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Hundreds of Syrians Deployed to Libya Despite the Ceasefire Agreement

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This extensive report documents the recruitment and transfer of hundreds of Syrians, mostly civilians, to Libya by armed groups affiliated with the Syrian government and Russian security companies from late October 2020 to early April 2021

Introduction

Parties in the Libyan conflict reached a permanent ceasefire agreement across the country on 23 October 2020.¹ The agreement contained a term on the removal of various groups of foreign forces and mercenaries from the country before 23 January 2021. However, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) obtained information verifying that recruitment drives and mercenary deployment to Libya are still underway.

Hundreds of Syrians were transferred to Libya by armed Syrian groups and Russian security companies between 23 October 2020 and early April 2021. Furthermore, STJ discovered that the large percentage of recruits sent to Libya during the recent period were civilians from several Syrian provinces, including the countryside of Damascus, As-Suwayda, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa, as well as the city of Palmyra in Homs province. Notably, most of these provinces are controlled by the Syrian government.

The enlistments, but not transfers, were carried out by para-military groups directly linked with the Syrian government, including the National Defense Militia in Deir ez-Zor, the Army of Free Tribes in Raqqa,² a number of Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party offices across various Syrian provinces, volunteer conscripts or soldiers with the 5th Corps of the Syrian Army,³ and al-Sayyad Company for Guarding and Protection Services, previously known as Islamic State (IS) Hunters.

These government affiliates lure Syrians into mercenarism in Libya by offering them salaries up to 1,000 USD a month and other tempting benefits, such as “writing off the names of those involved in security issues [from lists of people wanted by the Syrian government] and exempting potential conscripts from compulsory and reserve military service within the ranks of the Syrian army.” In doing so, recruiters exploit the disadvantageous humanitarian and economic conditions suffered by many Syrians as a result of the ongoing conflict.

¹ “‘A historical moment’: UN commends the ceasefire agreement signed in Libya” (in Arabic), UN News, 23 October 2020, <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2020/10/1064392> (last accessed: 11 June 2021).

² Jaysh al-Ashayer (Army of Tribes) is a para-military armed group affiliated with the Syrian government forces. The army is backed by the Syrian Republic Guard and mainly operates in Raqqa province. The army is stationed over the area between the al-Sabkha and Ma'adan east of Raqqa, under the command of Turki Mikhilif al-Mer'ie, known as Turki al-Buhamad, who is a member of the al-Buhamad Tribe. Al-Buhamad is in charge of 200 to 1500 fighters.

³ Several sources indicate that, in 2017, officers in charge of the Russian Khmeimim Air Base in Syria pushed for establishing a private security company called al-Sayyad. The company was founded and obtained a license to carry out protection and guard services. The company is headquartered in Hama's countryside. Al-Sayyad is considered the Syrian façade of the Russian security group Wagner. Pertaining to its relation with the Russian company, al-Sayyad recruited thousands of Syrian young men to deploy them to the Russia-controlled gas fields and phosphate mines in the countryside of Homs. The sources also reported that in October 2020, al-Sayyad's agents prepared lists with the names of potential recruits, intending to sign contracts and travel to the oil fields and gold mines that Russia seized near the Venezuelan-Colombian border. Other sources indicated that the al-Sayyad company, formerly known as IS Hunters, is commanded by Fawaz Mikhail Gerges, one of the key persons involved in recruiting Syrians to Libya, in cooperation with the Wagner Group. A number of IS Hunters were reportedly killed in US strikes on Syrian government forces and their allies in Deir ez-Zor in February 2018.

After being recruited, informed sources and eyewitnesses interviewed by field researchers with STJ testified that the Russian Wagner Group is practically responsible for vetting the new recruits. Once Syrian recruits arrive in Libya, the company supervises the assignment of fighters to military bases, camps, and facilities, allegedly to perform guard services.

In addition to witness testimonies, STJ obtained a list of names likely sent by Syrian-armed or partisan bodies to Russian forces in September 2020. The list contains the names of 15,688 Syrian citizens. The sources which provided STJ with the list claimed that these names belong to recruits approved for deployment in Libya. Syrian entities responsible for recruitments appear to have preliminarily approved the recruits, then provided the Russians with detailed personal information about the people on the list, including the person's name and surname, the names of his father and mother, and his place and date of birth, including his residence and additional remarks. STJ could not verify whether the recruits discussed in this report had their names included on this list.

Within the context of continued recruitment of Syrians as fighters to Libya, STJ also obtained evidence that the Turkish government— another actor in the Syrian conflict recruiting and deploying mercenaries — continued sending Syrians from the areas where they maintain a military presence to Libya to participate in combat alongside the forces of the Government of National Accord (GNA). Turkey not only transferred men to Libya, but additionally trained Syrian women to perform medical and logistical tasks before flying them to Libya, as well as additional transfers of civilian police personnel with their families.

Recruiters in areas controlled by the Syrian government continued the same mercenary transfers and flight routes they used in the past. They deployed Syrian recruits to Libya on board civilian carriers, such as Cham Wings Airlines, or military aircraft. When flown on military aircraft, recruits left Syria from the [Khmeimim Air Base](#) in Latakia Province, landing at either [al-Khadim Airbase](#) or [Benina International Airport](#), the two major arrival destinations for recruits previously deployed to Libya.

To obtain details on the use of civilian carriers for military purposes, STJ interviewed a source with Cham Wings Airlines. The source said that at least 30 flights took off from Damascus International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi, flying recruits between early January and early April 2021. Furthermore, the source pointed out that over 30 similar flights were carried out from late October to late December 2020.

Additionally, STJ accessed information demonstrating that even though Syrian recruits were recently being assigned only to protection and guard services at military camps and facilities, their recruitment contracts clearly indicate that they must also perform combat-related tasks. This information is corroborated by a copy of a recruitment contract published by the news website Suwayda24. The second party to the contract—signed in As-Suwayda province— is al-Sayyad Company for Guarding and Protection Services. Article (11) of the contract defines the service term. The article reads: “For three months, the worker [recruit] shall continue to carry out his service and combat duties.” The nature of the duties the recruits signed up for is reemphasized in Article (12), reading: “The worker, while working for the Company and for

the duration of his service and combat tasks, is obligated to complete confidentiality and not to disclose, by any means, information that indicate his location or the nature of the tasks assigned to him.”⁴

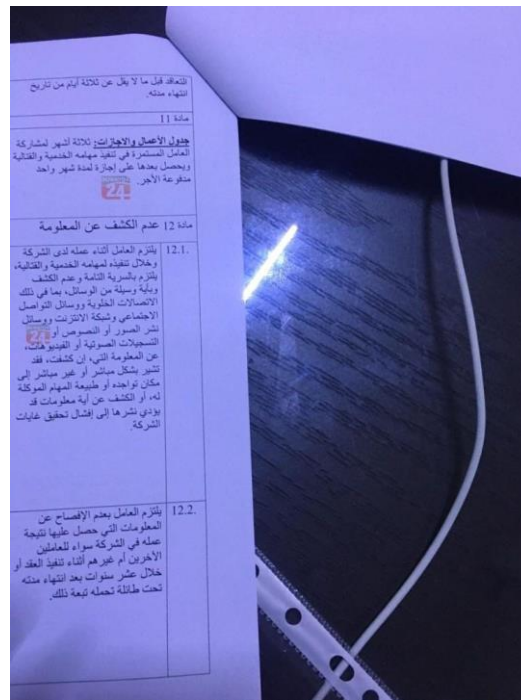


Image 1- Copy of the contract with the al-Sayyad Company for Guarding and Protection Services, overseeing recruitment of Syrians to Libya as fighters. The copy shows Article 11, discussed above.

Credit: News website Suwayda24.

These articles are concerning because they indicate that contracted recruits are likely to be used as mercenaries in military activities, especially as a former report by STJ exposed that the Russian Wagner Group⁵, colluding with entities affiliated with the Syrian government, recruited 3,000 Syrian civilians and fighters from across the country. The company sent the recruits to fight in Libya beside the Libyan National Army (LNA), commanded by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, against the Turkey-backed GNA, commanded by Fayez al-Sarraj.

