



## The Wagner Private Military Company

**OE Watch Commentary:** Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has developed a burgeoning private security sector, employing between 800,000-1,200,000 personnel, plus an estimated 200,000 people working in the industry without proper documentation. (Russia's gas conglomerate Gazprom's security service alone employs 20,000.) Private security services cover a wide swath of activities including personal protection, intelligence, counterintelligence, and facility protection. Although private security forces are common in today's Russia, they have only been used for domestic purposes or for safeguarding Russian industrial interests abroad. Where Russian private security forces have traditionally not been found, is on the battlefield. In the Russian system, the idea of contractors on the battlefield is a foreign concept, and contractors have rarely been used as stand-ins for military personnel or state employees. When private contractors are encountered in the Russian military, they are usually found in technical support roles and hired by a state controlled company.

The accompanying article from *Novaya Gazeta* discusses how Russian military contractors are now being used on the battlefield. Unlike in the West where Private Military Companies (PMCs) usually provide personnel that fill combat support and combat service support positions, the Russian PMC Wagner provides complete motorized rifle, tank, and artillery units. The Wagner PMC is the informal name of the private military company led by Dmitriy Utkin, a retired lieutenant colonel and former commander of a unit in the 2nd GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate) Spetsnaz Brigade. The Wagner PMC first became widely known in 2014, during the height of fighting in the Donbas, where it was actively engaged in fighting with the separatists against the Ukrainian government. Reports of Wagner being involved in the Syria campaign started to surface in October 2015. Since then, Wagner has been involved in the liberation of Palmyra and Aleppo from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Today, Wagner employs an estimated 6,000 personnel, with approximately 2,500 of them currently working in Syria.

The Wagner PMC forces in Syria are organized into four reconnaissance and assault brigades, with each brigade having three companies, and each company having up to 100 personnel. In addition, there is an artillery battalion (three batteries, each with approximately 100 personnel); a tank company (50 personnel in three platoons, each with four tanks); a sabotage and reconnaissance company (about 150 personnel); a signal company (about 100 personnel); staff and support (about 200 personnel). Although there is no official relationship between the Russian government and the Wagner PMC, it is obvious that Wagner is at least supported, and likely partially funded by the Russian government. Wagner reportedly trains its personnel at the 10th Spetsnaz Brigade's military training ranges and other facilities. The personnel are equipped from government depots, and transported to Syria on Russian Navy vessels and military aircraft.

Although the Russian government appears to be a fan of PMCs, legislation fully legalizing their activities has not been forthcoming. Apparently, various interest groups in the security services have different ideas about the long-term security issues of legalizing military forces that are not directly controlled by the state. In general, intelligence organs such as the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (GRU) have championed the legalization of PMCs, while counterintelligence interests, such as the Federal Security Service (FSB), have opposed such legalization. Russia has already loosened some restrictions on privatized security forces. In 2005, Russia passed the federal law 154-FZ "On State Service of the Russian Cossacks," to clarify the Cossacks' legal status and allow them to form paramilitary units to fulfill limited law enforcement duties. But the sensitive nature of PMCs and desire of the Russian government to maintain a modicum of plausible deniability about their activities may keep the legal status of PMCs in limbo for the foreseeable future. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bartles)**

*"... the Defense Ministry has no formal responsibility for the 'Wagnerites'..."*

**Source:** Irek Murtazin, "Сирийская кампания загадочной «ЧВК Вагнера»: численный состав и вооружение, ключевые операции и конфликт в верхушке Минобороны (Syrian Campaign of Mysterious 'Wagner Private Military Company': Numerical Strength and Weaponry and Key Operations and Conflict in Defense Ministry Top Echelons)," *Novaya Gazeta Online*, 9 October 2017. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/10/09/74125-ih-prosto-net>

*Twelve "cargo 200" units -- dead employees of the Wagner private military company -- have been delivered to Rostov-on-the-Don. And this is not the gravest news from Syria, where hundreds of Russian citizens may or may not be fighting...Radio Liberty has spoken of the 12 Russians to have died in Syria and who are presumed to have been Wagner private military company combatants, citing a woman acquainted with Roman Zabolotnyy, who had been taken prisoner by ISIS. There is no official confirmation of this information. But the specialists we questioned, including Defense Ministry officers who had returned from a tour of duty in Syria and "Wagnerites" who took part in the first liberation of Palmyra and later of Aleppo, were not even slightly surprised by the 12 "cargo 200" units.*

*Colonel General Sergey Surovikin, commander of the Russian Armed Forces Group of Troops in Syria, reported that in three months, from May through August 2017, enemy losses "were over 8,000 militants and 1,500 weapons and military and other vehicles, and that number is increasing with every day. "If the militants lost 8,000 men killed in three months and their losses continued to increase in September, then how many men killed and wounded did al-Assad's army and the Wagner private military company lose? However, the Defense Ministry has no formal responsibility for the "Wagnerites" and so to all appearances is not dissembling over the absence of major losses in its own ranks. And that means just one thing: We are scarcely likely to find out the precise figure for the number of Russians who have died (even over the past month). But it was obviously not the 12 men whose bodies were flown to Rostov.*

*Another interlocutor of mine -- a "Wagnerite" who took part in the first liberation of Palmyra -- said that two air assault companies, an armored company, and an artillery division took part in the fighting to liberate the ancient city: "The armored company was commanded by a guy with a leg missing, aged about 50. He had been in Syria since 2015. After a mine explosion his leg was amputated, but he received treatment and returned. With an artificial leg. They said he was a retired lieutenant colonel and that before being discharged from the army he had commanded an armored battalion. The armored company personnel -- even the drivers and navigators -- consisted only of former armor officers...*