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Russian Mercenaries Offered Cut of Profits from Oil Fields in Syria

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Andrei Rudakov / Bloomberg

A Syrian state oil company offered a Russian military contractor a cut of the profits from oil refineries liberated by the mercenaries from Islamic State (IS), a cache of documents obtained by the Associated Press (AP) revealed Tuesday.

President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops to withdraw from Syria during a surprise visit to an airbase there on Monday, two years after the Kremlin entered the Syrian war in support of Bashar Assad's regime.

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Russia's Defense Ministry does not officially recognize the role of private contractors in Syria, but their involvement has kept the country's official death toll low ahead of Putin's bid for reelection next year.

The 48-page contract between Moscow-registered Evro Polis and Syria's General Petroleum Corp said the Russian security firm would receive a 25 percent share of profits from oil and gas fields it wrested from IS, a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

Based on Russian media reports, the AP said Tuesday that thousands of the contractors were active in the embattled Middle Eastern country, whose civil war has cost at least 300,000 lives in six years. Since 2015, at least 73 mercenaries have died, AP reported, citing a Russian journalist.

Opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny earlier this year linked Evro Polis with Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is in Putin's inner circle and whose security firms have previously won lucrative Defense Ministry contracts, the AP reports.

Both the Russian and Syrian energy ministries declined to comment on the AP's findings.

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