

Wagner forces in Libya – EULPC report

Private Military Companies (PMC) or Security and Defense Service Companies (ESSD) provide services in the field of security and defence to governments, international organizations, NGOs or private companies.

A historic partner of the Kremlin, Libya - via Khalifa Haftar, signed diplomatic and military agreements with Russia in 2017, apparently requesting on-the-ground assistance involving military advisers and technicians. Furthermore, if the presence of the PMC Wagner is difficult to document today, the group would have been given the mission of training troops, securing oil sites and/or supporting Marshal Haftar's personnel.

Currently, three groups are present in Libya: Wagner, Patriot and RSB. However, the Russian government has also other proxies, such as the gas company Rosneft, to be able to set up in all centers of Libyan activities. The Wagner group, present in some 15 African countries, is the largest and the one on which we can give an assessment.

The UN Expert Panel for Libya reported the presence of ChVK Wagner since October 2018. Their operations in Libya can be divided into four categories: maintenance of equipment, combat operations, training, and influence operations through social media.

In this document we provide a break down of the capabilities Wagner has showcased in Libya since the consolidation of the Sirte Jufra frontline. Afterwards, we estimate for each of these capabilities the amount of personnel that would be required. The total of this sum brings us to 575 individuals; this is a very rough estimate with a low degree of certainty. These figures could be augmented by including Syrian and Sudanese elements that are incorporated into Wagner's Libyan detachment. This could give a total count of approximately 1500 pax.

Overview of past operations

Deployed in Libya since 2018, the company is primarily used to secure hydrocarbon sites, recognize sensitive points, train local units, maintain Russian equipment in operational condition, clean up certain sensitive sites (i.e. demining). The group has also been engaged in fighting like in Sebha in January 2019 or in Derna in March 2019.

Having Libya an abundance of derelict Soviet equipment, which often is no longer operational, we assess the first presence of Wagner been related to increasing the serviceability of this equipment. This presence was most likely strongly concentrated in the East of the country.

Throughout the Tripoli Offensive, which was launched in April 2019, we observed significant increases of Wagner operations. Especially in the South of Tripoli these forces had an influence on the fighting. Wagner elements most likely operated SA-22 surface-to-air systems to create air superiority¹. During this phase 2 MQ-9 unmanned aerial vehicles were shot down in the greater Tripoli area. On 21 November 2019, one of these two MQ-9s, belonging to the United States, was shot down in the Tajoura

¹ The Panstir S1 is a Russian made mobile surface-to-air system that used both cannons and missiles. It is characterised by the mobility and ability to operate autonomously (not integrated in a wider system of radars, etc.). Its operational limitations are its ceiling. It cannot target highflying aircraft, nor does it have a very big range (approx. 20km). Consequently, it is often used for point defence or the lower level protection of a multi-layered air defence umbrella.

area. During the weeks following this incident, US AFRICOM adopted a more open position about Wagner forces in Tripoli. Pressuring Russia to return the wreckage of their downed aircraft.

Wagner's presence greatly intensified with the outbreak of the offensive on Tripoli. Numerous images have demonstrated the close involvement of mercenaries in the fighting, in particular with the recovery of Orlan 10 tactical drones² known to be used by Wagner, or the discovery of Russian "*sniper holes*" on the outskirts of Tripoli.

AFRICOM estimated the number of Russian mercenaries present on Libyan soil at the height of the fighting at less than 2,000. Their numbers have most likely dwindled since the announcement of the ceasefire in August.

In early 2020, when the GNA was able to push back Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF, aka LNA) with the support of Turkish forces, this allowed a good analysis of the presence of these Russian forces in Libya. Wagner forces in Southern Tripoli resorted to urban warfare with snipers, artillery and modern air defence systems. They withdrew from the suburbs of Southern Tripoli and consolidated a new frontline that runs South from Sirte, to Jufra and onwards to Brak. This frontline is made up of a first line of defence which is most likely composed out of Sudanese mercenaries (**Annex**) with Wagner forces in a second line of defence. Wagner probably withdrew on their own initiative, indicating it is unlikely that LAAF commanders possess any meaningful direct control over Wagner forces.

