



## TURKEY: ORCHESTRATING VIOLENCE BEYOND BORDERS

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### INTRODUCTION

In late December 2019, the Tripoli based-UN backed-Government of National Accord (GNA) appealed for Turkey to intervene in Libya. As a response, the Turkish Parliament held an emergency session on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, and voted to authorize President Recep Tayep Erdogan to deploy Turkish troops to Libya. Soon after, the deployment of troops materialized. However, not only were Turkish military forces deployed but Syrian rebels from northern Syria too. In recent months, Turkey's military activities, such as its expatriation of Syrian refugees to their war-torn country and the deployment of Turkish-backed Syrian rebels to fight along the GNA in Libya, pose serious risks of escalation in the region.

While the European Union remains committed to fund its Facility for Refugees in Turkey, these activities require greater scrutiny on its financial support provided to Turkey. Based on first-hand data collected through interviews conducted by the BIC research team with

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Turkey continues its deployment of Syrian rebels to Libya.
- Syrian rebels are deployed with attractive salaries to fight in Libya.
- The selection process of rebels was based on a specific criterion.
- Private military contractors played a role in preparing and deploying Syrian rebels to Libya.

local activists, partners, and local population, this policy brief explores Turkey's deployment of Syrian rebels to Libya, its deportation of refugees to Syria and questions the implications these developments have on the EU's Facility for Refugees in Turkey.

# TURKEY'S SNA: PROXIES IN SYRIA, MERCENARIES IN LIBYA

Turkey finds the manpower of its proxy in Syria, the Syrian National Army (SNA), a less costly mean of intervention in Libya. The SNA is a Syrian rebel coalition formed in December 2017 and fights under the command of the Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defence.<sup>1</sup> The SNA is composed of 41 rebel groups and comprise Arab and Turkmen fighters.<sup>2</sup> While some of these groups include fighters from eastern and southern Syria, these groups have recruited rebels who originate from northern Syria, and who received support from Turkey prior to the formation of the SNA.

The nature of ties between Turkey and the SNA is remarkable. The extent of President Erdogan's influence over the SNA is not far from the extent of his influence over the Turkish army itself. It is not uncommon that observers would refer to the SNA as a Turkish proxy in Syria.<sup>3</sup> President Erdogan's pictures along with Turkey's flags can be seen in various SNA leaders' bureaus. Moreover, several groups from within SNA such as *Liwa' Sultan Murad* (لواء السلطان مراد) (or, the Sultan Murad Brigade) and *Liwa' al-Sultan Sulaiman Shah* (لواء السلطان سليمان شاه) (or, the Sultan Sulaiman Shah Brigade) hold the names of Ottoman Sultans. Their loyalty was put to the test in various occasions, particularly, as they were the spearhead of Turkey's cross-border operations against the Islamic State (IS) and *Quwat Soreya al-Demoqrateya* (قوات سوريا الديمقراطية) (or, Syrian Democratic Forces SDF) in Syria. Ahmed al-Shihabi, a prominent leader in the SNA, openly stated in an interview that "we would go and fight wherever there is Jihad",<sup>4</sup> adding that they are willing to sacrifice their lives and their children for the Ottoman Caliphate, in response to whether or not his comrades will fight Libya.

Reports of Syrian rebels deployed to Libya began to spread on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 2019. While scant information was available to confirm or deny their presence, the SNA responded by issuing a statement repudiating its involvement in Libya. Yet within no time, documented pictures and footage loomed to highlight the presence of armed Syrian rebels fighting in Libya. Furthermore, official statements on Syrian rebels made by French President Macron, the United States Embassy in Libya, and a former GNA minister all challenge SNA's repudiations.

Debates on whether or not Syrian rebels were deployed to Libya soon turned into debates on the exact number of Syrian rebels in Libya. Some estimates suggest that Turkey deployed and prepared to deploy 2,000 rebels.<sup>5</sup> Initially, Turkey's selection of groups from within the SNA wasn't conducted randomly. Participating in the deployment of rebels to Libya was limited to specific groups from within the SNA. The primary groups are Sultan Murad Brigade, *Firqa al-Hamza* (فرقة الحمزة) (or, al-Hamza Division), *Firqa al-Mu'tasim* (فرقة المعتصم) (or, al-Mu'tasim Division) along with Sultan Sulaiman Shah Brigade) from the SNA's 2nd and 1st legions respectively (see Map-1).

This, nonetheless, brings an important question to the forefront: Why did Turkey choose to deploy fighters from these particular groups? There appears to be several commonalities between these groups. First, north-west Syria is the birthplace of these groups. Second, with the exception of *Firqa al-Mu'tasim*, these groups feature Turkmen fighters amongst their ranks. Third, the activities of these groups were limited to battling IS and the SDF following Turkey's cross-border operation Euphrates Shield between August 2016 and March 2017. According to several local activists based in Aleppo's suburbs, who talked to BIC on condition of anonymity for security reasons, these groups didn't engage in any operation against the Syrian government

<sup>1</sup> Ömer özkizilcik, "Uniting the Syrian Opposition: The Components of the National Army and the Implications of the Unification" (SETA, 2019), <https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/10/A54En.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> özkizilcik.

