



Russian arms transfer to Libya : revealing the role of private military companies



Claire Courtin

Werra

September 2021



Claire Courtin is currently a first year student in the ILERI's Master's programme in international relations. Passionate about geopolitics and international relations, she would like to specialise in the Eastern Europe and Russia area.

The author is solely responsible for the content of this website.

All rights reserved, Paris, Werra, September 2021



INTRODUCTION

Construction of facilities, maintenance, supply of food, etc.: these are the initial functions of private military companies (PMCs). By definition, they characterize companies providing security/defense services to governments, international organizations or private companies. These irregular forces are growing, as are emerging threats such as terrorism and piracy. Originally, these companies were intended to help the regular armed forces train. In reality, they are increasingly taking part in combat, as illustrated by the Nisour Square shootings. Four members of the US private military company Academi, formerly Blackwater, were charged with intentional homicide in 2007. Pleading self-defense, an FBI study¹ revealed that 14 of the 17 Iraqis who died were actually killed without legitimate reason. While the use of these groups is regulated by the ICoCA² standard, each country has adopted its own measures to regulate their use. In Russia, non-state actors have been present since the sixteenth century, with Russian irregular forces playing a role in the major regional conflicts led by the Tsarist regime, and then during the Russian Civil War and the Soviet period. Their contemporary origins lie in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the painful transition to a new economic system dealt a blow to the Russian military. Deprived of sufficient funds, the army lost personnel and turned to private military companies. Today, Russian regulations are unclear regarding these entities. For the moment, the Russian Federation has not ruled on the activity of private military companies, as they are neither authorized nor forbidden by law, a law that does however punish mercenaryism. Vladimir Putin has been speaking in favor of the legalization of these entities for about ten years now. Several bills to this effect have been tabled, but rejected. This rejection is partly due to the fact that the financing of these PMCs comes from Russian oligarchs, and legalizing these groups would increase the power of these economic actors. These irregular forces, tolerated in practice, continue to operate in a legal and regulatory limbo, intervening in several theatres of operation. While the Middle East is the area with the most actions by Russian private military companies, they have also played a role in Ukraine and the suspicion of their presence in Nagorno-Karabakh has fueled debate since

¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation.

² The International Code of Conduct for Private Security Companies.



2020³. The Russian PMC market is relatively large, consisting of companies such as RSB-Group, Moran Security Group, Redyt-Antiterror. When the issue of these irregular forces is discussed today, Wagner is the first company mentioned. Unlike the entities mentioned above, it has no legal existence, is not registered in the Russian tax database. Founded in 2014 by Dimitri Outkin, a former lieutenant colonel in the Russian army, it operates in many Middle Eastern countries. Its main financier is Yevgeny Prigozhin⁴, who is close to President Putin, built his fortune in the restaurant business, and is one of the strongmen of the Russian state. The Wagner Group is considered a private military company but differs from others in that it is actually made up of mercenaries in the pay of Moscow. The relationship between the Russian political power and private military companies is today opaque. Many researchers and academics are trying to establish the mode of operation and function of these irregular forces in their various theatres of operation, including Libya. The second Libyan civil war follows on from the first, which led to the death of Muammar Gaddafi. It began in 2014 and is characterized by foreign interference, political instability, economic crisis and the recent outbreak of COVID-19. In 2017, Khalifa Haftar, commander-in-chief of the Libyan National Army, meets with the Russian foreign minister and then the Russian defense minister on the fight against terrorism in the Middle East. In 2019, Moscow blocked a Security Council statement that called on Marshal Haftar's forces to halt their advances. Russia is therefore not an outsider to the conflict, and doubts about the presence of Russian private military companies have been developing for many months now. Recently, fighter jets used in Libya have aroused curiosity, probably being of Russian origin.

So what is really going on with the relationship between Russian private military companies and the fighter planes used in Libya?

