



The Syria-Libya Conflict Nexus

From Brothers in Revolution to Partners in Crime

September 2021

Executive Summary

This report assesses the Syria-Libya conflict nexus embodied by parallel “pipelines” created by Russia and Turkey to recruit and mobilise Syrian combatants and deploy them as mercenary fighters in Libya. Through field-based research conducted in both contexts, this report finds that as these pipelines have expanded, they have eroded formal state authority and bolstered the networks used for Mediterranean migration and illicit economic activities. Both Russia and Turkey have benefitted, as have local armed actors and opportunistic intermediaries. In response to the realities surfaced in this report, decision-makers must re-assess the relationship between the Arab Spring’s most protracted conflicts in order to carry out more effective local aid implementation and realise durable solutions in the face of evolving patterns of migration from Syria.

Paradoxically, however, the two countries have also been drawn together and have been linked to each other in an emerging conflict nexus.

Introduction

Libya and Syria have experienced the deepest turmoil of all the states that were affected by the region-wide political upheaval of the Arab Spring. The decade of conflict that has followed has left both countries internally divided and externally isolated, a status cemented by deep-seated political disagreements with neighbours, COVID-induced economic downturn, and variable security conditions. Paradoxically, however, the two countries have also been drawn together and have been linked to each other in an emerging conflict nexus. Since 2019, direct military interventions by Russia and Turkey have created the conditions for the expansion and formalisation of linkages between their zones of influence in each country, shuttling fighters, migrants, and illicit goods, including narcotics between the countries (see: [The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State](#)).¹ While Syrian mercenary recruitment to Libya has been widely assessed – and condemned – its nuances and impact on conflict dynamics and European migration politics have been generally overlooked. Its relationship to Mediterranean migration has been almost entirely ignored.

It is believed that this is the first publicly available report that systematically assesses the disparate impacts of Russian and Turkish military interventions on the Syria-Libya conflict nexus. By focusing on each pathway in isolation, this research demonstrates that not all mercenary or migrant transits are alike. The important distinctions that have so far been overlooked have significant implications for the efficacy of strategies to mitigate refugee outflows, as well as the long-term aid environment and broader dynamics of stability and instability in both countries. Its findings shed light on the erosion of formal authorities and the rule of law, the export of violence from protracted crisis settings, the movements of refugees and labour migrants, and the widening scope for transnational illicit networks. Finally, this report is of further interest to decision-makers considering the long-term shifts in regional power competition, and it demonstrates in a granular manner the nature of parallel Russian and Turkish military interventions in the wider Mediterranean basin. Policymakers and analysts must consider the possibility that interventions in Syria and Libya will provide a template for future regional power contests, military intervention, and proxy warfare.

¹ “From Syria to Libya: Inside the booming drugs trade thriving on regional chaos,” *The New Arab*, 24 August 2021: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/captagon-and-cannabis-inside-syrias-booming-drugs-trade>.

Key Findings

- Parallel Russian and Turkish military interventions in Syria and Libya have formalised the recruitment of Syrian mercenaries for deployment in Libya. These networks are the backbone of a Syria-Libya conflict nexus that facilitates trans-Mediterranean labour migration, transit for asylum-seekers bound for Europe, and war economy profiteering.
- Although Moscow and Ankara have both recruited Syrians as mercenaries to fight in Libya, fighters' migration pathways, military deployment, and ultimate trajectories differ greatly. During the Tripoli War (2019–2020), Syrians recruited by Moscow were relegated to non-combat functions supporting Russian combatants and private military contractors. By contrast, Syrians recruited by Ankara fought directly alongside the Libyan coalition supported by Turkey, including during some of the most intense battles over Tripoli.
- The Damascus–Benghazi axis created by Russia presents a unique migration challenge. Through corrupt officials in the Government of Syria and Libyan National Army apparatuses and a host of supporting actors, Syrian migrants are able to secure the necessary authorisations and travel permits, often with the explicit purpose of onward migration to Europe. Crucially, no corresponding pathway for migration exists along the Turkish-controlled axis linking northern Syria to western Libya. However, pressure to seek migration pathways will grow as conditions in Syria degrade.
- Nonetheless, migrants departing for Europe predominantly do so from areas now controlled by the UN-recognised Government of National Accord² in western Libya, which is backed militarily by Turkey. Failed migration attempts can result in arbitrary detention, extortion, and abuse at the hands of armed factions that control detention centres.
- Ultimately, the Syria-Libya nexus strengthens the war economies of both countries and builds stronger transnational relationships between human traffickers, smugglers, corrupt officials, and military and security authorities who facilitate recruitment, safe passage, and permitting procedures.