<sup>3</sup> Engin Yüksel, "Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria," 2019, 24.

<sup>4</sup> "Opposition leader video: We sacrifice our lives and children from the Ottoman Caliphate (in Arabic)," Syrian Snack, January 19, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2OmsLXB>.

<sup>5</sup> "Shipped by Turkey from Syria: 14 Turkish-Backed Mercenaries Killed in Libya Battles," *The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights* (blog), January 14, 2020, <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=152905>.

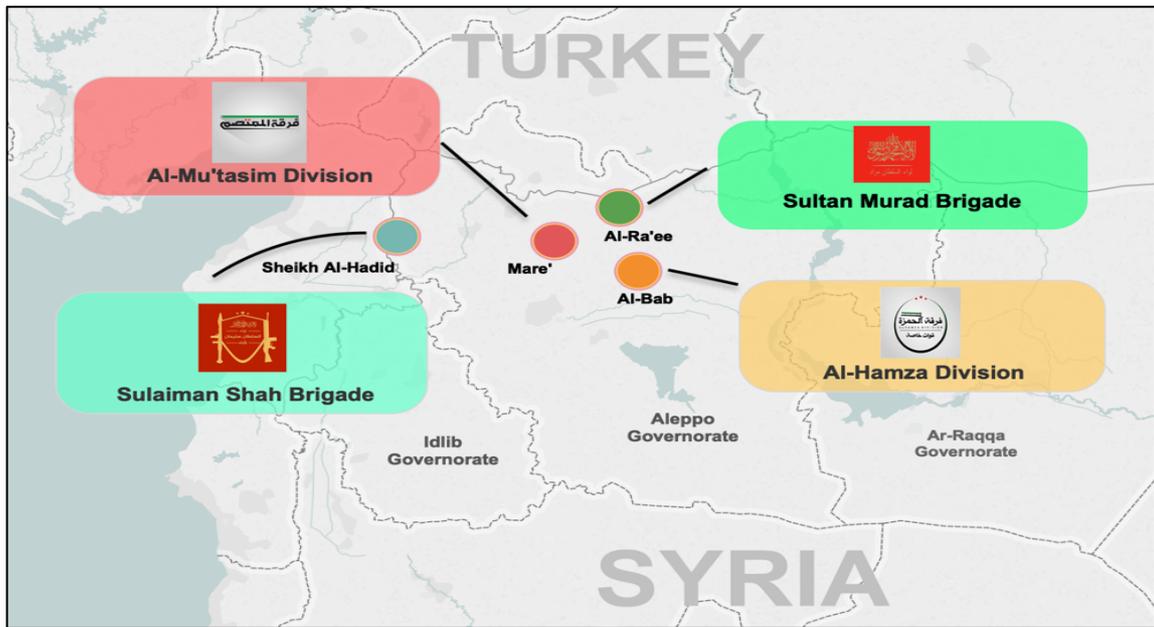


Figure 1 Key Syrian rebel groups deploying forces to Libya and their headquarters

Source: Interviews with BIC

forces ever since Euphrates Shield: “they didn’t fire a single bullet against the regime.”, as explained by one of them.<sup>6</sup> In line with the decline of IS and suspension of Turkey’s cross-border military operations, the activities of these groups in northern Syria declined in scale. As such, Turkey pursued benefiting from their services through employing their utility in Libya.

## RECRUITMENT AND DEPLOYMENT: WHAT IS THE PROCEDURE?

Fighters were recruited from the headquarters of their respective rebel groups. To attract these fighters to fight in Libya, Turkey made appealing offers that vary from high salaries to Turkish citizenship. Reports estimate that they were offered \$2,000 for fighting in Libya based on 6-months contracts signed with the GNA.<sup>7</sup> However, according to a local activist who maintains close contacts with northern Syria’s rebel commanders, the rebels were deployed based on contracts that grant a monthly salary of \$600 per fighter.<sup>8</sup> The

interviewee added that the margin in salaries between remaining in Syria (around \$65) and fighting in Libya serves as a motivating factor for rebels to find the Libya option more appealing. While as previously mentioned, only specific groups were approached for deployment. However, the high salaries motivated more rebel groups to deploy fighters. The deployment of troops eventually expanded to include most of the SNA groups. This, however, was only limited to groups that were established in northern Syria. Rebel groups such as *Jaysh al-Islam* (جيش الإسلام) (or, the Army of Islam) and *Ahrar al-Sharqiya* (احرار الشرقية) (or the, Free Men of the East) that were established in southern and eastern Syria were not part of the groups that deployed fighters to Libya. Interestingly, the high salaries allegedly have also attracted civilians to offer their services to fight in Libya, according to an interview with a local activist in Afrin.<sup>9</sup>