Therefore, even though hostilities in Libya have stopped under the recent ceasefire agreement, affiliates of the Syrian government continue to use their headquarters to enlist Syrians under written contracts that assign them both service and combat tasks. These government agents are also allowing recruiters access to Syrian military and civil airports to

⁴ “Putin and al-Assad throwing hundreds of Syrian young men as mercenaries into the Russian war; dozens are from As-Suwayda” (in Arabic), Suwayda24, 22 June 2020, <https://suwayda24.com/?p=14322> (last accessed: 11 June 2021).

⁵ “In Collusion with the ‘Syrian Government’, a Russian Security Company Recruits Thousands of Syrians as Mercenaries to Fight in Libya alongside ‘Haftar’,” STJ, 28 July 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 accessed: 11 June 2021).

facilitate the transportation of Syrian recruits to Libya, where they will likely be used as mercenaries in conflict zones.

The Syrian government has been a signatory to the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries⁶ since 23 October 2008.⁷

However, the government has failed to establish measures to end the practice and abide by the provisions of the convention.

Article 1 of the convention defines a mercenary as a person who:

- a) Is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict; is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that party;
- b) Is neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict;
- c) Is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict; and
- d) Has not been sent by a State which is not a party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces.

The Syrian government's inaction regarding their affiliate's use, financing, and recruitment of mercenaries on Syrian territories breaches several of the convention's provisions, particularly:

- Article 2: "Any person who recruits, uses, finances or trains mercenaries, as defined in article 1 of the present Convention, commits an offence for the purposes of the Convention."
- Article 5:
 1. States Parties shall not recruit, use, finance or train mercenaries and shall prohibit such activities in accordance with the provisions of the present Convention.
 2. States Parties shall not recruit, use, finance or train mercenaries for the purpose of opposing the legitimate exercise of the inalienable right of peoples to self-determination, as recognized by international law, and shall take, in conformity with international law, the appropriate measures to prevent the recruitment, use, financing or training of mercenaries for that purpose.

⁶ "International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries," OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Mercenaries.aspx> (last accessed: 11 June 2021).

⁷ "International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries: CHAPTER XVIII, Penal Matters," Treaties UN, 4 December 1989, https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtmsg_no=XVIII-6&chapter=18&clang=en (last accessed: 3 May 2021).

3. They shall make the offences set forth in the present Convention punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account the grave nature of those offences.

Local sources, as well as civilians transported to Libya who have recently returned home, indicated that the Russian command had already returned batches of mercenaries deployed to Libya over 2020 to Syria. These batches returned after their contract terms—between three and six months—ended. The remaining batches were still performing tasks on the day this was written, on 30 April 2021, because many recruits opted to renew their contracts.

Additionally, STJ interviewed two local sources informed of the recruitments in Deir ez-Zor province; one with access to the lists of names of conscripts and recruits who registered to go to Libya in al-Bukamal area. The sources told STJ that recruitment brokers also continued to enlist and transfer children to Libya from late October 2020 to early April 2021. The sources confirmed that at least four children, two from Deir ez-Zor and two from Homs and Palmyra, were recruited. The sources said that Firas Iraqiya—a commander of the government-affiliated National Defense, which operates in and around Deir ez-Zor—⁸ enlisted these children and provided them with fake identity documents proving they are over 18.

The Recruitment and Transfer of Syrians to Libya

Syrians, both civilians and fighters, were first recruited in As-Suwayda province in December 2019. Later, similar recruitment drives were monitored in the provinces of Quneitra, Daraa, Damascus and its countryside, Homs, Hama, al-Hasakah, Raqqqa, and Deir ez-Zor. Tracking the practice, STJ previously published a report revealing that a Russian security company, aided by the Syrian government, recruited at least 3,000 Syrians to deploy to Libya as mercenaries alongside the LNA against the Turkey-backed GNA.⁹

The Russia-led recruitment drives corresponded to similar drives by the Turkish government, headed by Turkish security companies and the factions of the opposition's Syrian National Army (SNA). Keeping tabs on these operations as well, STJ published a report documenting that the Turkish command continued to recruit and transfer Syrians,¹⁰ both civilians and fighters, to Libya to fight as mercenaries alongside the GNA against the Russia-backed LNA. Notably, these last batches of fighters were flown to Libya after the permanent ceasefire agreement was signed on 23 October 2020.

As part of its ongoing effort monitoring the recruitment of Syrian children in hostilities, STJ also published a report confirming that Turkey and their affiliated opposition armed groups continue to enlist children into combat in Libya. For the purposes of the report, STJ obtained

⁸ Firas Jaham, 37, known as Firas Iraqiya, is a resident of the Jourah neighborhood in the city of Deir ez-Zor. He joined the ranks of the National Defense Militia in 2011 and ultimately became their Commander-in-Chief.

⁹ See footnote 4.

¹⁰ "An Uncertain Fate Awaits Thousands of Syrian Mercenaries in Libya," STJ, 3 March 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/en/an-uncertain-fate-awaits-thousands-of-syrian-mercenaries/> (last accessed: 12 June 2021).

evidence that dozens of these child soldiers were stationed at military barracks in the Libyan city Tripoli, particularly at a military camp facility near Mitiga International Airport.¹¹

Methodology

This extensive report draws 11 interviews. Field researchers with STJ interviewed a civilian recruited to Libya who returned to Syria in 2020, a relative of a second civilian, from As-Suwayda province, who was deployed to Libya in late 2020 and returned home in March 2021, as well as three media activists, two from As-Suwayda and one from Damascus' countryside.

The field researchers also obtained the testimonies of a local source from Deir ez-Zor, and a female relative of a civilian who was recruited and transferred from Deir ez-Zor to Libya in February 2021, as well as the account of the relatives of a civilian who was recruited and transferred to Libya from Deir ez-Zor in 2021 and was still there on the day of reporting, 8 April 2021.

Pertaining to the recruitment of children, STJ reached out to two informed local sources, who confirmed that under-18 males were recruited using fake IDs.

To gain insights on the flights to Libya, STJ interviewed an employee of the civilian operator Cham Wings Airlines and a civilian, from As-Suwayda, who was recruited and transferred to the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia.

Field researchers conducted all 11 interviews online between late 2020 and March 2021, while STJ's digital forensic expert cross-checked the information obtained by the organization with flight schedules from Damascus International Airport to Libya during the period under study.

Syrians Recruited to Libya Despite the Ceasefire Agreement

In this section, STJ reveals that Syrian government affiliates, in cooperation with a Russian security company, continue to enlist and transfer Syrian civilians to Libya, from the countryside of Damascus, As-Suwayda, Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, ignoring the permanent ceasefire agreement that parties to the Libyan conflict signed in October 2020.

Ahmad M., from As-Suwayda, told STJ that his cousin was recruited and transferred to Libya on 22 December 2020. The cousin performed guard services at a Russian camp in the al-Khadim Airbase under a three-month-contract he signed in March 2021. M. said:

"My cousin was recruited by the al-Sayyad Company for Guarding and Protection Services with 250 other males aged between 18 and 55. They were transported from As-Suwayda to the Khmeimim Air Base in preparation for their transfer to Libya. At the air base, [Russian forces] confiscated their cell phones because one of the contract's terms forbade them from using any means of communication or taking photographs.

¹¹ "Syria-Libya: Child Soldiers Stranded at Mitiga International Airport," STJ, 12 March 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-libya-child-soldiers-stranded-at-mitiga-airport/> (last accessed: 12 June 2021).

He stayed there for nearly seven days and was then transferred with the rest of the young men to Libya. In Libya, they were distributed to assigned locations. All these recruits obtained a security permit [from the Syrian government] before they applied to the al-Sayyad Company. We heard that about 20,000 people from different Syrian regions had their names registered with the company to go to Libya. When my cousin returned from Libya, he was able to buy a house, when previously he could not afford a pack of cigarettes."

The information provided by M. intersects with a report by Suwayda 24 on 23 December 2020. The news network said it obtained a list of 20,660 names and their full details.¹² The listed persons obtained security approvals from the Syrian Military Intelligence Branch, allowing them to work with security companies and leave Syria for Libya. The network said that it identified about 1,500 of the names as being from As-Suwayda province while the remaining 19,000 people belonged to different Syrian provinces, including Latakia, Tartous, Damascus, Daraa, and Homs.

