

Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict



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- With Jacques Berlinerblau and Aurora Nou: *Secularism on the Edge: Church-State Relations in the U.S., France, and Israel*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Abstract

Syria represents the first battlefield in which the Russian Federation has, in a coordinated manner and on a large military scale, deployed and activated a contingent of expeditionary forces. Meanwhile Russia has coordinated its "command and control" system with a network of auxiliary forces—consisting primarily of Bashar al-Assad's armed forces, with support from Shia militias affiliated to Iran—which Moscow has provided with military assistance, training and equipment. Previously deployed during the two Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2009), the brief conflict with Georgia (August 2008) and the crisis in Ukraine (since February 2014), Russia's expeditionary forces have been tested and perfected in the Syrian theatre. Deriving from a new military doctrine and the reorganization of the armed forces, Russia's new involvement model, as implemented and honed on the Syrian frontlines, may further boost Russia's offensive and deterrence capabilities, both in its "near abroad" and in any operation it may undertake beyond its immediate zone of influence.

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Introduction

Russia's surprise military intervention in Syria, launched on 30 September 2015, drew attention primarily to the strategic objectives pursued by Moscow. The debate also focused on the potential impact of this military operation on Russia's relations with the different global and regional stakeholders involved, to varying degrees, in Syria: the US, above all, as well as Iran, Turkey, the Gulf States, Egypt and Israel. Still others examined the changing nature of Russian military might with regards to the projection of force and the exhibition of Russia's modernised military equipment in Syria. In a span of a few weeks, Russia managed to tilt the balance of forces in the Syrian theatre in favour of the Assad regime, despite its relatively limited military resources, consisting of several dozen combat aircraft, a new air base at Khmeimim, in Latakia province, combined with the naval support facility at Tartus, and the deployment of the S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air defence systems.

Beyond speculations about Russia's strategic aims in Syria, the durability of its alliances and the changing nature of Russia's military power, what has been Moscow's specific *modus operandi* on the Syrian ground? This article focuses on a lesser-explored aspect of Russia's intervention in Syria: the new and diverse expeditionary forces engaged on the Syrian frontlines alongside Russian regular armed forces—the Aerospace Forces (VKS) and the Navy. Syria represents the first battlefield in which the Russian Federation has, in a coordinated manner and on a large military scale, deployed and activated a contingent of expeditionary forces including the new Special Operations Forces (SSO) and different categories of special forces (*Spetsnaz*); the newly created military police; military advisers and technicians; as well as "volunteers", "contractors" (*kontraktniki*) and other paramilitaries working on behalf of private military companies (PMCs). Among them were veterans from the two Chechen wars and the Georgian and Ukrainian conflicts, as well as a significant number of Sunni Muslim fighters from the North Caucasus, primarily from the armed forces of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of the Chechen Republic. Some forces were discreetly deployed in Syria as early

as July 2015, two months before Russia's official entry into the Syrian conflict. With the intensification of Russia's military presence in Syria in late August/early September 2015, the number of Russian troops on the ground grew incrementally.

In contrast with previous military operations in the North Caucasus and Georgia, and in the aftermath of its swift seizure of Crimea, Russia has tightly supervised and coordinated its contingent of expeditionary forces in Syria, testing and upgrading a new involvement model that might be employed in any future "near abroad" or foreign operation. This complex of expeditionary forces joined a larger "command and control" network, that enabled Russia to articulate its military actions with those of its allies in Syria, whom Russia has provided with assistance, equipment and training.

How central is the use of force in Russia's new military doctrine?

The "New Generation Warfare"

The deployment of expeditionary forces in Syria alongside the regular forces of the Aerospace and Navy is integral to Russia's new concept of warfare and reflects the latest and ongoing restructuring of the Russian Federation's Armed Forces. Framed as "new generation warfare" (or "non-linear war"), Russia's new concept of war, like Western military doctrines, favours the use of special and mobile intervention forces. In a landmark article signed in 2013 by Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Army, combat units assigned to special operations (or missions) were given a crucial role in light of the "new rules of warfare in the 21st century".¹ Since the distinction between "peacetime" and "wartime" has become blurred, states' military operations need to be more flexible, rapid, specific and targeted. Consequently, the role of "non-military measures", including "the widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other measures", has grown considerably, whereas "frontal engagements between large formations of forces" belong to the past. According to Gerasimov, the art of war increasingly involves the use of "hidden" military resources; thus, states wishing to conceal or disavow their military presence in a theatre of operations tend to make greater use of special intervention forces.

The boosted use of "special operations forces" and "special purpose forces" also illustrates Russia's shift toward a new warfare economy: the use of limited or minimal military means that can generate a maximum military and diplomatic effect. In Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015), Russia embraced quite a minimalist warfare approach by maintaining a small density of ground forces, and training and equipping

1. V. Gerasimov, "Novye vyzovy trebuiut pereosmysleniia form i sposobov vedeniia boevykh dejstvij" [New challenges demand rethinking the forms and methods of carrying out combat operations], *Voenna-Promyshlennij Kur'er (VPK)*, No. 8 (476), 27 February-5 March 2013, <http://vpk-news.ru>.

proxies on the ground as an available and highly efficient extended military network and as an amplifier of conventional military strength. The use of special forces also serves as a palliative to the deficiencies and dysfunctions of the regular army. The hybrid nature of Russia's new warfare also lies behind its new ratio of non-military to military measures: 4:1.² While non-military measures, including information warfare, cyber warfare, and propaganda, represent the greatest value (4), military measures and the use of kinetic force (1) assume an ancillary position, accounting for only one fifth of Russia's warfare efforts and tapped in certain stages of conflict, primarily to achieve success in its final stage.³

The *Spetsnaz*

Russia's new warfare approach was mirrored by organizational reforms in the Russian Federation's Armed Forces. Since Vladimir Putin came to power, the different "special operation forces" and "special purpose forces" have multiplied within the Russian security complex (*silovye struktury*).⁴ These forces have their origins in the "first independent reconnaissance special assignment companies" created in 1949 and the first *Spetsnaz* battalions established in 1957. The different *Spetsnaz* groups formed the elite Soviet military intelligence unit (the GRU) during the Cold War. In post-Soviet Russia, the term *Spetsnaz* became widely used beyond the field of military intelligence, referring to any elite force (or regular military force assigned special tasks) operating on behalf of the security complex or "security structures" of the Russian Federation.

