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# Middle East, an Emerging Playground for the Private Military Contractors (PMCs)

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary Private military contractors (PMCs), as opposed to traditional mercenaries, are organised legal entities, corporate bodies providing diverse services, ranging from security guarding high-profile people and government officers, sensitive facilities like convoy escorting, ensuring goods and personnel transit in conflict regions, training, and advising states and other organisations. PMCs are important actors in the conflict prone. Middle East, where interstate and intrastate conflicts thrive, posing a challenge to the traditional state monopoly of violence. The PMCs have been blamed for grave human rights violations caused by lack of cultural awareness among the personnel, exploitation of the personnel with unfair contracts, dangerous working conditions, and insufficient support, magnifying unrest and instability in the region. The major powers are increasingly using PMCs in the Middle East for strategic and financial benefits. For example, Russia's Wagner Group has played a very strong role in securing its interests in Syria by supporting the Assad regime and helping with the acquisition of oil. Certain PMCs also show a unique blend of ideology with profit-driven warfare, complicating regional security dynamics which are now recognised as the "Jihadist PMCs" such as the "Malhama Tactics". While PMCs have often aggravated instability, they also possess potential for constructive roles. This paper will attempt to understand the role of PMCs in the Middle East with special emphasis on Syria while taking a look at Jihadist PMCs.

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Private Military Contractors, Jihadist PMC, Profit-driven warfare, Mercenaries, State monopoly, Corporate body

## Introduction

The emergence of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) in the last two decades has significantly transformed the face of contemporary conflict, especially in areas plagued by instability like the Middle East. PMCs, who exist in a legal limbo, offer essential services from security to direct combat support, sometimes playing roles states are unwilling or incapable of filling. Whereas the industry has provided cost-effective solutions, it has also caused controversies regarding accountability, human rights abuses, and the legal status of their personnel. In Syria, for example, where the conflict has attracted many external powers, PMCs have featured prominently in state and non-state operations, such as the use of jihadist-related contractors. This paper investigates the use of PMCs in the Middle East, specifically Syria, a principal location where private military players, including jihadist-affiliated actors, have heavily impacted the conflict. Particularly, the Russian-supported Wagner Group has also sparked concerns about its activities with illegal operations and human rights violations.

The research also investigates the increasing involvement of jihadist PMCs and how they engage -

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in asymmetric warfare and what this means for strategic implications. By engaging these problems, this paper aims to critically evaluate the complex dynamics of the private military players in the Middle East and the influence on regional security and international law.

### **1.PMCs: History and Relavance**

Since the ancient period, mercenaries have been popularly used to supplement and sometimes replace regular armies out on campaigns or in the field. However, in the mid-19th century, nations shifted their focus away from mercenaries and toward developing their regular forces. Only in recent decades has there been a new demand for soldiers of fortune, though concerns about their dubious ethics and profit-driven motives have led to questions about their legality. This resulted in the United Nations adopting the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries treaty in December of 1989, with the primary gain of suppressing access to mercenary services. This treaty entered into force in October 2001 and defined a mercenary as any person who is recruited locally or abroad to take on a combat role and has not been sent on official state military duty. To circumvent these rules, many enterprising professionals would go on to form private military companies, or PMCs, which differ just enough from the mercenary definition to maintain legality. Where mercenaries engage in combat, PMCs claim to act in self-defence, mercenaries get deployed, and PMCs conduct routine security, often working as international firms. PMCs provides military and political entities with combat assistance, military training, risk assessment, logistics, intelligence, and security. Many of these companies are useful to world powers as the discrete connections between a PMC and its client allow for a client's involvement by proxy into conflicts as unofficial belligerence, permitting them to exercise geopolitical and military influence without having to suffer the casualties or logistical concerns of discretion have made PMCs staple of modern conflicts. PMCs have also been involved in attempts to overthrow entire governments like Silver Corp USA, which participated in the failed operation aimed at deposing Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in the 1990s. One of the earliest examples of the modern PMC can be traced back to the KMS LTD, better known as the Keenie Meenie Services. Founded in 1975 by 4 British war veterans and staffed by ex-SAS personnel, Keenie Meenie started out protecting the British in Buenos Aires then in 1976 expanded to training the Sultan of Oman's special forces, a unit set up and commanded by Keenie Meenie contractors directly. Information on KMS is shadowy. It was also involved in the Sri Lankan civil war which occurred between 1983 and 2009. By 1998 KMS closed down and a new contractor emerged in America, Blackwater, founded in 1995 by former U.S. Navy SEAL Erik Prince, Blackwater, at first offered typical PMC services such as domestic security and military training. Another important PMC is the Wagner Group established in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin, a veteran of the Chechen wars, Wagner was owned and funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Wagner's personnel typically consist of Russian ex-military operatives. As one of Russia's biggest PMC groups, Wagner has been instrumental in Russia's quest to gain geopolitical footholds and influence around the world, all without the need to send actual troops into international conflicts. Wagner has gained Russia's sizable influence in Africa, including access to diamonds, oil, and warm water ports. Through Wagner, Russia has been able to establish an overseas presence with little risk, only making use of the Russian military to step in once situations have stabilized. Wagner was first deployed in Ukraine in 2014, where it assisted in work including assassinations and participants. During the Syrian civil war, The Syrian army's manpower fell from 250,000 at the beginning of the conflict in 2011 to only 125,000 by 2015. In need of soldiers to fight ISIS and other Syrian rebels, Syria requested help. Russia extended its hand, providing logistical support along with the deployment of troops in 2015, followed shortly by the Wagner Group. The PMC was first tasked with protecting military bases and other Infrastructure, but before long had been shifted to a combat role in late 2016 and this is how the PMCs entered the Middle East.

