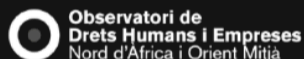


LIBYA: THE FIRST TOTALLY PRIVATIZED WAR IN MODERN HISTORY

A report by Javier Martín

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A victim of chaos and war since March 2011, when NATO -pushed by France- decided to intervene and contribute with its missiles to the victory of the different rebel factions over the long dictatorship of Muammar Al Gaddafi, Libya has been since then the scene of an armed conflict that in ten years has evolved from a rudimentary civil war conditioned by the terrorism of jihadist ideology to a highly sophisticated multinational conflict, becoming the first totally privatized armed conflict in contemporary history.

Unlike the war in Iraq (2003), where the trend was driven by the regular use of groups such as "Blackwater", and the war in Syria, where the use of Private Military Security Companies (PMSCs) became widespread, armies do not fight in the Libyan conflict. Not even local ones, since both the "Volcano of Anger" platform, linked to the UN-supported National Accord Government in Tripoli and its only local ally, the city-state of Misrata; and the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA), under the orders of the controversial Marshal Khalifa Haftar, tutor of the unrecognized Executive in Tobrouk and strongman of the country, are nothing more than a self-serving alliance of local militias and warlords that have unstable loyalties.

Only Turkey has officially sent troops, although not for combat. And the LNA has a structure that could bring it closer to that of a regular armed force, with uniforms and a clear consolidated chain of command. The rest of the combatants are native militias and local and foreign PMSCs contracted by both rival governments in a sort of outsourcing that offers multiple advantages, especially for foreign powers.

COSTS, WITHDRAWALS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The existence of mercenaries and PMSCs is nothing new, true. They have existed since ancient times, but their pattern has changed in the last forty years. From the Alsa Masa, the anti-communist forces created in the Philippines in 1984 during the presidency of the controversial Ferdinand Marcos, to the armed groups "the awakening", promoted by the United States in 2006 to fight the insurgency in the Sunni regions of Iraq, to the Janjaweed tribes in the Darfur region of Sudan, the Community Guards in Mexico and even the LAGs in Spain, the militias and paramilitary organizations associated with governments have been a planetary constant since at least the end of World War II. Defined as "groups that identify themselves as pro-government, sponsored by an Executive (national or sub-national), that are not part of the regular security forces, are armed and have a hierarchical organizational structure", according to the classic description of Sabine C. Carey, professor at the University of Mannheim (Germany), these controversial organizations act on the limits of legality, normally in countries in conflict or transition, and have more or less close, more or less visible links with the authority under whose interests they prosper.

According to a study conducted by Carey herself with Professors Neil J. Mitchell, a researcher at College London, and Christopher K. Butler, from the University of New Mexico, "between 1982 and 2007 the governments of nearly sixty countries

were linked to and cooperated with informal armed groups within their borders". A figure and a panorama that remain stable, grosso modo, a decade later, but now include a series of particularities that transform these militarized entities into a different threat, more disturbing and alarming if possible: advanced 2019, most of them - especially in the Middle East and North Africa - tend to conform to the pattern set by the new private military security companies in the style of the multinational Blackwater, whose use was popularized by the United States after the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. Once the profitable business of war has been privatized, in some regions, especially rural areas in the north of the Sahel, Europe's new southern border, or in countries in chronic conflict such as Libya, the springboard for irregular migration in the Mediterranean, they have begun to become solid heterarchies, a new concept that alludes to territories managed by armed groups and sustained in the informal economy where the authority of the state has practically been turned upside down.

