

Russian Soldiers Say Quit Over Deployment to Syria

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Several Russian contract soldiers claimed this week they were to be deployed to Syria, undermining Russian government denials that it has sent combat troops to the war zone, online newspaper Gazeta.ru reported Friday.

Russia caused consternation in the West by stepping up support for Syrian President Bashar Assad in recent weeks. Moscow has sent military hardware but says it is not fighting in the country. The Defense Ministry on Friday denied the Gazeta.ru report.

The newspaper interviewed four soldiers in the southern Russian city of Novorossiysk — not far from east Ukraine — who said they were part of a squad of 20 “most promising” troops sent to the city in late August.

The soldiers said that a representative of the General Staff on Wednesday told them they would be deployed to Latakia, a Syrian port city controlled by Assad's forces — and where the U.S. has said Russia is developing a "forward air operating base."

The whistleblowers said they refused to go. “We don't want to go Syria, we don't want to die there,” one of the soldiers, Alexei, whose last name was withheld, was cited by Gazeta.ru as saying.

The four soldiers said they went to the military prosecutor's office in Novorossiysk, demanding to check the legitimacy of the orders given by their commanders — which didn't exist on paper. They also filed a complaint to the presidential Human Rights Council and handed in their resignation notices, the report said. It was not clear whether the resignations were accepted.

Their decision to go public sparked a media storm, and the deployment — scheduled for Sept. 17, according to the report — was postponed, Gazeta.ru said.

Russia's Defense Ministry on Friday said it was impossible that the soldiers could have been deployed to Syria. The ministry's press service told the TASS news agency that the troops, who belonged to the Eastern Military District, could only be sent to a destination within that district.

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