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Foreign mercenaries who shaped Libya's civil war have been set a three month deadline to leave the country as part of a recent UN brokered ceasefire agreement. Dr Andreas Krieg analyses how foreign powers shaped Libya's war through mercenaries and could define the UN's latest attempt to bring lasting peace.

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NINETY TWO DAYS: HOW MERCENARIES SHAPE LIBYA'S CONFLICT AND ITS RESOLUTION

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Ninety two days: How Mercenaries Shape Libya's Conflict and its Resolution

On October 23rd the rival military factions to conflict in Libya announced a 12 point permanent ceasefire agreement ending 18 months of conflict. However, the first condition of the Libyan ceasefire is 'the departure of all foreign mercenaries from Libya's territories within the next three months'. The text is a rare acknowledgement by both sides of the degree to which foreign powers have shaped Libya's conflict. However, the urgency and time set for their departure, ninety two days, establishes a new deadline for foreign powers behind the mercenaries to decide their next move that could make or break Libya's delicate peace process.

How foreign powers shaped Libya's conflict

In June a UN Panel of Experts called out the extensive use of mercenaries by Russia, the UAE and Turkey in the already highly protracted and complex multipolar conflict in Libya - an issue the UN now views as a central obstacle to its latest efforts to broker a multi track peacebuilding process announced last month in Geneva. The estimate of the Russian mercenary contingent alone suggested that the Russian private military and security company (PMSC) Wagner Group had recruited somewhere between 800 and 1,200 mercenaries in Syria to fight on behalf of Khalifa Haftar,

the self styled leader of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF). The dark figure is likely to be much higher when considering that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Turkey have also partially outsourced their military operations to mercenaries themselves.

While the extensive use of guns-for-hire in direct combat constitutes a breach of an arguably globally weakening anti-mercenary norm in favour of training and equipping local forces, in Libya the consequences of delegating military combat services to a growing external mercenary force, are part of a growing trend, and their presence could be catastrophic for the course of the UN brokered political process. Mercenaries add another layer to a multipolar conflict where there is already no effective civilian control on either side over those under arms, and a need for Libyan local parties to guarantee a ceasefire that includes many armed groups they do not control in order to advance through political talks. If holding local factions to a ceasefire were not hard enough, mercenaries fight on the behalf of the Libyan factions, but are controlled by international actors, whose political conditions must be accommodated in any local political deal in order to guarantee an end to the conflict. Addressing the presence of mercenaries has therefore become an integral element of the UN-brokered permanent ceasefire deal

reached in October 2020, under the newly established Libyan Joint Military Council (JMC), calling on all 'foreign fighters' to depart Libyan territories within three months. However, a recent change in language by the JMC calling for a "withdrawal of fighters from the contact line in the conflict" as opposed to their departure from Libya's territories - "land, sea and air", has shown how this condition of the ceasefire may face

operational support to loose networks of local militias in Libya to extend their influence, whilst failing to seize control over them, and instead, contributing to the growth in strength and number of new informal security actors who have contributed to the weakness of Libya's nascent civilian authorities. In recent years, international actors and at times local actors have increasingly turned to foreign mercenaries over militias.



resistance from international actors, and demonstrates that they are perhaps not yet ripe for peace or may be waiting for political conditions to be met before they accept the ceasefire.

Why do international actors use mercenaries and not armies?

For nearly a decade external sponsors have pumped in money arms and

However, the notion mercenaries are a more controllable variable than militia contracted by private military contractors either in Turkey, Russia or the UAE, is also an illusion. Just like their local Libyan counterparts, those hired and flown to Libya to fight are for the most part just as unprofessional, untrained and uncontrollable. Although the political motivations to externalize the burden of war in Libya to mercenaries vary, there is a common

denominator between sponsors in Moscow, Ankara and Abu Dhabi: they are all engaged in a protracted conflict with no near term achievable strategic objectives that could easily develop into a forever war in Libya and an everywhere war for all of them. Mercenaries have provided their clients with an apparent panacea to the dilemma of remaining engaged in a conflict indefinitely while keeping political and reputational costs low, both domestically and internationally. In a country under a UN arms embargo, conducting an expeditionary military operation with your own country's

operating at a political arm's length from their political sponsors with a degree more operational autonomy that make them hard to control. Mercenaries are guns-for-hire who sell their services to the highest bidder. Unlike Western private contractors working within a corporate environment with contractual checks and balances, these mercenaries are hired by companies that possess only a thin enough veneer of corporate appearance to acquire contracts. Although the Russian Wagner Group, owned by a Putin confidante and supporting the Emirati war effort in Libya, offers a veneer of

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emblems and boots on the ground, does not only entail high political costs domestically but also high reputational costs internationally as the conflict in Libya is under tight global public scrutiny. To be exact, aside from additional capacity and new military capabilities, mercenaries have provided their patrons with the vital discretion at home and plausible deniability internationally, which allows international actors to sustain the burden of conflict in Libya indefinitely.