Recommendations

- Decision-makers and analysts must apply a region-wide analytic frame to identify linkages between the Syria and Libya contexts. Recognising, monitoring, and analysing dynamics in each of these conflict zones will be critical to anticipating and mitigating harmful spillover effects.
- Efforts to identify durable solutions for refugee populations and reduce trans-Mediterranean migration will be ineffective if they are limited to proximate staging areas in coastal Libya. Actions to reduce migration must begin by addressing upstream drivers of instability, including state fragility and fragmentation in both Libya and Syria. In addition, further efforts must be made to identify key communities and populations at risk of migration in Syria, where protracted crisis, conflict stalemate, security risks, and economic collapse continue to drive migration.
- Policymakers must contend with the reality that many Syrians migrating to or through Libya cannot or will not return to their home communities in Syria. As such, activities that support sustainable livelihoods for Syrian populations already in Libya may reduce pressure for risky trans-Mediterranean flight. In general, implementers will benefit from greater programmatic latitude in Libya than in Syria. However, it is important to avoid a moral hazard: activities must not incentivise migration to Libya, and considerable forethought will be needed.
- Crisis response actors should consider options for social media-based activities targeting both Syrian and Libyan audiences. Digital platforms such as TikTok are widely used by migrant recruiters. Identifying key messages and predatory tactics is an important first step to prevent opportunistic smugglers from preying on the desperation of would-be migrants.
- Ultimately, decision-makers must view migration as the result of a cascading series of breakdowns of the rule of law spanning the entire spectrum of actors from local mediators to regional military powers. Each actor set must be addressed by different means. Targeted aid implementation to address needs and impart stability in susceptible areas can be effective locally. At the other end of the spectrum, concerns arising from regional military intervention and migration should be part of overarching political dialogue with the relevant powers, Russia and Turkey.

² The GNA has belonged to a fragile coalition under the Government of National Unity in March 2021.

War-Torn Neighbours: Libya and Syria

Since 2011, protracted crises have ebbed and flowed in Libya and Syria, splintering both states into territorial patchworks, with each emerging region falling under the sway of unique military and political coalitions. Each coalition is supported by foreign military powers; arguably, the most influential of these are Russia and Turkey. In Libya, the population-dense coastal regions are currently divided into two main spheres of influence, each presided over by a coalition backed militarily by Russia or Turkey. Holding sway in the east is the Libyan National Army (LNA), headed by Khalifa Haftar. Moscow backs the LNA primarily through private Russian military companies, including the Wagner Group. Meanwhile, western Libya is dominated by a loose coalition led by the Government of National Accord (GNA), which is supported militarily with drones, ground forces, and technical assistance provided by Turkey.³

Comparatively, Syria is more deeply fractured. A decade of conflict has divided the country into three primary zones of control, whilst five international powers – Russia, Turkey, Iran, the U.S., and Israel – have intervened militarily. In Syria as in Libya, Russia and Turkey are generally viewed as the two most influential foreign powers operating on the ground. Russian influence in Government of Syria areas has mounted since Moscow's decisive intervention in support of Damascus in September 2015. The Russian military, private firms close to the Kremlin, and military companies including the Wagner Group are powerful forces in these areas, although they must sometimes compete with Iran-backed groups for influence locally. For its part, Turkey has intervened in the Syria crisis more comprehensively than any other power, and by August 2016, Ankara's political, logistical, and military support for the armed opposition gave way to a series of direct military interventions. A swathe of opposition-held areas along the Turkish border in northern Syria now sits under a de facto Turkish military, security, economic, and administrative aegis. Northeast Syria constitutes the third major zone of control; in areas east of the Euphrates River, the U.S. is the main foreign power to wield influence, although Russian forces are also present in some communities. For its part, Israel continues to carry out occasional airstrikes against Iranian targets in Syria, but it does not have a presence on the ground.

Military Mobilisation

Following the 2011 uprisings, sympathetic armed rebel factions in Libya and Syria sought to cultivate deeper strategic military ties, albeit without sustained impact. For instance, by building on their early revolutionary successes, the post-2011 transitional authorities in Libya lent military and financial support to the armed opposition in Syria. Their support to Syrian rebels included equipment that had been shipped to Libya during the early stages of the north African state's own uprising. The revolutionaries in power in Tripoli also encouraged former Libyan rebel fighters to travel to Syria to battle forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad. Among groups that made the journey was 'Liwa al-Umma', a brigade with an Islamist bent led by Mahdi al-Harati, a senior commander during the rebellion against Muammar Gaddafi. In the main, such support to Syria was sporadic, poorly coordinated, and ineffective at creating sustained military linkages between Libya and Syria.

Later military interventions by Russia and Turkey decisively linked the two conflicts in a way that scattershot attempts by rebel groups could not. In late 2019, the two regional powers established complex military recruitment pipelines to shuttle mercenary fighters from Syria to Libya. The proximate driver of the recruitment was the Tripoli War (2019–2020), one of the most violent recent periods of the conflict, which prompted a drastic increase in logistical, technical, and material support to Libya's two warring coalitions.⁴ The mobilisation of Syrian mercenaries to support both sides of the Tripoli War accelerated rapidly in late 2019, following a November agreement between the Turkish government and the GNA, which outlined Turkey's

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³ It is worth noting that the eastern side is led by the LNA of Khalifa Haftar, based in Benghazi and backed by the House of Representatives (HOR) in Tobruk, while the western camp is under the influence of the powerful city of Misrata.

