



Belarus Warning Update: Belarusian Forces May Deploy to Syria in Late 2021

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A Belarusian veterans group claims the Belarusian Armed Forces (BAF) are preparing to deploy two battalions of so-called “peacekeepers” to Syria in September 2021. BYPOL, an association of former Belarusian security service personnel and military veterans who sympathize with the protest movement against self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, claimed on January 30 that the BAF ordered Belarus’s two operational commands—roughly equivalent to Russian military districts—to construct units for peacekeeping and patrolling operations in Syria.¹ BYPOL claims the first Belarusian deployment to Syria will consist of two approximately battalion-sized (300 personnel) units totaling around 600 personnel.² The Kremlin likely instigated this order and will facilitate the deployment of Belarusian troops, which would support Russia’s military forces in Syria.

Neither Belarusian nor Kremlin authorities have commented on this alleged deployment. Belarus’ Ministry of Defense spokesperson made a general statement that Belarus “continually seeks new directions” for peacekeeping activities on February 1.³ ISW offers this low-confidence warning assessment despite the absence of confirmation of the report because of the importance such a deployment would entail for the Kremlin’s campaigns in both Syria and Belarus.

The Kremlin has sought to leverage partner forces in Syria for several years. The Kremlin unsuccessfully proposed that several Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states, including Belarus, send troops to Syria for joint peacekeeping operations in July 2017.⁴ Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan declined that request.⁵ CSTO member Armenia deployed a sapper company to Aleppo Province, Syria, in February 2019.⁶

The BAF will likely build a new capability for this deployment rather than deploy existing units. The BAF does not currently field two peacekeeping battalions. The Belarusian Army reportedly fields one peacekeeping company of approximately 100 contracted (rather than conscripted) personnel.⁷ BYPOL claims Belarusian authorities are offering Belarusians approximately \$2,000 per month to contract for this deployment, indicating a new recruitment effort.⁸ Belarus’ military will likely increase its current quantity of peacekeeper contractors over the next six months to support a deployment of 600 personnel rather than deploy existing non-peacekeeper units.

The deployment of battalion-sized units is consistent both with current Russian operations in Syria and with past Russian-Belarusian exercises. Russian military police battalions are the standard operational formation for deployments to Syria.⁹ Previous Russian-Belarusian joint exercises have practiced joint operations at the battalion and sub-battalion levels. Russian forces conducted joint exercises “as a single combat formation” at the battalion level with Belarusian forces for the first time on September 20, 2020.¹⁰

A Belarusian deployment could help Russian units secure ground lines of communication in central Syria. Russia launched a renewed effort to protect valuable oil and gas infrastructure in central Syria

in August 2020, including by expanding the footprint of Russia's military police and Wagner private military forces.¹¹ Russian-backed forces in Syria, including the Syrian Arab Army 5th Corps, have been conducting counter-ISIS clearing operations along the Deir ez Zour-Palmyra highway since January 19 in response to escalating ISIS ambushes along that road.¹² A Belarusian deployment could bolster regime security operations in the Deir ez-Zour-Palmyra security zone.

A Belarusian deployment to Syria would advance three strategic Kremlin lines of effort in addition to supporting Russia's Syrian operations.

1. The Kremlin's campaign to leverage partner forces in its war in Syria. The Kremlin likely intends to leverage a Belarusian deployment to lend additional legitimacy to Russia's intervention in Syria by framing it as an international effort. The Kremlin seeks to cultivate partner forces and international coalitions to amplify its own force deployments.¹³ ISW forecasted the Kremlin would likely leverage non-Russian forces in future expeditionary operations in January 2021.¹⁴

2. The Kremlin's effort to integrate Russian and Belarusian military units. The Kremlin likely seeks to integrate Belarusian military units under Russian command structures down to the battalion level.¹⁵ Joint Russian-Belarusian operations in Syria would further this Kremlin effort by practicing battalion-level coordination.¹⁶

3. The Kremlin's efforts to increase Russian military influence in Belarus via the planned Zapad 2021 exercises in September 2021. A Belarusian deployment in September 2021 would coincide with Russia's capstone military exercise for 2021 - Zapad 2021. The Kremlin will likely use the Zapad 2021 exercise to further Russian-Belarusian military integration. Conventional Russian forces likely will deploy to Belarus for Zapad 2021 on a significantly larger scale than they did for Zapad 2017.¹⁷ The Kremlin will likely tie the deployment of Belarusian forces to Syria to this major exercise.