### **2. Increasing Trend of Private Military and Security Companies (PMCs) in Contemporary Global Conflicts**

PMSCs are part and parcel of nearly all global conflicts, including both the Cold War and ongoing struggles in Ukraine.

PMCs have been applied by both U.S. and Russia to serve as a proxy means of furthering military interests, while still concealing this as a deniability factor or, at best, strategic maneuver. These firms have played an essential role in places like Afghanistan, where there were more private security contractors than the military personnel. They have also been applied for secret missions and proxy wars. The U.S. has traditionally relied on PMCs for various reasons such as the Post-Vietnam Syndrome: After the Vietnam War, the U.S. was afraid to deploy its forces outside its territory and sought help from PMCs instead. The use of PMCs saves money on pensions, insurance, and the bureaucracy associated with declaring war. The use of PMCs affords the United States a method of conducting military operations that neither the public nor Congress need be aware of, making it part of the US foreign policy.

Russia has used significant numbers of PMCs in operations such as the occupation of Crimea and ongoing Ukraine conflict. Although Vladimir Putin denied using private forces during the occupation of Crimea, he eventually admitted to having used them. Russia used companies for psychological warfare and false flag operations, in an effort to influence the discourse of the conflict. For instance, Russian private forces wore uniforms of the Ukrainian military to give the public false impressions of who was behind a particular action. In the ongoing war in Ukraine, both Russia and Ukraine have made use of PMCs. Wagner Group, among other Russian mercenaries, are actively involved in the conflict. Russia has used mercenaries in areas such as Africa and Latin America, with one of the strongholds being in Venezuela.

The UK has used PMCs, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, with hundreds of personnel deployed. China is expanding its private military capabilities, though it mainly uses Private Security Companies (PSCs) for non-combat operations, like guarding infrastructure in foreign nations. China has invested a lot in local PMCs to secure its interests, especially in regions related to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including areas in Africa, Central Asia, and South Sudan.

India currently employs PMCs for security purposes mainly, such as guarding infrastructure, intelligence, logistics. However, the use of PMCs for military purposes in the future is also on the cards considering the global trends. There is a growing apprehension about the possible use of PMCs by China in areas like Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, which border unstable territories like Myanmar.

An emerging issue is the prevalence of PMCs use by other non-state actors: insurgent groups or terrorist groups. Malhama Tactical, called the "Blackwater of Jihadists," is one such group that is purportedly training various militia in Syria. The paper reviews how private forces are increasingly becoming involved in more conflicts in the Middle East and Africa and at times even working for governments such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who engage in actions that support the military operations of terrorists.

The advantages of PMCs in modern warfare are many. States can deny involvement in certain military actions, reducing domestic backlash. Further PMCs are cheaper than deploying regular soldiers, as they avoid expenses like pensions and training. They can also be hired for specific operations, reducing the burden on regular forces. PMCs can be used to manipulate the narrative of a conflict, such as in false flag operations.