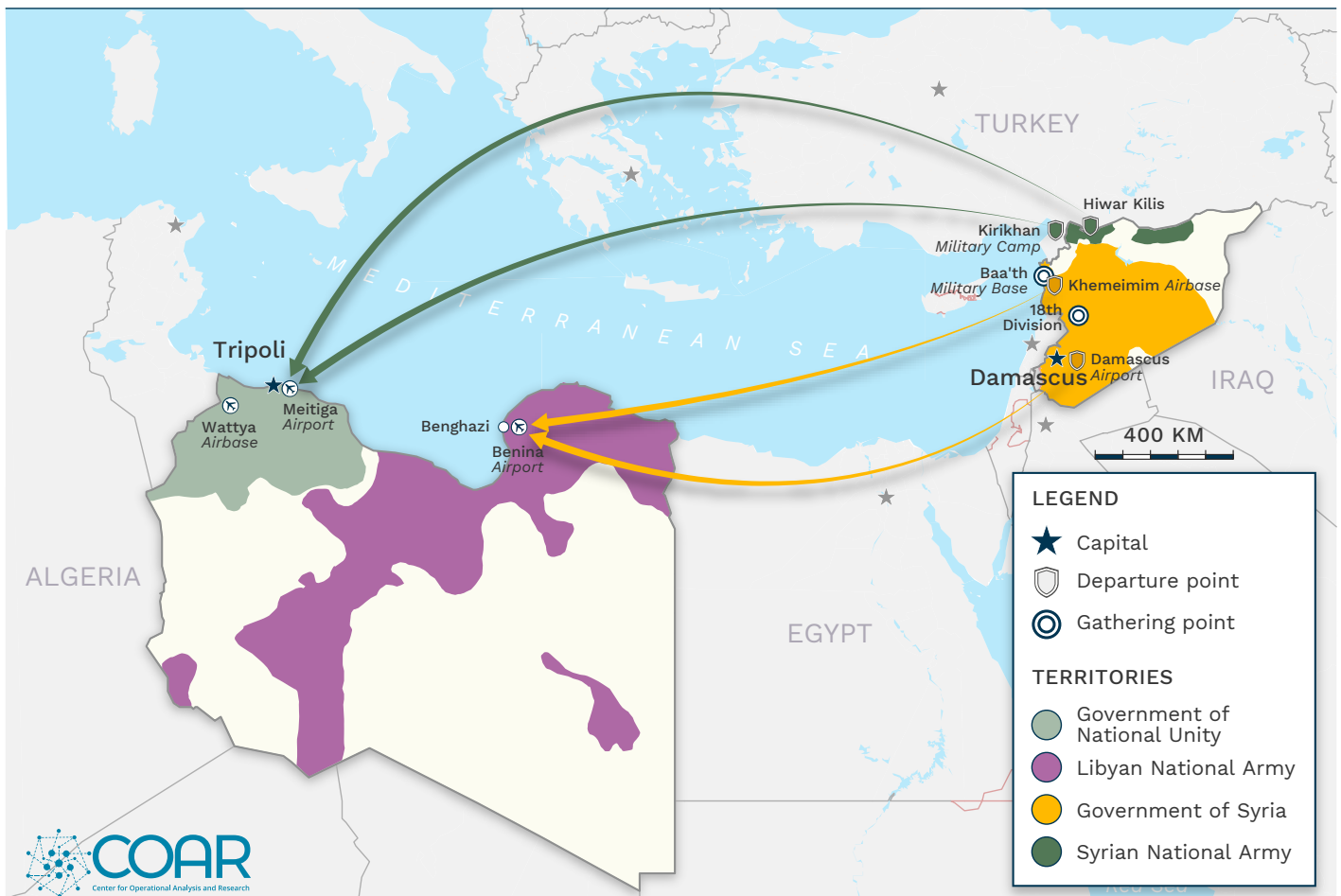
⁴ Although the advent of the Government of National Unity in March 2021 has ostensibly reduced institutional divisions across Libya, the political, institutional, and geographic fault lines that have plagued the country since 2014 remain. Following the LNA's failed military offensive on Tripoli (April 2019–June 2020), a UN-backed political, military, and economic process was implemented to form a unified government. Between February and March 2021, the Government of National Unity was formed, technically comprising the warring parties, while the country's acting governments, the Tripoli-based GNA and the eastern-based Interim Government, were dissolved.

support for the coalition as it squared off against the LNA.⁵ In parallel, military contractors operating in Russian-influenced Government of Syria areas also mobilised Syrian fighters to prop up the LNA. Crucially, although mercenary recruitment was driven by Moscow and Ankara’s respective military objectives in Libya, the pipelines rapidly subsumed wide networks of local actors in Syria and Libya, which played important intermediary and support functions that undermined conventional governance authorities and forged tighter bonds between non-state actors. Despite widespread condemnation, mercenary recruitment in Syria was – and remains – highly competitive due to the attractive salaries on offer (see: *The Syrian Economy at War: Armed Group Mobilization as Livelihood and Protection Strategy*).⁶

As the processes laid out below explain, both Russia and Turkey have devised complex mobilisation procedures to deploy Syrian mercenaries to Libya. Whilst each

pipeline operates with the tacit or overt endorsement of the recruiting state’s military establishment, the processes diverged in critical ways. Most importantly, during the Tripoli War, recruits mobilised by Russia generally performed non-combat support functions alongside Russian military personnel and Wagner Group contractors. In the main, their service reflected the interests of Russia, and their deployment served as a force multiplier for the numerically limited Russian direct presence. By contrast, those mobilising through Turkey to GNA areas were generally deployed directly alongside Libyan fighters in combat settings. Not surprisingly, Syrians deployed to GNA zones of influence experienced higher degrees of mobility within local communities, although war economy activities seeded tensions. Local sources report that attempts to emigrate from Libya onward to Europe were more common among fighters recruited by Turkey, but not fighters recruited through Russian channels.