In the 1990s and up to the second half of the 2000s, the *Spetsnaz* received increasing privileges and prestige, since they were seen as provisionally liable to compensate for the structural deficiencies of the regular armed forces. In Russia (as in other post-Soviet countries), the term *Spetsnaz* has since then been used to refer to different special units within various governmental organisations and military structures, including the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), the Ministries of

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. Though referred to using the generic term "*Spetsnaz*", the "special operations forces" (*sily spetsial'nykh operatsij*) and "special assignment troops" (*Vojska spetsial'nogo naznachenii*, specifically referred to by the abbreviation "*Spetsnaz*") are not equivalent or interchangeable. Similarly, the term "*Spetsnaz*" cannot be limited to its western (particularly American) meaning of "special operations forces" (SOF) or "special forces" (SF). In this regard, see R. Pukhov and C. Marsh (ed.), *Elite Warriors: Special Operations Forces from Around the World*, Minnetonka, MN, East View Press, 2017. See also C. Schofield, *The Russian Elite: Inside Spetsnaz and the Airborne Forces*, London, Greenhill, 1993.

Justice and Interior, the security forces of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the police and the armed forces. Subsequently, "special operations forces" and "special purpose forces" were put back in the spotlight and professionalised under Anatoliy Serdyukov, the former Minister of Defence (2007-2012), who initiated a wide-reaching program of military reform. One of the main objectives of these reforms was to improve the level of organization and coordination across the different organizations of the Russian security complex. The special forces in particular seemed to be too fragmented and disorganized to defend Russia's interests, both within and beyond its borders. The idea of bringing the mobile intervention forces together—within a single structure and under a sole command—had already emerged in the Soviet period, during the war in Afghanistan, but the project had been abandoned due to opposition from the GRU. The project re-emerged, however, following the two wars in Chechnya, which revealed a critical lack of coordination between conscripts, military personnel and other Russian intervention forces on the ground.⁵ Partially inspired by the American example of a unique special forces command system (the US Special Operations Command, created in 1987), Russia set up in 2009 an integrated and streamlined command structure for its special forces, the Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (SSO VS RF). These forces became operational in 2013, under Sergey Shoygu, who replaced the reformer Serdyukov as Minister of Defence in 2012.

While the *Spetsnaz* were made up of distinct and separate elite units, the SSO VS RF are now an integrated and coordinated military group, designed to carry out special missions both within and beyond Russian borders.⁶ They are headed by the Special Operations Forces Command (*Komandovanie SSO*), which is placed under the direct authority of the Chief of the General Staff of the Army. Since their creation, the SSO have benefited from elite training aimed at improving their operational effectiveness. They have been involved in "anti-terrorist operations" in the North Caucasus, the annexation of Crimea (the famous "little green men"), and the military intervention in Syria.

5. "Sily spetsial'nykh operatsij RF. Sozdanie, stanovlenie, rabota" [The Special Operations Forces of the Russian Federation. Establishment, training, functioning], *Voennyj Obozrevatel'*, 2 February 2017, www.militarycolumnist.ru.

6. *Ibid.*

From Ukraine to Syria: itineraries and profiles of Russia's "Men of War"

Special features of the Russian operation in Syria

Russia's military intervention in Syria has several distinguishing characteristics. Firstly, since the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989), it is the first Russian military operation outside the post-Soviet space. In Syria, Russia has activated its armed forces beyond its "near abroad", positioning itself as a global military power, rather than solely as a guarantor of the regional order. Initially excluded from the anti-Islamic State (IS) international coalition led by the US, and having failed to rally an alternative anti-terrorist coalition with global and regional stakeholders, Russia set up its own network of military and diplomatic alliances in Syria. Moscow established a military partnership with the Assad regime, Iran and their proxies, with Russia providing the bulk of aerial resources and delegating most of the ground fighting (and therefore human casualties) to the Assad regime and Iran.

On the diplomatic front, Russia took centre stage as arbiter of peace negotiations over the future of Syria. Leveraging America's perceived withdrawal from the Syrian frontlines, Moscow swiftly repositioned itself as a key player in the Geneva peace talks. Meanwhile Russia reached a diplomatic breakthrough in late December 2016 by initiating a new tripartite negotiations platform on Syria (known as the Astana format) with Tehran and Ankara, as a parallel and rival platform to western negotiations. The Russia-Iran-Turkey summit in Sochi on November 22, 2017, marked by the palpable absence of the US, enshrined Russia's diplomatic centrality in Syria and positioned the tripartite format of Astana as the leader of the peace negotiations on Syria.

In addition, the deployment of Russian troops in Syria is official. Even if Moscow initially declined to disclose the number, missions and losses of troops engaged there, it has publicly praised its combatants in Syria on numerous occasions. After a presidential decree was issued in 2015 declaring 27 February to be "Russian Special Forces Day", the Ministry of

Defence broadcast a series of video clips celebrating the professionalism, combativeness and operational performance of Russian special forces in Syria.⁷ Unlike the operations in Georgia and Ukraine, the Syrian arena also serves as a vast "military training camp" for Russia. On the one hand, it allows it to exhibit and experiment with the most cutting-edge military equipment the Russian military-industrial complex (MIC) has to offer. On the other hand, as President Putin acknowledged in late December 2015, Syria constitutes a vast training ground for Russia's elite forces. They can practice a wide range of exercises there, from intelligence gathering to anti-terrorist operations, without adding any financial burden to Russia's already strained defence budget.⁸

Moreover, Russia's military intervention is not, strictly speaking, a boots-on-the-ground operation. It has primarily been an aerial operation, since Moscow did not intend to engage its ground forces and armoured troops in frontal combat and assault operations. More specifically, its strategy has consisted of imposing itself as an arbiter in the Syrian air space—such as through the deployment of the S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air defence systems—and as a key actor in pro-regime aerial operations. Meanwhile Russia has combined its regular armed forces (mainly aerospace, but also naval forces) with its mobile intervention forces, whilst simultaneously joining a network of local forces, essentially made of Assad's regular army and Shiite militias controlled remotely by Iran (Hezbollah forces in particular). The "delegation" of ground fighting to local forces has also provided Russia with an advantage in domestic politics: unlike in the wars in Chechnya, which traumatized public opinion due to the scale of human losses, the Syrian conflict has yielded relatively few victims among Russian regular forces (34 men are believed to have been killed between September 2015 and May 2017),⁹ which may have prevented the emergence of grassroots protests in the spirit of the "Soldiers' Mothers of Russia" civic movement. By contrast with the Chechen wars and the Ukrainian crisis, Russian public interest in the

7. Video clip of Russian special operations forces in Syria, posted online on 28 February 2017, www.youtube.com.

8. During an interview given to the television channel *Rossia 24* in late December 2015, President Putin made the following statement: "It is hard to imagine better training. We can train over there [in Syria] without it seriously affecting our budget. See "Putin o Sirii: my mozhem dolgo trenirovat'sia" [Putin on Syria: we can train for a long time], *Rossia 24*, video posted online on 24 December 2015, www.youtube.com.

