



Discussion Paper (1)

Russian military police in Syria: function and prospects

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Introduction

Since 2015, Syria has been a test-ground for many Russian military innovations. Among them the Russian Military Police (RMP), which quickly became one of the symbols of the Russian involvement in the Syrian crisis. After defeating the militants, the Russian stabilisation and reconciliation strategy included the deployment of forces that could provide security for civilians, negotiators, demining teams and medics. Furthermore, once the ceasefire agreement was reached in 2016, a peacekeeping force was needed to oversee its implementation. Due to domestic and international circumstances, Russia could not deploy combat troops, so the RMP was chosen for its effectiveness and low profile.

The RMP provided support to the Reconciliation Centre (RC), secured humanitarian evacuations and monitored de-escalation zones. Despite certain achievements, total success was limited. Due to its size, the RMP was unable to maintain a massive presence in the government-controlled areas to protect the civilian population and shape the security environment. As such, it could not be a substitute for the local and national Syrian forces that were needed to bring peace and stability in the long run.

The Chechnya experience and the Syrian case

In Syria, the Russian military relied on a similar stabilisation strategy that was used in the second Chechnyan war (1999-2002). In Chechnya, this strategy emphasised dealing with individual villages and small towns where local community leaders were given a very simple choice; adhere to a ceasefire and receive important economic benefits (i.e. gas, electricity, roads and access to medical facilities) or resist and be rooted out. Russian troops provided overall security for the ‘loyal’ Chechen villages, where the quality of life was much higher than that in ‘rebel’ villages. The strategy included negotiations with the Chechen warlords and field commanders, many of whom were later incorporated into the new Chechen economic and political elite. The loyalist Chechen militias were transformed into police units (some current RMP units stationed in Syria originated from these). For Russia, the strategy of local ceasefires worked well, as it isolated the most committed Islamist groups in Chechnya and created a pro-Kremlin elite.

The same strategy of ‘local reconciliations’ — dealing directly with a particular town or village — was applied in Syria. In February 2016, the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides (RC) was established by the Russian military to monitor potential ceasefires brokered by the US and Russia. The RC conducted negotiations with smaller armed groups that controlled specific areas and served as a mediator between the militants and the government. Security guarantees were promised to local leaders, and humanitarian assistance was provided in the reconciled areas, including the development of medical facilities and distribution of medical supplies, food and repairs to vital infrastructure. According to the Russian MoD, from 2016 to 2018, around 2000 Russian humanitarian missions were used to monitor and assess the security situation in specific areas, while the RC, along with the Russian military, observed and guaranteed the ceasefire.¹

History and functions of the RMP

¹ Joint Coordination Committee holds another session in Moscow to discuss repatriation of Syrian refugees, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12197004@egNews>

The RMP is a nascent institution inside the Russian army branches, created in December 2011. On March 25, 2015, a few months before their first deployment to Syria, President Putin approved the Military Police Statute, indicating that the primary duties of the RMP was to guard military installations, maintain discipline among the servicemen, both in garrisons and in the field, (e.g. during manoeuvres) and ensure safe and swift passage of military convoys. In this sense, the RMP served as a support, rather than a combat, unit. It functioned independently with a separate chain of command, subordinate to the minister of defence with very wide authority, including the ability to arrest personnel of the Federal Security Service (FSB). RMP is a professional unit where all servicemembers are career military, which under the Russian legislation makes it easier to deploy them abroad. RMP has very high recruitment standards regarding physical abilities and security clearance. Candidates are independently reviewed by two other servicemembers who bear personal responsibility for each candidate they approve.

Syria was the first international deployment for the RMP. However, units with similar functions (e.g. military prosecutors) were deployed during the second Chechen War, where their main responsibility was to prevent looting and crimes against the civilian population. The RMP units deployed in Syria were unique in terms of experience and cultural background. The so-called 'Chechen' battalion, deployed in Aleppo in 2016, was staffed with operators from Special Forces units previously known as 'Vostok' (East) and 'Zapad' (West). These were elite Spetsnaz Special Forces battalions of the Russian military intelligence (GRU) that fought the radical Islamists during the second war in Chechnya and also fought the Georgian troops in 2008. Thus, the 'Chechen' battalion represented a considerable fighting force. The RMP battalions from Dagestan and Ingushetia have been described in a similar manner.

