

Russia's Army in Syria: Testing a New Concept of Warfare

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Russia's surprise military entry into Syria on September 30, 2015 brought Russia's main objectives and endgame in the Syrian battlefield to the world's attention. Questions arose about the impact the operation would have on Moscow's relations with global and regional powers involved in Syria, primarily the US, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Other debates focused on the nature and capability of the Russian military power showcased in Syria. In a matter of weeks, Russia tilted the balance of forces on the ground in favor of Assad's faltering regime. A few dozen fighter jets and a new air base in the Latakia province, combined with the existing naval base in Tartus and the introduction of surface-to-air missile systems S-300 and S-400, created new military constraints for other stakeholders in Syria, including Israel.

Beyond speculations about Russia's strategic aims in Syria, what is its specific *modus operandi* on the ground? This article focuses on a lesser-explored aspect of Russia's presence 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 career soldiers, special units assigned to special operations, military police, military advisors and technicians, and "volunteers." Among them were veterans from the first and second Chechen "operations," the Georgian war, and the Ukrainian crisis, as well as a significant number of Sunni Muslim fighters from the North Caucasus, primarily from Chechnya. Some forces were deployed

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to Syria as early as July 2015, two months before Russia's official entry into the Syrian conflict. With the accelerated buildup of Russia's military presence in Syria in late August-September 2015, Russian intervention forces grew incrementally.

In contrast with previous military operations in the North Caucasus and Georgia, and in the aftermath of its swift annexation 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 new "near abroad" or foreign operation.

Testing the Expeditionary Force Command on the Syrian Frontlines

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 "hybrid warfare" by Western standards), Russia's new concept of war, like Western military doctrines, favors the use of special and mobile intervention forces. As articulated in 2013 by Russia's Chief of General Staff Valerij Gerasimov,¹ the novel, critical role of special operations and special purpose forces is a consequence of the 21st century's changing rules of war. Since the distinction between "peacetime" and "wartime" has been blurred, states now resort to more flexible, swift, and highly specific military operations. Therefore, the role of non-military means (or soft power) including the "broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other measures" has grown considerably, gradually making "frontal engagements of large formations of forces...a thing of the past." According to Russia's Chief of General Staff, warfare has witnessed the increased "use of military means of a concealed character," including actions of informational warfare and of special operations forces, making special operations and special purpose forces more appealing to states wishing to conceal or disavow their military involvement. Partly due to new technological possibilities of command and control systems, mixed-type forces acting in a "single intelligence-information space" play a bigger role than ever before. The boosted use of special operations 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 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 proxies on the ground as an available and highly efficient extended military network and as an amplifier of conventional military strength.

As a matter of fact, Gerasimov insists less on the hybridity of non-military and military means to conduct modern warfare than on the new ratio that Russia has established between the use of military and non-military measures: 1 to 4. 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 a secondary 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.²

Russia's new warfare approach was mirrored by organizational reforms in the Russian Federation's armed forces. Since President Putin's rise to power, Russian armed forces underwent extensive structural reform, in which special operations and special purpose forces proliferated across military and non-military organizations. Spetsnaz, the first to be established after WWII, soon formed the elite unit of Soviet military intelligence (GRU). In post-Soviet Russia, Spetsnaz, an umbrella (and overstretched) term designating a wide array of elite forces or of regular forces assigned special tasks operating on behalf of the Russian Federation's security complex (*silovye struktury*), compensated for the provisional deficiencies of the regular armed forces.

Even though they are both often referred to as Spetsnaz, special operations forces and special purpose forces do not correspond to the same units in the Russian security complex, as they belong to different branches and hierarchies and conduct different missions. Nor can Spetsnaz be equated with the Western and in particular the US use of the term Special Operations Units. The term "Spetsnaz" (abbreviation for "special purpose force") is now applied to different special units of a large array of governmental and military structures, including Military Intelligence – GRU; the Ministries of Justice and Internal Affairs; the security forces of FSB (domestic intelligence service) and SVR (foreign intelligence service); the Russian police; and the whole armed forces. Later, special operations and special purpose forces received a boost under Defense Minister Anatolij Serdyukov (2007-2012), who embarked on a vast program of modernization in 2008.

The Russian Federation addressed not only the poor organization and coordination of Russia's security agencies, but also the lack of an encompassing special operations command able to defend Russia's interests

within and beyond its borders on a timely fashion. The idea of uniting all the sub-units of Russia's intervention forces into one integrated structure under a single leadership was born during the war in Afghanistan. However, the project only saw light in the aftermath of the first and second Chechen operations, which illustrated the dire need for coordination among the troops and security structures of the Russian Federation.³ Partly based upon the US example of a single command system of special forces (the US Special Operations Command created in 1987), Russia established its new Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (SSO VS RF) in 2009; they became operational in 2013.