Beyond their structure and the power that they have begun to accumulate in the territories where they have settled, one of the concerns of the experts is their Jael once the wars have ended, and the threat they pose both to good governance and the defense of and respect for human rights. With war as the reason for their existence, some become enforcers for policies of repression and fear that governments could not take on. As Janice E. Thomson points out in her book *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns: State-building and extraterritorial violence in early Modern Europe*, "few governments resist the temptation to condone and even authorize non-state violence while denying their responsibility for it or accountability". There have been many significant examples in recent decades. Take the example of the Janjaweed militia, the hammer of the Sudanese Government in the Darfur region. Recruited and encouraged under ethnic pretexts, this Arab tribe traditionally linked to pastoralism and the camel trade has been spreading terror in north-western Sudan and eastern Chad since a war with a political appearance and obvious features

of ethnic cleansing broke out in 2003. The Janjaweed are part of the bloody criminal record of former Sudanese President General Omar Hasan al Bachir, who is accused of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Cruelties were similar to those attributed in the former Yugoslavia to groups such as the Red Baretts or the Arkan Tigers, the latter having come out of one of the most tedious quarries of militias, the stands of football stadiums. As Xan Rice points out in his article [Terror link of Village spared by Janjaweed](#), militias and paramilitary groups are usually made up of former rebels, religious extremists, violent football radicals, bandits, "the case of the Janjaweed", or gangs formed in the streets, like the Chimeras, used in Haiti during the regime of Jean Bertrand Aristide (the Caribbean dictator also had a praetorian mercenary guard trained by the Steele Foundation, one of the first PMSC US companies in an already expanding sector).

The benefit for governments lies in the fact that it makes it easier for them to evade the obligation of "accountability", one of the essential principles of international law and the tool that prevents, in transition processes, the repetition of crimes, as the Irish journalist Pady Woodworth, author of *Dirty War, Clean Hands: ETA, the GAL, and the Spanish Democracy*, recalls. "Informal groups allow governments to shift responsibility and use repression for a strategic dividend while avoiding any accountability," insists Mitchell, Butler, and Carey in their study [The impact of pro-government Militias on Human Rights Violations](#). The main consequence of this gap is a significant increase in abuses and a greater difficulty in monitoring and restraining the militias, the first ones interested in the persistence of violence from which they profit. In this context, the lack of control is also much more pronounced and dangerous the more fragile the State authority with which they are associated. In an interview published in April 1987 by *The New York Times*, one of the leaders of *Alsa Masa* stated that this Philippine paramilitary organization "was useful to the military because it avoided the investigation of human rights abuses" perpetrated in Davao City.

THE LIBYAN CASE

Today, the most notable example is Libya, a failed state, victim of chaos and civil war, where militias condition the political agenda and rule over its economy. Especially in the capital, the seat of a ghost government imposed by the UN after the failure of the reconciliation plan promoted in 2015 by the then special envoy Bernardino León, which helped to strengthen the influence of armed groups. Although on paper the authority belongs to the entity led by Fayez al Serraj, the reality on the ground shows that it is the multiple katibas that impose the law in the neighborhoods they occupy. And those that handle the economic levers: access to employment, housing and even banking services depends on the degree of involvement with the group, which acts like a mafia family, but more and better armed. Militias such as the Tripoli Revolutionary Brigades (TRB), led by warlord Haithan Tajouri, or the Special Deterrence Forces (RADA), led by Abdel Rauf Kara, not only share and compete with smaller ones in the business of security and smuggling both arms, people or fuel; but also influence politics through the Ministries of Defence and Interior, which they have infiltrated. This is a business that also involves foreign PMSCs, mainly from the Balkans, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Qatar, Italy and Turkey, which moves billions of euros a year and has multiplied human rights violations without the government being held accountable and lacking the resources to control it. It is these militias, which are firmly established on their territory and have vague links with the central authority, that receive and administer the aid funds from external cooperation. The case of the Coast Guard, which is financed, equipped and trained by Italy and the European Union, is significant: its cadres are former smugglers who have been converted into police officers who have often not severed their ties with the mafia. Another example is the

migrant detention center in Tajoura, which was bombed at the beginning of July 2019: it was run by the local militia, one of the most powerful among those acting under the umbrella of the government supported by the UN and the EU. Weeks earlier, the humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières had denounced the systematic violations of migrants' rights committed there. "The use of these often poorly trained and poorly monitored groups often opens up more opportunities for violence and contributes to more human rights violations," argued Carey, Butler and Mitchell.