Deployment in Syria

The RMP was sent to Syria for both military and political purposes. In September 2015, the RMP was deployed along with other Russian military units to provide operational support. In that capacity, they guarded the Russian military installations and maintained discipline among the troops. However, these were situations when Russia needed ground troops that could operate outside the main bases, e.g. to protect Russian demining teams and medical personnel or monitor de-escalation zones. Politically, such operations implied unwanted domestic and international consequences. Domestically, any massive overt deployment could provoke objection from the public over Russian soldiers fighting abroad, a very sensitive issue among the Russian public since the Soviet participation in the Afghanistan war that involved massive casualties. Internationally, the unconcealed deployment of combat units could provoke more criticism against Russia. Under these circumstances, the RMP was considered most suitable for multipurpose deployments².

The RMP personnel operated in Syria under special regulations adopted in March 2017. Such regulations were required given that the conditions on the ground were hostile, law enforcement institutions weak, and illegal weapons and organised crime was widespread. Due to these circumstances, the RMP servicemen were authorised to use force, including firearms. They worked in coordination with the Syrian police and local authorities. Under the regulations, the primary mission of the RMP was to guard and defend RCs, including the medical facilities with Russian medics. The RMP was also authorised to patrol the streets and to maintain law and order. Servicemen on patrol were supposed to prevent crimes, and were authorised to arrest the perpetrators, who would then be transferred to the Syrian authorities. In Aleppo, for example,

² Voennaya politziya RF poluchila v Sirii pervyj opyt postkonfliktnogo uregulirovaniya, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4508324>

they provided security for the civilian population guarding citizens from militants, criminal gangs and harassment from government troops. Between 2017 and 2018, the RMP personnel had to fight to defend themselves when they were attacked by ISIS (in Deir-Ezzor) and Nusra (in Idlib) militants. On these occasions they received extensive air and artillery support.

This wide mandate helped the RMP to perform varying functions in different areas. The RMP units were deployed in Aleppo, the southern suburbs of Damascus, and Deir-Ezzor for stabilisation operations, in Idlib to monitor the de-escalation zone, and in Quneitra to protect UN personnel.

According to official statements, in Eastern Ghouta and Eastern Qalamoun, the RMP “provided assistance to local authorities to maintain public order, constantly patrolling the territories in order to ensure stability and prevent possible provocations”.³ By 4th of May 2018 more than 63,800 people returned to Eastern Ghouta and 5,219 former members of armed opposition formations laid down their arms and had been granted amnesty.⁴ On May 26th a video appeared of alleged RMP personnel arresting looters, presumably NDF soldiers. Earlier, regime soldiers were also beaten by the RMP in the towns of Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahm. Yet, despite these recognised successes, there were obvious shortcomings and limitations.

Limited success with limited resources

The main challenge the RMP faced in its operations in Syria was its size. The total number of the RMP personnel is classified, but according to official statements in 2016, there were only 6500 personnel. The estimated number of the RMP personnel stationed in Syria was about 1500 (three to four battalions), which constituted one quarter of the total number. The troops were rotated but they did not have sufficient time for proper rest and recreation – their time off between tours did not exceed one month. On average, servicemen completed approximately four tours to Syria, but for many, the number was as high as five or six.

The insufficient number of personnel stationed in Syria did not allow the RMP to become a major tool for stabilisation or act as a fully operational peacekeeping force. On the ground, the RMP personnel were spread very thin, and were therefore unable to maintain a constant presence in all liberated areas, and efficiently control the conduct of the government forces or ensure that all guarantees were respected. This severely limited Russia’s ability to act as an efficient broker for the settlement process.

As long as there was a Russian military presence in Syria, the RMP servicemen would remain in their primary capacity as military police. They would also continue to play their current role as de-facto peacekeepers. Acting as peacekeepers included tasks such as securing the return of the refugees (protecting them from abuse), monitoring the buffer zone in Idlib, maintaining a presence in the south of Syria to guard UN personnel and ensuring that there were no Iranian troops. At the current stage of the crisis, there are no Syrian institutions that could replace the RMP, but the lack of the personnel prevents the RMP from becoming a fully-fledged and adequate peacekeeping force.

³ Official representative of Russian Ministry of Defence Major General Igor Konashenkov briefs on situation in Syria, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12173951@egNews>

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