However, the use of PMCs comes with significant drawbacks such as the PMCs can contribute to human rights violations and extrajudicial killings. Their involvement in War becomes increasingly profit-driven, with security bought and sold in the global market. PMCs are not subject to the international law which is binding upon regular military forces, and so they are likely to commit more crimes. Additionally there would be a possibility that PMCs may be engaged in terrorism or insurgency training also poses a challenge, as it can help global terrorist networks grow. There is a broad offer of military services by Private Military Contractors (PMCs), operating under different business models depending upon the country's origin. While the South African model, well represented by the company Executive Outcomes, considers private armies going on independent campaigns financed by available local resources; the US-based model, particularly Blackwater, integrates PMCs into traditional army operations, particularly in logistics or back-office-related tasks to benefit from cost efficiencies.

Meanwhile, the Russian model, represented by Wagner, is a paramilitary organization with activities that are broad and destabilizing, including combat, propaganda, and criminal operations.

### **3. The concept of Jihadist PMCs in the Middle East**

Jihadist Private Military Companies (PMCs), like Malhama Tactical, are a growing and unique phenomenon in modern warfare, combining the traditional mercenary activity with an ideologically-driven goal. They offer military training, tactical support, and direct combat involvement in the context of jihadist conflicts. Although these companies are smaller in scale compared to state-funded mercenaries, they are increasingly vital to the operational capabilities of jihadist groups in regions like Syria. These PMCs offer specialized services, ranging from basic military training to high-tech support like drones and air defense systems. A great example of this hybrid model is Malhama Tactical, which, as one of the most notable jihadist PMCs, was at once a training provider and a combatant force in the Syrian Civil War.

The organization was founded originally as a training outfit by Ali al-Shishani, the Chechen jihadist leader. Its main clients consisted of other jihadist groups in Syria, including some affiliated with HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), which is a dominant jihadist faction. However, the model of the group evolved, especially after 2019, when it decided to become directly involved in the Syrian battlefield. Malhama Tactical gained its popularity with military trainings, mainly reconnaissance and anti-aircraft defense. The activities involved in their trainings began to expand and included high-tech support, for instance, the operations of drones. During 2019, when the Syrian government and Russia escalated their military operations in Idlib, Malhama Tactical transformed from a behind-the-scenes consultant to an active participant in combat. The group offered drone support, and manned air defense, especially against Russian and Syrian airstrikes. This operational change revealed the group's growing role in battlefield activities, even though it was still a non-state actor that operated largely outside the boundaries of traditional military structures.

Malhama Tactical's ethnic composition has also changed over time. Initially, the group was composed mainly of Russian-speaking Chechen militants, but over time it diversified its clientele. As its operations spread, so did its linguistic and cultural reach, the group would increasingly offer training in Arabic and Turkish, both more suitable languages for the changed demographic of clients it was increasingly dealing with.

The most notable involvement of Malhama Tactical in the Syrian conflict was when it engaged in Idlib in 2019. As Syrian and Russian forces stepped up their campaign to regain lost ground in the northwest, Malhama Tactical allied with local rebel factions, including Turkish-backed groups. It was an essential player in reconnaissance operations, gathering crucial intelligence and tactical support. They also carried out operations with commercial drones, such as the DJI Mavic Pro, used to scout positions of the Syrian army. Equipped with high-definition cameras, these drones became an essential component in real-time intelligence gathering for rebel forces.

The group also played a role in countering the Russian and Syrian air forces advantage with anti-air operations. The group was famously reported to have shot down a Syrian SU-22 fighter and for all their increasing connections with HTS and other jihadist groups, Malhama Tactical also made a point of asserting itself as independent.

Malhama Tactical has shown a keen sense of media and propaganda, using YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Russian social networks (VKontakte and Odnoklassniki) to promote its activities. While most of these websites have since pulled their content due to counterterrorism efforts, the group's online outreach has expanded into Arabic, English, and German to reach an even broader international audience. Besides online propaganda, Malhama Tactical has also used different methods of fundraising, including cryptocurrency, online payment services, and traditional donation channels.

The future of Malhama Tactical depends heavily on the general geopolitical situation in Syria, specifically the role of HTS and other larger groups that provide protection and support to smaller factions such as Malhama Tactical. If the power of these larger factions is lost or defeated, the status and survival of groups like Malhama Tactical may be in danger. That will be for now, and the group continues to operate in a hybrid capacity—part trainer, part combatant—adapting to the shifting needs of the conflict while maintaining its independence and commercial viability.