Routes and presence of Syrian fighters in Libya



5 This came as a result of a Memorandum of Understanding signed between Turkey and the GNA in November 2019. See: “Responding to a Turkish Request, Factions of the Syrian National Army are preparing to send fighters to Libya,” Zaman Alwasl, 25 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3ztBz3a>.
 6 “The Syrian National Army denies its intention to send fighters to Libya”, Shaam Network, 25 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3zVltzk>.

Damascus-Benghazi**Recruitment Procedures**

Military recruitment was initially confined to a small number of officers from the Syrian 25th Special Mission Forces Division who provided technical support for Russian and Libyan forces. A step-change in recruitment occurred following the Turkish deployment of Syrian fighters during the Tripoli War. Recruitment, therefore, widened to target Syrian Arab Army (SAA) officers, local pro-regime militia groups, and reconciled former opposition fighters from Rural Damascus, Damascus, Dar'a, Hama, Homs, and As-Sweida.⁷ Recruitment announcements circulate widely on social media platforms, and registration is carried out through local mediators linked to the SAA and various intelligence branches.

Actors

The main actors involved in the recruitment process are the Russian forces, the Wagner Group, the Syrian Military Intelligence, the 25th Special Mission Forces Division, local security companies (i.e., Sayyad and Sanad), and pro-regime local militia groups. While recruitment processes were initially overseen exclusively by Russia, mobilisation gradually shifted to the SAA and intelligence officers, in cooperation with local mediators who facilitated relations with fighters.

Contracts and Salaries

Contracts usually last between three and six months, with the possibility of renewal at the fighter's discretion. All recruits must obtain a security permit from Syrian Military Intelligence. Salaries range from 1,500 USD to 3,500 USD per month, but salary scales and criteria are unclear. Since the beginning of 2021, complaints have surfaced over payment delays and financial commitments to which mediators have failed to adhere.

Logistics

Recruits are transported from Government of Syria-controlled areas to LNA-controlled portions of Libya via two main routes. Cham Wings Airlines operates direct flights from Damascus International Airport to Benina International Airport (near Benghazi) twice weekly. Recruits are also assembled at Syrian military bases in Damascus, Homs, and Latakia, before being transported to the Russian-controlled Hmeimim Air Base, and from there via Russian military aircraft to Al-Kharouba airport (commonly known as Al-Khadim) east of Benghazi.

Aleppo-Tripoli**Recruitment Procedures**

Until late 2019, recruitment was carried out exclusively by Syrian National Army (SNA) factions with strong ties with the Turkish government. However, as in areas of Russian influence, recruitment efforts heightened as the fighting in Tripoli intensified. Local mediators began to play more central roles, and the scope of recruitment widened to include civilians, IDPs, young people, and individuals without significant military experience. Recruitment is conducted through SNA field commanders who secure positions for fighters under their command, or through local community-based mediators who enlist civilians and IDPs. All names must be approved by the Turkish Armed Forces.

Actors

The main actors involved in recruitment are the Turkish Armed Forces and the commanders of select SNA factions, such as the Sultan Murad Division, the Suleyman-Shah Brigade, the Hamza Division, the Samarkand Brigade, and the Mu'tasim Division. Recruitment is also carried out by Sadat, a private security company.

Contracts and Salaries

Contracts last between three months and one year, with a possibility for renewal. Salaries range between 1,500 USD and 4,500 USD per month depending on the fighter's specialisation. In most cases, fighters are paid between 1,500 USD and 2,000 USD. However, recruits have increasingly complained that SNA commanders have withheld portions of the salaries, echoing the criticisms raised by fighters mobilised in Russian spheres of influence.

Logistics

Fighters recruited in northern Syria reach GNA-administered regions of Libya by piggybacking off of Turkey's regional military infrastructure. Deploying fighters first gather in Hiwar Kilis, A'zaz district; from there, they reach Libya via a military transport plane, or are moved to military bases in southern Turkey (i.e., Kirikhan) before deployment. There are three main points of arrival in Libya: Mitiga Air Base in Tripoli, the main Turkish military base in the country; al-Watiya Air Base in the western region, near the Tunisian border; and Misrata Airport. Recruits moving inside Libya are brought to Tripoli under tight security restrictions.

⁷ As of the time of writing, recruitment of Syrian mercenaries remains active, while the last group of Syrian mercenaries sent by Russia to Libya was on 17 August 2021, consisting of 300 Syrians most of them are from As-Sweida. However, it must be noted that the continuation of the recruitment does not necessarily associate with any military escalation on the ground, but it can be linked with a routine process of replacing recruits whose contracts end with new recruits. See: "300 Syrians to Libya, Russia continues to recruit mercenaries to protect its interests", Syria News Agency, 17 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3Bkei18>.

