



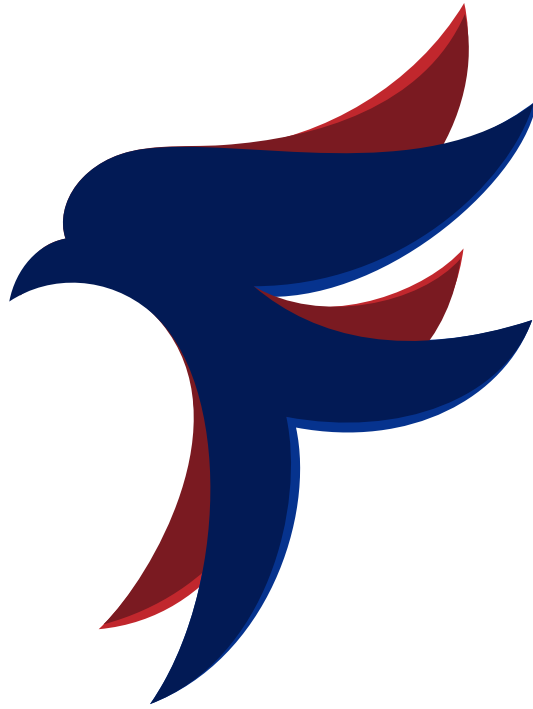
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

RUSSIA'S WAR IN SYRIA

THE RUSSIAN GROUND-BASED CONTINGENT IN SYRIA

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THE RUSSIAN GROUND BASED CONTINGENT IN SYRIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil War produces a new set of problems involving extended urban combat, intense fights for key resources (oil fields, water, and lines of communication and supply), conventional combat among irregular units, ethnic and religious cleansing, a large number of foreign combatants with varying motivations, and contending outside powers fighting a proxy engagement. The Russian Federation is not an expeditionary power, and its entry into Syria on the side of the regime has strained its logistical resources.

From the beginning of the Syrian campaign, it was clear that Russian involvement was initially envisaged to be through the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS). Although the Syrian government was on the verge of collapse, and the Syrian military was on its hind legs and a shell of its former self, there was a sufficient number of Syrian ground units that were mission capable. With this understanding, the VKS was to be the principal supplier of Russian combat power aimed at disruption of the command and control and leadership of the groups fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime through the provision of reconnaissance and target destruction. In particular, Russia's priority was the destruction of the Western-backed, moderate opposition groups, since it saw these as the greatest immediate threat to Assad. The Islamic State (ISIS) and other Sunni extremist groups were targeted, but sat lower on Russia's priority list.

As with other such operations, «mission creep» soon resulted in Russia's involvement quickly expanding past the provision of aerospace support to planning, and, in some cases, conducting ground operations. General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, confirmed this expansion of Russian involvement in a December 2017 interview.¹ Russia's ground-based contingent in the Syrian campaign involves a diverse set of forces and capabilities. Some of the key features of this expanded ground force mission included a Russian model of military advisors, integrated and modernized fires, mobility and countermobility operations, a featured role for military police, use of coastal defense, spetsnaz, and private military company (PMC) forces. Russian ground forces have benefitted from the opportunity to provide combat experience to a large number of professional soldiers, conduct battlefield testing of new systems and observe the impact of different terrain on tactics. The forces opposing the Syrian government provide a different opponent than the “enemy” encountered in normal Russian peacetime training and much of the “Syrian experience” is discussed and dissected in Russian professional military journals.

¹ Viktor Baranets, “Начальник Генштаба Вооруженных сил России генерал армии Валерий Герасимов: «Мы переломили хребет ударным силам терроризма» [Chief of the General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov: ‘We Have Broken the Back of the Shock Troops of Terrorism’],” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/>.

THE RUSSIAN GROUND FORCES

The Russian Ground Forces effort in Syria includes an advisory effort; artillery support, reconnaissance, integration and training; engineer mobility and countermobility support and training; national and international military police support and hands-on actions; coastal defense forces support from coastal artillery and naval infantry; the controversial employment of private military companies; and special operations forces.

