

**The Use of Mercenaries: A New Recourse to an Old Practice for
Waging War in the Middle East**

Yoel Guzansky, Daniel Rakov, and Gallia Lindenstrauss

A phenomenon that has intensified over the past decade in the Middle East is the use of mercenaries to project power and to realize interests. It seems that the Gulf states, Turkey, and Russia are leaders in this trend, using numerous mercenaries for combat missions beyond their borders. Mercenaries give those who deploy them a tool for managing warfare beyond their own borders, and another means of power projection while reducing their official losses. Israel, which is currently engaged in the struggle against Iranian entrenchment in Syria, has so far no direct military contact with mercenaries. However, the recourse to mercenary forces figures increasingly in its strategic environment, demonstrated both by its rivals and by its partners. It is therefore important to consider the challenges and opportunities posed by this tool.

Upheavals in the Middle East have created significant areas wracked by violence, involving regional and global players struggling to reshape the region according to their interests. A trend that has intensified over the past decade is the use of mercenaries to project power in the region. The Gulf states, Turkey, and Russia are leaders in this trend, using numerous mercenaries for combat missions beyond their borders. In this they differ from the United States, European countries, and China, who use mercenaries for support tasks, and from Iran, the regional leader in the use of proxies from the Shiite population. However, the rationale underlying the use of proxies and mercenaries is the same: limit military and political costs, reduce the number of casualties for the intervening country, and reduce the potential for escalation. Today, considerable numbers of mercenaries, who unlike proxies are driven by their financial interests, are employed in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Thus, it is important to assess the factors that accelerate this trend and to examine the impact on the regional picture and the potential impact on Israeli considerations.

The Gulf States

With small populations, the Gulf states have limited and untrained armies, and in most cases without a full mandatory enlistment. Demographic conditions, political reality, and security challenges, alongside huge wealth, have led the Gulf states since their

independence to make use of foreign mercenaries for policing, security, and intelligence gathering. Thousands of mercenaries were reportedly used in Bahrain in 2011 to quash the Shiite unrest that threatened the stability of the Sunni royal house. When recruiting mercenaries, preference is given to non-Arab Muslims, without family ties to the local population or political interests.

The upheavals that shook the region at the start of the previous decade led Qatar, the Emirates, and Saudi Arabia to use mercenaries beyond their borders as well. After securing relative stability at home, these three countries aimed to shape the region according to their own needs and interests, supporting certain regimes and trying to topple others. As of today, some are still militarily involved, making extensive use of mercenaries in distant arenas, such as Libya. From Yemen there have also been reports of tens of thousands of African and South American mercenaries deployed by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates – sometimes fighting each other – in the war against Houthi rebels, supported by Iran.

Turkey

Turkey's use of mercenaries in Syria has been highly evident in recent years. Many of the mercenaries had fought in the forces that rebelled against the Assad regime, and others were recruited from among displaced Syrians as well as the local population in northern Syria, particularly for the military campaigns initiated by Turkey in northern Syria starting in August 2016. It is estimated that Turkey has some 35,000 mercenaries in its service. The majority are Sunnis, while others are of Turkmen origin, and some of them have links to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Although many of these mercenaries feel strong hatred toward the Assad regime, their main motive for enlisting on behalf of Turkey is their desire to be rescued from financial distress and achieve a minimal sense of personal security.

There have been accusations by the population of northern Syria, and particularly the Kurds, against the mercenaries fighting for Turkey, who are said to have committed various crimes, from looting to war crimes, while fighting in Operation Olive Branch in northwestern Syria and Operation Peace Spring in northeastern Syria.

Since January 2020 there have been reports that Turkey began sending mercenaries from Syria to Libya. It is estimated that it is operating some 2,000 to 4,000 mercenaries alongside the Government of National Accord in Libya. These forces reportedly earn far higher wages than what they received in Syria and have been promised Turkish citizenship. In both the Libyan and the Syrian contexts, the Turkish army directs the actions of the mercenaries, but Sadat, the private Turkish security firm, is also involved.