Damascus-Benghazi

Deployment Conditions and Specialisations

Syrian recruits fighting in the Russian sphere in Libya primarily operate in support capacities, including guarding military outposts or performing maintenance for weapons systems. Russian officers exercise a high degree of direct control over the deployment of Syrian fighters, while fighters who are recruited by the Wagner Group remain under its direct command. As a result, Syrian fighters mobilised by Russia can be seen as supporting limited Russian military interests rather than fighting on behalf of the LNA itself. After arriving in Libya, recruits are usually gathered at the Tariq Bin Ziyad military base in Benghazi before being deployed to smaller regional bases where Russians are present, such as al-Jufra, Sirte, and Ras Lanuf oil terminal. Transportation and logistics for Syrian fighters is overseen by local factions that control central regions, such as the LNA's 128th Brigade.

Relationship with Libyan Communities

Syrian fighters recruited by Russia to Libya have little interaction with local communities, as they are mainly stationed at military bases located in the remote desert. They are not permitted to enter the downtown areas of cities such as Benghazi, Ras Lanuf, and Sirte. In Benghazi, they are housed in designated sections of the Tariq Bin Ziyad military base, and their engagement with Libyan forces garrisoned there is limited. Fighters' cell phones are confiscated upon arrival, and communication with their relatives in Syria is only possible through a single shared cell phone that is allotted to each unit.

Demobilisation

All recruits have reportedly returned home upon finishing their contracts in Libya. There are no known reports of recruits deserting their bases or remaining in Libya after completing their service.

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Aleppo-Tripoli

Deployment Conditions and Specialisations

In contrast with Syrian fighters deployed through Russian channels, those deployed via Turkey often serve in direct combat functions. Many are deployed within anti-LNA armed groups, such as the Misratan Sumud Battalion, the 166th Battalion, the 301st Battalion, or the Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion, and they operate at the tactical level under the battalions' respective commanders. During the Tripoli War, Syrian fighters were deployed mainly to the city's southern frontlines. In the aftermath, Syrians returned to military bases south of Tripoli, including Yarmouk Base, Tekbali Base, and al-Watiya Base to the west. The Turkish officer corps at Mitiga Air Base plays a leading role in the deployment of Syrian fighters, in cooperation with western Libyan authorities (GNA).

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Relationship with Libyan Communities

In contrast with their counterparts in the east, Syrians recruited to GNA areas were initially allowed a high degree of freedom of movement in communities near the bases where they were deployed, granting them wider scope for engagement with Libyan civilians. Generally speaking, however, the local population held foreign troops, including Syrians, at arm's length, an attitude bolstered by the involvement of some Syrian groups in the illicit fuel and weapons trade alongside Libyan factions. Consequently, Turkey has barred Syrian recruits from contact with locals outside the military bases where they serve. Syrian and GNA-aligned fighters interact regularly, as Syrians serve with local units. Disputes often arise during these interactions, mainly prompted by rivalries over influence and economic interests, or because Syrian factions have picked sides in feuds among Libyan groups.

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Demobilisation

Theoretically, Turkey is responsible for returning to Syria all fighters whose service contracts in Libya have ended. However, there have been dozens of reports of Syrian fighters fleeing their bases with the intention of remaining in Libya or migrating to Europe. Such cases declined when Syrians were prevented from commuting to communities near their bases. Although major military operations have ceased, a significant (although the exact number is unknown) number of Syrian fighters remain on Turkish-run military bases.

Mediterranean Migration

Military recruitment pipelines have also boosted formal and informal migration from Syria to Libya, albeit exclusively along the Damascus-Benghazi axis. Despite the recent surge in attention, Syrian migration to North Africa is not in itself a new phenomenon. Beginning in the 1950s, Syrians and other Arab migrants sought economic opportunity in the burgeoning Libyan petro-state, which had a small national population and high demand for oil-sector workers.⁸ Migration slowed in the latter part of the twentieth century, until Libya became an unexpected safe haven for refugees following the outbreak of the conflict in Syria. Libya offered both lower costs of living and greater livelihood opportunities compared to Syria's neighbours, particularly Lebanon and Jordan. By December 2013, the Syrian community in Libya comprised an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people, although only 18,000 Syrians were officially registered as asylum seekers by UNHCR.⁹ Benghazi and Tripoli (Souq al-Juma and Janzour districts in particular) were among the main communities hosting Syrians in large numbers.

Although conflict conditions after the 2011 uprising reduced Libya's appeal for many migrants, Syrian migration to (or through) Libya did not peak until after 2013, following the January imposition of visa requirements for Syrian nationals. Transit did not stop altogether, however, and tighter visa regulations forced a reliance on smugglers. At least initially, Egypt was a main conduit to Libya; Syrians could reach Libya for roughly 500 USD, and many settled in Benghazi, near the Egyptian frontier.¹⁰ Naturally, some Syrians viewed Libya as a jumping-off point to Europe. According to UNHCR, 10,650 Syrians arrived on the Italian coast in 2013 alone, many of them departing from Libya and Egypt.¹¹ This number increased in 2014 to around 32,681, before falling sharply again in 2015 to 7,072.¹² The years between 2015 and 2019 witnessed an overall decline in the number of Syrians traveling toward Libya due to visa restrictions or the rise of conflict. However, the establishment of the Russian and Turkish pipelines has inadvertently created the infrastructure for Syrian migration to or through Libya.