9. "Spisok pogibshikh rossiian s nachala kampanii VKS v Sirii" [The list of Russians killed in combat in Syria since the beginning of the military campaign], *RBK*, 3 May 2017, www.rbc.ru.

Syrian operation has been low: one year after it began, fewer than one fifth of Russians were regularly following the evolution of the conflict.¹⁰

From denial to acknowledgment

Officially, Russia deployed only air and naval forces and a contingent of military "advisers" and "instructors", at the request of the Syrian regime. Moscow initially "omitted" to mention any other form of military presence on Syrian soil. In May 2015, Vladimir Putin had the Supreme Court ratify a decree classifying as state secrets any information on military damage and losses suffered, not only in "wartime" (as had been the custom since 1995), but also in "peacetime".¹¹ However, the reality of the presence of Russian forces in Syria became clear in summer 2015, with the geolocation of soldiers by the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) web platform¹² (the CIT used photos of troops and maps to refute the official line, according to which Russia was involved only in aerial operations and was not taking part in ground combat). In parallel, social networks (particularly VKontakte and Instagram) shared photos of Russian soldiers leaving for Syria as of August 2015.

When victims' loved ones began to share this information on social media and in the press, the Ministry of Defence was forced to acknowledge the reality of the losses, particularly among the expeditionary forces. The first official confirmation of the presence of Russian special forces in Syria came with the death of Alexander Prokhorenko, a member of the special forces who was killed on 17 March 2016 during the Russo-Syrian assault on Palmyra. Other examples include Sergeant Mikhail Shirokopoyas, a 35-year-old "contract soldier" (*kontraktnik*) engaged in April 2016, who was injured in a mine explosion in early May in Aleppo province, before dying in a Moscow military hospital two months later. After arranging the

10. See the survey and infographic produced by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM): "Vojna v Sirii: God Spustia" [The war in Syria: one year on], VTsIOM, 28 September 2016, <https://infographics.wciom.ru>.

11. This piece of legislation has a broad scope of application, since its introduction meant that not just deaths and injuries, but also soldiers' psychological state (including cases of depression), became classified. See P. Khimshiashvili and A. Filipionok, "Putin zasekretit dannye o pogibshikh voennykh v mirnoe vremia" [Putin classifies data on military losses in peacetime], *RBK*, 28 May 2015, www.rbc.ru.

12. Conflict Intelligence Team is an anti-regime electronic platform set up by a group of Russian bloggers in May 2014, with the initial aim of documenting Russia's military activities in Ukraine. See their website: <https://citeam.org>.

deletion of information about his death that had appeared in the local press, the Ministry of Defence finally acknowledged it in June 2016.¹³

After an amateur video clip revealed the deployment of some 100 members of the military police from Chechnya to Syria in December 2016,¹⁴ Ramzan Kadyrov published a denial on his Instagram page, whilst declaring that he was prepared to deploy his men in Syria if ordered to do so by Vladimir Putin. In January 2017, however, Kadyrov admitted that a military police battalion made up of Chechen troops had in fact been deployed in Syria along with the Russian Ministry of Defence forces.

Moscow also kept the name of the commander of the Russian contingent in Syria secret for a long time, as well as those of the air force commanders in charge of the base at Khmeimim. The identity of the first commander of the "group of Russian forces" in Syria, Colonel General Aleksandr Dvornikov, was therefore not revealed to the public until early 2016, when he was awarded the title of "Hero of the Russian Federation",¹⁵ several months after his appointment by President Putin.

Military personnel of varying categories and profiles

The Russian forces deployed in Syria can be divided into two broad categories: regular troops, comprising mainly the air force, and a contingent of expeditionary forces. Open sources reveal relatively little information about the Russian men of war in Syria. However, cross-referencing Russian official sources and unofficial ones enables to sketch out the broad lines of their itineraries and profiles. These sources include the "Air Force Group in Syria" and "Bulletin of the Russian Defence Ministry on Ceasefire Observation" sections of the website of the Russian Ministry of Defence,¹⁶ the Syrian pro-Assad newspaper *Al-Masdar*, the

13. S. Osipov, "V Minoborony RF podtverdili gibel' kontraktnika, ranenogo v Sirii" [Russian Ministry of Defense confirms death of contract soldier injured in Syria], *Argumenty i Fakty*, 17 June 2016, www.aif.ru.

14. "Syria War Report, December 8, 2016: Russia Deploys Military Police to Syria", South Front Analysis Intelligence, 8 December 2016, <https://southfront.org>.

15. T. Ripley, "Increasing Thrust", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 2017, p. 27.

16. See "Air Force Group in Syria", <http://syria.mil.ru> and "Bulletin of the Russian Defense Ministry On Ceasefire Observation", <http://eng.mil.ru>.

Instagram account of Ramzan Kadyrov,¹⁷ and a series of published reports and reportages.

