



### Libyan National Army Forces Mobilize Thousands of Foreign Mercenaries

Thousands of foreign fighters have descended on the Libyan city of Sirte as Libya's internationally-recognized government ramps up preparation to retake the city from rebel forces. Sirte is a strategically vital city in the context of Libya's civil war, as it represents the last significant boundary dividing the country's west from east. Thousands of foreign fighters from Sudan, Chad, and Russia loyal to renegade military commander and warlord Khalifa Haftar have funneled into Sirte to defend the city. Haftar leads the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA), and has been waging a war against the internationally-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) with support from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and others.

The issue of foreign mercenaries has been an important topic in Libya's civil war. Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army has solicited the assistance of mercenaries from Russia and sub-Saharan Africa to bolster their forces. Despite Russia not having an official military presence in Libya, 3,000 Russian mercenaries are believed to have moved into Sirte recently. These mercenaries belong to the Wagner Group, a paramilitary organization that is known to have close ties with the Kremlin. Mercenaries from Sudan and Chad have also been recruited by Haftar's forces, including members of the Janjaweed, a Sudanese militia best known for committing atrocities in Darfur.

In addition to complicating the fighting in Libya, foreign mercenaries have been accused of a wide range of abuses against civilians during the Libyan civil war. The United Nations recently set up a fact-finding mission to discern the true extent of the crimes committed by foreign fighters, after evidence surfaced of mass graves in areas recently abandoned by mercenaries allied with the Libyan National Army.

Libya's internationally-recognized government has made significant progress recently in the country's long-running civil war. The Libyan National Army's effort to capture Tripoli was repulsed, and government forces have regained significant territory around the capital. The city of Sirte is the next military target for Libya's government as they look to advance eastward toward the Libyan National Army's strongholds in Benghazi and Tobruk. Additionally, Sirte is the LNA's final stronghold before Libya's primary oil export ports. These ports are currently controlled by Haftar's forces and they represent his most strategic asset. The Government of National Accord is also seeking to recapture the Jufra airbase near Sirte, which is widely known to be home to a large number of Russian mercenaries.

Khalifa Haftar's patrons in Cairo and Abu Dhabi have given the Libyan government warning not to advance on Sirte. Egypt in particular has taken an active role in pressuring the Government of National Accord to not advance on Sirte, and Egyptian leader Abdel Fateh el-Sisi proposed a ceasefire that would consolidate LNA control of Sirte. However, a spokesman for Turkey, the Libyan government's strongest ally, said that LNA forces leaving Sirte had to be a pre-condition for any ceasefire negotiations.