The networks of quasi-official and non-state actors that make up the Syria-Libya pipelines have fundamentally changed the shape of migration to and through Libya once again. Now, economic migration and migration with the intention to seek asylum in Europe are concentrated exclusively along the Russian-controlled Damascus-Benghazi route. Currently, Syrians migrating to Libya for non-military reasons broadly fall into two main groups: migrants planning to reach Europe by boat, and those seeking to join the labour force in Libya, where relative economic stability affords greater livelihood opportunities than in Syria. Crucially, some of the Syrians who settle in Libya for work ultimately plan to migrate onward to Europe, but must remain in Libya to save money to cover the associated expenses. For others, work in Libya is a fallback option brought on by the need to pay for the return trip to Syria after failed attempts to reach European shores.

Now, economic migration and migration with the intention to seek asylum in Europe are concentrated exclusively along the Russian-controlled Damascus-Benghazi route.

⁸ The wider Arab diaspora in Libya has maintained a favourable position and enjoyed almost equal treatment with Libyans. While the first waves of workers (including Syrians) found employment in the public sector, they have shifted toward the private sector since the 1990s, as large numbers of Libyans moved into the public sector. Syrians have gravitated towards construction, retail, and restaurant work. See: "Thematic Report: Palestinians & Syrians in Libya", Lifos, February 2016, <https://bit.ly/2UkhmoD>, p. 7-8.

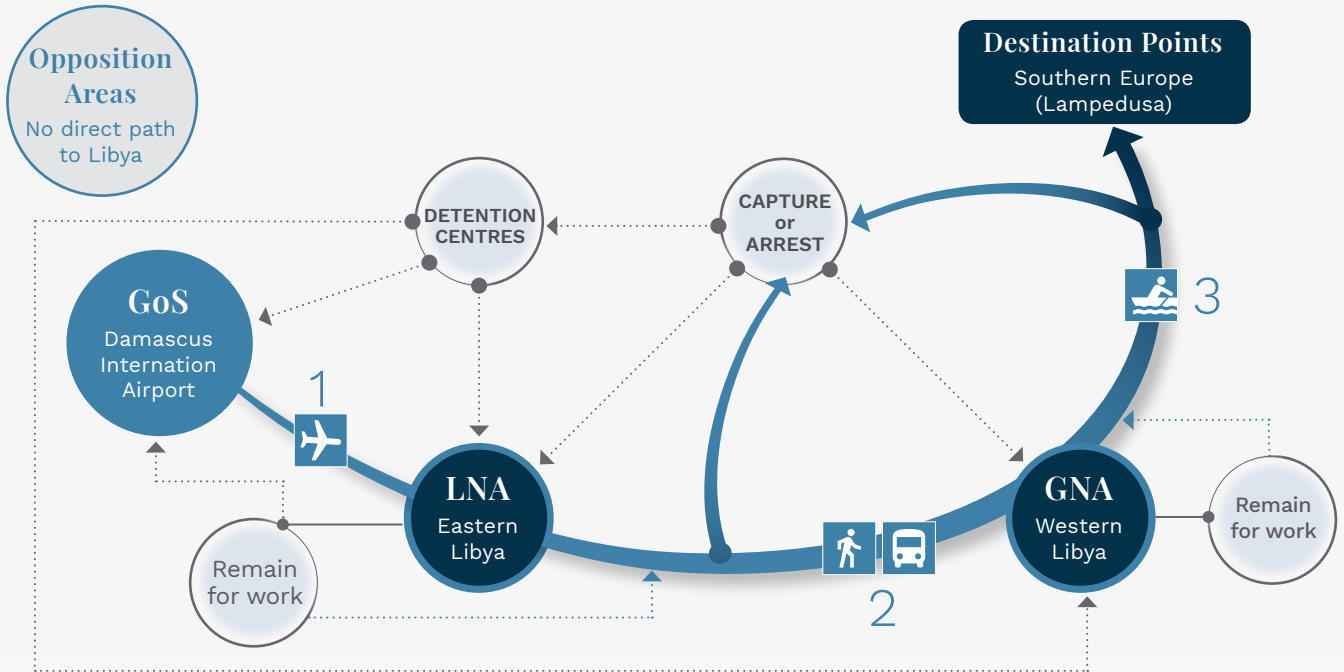
⁹ "An International Failure: The Syrian Refugee Crisis," Amnesty International, 13 December 2013, <https://bit.ly/3rxjVbR>, p. 6.

¹⁰ "Syrians seeking refuge in Libya," The New Humanitarian, 23 May 2013, <https://bit.ly/2TvFIUO>.

¹¹ Egypt Weekly Update Syria Operation 4-10 November 2013, UNHCR, 11 November 2013.

¹² Mattia Toaldo, "Libya's Migrant-smuggling Highway: Lessons for Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2015, <https://bit.ly/3rLTC22>.