From these sources, several categories of military personnel deployed in Syria can be identified:

- The regular armed forces: the Aerospace Defence Forces (VKS), the naval infantry (particularly the 810th Separate Marine Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet) and the artillery, including the soldiers of the 120th Separate Artillery Brigade, whose presence in Syria was reported on social media in early 2016 and confirmed by several medal award ceremonies broadcast by Russian television.¹⁸ Many fighters identified in Syria had previously served in Ukraine (Crimea for the SSO and eastern Ukraine for the "volunteers"), and some seem to have been transferred directly from Ukraine to Syria.¹⁹
- The expeditionary forces, which include several sub-categories of personnel. The first sub-category consists of "special operations forces" (SSO) and "special purpose forces".²⁰ Under the direct authority of the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian army, the Special Operations Forces Command (SSO) incorporates and coordinates a range of special operations forces and special purpose forces. The presence of SSO men in Syria became known when Captain Fyodor Zhuravlyov, a 27-year-old SSO fighter, was killed on the front on 9 November 2015. The young captain was posthumously promoted to the rank of officer by Vladimir Putin on 8 December 2015,²¹ and his death was made official in March 2016.²²
- The *Spetsnaz* to have been seen in Syria include the GRU-*Spetsnaz*, the SVR-*Spetsnaz*, the FSB-*Spetsnaz* and the 431st Naval Reconnaissance Brigade. The SVR's Zaslou force is believed to have been present in

17. Instagram page of Ramzan Kadyrov: www.instagram.com.

18. See, for example, the awarding of the "Participant of the Military Operation in Syria" medal to Sergei Turkanov, pursuant to a decree of the Russian Ministry of Defense of 6 March 2016, www.youtube.com.

19. Vasgri, "Syrian Mission of Russian 120th Artillery Brigade", Inform Napalm, 25 January 2017, <https://informnapalm.org>.

20. R. Leviev, "Gibel' bojtsov spetsnaza SSO v Sirii" [The death of *Spetsnaz* SSO fighters in Syria], Conflict Intelligence Team, 26 November 2015, <https://citeam.org>.

21. "Kapitan Fiodor Zhuravliov: shkol'nyj lider i ljubimets devochek stal ofitserom" [Captain Fyodor Zhuravlyov: top of the class and girls' pin-up becomes an officer], *RIA Novosti*, 29 September 2016, <https://ria.ru>.

22. *Ibid.*

Syria in the summer of 2015²³.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, the main missions of the combat units assigned to special assignments consist of ground reconnaissance operations and combat intelligence gathering. They also include real-time guidance of air and artillery strikes, primarily based on information provided by the Syrian army. They are tasked with protecting the air base at Khmeimim, in Latakia province, and the naval facility at Tartus, as well as carrying out assault operations aimed at tipping the balance of forces in favour of the regime troops. Thus, at the Battle of Aleppo in December 2016 and during the second Palmyra offensive (13 January–4 March 2017), Russian SSO are believed to have been mobilized to fight several groups of jihadist militants and to have coordinated their operations with the Russian air force. The role of the SSO in assault and combat operations was made official in February 2017, when Sergey Shoygu praised their "high efficiency in Syria".²⁴

What is the scale of Russian special forces in Syria? Open sources do not provide a precise figure. According to some estimates, the *Spetsnaz* of different units had between 230 and 250 men in Syria at the peak of their deployment.²⁵

The second sub-category of emissary forces comprises units or battalions of the "Military Police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" (VP VS RF), a law enforcement structure based on the American model, which was created on 1 December 2011 and placed under the authority of the Ministry of Defence. A battalion of the Russian "military police", comprising some of Ramzan Kadyrov's fighters, was transferred from Chechnya to Syria in winter 2016, to help recapture the city of Aleppo. There are thought to have been between 300 and 500 Chechens in Syria in the first few months of 2017.²⁶ The Ingush, who joined this battalion in February 2017, are believed to number around 300

23. M. Galeotti, "The Three Faces of Russian Spetsnaz in Syria", War on the Rocks, 21 March 2016, <https://warontherocks.com>.

24. "Defense Chief Praises Russian Military's Success in Syria", 22 February 2017, ITAR-TASS, <http://tass.com>.

25. M. Galeotti, "The Three Faces of Russian Spetsnaz in Syria", *op. cit.* [23].

26. "Siloviki zaiavili ob otpravke 500 voyennykh iz Chechni v Siriiu" [The siloviki announced the deployment of 500 Chechen soldiers in Syria], Kavkazskij Uzel, 9 December 2016, www.kavkaz-uzel.eu. "Kreml' udvoil voennuiu politsiiu v Sirii ingushami?" [Has the Kremlin doubled the size of its military police in Syria with the Ingush?], Kavkaz.Realii, 14 February 2017, www.kavkazr.com.

to 400 men.²⁷ The Russian military police has been assigned a central and wide-ranging role in the Syrian theatre; in the words of *Sputnik*, Russian military police units have carried out "vital missions" in Syria.²⁸ In addition to protecting the security of Russian military personnel (particularly within the aerospace forces), the members of the military police (commonly known as "red berets") are also believed to carry out peace keeping missions, which involve protecting Russian checkpoints and command posts, keeping Syrian civilians safe during the distribution of humanitarian aid by the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides, and protecting Russian journalists dispatched on the ground by the Information Department of the Russian Ministry of Defence, as well as accompanying convoys and protecting Russian mine disposal experts. The military police have also been engaged in training special units of Syria's *mukhabarat* (the military intelligence service).²⁹ They have simultaneously coordinated the defence of pro-government bastions together with regime forces³⁰ and, when required, acted as an elite anti-terrorist force, countering, with the help of Syrian government special forces and Russian SSO, attacks by different Islamist groups, such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.³¹ Lastly, since May 2017, the Russian military police has acted as guarantor of the "security zones"—also designated "de-escalation zones"—announced in May 2017 in a memorandum signed by Russia, Iran and Turkey (following a meeting in Astana on 15 September 2017, a new de-escalation zone was created in Syria's Idlib province, taking the total number of such zones to four; the creation of a fifth zone was discussed during that meeting). The first agreement on the security zones led to additional

27. N. Hauer, "Putin Has a New Secret Weapon in Syria: Chechens", *Foreign Policy*, 4 May 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

28. A. Ramm, "Za kazhdym nashim shagom sledili inostrannye zhurnalisty. Rossijskij voennyj politsejskij – ob Aleppo, gumanitarnoj missii i podgotovgoj sirijskikh spetsnazovtsev" [Foreign journalists were following our every step. A Russian military policeman talks about Aleppo, pursuing the humanitarian mission and training Syrian special forces], *Izvestiia*, 13 July 2017, <http://iz.ru>.

29. The training of the *mukhabarat* is believed to have been carried out by a special unit of the Russian military police in Syria.