When Wagner forces withdrew from Southern Tripoli they booby-trapped several urban residential areas, by doing so they denied the residents to return to their homes. According to the UN report, the explosive devices hidden in the areas of Ain Zara, Salaheddin, Ben Gashir airport and Khallet el-Ferjan would have been "*difficult to spot and neutralize*", reflecting a certain competence from sappers within the LNA/LAAF. Some techniques had also been observed previously in the Donbass region.

In all, around fifty Russian mercenaries were killed in the fighting in Tripolitania, including around thirty during strikes attributed to the Turks in October 2019.

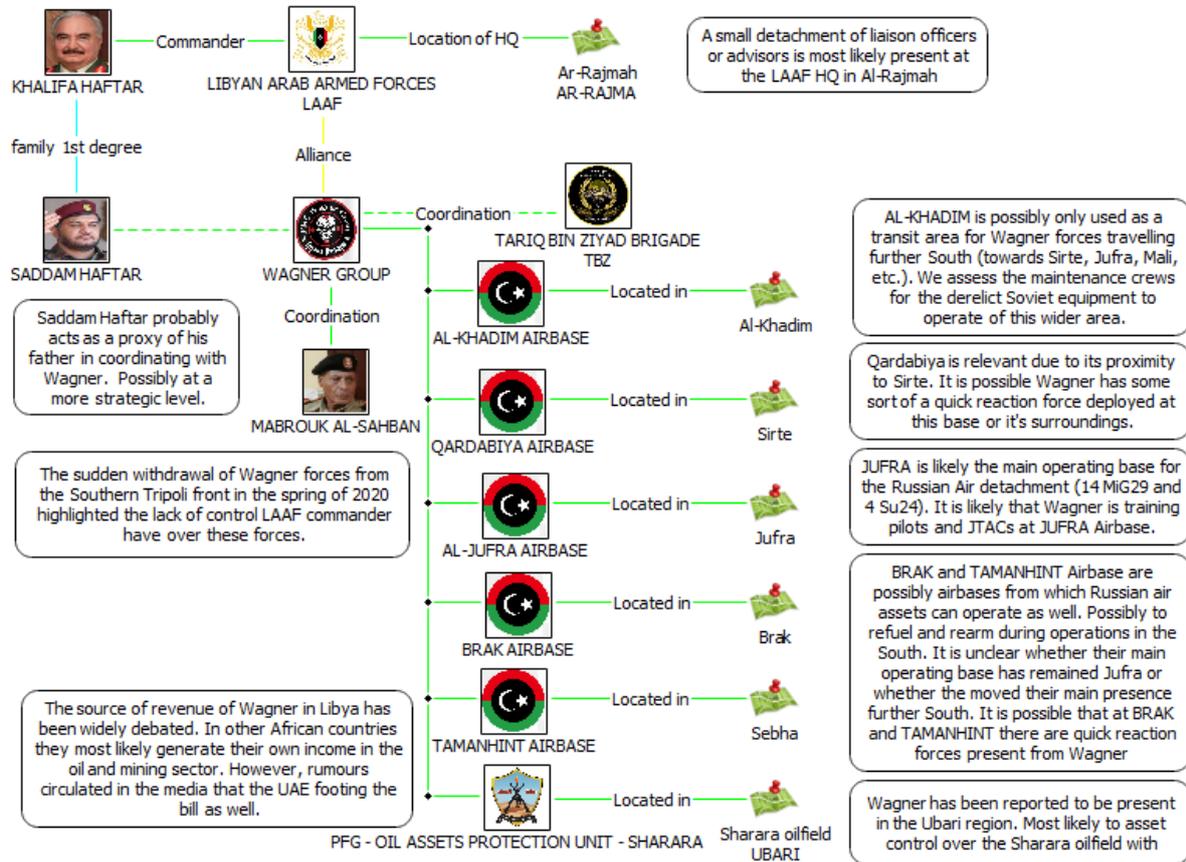
In late May 2020, US AFRICOM reported that at least 14 MiG-29s and several Su-24s were flown to Libya via Syria. The MiG-29 is an air defence fighter with a limited range and the Su-24 is an aircraft developed to attack ground targets. Pictures on open sources confirm that at least 4 Su-24 were present in Libya, they transited through AL-KHADIM Airbase and are most likely operating out of either JUFRA Airbase or TAMANHINT Airbase today. The nationality and affiliation of the pilots flying these aircraft has been a source of speculation since their arrival. These jets had been repainted to camouflage the Russian origin. Uncorroborated reporting indicate that MiG-29s have since been repatriated, probably between July and August the same year. The Su-24 Fencers have also been paraded during last year's ceremony of the LNA/LAAF.