The use of these companies was introduced in Libya by Marshal Haftar in 2015, when he launched his offensive "Operation Dignity" to expel the Salafist militias associated with the former democratic Libyan government in Benghazi, capital of the east and second-largest city in the country, and to conquer both the city of Derna - one of the bastions of Jihadism in northern Africa - and the Gulf of Sidra, a pearl of the opulent Libyan oil industry. And it has become widespread to the point of overflowing on all fronts with the entry of both Russia and Turkey into the conflict - along with other states such as France, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan or Qatar - in the conflict throughout 2019. On September 9, 2019, barely five months after Haftar lifted the siege on Tripoli that still suffocates and bloodstains the city in April 2020, unmanned Turkish-made "Bayraktar TB2" class fighter planes bombed a position of the forces under the command of the LNA in the strategic location of Ksar bin Ghasir, twenty kilometers south of the Libyan capital.

It would have been one more of the multiple combat operations taking place in the area since the controversial officer laid siege to the capital on April 4, if it were not for the nature of the casualties caused. Hours after the incident, a military spokesman for the rival government supported by the UN (GNA) assured the Efe Agency that a dozen Russian mercenaries had died in the attack, all members of the PMSC Wagner Group, linked to the Kremlin. In a previous tracing mission in the neighboring town of Al

Sabiaa, one of its militias had found weapons and documentation in Russian that supposedly proved the warlike involvement of Moscow - Hafter's traditional ally - in the capital's siege. "Africa has become a huge battleground of the war between Russia and the West in what we can define as a new edition of the Cold War, a period of tension this time with money taking precedence over ideological questions," explains Grzegorz Kuczynski, director of the Eurasia program at the prestigious Warsaw Institute. "Given the dramatic economic situation in many of the countries of Africa and the relatively low financial cost required to provide essential aid to certain regimes, it is no surprise that Moscow is devoting itself to supporting more and more countries on the black continent. African leaders are also aware that Russia will not ask them to respect democracy and human rights in return," stresses Kuczynski, one of the world's leading experts on Russian politics.

Academics and analysts agree on setting the date of Russia's return to Africa at 2015, just a few months after the start of international sanctions for the conflicts in Ukraine and Crimea. That year, trade between Moscow and the continent multiplied from 3.4 billion dollars a year to more than 14.5 billion dollars in 2016. According to data from the renowned Swedish research center SIPRI, the sale of arms and the privatization of war - a growing global business - were the mainstays of a revival that is flourishing from the ashes of the former Soviet Union and aims to displace the former colonial powers, particularly France. In that short time, Russia became the main supplier of arms to Africa with 35 percent of the market share, surpassing Beijing (17 percent), Washington (9.6 percent) and Paris (6.7 percent). Its main clients were its traditional partners - Algeria, Egypt, Angola, and Uganda - but also new allies such as Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, and Rwanda, where the presence of Russian engineers, political advisers and mercenaries has shot up exponentially in the last five years. A Neo-Zaragoza-style expansion orchestrated from the Kremlin, which has made the military company Rosoboronexport the third most powerful

on the continent, and Libya and the Central African Republic the pivots of President Vladimir Putin's African envoy. "Libya, one of the major oil producers, is an attractive market for Russian oil companies seeking to compete there with their Western counterparts. But it is also vital from a military point of view because of its location. With a Russian-friendly government, Moscow would expand its military capabilities further west, for example by building naval facilities, in the Mediterranean, thus forming the Syria-Egypt-Libya axis," argues Kuczynski.