Another crucial point worth highlighting is the process by which Turkey is transferring Syrian rebels to Libya. According to The Guardian, fighters sign six-month contracts directly with the GNA rather than with the Turkish military.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, data obtained by the BIC

<sup>6</sup> Interview with local activist, Aleppo, January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Bethan McKernan and Hussein Akoush, “Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian Fighters Deployed to Libya to Support Government | World News | The Guardian,” accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/exclusive-2000-syrian-troops-deployed-to-libya-to-support-regime>.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with local activist, Aleppo, January 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with local activist, Aleppo, January 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Bethan McKernan and Hussein Akoush, “Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian Fighters Deployed to Libya to Support Government | World News | The Guardian,” accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/exclusive-2000-syrian-troops-deployed-to-libya-to-support-regime>.

## KEY INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

suggest that fighters are deployed based on three-month contracts that are signed with Turkey's private military contractor SADAT International Defense Consulting. SADAT is chaired by President Erdogan's previous chief military counselor Brigadier General Adnan Tanriverdi and was active in Libya prior to the latest developments.<sup>11</sup> While the exact nature of its activities in Libya remains ambiguous, the company traditionally provides international consultancy and military training services. Beyond Libya, the cornerstone of SADAT's services can be traced with its interactions with Syrian rebels,<sup>12</sup> particularly those that operate in northern Syria. SADAT's previous activities along with its understanding of the configurations in Syria and Libya have also prompted observers to suggest that SADAT participated in preparing Syrian rebels prior to their deployment by Turkey to Libya.<sup>13</sup>

Within no time, the same areas that rebels departed from ended up receiving corpses of Syrian rebels killed in Libya. Rebel groups, however, remained discrete. It would probably not be in their interest to appear as turning a blind eye to their own to struggle in Syria and fight in Libya instead. BIC conducted an interview with a local from Afrin that explained "the returned [dead bodies] were buried at night (...) they want to avoid making any troubles."<sup>14</sup> One of the returned dead bodies was that of Ahmed al-Salam, a 17 years old Syrian rebel from the city of Ras al-Ayn,<sup>15</sup> which also denotes that age is neither seen as an issue nor a criterion for whoever is deploying these rebels.

Turkey's recent decision to deploy Syrian rebels into Libya risks wider escalation in the region. For a country that has been calling for a negotiated way out for the Libyan conflict, deploying more fighters can provoke multiple spillovers. The EU's financial contributions are exploited by Turkey that steers a conflict in a different country. While working with Turkey to restrict its behavior is vital, the EU should also work on addressing the roots of the problem in Libya.

› Turkey's behavior with regards to refugees is alarming. At the end of 2019, Turkey, through cross-border Operation Peace Spring, attempted to resettle more than one million Syrians in northern Syria in an attempt to structure a non-Kurdish ethnic belt that separates the SDF from Turkey's southern borders.

› Turkey's policies are pushing against the outcomes of the Berlin Conference of January 2020 that reiterated the commitment of arms embargo on Libya. The arrival of more Turkey-backed fighters only risks a standoff in Libya and limits efforts of a negotiated way-out for the war-torn country.

› Turkey constitutes a key hub for hosting Syrian refugees. EU and Turkey established the EU facility for refugees since the end of 2015 to accommodate the refugee crisis in Turkey. It attempts to fund a total of €6 billion that are to be mobilized in two tranches that support projects that run for a 10-year period.

<sup>11</sup> "SADAT A.S. in Libya," SADAT, accessed January 28, 2020, <http://www.sadat.com.tr/homepage-en/88-en/news/312-sadat-as-in-libya.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "Erdogan's Shadow Army," Middle East Forum, April 13, 2018, <https://www.meforum.org/7327/erdogan-shadow-army>.

<sup>13</sup> Ali Bensaad, "Libye. Le fatal soutien de la Turquie," Orient XXI, January 20, 2020, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/libye-le-fatal-soutien-turc,3558>.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with local activist, Aleppo, January 2020.

<sup>15</sup> "Death of a militant minor from Sultan Mourad Militia in Libya," *AfrinpostArabic* (blog), January 8, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Rz5JPq>.

# BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Addressing the Libyan conflict in light of Turkey’s deployment of fighters will be difficult. The EU should encourage all parties to participate in ceasefire talks and promote a negotiated-all inclusive-solution for the Libyan conflict through means of diplomacy along both military and economic tracks.
- The EU should work with the concerned parties to fulfil the commitments of the Berlin Conference by strengthening monitoring and accountability mechanisms to prevent the flow of arms and fighters to Libya.
- The EU should maximize all economic leverage to deter Turkey against further destabilizing actions, and guarantee that human rights, natural resources, and appropriate treatment of refugees factors into future negotiations on the EU’s Facility for Refugees in Turkey.

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.



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