

Libya**Libya says foreign mercenaries could bring coronavirus to region**

UN-backed government accuses Russia's Wagner of flying Syrian fighters to Benghazi



Fighters of Libya's UN-backed Government of National Accord. The GNA has been fighting military leader General Khalifa Haftar for control of the country since last April © Amru Salahuddin/dpa

Chloe Cornish in Beirut, **Asmaa al-Omar** in Erbil, **Heba Saleh** in Cairo, **Henry Foy** in Moscow
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Libya's UN-backed government has accused a Syrian airline of exposing the war-torn country to coronavirus by flying mercenaries into the eastern city of Benghazi, controlled by the military leader General Khalifa Haftar.

The Government of National Accord in Tripoli said flights operated by Syria's Cham Wings had brought Syrian fighters connected to the Russian private military contractor, Wagner Group, as well as members of Lebanon's Hizbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guard, to eastern Libya to support Gen Haftar.

The presence of Syrian mercenaries in Libya could "cause a health disaster" due to their activities in other parts of the Middle East, such as Iran, where coronavirus infections are already widespread, the GNA's interior ministry said this week.

There are currently no confirmed cases of coronavirus in Libya, but western and Arab countries have called on the warring factions to cease hostilities to allow the county to

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confront the virus.

The UN-recognised GNA has been fighting Gen Haftar for control of the country since April, when the military strongman besieged the capital, Tripoli. The battle is now one of the world's most [internationalised conflicts](#). While the GNA is backed by Turkey, Gen Haftar has received military support from Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

The GNA's concerns over the spread of the coronavirus provides another example of how those international links are deepening, analysts said, in particular the growing role of a new alliance in the region between Syria's president Bashar al-Assad, Moscow, and Gen Haftar.

Keen to shake off the Syrian regime's international pariah status, Mr Assad — with Russian support — has sought to build relations with Gen Haftar as the conflicts in Libya and Syria have become increasingly connected.

Gen Haftar opened a Libyan embassy in Damascus this month and Cham Wings opened an office in Benghazi. Travel between eastern Syria and Libya has increased, flight tracking data shows.

Cham Wings, which was sanctioned by the US Treasury in 2016 for allegedly assisting Mr Assad's government, described the allegation that it had flown fighters to the conflict as "false". The privately owned Syrian carrier said it had never "transported any passenger linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards or any party to the conflict in Libya". Last week, the airline said it was postponing flights due to coronavirus.

Jalel Harchaoui, a Libya specialist and research fellow at the Clingendael Institute, a Dutch think-tank, said Wagner Group has sent about 200 Russian fighters to Libya this year and recruited a further 300 to 400 Syrians to fight alongside Gen Haftar.

The UAE has provided thousands of tonnes of weaponry to Gen Haftar but he lacks troops, meaning more men are needed "to go and die on the frontline," Mr Harchaoui said.

Life as an international mercenary has become an attractive career prospect for some in Syria, where its own [10-year civil war](#) has left the economy in ruins. One former militia member from southern Syria told the Financial Times he had been recruited to fight in Libya and promised \$1,000 a month to protect facilities, rising to \$1,500 a month for “missions”.

The 29-year-old fighter, currently undergoing pre-deployment training in the Syrian city of Homs, was told he would “fight with the Libyan army” and that “a Russian company” would sponsor the mission, though the Syrian officer that recruited him did not specifically refer to Wagner Group.

“I don’t like fighting but this is what life has imposed on us,” the fighter said. “There are no more proper work opportunities [in Syrian].”

Wagner Group has an extensive presence in Syria and is best known for fighting alongside pro-Assad forces to recover oilfields from the jihadist group Isis. Reportedly linked to Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a businessman nicknamed “Putin’s chef” due to his relations with the Kremlin, Wagner shies away from publicity. The group has reportedly used its experience in Syria to win contracts in Libya and other countries where its troops can assist Russian foreign policy goals.

Concord, Mr Prigozhin’s business group, said that the FT’s request for a response to the GNA’s warning was akin to “minor hooliganism”, and referred to previous denials of any links between Mr Prigozhin and the paramilitary group.

This story has been updated to include a comment from Cham Wings that was received after publication.

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