30. "Voennaia politsiia iz Chechni dlia okhrany bazy v Sirii okazalas' pereodetym spetsnazom" [The Chechen military police defending bases in Syria turn out to be special forces], RuPosters, 8 December 2016, <https://ruposters.ru>.

31. The Russian press, in particular, covered an incident illustrating the bravery of 29 members of the country's military police, who were attacked by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham troops on 20 September 2017 in Idlib province. See in particular: T. Moiseeva, "Opublikovany kadry posledstsvij obstrela voennoj politsii RF v Sirii" [Images of the consequences of the attack against the military police of the Russian Federation in Syria], TV Zvezda, 22 September 2017, <https://tvzvezda.ru>.

deployments of Russian military police in Syria during May 2017.³² On 7 July 2017, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced that Russia's military police would be deployed in the "de-escalation zone" created in south-western Syria following a memorandum signed between Russia, Jordan and the US that very day in Amman.³³ In order to guarantee the ceasefire decreed by the memorandum, on 21 and 22 July 2017, Russian military police units deployed two checkpoints and ten observation posts close to the de-escalation zone in question. According to an official Russian source, one of the observation posts was established 13km away from the Israeli-Syrian border, on the Golan Heights.³⁴

The third sub-category of expeditionary forces comprises military advisers, technicians (particularly mine disposal experts), engineers and military doctors. On 16 March 2017, a detachment of the Russian Armed Forces International Mine Action Centre arrived in Palmyra and began a mine clearing operation across the city's historic sites. On 17 March, there were more than 150 specialists and 17 special equipment units in Syria.³⁵ Other ground forces included military doctors. In January 2017, medical specialists from the Central Military District had provided medical assistance and humanitarian aid to more than 5,000 civilians.³⁶

Several sources indicate the presence in Syria of Russian "volunteers" who are in the country unofficially. Nevertheless, these men have, with the utmost discretion, been awarded posthumous medals or decorations, including the Order of Courage, as well as funeral wreaths provided by "security agents".³⁷ Some of them appear to belong to groups of private soldiers (employed by private military companies, whose existence is forbidden under Russian law). According to Fontanka, a Russian

32. "Russia to Deploy Military Police in Safe Zones in Syria", FarsNews, 4 May 2017, <http://en.farsnews.com>.

33. Sergey Lavrov stated: "The security around the de-escalation zone will initially be provided by Russia's military police, in coordination with the Americans and the Jordanians". See "Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's responses to the press following the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and American President Donald Trump on the margins of the G20 summit, Hamburg, 7 July 2017", Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 7 July 2017, www.mid.ru.

34. "Briefing of the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Russian General Staff, Colonel General Sergey Rudskoy", Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, 24 July 2017, www.youtube.com.

35. "Detachment of the International Mine Action Centre has arrived in Palmyra for mine-clearing operation", Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, 16 March 2017, <http://syria.mil.ru>.

36. "Russian Military Physicians Came Back from Syria", Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, <http://syria.mil.ru>.

37. R. Leviev, "They Fought For Palmyra... Again. Russian Mercenaries Killed in Battle with ISIS", Conflict Intelligence Team, 22 March 2017, <https://citeam.org>.

investigative website, battalions of Russian mercenaries were deployed in Syria two years before the campaign was officially launched.³⁸ A first Russian private military company (registered in Hong Kong), the Slavonic Corps (*Slavyanskij korpus*), is believed to have been deployed in Syria in 2013, with the mission of protecting Bashar al-Assad and Syria's oil facilities. Some of its members are thought to have joined rebel groups in Syria, resulting in the recall of the unit to Russia and the conviction of its leaders under Article 348 of the Russian Criminal Code, which outlaws mercenary service.

The Slavonic Corps was succeeded in Syria by another private military company, the Wagner Group, which was created in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin. A former *Spetsnaz* with close ties to neo-Nazi circles, Utkin is better known under his *nom de guerre*, "Wagner". In June 2017, he was added to the US Treasury's list of individuals subject to sanctions for his "actions in Ukraine".³⁹ The Wagner Group is believed to be registered in Argentina, but has its training camp located at the Molkino base in Russia, which is home to the 10th Brigade of the special forces of the GRU. Those elements may suggest that there have been contacts between the Wagner Group, the GRU and the Ministry of Defence.⁴⁰ Fontanka reports that the group was in Crimea in May 2014, then in Luhansk (in the Donbass), and later in Syria, from October 2015 onwards. Dmitry Utkin was reportedly decorated for his action, being awarded the Order of Courage at the Kremlin on 12 December 2016.⁴¹ Some of the Russian "mercenaries" in Syria claim to be veterans of Afghanistan or of the civil war in Tajikistan. Most are thought to have served in elite units of the Russian Air Force, Navy or infantry⁴² and fought in Chechnya and the Donbass.

One such fighter is Alexei Nainodin, a member of the 101st Brigade of the Wagner Group. According to information gleaned from various social networks, Nainodin served in the two Chechen wars, where he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He is also believed to have fought in eastern Ukraine before moving on to Syria, where it is thought he

38. D. Korotkov, "Oni srazhalis' za Pal'miru" [They fought for Palmyra], Fontanka, 29 March 2016, www.fontanka.ru.

39. "Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Involved in the Ongoing Conflict in Ukraine", US Treasury Department, 20 June 2017, www.treasury.gov.

40. M. Tsvetkova and A. Zverev, "Ghost Soldiers: The Russians Secretly Dying for the Kremlin in Syria", Reuters, 3 November 2016, www.reuters.com.

41. D. Korotkov, "Vagner v Kremle", Fontanka, 12 December 2016, www.fontanka.ru.

42. In terms of the training of its members, the Wagner Group strongly resembles the American group Blackwater, later renamed Academi.

died on 31 January (or 1 February) 2017.⁴³ Men from the Wagner Group are thought to have been involved in the battles of Palmyra in March 2016 and winter 2017, where, according to the death notices circulating on social media, they suffered several losses.⁴⁴

According to several Russian sources, the "volunteers" and members of private military companies working for the Syrian government include the "Spetsnaz of the USSR". Deployed in Syria in April 2017 and numbering between 800 and 1,200 men⁴⁵, it is believed to be made up of Muslim and Turkish-speaking "volunteers" from the North Caucasus, the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Central Asia.⁴⁶ It reportedly includes the Muslim Turan battalion, which is thought to be based in the outskirts of Hama.⁴⁷ The deployment of the "Spetsnaz of the USSR" also involves an aspect of psychological warfare: it is intended to show the Islamist fighters and Syrian rebels that the Muslims from the post-Soviet region are their enemies.⁴⁸

How many Russian troops are there in Syria?