In order to consolidate their position in Libya after the implementation of the ceasefire and to prevent the LNA/LAAF from being overrun, Wagner's Russian mercenaries undertook to fortify the front line and in particular the military bases of Al-Jufra, Tamanhint and Brak. These reinforcements take the form of entrenched and bermed defensive positions north of Jufra and Brak, as well as the establishment of SA-22 (PANTSIR S-1) air defence systems. Wagner's objective was to consolidate the control of the LAAF/LNA on the front line and to maintain the control of pro-Tobruk forces on Libyan oil sites.

² The Orlan 10 is a tactical UAV which weighs only 15kg, so that it cannot be compared to a Bayraktar TB2 (which is a UAV that can be armed). The Orlan is launched from a catapult and lands via a small parachute. It can be used to "*look across a hill*". Later variants have a laser designator, meaning it can be used to designate targets with the laser, in a way that precision guided artillery and aircraft precision guided munitions (PGM) can be guided on a target.

Organisation

DISCLAIMER: The figures are purely based on the Wagner’s assessed capabilities from open sources. One of the main question is how big the Wagner detachment is in Libya. Even though we have no specific figures, we have decided to estimate that through the amount of personnel observed for every event in Libya throughout the last year. The total figure is the sum of all these estimates combined, being 575.



For the purpose of this analysis, we have adopted following assumptions. Firstly, we assume Wagner is focussed on airbases, both as operational and logistical hubs, due to the size of Libya. Secondly, we assume Wagner forces are not manning the first line of defence because of a lack of manpower and the associated risks. Thirdly, we assume all forces that employ modern Russian equipment to be Wagner forces and not Russian regulars (even though this is unlikely at times, especially for too high skilled functions such as Air Defence operators or pilots).

LAAF HQ at Al-Rajmah: 5 persons (Liaison officers/advisors)

Every cooperation between the LAAF and Wagner Group needs some form of coordination at HQ-level. Consequently, we assess it to be highly likely that Wagner has some elements deployed at Al-Rajmah.

Al-Khadim Airbase and surroundings: 5 persons for logistics, 35 pax for maintenance

Al-Khadim (Bnghazi) has often been used as a stop-over for Wagner related flights. We also assess that Al-Khadim might be the base from which their maintenance personnel operates to service the derelict Soviet equipment. Consequently, it would make sense to have a small logistical team permanently based at that Airbase.

Sirte-Jufra frontline: 90 persons as operating air defences, 180 persons as advisors

We assess there to be two type of Wagner forces employed on the frontline. The first group of Wagner forces are most likely involved with operating the SA-22 Pantsir systems that have been widely reporting in central Libya. Since the establishment of the ceasefire between the two camps at the end of August, at least two SA-22s are still present and operational within the LNA/LAAF, including one permanently visible on the base by Birak al-Shati. The launcher itself has a three-person crew. If we include command and control (C2), support, maintenance, etc., 7-10 people are needed to manage one SA-22. In total, we estimate 90 Wagner elements to be involved in operating these systems in Libya. This figure could be smaller as some functions are performed by Syrians, Libyans or Sudanese fighters.

Another section of Wagner is most likely involved with the ground dimension of this frontline, the presence of Sudanese forces between Sirte and Jufra has been consequently reported in several open sources (often referred to by Libyans as Janjaweed). Several think tanks have made estimates of their numbers that fluctuate around 5.000-7.000. We assume that not all of these forces operate in coordination with Wagner forces. We assume half of them will be deployed on this frontline. If Wagner deploys some sort of advice and assist teams, they could be dimensioned as following: 6 advisors for a company of 100 Sudanese. Consequently, we have a total estimate of 180 advisors. These teams are possibly deployed behind the frontline.