Migration Nations: Syrians' Libyan Pathways to Europe



Damascus-Benghazi

Logistics and Preparations in Syria

Several tourism agencies in Syria, mainly in Damascus and Dar'a, offer full-suite migration packages to Libya that are arranged via mediators operating in both countries. Syrians attempting to travel to Libya must first obtain security permits from Syrian security forces (e.g., Military Intelligence) and the national conscription bureau. Also required is a Libyan work permit issued by the LNA's Military Investment Authority (MIA) through local mediators using dubious and potentially inactive corporate registries.¹³ The tourism agencies arrange direct flights from Damascus International Airport to Benina International Airport in Benghazi, operated by Cham Wings Airlines. In some cases, especially for those leaving from Dar'a and As-Sweida, transportation to the airport is also arranged via security forces, allowing travelers to pass through checkpoints unimpeded. Of the roughly 1,500 USD cost of the travel package, the MIA takes 500–600 USD, whilst the remaining 900 USD is divided among tourism agents and various intermediaries. Airfare costs are additional.

Syrians seeking to use Libya as a waypoint en route to Europe sometimes pay in advance for the entire journey, which is estimated to cost roughly 7,000–8,000 USD. This includes the working permit and intermediaries' fees (1,500 USD) in addition to the cost of traveling from Damascus to western coasts via Benghazi, then to Italy by sea (5,500–6,500 USD, which covers the cost of a host of intermediaries and smugglers, as well as bribes for security actors, housing, and other expenses). Although riskier, some Syrians wishing to migrate northward elect to arrange their own onward travel after reaching Libya; not being able to afford the upfront costs and hoping to tap into their own personal networks to arrange the final leg may be factors contributing to this decision.

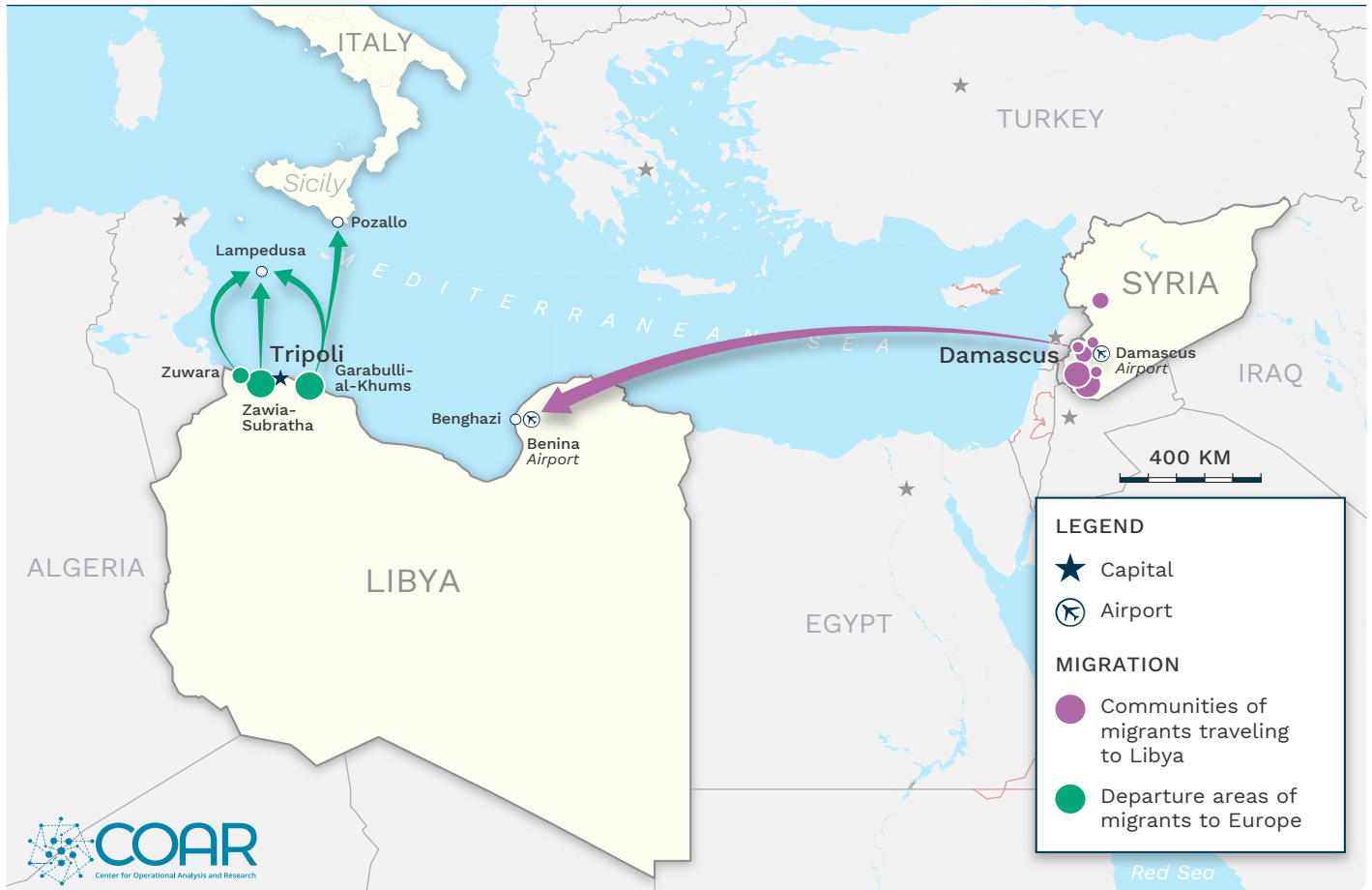
Aleppo-Tripoli

Logistics and Preparations in Syria

Syrian civilian movement from opposition-held areas of Syria, or from Turkey, to Libya is tightly restricted. As a result, Syrian civilians traveling to Libya depart exclusively from Government of Syria-controlled areas toward LNA-held areas, after obtaining special permits. At the time of writing, there are no known reports of Syrians crossing from opposition-to Government-controlled areas in order to reach Libya, as this process requires security permits and travel authorisations provided by Damascus authorities and working permits provided by the LNA.