STJ obtained a similar list of 15,688 names from a local source informed of the recruitments. The source said that these people were granted permits to enlist with recruiters. The source added that these people were recruited from various Syrian regions, including Hama, Homs, Damascus countryside, Daraa, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor and other areas between early and late 2020. However, the source stressed that no information was obtained as to whether these recruits had been transferred to Libya or not.

In another interview, STJ spoke with Nizar S., a media activist from As-Suwayda province. S. said that a batch of young men was recruited and transferred to Libya on 1 February 2021, including dozens from Ariqa, Harran, Shaqqa, Mufa'ila, Qanawat, and Labin in As-Suwayda province. These recruits were flown from the Khmeimim Air Base and landed at the al-Khadim Airbase, east of Libya. S. recounted:

"These people were recruited by the Al-Sayyad Company for monthly salaries of 1,000 USD in exchange for performing guard services at facilities. The contracts provide that 200 USD would be deducted as security deposits, while offering commanders of armed groups, divisions, and brigades monthly bonuses between 20 and 100 USD."

He added:

"Article 14 of the company's contract confirms that there is a memorandum of understanding between the company and the Syrian Ministry of Defense. The memorandum ensures that evaders of compulsory and reserve service with the Syrian army will not be harassed. Accordingly, the memorandum legalizes the status of wanted persons, in a clear indication that the highest authorities within the Syrian regime agreed to jeopardize Syrian youths and send them abroad. Article 11 defines the service term as extending over three months. At the end of the three months,

¹² "Russia attracts 20,000 Syrians to deploy them to Libya" (in Arabic), Suwayda 24, 24 December 2020, <https://suwayda24.com/?p=15911> (last accessed: 18 June 2021).

recruits are granted one-month paid leave. Other articles specify the nature of the duties assigned to recruits and oblige them to total confidentiality.”

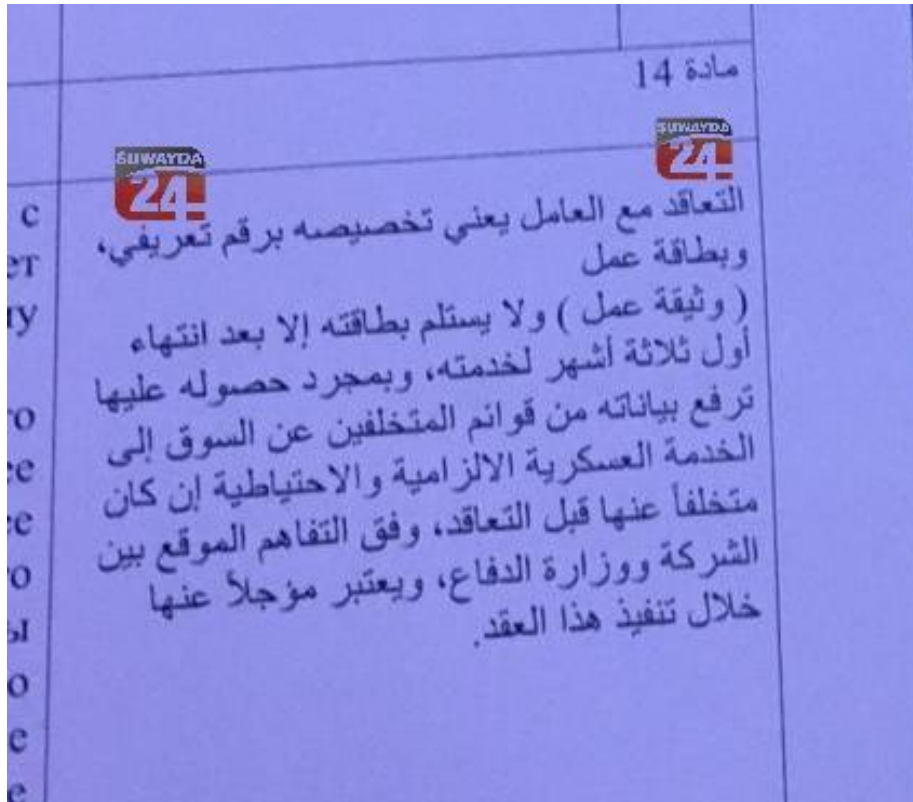


Image 2 – Copy of the contract with the al-Sayyad company that is supervising the recruitment and transfer of Syrians to Libya, highlighting Article 14, discussed above. Credit: News network Suwayda 24.

In another report covering mercenary enlistments in As-Suwayda, Suwayda 24 said that on 21 January 2021, a group of 50 young men gathered at the entrance to the city of As-Suwayda. They boarded a bus headed to the Russian Khmeimim Air Base before they were flown to Libya, where they will perform guard tasks at facilities controlled by Russian forces.¹³

¹³ For more: <https://twitter.com/suwayda24/status/1352692369670492160>



Image 3- One of the buses that transported dozens of young men from As-Suwayda city to the Khmeimim Air Base before they were flown to Libya. Credit: News Network Suwayda 24.

Saber M., a third eyewitness interviewed by STJ, verified that the recruitment and transfer of Syrians to Libya are still underway in the provinces of Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Palmyra through local agents affiliated with the Syrian government. M., from Raqqa, said that his cousin Qutayba M. was enlisted in late January 2021 with a batch of young men who were transferred to Libya on 3 February 2021. M. narrated:

“My cousin reached out to me, taking advantage of my connections with the Al-Buhamd Militia—affiliated with the Army of Tribes of the Syrian government. He wished to go to Libya, driven by unemployment and the deteriorating economic situation in the country. I told him to go to the enlistment center in the village of Zour Shammar, east of Raqqa, to register his name with the batch to be sent to Libya. His name was registered after he was subjected to a security checkup. In late November 2020, I called Qutayba and told him to be ready within 24 hours to go to the headquarters of the al-Harbi Brigade—commanded by Saleh al-Harbi and affiliated with the Syrian government’s Republican Guard—located in the village of Zour Shammar or in the town of al-Sabkha. From there, he would be transferred to the Deir ez-Zor military airport that functions as [the conscripts’] assembly and departure point in the eastern provinces.”

He added:

“My cousin left for al-Harbi’s headquarters and stayed there for two days before heading to Deir ez-Zor military airport with more than 35 young men from the area. On 29 January 2021, military buses transported them from Deir ez-Zor military airport to the Russian Khmeimim Air Base. On 3 February 2021, they were sent from the Air Base to Libya. On 9 February 2021, I called a commander of one of the groups under the al-Buhamd militia to talk to my cousin. He told me that they landed at an airport east of Libya, where they were supposed to be distributed to the sites of the facilities they are tasked guarding.”

A local source gave a corroborating account of the route that recruits take to Libya. He told STJ that at least 200 people from Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Palmyra were recruited and transferred to Libya on 2 and 3 February 2021. They were transported from Deir ez-Zor military airport to Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia province and from there to Libya. He said:

“Turki al-Buhamd, the commander of the al-Buhamd militia, is the Russians’ exclusive enlistment agent. He was assigned brokering the recruitment and transfer of Syrians to Libya because he belonged to a big powerful clan in the region, having enlistment centers in Ma’dan, al-Sabkha, al-Buhamad, Zour Shammar, and al-Khamisiya, east of Raqqa. In Deir ez-Zor, Russians have assigned many agents, notably Firas Jaham, known as Firas Iraqiya—commander of the National Defense in and around Deir ez-Zor—, and Saleh al-Harbi in al-Bukamal— commander of the al-Harbi militia, loyal to the regime and affiliated with the Republican Guard, as well as several tribal sheikhs, such as Nawaf al-Bashir and others. In Palmyra, Hassan Aziz, one of the National Defense officers, mediated recruitments. Aziz has so far recruited over 170 young men from Palmyra and its countryside, all intended for Libya.”

The source added that on 12 November 2020 another batch of about 120 young men from several Syrian regions were recruited and deployed to Libya. These were taken to Deir ez-Zor military airport, next to the Khmeimim Air Base, and finally to Libya.

