

Thrill-Seeking Russian Judge Wounded in Syria

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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A Free Syrian Army fighter wielding a rocket-propelled-grenade launcher amid rubble in Homs on Wednesday. **Yazan Homsy**

Provincial judge by day, war correspondent by night.

That very nearly describes Sergei Berezhnoi, a 57-year-old arbitration court judge in Belgorod who traveled to Syria last week to observe the country's civil war and write firsthand accounts for an obscure Abkhazian news portal.

But things didn't go according to plan for the robed renegade, who wound up in a hospital after he was shot in the face and arm Monday in Darayya, a Damascus suburb.

The incident was an odd reminder of the complicated ties between the two countries. The old Soviet-era allies are linked by billions of dollars in weapons deals over the years, thousands of intermarriages and Russia's only military base outside the former Soviet Union.

In a blog post for the Abkhazian Network News Agency, Berezhnoi, a judge with more than 20 years of experience, explained in heroic prose why he had risked his life to visit the front lines.

If Syria falls to the rebels — Islamic terrorists, he said — sectarian violence will spread to "Mother Rus" via the fractious North Caucasus and tear the entire country asunder. "Today, our scalpel against [this cancer] is our words," he said.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman moved to quash rumors that Berezhnoi is part of a covert Russian operation, describing him as a "volunteer" who had gone to Syria on his own initiative, Interfax reported Thursday.

News reports described Berezhnoi as a former intelligence officer with experience in war zones from Chechnya to Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Foreign Ministry spokesman also bristled at suggestions made earlier this week by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who accused Russia of "siding with" the government of President Bashar Assad and failing to "go forward" with a peace plan signed in Geneva last year.

Clinton's statement is nothing but "an attempt to turn [Russia's position] on its head," Alexander Lukashovich told reporters, Interfax reported.

Russia has attracted criticism for shielding Assad's government from international sanctions. The Kremlin says the West is unwisely backing anti-government fighters in the conflict, which the UN estimates has killed 60,000 people since it began two years ago.

The Kremlin condemned a reported Israeli airstrike Wednesday near Damascus, calling it an "unprovoked attack on a sovereign state" and a gross and unjustifiable violation of the UN Charter, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement on its website Thursday.

A video uploaded to YouTube on Tuesday of Berezhnoi in action offered a glimpse of the savage fighting.

A camera dangling from his neck, Berezhnoi and several men scramble across a debris-strewn street as gunshots crackle in the distance.

The action becomes chaotic. Then one of the men says in Russian, "He's hit, he's hit!" Berezhnoi then reappears, his bulletproof vest splattered with blood and his left forearm punctured.

Berezhnoi didn't tell his boss where he was going, but Yury Glazov, head of the Belgorod region arbitration court, said he wasn't angry at his daring deputy. On the contrary, Glazov spoke highly of him.

"Perhaps many people will not understand why a person would choose to spend their free time traveling to hot spots rather than sitting in front of the television in peace and comfort. But my deputy is a decent and responsible person" with an impeccable work record, he said.

The suggestion that Berezhnoi is a spy is "unacceptable," Glazov told the Pravo.ru news portal.

"Anybody who says that should give up television and spy novels and follow his example," Glazov said.

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