Advisors

Perhaps, the way that the ground-based contingent of Russian forces has had the most influence on the outcome of the Syrian conflict is through the provision of military advisors. Russian military advisors have been a key factor in saving Assad's regime from near collapse and enabling it to regain control of much of the country. The Russians take a different approach from other countries and coalitions. Instead of forming specialized units to train, advise, and assist local forces, the Russians take complete staffs from divisions/ regiments, brigades, and battalions and place them with their Syrian counterparts. These complete staffs are likely rotated back to their units in Russia intact, in order to give them battle-tested staffs accustomed to working together. In 2017, General Gerasimov stated that over 48,000 Russian Ministry of Defense personnel had served in Syria: many Ground

Forces commanders and staff officers, and including some from the Naval Infantry and Airborne forces, have received much valued combat experience.²

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Fires

Aside from the provision of military advisors to coordinate the tactical and operational levels of war, probably the most significant way that the ground-based contingent has influenced the outcome of the conflict is through the provision and coordination of fires and targeting data. Although Russian

² Viktor Baranets, "Начальник Генштаба Вооруженных сил России генерал армии Валерий Герасимов: «Мы переломили хребет ударным силам терроризма» [Chief of the General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov: 'We Have Broken the Back of the Shock Troops of Terrorism']," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/>.



artillery is playing a major role, the gun crews are primarily Syrian. The most high-profile asset of growing importance in finding targets for these gun crews is the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The Russians introduced *Orlan* and several other UAV reconnaissance systems that have proven their value. The *Orlan* has been used to detect groups of enemy combatants before they attack Russian and Syrian columns. Experience, going back to the Soviet war in Afghanistan, has shown the Russians that it is desirable for the formation staff and each artillery battalion to have aerial reconnaissance ahead and on the flanks of column movement with the objective of detecting ambushes and concentrations of combatants as well as destroying them before

the forward detachment (movement support detachment) approaches them.³ In Syria, UAVs are easier to deploy, do not require a trained pilot physically in the vehicle, can linger much longer than helicopters, are harder to detect and shoot down, and can provide accurate targeting information for near-real-time destruction of targets. The Russians have not weaponized their UAVs, preferring to capitalize on their reconnaissance value and leave the destruction mission to the artillery.⁴

One of the Russians' first tasks when entering the conflict in fall 2015 was establishing a combined command and control system in order to integrate Russian and Syrian fires. This development has reportedly enabled

3 In providing close support to columns from Kunduz to Faizabad (a route 370 kilometers long) in Afghanistan in 1986, helicopters were used for active reconnaissance and coordinated closely with the artillery staff of the 201st Motorized Rifle Division. Such coordination permitted instantaneous reaction to detected guerrilla groups advancing toward troops' main movement route. V. Litvinenko, "Организация боевого применения подразделений воздушной разведки в интересах Ракетных войск и артиллерии [The Union of Earth and Air: Organization of the Combat Use of Aerial Reconnaissance Subunits Supporting Missile Troops and Artillery]," *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, February 2018, p. 46.

4 V. Litvinenko, "Организация боевого применения подразделений воздушной разведки в интересах Ракетных войск и артиллерии [The Union of Earth and Air: Organization of the Combat Use of Aerial Reconnaissance Subunits Supporting Missile Troops and Artillery]," *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, February 2018, p. 46.

Russian and Syrian troops to respond rapidly to emerging threats, decrease incidents of fratricide, and better use precision fires. In addition to the artillery assets of the Syrian Arab Army, the Russian Federation has reportedly used a variety of artillery and missile systems. Russia has used many of its tube artillery systems, including the 152-mm Msta-B and 122-mm D-30 howitzers. The Russians have also used the 120mm Grad/Tornado-G, 220mm Uragan, and 300mm Smerch multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), which can blanket about 10, 72, and 166 acres, respectively. The TOS-1A Solntsepyok heavy flamethrower system, in the Russian Nuclear Biological and Chemical Troops, has reportedly been quite effective. Although considered a “flamethrower” by the Russians, the Solntsepyok (Blazing Sun) is essentially a short-range (6km) MLRS system with thermobaric rockets mounted on a T-72 chassis.⁵

Perhaps, Russia’s most interesting use of fires in Syria is its employment of operational-tactical fires assets. The Iskander Operational-Tactical Rocket Complex (OTRK) can fire two short-range ballistic missiles (SS-26 STONE), or two ground-launched cruise missiles (SSC-7), and is capable of hitting targets at ranges of up to 500 kilometers. The Iskander was designed to target enemy MLRS, missile and air defense system, airfields, command posts, and critical infrastructure. In Syria, the Iskander has been used against a number of small point targets to include ISIS command

and control posts, arms and ammunition dumps, and communications centers.⁶

IN SYRIA, THE ISKANDER HAS BEEN USED AGAINST A NUMBER OF SMALL POINT TARGETS TO INCLUDE ISIS COMMAND AND CONTROL POSTS, ARMS AND AMMUNITION DUMPS, AND COMMUNICATIONS CENTERS.

