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Defense Ministry Confirms Russian Military Advisor Killed in Syria

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An image of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad is seen on a car parked in front of damaged buildings in a town in Syria.

Russia's Defense Ministry on Wednesday confirmed that one of its military advisors in Syria had been killed by mortar fire, the Interfax news agency reported, although Turkish media cited unidentified sources in the Syrian opposition as saying Russian casualties included four generals.

The adviser had been training Syrian government troops in the use of modern weapons, "supplied under current state contracts on military-technological cooperation," a Defense Ministry spokesperson was quoted by Interfax as saying.

The officer was mortally wounded Monday when Islamic State fighters fired rounds of fire at a Syrian military base, and will be posthumously decorated with a Russian state award, the spokesperson was quoted as saying. The Islamic State is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

Meanwhile, Turkey's Anadolu state-run news agency cited unidentified Syrian opposition sources Wednesday as saying four Russian generals had been killed by rebel forces in northwestern Syria near the border with Turkey.

The Russian government has previously denied scores of media reports about its military casualties in Syria.

The Wall Street Journal quoted unidentified sources as saying last December that nine Russian contractors had died in Syria last fall when a mortar round hit their base in the west of the country.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the Russian administration does "not possess this kind of information," the state-run TASS news agency reported at that time.

"Especially since the information is hearsay, without any references," Peskov said, TASS reported. "There is hardly anything worth talking about here."

One of the four Russian generals mentioned in the Anadolu report had allegedly been coordinating attacks in Turkmen Mountain — an area controlled by Syria's Turkmen, rebel tribes of Turkish descent — the opposition sources were quoted as saying.

Ankara has frequently accused Russia of aiming its airstrikes against Turkmen rebels, who oppose the regime of Syria's President Bashar Assad, a Moscow ally, but are not part of Islamic State terrorist forces. Moscow denies the accusation.

Amid the dispute, Turkey downed a Russian bomber in late November, arguing it had violated Turkish airspace. Last week, Ankara accused another Russian Su-24 bomber of a similar infringement, and warned Moscow of "consequences."

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