On February 7, 2018, a firefight broke out between U.S. troops and pro-Syrian government forces in Deir al-Zour, Syria. The pro-regime forces that led the attack included private Russian mercenaries, marking the first time that Americans and Russians had directly engaged in Syria.¹ Shifting narratives from the Kremlin, and the fact that the Russians involved were members of a private military company (PMC), have raised questions about the extent to which the Russian government knew of—or directed—the attack. The use of PMCs provides plausible deniability for the Russian government, as the links between such groups and Russia’s leadership are often unclear. This uncertainty is leveraged by the Kremlin in its military strategy to stall adversaries’ responses and make short-term strategic gains. With Russian PMCs expanding to new regions, the United States and its allies need to develop a clear strategy for countering the threats from these groups.

In the days leading up to the attack, U.S. military personnel watched as pro-Syrian troops amassed near a U.S. outpost. Military intelligence revealed that many of these troops were speaking Russian and likely belonged to a Russian PMC named the Wagner Group.² According to Pentagon statements, U.S. military commanders used U.S.-Russian deconfliction lines to question the group’s actions and to warn of a U.S. response, but their Russian counterparts claimed no involvement, even once the attack had begun.³ The four-hour firefight demonstrated deft use of U.S. air support in combat and resulted in no U.S. casualties while an estimated 300 of the Russian mercenaries and Syrian fighters were killed.⁴

The official narrative from Moscow—that no Russian citizens were involved—began to shift after the attack, and slowly some Russian casualties were reported.⁵ While the Kremlin’s numbers have stayed low, other sources suggest many more casualties, with some placing the number of Russians dead at roughly 100, with 200 more wounded.⁶ It is unlikely that the Russian military and foreign ministry would lack its own intelligence about the attack and resulting casualties. In fact, since the incident in February, reports have surfaced that Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is believed to control the Wagner Group, was in touch with Kremlin officials shortly before and after the attacks.⁷ Prigozhin enjoys close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin and is said to have “secured permission” from a Russian minister to move ahead with the affront.⁸ The plausible deniability afforded to the government by the use of PMCs means that whether Kremlin officials played a large role in planning or approving the attack, or no role at all, the government can refuse blame.
Russia’s shifting public narrative points to the difficulty of addressing these groups to domestic audiences. The private nature of PMCs allows many of their actions to remain secret, and some suggest that Russia employs private militias in areas of conflict to avoid having to report deaths, which would be required with regular soldiers. In the case of Deir al-Zour, the Russian government likely sought to keep news of the deaths under wraps in order to prevent further erosion of domestic support for the military’s role in Syria.10

This incident is just one in a string of many in which the Russian government has been accused of using PMCs to advance its foreign objectives while maintaining plausible deniability.11 And the presence of Russian PMCs is spreading internationally: in addition to Syria and Ukraine, the Wagner Group is reported to have soldiers in Libya, Sudan, and the Central African Republic, where the groups are often hired by governments and corporations to provide security for natural resource facilities, in addition to their work for the Russian government.12 Russian PMCs are primarily composed of veterans and former officers of the military intelligence agency (GRU) and federal security agency (FSB).13 Some contend the FSB played a role in the creation of the Slavonic Corps, an early Russian military company, and later the Wagner Group, which notably shares a location with a Russian military base.14 In 2014 in Eastern Ukraine, when Russia used “little green men” to bolster the ranks of the Ukrainian separatists, members of the Wagner Group were discovered to have taken part in some of these separatist militias and contributed to the fighting.15

The deniability resulting from Russia’s use of private military groups makes crafting a response difficult. Yet there are a number of steps the United States and its allies can take to counter the threats posed by these groups. First, U.S. leadership should focus on transparency regarding foreign government ties to proxy forces. Even if a PMC is not led or directed by a government figure, using intelligence to expose links between the group and the government can help to hold that government accountable. Russia’s military adventures in Syria are a business opportunity for Prigozhin, given his role in the Wagner Group and close relationship with Putin.16 Exposure (and proof of) these financial links to the Russian public would raise the question of whether Putin’s friends are profiting off of Russian deaths abroad. This would have serious political ramifications. A credible threat of exposure of these links could act as a deterrent for Russia’s future use of PMCs in its military strategy. Some have argued that by not placing the blame fully on Russia for the Deir al-Zour attack, the United States has set a dangerous precedent that enables the Russians to continue using proxy actors.17

Furthermore, the United States must make clear that it will hold the Russian government accountable for the conduct of its country’s private militias. In situations of armed conflict, PMCs, like armies, must abide by international humanitarian...
law, and it is in part the responsibility of the state that hired the group to ensure those standards are met. Of course, the United States is no stranger to the use of private military groups. The U.S. government is the number one employer of PMCs worldwide and in some areas, such as Afghanistan, contractors greatly outnumber regular service members. By holding its own PMCs to standards of international law as well as U.S. laws—as happened with the indictment of officials from Blackwater—the United States might work to establish norms of PMC conduct that would deter events similar to that in Deir al-Zour. It is also important that the United States use clear language to first define what it considers provocative actions and then to identify how it will respond to these offenses, before finally following through with these repercussions to discourage the adversary from repeating such offenses.

With the number of Russian mercenaries seemingly on the rise and their presence spreading globally, it’s vital for U.S. security that the role of these groups in Russian foreign policy is understood. The current Russian use of PMCs not only poses a threat to a norms-based international order, but also a very real physical threat to Americans, as seen in the February 2018 incident. Some steps to counter these threats have been taken: Yevgeny Prigozhin was indicted in February 2018 for his role in interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, exposing his ties to the Russian government. There have also been several recent examples of strong U.S. messaging and follow-through with threats, like the diplomatic response following the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom and the use of deconfliction lines in the case of Deir al-Zour to warn of U.S. military action. These types of firm responses should be emulated and bolstered in response to other coercive actions. By holding Russia accountable for the hostile actions of its private militias, tying officials to the actions of these groups worldwide, and following through with stated consequences, the United States and its allies would signal that the Kremlin’s use of PMCs in such a way is not viable and would help prevent another incident like that in Deir al-Zour from happening again.

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6. Maria Tsvetkova, “Russian toll in Syria battle was 300 killed and wounded: sources.”


8. Ibid.

9. Maria Tsvetkova, “Russian toll in Syria battle was 300 killed and wounded: sources.”


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