

# Russian Soldiers Who Went Public on Syria Deployment Facing Threats, Lawyer Says

By [Daria Litvinova](#)

September 20, 2015



Children inspect rubble as smoke rises behind them during clashes between forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad and the Army of Islam fighters, on the eastern mountains of Qalamoun in Damascus, Sept. 19.

Several Russian contract soldiers who claimed this week they were being deployed to Syria, undermining Russian government denials that it has sent combat troops to the war zone, are now being threatened with criminal charges, their lawyer said Saturday.

"The military prosecutor's office is doing absolutely nothing. ... Instead of their [the soldiers'] rights being protected, the military security services and the FSB [Federal Security Service] have got involved," human rights lawyer Ivan Pavlov, who has defended many Russians accused of treason and espionage, was cited as saying Saturday by Gazeta.ru news website.

"There's been an inspection, interrogations and threats of criminal prosecution. The crime isn't being named, but judging from the conversation, they could be charged with anything up to high treason," he added.

Gazeta.ru on Friday published an interview with four soldiers in the southern Russian city of Novorossiisk 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 Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces — and where the U.S. has said Russia is developing a "forward air operating base."

The soldiers said they refused to go. "We don't want to go to 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 Novorossiisk, demanding a check into 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, the report said.

Human Rights Council member Sergei Krivenko told Gazeta.ru on Saturday that his organization had appealed to Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov to review the complaint.

"Instead of addressing the violation of the soldiers' rights, they've passed the case on to the FSB," Krivenko was cited as saying.

The soldiers' decision to go public sparked a media storm, and the deployment — scheduled for Sept. 17, according to the report — was postponed, Gazeta.ru said in its Friday report.

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.

Russia has caused consternation in the West by apparently stepping up support for Assad in recent weeks. Moscow says it is sending military hardware and advisers to the country, but not combat troops.

Contact the authors at [newsreporter@imedi.ru](mailto:newsreporter@imedi.ru) and [e.hartog@imedi.ru](mailto:e.hartog@imedi.ru)

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