From our perspective, the most efficient way for Wagner to enforce these forces would be to assist and advice those personnel with specific skills such as JTACs (Joint Terminal Attack Controllers), to guide pilots to their targets over the radio. These JTACs are often quite rare profiles sought after within armed forces.

Qardabiya Airbase and surroundings including Sirte

We assess that the forces involved in both Air Defence and the Advise and Assist Teams are based out of Sirte or Jufra. These teams will not spend their entire stay in Libya out in the field and are possibly rotating in and out with a rest and relief area in nearby urban centres, such as Sirte.

Al-Jufra Airbase: 170 personnel (Air assets and training)

As we assess some of these Air Defence and Advising Teams to have their main base in Qardabiya, and their rest and relief in the urbanised areas in Sirte, the same is true for Jufra. There, it could be possible to notice rest and relief areas for example in Suknah. During the Tripoli Offensive, we observed Wagner occupying civilian compounds, so that it could be likely they use a similar modus operandi in these areas.

Jufra Airbase is also the main hub for Wagner's air operations in Libya, at least until the summer of 2021. It could make sense that Wagner forces are possibly training Libyans or Syrians in key functions such as pilots and JTACs that are needed to control a country with such tremendous distances, to guide firepower from aircraft on target with small mobile teams.

From a manning perspective, we roughly estimate 150 technicians for the maintenance of the air assets, 10 individuals involved in command and control, 15 (instructor) pilots and 5 pax to provide general support. This brings us to a total estimate of 170.

The Wagner presence at Jufra Airbase could possibly be gradually diminished but not zeroed. Some indicators suggest a shift in effort towards the South, with an increased presence at Brak, under the relative pressure exerted within the framework of the plan for the withdrawal of foreign and mercenary forces from Libya, in the context of a rebalancing in favour of the Malian theatre.

Brak and Tamanhint Airbases, and Sharara oilfield: 30 persons each as Quick Reaction Forces

Due to the remote nature of the South, we assess Wagner Group to ensure a forward presence in some airbases/locations that are easily resupplied. These forces can act as a Quick Reaction Force that can deploy in the South on short notice. We estimate such a force to be about the size of a platoon, to say 30 individuals to be effective. These forces most likely use light vehicles such as pick-up trucks.

The Russian presence at Brak Airbase remains significant with several dozen pick-ups, the location of at least one probably operational PANTSIR S-1 and the establishment of defensive positions north of the airbase. It is unclear whether this will become the main hub for Wagner forces in Libya. Recent observations indicate this might be possible.

Outlook

We assess it to be unlikely that Wagner Group will completely withdraw from Libya in the near future. This is because they have most likely developed their proper sources of revenue linked with the illicit economy and the oil/mining sector. Furthermore, Libya is likely considered a gateway to Africa for Russia. The Wagner presence in Mali and the use of the Libyan bases as part of the communication lines between these theatres confirms such hypothesis.

Wagner has also de facto control over the bigger part of Libya's overall oil producing assets, which amount to approximately 1 million barrels in total per day, mostly located in the South. Therefore, in the near-term, we might observe an increased presence of Wagner in the South of Libya where it can enjoy more freedom of movement, closer to Mali where Wagner has recently become active, and to national resources.

However, in the mid-term some of the missions that Wagner is performing in Libya could be scaled down whenever the ceasefire would become stronger and the possibility of a resurgence of violence would decrease. At this stage, this remains speculation.

Recent significant activities related to Wagner

Following is a selection of the most relevant events related to the Wagner group in Libya throughout the past 6 months.

2021-09-14: On September 14, the Tareq Bin Ziyad Brigade (TBZ) attacked a camp linked to the Chadian FACT in the vicinity of Murzuq. Initial reports suggested that the attack was coordinated with airstrikes against FACT 40km south-east of Umm al-Aranib. The airstrikes were possibly conducted by MiG-29s suggesting Wagner Group was implicated.

COMMENT: Previously Wagner had reportedly been involved in training the Chadian FACT forces. From this, we can deduce that Wagner is indeed involved in training foreign forces in Libya and secondly that they indeed use their air assets to generate effects in the remote Libyan South. It is likely that they were in close coordination with the TBZ.