¹³ The working permit delivered by the LNA's MIA serves as a de facto residency card. The MIA is seemingly facilitating Syrians' entry into Libya with the aim of pocketing the 500 USD fees imposed on each foreign worker in a time of financial crisis for the LNA. This effectively makes the MIA part of a cross-border human trafficking network, as at least some of the migrants are using Libya as a stepping stone to Europe. The MIA (not recognised by the GNA) is closely linked to the LNA's General Command, and oversees and centralises the LNA's ad-hoc sources of revenue in the areas under its control.

Syrian migrant communities and routes from Libya to Europe



Damascus-Benghazi

Labour Conditions in Libya

Syrians holding the MIA-issued work permit are allowed to reside, move, and work freely within LNA-controlled areas. The permit is unlikely to be recognised in GNA-controlled areas, however, as the western authorities view the MIA as illegitimate. Syrians in eastern Libya most often seek employment in Benghazi and Ajdabiya, often in retail and construction. A considerable portion of Syrians currently working there are believed to be saving money for the journey to Europe.

2

Aleppo-Tripoli

Labour Conditions in Libya

Syrians working in western Libya are largely concentrated in Tripoli, which offers the most livelihood opportunities and access to basic services. No major tensions have been reported between Syrian labourers and the local community in Tripoli, as Syrians have a history of working in Tripoli that predates the onset of the conflict in 2011. In many cases, local enterprises are owned by Syrians in conjunction with Libyan partners. The primary businesses in which Syrians now work include restaurants, cafes, bakeries, and textile shops. Syrian migrants are also sought after in sectors such as the marble and stone trade, construction, auto repair, and IT, due to their relevant skill sets. While some Syrians who migrate to western Libya do so with the intent of saving money for the trip to Europe, it is believed that some return to Syria, after they had failed to reach Europe.

Damascus-Benghazi

3

Aleppo-Tripoli

Stepping Stone to Europe

Syrians transiting through Libya toward Europe primarily set out for Italian islands in the southern Mediterranean on small boats from the western coastal areas outside Tripoli. Smuggling networks control migrants' journeys across Libyan territory as they move from eastern areas toward Tripoli. These networks include local mediators who facilitate passage, tribal groups that impose fees for passing through their territories, and armed groups (such as the 128th Brigade based in Sirte and al-Jufra) that dominate routes and impose checkpoint fees. Of note, Syrians who are stopped by eastern authorities or security forces en route to coastal areas from Benghazi are not held in detention — as migrants of other nationalities are — because their presence in Libya is considered legal by LNA authorities.

Stepping Stone to Europe

The main departure points for migrants setting out for Italian islands in the Mediterranean Sea are located along the western coast between Zuwara to Khoms, including the shores of al-Garaboulli (near Tripoli), Subrata, and Zawia. Their proximity to Italian territory, the strength of the smuggling networks, and the limited control exercised by western authorities outside the main cities make these locations attractive points of embarkation. Migrants depart on small boats for a journey lasting several hours, often toward the Italian island of Lampedusa. Many would-be migrants are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and are returned to Libyan territory. In one interception, on 13 June 2021, the Libyan Coast Guard halted 80 migrants attempting to embark for Europe, of whom 54 were Syrian.

Migrants who are intercepted, whether at sea or on land, are held in detention centres run by local armed groups, some of which are outside the official control of the GNA. Detained migrants are subject to physical and verbal harassment, and extortion.¹⁴ Many are forced to pay the militia groups that guard the detention centres to secure their release. One Syrian migrant interviewed by COAR stated that he secured his release from a detention centre only after paying 3,500 USD, whilst his cell phone and personal belongings were confiscated. Militia members who serve as detention centre operators often contact detainees' families to negotiate payments.

14 On 12 August, images of Syrian migrants held in Libyan detention centers were circulated on social media, demonstrating the dire conditions in the centers where they are held. See: "Syrian migrants in Libya are victims of detention centers: torture, extortion, and malnutrition", Info Migrants, 12 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3zqV5Og>.

The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria project (WPCS) is funded by the European Union and implemented through a partnership between the European University Institute (Middle East Directions Programme) and the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). WPCS will provide operational and strategic analysis to policymakers and programmers concerning prospects, challenges, trends, and policy options with respect to a mid-conflict and post-conflict Syria. WPCS also aims to stimulate new approaches and policy responses to the Syrian conflict through a regular dialogue between researchers, policymakers and donors, and implementers, as well as to build a new network of Syrian researchers who will contribute to research informing international policy and practice related to their country.

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