Unofficial estimates vary, partly due to the frequent rotation of Russian troops between Russia and Syria. In November 2015, American sources observed that the number of Russian soldiers in Syria had doubled, rising from 2,000 to 4,000 men since the beginning of the military intervention. According to Qatari newspaper *The New Arab*, between 1 September 2015 and 31 October 2015, Russia deployed around 8,000 soldiers in Syria—a figure that is likely to have been deliberately exaggerated due to the paper's resolutely anti-Assad line.⁴⁹ In September 2016, during the Russian

43. R. Leviev, "They Fought For Palmyra... Again. Russian Mercenaries Killed in Battle with ISIS", *op. cit.* [37].

44. D. Korotkov, "Oni srazhalis' za Pal'miru", *op. cit.* [38].

45. I. Sinchougova, "All for One and One for All: 'USSR Spetsnaz' Arrive in Syria", Fort Russ News, 18 April 2017, www.fort-russ.com.

46. The deployment of the USSR *Spetsnaz* was even mentioned by the Russian press in May 2017, see R. Melnikov, "Video: V Sirii protiv terroristov vystupil 'spetsnaz iz SSSR'" [Video: "USSR Spetsnaz" fight terrorists in Syria], *Rossijskaia Gazeta*, 3 May 2017, <https://rg.ru>. See also I. Sinchougova, *op. cit.* [45].

47. A. Jules, "Syria.Video: Russian special forces infiltrate Al-Qaeda stronghold in northern Hama", Mamafrika.tv, 2 May 2017, www.mamafrika.tv.

48. O. Soloviov, "V Sirii nachal 'rabotu' kontrpartizanskij 'Spetsnaz iz SSSR'" [The counter-insurgency "USSR Spetsnaz" has started "work" in Syria], Free News, 17 April 2017, <http://free-news.su>.

49. The Al-Araby Al-Jadeed website reports that 36 Russian warships crossed the Bosphorus Strait between 15 September and October 2015. More than 70% of the ships are believed to have

legislative elections, statistics from Russia's Central Election Commission provided a more reliable glimpse of the presence of Russian troops in Syria: 4,571 Russian citizens voted in Syria, with 193 votes cast in the city of Damascus and 4,378 being collected from mobile ballot boxes at other sites in the country (according to an official Russian source, all Russian military personnel voted in Syria).⁵⁰

However, these figures reflect only the presence of regular forces on the ground. According to DEBKAfile, an intelligence website, some 2,000 Russian "mercenaries" travelled to Syria in summer 2017, supposedly bringing the number of Wagner Group fighters on the Syrian frontlines to 5,000 as of summer 2017.⁵¹

Naturally, figures relating to Russian troops in Syria are not static: they fluctuate due to the partial withdrawal of Russian troops, such as those announced by President Putin in March 2016, as well as in January and December 2017. These announcements result partly from a communication strategy, since each one gives the impression that a chapter of the Syrian campaign is closing—if not the Syrian campaign altogether—, whilst also highlighting Moscow's military and diplomatic gains. They also suggest the image of a rational and gradual military operation that forms part of a coherent long-term strategy. In terms of domestic policy, winning the "war of images" is crucial, since the Syrian operation is weighing on Russia's budget.⁵² Between September 2015 and March 2017, it is believed to have cost Russia approximately €830 million.⁵³ Moreover, the daily cost of the Syrian operation is thought to have increased by 50% during that period.⁵⁴

transported military troops and equipment. See A. Hamza and Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, "Russia's War for Assad: Military Assistance in Numbers", *The New Arab*, 19 November 2015, www.alaraby.co.uk.

50. "Media: Elections Stats Disclosed Russia's Manpower in Syria", *Mil.Today*, 23 September 2016, <http://mil.today>.

51. "Russia Builds a Syrian Spetsnaz, is Taking over Iran's Shiite Militias", *DEBKAfile*, 3 August 2017, www.debka.com.

52. In the short term, this budget will probably not have an impact on the Russian economy. Nevertheless, the cost of the operation would become problematic if Russia's military presence in Syria were to remain—or be reinforced—in the medium-to-long term.

53. "Rossiia mogla potratit' na operatsiu v Sirii okolo 38 mlrd. rub." [Russia may have spent around 38 billion rubles on its operation in Syria], *RBK*, 15 March 2016, www.rbc.ru.

54. *Ibid.*

What are Russia's missions beyond saving the Assad regime?

The activities of Russian forces on the ground enable us to catch a glimpse of some of the less visible objectives of the operation in Syria, beyond saving the Assad regime and fighting an anti-terrorist campaign against IS, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and other Islamist groups. The deployment of Russian officers and instructors is designed to prepare and consolidate the security and military apparatus of the Syrian regime in the "post-civil war" period. The presence of soldiers on the ground also allows Russia to preserve or even extend its areas of influence in Syria, sometimes to the detriment of its allies on the ground. In particular, this involves containing Iran's military expansion in Syrian territory and preventing a scenario—negative from Russia's perspective—under which Syria would be transformed into an Iranian protectorate. However, Russia's influence over Iran and its Syrian ambitions remains limited, since Moscow is still dependent on Iranian troops in order to stabilize the situation on the ground in favour of the Assad regime.⁵⁵ The Russian ground troops are also useful for containing Turkish ambitions in northern Syria; for example, Chechen forces reportedly protected Kurdish units against the Turkish Army in order to ensure a better balance of forces in the north of the country.⁵⁶ In late March 2017, Russian troops are believed to have been deployed in the district of Jindires, in Afrin province, following an informal Russian-Kurdish agreement.⁵⁷

One of the core challenges of Russia's policy in the Middle East is to maintain its equilibrium of alliances and preserve an image as a fair mediator, regulator and peacemaker between the Shia and Sunni worlds. Despite its alliance with Iran, Russia does not want to give the impression that it has chosen the Shia side over that of the Sunnis: such a position could fuel hostility among Syria's Sunni civilians towards Russia's presence, and in the long term could exacerbate tensions in Russia itself, where the majority of Muslims are Sunni. Moreover, too strong an

55. The deployment of the first Chechen battalion in Syria in December 2016 thus enabled Moscow to present a counterweight to pro-Iranian forces (which were also Russian allies) and to secure a Russian presence in certain districts of Aleppo when it was recaptured by the Assad regime. See M. Suchkov, "What's Chechnya Doing in Syria?", Al-Monitor, 26 March 2017, www.al-monitor.com.

