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Russian Mercenaries Linked to Gruesome Syrian Torture and Beheading Video

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Valery Sharifulin / TASS

This article contains graphic content which may be disturbing to some readers.

Four Russian-speaking men who were filmed beheading, dismembering and setting fire to a Syrian man in 2017 are believed to be private mercenaries for the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, the investigative Novaya Gazeta newspaper reported Wednesday.

Novaya Gazeta said it has identified one of the fighters involved in the torture after new footage appeared on social media this month. The first video showing the men striking the victim with a sledgehammer and dismembering him appeared online on June 30, 2017, it reported Wednesday.

The Wagner Group is believed to be owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman with close links to Russian President Vladimir Putin often referred to as "Putin's Chef" because of his

catering business. Russia does not officially recognize the role of private contractors like Wagner, which has been reported to be fighting in Libya and various other African countries.

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“Cut him harder, come on! Just break his spine! Use a shovel,” the men are reportedly heard saying as the footage shows one of the fighters cutting the unresponsive body.

“Keep the legs, we’ll hang him by the legs,” Novaya Gazeta quotes them as saying. Another leaked video shows the masked men dousing an upside-down body with fuel and lighting it on fire.

Syrian and British outlets this week identified the victim as Muhammad “Hamadi” Abdullah al-Ismail from the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor. He reportedly fled to Lebanon during Syria’s civil war and was arrested and forcibly conscripted into President Bashar al-Assad’s army upon his return.

The outlets cited open-source intelligence that geolocated the torture site at the al-Shaer oil fields in Homs, central Syria. Al-Shaer was named in an Associated Press report about a deal between a Syrian state oil company and a Russian military contractor to share profits from oil refineries liberated from the Islamic State.

The Russian military contractor, Evro Polis, was linked to Prigozhin, and said to be a front for Wagner’s operations in Syria.

“Hide your face... Forget it, this video won’t appear anywhere,” one of the men filming the violence appeared to tell others, according to Novaya Gazeta.

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The newspaper said it used face-recognition technology to name one of the perpetrators as Stanislav D. and corroborated his identity through a copy of his passport and a Wagner questionnaire.

Stanislav D. reportedly served as a Wagner reconnaissance gunner. Large writing on the victim’s upside-down body said “for VDV [paratroopers] and reconnaissance” before the men burned it.

Novaya Gazeta said it withheld the fighter's last name to protect the safety of his family. The newspaper said it approached his wife and friends, all of whom have either not answered or denied knowing him.

The publication said it is ready to provide its materials to Russian law enforcement authorities if they want to investigate the torture. A photograph showing the four fighters posing with unmasked faces at the scene of the incident appeared online while Novaya Gazeta was reporting this story, it said.

Other online sleuths have identified Stanislav D. as a different man and claimed to have found the identity of a second man who appears in the video.

The Kremlin later said that the reports "have nothing to do with the Russian military operation in Syria."

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