Mobility and Countermobility

Russian engineer troops have been widely employed in Syria. Their biggest role has been to provide and gain exceptional experience in a broad range of mobility and countermobility tasks. In Syria, Russian engineers have planned and improved installation defenses, provided route reconnaissance, supervised road construction, provided water purification, and supported Syrian Army combat. The new PMM-2M tracked, amphibious bridging ferry

5 Vladimir Chernov, “Боги живут не на олимпе: Ракетчики и артиллеристы осваивают новую боевую технику [The Gods Don’t Reside on Olympus: Missile Operators and Artillerymen Are Mastering New Combat Hardware],” Na Strazhe Rodiny, November 23, 2018.

6 Ivan Petrov, “Сирийский полигон: как война помогла обкатать российское оружие Юрий Борисов рассказал о применении российской военной техники в Сирии [Syrian Proving Ground: How the War Helped to Break in Russian Weapons],” Gazeta.ru, December 17, 2018, <https://rg.ru/2018/12/17/kakoe-oruzhie-i-tehnika-proiavili-sebia-v-sirii.html>.



Mine detection specialists in Palmyra (mil.ru)

is being introduced into Russian engineer battalions. It can carry 42.5 tons and be linked with other vehicles to form a bridge. It had a thorough, successful combat testing in Syria. Russian engineers, while under fire, constructed a 210 meter-long PMM-2M bridge across the Euphrates River in support of a Syrian Army advance in September 2017. The bridge remained in use until February 2018 when it was dismantled by flooding.⁷

Russia is a member of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS). According to the 2018 *Land Mine and Cluster Munitions Monitor*, Russia deployed several hundred military explosive and ordnance specialists from the Russian Ministry of Defense's International Mine Action Center supported

by mine detection dog teams and Uran-6 mine detection robots. Deployments included 200 explosive and ordnance specialists sent to Aleppo governorate, 150 to Palmyra, and 175 who were due to be sent to Dayr-az-Zawr governorate. Russian explosive and ordnance specialists trained Syrian army engineers at Khmeimim Airbase and at training centers established in 2017 in Aleppo and Homs. By the start of January 2018, Russian armed forces reported that they had trained 900 Syrian engineers.⁸ With this effort, the Russian military reportedly cleared mines from more than 30km² in Syria between December 2016 and February 2017. Army engineers reported clearing some 20km² in Palmyra in 2016 and 2017, removing more than 24,000 mines and duds. A Russian Defense Ministry

⁷ "Russia has deployed PMM-2M amphibious bridging ferry in Syria," Army Recognition Group, https://www.armyrecognition.com/september_2017_global_defense_security_news_industry/russia_has_deployed_pmm-2m_amphibious_bridging_ferry_in_syria.html, September 27, 2017. Youtube has some good footage of the bridging at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhkBYW1syc8>.

⁸ *Mine and Cluster Munitions Monitor*, dated November 18, 2018, <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2019/syria/mine-action.aspx>.

spokesman stated that Russian explosive and ordnance specialists had cleared an area of 3.6km² around Aleppo, along with 75 kilometers of road, destroying 1,000 mines and duds, all in the span of one week. Russian and Syrian army engineers were also active around Damascus and its suburbs, where opposition-held areas became the target of a major Syrian-Russian offensive in early 2018.⁹ Overall, Russian engineers have received an exceptional scope of experience in this battlefield task.

MILITARY POLICE

Arguably, Russian Military Police have been the “face” of the Russian presence in Syria, and the General Staff has used the deployment to advance operational experience and development. Russian Military Police duties in Syria include tasks that would be considered standard for these forces: providing base security, manning checkpoints and observation posts, ensuring passage to/from de-escalation and de-confliction zones, conducting security patrols, and guarding command posts. Military police traffic control activities include enforcing traffic regulations, issuing registration documents and state license plates, conducting mechanical inspections of military transport vehicles, and providing convoy security.¹⁰

⁹ *Mine and Cluster Munitions Monitor*.

¹⁰ Andrey Ontikov and Aleksey Zabrodin, “Военная полиция РФ отправится в зону деэскалации в Идлибе [Russian Federation Military Police Will Go to Deescalation Zone in Idlib],” *Izvestiya*, September 11, 2017, <https://iz.ru/642260/andrei-ontikov/rossiiskaia-voennaia-politcia-otpravitsia-v-zonu-deeskalacii-v-idlibe>.

