

Russian “Military Police” in Syria – A Successful Information Operation?

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Key points

- Since the end of 2016, Russia has deployed Military Police units to Syria, which are comprised of personnel with similar religious views and ethnic origins as the Syrian population.
- Russia’s use of Military Police in Syria supports the campaign of a “Russian peacekeeper.”
- Trained Military Police and supporting specialists are a finite resource in Russia. Training new personnel is time intensive and harmonizing Russian trained forces within the Syrian legal framework will take significant effort.

Introduction / Overview

Russia continues to employ unconventional warfare methods to achieve strategic objectives in targeted countries. In Syria, Russia seeks to integrate Russian Military Police (MP) units with the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF). Interoperability with the SAF interests Russians due to their unconventional capabilities and involvement in information campaigns. However, Russia has a limited quantity of trained MP and supporting specialists. Consistent long-term MP investment will be required to realize this strategic outcome.

Background

Russian MP forces date back to the 18th century. In the Soviet Union (USSR) the Military Commandant's Office operated within the garrisons to maintain law and order within the armed forces. USSR military road safety units were assigned to the Military Traffic Inspectorate. USSR Prosecutor General's military prosecution bodies carried out matters of military justice for armed forces personnel. During this period, all military tribunals were subordinate to the Ministry of Justice. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Russian Armed Forces absorbed the Military Commandant's Office, Military Traffic Inspectorate, and military justice organizations.¹

After this reorganization, military commanders proved ineffective at maintaining law and order, and the number of crimes in the armed forces increased. Therefore, the Russian Military soon formed the military police. The main stages in forming the Russian MPs were:

- 1991-1992: Representatives of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office began discussions on the formation of military police. They proposed the creation of territorial units of military militia on a garrison principle and with various services.²

¹ “History of the creation of the military police of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation”, Russian news agency TASS, January 31, 2019, <https://tass.ru/info/6065284> (accessed May 21, 2020)

² V.M. Koryakin, “DESK BOOK of a soldier of the military police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation”, (Subportal “Military law”, 2015), <http://www.voennoepravo.ru/files/015%20VP.pdf> (accessed May 21, 2020)

- 1994: The Russian President adopted decree Number 1016 on May 24, 1994, *On Urgent Measures to Implement the Federal Program of the Russian Federation to Strengthen the Fight against Crime for 1994-1995*. The decree directed the armed forces, "...create military police in all military districts in the fleets and in large garrisons within the strength of the Russian Armed Forces. The deadline is 1994-1995." However, the military never created the MPs.³
- 1996: The *Duma* (Russian Parliament) drafted federal law Number 96018301-2, "On Military Police." The bill proposed establishing MP as an independent state body, directly reporting to the Russian President.⁴ This bill was withdrawn from consideration on April 17, 2001.
- 2006: During a press conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin noted, "The Minister of Defense has prepared and will make proposals in the near future on the qualitative improvement of this work, including the possible creation of a military police." This plan was not implemented.⁵
- 2009: Russian Minister of Defense Serdyukov signed an order to organize MP under the Military Commandant's and Military Traffic Inspectorate structures. In the spring of 2010, this decision was canceled due to the lack of a regulatory framework.⁶
- 2011: The Russian MP headquarters was formed upon internal regulations of the Ministry of Defense. In May 2012, the Minister of Defense ordered regional MP departments to establish military districts.⁷ On April 8, 2013, the Ministry of Defense drafted the proposed law, *On the Military Police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation*. The law was never codified.⁸
- 2014: On February 3, 2014, Law No. 7-F3 was adopted, *On Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Activities of the Military Police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation*. For the first time it was determined that the Charter of the Military Police would serve as the primary regulatory document governing the activities of the Russian Military Police.⁹ Presidential Decree No. 161 approved this law on March 25, 2015.

