testimony that confirmed Syrian mercenary fighters in Libya had been handed over to the Syrian

⁹ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 14 May 2020, <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%89-%D9%85/> (last visited: 25 January 2021).

government. The witness N. H. said that her fiancé, who is also her cousin, was arrested in Libya and handed over later to the Syrian government, she recounted:

“I was displaced from the eastern countryside of Hama, and am currently living in rural Idlib near the town of Sarmada. I was engaged to my cousin Hatem M., 25, who had defected from the 4th Armoured Division of the Syrian Army and then joined the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham. In February, he decided to go to Libya with the Legion despite his family's opposition, and was helped by Salil al-Haddar al-Khalidi, the commander in the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham who lives in Afrin. On 20 February, Hatem left Syria for Libya. I used to call him three times a week after he arrived until last Ramadan, when we lost contact. After numerous attempts to find out his whereabouts, my cousin (who is also in Libya), told us that Hatem was arrested from near Tripoli with other 12 guys; five of them were affiliated with the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham, and the rest from the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and the Sultan Murad Division.”

She added:

“After that, my father, my uncle, and a number of my relatives went to Salil al-Haddar (through whom Hatem had gone to Libya), but he evaded the issue and he denied knowing Hatem and claimed that he and the other guys had gone to Libya with Turkish intelligence, but he assured them that the Turkish government would soon conduct a prisoner exchange in which Hatem would be released; but that did not happen. On 9 July 2020, several months after Hatem's disappearance, a relative named Hazaa al-Hamidi, a captain of the Air Intelligence Service in Homs, called me and said that he had learned of the arrival of some 29 prisoners, brought from Libya by Russia, at the Khmeimim Airbase. Hatem was among them, with an untreated gunshot wound to his right foot. Since then, we have not received any new information about Hatem.”

9. The Consequences of Going to Libya

In any war, the most affected are families of the dead and injured. Fighters who went to Libya left their families anxious about their fate, and many more torn apart. The women in these families have faced overwhelming suffering and responsibilities.

A. Fighters Died for False Promises

A media worker (nicknamed Asem) in the Free Police of the Syrian Interim Government told STJ:

“ The bodies of numerous fighters who fell in combat in Libya have been returned to Syria. Among them was the body of a commander in the Sultan Murad Division, Abu Hamad al-Azizi, which arrived in Syria on 30 May 2020 along with the bodies of 16 fighters from the Northern Hawks Brigade, led by Mahmoud al-Khalaf. Later, on 21 April, the body of the SNA commander Mohammad Ata Ikrimah arrived in Syria three days after he was killed in Libya. Further, on 12 June bodies of fighters of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, hailing from the villages of Faqiran (feqîra) and Julqan

(Jūlaqān) in the district of Jindires in Afrin, were brought to Syria where they were given a funeral procession amidst heavy gunfire.”

Additionally, the families of some of those killed in Libya have not been compensated nor granted Turkish nationality, as was agreed upon with the groups which recruited their sons. On this, a relative of a fighter killed in Libya told STJ that:

“My friend’s brother M. Sh., 25, from northern rural Aleppo, used to be affiliated with the Sultan Murad Division of the SNA. He and others were transferred to Libya by a Turkish aircraft to fight alongside the GNA for a monthly salary of 1,000 USD. In March, he was killed during clashes on the outskirts of the Libyan capital of Tripoli, but his family did not get the 3,000 USD financial compensation agreed upon with the group that had recruited him.”

STJ field researchers also met a relative of a fighter of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division. who was killed in Libya, but his family was not compensated with Turkish nationality as they had been promised.

It is worth mentioning that this fighter was under 18 when he was recruited by the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and sent to Libya. He was only 19 at the time of his death.

He said that the fighter A. Othman was recruited in June 2019 and left to Libya on 25 April 2020 and was killed there on 12 May 2020, and added:

“The news of his death was shocking for his poor mother. He had called her twice while he was in Libya promising to secure her a better life. Two days after his death his body was transferred with others to the Turkish city of Urfa, and then taken to Afrin to be handed over to the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division. His father and brothers went and picked up the body and buried it in the cemetery of the village of Hazano in rural Idlib.”

According to the witness, the family of the killed fighter only received 6,000 USD. The fighter had not previously been paid and his family was not granted Turkish nationality.

B. Families Torn Apart

The harm caused to families of the fighters sent to Libya cannot be remedied by money. Um Albara’, 22, married with a two-year child, was living with her husband and his family in a camp in Afrin, as they were displaced from western rural Hama. Her husband’s family, however, expelled her from the tent after their son went to Libya on 1 May 2020 after having previously joined the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat). Um Albara’ spoke to STJ field researchers, saying:

“My husband went to Libya without our knowledge. When he joined the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) in Afrin, he would leave home for 15 days at a time, but the last time more than a month passed without us hearing from him - until one of his friends told us that he had gone to Libya. At that time, my husband’s

family told me to go to my family's tent in Kafar Houm as they blamed me for not telling them about my husband's plan to go to Libya, even though I hadn't known anything about it. I hope my husband comes back alive from there. He has only contacted me once since he left, and told me then that he was shocked by the situation there; it was not like what he had been told to expect, and that he was being forced to stay for three months. We have not had contact with him since then."

Yaseen J. was also among the Syrian fighters killed in Libya, as his mother recounted to STJ:

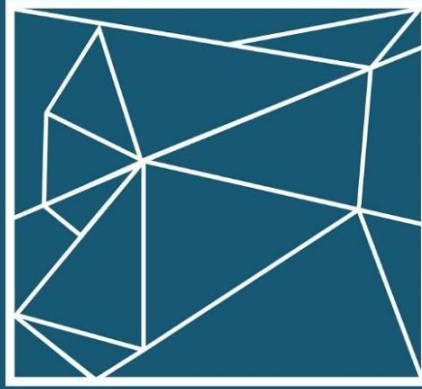
"Yaseen was 30. He is my eldest son and my only provider. Soon after his marriage ceremony, he told me that he was going to Libya to fight alongside the SNA in exchange for a high salary. He traveled on the second day of his marriage, and was killed after only one week there. He left his bride after only one day, and returned as a body a week later!"

She added:

"My son's body was transferred from Libya to Turkey, and his brothers brought it from the Jarablus crossing. I saw a lot of shrapnel in it. We buried him in al-Karama camp north of Idlib, and we did not get any financial compensation nor nationality."

سوريون
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Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



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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