#### **4. Russia, Syria and the fall of Assad**

Having understood the nature and role of PMCs, one can move on to some context regarding the complex scenario in Syria which would give a background to access the role of PMCs in the territory. Since the early 1970s, the Assad family has dominated Syria's government. The most serious challenge to the families' long rule over the country erupted in 2011 when protests evolved into a revolution, which evolved into a full-scale civil war. Then after nearly a decade of brutal fighting throughout the country that claimed the lives of around 600,000 people and forced more than six million others to flee the country as refugees. The war entered into a tenuous ceasefire in 2020. They largely froze the front lines where they stood at the time, which left the Assad regime in control over most of the country's major cities and population centres. Many began presuming that Assad, along with his Russian and Iranian supporters, had effectively won the war where Syria had become a frozen conflict. But then, four years into the ceasefire generally holding steady, it was suddenly shattered by a renewed rebel offensive against the government that began at the end of November 2024 and at the complete shock of the world, this renewed rebel offensive exposed the Assad regime in the country, and the Assad family's 54-year long rule in the country was decisively overthrown in a matter of only 11 days. Since then, this sudden and unexpected collapse of such a long-lasting regime in such a strategically significant country has generated one of the 21st century's most substantial geopolitical earthquakes, the aftershocks of which will be felt far and wide throughout the world as the players on the Middle East chessboard recalibrate their moves and plays.

Russia and the Assad dynasty in Syria had a very long and very mutually beneficial relationship. After Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, first rose to power in Syria in 1971, he almost immediately agreed to lease the port of Tartus on the Syrian coast to the Soviet Navy, Tartus then became an extremely strategically important asset to the Soviets as it was the only Soviet naval base located anywhere on the Mediterranean Sea. It enabled the Soviet Navy to use the Tartus as a resupply and replenishment base to support their operations in the Mediterranean without having to pass through the NATO controlled straight back to their own domestic ports on the Black Sea. Russia remained the primary arms supplier of Syria, while Syria continued to lease the port of Tartus to the Russian Black Sea Fleet in 2005, Syria agreed to allow the Russians to expand their naval facilities in Tartus in exchange for Russia riding off more than 70% of Syria's \$13 billion debt that was leftover from the Soviet era. Russia diplomatically supported the Assad regime by using its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to veto multiple resolutions by Western and Arab countries that called for sanctions or military intervention in Syria.

In 2015, as it appeared that the Assad regime was on the brink of imminent collapse in Syria with dramatic rebel advancements, Russia initiated a massive full-scale military intervention in Syria to save Assad and to save their continued access to the port. By 2017, the Russian military intervention had largely stabilized Assad's position in Syria, and in return, Assad led Syria to sign an agreement with the Russians that granted to let the bases were granted full legal immunity from Syrian jurisdiction. However, with the collapse of Assad's government in Syria, Russia's enormous investment into propping him up in the country now seems like it might all go up in smoke. Now after another revolution and coming up of new forces in power leading to a security vacuum, offering a chance for jihadist organizations such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its associated private military contractor, Malhama Tactical, to increase their control. Malhama Tactical, which has specialized in training Islamist insurgents in sophisticated guerrilla warfare tactics, might take advantage of the anarchy to enhance HTS's military -

strength and make itself a power to be reckoned with in post-Assad Syria. Their experience with urban warfare and asymmetric operations can help them outmaneuver their competitors, perhaps setting the direction for the next chapter of Syria's war. That would also be troublesome in terms of allowing transnational jihadist networks to gain a foothold in Syria and make regional stability and international counterterrorism efforts more difficult.

### **5. Syria and Wagner: A case study**

The involvement of PMCs began as early as 2013, with the Slavonic Corps, a precursor to Wagner, deployed by the Moran Security Group, a private firm registered in Hong Kong. These companies were initially used to support Russian interests in Syria without the direct involvement of the Russian military. Their role was part of a broader strategy to secure Russia's national interests in the region and maintain the Assad regime in power, which was crucial for protecting Russia's geopolitical and strategic goals.

Russia's primary motivation for using PMCs in Syria was to preserve the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, who had supported Russian interests in the Middle East. If Assad had been overthrown, it would have led to a potential collapse of the Syrian government, which was viewed as a significant loss for Russia. Additionally, Russia wanted to avoid the destabilizing effect of radical groups in Syria, including fighters from the Caucasus and former Soviet republics who posed a direct threat to Russian domestic stability. By engaging these radicals in Syria, Russia aimed to prevent them from returning to Russia and destabilizing regions such as Chechnya.