RUSSIAN MILITARY POLICEMEN IN BATTALION AND SMALL UNIT-LEVELS ARE MONITORING CEASEFIRE AGREEMENTS AND CONDUCTING HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES

Additionally, Russian military policemen in battalion and small unit-levels are monitoring ceasefire agreements and conducting humanitarian activities; they also are the main Russian contingents for the Russian version of peace support operations. These aspects of stability operations in particular have been well publicized by the Russian Federation. Their support to mine-clearing activities, escorting United Nations humanitarian convoys, and protecting Russian medical units and mobile hospitals when they are rendering medical assistance to the civilian population are often covered by Russian and international media. But the most important role of the Russian military police in Syria is that of expeditionary peacekeeper. According to Lieutenant General Vladimir Ivanovsky, Chief of the Military Police Main Directorate



Mine detection specialists in Palmyra (mil.ru)

of the Russian General Staff, about 60% of Russia's Military Police personnel have served in Syria.¹¹

In order to provide sufficient numbers of military policemen to support the Syrian campaign, the Russian Federation created two new Military Police battalions, with approximately 600 personnel each.¹² An interesting aspect of these new Military Police battalions is where they are located. These battalions have been formed from Russia's predominantly Muslim regions and the same areas of Russia from which many ISIS fighters have emerged. This situation has been attributed to a few terrorism-related incidents in the Caucasus, in protest of Russian actions

against ISIS.¹³ The Russian use of co-ethnics in these sorts of missions is not new. During the Tajik civil war and other conflicts in Russia and its near abroad, Russian-led local coalitions included belligerents in Russian peacekeeping and stability operations. With respect to location, the fact that military service in the Muslim-populated Caucasus is highly sought after also likely plays a role. In fact, it is so prestigious that conscription quotas are usually exceeded, and some young men are turned away from compulsory military service. In addition, Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov has stated: "Tatars, Russians, Chechens – together, they protect the Muslims there. They prevent different

¹¹ "60% of Russian military police officers have Syria service record," *Interfax*, February 18, 2019.

¹² The structure of these military battalions can vary, but at a minimum there are three companies (up to 100 service-men each) plus operational and logistic-support elements. Vladimir Mukhin, "Москва усиливает военно-полицейскую группировку в Сирии [Moscow Is Beefing up the Military Police Contingent in Syria]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 13, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-01-13/2_7480_syria.html.

¹³ Yelena Milashina, "Нападение на Грозный. Что это было? [Attack on Grozny. What Was It?]" *Novaya Gazeta*, December 20, 2016, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/12/20/70958-napadenie-na-groznyy-cto-eto-bylo>. In a few cases, both fighters and military policeman have been drawn from the same extended families.

denominations from setting at variance among themselves.”¹⁴ Kadyrov’s statement implies that both Christians and Muslims from Russia are protecting Syrian Muslims and that these protectors can dissuade some of the ongoing sectarian violence in the country. Considering these battalions are already on their fourth rotation in Syria, it seems clear that Russia is deploying these predominately Muslim military police battalions to alleviate religious concerns in Syria and provide a suitable outlet for the martial cultures found in the Caucasus.¹⁵

COASTAL DEFENSE TROOPS

The Russian Navy’s ground combat element in Syria is the Coastal Defense Troops, which consist of the Coastal Artillery Troops and Russian Naval Infantry. The Coastal Artillery Troops’ primary purpose in Syria appears to be deterring Western interference from the sea, but in November 2016, a K-300P Bastion-P coastal defense missile system was used to engage an unspecified ground target.¹⁶

(The Bastion-P has an advertised capability to engage “limited mobility” ground targets, such as command and control facilities, radar stations, airfields, helicopter landing areas, and artillery batteries.)¹⁷

The Naval Infantry has been the most prominent component of the Coastal Defense Troops used in Syria and has been on the ground the longest of any of the ground-based contingent. They were first responsible for maintaining security at the Tartus Naval Base, and also later at the Khmeimim Airbase.¹⁸ The Naval Infantry is hindered by the lack of sufficient modern Large Landing Ships (BDKs), much like its cousin the Russian Airborne Troops (VDV) are hindered by the lack of sufficient modern Transport Aviation (VTA). Although the Naval Infantry lacks large-scale offensive capabilities, Russia is augmenting other Naval Infantry capabilities by increasing the size and standardizing the composition of Russian Naval Infantry Brigades. Generally in the Naval Infantry, there will be six maneuver battalions in each brigade (three naval infantry battalions, one assault battalion, one tank battalion, and one reconnaissance battalion), a sniper company, and a UAV company. Although the Russian Naval Infantry currently lacks the necessary naval vessels and landing craft to conduct large-scale

14 “Kadyrov explains why he sends Chechens to Syria” *Crime Russia*, February 11, 2017, <https://en.crimerussia.com/gover/kadyrov-explained-why-he-sends-chechens-to-syria/>.