In October 2019, this political, military and diplomatic courage led to an unprecedented international conference, held in the city of Sochi, which was attended by more than forty African leaders and nearly ten thousand businessmen, mostly Russian. Four months earlier, the Russian Arms Forum had witnessed a similar success, with some twenty major contracts signed. "The Russian oligarchs see Africa as an opportunity, especially those closest to Putin. As a source of minerals and as a market of opportunities for the military industry," insists Kuczynski. "It is the scene of a global geostrategic reconfiguration with both the entry of China and the return of Russia, expelled in 1991. Both benefit from the retreat of the colonial powers and the United States," he adds. Like Beijing, Moscow is pursuing a neo-imperialist policy devoid of prejudice beyond money. But it gains a certain advantage by taking advantage of the still lukewarm bailouts left by the USSR's presence. It negotiates the same with both, without paying attention to the ancestral enmities that populate North Africa -Algeria, Morocco-, nor to past history or international denunciations, as in the case of Egypt of Abdel Fatah al Sisi, one of its best comrades. In exchange for contracts to exploit oil, gas, gold, diamonds, nuclear energy and rare minerals for companies such as Rosneft, Lukoil, Zarubezhneft, Gazprom, Rosal or Rosatom - all of which are present in Africa -, he offers arms and various military services through the expansive and lucrative business of private security, which he has arrived at late but with a potentially superior logistical and

human force than his competitors. Sudan and the Central African Republic itself are two of the best examples. In 2016, the then Central African President, Faustin Archange Touadera, - who was suspicious of France - accepted Russian aid. About 250 mercenaries from the Wagner Group landed in the country to guarantee its peace of mind. Just one year later, the Bangui government granted licenses for gold and diamond mining to the Lobaye Invest company, owned by the controversial oligarch Yeugeny Prigozhin. Known as the restaurateur of President Vladimir Putin -of whom he is a personal friend-, owner of the largest Russian catering company and the "troll farm" Internet Research Agency, Prigozhin is also the main shareholder of the Wagner Group and has his tentacles extended in both Libya and Sudan.

In the latter state, his mercenaries escorted deposed dictator Omar Hasan to Bachir in exchange for permits for two more of his mineral companies: M-Invest and Meroe Gold. Although the tyrant fell, the so-called Sudanese Transitional Council - author of the bloodless coup d'état in 2019 - has maintained the contracts already signed. "Security companies are the big business of this century," explains Filip Bryjka, a researcher at the Faculty of Military and Security Affairs at the University of Wrocław. Not only because of the economic benefits it generates but also because of the political advantages it offers. Unlike armies, which are supported by public money and subject to the rule of national and international law, the privatization of war reduces costs, avoids accountability and avoids the political price of returning coffins home. It is easy to deny the links to mercenaries, to avoid legal responsibility and to protect one's reputation from civil society's denunciations. "Combat operations, military training, security consultancy, bodyguard service, logistics, and intelligence operations in a grey area of the law that is closer to the forbidden than to morality," Bryjka points out.

In this scenario, Libya and its civil war have emerged in the last five years at the heart of Russian African politics. A bridgehead that, beyond its privileged geographical position in the Mediterranean,

is seen as the bolt from which to consolidate and extend the military strategy against the economic muscle of China. "For Putin, Libya is also a question of prestige: Russia is striving to regain the former influence it had enjoyed in the country under the Gaddafi government and rectify what the Kremlin perceives as a mistake: not having blocked the NATO-backed intervention in 2011," Kuczynski stresses. In the same vein, the commander of the U.S. Forces in Africa (AFRICOM), General Thomas Waldhauser, warned the U.S. Senate months ago that Moscow's interest in the North African nation is related to the desire to create difficulties for the Atlantic Alliance. "For Russia, Libya is of political, economic and military importance. The country serves as an important gateway for many immigrants to Europe, who cross the border illegally. This is where Moscow seeks to play a key role in having an impact on migration processes, trying to use them to potentially destabilize the European Union," insists the Polish expert.