2021-09-22: Localised sources inform of the presence of alleged Syrian Shiite external forces alongside alleged Russian Wagner Forces at Al-Jufra Airbase and within the Hun area.

COMMENT: We deduce that Wagner is most likely working in close cooperation with Syrian forces in Libya. This probably linked due to common experience in Syria, another factor might be that Syrian forces are fluent in Arabic, which might possibly be a limiting factor for Wagner in Libya.

2021-09-28: Reports indicate that Wagner Group has dismantled radars and the SA-22 Pantsir S1 Air Defence systems at Jufra Airbase and has transported them eastwards to Ajdabiya.

COMMENT: It remains difficult to assess whether individual troop movements are withdrawals or reinforcements. Often these are mere planned troop rotations where personnel and or equipment is replaced.

2021-10-01: In the context of the 5+5 JMC and the partial withdrawal of military assets in Libya Wagner Group was pictured transporting what were reported to be air defence and radar systems from Jufra Airbase to the east of Libya.

COMMENT: It remains difficult to assess whether individual troop movements are withdrawals or reinforcements. Often these are mere planned troop rotations where personnel and or equipment is replaced. However, we have observed several indicators of assets being pulled away from the frontline, without any clear reinforcements.

2021-12-04: Reported presence of suspected Wagner forces in Sebha.

2021-12-11: A single source reported a sighting of 6 military jets, including one MiG-29, leaving Jufra Airbase heading South to Tamanhint Airbase. The source claimed this to be Wagner Group and Sudanese forces.

COMMENT: Whether these jets deployed temporarily to Tamanhint is hard to assess. However, the coordination with Sudanese forces confirms earlier claims of cooperation with Sudanese forces in vicinity of Jufra.

2021-12-26: LAAF troop movements reported in the South, including heavy military equipment deployment in Sabha. Mig-29 fighter jet presence reported, as well as reported Wagner Group presence also in Sebha.

2022-01-12: Wagner Group movements reported in the Southern Region, including transfer of air defence system to Brak Airbase and alleged Wagner Group piloted flights over the Brak Al Shati area

COMMENT: It remains difficult to assess whether individual troop movements are withdrawals or reinforcements. However, several sightings of troop movements make it more credible that Wagner is repositioning its forces towards the South of Libya.

2022-01-26: Localised source report possible Wagner Group movements in the Central Region, including a convoy consisting of four armed vehicles, three buses, a transporter, and two Toyota vehicles, mobilising from Hun westwards towards “new locations” in the wider Sukna area

COMMENT: The size of this convoy suggests these Wagner forces are implied in training as such large convoys are unlikely to be full of Wagner elements.

2022-02-07: Open sources report the return of approx. 300 Syrian external force members, who possibly worked with Wagner Group as oil facility guards, while stationed in the Jufra Region.

COMMENT: This could suggest that Wagner was also involved in the protection of oil facilities in the Jufra region and not only in Sharara. The report also substantiates the claim of Syrians working together with Wagner forces in Libya.