15 Vladimir Mukhin, “Москва усиливает военно-полицейскую группировку в Сирии [Moscow Is Beefing up the Military-Police Contingent in Syria],” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 13, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-01-13/2_7480_syria.html.

16 Sergey Ptichkin, “Бастионы” на всех флотах [‘Bastions’ in All of the Fleets], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, April 26, 2017, <https://rg.ru/2017/04/26/reg-szfo/raketnyj-kompleks-bastion-predstaviat-zhiteli-am-kamchatki-9-maia.html>.

17 Aleksey Ramm, Aleksey Kozachenko, and Bogdan Stepanov, “Отряд не заметит: Арктику защитят маневренные группы с «Бастионами» [Detachment Will Remain Unseen: Arctic Will Be Defended by Maneuver Elements with ‘Bastions’],” *Izvestiya*, August 12, 2019, <https://iz.ru/908520/aleksei-ramm-aleksei-kozachenko-bogdan-stepanov/otriad-ne-zametiat-arktiku-zashchitiat-manevrennye-gruppy-s-bastionami>.

18 Yaroslav Vyatkin, “Сила убеждения [Power of Persuasion],” *Vzglyad*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2013/9/24/651799.html>.

forced entry amphibious operations, these reforms were specifically made to enhance its capability to not only conduct a coastal defense against a well-organized amphibious or airborne assault, but also to support and conduct peacekeeping operations, as the Naval Infantry is envisioned to work closely with Russian Military Police units during these endeavors.¹⁹

PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES (PMCS)

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has developed a burgeoning private security sector, by some estimates employing between 800,000-1,200,000 personnel, plus an estimated 200,000 people working in the industry without proper documentation.²⁰ Within the private security sector, there are elements and individuals associated with Private Security Companies (PSC) and Private Military Companies (PMC). Another related force are state-sponsored militias, such as Cossacks. Private security services cover a wide swath of activities, including personal protection, intelligence, counterintelligence, and facility

ALTHOUGH PRIVATE SECURITY FORCES ARE COMMON AND LEGAL IN TODAY'S RUSSIA, THEY HAVE ONLY BEEN USED FOR DOMESTIC PURPOSES OR FOR SAFEGUARDING RUSSIAN INDUSTRIAL INTERESTS ABROAD.

protection. Although private security forces are common and legal in today's Russia, they have only been used for domestic purposes or for safeguarding Russian industrial interests abroad. Russian private security forces have traditionally not been found on the battlefield. When private contractors are encountered in the Russian military, they are usually found in technical support roles and hired by a state-controlled company. Cossacks have functioned as alternative police and even as irregular fighters. Whenever they are present, they are usually visible to media and other observers. However, these PSC and Cossack elements and individuals are not apparent in

19 Aleksandr Anatolyevich Khramchikhin, "Российская морская пехота сегодня: Возможности и задачи черных беретов [Russian Naval Infantry Today: Capabilities and Missions of the Black Berets]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, December 6, 2019, http://nvo.ng.ru/forces/2019-12-06/2_1073_marines.html; and Aleksey Ramm, Aleksey Kozachenko, and Bogdan Stepovoy, "Выдадут броню: бригады морпехов усилят танковыми подразделениями [They Will Issue Armor: They Will Reinforce Naval Infantry Brigades with Tank Subunits]," *Izvestiya*, October 22, 2019, <https://iz.ru/923772/aleksei-ramm-aleksei-kozachenko-bogdan-stepovoi/vydadut-broniu-brigady-morpekho-uvosiliat-tankovymi-podrazdeleniyami>.