56. N. Hauer, "Putin Has a New Secret Weapon in Syria: Chechens", *Foreign Policy*, 4 May 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

57. F. Tastekin, "Is Turkey Rattled by Russian-Kurdish Deal?", Al-Monitor, 24 March 2017, www.al-monitor.com.

alignment with Syria's Shiite forces would compromise the ambition Moscow claims to have in Syria of leaving behind a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, secular and federal Syrian state.

In this regard, the dispatch of Chechen, Ingush and other Sunni Muslim fighters from Russia to Syria within the "military police" or other units is part of a charm offensive aimed at Syrian Sunnis and the Sunni world in general. The troops of Ramzan Kadyrov, consisting partly of former separatists, offer a pool of seasoned, battle-ready fighters, who have also been trained in the combat techniques of the elite units of the Russian Armed Forces. These troops style themselves as Vladimir Putin's personal "combat infantry" and have become a key military force for Russia, regardless of the theatre of operations in question (Ukraine, Syria, etc.). Ramzan Kadyrov himself has assumed the role of informal leader of Russia's relations with the Sunni world in Syria, where he has undertaken several large-scale humanitarian and reconstruction projects, including the restoration of the Umayyad Mosque, the Great Mosque of Aleppo which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and was destroyed by IS.⁵⁸ At the same time, Kadyrov has become a preferred mediator between Russia and the Sunni world. He has acted as an informal ambassador to the Gulf countries for the conclusion of economic, energy and military partnerships with Moscow, as well as leading efforts at rapprochement between Moscow, Riyadh and Doha on Syria.

Lastly, private military contractors are believed to have been approached by Russian companies with a view to facilitating future contracts for the exploitation of natural resources in Syrian territory. According to Fontanka, the Wagner Group has cooperated with Russian firm Evro Polis, which has been granted a 25% stake in the oil and gas exploited in Syrian territory recaptured from IS by Russian private military companies.⁵⁹

58. These humanitarian and charitable missions are financed by the Akhmad Kadyrov Regional Public Foundation, a charitable organization established in 2004 to provide assistance to the Chechen population; see M. Suchkov, "What's Chechnya Doing in Syria?", *op. cit.* [55].

59. "Nemnogo biznesa v sirijskoj vojne" [A bit of business in the Syrian war], Fontanka, 26 June 2017, www.fontanka.ru.

A command and control system coordinating with the Syrian regime and its allies

The Russian military personnel in Syria are pursuing two other central missions: coordinating the Russian "command and control" system with that of Bashar al-Assad's armed forces, and equipping and training the armed forces of the Syrian regime and their local auxiliary forces, particularly Shia militias.

The Russians have established a liaison and communication system, as well as a particularly sophisticated and high-performing "command and control" (C2) network that coordinates with that of their Syrian ally.⁶⁰ The commander of the Russian forces in Syria (Colonel General Dvornikov, who was succeeded in June 2016 by Lieutenant General Zhuravlyov, who in turn was replaced in December 2016 by Colonel General Andrei Kartapolov; the latter was replaced in March 2017 by Colonel General Sergey Surovikin) has been installed in Damascus, close to the Syrian Ministry of Defence and the HQ of the Syrian Army. The aerial strike operations led by Russia are coordinated with the Syrian Army, thanks primarily to the aerial command centre at the Russian air base at Khmeimim, in Latakia province, and to the various "liaison teams" spread across several Syrian air bases.

The integration of Russia's command and control system with that of the Syrian Army has been facilitated by the regular visits to Syrian Army bases by Russian superior officers and mobile detachments, in order to advise and ensure coordination of aerial operations. The Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides, which became operational in February 2016 and is based at the Khmeimim site under the authority of the commander in charge of the group of Russian armed forces in Syria, offers another platform for coordination between Russian personnel and

60. T. Ripley, "Increasing Thrust", *op. cit.* [15], p. 26.

the army of the Syrian regime. It oversees the ceasefire, the evacuation of civilians and the transfer of humanitarian aid, but also facilitates the exchange of intelligence between Russia and the Assad regime.⁶¹

In parallel to this, Russian military personnel in Syria have reportedly advised, trained and equipped the regular Syrian Army, pro-Assad Shia militias (Hezbollah and its elite Radwan and Al-Ridha forces, Iraqi and Afghan militias and other Shia militias)⁶² and Kurdish militant organizations, such as the People's Protection Units (YPG).⁶³ Russia is also thought to have advised and trained several pro-Assad Sunni militias, such as the Palestinian Liwa al-Quds.⁶⁴

Russian and pro-regime forces have coordinated their actions in multiple operations. In February 2017, Russian forces travelled to the outskirts of Palmyra to train the 5th Volunteer Corps of the Syrian Arab Army, created in late 2016. The Russians are also believed to have sent (via a maritime corridor linking the city of Novorossiysk, on the shores of the Black Sea, with the Mediterranean port of Tartus) military equipment to the 5th Syrian Volunteer Corps, with a view to making the unit the backbone of Bashar al-Assad's armed forces.⁶⁵ The killing on 24 September 2017 in the Deir ez-Zor region of the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian forces deployed in Syria, Lieutenant General Valery Asapov, made official not only the close coordination between the Russian forces and Assad's army, but also the placement of the 5th Syrian Volunteer Corps under Russian command. According to Valery Gerasimov, Asapov had become commander of Syria's Fifth Corps of Volunteers.⁶⁶ Russian

61. *Ibid.* p. 26-27.

62. At the end of December 2016, images of Russian special forces carrying the Hezbollah emblem in the city of Aleppo circulated on social media, giving rise to assumptions of close coordination on the ground between Russian special forces and Syrian Hezbollah troops. On this point, see the photographs provided by the Conflict Intelligence Team platform: A. Leviev, "Strengthening Battle Brotherhood: A Look at Russia-Backed Militias in Syria", Conflict Intelligence Team, 26 October 2016, <https://citeam.org>.

