



Putin's Pocket Army? The Rise of Russian Mercenaries in Syria

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Russia is taking America's use of privatizing war to the next level—hired guns who are off the books and unaccountable to the people.

If you think the media has been saturated with news about Russia think again. While thoughts might run to Robert Mueller's probe into possible Russian collusion with the Trump election campaign, I refer to something possibly far worse: the development and expansion of Russia's private military companies (PMC) and its implications for the global spread of armies for hire by great powers and multinational corporations alike.

Before going further it is important to define exactly what I mean by PMC sector.

Despite all the often negative publicity surrounding companies like Blackwater, Dyncorp, and numerous others operating in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last 17 years, they essentially served as private security companies (PSC), guarding embassies, U.S. and coalition bases, convoys, officials, etc. PSCs carry guns, of course, and use them, but they are not engaging in what we would recognize as combat operations (though there were of secret operations throughout the War on Terror, where contractors, specifically Blackwater, were skirting that line).

A PMC like the ones I am describing in Russia, on the other hand, is doing exactly that. It is carrying out offensive, military operations, just like a regular military unit would. While due to their relatively small size PMCs are incapable of engaging large-scale, combined arms operations, they carry out many of the tactics and strategies akin to special operations forces.

Up until recently this kind of mercenary activity has not been an issue, at least since the now-defunct South African-based Executive Outcomes successfully fought Jonas Savimbi's UNITA forces in Angola and forced the murderous Revolutionary United Front rebels in Sierra Leone to the negotiating table in 1995. The global PMC also worked for several multinational corporations, including De Beers, Chevron and Texaco, before it disbanded in 1998.

But since the U.S. let the genie out of the bottle with its unprecedented use of private contractors in its Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Russia has taken it to the next level and has been using Russian PMCs—off the books—to conduct serious combat missions both in the Donbass region of Ukraine and in Syria.

In both countries, the PMC *de jour*, Russia's Blackwater on steroids as it were, is something called Wagner. That Wagner is an active operator is beyond dispute. In August 2017, the Saint Petersburg, Russia, publication, *Fontanka*, which has been reporting on Wagner since 2013, published photographs from the company's "recruiting center," along with the personnel records of several dozen mercenaries filed during hiring procedures.

An interview with *Fontanka*'s reporter, Denis Korotkov, helps explain why Wagner is qualitatively different from the PSCs we're accustomed to hearing about in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Can private military companies be involved in military operations? Certainly. They can guard bases and communications lines, and protect key human assets in zones of active operations. However! When a private company is armed with tanks, 122-mm artillery, and armored infantry vehicles, and it's carrying out attack missions or performing tasks better suited to the special forces, that, in my view, isn't okay.

122mm artillery, armored infantry vehicles? Not even in his wildest fever dreams did Erik Prince's Blackwater have anything like that.

The history of Wagner is intriguing. According to an interview with Vasyl Hrytsak, of the SBU, Ukraine's Security Service:

Wagner's group' was created in late May 2014. Wagner is former citizen [of Ukraine – ed.], born in the Kirovohrad region. Back then his group comprised 10 people... "By late August 2014 they were 300 people. In 2015, 1,350 men of Wagner were sent to Syria. Subsequently, the group grew, and more than 1,000 mercenaries were sent to Syria. They were taken back after three months. In early 2016, they were sent to Syria again... Wagner's PMC comprises highly professional former Spetsnaz representatives who will be used primarily by the Russian military leadership in situations where they will not be able to officially use the army. At first, 10 people ran in. Now, according to our data, there are about 5,000 of them...

They've created a powerful pocket army operating tanks, armored personnel carriers, BM-21 Grads, and heavy artillery. What does it look like? It looks like a private army of Putin. If the situation destabilizes, God forbid, in Belarus or Baltics states or Moldova, the first to go there wearing civilian clothing will be the representatives of Wagner PMC.

According to InformNapalm, a volunteer initiative to inform Ukrainian citizens and the foreign public about the undeclared war against Ukraine:

Dmitry Utkin. ... On transferring from active duty to the reserves in 2013, Utkin went to Syria along with other security veterans to fight on the side of President Bashar al-Assad as part of the Slavic Corps, a Russian mercenary group. There, in October 2013, they almost were encircled by the rebels and were forced to return to Moscow. .

Almost immediately after returning to Russia, Utkin went to Ukraine at the head of his own group of mercenaries. This unit was named the Wagner Group after Richard Wagner, a favourite composer of Adolf Hitler, for whom Utkin allegedly holds affection. The Slavic Corps veterans were seen both in the Crimea in February 2014 and then at Donbas, where they fought alongside Russian militants. According to the Russian media, the Wagner squad could have been involved in the killing of several warlords of so called "LPR".

According to InformNapalm, “Taking part in the annexation of Crimea and in the fighting on Donbas, Wagner PMCs is illegal under international law, even more so from the point of view of Russian law. It does not protect sites or escort objects but performs military tasks on an equal level with the national armed forces. The armed group is acting on the orders of the Kremlin and is supervised by the Russian special services, performing those military tasks in which the Russian authorities does not want to “blow” its regular troops. In other words, Wagner PMCs is a private and illegal special forces, secretly carrying out the criminal orders of the Kremlin.

And why is this a problem? Korotkov lays it out succinctly:

Because these people aren’t constrained by the law. Guys, if we’re using violence in the state’s interests, it should be done by the army, which has to comply with the laws of the state, which observes the laws of war. ...And who are these people really? Who gives them their orders? Who are they fighting for? When we’re fighting for some oligarch, instead of our country — guys, I don’t know, but this is like something out of the 15th century. And I’m not even talking now about the fact that it’s simply illegal. The legal, ethical, and reputational losses here seem to me to be incompatible with any supposed benefit we could possibly be getting.

One could argue that companies like Wagner are an exception, but events in Russia over the past decade argue the opposite. There has been a trend to not only utilize and regulate PMCs but to outright legitimize them.

In 2013 a bill, “On Amendments to Certain 7 Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation on the Creation of a Mobilization Human Reserve” was submitted to the State Duma of the Russian Federation by the representatives of the Putin’s party.

In March 2016 deputies from the Just Russia party submitted to the Duma a draft law on private military security organizations. However, the government opposed the adoption of the law and the authors of the bill themselves decided to withdraw it.

But there is a new law on the table and it has been sent out for expert evaluation. One Russian commentator suggested that the new draft may be opposed by those it is supposed to benefit: the private military companies themselves. They may prefer, he suggests, to remain in the shadows where they can operate with fewer constraints and controls.

But even adopting a law that, nominally, regulates a company like Wagner vastly understates the harm that would ensue. Right now, there are numerous countries around the world hosting companies that would love to have combat contracts in ongoing war zones. But to date, public sentiment and cautions on the part of various countries has largely restricted them to private security, not private military, operations. If a major power like Russia legitimizes the activities of a *de jour* PMC company, even under the guises of regulating it, it won’t be long before other countries follow. Recent history suggests that won’t be a good thing for the world.

But aside from that possibility, real life has already provided an example of the dangers of Wagner. Bloomberg reported on February 13, that “U.S. forces killed scores of Russian mercenaries in Syria last week in what may be the deadliest clash between citizens of the former foes since the Cold War...More than 200 contract soldiers, mostly Russians fighting on behalf of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, died in a failed attack on a base held by U.S. and mainly Kurdish forces in the oil-rich Deir Ezzor region,”

While the exact number of casualties remains unconfirmed, this is undoubtedly the most significant number of casualties by a PMC in a single incident in modern history. And, if it serves to heighten tensions between the United States and Russia it will take the PMC sector into uncharted territory.

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