STJ spoke to Rehab M., from al-Bukamal, who addressed the reasons that pushed her civilian fiancé and cousin, Subhi Kh. to enlist to go to Libya. She recounted:

“I got engaged to my cousin in early 2020. However, due to the high wedding expenses and the lack of job opportunities, Subhi approached Abu Adham Hajj Hussein al-Nayef, a commander of one of the groups in the al-Harbi Brigade led by Saleh al-Harbi, an affiliate of the Republican Guard for work. Al-Nayef persuaded him to go to Libya for a period of three to four months, after which he will return to Syria having gained no less than seven million Syrian pounds, considering that the salary will be in dollars. My cousin registered his name to go to Libya. He joined a military training camp held by Saleh al-Harbi Brigade for 20 days in January 2021. They called him Abu al-Laith. After the camp, my fiancé was granted a 6-day-leave to visit his family. He informed me that he was going to Libya on 3 February 2021. I tried to talk him out of the whole thing, but he was determined, arguing that travel there would pay for the costs of the wedding he was waiting for.”

M. said that on 15 February 2021, Abu Adham, the agent who brokered her fiancé’s recruitment, called his family and informed them that he had arrived in Libya safe and that his mission there would be limited to protecting oil and government facilities in return for a monthly salary of over 1,000 USD. She added:

“We are certain that a number of people from Deir ez-Zor were either killed or wounded in the battles in Libya. Some of the dead people’s bodies were brought back home and delivered to their families; others were less fortunate and were buried outside Syria,

including Nizar Walid al-Nabhan from the Abu al-Lail Tribe, who died with his brother Hassan al-Nabhan in Libya. The mother of these two men was denied burying them, or even talking to them before they died. They both died in the clashes in Libya. Numerous other young men from Deir ez-Zor and its countryside were transported to Libya and went missing.”

From Libya to Syria: The Testimony of a Civilian Recruit

STJ interviewed a Syrian civilian, Amer D., who was recruited to serve in Libya. He was deployed in June 2020 on a three-month contract and was assigned to guard Russian camps in Libya.

D., originally from Damascus’s countryside,

returned to Syria in October 2020. D. recounted to STJ the details of the enlistment process and the nature of the tasks he performed in Libya for those three months. He said:

“I registered my name at the Ba'ath Party building in the city of Latakia, where the Russian forces are stationed. The recruitment broker there was Ratib Dura, a volunteer recruit within the ranks of the Russia founded 5th Legion and a member of the Ba'ath Party from Duma city. I travelled with dozens of young men from various Syrian provinces from the Khmeimim Air Base to the al-Khadim Airbase. We were received by the Russian Wagner Group, which transported us to one of the Russian-led camps. The Russian flag was hoisted there. The camp is called al-Haniyah and located in the city of Ajdabiya. We stood guard there. On the morning of 1 October 2020, I was sent back to Syria with a number of young men from the Libyan city of Benghazi. Other recruits decided to stay in Libya and renew their contracts with the Russians.”

D. told STJ that the first batches of mercenaries that were recruited from the western countryside of Damascus and transferred to Libya on 11 May 2020 returned to Syria on 15 August 2020, when their contracts ended. He said that these batches consisted of at least 300 people, stressing that the number of people recruited and deployed to Libya from Damascus countryside alone amounted to approximately 1,500 people in 2020. He added:

“Most of the young men who were recruited from the countryside of Damascus were stationed in the al-Haniyah camp. We were paid a monthly 1,000 USD each. We received part of the payment, while the remaining sum was to be handed over to our families in Syria on a regular basis. Our families are paid in the Syrian Pound (SYP), according to the rate set by the Central Bank of Syria (1200 SYP for 1 USD). The Russian troops entrusted us with guarding the camp, carried out frequent extensive searches of the Syrian recruits’ luggage, allegedly looking for cell phones. About 45 young men from As-Suwayda province disappeared in the city of Benghazi. Later, we learned that they crossed to Europe, including a young man, Dhaifallah A.”

that After recruits returned to Syria from Libya, D. said that Russian forces in the countryside of Damascus recruited at least 65 other young men from the city of Duma in September 2020. These additional batches were brokered by Ratib Dura— a member of the Ba’ath Party and a volunteer recruit in the Russia-founded 5th Legion. These recruits enlisted in exchange for exemption from compulsory military service. D. added that the Russian Reconciliation Center granted cards to all the young men from the countryside of Damascus who returned from Libya calling them “Friends of Russia”. These cards allow them to pass checkpoints without fearing arrest.



Image 4- A satellite image showing the location of the al-Haniyah camp in the Ajdabiya region in Libya, where a number of Syrian recruits are stationed.

The return of mercenaries from Libya reported by D. were confirmed by Suwayda 24. The network published on 30 April 2021 that a number ranging between 150 and 200 Syrians recruited by Russia to Libya returned to As-Suwayda province after spending four months in Libya.¹⁴ The network added that additional hundreds of other recruits returned to various Syrian provinces. The outlet reported that, under the contracts they signed, recruits were paid monthly salaries between 1,000 and 1,500 USD, but the majority had received only 3,000 USD over four months, while very few received from 4,000 to 5,000 USD.

Suwayda 24 interviewed one of the recruits who returned to Syria. The recruit said they were mistreated by the Russian forces that supervised them for the three months they were in Libya, which they spent in the city of Sirte. The Russians insulted them, suddenly reduced

¹⁴ “Fighters Returning from Libya Reveal New Details” (in Arabic), Suwayda 24, 30 April 2021, <https://suwayda24.com/?p=16801> (last accessed: 17 June 2021).

food provisions, and coerced them into doing heavy manual labor like digging trenches, preparing earth mounds, and paving roads with stones.

Furthermore, the network reported that one of the Syrian recruits deployed to al-Jufra, Libya said that UN observers toured the areas where they were stationed two weeks ago, noting that a Russian officer warned them not to speak to the observers or reveal any information about the nature of their work.

Children Recruited and Deployed to Libya under Fake IDs in Early 2021

Regarding the deployment of child soldiers to Libya, STJ spoke to a local source informed of the enlistment drives within the al-Harbi Brigade, led by Saleh al-Harbi, a Russian proxy in al-Bukamal area. The source reported that several children were recruited from the al-Bukamal and deployed to Libya accompanied by relatives. To facilitate the recruitment of these children, enlistment brokers provided them with fake IDs proving that they were above 18. The source recounted:

“On 3 February 2021, a batch of young men from al-Bukamal was transported from the Deir ez-Zor military airport to the Russian Khmeimim Air Base and next to Libya. The batch included children under the age of 18, who were registered under the above-18 groups. Issa M., 16, is one of these children. His father was killed in Russian air force airstrikes in al-Bukamal and he is his family’s only breadwinner. M. was transported to Libya with his maternal uncle Sadam Sh. A second identified child soldier is Talib Q., 16, from the al-Salihiya village in al-Bukamal’s countryside, east of Deir ez-Zor. Q. registered his name and went to Libya with his cousins, recruits of the al-Harbi Brigade. Saleh al-Harbi reassured Q’s parents that the Russians told him that all the Syrian recruits will return from Libya, alluding to the abating combat in Libya.”

The source said that two other children were deployed to Libya and then returned to Syria in 2020. Adel H., 17, and Safwan L., 15, are from the city of al-Mayadin, east of Deir ez-Zor. They were both recruited and transferred to Libya by Firas Iraqiya, the commander of the National Defense in and around Deir ez-Zor.

A second source from Deir ez-Zor corroborated the account. He confirmed to STJ that children under the age of 18 were transferred to Libya on 3 February 2021. The source added that while enlistment brokers faked the children’s personal information, Russian forces were well-aware that children were being recruited. Russian forces are turning a blind eye on the issue of child recruitment, claimed the source, because faking data is a legal liability for the brokers, not them. He told field researchers with STJ:

“One of the children recruited and sent to Libya in early February 2021 is Nour L., born in Palmyra in 2005. He went to Libya with his uncle Zakaria N., a member of the National Defense forces. There is also Qassem T., born in Homs in 2004. All we know is that this

batch, which included the children, was deployed to the cities of Sirte and al-Jufra, which are full of Syrian recruits.”

