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Multiple reports confirm US killed Russians in Syrian oilfield airstrikes



Reports emerging from Russia indicate that anywhere from dozens to hundreds of Russian military contractors may have been killed in the US air and artillery assault against a column of fighters loyal to the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in eastern Deir Ezzor province on February 7.

As yet, a handful of names of Russians killed in the one-sided battle have emerged. The right-wing nationalist “Other Russia” group reported that one of its members, Kirill Ananiev, who had gone to Syria a year ago, was among the dead. A spokesman for the group said there had been “substantial losses” inflicted upon “paramilitary structures with ties to Russia.”

A paramilitary organization calling itself the Baltic Cossak Union posted a statement online reporting that one of its members, Vladimir Loginov, had died in the US bombardment in Deir Ezzor.

The Conflict Intelligence Team, a Russian opposition group that has monitored developments in Syria, provided three other names: Alexi Ladigin of Ryazan and Stanislav Matviev and Igor Kostorov of Kaliningrad.

The Pentagon initially said it had killed 100 fighters in its February 7 attack, which took place on the western bank of the Euphrates River. It claimed it had responded to an advance by as many as 500 fighters, backed by tanks and artillery, on a headquarters of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, the US proxy ground force that consists overwhelmingly of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia. US special forces troops directing the YPG's operations in the area were reportedly at the site.

The US troops called in a withering assault by Apache attack helicopters, an AC-130 Specter gunship and F-15 fighter jets, as well artillery batteries.

The Syrian government denounced the US firestorm as a "massacre" and a "war crime," insisting that its fighters had been targeting remnants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has reported that it mounted another attack in the same area on Saturday, calling in a strike against a Russian-made T-72 tank, which it claimed had been "maneuvering" into firing range of an SDF "defensive position."

In both cases, US military spokesmen asserted that American forces used "deconfliction lines" to inform the Russian military about the strikes before and during their execution.

The location of the two attacks reveals the real motives underlying the military confrontations. Both took place near the Omar oil field, the Hashim gas field and the former Conoco gas refinery.

Deir Ezzor is the center of Syria's gas and oil industry, which ISIS captured and exploited to finance its operations. The US military was so determined to lay claim to these strategic resources that it negotiated a surrender of the Syrian city of Raqqa last October in exchange for the evacuation of some 4,000 ISIS fighters to Deir Ezzor, where they were redeployed to impede the advance of Syrian government forces. Washington's ground proxies in the YPG-dominated SDF were then rushed to the area to seize control of the oil and gas fields.

Washington's aim is to deny these resources to the Assad government in order to impede its consolidation of control and the beginning of the shattered country's reconstruction.

Russian military expert Viktor Murakhovsky told the daily *Kommersant*: "For the Arab Republic, these are serious resources... Actually, control over such resources in many ways was the source of the civil war in Syria."

The Russian government of President Vladimir Putin, while denouncing US machinations in Syria, has remained tight-lipped about the reported Russian casualties in Deir-Ezzor.

Reuters cited sources in Russia who said that “dozens” of Russians were killed on February 7. Bloomberg wrote Tuesday that two Russian sources had reported more than 200 soldiers, “mostly Russians,” had died in the US attack.

Grigory Yavlinsky, the leader of the pro-Western, free-market Yabloko party and one of the original architects of capitalist restoration, issued a statement demanding that the Putin government make public what happened in Deir Ezzor.

“If there have been mass deaths of Russian citizens in Syria, then the relevant authorities, including the general staff of the Russian armed forces, have a duty to inform the country about this and decide who bears responsibility,” Yavlinsky said on Twitter. He is running against Putin in next month’s presidential election.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Tuesday that the account of Russian dead in Deir Ezzor was only “information published in the media,” adding that he did not believe Yavlinsky had “more reliable sources of information.”

Russia’s Defense Ministry, meanwhile, has stated only that no members of the Russian military were in the area at the time of the attack. Other sources close to the Russian government have described reports of mass casualties as Western-driven “information warfare.”

Vitaly Naumkin, a leading expert on the Middle East who has collaborated closely with Russia’s Foreign Ministry on Syria, was somewhat more frank. He told Bloomberg: “No one wants to start a world war over a volunteer or mercenary who wasn’t sent by the state and was hit by the Americans.”

The Russians killed in the US attack, whatever their actual number, are believed to have been military contractors employed by the Wagner Group, an outfit that has been described as Russia’s equivalent to America’s Blackwater. Contractors from the group have been used to guard key facilities in Syria, including the Russian naval base at Tartus and the airbase at Hmeimim, as well as oil and gas installations. They have also been imbedded with Syrian troops, participating in heavy combat.

It strains credulity to accept that these contractors are operating in Syria with tanks and artillery without the approval and close collaboration of the Russian government. While Putin announced during a visit to Syria last December that Russian armed forces had achieved victory over ISIS and were being withdrawn from the country, the fighting continues, and Russian military contractors are apparently heavily involved.

The use of such forces, which allows the Kremlin to deny responsibility for military clashes and conceal from public scrutiny the casualties in Syria, has obvious attractions for the Putin government.

It has also been reported that Wagner is involved in deals with the Syrian government that guarantee Russian capitalist interests up to 25 percent of revenues from oil and gas fields that its fighters retake.

On Tuesday, Russian Minister of Energy Alexander Novak announced that Moscow had signed a “roadmap” agreement with the Syrian government for the recovery and development of oil and gas fields. It is highly probable that whoever died in the US bombardment in Deir Ezzor on February 7 was acting in furtherance of this agreement.

Russia’s military intervention in Syria, launched in 2015, has been directed at propping up Moscow’s principal ally in the Middle East and impeding the US-backed attempt to carry out regime-change through the arming and support of Al Qaeda-linked militias.

In part, Russian motives were bound up with the interests of Russia’s ruling oligarchs and Gazprom, the country’s largest corporation, which faced the prospect of Qatar gaining access to Syrian territory for a gas pipeline directed toward Western Europe, undermining Russian profit interests. Moscow also justifiably feared Syria becoming a base for Al Qaeda-linked Islamist fighters drawn from Russia’s Caucasus region to launch a campaign, backed by the CIA, to destabilize and ultimately dismember the Russian Federation.

Despite this defensive element in Moscow’s intervention in Syria, there is nothing progressive about the motives of the Russian government, which represents the interests of a thoroughly reactionary and criminal capitalist oligarchy. It has, in recent weeks, provided tacit approval for the Turkish assault on the Kurdish enclave of Afrin, as well as for the Israeli bombing of Syrian and Iranian forces.

Whatever the attempts of the Putin government to smooth over the latest military confrontation in Deir Ezzor, the objective geo-strategic conflicts underlying the fighting in Syria are pushing the world to the brink of a war between the world’s two major nuclear powers.

Reflecting the increasingly belligerent posture adopted by the US military and intelligence apparatus, along with decisive layers of the American ruling establishment, the *Washington Post* on Tuesday published an editorial calling for a further escalation in Syria.

“Far from winding down, Syria's civil war is threatening to trigger direct conflicts between the United States and Turkey, Israel and Iran, and even the United States and Russia. These threats can be defused only by high-level diplomacy backed by the credible threat of force. So far, the Trump administration’s response looks underpowered,” the *Post* warned.

The editorial insisted that Washington can block Russia from becoming “the dominant power in Syria and, by extension, a major player in the Middle East” only by means of a major military escalation.