³ Information report No. 754 (2020-2021) by Mr Olivier CIGIOTTI and Ms Marie-Arlette CARLOTTI, submitted on behalf of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Armed Forces on 7 July 2021 - "Nagorno-Karabakh: ten lessons from a conflict that concerns us" http://www.senat.fr/rap/r20-754/r20-754_mono.html#toc291

⁴ IRSEM (Strategic Research Institute of the Military Academy) - "Private military companies in Russia: in the East, what's new?" Emmanuel Dreyfus - 10/2018



Libya, a country mired in a conflict involving several foreign powers

Libya, with its geographical position at the crossroads of Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, and its hydrocarbon resources, crystallizes several strategic interests. The death of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 led to a long period of political instability. The General National Congress (GNC) initially took power, but soon failed. Suspected of abuse of power, it was dissolved in 2014 by General Khalifa Haftar, a former officer under Gaddafi's regime who was exiled⁵ to the United States between 1990 and 2011. Faced with the various armed groups trying to take power, K. Haftar imposed his power by force and created the Libyan National Army (LNA). One of the main missions of this group is to fight against armed jihadist groups, as illustrated by the Battle of Benghazi which took place from 2014 to 2017. The NLA also wants to re-establish Libya's sovereignty and is mainly opposed to the Government of National Unity (GNU), formerly the Fajr Libya⁶ coalition. This second Libyan civil war pits these two armed groups against each other, as well as groups with varying degrees of connections to certain jihadist entities⁷. In 2014, the Libyan House of Representatives called on the UN to intervene, due to the seriousness of the conflict and the danger to civilians. The General National Congress is re-established in view of the instability of the country. Despite several ceasefires, the first of which was announced in 2015, the situation deteriorated. During these years of conflict, jihadist groups attacked oil terminals in particular, increasing insecurity within the country. The GNU quickly gained the upper hand. Its legitimacy stems from the international support it receives⁸. On 5 April 2016, the Fayez-al-Sarraj government was officially recognized after receiving the support of several institutions, notably the UN and the central bank. The NGC was dissolved. However, the NLA, ruling over the east and part of the south of the country (Cyrenaica), wants to reconquer the capital and more generally the whole country. Several battles have taken place, such as that of Sirte in 2020, with each side wanting to recover key cities in Libya. Today, the situation is stalled. Khalifa Haftar is seen as one of the strong men of the country, and the peace process cannot take place without him. However,

⁵ Exiled following his rapprochement with Hissène Habré, the self-proclaimed Chadian president, during the Chad-Libya conflict.

⁶ "Aube de Libye".

⁷ The 'Tripoli government', dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood; the Libyan branch of the Islamic State; Tubu, Tuareg and Arab militias.

⁸ France, USA, Germany, Italy, UK.



what is the place of foreign interference? The GUN, from Tripolitania, is supported militarily by Turkey, and the NLA has the support of the United Arab Emirates, including the transfer of Wing Loong drones and fighter planes, as well as Egypt, Jordan and Russia. This support translates into the sending of mercenaries and weapons from Turkey and Russia, with the Turkish Grand National Assembly passing a resolution authorizing the deployment of the Turkish army⁹ on the ground in January 2020. At the same time, the UN-sponsored Berlin 1 conference brought together several heads of government to make progress on the Libyan situation. It results in the ceasefire being maintained and the arms embargo being strengthened. In October 2020, a new ceasefire is signed between the two main parties to the conflict, and the Abdel Hamid Dbeibah government now leads Libya.¹⁰ In June 2021, the Berlin 2 conference was held.

Russia as a carrier of strategic interests in the region

The energy sector is a source of Russian greed throughout the Middle East. Since the end of the 2000s, Vladimir Putin's country has been selling defensive weapons to the states of this region in order to consolidate its relations with them. This is the case, for example, with the sale of S-400 air missile defense systems to Iran, Egypt, Syria and Turkey. Russia has qualitative military equipment, especially since its 2008 reform. With the aim of forming a more professional and resized army, this reform was accompanied by new equipment. The Russian army is therefore developing to meet the objectives of the power, which has Libya in its sights.

But what about Russian interests in Libya? In May 2020, suspicions emerged about the Russian transfer of fighter planes. Fathi Bachagha, Minister of the Interior of the Government of National Unity, told the press in 2020 that he had learned of the arrival of these planes. This information was only unofficial, but was confirmed when, on 19 May 2020, a satellite image showed the presence of a MiG-29 at the Marshal's base. From then on, satellite images followed one another, illustrating the presence of Russian weapons.