63. T. O'Connor, "Russian Military Can Now Bomb Syrian Rebels and ISIS from Iran", *Newsweek*, 28 March 2017, www.newsweek.com.

64. The Palestinian Sunni militia Liwa (Brigade) al-Quds is believed to comprise several hundred fighters and to have close ties to Syrian intelligence and the Ba'ath party. It is made up of Palestinian fighters who were reportedly trained by Russian military advisers. In August 2016, the commander of Liwa al-Quds, Muhammad Rafi, was awarded a medal for "strengthening battle brotherhood" by Lieutenant General Zhuravlyov, the then commander of the Russian mission force in Syria. See A. Leviev, "Strengthening Battle Brotherhood: A Look at Russia-Backed Militias in Syria", *op. cit.* [64].

65. "Russia Builds a Syrian Spetsnaz, is Taking over Iran's Shiite Militias", DEBKAF, 3 August 2017, www.debka.com.

66. "Un général russe tué en Syrie" [Russian general killed in Syria], *Le Figaro*, 27 September 2017.

armed forces also prepared Assad's troops and Hezbollah forces to liberate the Hayyan gas fields, located 40km west of Palmyra (which at the time were occupied by IS).⁶⁷ The Russian forces, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard,⁶⁸ the forces of the Syrian regime and Hezbollah⁶⁹ all coordinated actions in various fights.

Russian forces have established particularly close ties with the officers of Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Russia has also used (not without causing friction with its Iranian ally) the Shahid Nojeh air base, located close to the Iranian city of Hamedan, from where it launched air raids on Syria in March 2017. Moreover, Iran has encouraged the training of its military personnel in Russian military equipment and techniques.⁷⁰ Tehran has also learned Russian encirclement techniques, previously used in the battle of Debaltseve, in the Donbass (January-February 2015), as proven by the recapture of Aleppo in three phases by pro-regime forces in 2016.

Likewise, training in Russian conceptual and operational military techniques has strengthened the skills of Hezbollah, despite the heavy losses it has suffered in Syria. Hezbollah has probably observed and integrated Russia's radio-electronic warfare techniques, which are developing rapidly in Russia.⁷¹ In the long term, the potential (even if only partial) transfer of radio-electronic warfare systems (as well as information warfare techniques) to Hezbollah and Iran could weaken the capacities of other regional actors.

67. C. Tomson, "In Pictures: Russian Special Forces Train Syrian Army Recruits for Battles with ISIS", Al Masdar News, 28 February 2017, www.almasdarnews.com.

68. "Hezbollah Deploys to Palmyra Front: Report", Now, 28 September 2017, <https://now.mmedia.me>.

69. L. Sly, "Hezbollah, Russia and the U.S. Help Syria Retake Palmyra", *Washington Post*, 2 March 2017, www.washingtonpost.com.

70. G. Casagrande, "How Iran Is Learning from Russia in Syria", Institute for the Study of War, 3 February 2017, www.understandingwar.org.

71. D. Adamsky, "Hitavut Harusit BeSuria: Mashmauyot estratiyot velekahim maarakhtim" [Russian engagement in Syria: strategic implications and operational lessons], *Merkaz Hamehkar, Hamikhlalah Lebitahon Leumi*, Vol 13, November 2016, p. 70-71.

Conclusion

Russia's military intervention in Syria was supposed to be short-lived and limited to aerial operations and the delivery of arms to the Assad regime. However, Russia, like other global and regional powers, has sent a contingent of expeditionary forces to the Syrian frontlines.

As a result of its new military doctrine and the reorganization of Russia's Armed Forces, Moscow's new involvement model, as implemented and honed on the Syrian frontlines, is liable to improve the country's operational capacities and military power, both offensive and deterrent, whether in Russia's "near abroad" or in any potential operation beyond its immediate zone of influence.

The Syrian battlefield has enabled Russia, for the first time, to launch a coordinated, large-scale deployment of its expeditionary forces. Their fieldwork experience has helped to boost Russian military know-how and project the image of an agile, sophisticated military power capable of providing effective support in other theatres of operations in the Middle East, Africa or Asia, such as in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Sudan or Afghanistan. In March 2017, rumours of the deployment of Russian special operations forces and military advisers at an air base in western Egypt, near the Libyan border, may have been the first manifestation of this phenomenon.⁷²

The objectives and duration of the mission of the special intervention forces in Syria remain unclear, despite the official Russian declaration of the "end of the war" against the Islamic State in Syria on 6 December 2017 and the surprise announcement—on December 11—of the withdrawal of a "significant part" (without specifying a number) of Russian troops from Syria. Nevertheless, the Russian men of war have played a decisive role in keeping the Assad regime in power. The Russian military police have been given a central role in preserving the ceasefire and protecting the "security zones" established in the northern, central and southern regions of Syria, pursuant to a Russian-Iranian-Turkish agreement in early May 2017 and a

72. "Exclusive—Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role: Sources", Reuters, 14 March 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com>.

Russian-American memorandum of 7 July 2017. Russian forces can also help to eliminate the last rebel bastions in Syria.

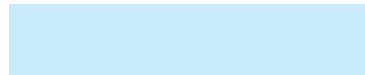
Russia's fighters have also helped crystallise the Assad military coalition in Syria. They have participated in the transfer of Russian military technologies and know-how to Shia forces in Syria. This aspect of Russia's involvement (particularly in southern Syria) has caused tensions between Russia and Israel. Russia's military personnel can also help to preserve the country's zones of influence and position as an arbiter in Syria, crushing the ambitions of its allies and rivals, Iran and Turkey. The presence of Russian expeditionary forces, particularly of an irregular nature, may help secure Russia's long-term presence in Syrian territory, regardless of the future political formula of Syria. Irregular forces could help preserve, in a form that is acceptable for other stakeholders involved on the Syrian territory, the military sites and economic interests of Moscow in Syria.

Above all, the Russian men of war in Syria have demonstrated Russia's capacity to swiftly deploy and activate a pool of elite fighters beyond its near abroad, thereby repositioning Russia as a key player on the Middle Eastern and global arenas.

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