At Least 60 flights Carried Recruits from Damascus International Airport to Libya

In addition to the estimated number of Syrian recruits sent to Libya, STJ obtained similar estimates on flights carrying recruits. In an exclusive testimony, an employee of Cham Wings Airlines verified that at least 30 flights were carried Syrian recruits from Damascus International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi between early January and early April 2021. The source added that 30 similar flights were carried out through Damascus airport in 2020, landing in Benghazi between late October and late December.

The source added that Cham Wings carried out the first group of flights using YK-BAB, YK-BAG, and YK-BAE aircraft to transport Syrian recruits to Libya, noting that the flights were coded SAW351 and SAW353.

A digital forensic expert with STJ tracked the flights and aircraft the Cham Wings employee reported with Flight Radar 24.. The expert discovered that from late October 2020 to 9 April 2021, 63 flights kicked off from Damascus to the Libyan city of Benghazi. The website’s flight logs documented the use of three Airbus A320 Cham Wings aircraft. The YK-BAB flew 52 times, YK-BAG 6, and YK-BAE 5. Furthermore, corroborating the employee’s account of flight codenames, the expert verified that 33 flights were coded SAW351, identical to those coded by the website as 6Q351, and 25 flights were coded SAW353, matching those coded by the website as 6Q353.

Flight history for Cham Wings Airlines flight 6Q351

DATE	FROM	TO	AIRCRAFT	FLIGHT TIME	STD	ATD	STA	STATUS
06 Apr 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:48	—	8:24 AM	—	Landed 10:12 AM
02 Apr 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:34	—	9:33 AM	—	Landed 11:07 AM
26 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:43	—	12:13 PM	—	Landed 1:56 PM
25 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:50	—	1:13 PM	—	Landed 3:03 PM
21 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:55	—	8:11 AM	—	Landed 10:06 AM
16 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:52	—	4:26 PM	—	Landed 6:18 PM
12 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	—	—	—	Landed 9:50 PM
07 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	—	—	—	Landed 6:34 PM
05 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	2:03 PM	—	—	Landed 2:03 PM
19 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:28	1:42 PM	11:13 AM	—	Landed 1:42 PM
12 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	1:39 PM	—	—	Landed 1:39 PM
11 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:28	6:53 AM	4:25 AM	—	Landed 6:53 AM
04 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	9:46 PM	—	—	Landed 9:46 PM
29 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:37	7:07 PM	4:30 PM	—	Landed 7:07 PM
28 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:34	10:11 PM	7:37 PM	—	Landed 10:11 PM
24 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	8:49 PM	—	—	Landed 8:49 PM
22 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:35	12:03 AM	9:20 PM	—	Landed 11:55 PM
19 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:43	4:55 PM	2:12 PM	—	Landed 4:55 PM
12 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	4:11 PM	—	—	Landed 4:11 PM
07 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:39	8:23 PM	5:44 PM	—	Landed 8:23 PM
03 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	7:38 PM	—	—	Landed 7:38 PM
31 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	3:01 PM	—	—	Landed 3:01 PM
27 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	3:14 PM	—	—	Landed 3:14 PM
22 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:43	7:59 PM	5:16 PM	—	Landed 7:58 PM
17 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:32	2:44 PM	12:13 PM	—	Landed 2:44 PM
13 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	3:25 PM	—	—	Landed 3:25 PM
10 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	5:19 PM	—	—	Landed 5:19 PM
08 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:41	8:16 PM	5:35 PM	—	Landed 8:16 PM
06 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAG)	2:30	12:54 PM	10:25 AM	—	Landed 12:54 PM
03 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAG)	—	4:40 PM	—	—	Landed 4:40 PM
02 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAG)	2:28	4:46 PM	2:18 PM	—	Landed 4:46 PM
29 Nov 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAG)	2:40	7:30 PM	4:50 PM	—	Landed 7:30 PM
11 Nov 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAG)	2:28	4:24 AM	1:56 AM	—	Landed 4:24 AM

Image 5 – Screenshot taken from Flight Radar 24, showing the history of the SAW 351/6Q 351 flight that took off from Damascus International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi between late October 2020 and early April 2021. These flights were carried out to Libya using aircraft YK-BAB and YK-BAE.

Flight history for Cham Wings Airlines flight 6Q353

DATE	FROM	TO	AIRCRAFT	FLIGHT TIME	STD	ATD	STA	STATUS
04 Apr 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:39	—	7:35 PM	—	Landed 9:14 PM
31 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:28	—	5:07 AM	—	Landed 6:35 AM
28 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:37	—	4:52 AM	—	Landed 6:28 AM
24 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:50	—	5:05 AM	—	Landed 6:55 AM
21 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:54	—	7:05 PM	—	Landed 8:59 PM
19 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:58	—	5:43 AM	—	Landed 7:41 AM
18 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:51	—	5:02 AM	—	Landed 6:53 AM
17 Mar 2021	Latakia (LTK)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	—	2:16 AM	—	Unknown
14 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:40	—	5:41 PM	—	Landed 7:20 PM
12 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	—	—	—	Landed 2:19 PM
07 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	—	—	—	Landed 8:32 AM
06 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	—	—	—	Landed 2:36 PM
03 Mar 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	7:51 AM	—	—	Landed 7:51 AM
28 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	7:47 AM	—	—	Landed 7:47 AM
27 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	7:19 AM	—	—	Landed 7:19 AM
26 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	12:11 PM	—	—	Landed 12:11 PM
24 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	6:33 AM	—	—	Landed 6:30 AM
21 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	—	6:32 AM	—	—	Landed 6:32 AM
17 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:31	4:45 AM	2:14 AM	—	Landed 4:45 AM
14 Feb 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:35	4:41 AM	2:06 AM	—	Landed 4:40 AM
26 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAB)	2:32	12:44 AM	10:12 PM	—	Landed 12:44 AM
06 Jan 2021	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAE)	2:32	9:41 PM	7:10 PM	—	Landed 9:41 PM
18 Dec 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAE)	2:27	8:45 PM	6:18 PM	—	Landed 8:45 PM
03 Nov 2020	Damascus (DAM)	Benghazi (BEN)	A320 (YK-BAG)	—	8:12 AM	—	—	Landed 8:12 AM

Image 6 – Screenshot taken from Flight Radar 24, showing history of the SAW 353/6Q 353 flight that took off from Damascus International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi between late October 2020 and early April 2021. These flights used YK-BAB and YK-BAG aircraft.

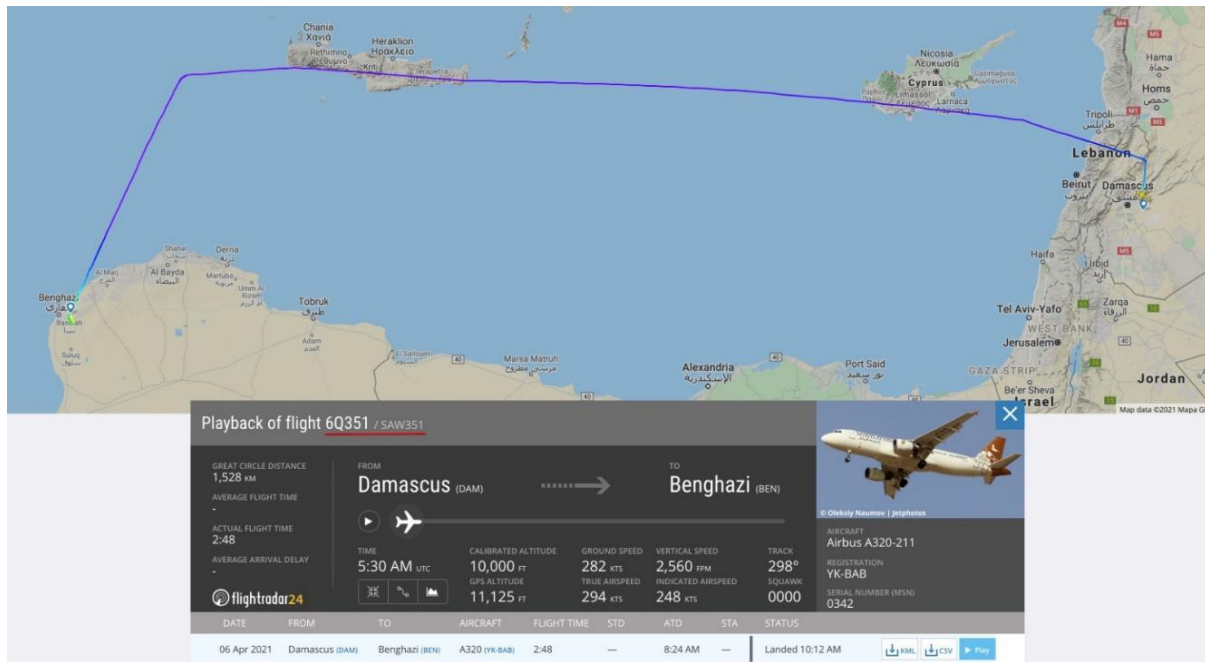


Image 7 - Screenshot taken from Flight radar 24 website, showing that flight number 6Q351 is the same as flight number SAW351.