⁹ The support is also made up of Syrian mercenaries, with Turkey offering them nationality and a regular salary in exchange for their involvement.

¹⁰ Since 15 March 2021.



Figure 1 Satellite image of 14 July 2020 provided by the US Africa Command showing, according to the Pentagon, Russian involvement in Libya.

Russia and the Libyan National Army do indeed have ties, and it would not be surprising if Russia wanted to interfere on behalf of Marshal Haftar. However, if Russia has proceeded with this transfer of arms, it violates the embargo on sales imposed since 2011. Established by UN resolution S/2011/95¹¹, this embargo prohibits members of the international community from supplying arms to Libya, due to its conflict situation. Russia has notably taken advantage of its role in Syria to play its cards in Libya. An agreement between the Libyan National Army and the Russian Army allowed the evacuation of several wounded troops of the Marshal to Russian field hospitals in Syria. According to satellite images, Russian fighter jets have been added to the NLA's air force, including Mig23s, Mig29s, Su-24s and Mi24 and Mi8 helicopters. Several satellite images have pointed in the direction of these arms transfers, throughout the year 2020. Where do these accusations come from? The UN Council Committee issued two reports in 2020, ruling on the presence of mercenaries in Libya¹². These are not only employees of the Wagner Group, as members of the *Russian SMP Russkie System Bezopasnosti* and *Moran Security Group* have also been reported. These men provide maintenance, particularly at the

¹¹ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/698924?ln=fr>

¹²S/2020/41 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/003/19/PDF/N2000319.pdf?OpenElement> /S/2020/360 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/100/51/PDF/N2010051.pdf?OpenElement>

technical level. The American army, for its part, has exposed on its social networks satellite images of weapons, accusing Russia of being at the origin. These latest insinuations concern the Wagner Group, which provides unofficial support to the party of Gaddafi's former ally. However, the main parties involved, Russia and the NLA, have always denied this.



This would not be the first time that a Russian private military company has acted in Libya. Indeed, according to Oleg Krinitsyn¹³, founder of RSB Group, in 2017, RSB-Group carried out the demining of a cement factory in Benghazi. However, the present case is different. The Russian Federation is accused of sending equipment as well as men to the Cyrenaica camp, but denies any responsibility. This is not official aid. But then, what exactly are these weapons and why is Russia making them available to this North African country?

¹³ Article from Le Figaro from 2016 <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2016/09/27/01003-20160927ARTFIG00279-les-mercenaires-russes-sortent-de-l-ombre-en-syrie.php>



Military equipment: the real issue in this confrontation

Several fighter planes are now in the hands of Marshal Haftar. The Mikoyan-Gurevitch MiG-23, named after its creator, is designed to spot and engage targets flying lower than it. It is its attack version that is suspected to be used in this case, the MiG-23BN, which is powered by a third-generation turbo-engine Tumanski R-29B-300. The MiG-29 was created at the same time as the MiG-23, during the 1970s, when the Soviet Army was fighting against American interests. This fighter, the fifth most used in the world in 2020, is no longer used by the Russian Air Force¹⁴, but continues to be used by other countries. It is therefore not impossible that the Russian Federation transferred this weaponry to support the NLA commander. Another type of equipment is suspected to have been transferred by the Transcontinental Federal State. The Sukhoi Su24, a Russian frontline bomber based on the American F-11, was used in several conflicts in the Middle East. For example, Russia deployed a dozen Su-24s during its intervention in Syria in 2015 in support of Bashar al-Assad's forces. Libya also officially purchased six of these bombers, most of which were destroyed during the first Libyan civil war.¹⁵ For a part of the Russian military opinion, this armament was the key to the anti-terrorist operations in Syria, and can therefore have an impact in Libya. Russian Mil Mi-24 and Mil Mi-8 helicopters, as well as the aforementioned weaponry, were spotted on satellite images in the NLA camp, suggesting a transfer of military equipment. Many analysts and members of the international intelligence community assume that the Russian Federation delivered these weapons. But for what purpose? First of all, the death of Muammar Gaddafi meant that Russia lost its main ally in the Maghreb. Vladimir Putin is therefore seeking to rebuild support in this region shaken by conflict. Indeed, to impose oneself in the Middle East is today a major stake for any great power, notably because of the energy resources present in the area. Moreover, the enemy camp of Marshal Haftar is supported by Turkey, and the two regional powers have complex relations. Historically, Turkish-Russian ties are conflicting. However, the supply of Russian gas to Turkey has made them co-dependent, and Ankara's recent purchase of Russian S-400 missiles demonstrates that their relationship shows signs of convergence - suggesting an improvement in their relationship. However, they remain in competition to impose their