Russia has indeed diversified its support among the distinct factions active in the Libyan conflict. Both in that of the weakened GNA and in that of the Al-Qadhafi family, which it continues to protect. But the most abundant is undoubtedly that carried by Marshal Haftar, his favorite bet. A member of the coup d'état leadership that brought the tyrant to power in 1969, the biography of the controversial officer is a succession of ambitions and betrayals. Abandoned on the battlefield of Chad by Al Gaddafi, who saw his progressive popularity as a threat, he was recruited in the 1980s by the CIA, which transferred him to the United States, granted him nationality and provided him with the means to rise as the main opposition figure in exile. Back in Libya at the beginning of the revolution, he needed three years to convince and dominate the heterogeneous rebel groups that arose in the eastern region. Inaugurated in 2014, he managed to get the then elected parliament and the unrecognized government in Tobrouk to grant him control of all the related militias. Months later, he launched a phased military campaign that has allowed him to appropriate most of the national territory and become a key

political actor, fundamental in any process of pacification.

Lacking a regular army, Hafter has intelligently maneuvered and used both the economic, political and military support of his Arab allies - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, which have provided him with the necessary air superiority - and the advantages offered by the various PMSCs to forge his alternative and secure a dominant negotiating position. Russian companies in particular, even though they account for only five percent of a growing global business. The first of these, RSB Group. Owned by Oleg Krinitsyn and linked to the New Zealand shipping company Navsec Group Ltd. After the expulsion of the jihadist groups in Derna and in the eastern capital itself - for which Hafter opened a corridor to Sirte to create complications for Misrata and Tripoli - the marshal needed the support of a company specialized in mining and protection of oil installations to guarantee the security of his conquests in the Gulf of Sidra, the diamond of the energy industry in Libya. And RSB had already proved its effectiveness in a similar task in Syria. Wagner Group was the second. Led by Dimitry "Wagner" Utkin, a retired lieutenant general who commanded two of the Russian Army's elite brigades, its specialty is forward combat. Formed - mostly - in the Alpha and Vimpel units, attached to the Main Directorate of Intelligence (GRU) and the FSB, it has four assault brigades, one tank brigade, three communication brigades, one reconnaissance and intelligence brigade and one engineering brigade that train at a base in Molkina (Krasnodar) and have years of experience. First at the siege of Donbas and then in the Syrian war, where they played a major role in the battle of Palmyra, fought in March 2016. In need of elite forces on the front line, more than a thousand of them landed in Benghazi via Latakia at the end of 2018 to prepare the assault on the capital. "Libya's civil war is turning into a power struggle between Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the one hand, and Turkey, Qatar and Italy on the other. Both sides in the conflict will continue to send more contractors and

militants to offer support to both the Tripoli government and Hafter," Kuczynski says. "Russian mercenary forces offer a valuable reinforcement for Hafter's forces because of their combat experience and special skills. Although the Tripoli government had documented between 600 and 800 Russian fighters in Libya, this number was believed to be much lower until early January. However, it has started to grow sharply following the arrival of the private mercenary companies Moran and Schieft, in response to the entry of Syrian militias," he stresses.

According to the Italmiradar website, soldiers of fortune from the latter two companies landed in Benghazi in the first week of this year onboard military transport planes from an airbase in Latakia. Moran Group, linked to Slavonic Corps, based in Hong Kong and with experience in the North Caucasus and Tajikistan, specializes in unit escorts and maritime traffic. Present in the war in Syria, where it fought Jays al Islam extremists in Al Sukhnah and Homs, it has also carried out anti-piracy missions in the Horn of Africa. The Schiff Group's main asset is its expertise in protecting oil installations, as it also demonstrated in Syria. Both landed at a time when Hafter was seeking to shore up his conquests in the West and secure the maritime transport of both arms and oil. "The recent growth in the number of Russian mercenaries, paid by the Persian monarchies, serves to counteract the influx of Syrian insurgents, previously redeployed by Turkey. Those who enter the game are Russian mercenary companies that take advantage of the shortage of personnel (of others), since the contractors operate in many other countries," concludes Kuzcinsky.

