



Revelations of a Russian Mercenary in Syria

OE Watch Commentary: While still officially illegal, over the past several years there have been credible reports that Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs) have been active in Ukraine, Syria, Africa, and possibly South America. In the accompanying excerpt, the moderate news source, *Sobesednik*, interviews a former member of a Russian PMC who had been deployed to Syria. Some of his remarks are revealing.

The article begins by explaining that the interview was conducted anonymously by phone since the Russian “Criminal Code article ‘On Mercenaries’ has not been revoked,” and that the ex-officer “could even be arrested.” Since PMCs are not legal on Russian territory, the interviewee points out that his contract stated that the PMC who hired him was “registered in the Virgin Islands.” A former artillery officer in the Russian military, the interviewee had military contacts who encouraged him to join the PMC. Since he was prior service, he did not have to go through training and was soon deployed for “the next six months in the middle of Syria, north of Palmyra.”

The ex-mercenary describes the relatively high pay—“200,000 rubles [about \$3,000] a month,” pointing out that this “unrealistically huge amount,” allowed him to pay off his mortgage, “which is why I [he] went to Syria.” For spending money while in Syria, the “main currency there was ammunition. Sell 10 to 15 cartridges to a middleman, get several packs of cigarettes, alcohol, or some gear.” He paints a grim picture of logistic support, claiming that the “food was the most dangerous factor of the entire deployment. It is impossible to survive more than six months on it.” He claims that the “equipment is usually your own, brought from Russia.” Soldiers are prohibited from owning phones, and if a soldier posted something on social media, he “could easily get sent home without being paid a single ruble.”

The interview concludes on a dark note, with the ex-mercenary claiming that even though he has been asked to return to Syria, he “will not go,” describing the situation there as “anarchy and lawlessness,” where Syria “after the war is even worse than it was during the war.” Within the state-sponsored media, Russia’s military operation in Syria has been portrayed as an overwhelming success, where Russian forces have helped their Syrian comrades defeat terrorism and restore order. This interview, albeit from a member of a Russian PMC, provides an alternative assessment. **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

“...*The country after the war is even worse than it was during the war....*”

Source: Rimma Akhmirova, ““Бумажки не так важны, как доверие”. Бывший боец ЧВК – о войне в Сирии (“Papers Are Not as Important as Trust,” Former PMC Fighter on War in Syria),” *Sobesednik*, 23 January 2019. <https://sobesednik.ru/obshchestvo/20190122-ya-voeval-v-sirii>

Sobesednik is launching a new section: “Confession of an Anonym.” Its heroes will tell us about things they cannot make public under their real names. The truth may cost them money, reputation, freedom, or even their lives. Our first interlocutor is Aleksander, a private military company (PMC) fighter who recently returned from deployment in Syria...

...Alexander never elaborates on his Syrian trip publicly; he can discuss the details only among former military men like himself. The details may shock people who aren’t prepared and cause condemnation, and if the current policy changes, Aleksander could even be arrested -- the Criminal Code article “On Mercenaries” has not been revoked.

“I am a former officer, an artilleryman; I have a lot of acquaintances in military and near-military circles. One of these ‘acquaintances of my acquaintances,’ as it turned out, served in a PMC and just returned from deployment. He answered my questions succinctly: ‘It is okay to go.’ Both of us had combat experience, served in hot spots, and would not have taken a complete gamble. The acquaintance got paid and said that I could survive there if I thought about what I am doing. And I took the chance....”

“You sign a contract, but everyone understands that it is a worthless piece of paper. Mine did not even have a seal, just signatures. An LLC something or other -- a name I do not even remember because it is impossible to find if anything happens -- is registered in the Virgin Islands.... I flew out in March and spent the next six months in the middle of Syria, north of Palmyra, practically in the desert.”

“My pay rate was R200,000 [about \$3,000] a month. Maybe in Moscow people get this kind of money working in offices, but for the majority of those who go to ‘make war’ this is an unrealistically huge amount. Our main currency there was ammunition. Sell 10 to 15 cartridges to a middleman, get several packs of cigarettes, alcohol, or some gear richer....”

“There is no fierce fighting in Syria anymore. Officially, the military operation is over. But skirmishes and shootouts are a common thing.... Food -- canned food, rice, and pasta. They would drop off a few bags for a group for a month and we gradually ate through them. Fighters laughed that this food was the most dangerous factor of the entire deployment. It is impossible to survive more than six months on it....”

“Equipment is usually your own, brought from Russia. There are no mobile phones. You can, of course, get a phone locally, but after several scandals with fighters taking pictures at secret locations and posting them on social media, control became stricter, for disclosing information also. You could easily get sent home without being paid a single ruble.”

“I fulfilled my personal task -- I returned alive. I did not participate in the obvious dirt that follows you in nightmares for the rest of your life. I paid off the mortgage, which is why I went to Syria and remained in good standing with the commanders. They are calling me back. But I will not go. I had enough; it is anarchy and lawlessness there. The country after the war is even worse than it was during the war.”