

Macron pitches Biden on plan to get foreign fighters out of Libya

Е. Макрон подає Д. Байдену план вивезення іноземних винищувачів з Лівії

Франція підготувала США та інших країн щодо плану вивезення іноземних бойовиків з Лівії, країни, яку в останні роки потрясла громадянська війна. План визначає шестимісячний графік, за яким пропонується спочатку вивести сирійських найманців, яких підтримують Туреччина, а потім найманців, яких підтримує Росія, та регулярні турецькі війська. І останніми днями президент Франції Емманюель Макрон передав цю ідею безпосередньо своїм колегам у США та Туреччині. Е. Макрон обговорив цей план із президентом США Джо Байденом на саміті Великої сімки в Англії, перед тим як обговорити його з президентом Туреччини Реджепом Тайїпом Ердоганом на саміті НАТО в Брюсселі.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-joe-biden-withdrawal-fighters-libya/>

France has pitched the U.S. and others on a plan to remove foreign fighters from Libya, a country rocked by civil war in recent years.

The plan — seen by POLITICO — lays out a six-month timeline that proposes first withdrawing Turkish-backed Syrian mercenaries, followed by Russian-backed mercenaries and regular Turkish troops. The two-page proposal has been circulating for several weeks among diplomatic officials with the involved countries, according to two officials familiar with the talks.

And in recent days, the officials said, French President Emmanuel Macron has put the idea directly to his counterparts in the U.S. and Turkey. Macron discussed the plan with U.S. President Joe Biden on Saturday at the G7 gathering of wealthy democracies in England, before raising it with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on Monday at the NATO summit in Brussels.

The ultimate goal is to further stabilize a country on the EU's southern border, which has created migration challenges and terrorism risks for Europe. The major players have been trying to cement a civil war cease-fire reached last October between the U.N.-backed government in Tripoli, Libya's capital, and Khalifa Haftar, a general who controls territory in eastern Libya.

In March, Libya established a national unity government recognized by all major players in the civil war. But its position remains precarious ahead of an election in December — Haftar retains a significant military backing and Turkish- and Russian-backed fighters still linger in the country. Compounding those challenges is the fact that Turkey and Russia entered the war on opposing sides — Turkey behind the Tripoli government and Russia behind Haftar.

The idea behind Macron's plan seems to be to tap into America's heft and use that as leverage to pressure Turkey and Russia into withdrawing their affiliated forces. It's a tactical shift for Macron, adopting a more collective approach that could end up offering a foreign policy win to someone else — Joe Biden.

“This could resonate with U.S. policy,” said Tarek Megerisi, a Libya expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations. “They prize expediency over substance when it comes to Libya, and lean heavily on key allies despite their partisanship.”

Under Macron's plan, Turkey would first withdraw the Syrian mercenaries it sent to Libya in 2020, when the Tripoli government sought help in fending off a siege from Haftar's forces. Such a step could take place as soon as July 1.

The second phase would see both Russia pull out its Wagner Group private militias and Turkey withdraw its own soldiers. The step, proposed for September, could be more challenging, given that it equates Turkish troops, which were invited into the country by an internationally recognized government, and the Russia-linked private militias there illegally.

The third phase proposes to reunify Libya's divided security forces, currently split between those who defended the Tripoli government and those fighting for Haftar. Ostensibly, this step would leave Haftar's Libyan National Army as the predominant group. That fact could make it a hard

sell to those backing Tripoli. The outcome could also be seen as a reward for Haftar's failed siege on Tripoli, and risks reinforcing the perception that France is too close to Haftar, who has been the country's partner of choice in its fight against the Islamic State and jihadist groups in the area.

The proposal is an attempt to jump-start stalled efforts to get foreign fighters out of Libya. It comes after two previous plans failed. The October cease-fire included a clause directing all foreign fighters and mercenaries to leave the country within 90 days. But that deadline came and went with no movement. The U.N. Security Council later adopted a resolution calling on all relevant parties to withdraw their foreign forces, but that has similarly been ignored.

The Biden administration would not say whether it backs France's latest proposal — and didn't indicate whether Biden would discuss the plan with Erdoğan or Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom Biden is meeting on Wednesday for a day-long summit. But U.S. officials conceded they are working to secure the withdrawal of foreign fighters from Libya.

"We are consulting with a range of Libyan and international partners to urge full respect for the Libyan ceasefire agreement and its call for the departure of foreign elements," a senior administration official said.

Biden officials said the president discussed Libya generally with Erdoğan during a longer-than-expected meeting at the NATO summit on Monday. And Libya is expected to be on the agenda for Biden's meeting with Putin Wednesday afternoon in Geneva.

If Biden emerges from his Putin meeting with some commitment to cooperate on Libya, it could offer the U.S. president a concrete win from a meeting that isn't expected to produce many.

Yet the bigger issue might lie in trying to win over Turkey. The equivalence the document draws between Turkish soldiers and Wagner Group mercenaries could frustrate Turkish officials.

"It seems to be designed to antagonize Turkey while largely ignoring Russia," said Megerisi, the Libya specialist. "The Wagner Group are there on dubious grounds, represent a strategic threat to Europe and remain the most likely foreign force to scupper the upcoming elections."

Indeed, Libya has general elections scheduled for December 24, and there are growing doubts they will be held on time.

When pressed on Monday about whether Erdoğan had agreed to withdraw his regular troops, not just the Syrian mercenaries, Macron dodged and focused on what he said was their broad agreement that foreign fighters needed to withdraw. Macron also remained vague about a withdrawal timeline.

"President Erdoğan confirmed in our meeting his desire for foreign mercenaries and militias operating on Libyan soil to leave as quickly as possible, and his desire to work on this together," he said.

The French leader also cautioned that France and Turkey could not necessarily solve the issue alone, alluding to the panoply of other countries with interests in the country. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt — to name a few — have all played various roles during the civil war.

A withdrawal, Macron said, "doesn't totally depend on the two of us."