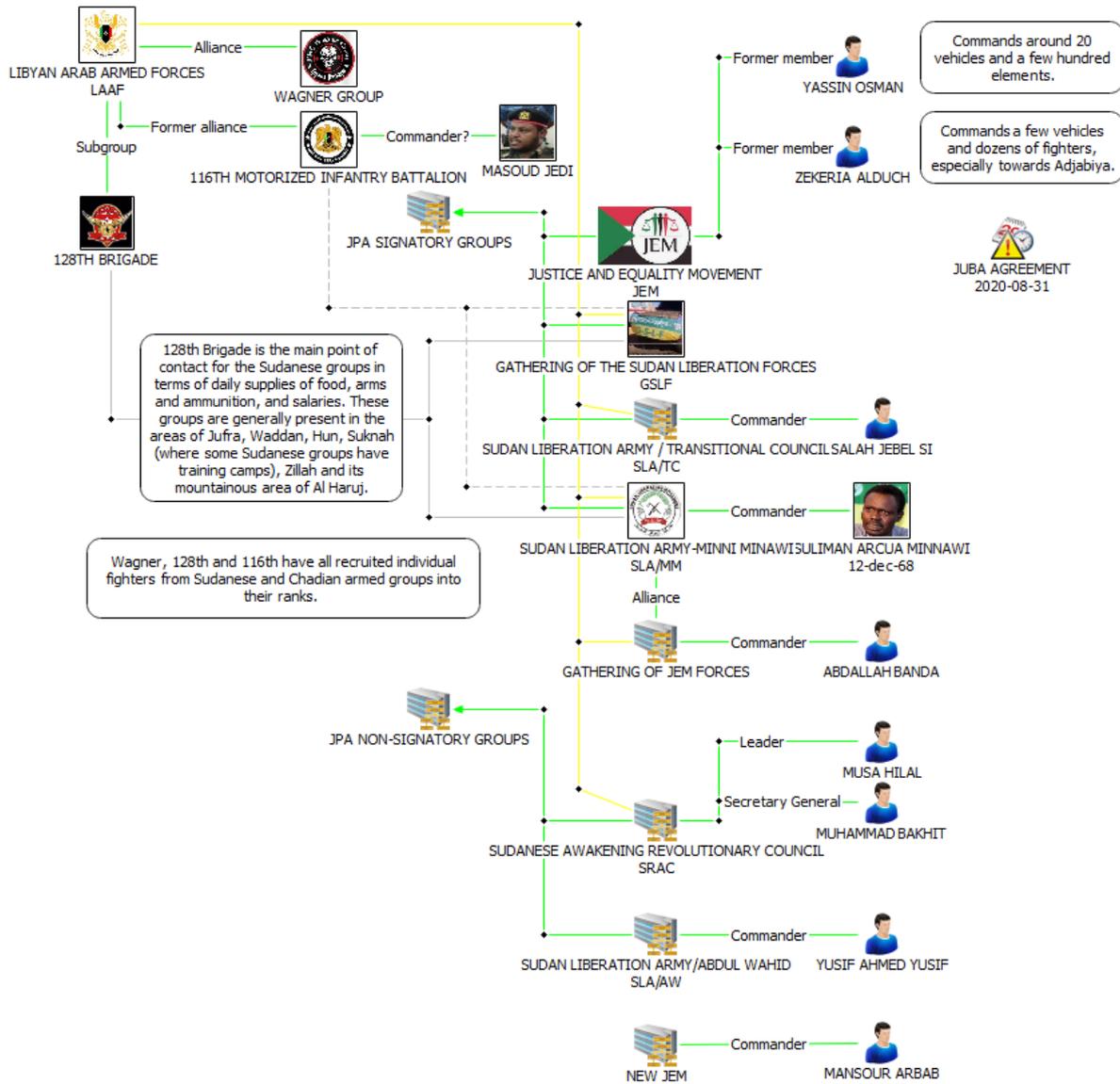
2022-02-20: Open sources report Wagner Group elements transporting advanced equipment to Brak Airbase. The movements appear to be part of a transfer of personnel and equipment from the Central Region, including from the wider Jufra area. Additionally, localised sources report the “departure” of Wagner Group personnel from residencies in the Sawknah area, including i.a. from houses near the Sawknah-Sabha route

COMMENT: These reports of Wagner forces leaving residencies resemble reports of Wagner leaving residencies in Southern Tripoli. If substantiated this could suggest that Wagner is decreasing its footprint in the Jufra area.

2022-02-23: Open sources in vicinity of Sirte reported the withdrawal/ possible re-deployment of Russian Wagner Group forces in the wider Sirte area, followed by looting of newly unoccupied homes south-west of Sirte, allegedly carried out by Sudanese forces.

COMMENT: Normal rotational troop movement are less likely to be accompanied with forces definitely departing from their rest and relief areas without.

Annex: Sudanese armed groups in Libya



This chart aims to shine a light on the complexity of these Sudanese armed forces. They are not a monolithic entity. Some of these groups are small and loosely affiliated. Others are more organised. Wagner has probably trained and assisted these groups. However, it is also possibly they recruited elements directly from these armed groups for specific tasks such as guarding strategic infrastructure (related to the oil industry).

Without going in too much detail, the Sudanese groups can be divided into Juba Peace Agreement Signatory groups and non-signatory groups. Some groups have aligned themselves to the LNA/LAAF and others have not.

The solution for the withdrawal of these forces from Libya lies in their country of origin, Sudan.