However, discretion and deniability have a cost of their own. In order to achieve the desired degree of dissociation between sponsor and surrogate, mercenaries are

corporate and commercial appearance, fighters are not really integrated into a corporate structure, are not subject to due diligence and screening, but are loosely assembled militias from Syrian regime control territory that join for individual not corporate profit. On the Turkish side, where companies such as Sadat and Abna'a al-Umma at least have vetting, screening and training in place, recruits also lack the professionalism that most Western contractors display. And the mercenaries on the UAE's payroll, although not Syrian militia men but Australian and South African war privateers, privateers, promised to deliver hunter-killer teams and helicopter pilots

to Haftar, yet abruptly pulled out after arriving in Libya on an \$80 million contract and disappeared.

Hence, the idea that mercenaries might be easier to control than local militias are an illusion. As remote means of warfare, mercenaries do not provide sponsors with effective tools to seize, hold and build as regular armies on the ground might. Mercenaries are a means for patrons to delegate the burden of conflict, disrupt conflicts and protract conflicts but they do not constitute a lever of power that alone can end conflict and meet strategic objectives.

As all sponsors in Libya are looking for plausible deniability and means to out-source casualties in a conflict where constituencies at home would not tolerate large numbers of body bags returning home, Russia and

the UAE additionally seek to enhance inhouse capability that they are unable and unwilling to mobilize on an expeditionary campaign in North Africa. Unwilling to bear the burden of full-out war, all patrons in the Libyan conflict, chose mercenaries in the hope that the other side would eventually wear out under the weight of prolonged attrition- a strategy Russia has been using in Syria and the UAE has employed in southern Yemen. In Libya it failed. While mercenaries might win battles, they cannot win wars.

Precarious peace and protracted negotiations

Unless mercenaries definitely depart Libya's territories, their presence, even away from the frontlines threatens the prospects for enduring peace in Libya and may restart or prolong an already protracted conflict, even if Libyans no longer want to fight. The presence of mercenaries could be used by foreign powers to maintain tensions or threaten a planned demilitarised zone in Sirte, the seat of

Libya's next government even if local armed groups choose to leave and demarcate. Russian mercenaries who deployed to oil fields after retreating from Tripoli in May on behalf of the LAAF may jeopardise the JMC's negotiations over a unified Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) to guard Libya's oil from years of oil



blockades. Moscow have already hosted discrete negotiations between the GNA and LAAF in September 2020 to discuss redistributing oil revenues. Most troublingly however, the JMC have already changed the language used in the conditions of the permanent ceasefire agreement. Mercenaries may disappear but not depart Libya.

Mercenaries may be discretely returned to military barracks in Western or Eastern Libya to be redeployed if the nego-

tiations break down. Keeping foreign mercenaries on 'standby' can be a policy maintained throughout Libya's UN military and political unification process without increasing the burden of war for their external sponsors who are unlikely to engage in meaningful political negotiations to end the conflict, unless significant concessions are made.

Mercenaries have given international actors on both sides substantial leverage in the negotiations and a hand in determining the final political settlement, dangerously putting them on par with Libyan actors in their bargaining power. Mercenaries keep the illusion alive that a military solution to the Libyan conflict can be brought about coercively even though their track record of operational successes on the ground are only short-lived and so far, have not translated into successes on the strategic level, only further stalemate. Hence, external actors are likely hesitant to surrender a discrete and potentially very effective lever of power to keep the balance in a surrogate standoff, making it harder for the UN to supervise the departure of mercenaries, which can remain in the theatre with plausible deniability.

In the end it is ordinary Libyans who bear the burden of conflict, as foreign sponsors not only pour arms into the conflict but have found a sheer endless supply of human capacity willing to keep fight even as Libyan fighters become increasingly tired of what seems like an endless war. The fact that this helps foreign players to shape the political outcome in today's political negotiations is a dangerous by-product of the international community's years of ambivalence to foreign meddling in Libya. The fact that they have remained in Libya throughout the latest

political negotiations and could remain in Libya discreetly after a political deal is struck means this may not be Libya's last war, or its last political process shaped by foreign powers and their mercenaries.

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