20 Russia's gas conglomerate Gazprom's security service alone employs 20,000. Cindy Hurst, "The Militarization of Gazprom," *Military Review*, September-October 2010, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a529212.pdf>.



service to Russia in the Syrian conflict.²¹

With regard to PMCs, the picture is different. In 2013, the first reports of Russian citizens serving in PMCs in Syria began to surface.²² Instead of providing simple physical security, Russian PMCs are actively engaged in combat by providing motorized rifle, tank, and artillery units. Perhaps, the most famous Russian PMC is the Wagner PMC. The Wagner PMC is the informal name of the private military company led by Dmitriy Utkin, a retired lieutenant colonel and former commander of a unit in the 2nd GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate) Spetsnaz Brigade. The Wagner PMC first gained notoriety in 2014 during the height of fighting in the Donbas, where it was actively engaged in fighting with the separatists

against the Ukrainian government. Reports of Wagner being involved in the Syria campaign started to surface in October 2015. Since then, Wagner has been involved in the liberation of Palmyra from the Islamic State and the capture of Aleppo from a coalition of opposition groups. At one point, Wagner was estimated to employ 6,000 personnel, with approximately 2,500 of them currently working in Syria.²³

According to Russian sources reporting from Syria, the Wagner PMC forces in Syria are organized into four reconnaissance and assault brigades, with each brigade having three companies, and each company having up to 100 personnel. In addition, there is an artillery battalion (three batteries, each with

21 Sergey Sukhankin, "War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests," Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/>.

22 James Bingham, "Private Companies Engage in Russia's Non-Linear Warfare," Jane's Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Center, 2018, https://www.janes.com/images/assets/018/78018/Private_companies_engage_in_Russias_non-linear_warfare.pdf.

23 Denis Korotkov, "Список Вагнера [The Wagner List]," *Fontanka.ru*, August 21, 2017, <http://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.

approximately 100 personnel); a tank company (50 personnel in three platoons, each with four tanks); a sabotage and reconnaissance company (about 150 personnel); a signal company (about 100 personnel); and staff and support (about 200 personnel). Although there is no official relationship between the Russian government and Wagner PMC, it is obvious that Wagner is at least supported, and likely partially funded, by the Russian government.²⁴ Wagner reportedly trains its personnel at the 10th Spetsnaz Brigade's military training ranges and other facilities. The personnel are equipped from government depots and transported to Syria on Russian Navy vessels and military aircraft. Russia's nonofficial recognition of Wagner's employees' activities have even gone to the extent of presenting PMC employees with government medals and awards.²⁵

Legislation fully legalizing PMC activities has not been forthcoming in Russia. Unlike the state-sponsored Cossacks, there is little appetite in Russian legislation to significantly loosen regulations regarding PMCs. Regardless of their current and future status, PMCs give the Russian government a modicum of plausible deniability about their activities. It is notable after the February 7,

2018 attack on a Conoco refinery in Syria, where at some 200 Russian PMC employees were killed by U.S. airpower, there was no official denouncement from Moscow, a testament to how valued this plausible deniability may be to Russia.²⁶

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Russia's use of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Syria is mostly unseen, but comes from a rich pedigree. The Soviets started experimenting with elite reconnaissance and sabotage units in the Spanish Civil War, and employed such units in the Soviet-Finnish War, and in Romania, Yugoslavia, and Belarus during the Second World War. But modern usage of the term "spetsnaz" started in the 1950s. The development of modern spetsnaz was the direct result of the U.S. introduction of tactical nuclear weapons systems into the European theater. Since conventional Soviet forces were ill equipped to handle the

24 Irina Malkova, Anton Bayev, and Anastasiya Yakoreva, "Частная армия для президента: история самого деликатного поручения Евгения Пригожина [Private Army for a President: History of Yevgeniy Prigozhin's Most Delicate Mission]," *The Bell*, January 29, 2019, <https://thebell.io/41889-2/>.

25 Irek Murtazin, "Сирийская кампания загадочной «ЧВК Вагнера»: численный состав и вооружение, ключевые операции и конфликт в верхушке Минобороны [Syrian Campaign of Mysterious 'Wagner Private Military Company': Numerical Strength and Weaponry and Key Operations and Conflict in Defense Ministry Top Echelons]," *Novaya Gazeta*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/10/09/74125-ih-prosto-net>; Denis Korotkov, "Без «Щита»: Служба и смерть в еще одной частной военной компании, которой в России официально нет [Without a 'Shield': Serving and Dying in Yet Another Private Military Company Which Allegedly Does Not Exist in Russia]," *Novaya Gazeta*, July 7, 2019, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/07/28/81406-bez-schita>; and Yevgeniy Berg interview with Denis Korotkov, "People Think It Doesn't Affect Them. But It Affects Everyone," *Meduza*, August 30, 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2017/08/30/people-think-it-doesn-t-affect-them-but-it-affects-everyone>.