In contrast to different Spetsnaz units that comprise separate groups of professionally trained militaries, Russia's new SSO VS forms a highly mobile and coordinated army group incorporating numerous special elite units, designed for the completion of special missions inside and outside Russia.⁴ Komandovanie SSO (KSSO), a command structure directly under the Chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation, singlehandedly leads the SSO VS. Since their establishment, Russia's SSO were involved in counter-terrorist operations in the North Caucasus, in the Crimean crisis (the "polite" or "little green men"), and in the military operation in Syria.

A Complex of Expeditionary Forces

Russia's military intervention in Syria has some distinctive characteristics. Since the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) it is the first military operation conducted beyond the post-Soviet space. In Syria, Russia uses its armed forces beyond its "near abroad" and acts as a global power instead of as a simple guarantor of its regional interests. After Russia was prevented from entering the US-led Western military coalition in Syria, it arose as the leader of an alternative military coalition and has been involved in an all-out confrontation with a web of challenging enemies. Initially in a challenge to the US-led coalition, Russia has combined diplomatic involvement, military operations, and humanitarian aid, and has striven to create an efficient coalition against the Islamic State and other radical Islamist groups including Iran, Assad's Syria, and Turkey.

Second, the deployment of troops to Syria is official. The Russian Federation has even resorted to public celebrations of its special forces in Syria. In 2015, February 27 was declared by presidential decree as the "Day of the Russian Special Forces." Since that day, Russia's Ministry of Defense has circulated videos showcasing the professional training,

determination, and military successes of Russian elite forces inside Syria.⁵ Such celebrations convey a positive image of Russia's elite units and help promote Moscow's Syrian operation within Russia. However, the official character of Russia's deployment of forces does not prevent Moscow, like any other state deploying intervention forces, from concealing the number of casualties and their functions. Also, unlike the brief 2008 Georgian War, and in a much clearer and explicit way than the Ukrainian case, the Syrian battlefield comprises an official military training camp for Russia. Syria serves as a live exhibition and test of Russia's latest military equipment and is used – as President Putin publicly acknowledged in late December 2015 – as an extensive and useful training ground for Russia's elite forces. These forces practice a wide variety of exercises, ranging from intelligence gathering to counter-terrorist elimination operations, without putting additional constraints on the already pressured defense budget of the Russian Federation.⁶

Third, Syria is not a “boots on the ground” operation. Russia is not involved in large scale combat and assault operations with regular armed forces. Rather, it has relied on a combination of its regular forces (Aerospace and Navy), its expeditionary forces, and a network of allies and proxies, including the Syrian regular army, Shiite militias, and minority combatants, such as the Kurds. Combining these forces on the ground provides Russia with an additional advantage in domestic political terms, since casualties among proxies do not have an effect on public opinion, and that mutes potential criticism of Russian involvement. By contrast, the relatively high number of casualties among Russian conscripts and soldiers during the First and Second Chechen wars was traumatic among the Russian public.

Little open information about Russia's military personnel in Syria is available, yet a combination of official and alternative sources – the Russian Defense Ministry's “Air Force Group in Syria” and “Bulletin of the Russian Defense Ministry on Ceasefire Observation” web entries;⁷ the Syrian pro-Assad *al-Masdar* newspaper; the Russian web platform *Conflict Intelligence Team*;⁸ the Instagram account of Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic;⁹ and situation reports provided by the US Institute for the Study of War (ISW) – enables us to build a tentative profile.

Based upon those sources and others, several categories of forces can be identified. The first category is the regular armed forces: the Aerospace Defense Forces (VKS), the Naval Infantry (and in particular the elite 810th Marine Regiment of the Black Sea Fleet), and artillerymen, including

elements of the 120th Separate Artillery Brigade, which in early 2016 were spotted on a “Novorossiia-Syria mission.”¹⁰ Initially the deployment and equipment of these troops was limited and seemed insufficient to defeat Syrian rebels or reconquer some territories under rebel control, but their presence helped deter any Syrian rebel attack on Russian military bases.

The second category includes the expeditionary forces, with several sub-categories of special operations and special purpose forces. The first is the new Special Operations Forces (SSO), which includes a variety of special operations and special purpose units coordinated by the Chief of the General Staff.¹¹ Various reports indicate that among the Spetsnaz forces spotted in Syria were the GRU-Spetsnaz (Military Intelligence), SVR-Spetsnaz (Foreign Intelligence Service), FSB-Spetsnaz (Federal Security Service), and the 431st Naval Reconnaissance Brigade. Other Spetsnaz forces allegedly deployed since April 2017 in Syria include the USSR Spetsnaz, a group of Muslim fighters originating from Central Asia, South Caucasus, and North Caucasus (including the Muslim Turan battalion, which was established around Hama).¹² In addition, the Zaslon force of the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service) was allegedly present in Syria in the summer of 2015.¹³