Analysis

The Charter of the Russian MP's main purpose is, "Protection of the life, health, rights and freedoms of military personnel, civilian personnel, ensuring law, order, military discipline, road safety, protection of the Armed Forces, as well as within its competence to combat crime and protect other legal relationships protected by law in the field of defense." Employing the MP outside Russia is mentioned only once (Section 3, Article 31), which reads, "Features of the performance of bodies and (or) Military Police in the territory of a foreign state are

³ President of Russia, "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of May 24, 1994 No. 1016", <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/6121/page/4> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

⁴ The State Duma, The Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, "drafted federal law Number 96018301-2", April 17, 2001, https://Sozd.Duma.Gov.Ru/Bill/96018301-2#Bh_Hron (accessed May 21, 2020)

⁵ President of Russia, "Transcript of the press conference for Russian and foreign journalists", January 31, 2006, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23412> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

⁶ Denis Telmanov, "The military police will be headed by the president of the judo federation of St. Petersburg", *Izvestia*, July 2, 2013, <https://iz.ru/news/552894> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

⁷ The Russian Legislation database GARANT, "Order of the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation of May 7, 2012 N 1111 "On the activities of the military police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation", <http://base.garant.ru/70210704/#friends> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

⁸ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation "Federal Law "On the Military Police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation" (draft)", April 8, 2013, <https://doc.mil.ru/documents/projects/more.htm?id=11709428@morfNPAProject> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

⁹ Consortium "Codex", "On Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Activities of the Military Police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, January 29, 2014", <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/499073691> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

established by an international agreement between the Russian Federation and the state in whose territory they are deployed.”¹⁰

Enactment of Article 31 occurred on August 26, 2015 between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the deployment of a Russian Air Force Group in Syria. The Russian-Syrian agreement was ratified by the Federal Law N 376-F3 on October 14, 2016. However, Russian MP is not included in this agreement.¹¹ On January 18, 2017, an addendum was signed between Russia and Syria and ratified by the Federal Law of July 26, 2017 N 181-F3. This addendum first mentioned stationing the Russian MP units with the Russian Aviation Group in Syria.¹²

All Russian MP specialty training occurs in a single dedicated location. After adopting the 2015 Military Police Charter, the first military police training center in Russia opened in December 2017 in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia. According to official information from the Russian Ministry of Defense, over 3,500 personnel trained there in its two-year existence.¹³ Graduates from the training center receive an MP Officer's certificate that entitles them to use non-lethal weapons.¹⁴

The full vision for the Russian MP has not been executed and current efforts focus on basic and specialty training for existing service members. Concurrently, Russian leadership prioritizes the MP's cooperation with similar units in other countries and showcases these events for the media. For example, in 2019 Russia and Iran signed a bilateral protocol and deployed Russian MP to test Tehran's readiness for an international competition.¹⁵ At the end of 2018, the Russian MP formed units in the annexed territories of Abkhazia, Georgia and in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukraine.¹⁶ It is noteworthy that in November 2019, the Russian Naval Police's first exercises took place in the Crimean territory.¹⁷

Despite Russian MP training, and the lack of an appropriate regulatory framework, Russian Armed Forces MP have deployed to Syrian territory since 2016:

- In late 2016, Russian media reported that two MP battalions formed in Chechnya for deployment to Syria. Personnel from various law enforcement agencies in Chechnya formed these units. Interestingly, the Commander of one of the battalions planned to appoint Bolotkhanov Apti Denisoltanovic. Denisoltanovic

¹⁰ President of Russia, “On approval of the Charter of the military police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and amendments to some acts of the President of the Russian Federation”, March 25, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/39549/page/1> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

¹¹ President of Russia, “On ratification of the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the deployment of an aviation group of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic”, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/420329053> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

¹² Consortium “Codex”, “Agreement between Russia and Syria on the deployment of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (as amended on January 18, 2017)”, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/420329053> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

¹³ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation “Military Police Training Center celebrates its second year”, December 14, 2019, http://contract.mil.ru/sel_contract/news/more.htm?id=12266824@egNews (Accessed May 21, 2020)

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation “The graduation of cadets took place in the training center of the military police of the Southern Military District”, April 22, 2019, <https://ens.mil.ru/education/more.htm?id=12227193@egNews> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

¹⁵ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation “The Main Directorate of the Military Police of the Ministry of Defense of Russia will check in Iran readiness for the competition “Highway Patrol”, April 11, 2019, <https://ens.mil.ru/education/more.htm?id=12225400@egNews> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

¹⁶ Alexey Savelov, “A military police unit created at a Russian base in Abkhazia” defense ministry TV channel Zvezda, December 21, 2018, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/201812210303-7x7s.htm> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