Russia

The first significant attempt to set up a Russian mercenary army was in 2013, in the form of the Slavonic Corps, a private enterprise. This force was intended to defend energy facilities in Syria and consisted of a few hundred fighters. Some who left the corps were subsequently employed in another framework, the Wagner Private Military Company. The Wagner operatives were first identified in 2014 fighting alongside the pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, and in 2015 their activities were also reported in Syria.

The Russian military force in Syria lacked the element of regular land fighting, because in Moscow they feared the possibility that heavy losses would arouse internal criticism of the Syrian intervention. On the other hand, Russian forces had difficulty relying on the Syrian army, which was exhausted by the civil war, or on the Iranians, who did not accept their authority. The Wagner fighters therefore gave the Russian army decisive independent ground offensive capability, without endangering the formal casualty statistics. Later, the Russians also led the establishment of the “volunteer”-based Fifth Storm-Troop Corps of the Syrian army. They were in charge of training, equipping, and commanding the corps, alongside Syrian commanders. These “volunteers” were actually another mercenary force acting on behalf of Russia in Syria.

Wagner appears to be a joint venture of Russian military intelligence (GRU) and a businessman called Prigozhin, who is also reputed to own the Russian “Troll Factory” (an entity engaged in cognitive warfare). In return for his services in gray areas, Prigozhin has been awarded generous governmental contracts in the field of maintenance and catering, worth over a billion dollars annually, and earned a nickname “the chef of the Kremlin.” Wagner people have also been identified in Libya, assisting the forces of General Haftar; and in sub-Saharan Africa. In these places, Prigozhin’s business is perceived as backed by Moscow to promote Russian interests. Wagner is estimated to have only a few hundred or few thousand soldiers in each arena (Syria, Libya, Sudan). Their recruits are graduates of combat units, but also sometimes come from the margins of society. Their pay is much higher than the Russian average.

The Russian model of a private security company is improving and appearing in a growing number of arenas. It is integrated into the Russian toolbox and that of business elements working for the state. At present it is clear that Moscow considers that its advantages (deniability and low operating costs) outweigh its disadvantages (mixing private and state interests and loose control). These drawbacks were reflected in a February 2018 incident where a combined force of Wagner and Syrian fighters tried to capture a refinery in the Deir ez-Zor area that was under Kurdish control with US protection. The US Air Force killed hundreds of fighters in the attacking forces. This was apparently the first direct US-Russian encounter since the Cold War, and in retrospect,

there was a grave risk of a descent into war. Details of the incident raised the possibility that the Wagner attack was not coordinated with the commanders of the Russian forces in Syria.

Conclusion

Mercenaries give those who deploy them a tool for managing fighting beyond their own borders, and another means of power projection while reducing their official losses. While the use of mercenaries is limited in scope and is largely confined to small and medium sized campaigns – sometimes the fighters have previous battle experience, which makes the forces relatively more efficient – it also rests on the need to retain political flexibility and limit the cost of war. Like the use of proxies and militias, the use of mercenaries allows a country the ability to deny its involvement. However, it has its own risks, due to difficulties of control.

Israel, which is currently engaged in the struggle against Iranian entrenchment in Syria, has no direct military contact with mercenaries. However, the recourse to mercenary forces figures increasingly in its strategic environment, demonstrated both by its rivals and by its partners. It is therefore important to analyze the challenges and opportunities that this tool poses.

Traditionally, Israel prefers an “address” on the other side, to which it can direct its military and political efforts and through which it can influence the course of events. Multiple addresses through the use of mercenaries could make it harder to limit the duration of rounds of fighting and to make it more difficult to achieve the conditions necessary for a long-term ceasefire.

Moreover, the presence of foreign mercenaries in conflict territories could create a crisis between Israel and their country of origin, even though it is not the host country or a party to the conflict. An attack by Israel on mercenary forces will probably not have the same effect as an attack on the enemy’s regular forces. However, an attack of this sort would also have a lower political cost, and thus incur fewer risks of escalation.