The special operations and special purpose forces’ core missions include battlefield reconnaissance (designating air and artillery targets, mostly based upon information from the Syrian army), protection of the Hmeymim airbase at Latakia and the Tartus naval facility, and pinpoint assault operations aimed at tilting the balance of forces in favor of the regime. During the December 2016 battle for Aleppo and the second Palmyra offensive (January 13-March 4 2017), Russian SSO (Special Operations forces) were called to fight against Islamist groups, coordinating their fight with the Russian Air Force and suffering casualties. The SSO’s role in the assault and combat operations was made official in February 2017, when Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu praised their “high efficiency in Syria.”¹⁴ There is no information on the exact number of special operations and special purpose operatives sent to Syria. According to some sources, Spetsnaz from different units numbered some 230-250 in Syria at the peak of their deployment.¹⁵ In contrast, the USSR Spetsnaz is likely to be a larger body, with reports providing an estimation of 800-1200 men engaged in Syria since April 2017.¹⁶

The second sub-category of intervention forces includes units of the Military Police of the armed forces of the Russian Federation (VP VS

RF). They are a structure established in 2011, inspired by the US model, and placed under the authority of the Ministry of Defense. A battalion of Russian Military Police, including Chechen and Ingush fighters, was deployed to Syria in the winter of 2016 to help conquer Aleppo. Initial reports estimated that around 500 Chechens were deployed, while others suggested a total of 300-400.¹⁷ The number of Ingush who joined in February 2017 is reportedly also roughly 300-400.¹⁸ The Ingush soldiers' mission went beyond guaranteeing Russian airgroup security. Their tasks included manning checkpoints, distributing aid, and coordinating the defense of pro-government strongholds with regime forces.¹⁹ The Military Police received another critical task in May 2017: guaranteeing the security of the newly declared de-escalation zones across Syria, which triggered additional deployments of Military Police forces from Russia to Syria.²⁰ Especially useful to Moscow are the Chechen and Ingush fighters, who constitute an elite ground personnel of Sunni Muslim men (who often learned Arabic and, in some cases, the Syrian dialect) on the Syrian battlefield.

The third sub-category of forces involves paramilitary personnel, among them Russian engineers involved in the reconnaissance and clearance of minefields at different sites in Syria. On March 16, 2017 a detachment of the International Demining Center of the Russian Armed Forces arrived in Palmyra and undertook an operation in historic parts of the city. According to Russia's Defense Ministry, over 150 specialists and 17 units of special equipment came to Syria.²¹ Other para-military personnel include Russian military doctors, and by January 2017, medical specialists from the Central Military District provided medical assistance and aid to more than 5,000 civilians.

The fourth (non-official) sub-category includes "volunteers" who operate in Syria on a private and informal basis. Some signs indicate that among them are military contractors operating on behalf of private military companies (PMCs that are nonetheless forbidden under current Russian legislation). In addition, some of them were allegedly awarded military medals or posthumous decorations such as the Order of Bravery.²² According to the investigative Russian newspaper *Fontanka* (whose reliability is questioned by Russian officials), Russian mercenary battalions were deployed in Syria two years before official Russian intervention began.²³ A first unit, the Slavonic Corps, joined in 2013 with a mission to protect Bashar al-Assad and Syria's oil facilities. When some of the Corps' members defected to rebel groups, the unit was quickly recalled to Russia and its leaders were

sentenced to jail. They were replaced by another group, the OSM, under the leadership of Dmitry Utkin, also known by his nom-de-guerre, Wagner. A neo-Nazi, Wagner was a former member of the Spetsnaz who renamed the group PMC Wagner and in June 2017 was added to the US Department of Treasury's sanctions list for his alleged actions in Ukraine.²⁴ The group has been spotted in Syria since 2013. It is registered in Argentina, but has its training camp in Molkino, Russia, where it hosts the GRU's 10th Special Forces brigade.²⁵ *Fontanka* reports that the group was spotted in Crimea in May 2014, in Luhansk, and since the fall of 2015, in Syria. It had nearly 1,000 members in 2016.²⁶ It was reportedly involved in the Palmyra offensives of March 2016 and of January 13-March 4, 2017, where it suffered casualties. In addition, the Wagner group has allegedly cooperated with the Russian company Evro Polis, which is supposed to receive a 25 percent share of oil and gas produced on lands recovered from the Islamic State by Russian military contractors. The Wagner group may thus advance another Russian agenda in Syria: securing natural resources deals for Russian companies.²⁷