But it's not just Russia he's turned to. Hafter has also benefited from the services of several Arab PMSCs, which are also involved in a business, that of privatizing the war, which moves more than 225 billion euros a year. Knowing the terrain, the marshal added Sudanese and Chadian militias to his campaign in the south, which culminated successfully at the end of 2018 and served to snatch the oil resources of the west from the GNA.

Through a former Gaddafist airbase installed in the southern oasis of Jufrah, they have joined his offensive with mercenaries from the Justice and Equality Movement, of Abdelkarim Cholloy Konti, from the Sudanese Liberation Movement (Minni Minawi) of Haber Ishak and from the Sudan Liberation Movement Abdel Wahib of Yusif Ahmad Yusif "Karjakola", all of them essential to guarantee the control of the border and of the Al Sahrara field, which are exploited by multinationals such as TOTAL or Repsol. About 4,000 mercenaries from the Rapid Support Forces, linked to the new military government in Khartoum, joined the encirclement of Tripoli and Misrata in July 2019. Led by Mohamad Hamdam Dagalo "Hemadti", a prominent member of the Sudanese Transnational Council that overthrew Omar Hasan al Bachir, is a force of some 30,000 men from the Arab "Janjaweed" militias, accused of war crimes in the Darfur region and allegedly linked to Dickens&Manson, a front company in Canada. Armed and financed from Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, they have shared the front lines with forces from both countries in the war in Yemen. Like the rest, Rapid Support Forces are also linked to human, arms and fuel trafficking in the region.

Thanks to his long-standing ties with the Tebu and Taureg tribes living in southern Libya, Hafter also has in his ranks Chadian paramilitary forces, in particular the Front for the Alternation and Control of Chad, led by Mahdi Ali Mahamat, which has some 700 men in Jufrah and which the marshal knows from his years of war in the Aouzou mining region, and Mahamat Nari's Union of Forces for Democracy and Development. He has also used private local Madkhali militias to combat Jihadi groups. Founded in the 1990s by Rabi' bin Hadi 'Umayr al-Madkhali, a cleric close to the Saudi royal family, the Madkhali movement is a heretical interpretation of Islam that advocates extreme non-violent Salafism and fights jihadism. Present in Libya since the time of Al Gaddafi, it is concentrated in five large militias in the eastern region - Battalion Tawhid, the Tariq Ibn Ziyad Brigade, Subul al Salam, the Al Wadi Brigade and Al Kaniyat - and they have already been key in the fight with the

Benghazi Defense Brigades, the radical militia led by the former mufti of Tripoli, Sheikh Sadeq al Ghariani, linked to Qatar. In Tripoli, he has infiltrated the Special Deterrence Force (RADA), led by the powerful warlord Abdel Rauf Kara, owner of the GNA's Ministry of the Interior and the only one who has not joined in the defense of the capital.

In the war in Libya, the first totally privatized in history since this trend began to spread after the illegal invasion of Iraq (2003), PMSCs from the US, UK, France, Italy, Turkey, and Jordan, -among many others- are also active, some of them present in the country since the rebel uprising that in 2011 ended Al Gaddafi's long dictatorship. One of the first entrepreneurs was Erik Prince, founder of the famous "Blackwater". Persecuted for his shadowy activities in Iraq, Prince moved to Abu Dhabi in 2010, shortly after selling his share in the controversial company and there he founded a new one, Reflex Responses Company (R2), with which he has worked in every Arab spring in which the Emirate government has been involved. In May 2011, R2 and the Royal Al Nahayan family signed an agreement worth 529 million euros to create an elite force called the "Security Support Group", with a thousand men trained in intelligence and counter-terrorism. Part of this legion, made up of foreign soldiers of fortune, has worked in eastern Libya, along with different militias linked to the Tobruk government and the former Libyan National Army (LNA), which is led by Hafter. Since 2015, some of these foreign officers have been flying IOMAX AT-802 Air Tractors of the UAE army, armed with Turkish-made bombs, and supporting the Marshal's operations from the air.