Another key factor was Syria's geostrategic significance, as it provided Russia with vital access to the Mediterranean Sea through naval bases like Tartus and airbases such as Khmeimim in Latakia and Shayrat in Homs. Syria was strategically important for maintaining Russia's military presence in the region, especially as Turkey, a NATO member, controlled the Bosphorus Strait, which could block Russian access to the Mediterranean if necessary.

PMCs were used to support the Syrian military in a variety of ways, including the protection of critical infrastructure, securing oil and gas facilities, and assisting with combat operations. Wagner Group, in particular, was a significant player in these operations, providing a force that could act as a proxy for Russian military involvement.

PMCs allowed Russia to engage in military operations while avoiding the political and legal risks associated with sending regular Russian troops into Syria. By using PMCs, Russia was able to mask its direct involvement in Syria and avoid the accountability that would come with official military casualties.

The Slavonic Corps, deployed in 2013, was the first Russian PMC to operate in Syria, with a mission to protect infrastructure under a contract with the Syrian Ministry of Oil and Mineral Resources. This early engagement was largely an experiment that exposed several challenges, including a lack of sufficient equipment, training, and coordination with Syrian forces. These initial failures were later addressed when the Wagner Group became the primary PMC supporting Assad's forces.

**Wagner Group Operations:** Wagner's military presence in Syria was initiated back in 2015 with around 1,350 troops in place. At one point in time, they were increasing and maintained a level of constant deployments to around 2,000 to 3,000. Wagner carried out various operations- reconnaissance, security for convoys, and offensive actions-in company with the military forces of both Syria and Russia. Wagner was particularly involved in the recapture of Palmyra from ISIS in 2016 and 2017, as well as in operations to secure oil fields and other critical infrastructure.

The group's operations were divided into phases:

1. Ground Reconnaissance (2015–early 2016): Wagner's initial role was limited to reconnaissance and providing logistical support to Syrian forces.
2. Baptism by Fire (2016): Wagner was drawn deeper into battle, especially in Palmyra, where it experienced its first heavy losses.
3. Deep Involvement (2017–2018): Wagner was also used to seize oil and gas fields and provide security for the regime's troops in key cities, such as Deir el-Zour. Manpower and military capabilities expanded.

During the battles for Palmyra and later engagements, Wagner operated alongside Russian special forces and Syrian troops, benefiting from Russian air support and artillery. In some cases, Wagner received official recognition for its actions, with commanders receiving awards like the Order of Courage from the Russian government.

Despite Wagner's involvement in key operations, its deployment in Syria was not without challenges. A significant issue arose in 2017 when Wagner faced a decline in support from the Russian Ministry of Defense, which affected the group's operational effectiveness. This shift was linked to disagreements between Wagner's leadership and the Russian military, as well as changes in funding and command structures. Moreover, political motivations constrained Wagner's cooperation with the Russian forces, especially in the Second Battle of Palmyra and the later fighting in Deir el-Zour.

The offensive of Deir el-Zour in 2018 revealed the risks inherent in the activities of Wagner. At the beginning of February 2018, there was a fierce clash between Wagner fighters and U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurdish forces near Deir el-Zour. The battle resulted in significant casualties for Wagner, with estimates suggesting that up to 100 mercenaries were killed. The Russian government was quick to downplay the incident, claiming that only five Russian citizens had been killed, thereby avoiding any direct acknowledgment of the deaths of Russian nationals in combat. This allowed the Russian government to distance itself from the operation and avoid escalating tensions with the U.S. In addition to Wagner, other PMCs were active in Syria, including companies like Evro Polis and Schit. These groups provided various services such as training, security, and protection of infrastructure. Evro Polis, for example, was involved in securing oil fields and other critical infrastructure in exchange for a share of the profits, which was estimated at 25% of the output. Schit, on the other hand, focused on protecting oil fields in Palmyra and other strategic areas.

## **6. Conclusion**

Although PMCs have played a crucial role in meeting humanitarian requirements—most notably in conflict zones where states lack capacity—PMSCs are criticized for their involvement in sustaining violence. The absence of a universally binding regulatory framework continues to be one of the greatest challenges in managing the complex role of PMSCs in the region. As the international community addresses these concerns, a more unified approach must be adopted to ensure that PMCs conduct their operations in a way that respects human rights and international law while effectively addressing both security and humanitarian concerns in areas of conflict.

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