Many of the fighters, military personnel, and "volunteers" in Syria had previously served in Ukraine, and in some cases were directly transferred from Ukraine to Syria.²⁸ The exact number of troops deployed remains classified. Non-official estimates vary, in part due to the frequent rotation of troops between Russia and Syria. As early as November 2015, US officials reported that the Russians had increased their field staff from 2,000 to 4,000. According to the Qatari newspaper *The New Arab*, from September 1 to October 31, 2015, Russia allegedly deployed 8,000 troops to Syria – a number possibly inflated due to the strong anti-Assad line of the outlet.²⁹ In September 2016, statistics of the Russian Central Electoral Commission provided a fairly reliable glimpse of Russia's general ground presence: 4,571 Russian citizens voted in Syria – 193 ballots were handed out in Damascus; the other 4,378 were in portable voting boxes elsewhere (Russian official sources maintain that all servicemen in Syria voted).³⁰

The withdrawal of troops announced by President Putin in March 2016 and January 2017 may in fact have had a public relations dimension: each announcement was to close a chapter of the Syrian campaign, show military and political gains, and suggest a phase-based, gradual military campaign, rather than an indefinite military presence devoid of a long term strategy.

The activities of Russian ground forces offer insight into Russia's lesser known goals in Syria, beyond saving Bashar al-Assad's regime and conducting anti-terrorist operations against the Islamic State, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham,

and other radical Islamist groups. A Russian ground presence establishes facts on the ground and secures the Russian Federation's informal zones of influence in Syria. The deployment of the Chechen battalion in Syria in late 2016 (and especially its participation in the storming of Aleppo) enabled Moscow to counterbalance the stronger position of pro-Iranian forces and secure Russian presence in certain areas of Aleppo.³¹ Furthermore, Chechen forces allegedly protected Syrian Kurdish units from the Turkish army, in order to ensure a power balance in the north part of Syria.³² In late March 2017, speculation arose about the deployment of Russian troops to the Cindires district of the Afrin province, which allegedly resulted from an informal agreement between the Kurds and Russia.³³ In addition, the deployment of Chechen, Ingush, and other Sunni Muslim and Arabic-speaking fighters to Syria is part of a new Russian charm offensive vis-a-vis Syria's Sunnis and the Sunni world at large. Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov became the leader of the public relations policy in Syria, where he undertook several large scale humanitarian and reconstruction projects, including the restoration of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo after its destruction by the Islamic State.³⁴

Conclusion

Russia's military involvement in Syria was supposed to be short lived and limited to air operations and arms deliveries to the imperiled Assad regime. Yet Russia, like other global and regional stakeholders, has sent hundreds of expeditionary forces to the Syrian frontlines, partly as a result of changes in Russian warfare conceptions and the reorganization of its armed forces. The Syrian battlefield permitted Russia to undertake the first large scale and coordinated activation of its upgraded intervention forces, whose experience in the field is liable to boost Russia's military power and image. Russia's ground personnel in Syria help portray Russia as an agile military power and as a provider of efficient military support in other hotspots across the Middle East and even North Africa. Speculation about the deployment of Russian special operations forces and military advisors to an air base in western Egypt near the border with Libya in March 2017 may be the first manifestation of this phenomenon.

Russia's intervention forces are not yet a game changer per se on the Syrian battlefield. In addition, the duration of their stay and their ultimate purpose in Syria remain unclear, as Russia needs to define the next stages of its diplomatic and military involvement. However, they have played a

role in Russia's main achievement in Syria – the preservation of Assad's regime – by guiding airstrikes, upgrading Assad's capabilities, and giving them a boost in the critical Aleppo and Palmyra offensives. Russian forces may play a role in monitoring and safeguarding the de-escalation zones established in the northern, central, and southern parts of Syria in a Russian-Iranian-Turkish memorandum in early May 2017. On July 7, 2017 Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated Russia's intention to deploy its Military Police as a security guarantor in the southern de-escalation zone in Syria (at least at an initial stage) following President Putin's first meeting with US President Trump.³⁵ Russian forces can help defeat the remaining rebel strongholds across Syria – also one of Russia's critical objectives.

Russia's "men of war" have been instrumental in crystallizing the Russia-led military coalition in Syria. They have helped transfer Russian military technologies and know-how to the forces of the Shiite axis in Syria, a dimension of Russian involvement (especially in the southern area) that creates a need for deeper Russo-Israeli dialogue and further understandings between Jerusalem and Moscow. In early May 2017, Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu made it clear that Israel may accept the de-escalation zones as a general principle, as long as they do not serve as bases for Hezbollah and Iran.

Ultimately, Russia's ground personnel may help preserve its zones of influence in Syria against the ambitions of allies and competitors, including Iran and Turkey. The presence of Russian intervention forces, especially those of a deniable character, can help secure Russia's long term presence inside the Syrian state in whichever formula it may emerge following a putative and still elusive political settlement.

Notes

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- 8 *Conflict Intelligence Team* is an electronic platform of Russian online journalists and bloggers established in May 2014 to document Russia's military activities in Ukraine. See <https://citeam.org/>.
- 9 See https://www.instagram.com/kadyrov_95/.
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