A field researcher with STJ interviewed a second civilian recruit, Yazan M. from As-Suwayda province. M. said that a batch of 180 young men was recruited from the province by the al-Sayyad Company and transported on 23 December 2020 to Khmeimim Air Base and then flown to Libya. He added that this batch, including him, was supposed to be flown to Libya with 400 young men from Khmeimim Air Base that day. However, only 180 people out of the total number were flown, while he and the rest of the young men were returned to As-Suwayda to be transferred later. The field researcher says that it is most likely that M. has been already transferred to Libya because our researcher lost contact with him in early February 2021.

The dates and the locations of the transfers provided by M. match with one of the flights monitored by Flight Radar 24. The website shows that a Russian Tupolev tu-154m aircraft took off from Latakia on 23 December 2020. Furthermore, a digital forensic expert verified that this aircraft landed east of Libya, based on the aircraft's return flight.. The aircraft then set off from Libya and returned to Latakia. Based on this information, we believe the aircraft was carrying Syrian recruits onboard.

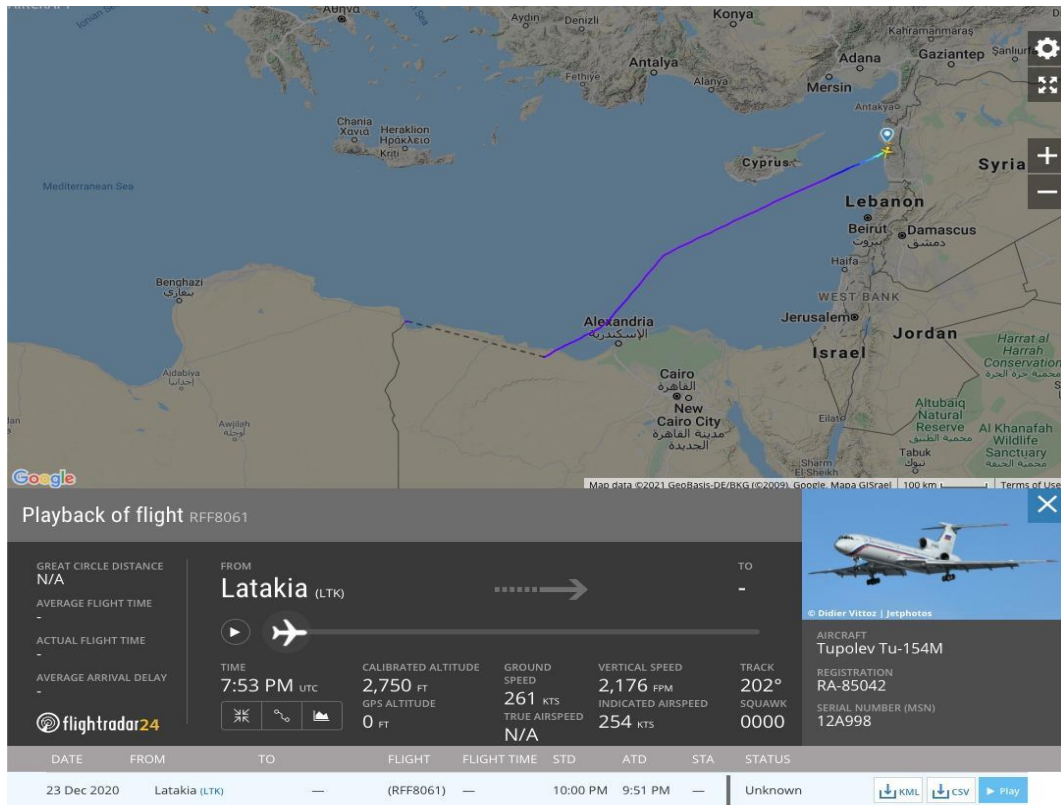


Image 8 - Screenshot taken from Flight Radar 24, showing the route of a Russian military aircraft on 23 December 2020. The aircraft took off from Latakia and landed in Libya.

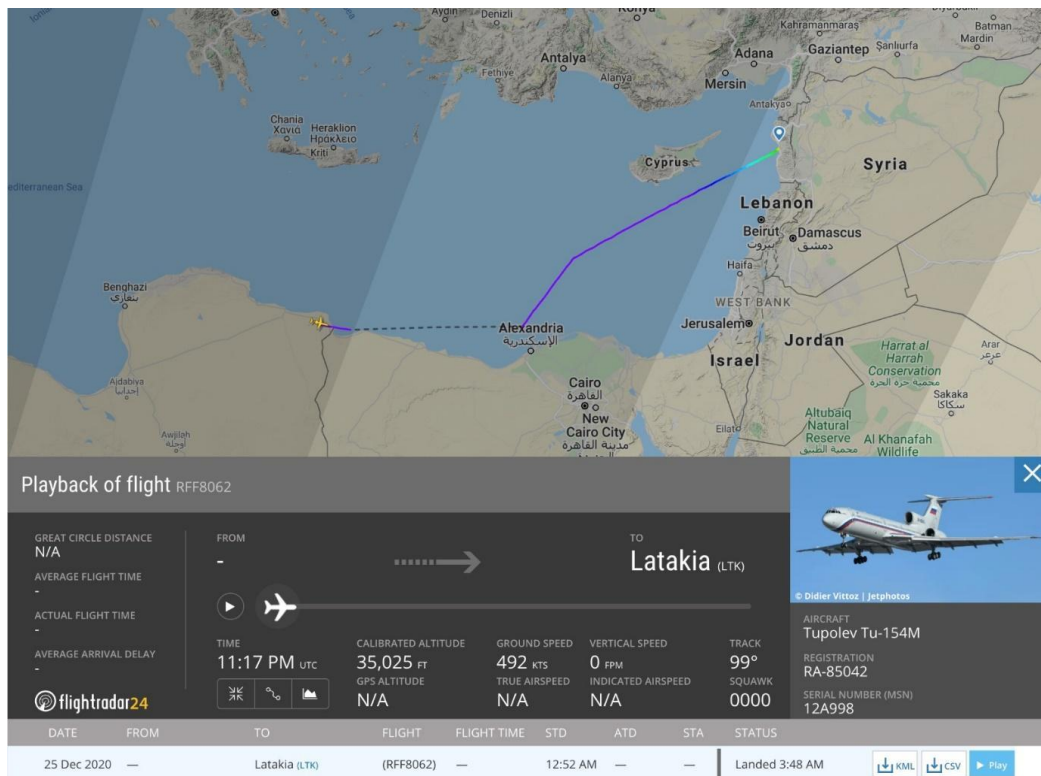


Image 9 - Screenshot taken from Flight Radar 24, showing the return flight of the Russian military aircraft on 25 December 2020. The aircraft took off from Libya and landed in Latakia.

STJ cross-checked M.'s account with the witness Nizar S., also from As-Suwayda province. S. said that a second batch of recruits, including dozens of locals from the province, was transported on 1 February 2021 to Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia and flown from there to the al-Khadim Airbase in Libya.