26 Pavel Felgengauer, "Разгром [Rout]," *Novaya Gazeta*, February 20, 2018, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/20/75571-razgrom>.

threat of tactical nuclear weapons, spetsnaz reconnaissance units were formed to identify and neutralize such targets quickly in the enemy rear. By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the term “spetsnaz” when used in reference to the Soviet Union’s elite combat units usually referred to the GRU’s Spetsnaz Brigades and Combat Swimmer units (roughly the GRU’s naval reconnaissance force with a saboteur/anti-saboteur capability), the Russian Airborne’s 45th Spetsnaz Regiment (later brigade), or select elite anti-terrorist units such as the FSB’s Alpha and Vypel.

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AMERICAN/WESTERN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES (SOF) AND RUSSIAN SPETSNAZ, REFERRING SPECIFICALLY TO PERSONNEL SERVING IN THE GRU SPETSNAZ BRIGADES, IS THE PERCEPTION OF THESE FORCES AS ELITES.

In a more general context, the term “spetsnaz” also found use while referencing special purpose units such as certain signals intelligence, experimental, or other atypical sorts of troop formations. (In these instances perhaps a better translation would be “special troops” instead of “spetsnaz” to differentiate.) Various armed units subordinated to Russia’s numerous government agencies also began to borrow the word spetsnaz for their own titles so as to sound more important, even though in many cases these units were just glorified guard and protection squads, to include some highly trained and well-armed police units, the Russian equivalent of America’s SWAT teams.

In all, Russia has an estimated 50,000 personnel in “spetsnaz” designated units. Perhaps the biggest difference between American/Western Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Russian spetsnaz, referring specifically to personnel serving in the GRU Spetsnaz Brigades, is the perception of these forces as elites. In the United States, SOF have the highest prestige. This is in marked contrast to the Russian system, where the true elite “trigger pullers” are members of the Russian Airborne (VDV). In general, this difference between American SOF and Russian spetsnaz can be attributed to very different origin stories, namely American SOF growing out of the American Vietnam experience as direct action forces, training guerrillas, and conducting counterinsurgency versus the Russian usage of GRU spetsnaz as primarily intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets.²⁷

²⁷ Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, “The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and the Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces,” *Mentor Military*, 2018, pp. 272-284.

Due to the sensitive nature of special operations, there has obviously been little mention of their Syria operations in Russian mass media. However, what few accounts that have surfaced generally conform to the above description. The primary activities of these special operators in Syria appear to be that of deep reconnaissance and forward air control, for the calling in of artillery, missile, and air strikes. Some of these special operators are functioning like their Western brethren and conducting direct action missions. For instance, several have been recognized with valor awards, which on one occasion Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu presented.²⁸ Noted scholar of the Russian military Timothy Thomas gives the following take on the use of Russian SOF in Syria:

Russian spetnaz has focused its efforts in Syria's mountains and deserts while the Russian motorized rifle forces have focused on urban areas. While much of Russia's military thought, training and research and development has focused on preparation for a major conventional maneuver war under nuclear-threatened conditions, Russia must also prepare for regional and local conflicts. Syria provides the opportunity to develop the Russian military

for those 'other' conflicts. The Russian military has always been concerned with two threats—a threat from the West and a threat from the south. The Russian military has also had to help deal with the threat of internal insurrection and rebellion. The Syrian experience has prompted Russian forces to be more flexible and prepared for different types of armed conflicts in contrast to their preparation for conflict with NATO. The battlefield changes quickly and integrates numerous forces. In Syria, forces have included Russian, Iranian, Turkish, Hezbollah, Syrian, US, and others, including Russian private military companies.

