

These Syrian militiamen were foes in their civil war. Now they are battling each other in Libya.

[washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/these-syrian-militiamen-were-foes-in-their-civil-war-now-they-are-battling-each-other-in-libya/2020/06/25/c7ceff8c-affa-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/these-syrian-militiamen-were-foes-in-their-civil-war-now-they-are-battling-each-other-in-libya/2020/06/25/c7ceff8c-affa-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4_story.html)

By Kareem Fahim and Zakaria Zakaria

The Syrian fighter was a teenager when he joined his first militia and a veteran of two armed groups by age 25, a close relative said. He posted brooding photos of himself on Facebook wearing fatigues and posing with guns, proud to share his battlefield exploits.

But there are no posts about Mamdouh's most recent assignment, in Libya, where he joined a Russian-backed security force, according to the relative. The mission was supposed to be secret, but it also carried a whiff of shame. It transformed Mamdouh from fighter to foreign mercenary and placed him on the battle lines facing other Syrians, former adversaries in their own country's civil war but now squaring off in someone else's.

When he called his family in Syria last week from Libya to ask for their prayers, his father called Mamdouh a dog and said he would refuse condolence calls if the fighter was killed, according to the relative, who lives in Turkey. The relative asked that his name as well as Mamdouh's full name be withheld to prevent retaliation against the family.

Thousands of Syrian men have been recruited for the warring sides in Libya over the past year, coaxed to fight there by powerful foreign sponsors and promised lucrative salaries or other incentives, according to a Syrian human rights monitor, Syrian opposition members, and Libyan and U.S. officials.

The Syrians are not the only mercenaries in Libya. But their preexisting rivalries have introduced a "bizarre" dynamic into Libya's already volatile conflict, said Tarek Megerisi, a Libya expert with the European Council on Foreign Relations.

"You have the Syrian civil war taking place inside Libya," he said.

Syria's ruinous and durable conflict was largely to blame: Many of the young men being recruited were idle, desperate for cash and, after nine years of devastating civil conflict at home, possessed of little experience but war.

Most of the Syrian fighters in Libya have been hired by Turkey, which sponsors militias inside Syria opposed to the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Turkey also is the main military supporter of Libya's U.N.-recognized government, known as the Government of National Accord, or GNA.

Turkey began deploying Syrian fighters to Libya late last year, as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government began ramping up its military assistance to the GNA. The Syrians were viewed as reliable fighters and an important addition to the GNA's defensive lines as it tried to fend off an attack on the capital, Megerisi said.

The deployment of Syrian fighters in support of Libyan government forces was controversial as soon as it became public late last year. Syrian opposition figures said at the time they were furious that rebel fighters had flown off to a foreign war at the worst possible time — during a fierce Russian-backed Syrian government offensive aimed at retaking Idlib province, one of Syria's last rebel-held areas.

In interviews, Syrian rebel commanders, apparently fearful of crossing secretive Turkish officials, insisted for months that the deployments to Libya were not happening at all, even as pictures of Syrian fighters in Libya were circulating widely.

More recently, hundreds of other Syrians aligned with Assad's government have been hired to support the rogue Libyan commander Khalifa Hifter, according to Syrian opposition members who have been tracking the recruitment and Libyan military officials. Hifter is based in eastern Libya and has waged a long and so far fruitless campaign to defeat the GNA. The Turkish-backed government dealt Hifter a major setback this month, repelling his advance on Tripoli, the Libyan capital, and seizing his last stronghold in the west.

The latest recruiting inside Syria, including in Syrian government-held and Kurdish areas, is on behalf of Russian-backed security forces in Libya. Russia is one of Hifter's most important backers, and he is supported also by Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates.

At a time when the Syrian economy and currency are collapsing, it is difficult for prospective fighters to pass up the generous financial packages offered for heading to Libya, offers that include salaries of \$2,000 a month, a \$500 advance for families left behind in Syria, and the promise of several thousand dollars in death benefits.

But the transfer of Syrian fighters to both sides of the Libyan conflict has gone over badly at home. Syrian opposition militiamen are accused of forsaking the battle against Assad's government. Fighters such as Mamdouh who served in pro-Assad militias are being criticized for serving Russian rather than Syrian interests.

And, for many Syrians across the country's political divides, the promise of a payday was no excuse.

"As a journalist and activist in the revolution, I feel ashamed of this, on both sides," said Samer al-Ahmed, a pro-opposition Syrian journalist who has been investigating the recruitment of Syrians to fight in Libya. "I do not accept Syrians being transformed into mercenaries," he said.

The Trump administration's position on Libya has been difficult to pin down. Trump appeared to endorse Hifter's attack on Tripoli when it began. More recently, U.S. officials have strongly condemned Russian intervention on Hifter's behalf.

In a briefing in early May, Christopher Robinson, the State Department's deputy assistant secretary of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, said that Russia and the Assad government had "ferried Syrian fighters to Libya to participate in Wagner operations in support of" Hifter's forces. The Wagner Group is a Kremlin-backed security firm that has sent hundreds of operatives to fight for Hifter in Libya.

Another State Department official, Henry Wooster, the deputy assistant secretary for North Africa and Egypt, said during the same briefing that the United States opposed the deployment of mercenaries by "both sides within the Libyan conflict."

Mamdouh, the fighter, was among dozens of men recruited by tribal figures in northeastern Syria's Hasakah province in May to go to Libya, according to his relative and Syrian anti-government activists tracking the deployments to Libya. Mamdouh did not respond to messages sent to his social media accounts and to a number he has used to contact his family from Libya.

Many of the recruits had served in the National Defense Forces, a pro-Assad militia, and were told they were going to guard oil installations in Libya, according to relatives of the recruits.

But commanders in western Libya said Syrian fighters allied with Russia are serving in front-line positions. Col. Mahmoud Mustafa, a Libyan commander from the city of Misurata who is allied with the GNA, said that Russian and Syrian mercenaries were stationed together in Sirte, a flash-point city on the Mediterranean coast. Syrian snipers in the city had taken up positions in high-rise buildings, he said.

Hassan al-Handal, a Syrian opposition member who belongs to the Harb tribe, said several of his relatives had gone to Libya. He and others said that recruiting was spearheaded by Russian military officers stationed in Syria along with employees of the Wagner Group. Intermediaries from Arab tribes collected names of possible candidates and approached the recruits, according to Handal, who signed an open letter criticizing the tribal involvement in the Russian recruiting.

The letter, by the "free men and women of the Harb tribe," accused the recruiters of "exploiting" the collapsing currency and using other pressure tactics, and called on young people to ignore "Russian calls to send them to inevitable death."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov recently denied reports of Syrian fighters being transported to Libya to fight for Hifter.

Bogdanov, speaking to the Egyptian daily newspaper Al-Ahram this month, also rejected reports that members of the Wagner private military company were operating in Libya, saying such reports were "based mostly on fabricated data and aimed at

discrediting Russia's policy on the Libyan track.”

Megerisi said Russia appeared to be trying to carve out a sphere of influence in Libya to counter Turkey's reach.

“With the collapse of Hifter, the Syrians who were fighting on his side may become a Russian expeditionary force inside Libya,” Megerisi said. He added, “The next few weeks will be very telling about whether Russia is in a position to draw lines or not.”

Also unclear was what would become of the Syrians fighters if intensive international efforts to tamp down Libya's fighting were successful. “What happens when the game is over and they don't want to go home?” Megerisi asked.

Zakaria reported from Doha, Qatar. Sudarsan Raghavan in Cairo, Robyn Dixon in Moscow and Fahmi Igwiaan in Misurata, Libya, contributed to this report.