



[Three Advocacy Organizations File a Landmark Lawsuit Against the Russian Mercenary Group Wagner](#)

Earlier this week, three nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) announced the filing of a lawsuit against the Wagner Group – a Russian mercenary company with links to the Kremlin – over the torture and killing of a detainee in Syria. In the landmark legal case, the NGOs accuse the Kremlin of using Wagner fighters to avoid liability for major human rights violations committed in Syria and elsewhere. The Russian government has long been suspected of deploying the Wagner Group as a shadowy military force and rights organizations have criticized its destructive role in many countries around the world including Syria, Libya, and Sudan, among others. The recently filed lawsuit marks the first known attempt to try to directly hold anyone connected to the secretive group accountable for its actions. Social justice advocates are hopeful that the litigation effort will help expose the scale of abuses carried out by the Wagner Group and its enablers.

The lawsuit against members of the mercenary company was filed by the brother of murdered Syrian victim Muhammad “Hamdi Bouta” Taha al-Abdullah, and was facilitated by the International Federation for Human Rights, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, and the Memorial Human Rights Center. In it, the attorneys contend that six Russian citizens with links to the Wagner Group were responsible for the 2017 killing of al-Abdullah. Allegations of the group’s involvement in the torture and murder of al-Abdullah date back to June of 2017 when a two-minute-long video clip of the gruesome beating of an unarmed man emerged in an anonymous post online. Following that in 2019, Russian independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta obtained additional footage claiming to show what happened after the beating, in which the man was further tortured and beheaded with his body being mutilated and set on fire. The newspaper then published an investigation identifying the victim as a deserter from the Syrian army and at least one of the killing’s perpetrators as a member of the covert paramilitary force.

The Wagner Group is run by one of Russian despot Vladimir Putin’s close allies, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is known to be in regular communication with the Kremlin. The mercenary outfit has sent fighters to Syria, Libya, Sudan, Ukraine, and other countries where the Russian government has a notable strategic interest. While Putin has tried to deny that the Wagner Group is in any way supported by the Kremlin, analysts push back on this by pointing out that the company has been playing an increasingly prominent role in advancing Russia’s foreign policy objectives abroad. All told, the Russian government has been accused of using the force to free itself of direct culpability in grave human rights violations and war crimes committed by its troops in the various conflicts it is involved in overseas. As such, proponents of the lawsuit are hopeful that it will open the door for closer examination into these suspected crimes which have taken place both in Syria and an array of other places as well.

Overall, this week’s legal case is particularly significant because it aims to shed light on the connection between the Russian government and the Wagner Group. In doing so, human rights advocates are attempting to seek accountability for the documented abuses. They have also expressed that if the lawsuit does not move forward where it was filed in Moscow, it will likely be taken to the European Court of Human Rights.