In the past Spetsnaz forces were used for long-range reconnaissance missions and for sabotage or assassinations. These missions remain, but these operations are adapting. In Syria, Spetsnaz forces reportedly operated without going past the frontline due to new reconnaissance and weapon systems. Spetsnaz

28 Aleksey Ramm, "Мы здесь в командировке: А они уже шесть лет воюют [We Are Here on a TDY: But They Have Already Been Fighting for Six Years]," *Izvestiya*, October 24, 2017, <https://iz.ru/648658/aleksei-ramm/my-zdes-v-komandirovke-oni-uzhe-shest-let-voiuut>; and Roman Kretsul and Aleksey Ramm, "Боевые преграды: как сирийская операция изменила разведку [Combat Obstacles: How the Syrian Campaign Changed Reconnaissance]," *Izvestiya*, October 24, 2018, <https://iz.ru/803382/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm/boevye-pregrady-kak-siriiskaia-operatsiia-izmenila-razvedku>.

actions do not follow a model or template, but are planned for the specific situation. Transport vehicles, such as the Tigr armored motor vehicle, transport a team of four to the frontline and conduct limited actions using heavy weaponry, antitank guided missiles, and automatic grenade launchers. Using several Tigr or all-terrain vehicles simultaneously can soften up a frontline and stress an enemy force. Team members usually have a reconnaissance specialist, a forward observer, and a sniper pair. Some members have foreign language skills. The Syrian Desert makes ambush tactics difficult to conduct but increases the value of UAVs, which can fly deep into an enemy's rear area, accelerating detection time and the guidance of artillery and aviation strikes.²⁹

in combat operations. At least two, 2-man sniper teams were in an advance party to reconnoiter a potential meeting area for Turkish and Syrian military leaders on Turkish-Syrian Border, near Kasab. Major Ruslan Gimadiyev and Captain Dmitriy Minov from the TsSN "K" Directorate (unit focusing on the Caucasus) and Major Bulat Akhmatyanov and Lieutenant Vsevolod Trofimov from the TsSN "S" Directorate (counterterrorism unit) were killed in an ambush while returning from the mission. This was at least the second short-term rotation for the two sniper teams, as the Russian media mentioned that the teams had provided security for President Vladimir Putin's January 2020 visit to Syria. Anecdotal information gleaned regarding Russian Special Operations Forces and assets in the various security services and ministries indicates that they are being rotated through Syria for the same reasons the conventional forces are: to support Russian national interests in the region and gain valuable combat experience.³⁰


The February 1, 2020 high-profile deaths of four Russian snipers in Syria also sheds some light on Russian SOF activities, and the Russian media has reported that the FSB Spetsnaz Center (TsSN FSB) has personnel in Syria on a rotational basis, actively engaged

29 Timothy Thomas, "Russian Combat Capabilities for 2020: Three Developments to Track," occasional paper of the Mitre Corporation, December 2019, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Legacy-Articles/documents/Thomas-Russian-Combat-Capabilities.pdf>.

30 Irek Murtazin, "Их добивали, стреляя в упор: В гибели четырех офицеров спецназа ФСБ в Сирии не обошлось без предательства [They Killed Them, While Shooting Them at Point Blank Range. Betrayal Played a Hand in the Deaths of Four FSB Spetsnaz Officers in Syria]," *Novaya Gazeta*, February 4, 2020, <https://iz.ru/648658/aleksei-ramm/my-zdes-v-komandirovke-oni-uzhe-shest-let-voiuiut>.

CONCLUSION

The Russian ground-based contingent in Syria has accomplished several goals. First, it sharpened the regional knowledge and expertise in the Russian military, especially the officer corps. Russian officers gained valuable experience serving with local forces as advisers, artillery planners, on-site engineers, logisticians, communicators, trainers, and special operations forces. Second, Syria provides combat experience to Russian military professionals. Russia's rotation of entire battalion and higher staffs into Syria provides an excellent way to expand their proficiency and test ways to improve their military decision making, intelligence analysis, terrain appreciation, and ability to work with allies and private military companies. Alongside the Ground Forces, Airborne and Naval Infantry elites and spetsnaz forces develop their tactical skills and improve interoperability in a very real environment. Russian engineers get to experience bridge-building under fire, mine removal, field fortification construction, field water purification, and on-site topographical work. The Syrian experience trains Russian professionals in regional tactics, urban combat, and tunnel warfare. Spetsnaz sharpen their skills in an actual environment. Third, Syria provides an opportunity to combat test a wide variety of Russian military equipment. Not only does this help with improving and testing this equipment and the techniques of its employment, but it also is an advertisement for future military sales.

One of the major lessons that the Russians relearned is that conflicts cannot be won by airpower alone. The recipients of air attack develop work-arounds and counters. Russia entered the conflict intending to primarily provide air support. Like Britain and the United States in World War II and the United States in South Vietnam and Afghanistan, Russia eventually realized that airpower alone is insufficient. Ground and naval support proved essential. While Russian military support to Syria has proved expensive and difficult to withdraw, Russian Ground Forces have, nevertheless, improved their expertise in many areas. 

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