The information about the date and the launch place of the flight obtained from S. also match with the logs of one of the flights recorded by Flight Radar 24. The website shows that a Russian Tupolev tu-154m aircraft left Latakia for Libya on 1 February 2021. The digital forensic expert verified the link between the witness' account and data from the website by tracking the aircraft's return flight, heading from Libya to Latakia.

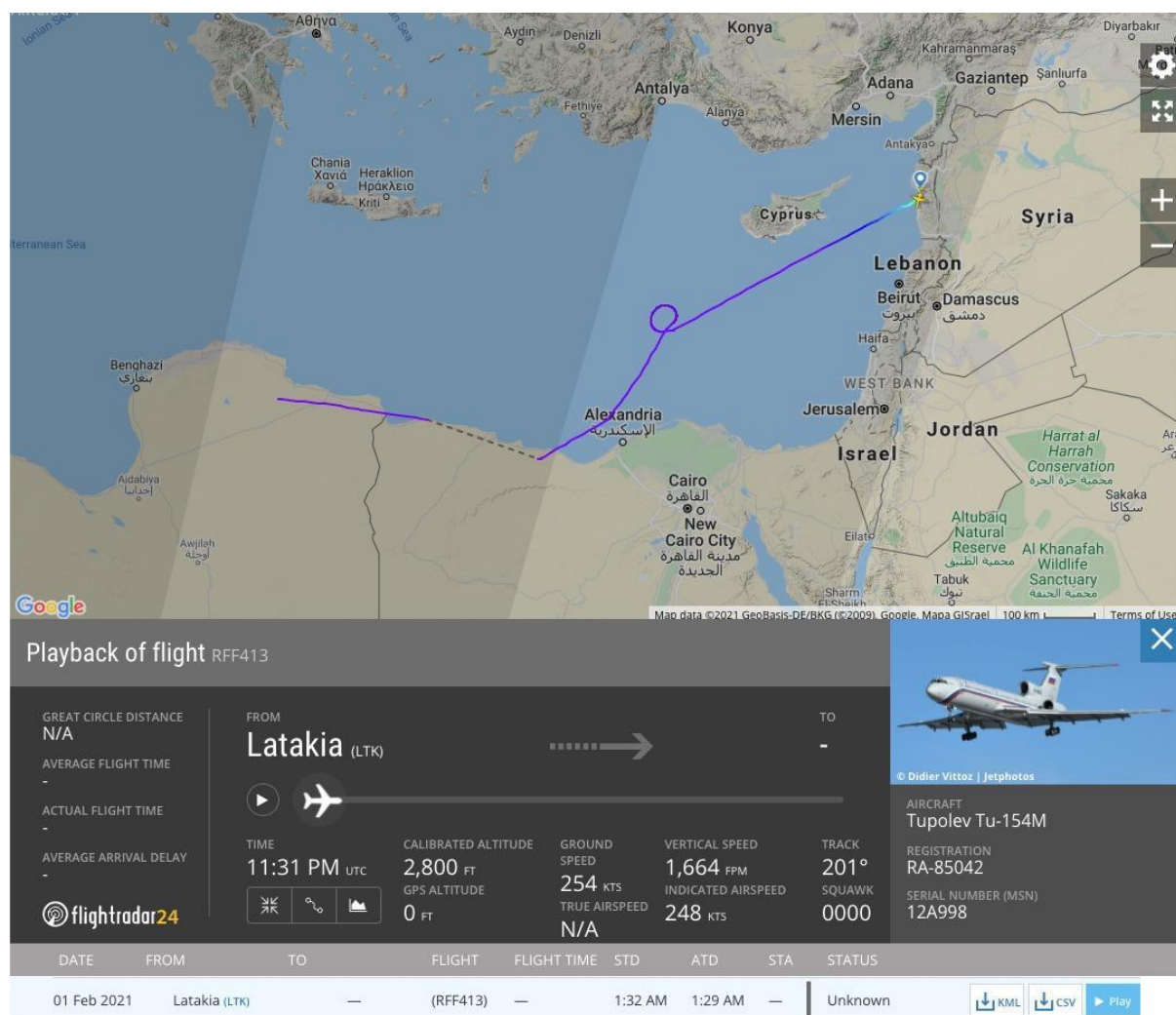


Image 10 - Screenshot taken from Flight Radar 24, showing the route of a Russian military aircraft on 1 February 2021. The aircraft took off from Latakia and landed in Libya.

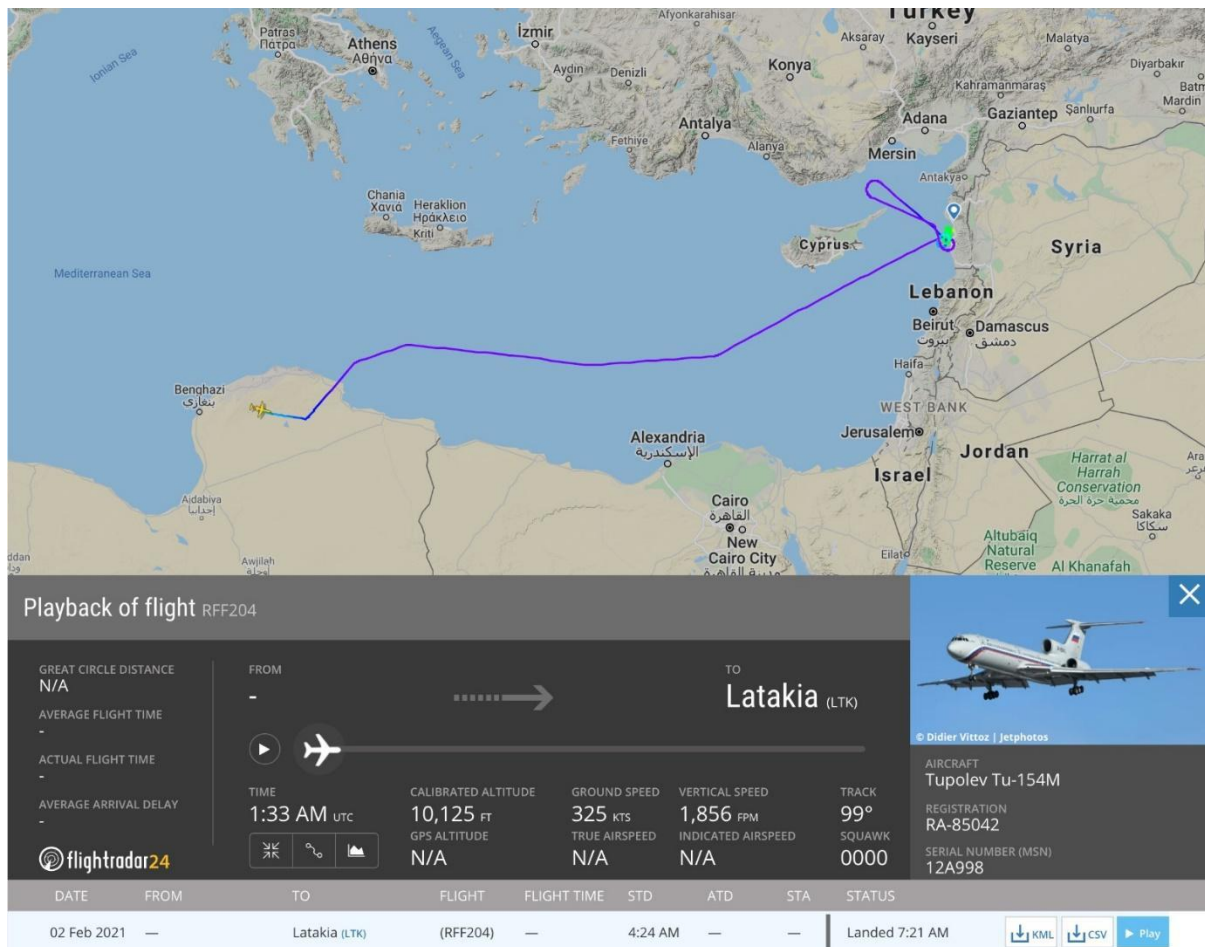


Image 11 - Screenshot taken from Flight Radar 24, tracking the return flight of the Russian military aircraft on 2 February 2021. The aircraft took off from Libya and landed in Latakia.