¹⁴ In particular for corrosion problems

¹⁵ <https://aviationsmilitaires.net/v3/kb/aircraft/show/1732/sukhoi-su-24-otan-fencer>



influence in the Middle East, and more specifically in Libya, although they are not ready to risk a real escalation. Several analysts believe that some of the above-mentioned armaments may have originated in Belarus or the United Arab Emirates. However, neither of these two countries could deploy weapons in Libya without Russian state assistance. Russian weapons would therefore complement the Libyan Marshal's air force. They are also accompanied by Russian mercenaries, who fly these planes. Indeed, a large part of Gaddafi's operational airmen were killed during the civil war. Few experienced Libyan pilots are still present, and Russian air weapons require several years of training.

The battle of Tripoli is a perfect illustration of the various interferences that Libya is experiencing. Taking place from 04 April 2019 to 05 June 2020, it pits the two main parties to the conflict against each other; the NLA wants to seize Tripoli, the capital then under the control of the GNA. In return, the GNA launches the "Volcano of Wrath" operation. Turkish assistance to the latter prevents the NLA from achieving its objective. During this year of conflict, many foreign involvements take place, and the UN arms embargo is violated on several occasions. Several Russian entities are suspected of operating in this battle alongside General Haftar: the Wagner Group, as well as the Moran Company. Although the precise number of mercenaries is unknown, an article published at the end of May 2020 by the French newspaper *Le Monde*¹⁶ mentions a classified United Nations document that puts them at between 800 and 1200. But then, more than mercenaries, it is also weapons that have been sent. Indeed, Turkish drones played a crucial role in this conflict. The Bayraktar-TB2 drones, which Turkey had already deployed in Iraq in 2018, in Syria in October 2019, and recently in Nagorno-Karabakh, once again demonstrated their effectiveness by repelling Russian Pantsir S-1 anti-aircraft missiles. These missiles, manufactured by *Ulyanovsk Mechanical Plant* and with a launch speed of 3.8 Mach, were intended to prevent the risk of possible air strikes by Al-Sarraj's aircraft, and to secure the operations of the LNA. As in Syria, this anti-aircraft missile system was no match for the Turkish drones.

Although the Russian defense system presented itself as a strong opponent to foreign air forces, it was soon defeated by the Turkish tactical drone, which destroyed several of these

¹⁶ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/05/25/en-libye-les-mercenaires-russes-au-service-du-marechal-haftar-desertent-le-front-de-tripoli_6040683_3212.html



units. Although the exact numbers are unknown, as the two parties do not promulgate the same data, several videos testify to the destruction of more than a dozen Pantsir-S1 in Libya. President Erdogan officially confirms the supply of Turkish weapons to the GNA. The Pantsir S-1 weapons were delivered by the United Arab Emirates, which had purchased them from Russia, according to GNA spokesman Mohammed Al-Giblawi. This information can be confirmed by several photos of the Pantsir used by the GNA, which are identical to the model supplied to the UAE, i.e. mounted on a German-made Man-SX 45 eight-wheeled truck.



Conclusion

Russia denies any unofficial interference in Libya, although it has increased contacts with the parties to the conflict in recent months. The Libyan ceasefire has helped to ease tensions. The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, which took place in February 2021, selected a new provisional executive authority, following the Fayez el-Sarraj government. Parliamentary and presidential elections are to be held on 24 December, the anniversary of Libya's independence. The Biden administration is putting the departure of Russian mercenaries and the organization of elections at the top of its foreign policy priorities in the Middle East. The United States, which has been absent from Libya since Obama left office, takes a dim view of this Russian interference. But private military companies, notably the Wagner Group, continue to expand their activities in the Middle East.