¹⁷ Julia Krymova, “For the first time, naval military police exercises were held in Crimea”, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, November 21, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/11/21/reg-ufo/v-krymu-vperve-proveli-ucheniia-morskoj-voennoj-policii.html> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

was the commander of the Chechen unit that took part in hostilities in occupied Donetsk, Ukraine with Military Unit 4157. Previously, Denisoltanovic was a Major in the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Chechnya.¹⁸

- In December 2016, Russian media reported the deployment of a MP battalion to Syria. Russian soldiers provided a video of MP preparing for a Syrian deployment from a Russian base in Khankali, Chechnya. After the videos' showing, MP opened several criminal cases.¹⁹ The Russian Ministry of Defense subsequently announced the deployment of MP battalions to maintain order in the liberated territories.²⁰
- In February 2017, the head of the Republic of Ingushetia, Yunus-bek Evkurov, reported that a Russian MP battalion was operating in Syrian territory. This battalion was comprised of residents from Ingushetia and Chechnya.²¹ Evkurov's words were confirmed by an April 2017 statement by Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic. Kadyrov told the Russian media that one battalion continues to operate in Syria, and another battalion stationed in Chechnya will replace it on a rotational basis.²²
- In October 2019, the Russian media documented a rotation of the Russian MP unit on Syrian territory. It is important to note this MP battalion, which returned to Russia, is part of the 136 Armed Forces Brigade of the Southern Military District of the Russian Armed Forces (military unit No. 63354). The unit headquarters is located in the Republic of Dagestan, and the MP battalion has an estimated 260-300 people.²³

According to some experts, Russian MP in Syria may exhibit the following characteristics:

- Competing for Moscow's attention due to long-strained relations among Northern Caucasus leaders;
- Primarily Muslim with good command of Arabic, and well trained - why Moscow considers their involvement most effective;²⁴
- From 1991 to 2012, there was no conscription in the Chechen Armed Forces. Since 2012, a full-fledged conscription campaign has not carried out on the territory of the Republics of the North Caucasus. Thus, the staffing of Russian MP battalions is carried out at the expense of various Russian departments;
- Contractors in the Russian MP "Syrian battalions" do not perform their functions in Russia; they are specifically recruited for MP deployments and disbanded upon return;²⁵
- Russian MPs serving abroad are likely part of Russia's information campaign that primarily targets the domestic consumer. Russia's main informational objective in Syria is to present a humanitarian mission.

¹⁸ Novaya Gazeta "Two battalions are formed in Chechnya to be sent to Syria" December 20, 2016, <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2016/12/20/127616-v-chechne-formiruyut-dva-batalona-dlya-otpravki-v-siriyu> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

¹⁹ @Kavkaz.Realii, "Chechens Sent to Serve in Syria," Khankala, December 6, 2016, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/hankala-chechentsev-otpravlyayut-sluzhit-v-siriyu/28159413.html> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

²⁰ Radio Liberty, "Two Battalions Are Being Formed in Chechnya to Be Sent to Syria," December 21, 2016, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28188597.html> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

²¹ RosBusinessConsulting, "A military police battalion from Ingushetia was sent to Syria", February 13, 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/13/02/2017/58a1c09e9a79475806d0095d#> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

²² Kommersant, "Ramzan Kadyrov: one battalion of military police from Chechnya is in Syria", April 19, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3275984> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

²³ Molodez Dagestan, "The military police battalion returned to Dagestan from Syria", October 3, 2019, <https://md-gazeta.ru/news/76514> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

²⁴ RosBusinessConsulting, "A battalion of military police from Ingushetia was sent to Syria", February 13, 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/13/02/2017/58a1c09e9a79475806d0095d> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

²⁵ Sasha Busova, "Military police for Syria complete with Muslims", *National News Service*, October 24, 2019, <https://nsn.fm/army-and-weapons/voennyi-ekspert-rossiiskuu-voennuu-politsiu-dlya-sirii-sozdali-iz-musulman> (Accessed May 21, 2020)

Most reported military casualties are actually Russian private military contractors not officially recognized by Moscow.²⁶

Recommendations:

- Monitor the activities of the Russian MP deployed to Syria as well as the various paramilitary groups and private military companies involved with law enforcement.
- Monitor Russia's internal and external messaging relating to MP deployment.

²⁶ Mark Galeotti, "Not-So-Soft Power: Russia's Military Police in Syria," War on the Rocks, October 2, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/not-so-soft-power-russias-military-police-in-syria/> (Accessed May 21, 2020)