The Kremlin may remove Belarusian officers opposed to the Kremlin's effort to gain control over the Belarusian military through a Belarusian deployment to Syria. Lukashenko resisted the Kremlin's efforts to further Russian-Belarusian military integration during the Zapad 2017 exercises.¹⁸ Belarusian officers may attempt to resist intensified Russian pressure for integration in Zapad 2021 as they did in 2017. The alleged deployment to Syria would likely take several of Belarus' best officers out of Belarus, as the deployment would be Belarus' first expeditionary deployment. Such a relocation of officers could decrease Belarusian resistance to Russian efforts to maximize Russian-Belarusian military integration during Zapad 2021.

The Kremlin may seek to set a precedent of Belarus acting as a Kremlin proxy. The Kremlin has attempted to use Belarus as a proxy "peacekeeping" force in eastern Ukraine.¹⁹ The Kremlin is likely attempting to do so again in Syria since it likely expanded its leverage over Belarusian forces in late 2020.

The Kremlin may brand Belarusian peacekeepers as a CSTO mission. Russian President Vladimir Putin likely seeks to blur the lines between Russian and CSTO activities to obfuscate Russian actions. The Kremlin may cite a Belarusian "peacekeeping operation" in Syria in its 2021 bid to legitimize the CSTO as a United Nations (UN)-recognized peacekeeping force. The CSTO stated it plans to conduct negotiations with the UN in 2021 to hold CSTO peacekeeping operations under the UN's auspices.²⁰ This stated effort aligns with the Kremlin's assessed campaign to leverage the UN to justify Russia's international military deployments—an important hybrid war capability the Kremlin is developing.²¹

¹ https://t.me/By_Pol/161.

² https://t.me/By_Pol/161; <https://42.tut.by/717175>.

³ <https://regnum.ru/news/3179162> https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20210201/1046791963/Belorusskie-voennye-planiruyut-rasshiryat-uchastie-v-mirotvorcheskikh-missiyakh.html; <https://www.belta.by/society/view/minoborony-rasskazalo-ob-uchastii-v-mirotvorcheskih-missijah-426609-2021>; <https://interfax.by/news/policy/raznoe/1291052/>

⁴ <https://ria.ru/20170705/1497907227.html>; <https://naviny.online/new/20170706/1499333719-mid-belarus-ne-poluchala-oficialnogo-predlozheniya-o-napravlenii-mirotvorcev>.

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- ⁵ <https://eurasianet.org/csto-ready-but-not-yet-willing-to-send-troops-to-syria>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-kazakhstan/kazakhstan-denies-its-in-talks-to-send-troops-to-syria-idUKKBN19E0I8>; <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/russia-proposes-deploying-kazakhs-and-kyrgyz-to-syria/>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-csto-kazakhstan-russia-nazarbaev/28661553.html>.
- ⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-sends-another-group-of-sappers-medics-to-syria/29983442.html>; <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-sends-military-deminers-and-medics-to-support-russian-mission-in-syria>; <https://ria.ru/20200730/1575158378.html>; <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/02/19/armyanskie-sapery-pristupili-k-razminirovaniyu-rayona-bliz-siriyskogo-aleppo>.
- ⁷ <https://42.tut.by/717175>.
- ⁸ https://t.me/By_Pol/161.
- ⁹ http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Russian%20Military%E2%80%99s%20Lessons%20Learned%20in%20Syria_0.pdf.
- ¹⁰ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-nexta-actively-encourages-belarusian-security-service-defections>.
- ¹¹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181464/>.
- ¹² <https://www.enabballadi.net/archives/443693>.
- ¹³ <https://www.syriahr.com/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8-2/416760/>.
- ¹⁴ http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Russian%20Military%E2%80%99s%20Lessons%20Learned%20in%20Syria_0.pdf.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-will-increase-pressure-lukashenko-integrate-belarus-2021>.
- ¹⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-nexta-actively-encourages-belarusian-security-service-defections>.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-will-increase-pressure-lukashenko-integrate-belarus-2021>.
- ¹⁸ <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/03/20/681893-lukashenko>; https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20170320/1027926111/lukashenko-utverdil-zamysel-uchenij-zapad-2017.html; <https://sputnik.by/politics/20170203/1027281478/lukashenko-oproverg-informaciyu-chto-rossiya-vvodit-v-belarus-vojska.html>; <https://rus.postimees.ee/4250219/lukashenko-nablyudal-za-ucheniyami-zapad-2017-otdelno-ot-putina-oni-rassorilis-podozrevayut-smi>; https://www.belarus.by/ru/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/lukashenko-uchenie-zapad-2017-v-belarusi-neobxodimo-provesti-maksimalno-prozrachno_i_54468.html; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-setting-conditions-long-term-continuous-russian-military>.
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- ²⁰ https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20201016/1045917923/ODKB-provedet-peregovory-s-OON-ob-uchastii-v-mirotvorcheskikh-operatsiyakh.html; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiuyVyRIEVg>.
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