The Emirate's AT-802 were crucial during the siege of the city of Benghazi, particularly during the siege of the Ganfuda quarter, one of those that resisted to the end; and in the city of Derna, one of the main bastions of Jihadism in North Africa. And more recently they are in the current military harassment of Tripoli and Misrata. The planes usually take off from the Al Khadim base in eastern Libya, and they carry the distinctive cover. Prince, who

currently runs the Frontier Resources Group, a reputed air transport company in Africa, denies that his mercenaries are involved in the conflict. Just like Russia, Sudan and the rest of the states involved in a war, Libya's has become a multinational armed conflict without the presence or need for national armies. The fact is that private companies not only make attacks cheaper and eliminate responsibility for "collateral victims". They also support the logistic chain links, by participating in the transport of weapons and soldiers. Hafter and the Tobruk government have turned to companies such as the Moldovan Sky Prim Air, linked to the Emirate operator Oscar Jet. There is evidence of different flights in the interior of the country, transporting delegations between bases in Zintan (west) and Tobruk (east), in days before or after battles.

The GNA, a government not elected but recognized by the international community, imposed by the UN after its failed peace process in 2015, also lacks an army. Its ranks include local Islamist militias - financed from Qatar -, Italian government intelligence units, French, Italian and British mercenaries and, above all, regular soldiers and Turkish special forces. At the beginning of January, and in the middle of Hafter's troops' advance towards the port of Misrata, Ankara became the first government to make its interference in Libyan affairs official. Also concerned about the close relationship between the Tobrouk government and Cyprus, Turkish President Recep Tayeb Erdogan justified the sending of "non-combatant troops" into the country on the need to undermine the fragile ceasefire negotiated with Russia. However, together with Turkish soldiers, nearly 2,000 Syrian mercenaries landed in Tripoli and Misrata, most of them highly qualified fighters of the opposition "Syrian National Army", a platform of Islamist rebel groups that took up arms against the Bachar al-Assad dictatorship and which Ankara has financed. Most of them belong to the so-called "Sham Legion", although units from the "Sultan Mourad" and Moutasim divisions, all of which are registered with the Salafist movement, have also been detected.

Intelligence sources in Tripoli consulted at the time by the Efe Agency stated that the Syrian fighters were deployed in the south of the capital and east of Misrata, and that they made it possible to contain the momentum of their Sudanese, Chadian and Russian counterparts and to rebalance the political process. At the end of March, amid intense calls from international powers and in particular from the UN for both sides to accept a "humanitarian truce" to prevent the real fear of the invisible coronavirus from being added to the war, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights revealed that at least 151 Syrian mercenaries had died in fighting in the south of Tripoli and in the outskirts of the city of Misrata since the beginning of 2020. According to the organization, which has been monitoring the conflict in Syria since the outbreak of the uprising against the dictatorship of the Al-Assad dynasty, most of them perished on fronts south of the capital such as Al Salah Al-Din, Al Ramlah or Al Hadabah, all of them near the old international airport, the key to the conquest of the city - and in the neighboring city-state of Misrata, which has historical, economic and strategic ties with Turkey, and their bodies were repatriated to Syria and buried in areas under the control of the militias ".Euphrates Shield", in the region of Aleppo. They belonged, the Observatory claims, to Syrian rebel opposition groups such as the Al-Mutasim divisions, Sultan Murad and the Suqur Al-Shamal Al-Hamzat and Suleiman Shah brigades, the source explained, and they were part of a total of 4,750 Syrian mercenaries reportedly recruited by Turkey. Another 1,900 were then in Syria completing their training before being sent to North Africa, he claimed.

"War and smuggling are two very profitable businesses in Libya, and as long as that goes on, there is no interest in ending the conflict," explains a European intelligence officer posted in the area. This situation is reminiscent of Syria, where Turkey and Russia, through the business of war and the support of the various Arab allies, have taken advantage of the new geopolitical interests of the United States and the retreat of the European powers to divide up the country and begin to recover their lost ancestral influence. And without having to worry about what they call human rights.

END

A report by Javier Martín