



Escalation in Syria?

OE Watch Commentary: The official, Kremlin-supported media had little to say regarding the 7-8 February losses incurred by the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) near Dayr az Zawr, Syria. The Kremlin's reticence stemmed not only from the unwillingness to admit the losses of Russian mercenaries, but that Russian PMCs still don't officially exist. As discussed in last month's *OE Watch* ("Pros and Cons of Legalizing Private Military Companies") Russian legislators have yet to pass legislation authorizing the development of PMCs. While denying the existence of Russian PMCs presents no grave challenges for the Kremlin, covering up the deaths and injuries of Wagner personnel, particularly given the spread of digital technology and alternate channels for information in Russia, has proven more difficult.

The accompanying excerpt from the semi-independent news source, *Rosbalt*, describes how even without official Kremlin recognition of the Wagner PMC losses, Russian defense officials are preparing to escalate to avoid further personnel and reputation losses. The article begins by suggesting that "the current standoff between Russia and the West... could make the Cuban missile crisis and other critical moments of the Cold War... seem like child's play." It reminds readers of the US strike against "the Syrian Government forces' Shayrat airbase" in April 2017 and the February 2018 attack which "destroyed a column of the Wagner private military company... near Dayr az Zawr." The source alleges that Russian military personnel did not intervene during these two attacks, "but now everything could change." Having recently declared Russia's superpower pretensions, "the Kremlin needs to make at least some attempt to restore its reputation."

The author supports this assertion by quoting the recent statement of General Valeriy Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian Army General Staff, who stated on 13 March that, "in the event of a threat arising to our servicemen's lives, the Russian Federation Armed Forces will take retaliatory measures, both against the missiles and against their delivery vehicles." The author queries a number of Russian military experts to gauge their assessment on the likelihood of escalation, with the responses ranging from not very likely to the possibility of direct conflict. One expert summed it up by saying "we are moving in a dangerous direction."

End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)

"The situation in Syria is such that 'uncontrollable escalation is always possible if hostilities suddenly begin locally, because no one is prepared to lose. And that could lead to anything'."

Source: Aleksandr Zhelenin, "Неконтролируемая эскалация возможна," (Uncontrollable Escalation Possible) *Rosbalt*, 14 March 2018. <https://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2018/03/14/1688403.html>

Journalists love shocking headlines and preambles that excite the imagination, but today it will probably be no exaggeration to say that never since World War II has the world come closer to the brink of the abyss. Recent statements by official representatives of the United States and the Russian Federation could make the Cuban missile crisis and other critical moments of the Cold War -- to which people like to compare the current standoff between Russia and the West -- seem like child's play....

...Let us recall that recently the Americans, after a similar warning, destroyed a column of the Wagner private military company, which shortly before this had been firing at the headquarters of the Kurdish armed opposition near Dayr az Zawr.

In both cases no response or attempts at counteraction were observed on the part of the Russian Federation Armed Forces. But now everything could change. First, because the rout of the Wagner private military company was received extremely painfully by the Russian public, and second, because the Russian presidential election is literally upon us and the Kremlin needs to make at least some attempt to restore its reputation, which has been shaken by these American strikes....

...The very next day after Haley's statement at the UN, Valeriy Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian Army General Staff, stated that, in the event of "a threat arising to our servicemen's lives, the Russian Federation Armed Forces will take retaliatory measures, both against the missiles and against their delivery vehicles."

...The expert's [Mikhail Magid] explanation for Gerasimov's statement is that "the Russian Federation would like to ensure the safety of its troops in Syria. They have already suffered major losses: the rout of the column containing representatives of the Wagner private military company, the plane with dozens of servicemen that crashed near the Humaymim airbase. Fresh losses would be extremely disadvantageous to the Kremlin just before the election. Nevertheless, for the exact same reason the Russian Air Defense Forces will most likely not fire at the Americans: No one wants another rout."

...Novaya Gazeta military observer Pavel Felgengauer assesses the danger of a direct Russian-American military conflict in Syria as close to zero. The mutual threats currently being heard from both the Russian and the American sides, according to him, are "not so terrifying." But we are moving in a dangerous direction," he commented, even so.

Aleksandr Khramchikhin, deputy director of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis, holds the directly opposite opinion. According to him, "there is a certain 'red line,' beyond which it will be necessary to join battle, because it will be impossible not to do so." ...The situation in Syria is such that "uncontrollable escalation is always possible if hostilities suddenly begin locally, because no one is prepared to lose. And that could lead to anything."