STJ reached out to a media activist in Damascus' countryside to obtain additional information on the reported recruitments and transfers in the area. The activist claimed that on 3 March 2021, a batch of 40 recruits from Hama province and Damascus Countryside—Duma, Qudsaya, and Harasta, was flown through the Damascus International Airport onboard Cham Wings Airlines and landed in the Libyan city of Benghazi.

Notably, this batch made headlines in the media. The Sawt al-Asimah news website said that this batch included people from Damascus's countryside who enlisted through contracts provided by agents of the Russian security company Wagner. The website added that the agents included Jamal Hamoud and Suleiman Saleh, a Captain within the ranks of the Russia-founded 5th Legion.¹⁵

¹⁵ "Russia recruits a new batch of Eastern Ghouta men to fight in Libya" (in Arabic), Sawt al-Asimah, 4 February 2021, <https://damascusv.com/archives/35207?fbclid=IwAR19iMUGSeCmHi4oMaIMJCUvLjE6zoi2rFaI0raIWwjsr5nT36vGSvkd84> (last accessed: 18 June 2021).

The account provided by the activist also matches with the logs of a flight recorded by Flight Radar 24. The website shows that a Cham Wings' Airbus A320-211, named YK-BAB, took off on 3 December 2021 from Damascus International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi.

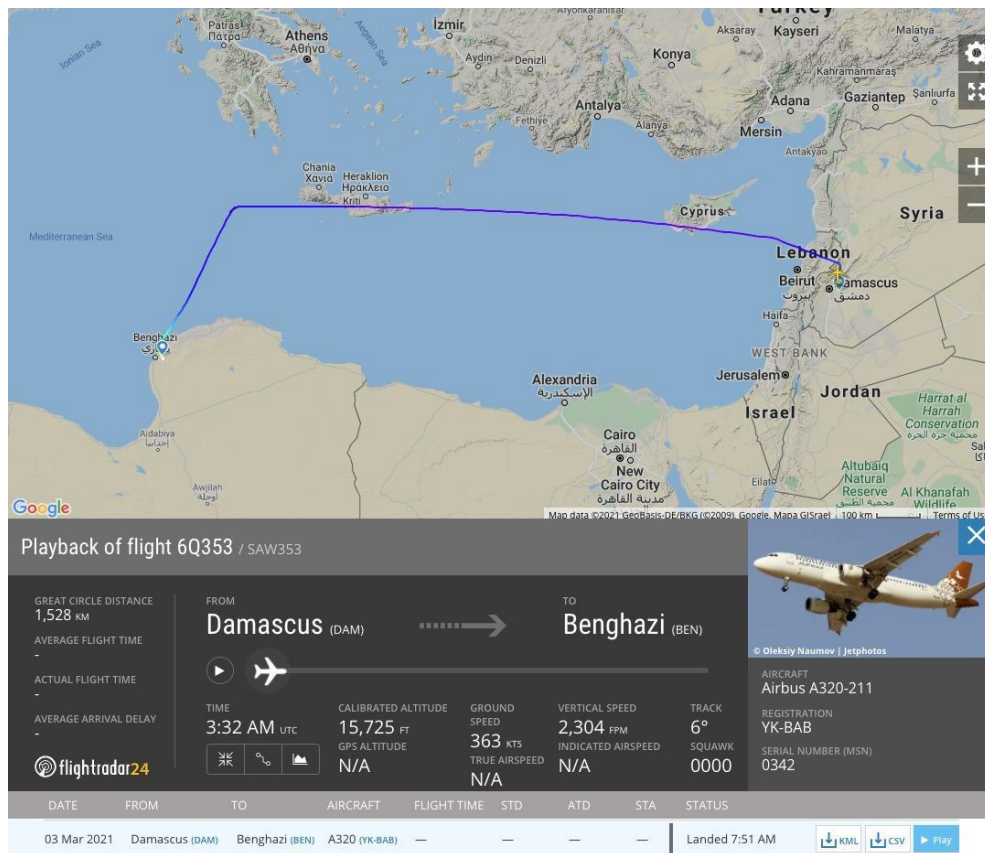


Image 12 – Screenshot taken from Flight radar 24 shows a Cham Wings aircraft departing from Damascus International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi on 3 March 2021.

Monitoring recruitments and transfers from As-Suwayda province, STJ reached out to a local media activist. He testified that a new batch of about 30 men from the province departed from Damascus International Airport on 12 March 2021 onboard a Ilyushin IL cargo plane belonging to Syrian Airlines. The carrier landed at al-Khadim Airbase. The activist stressed that the plane stayed there for five hours and then returned to Syria.

Monitoring recruitments in the province, several media activists on 12 March 2021 circulated a screenshot showing the flight route of the Syrian Airlines Ilyushin IL-76T cargo aircraft. Corroborating the account of the As-Suwayda activist, the aircraft left Syria through Damascus International Airport and landed in eastern Libya.

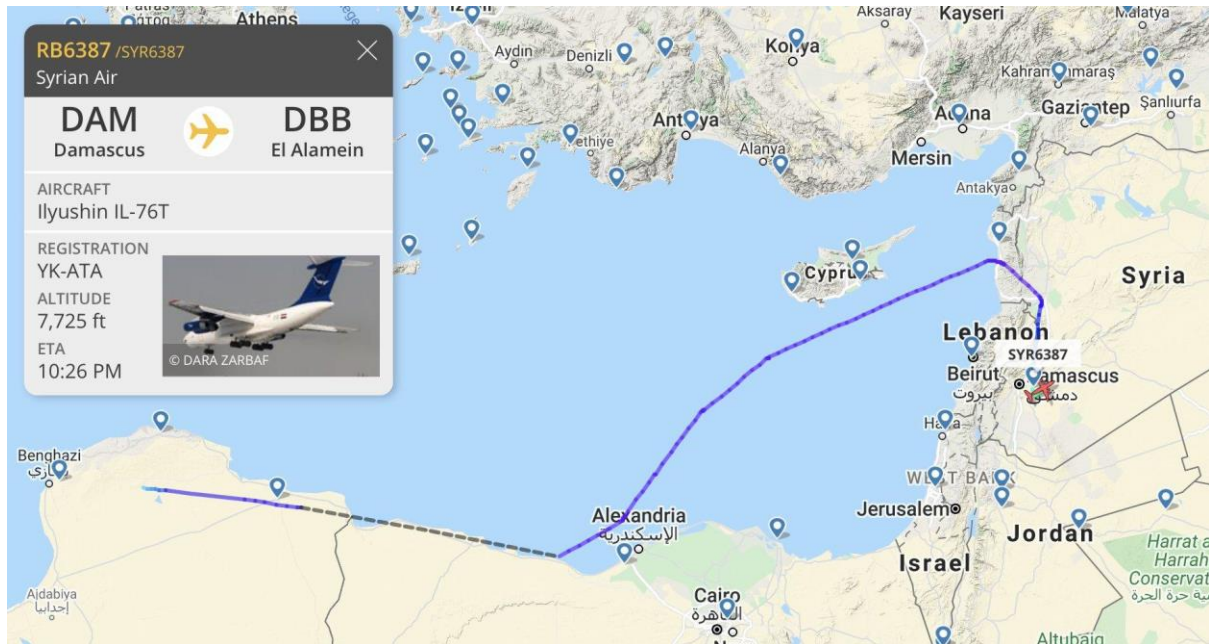
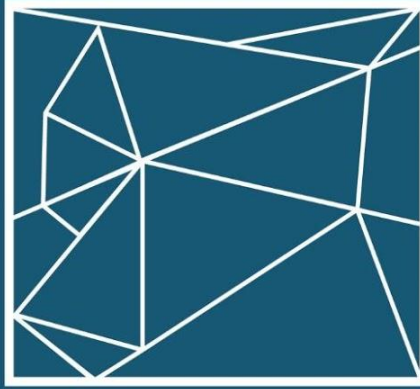


Image 13- Screenshot circulated by media activists shows the flight route of a Syrian Airlines cargo plane that took off from Damascus International Airport to eastern Libya on 12 March 2021.

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة

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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