

Russia's Recruiting Afghan Commandos

Abandoned special forces veterans are getting job offers for a very different kind of battlefield.

[Lynne O'Donnell](#) October 25, 2022, 2:53 PM

Members of Afghanistan's elite National Army Commando Corps, who were abandoned by the United States and Western allies when the country fell to the Taliban last year, say they are being contacted with offers to join the Russian military to fight in Ukraine. Multiple Afghan military and security sources say the U.S.-trained light infantry force, which fought alongside U.S. and other allied special forces for almost 20 years, could make the difference Russia needs on the Ukrainian battlefield.

Afghanistan's [20,000 to 30,000 volunteer commandos](#) were left behind when the United States ceded Afghanistan to the Taliban in August 2021. Only a few hundred senior officers were evacuated when the republic collapsed. Thousands of soldiers escaped to regional neighbors as the Taliban hunted down and killed loyalists to the collapsed government. Many of the commandos who remain in Afghanistan are in hiding to avoid capture and execution.

The United States spent almost [\\$90 billion](#) building the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. Although the force as a whole was incompetent and handed the country over to the Taliban in a matter of weeks, the commandos were always held in high regard, having been schooled by U.S. Navy SEALs and the British Special Air Service.

Emblematic of the commandos' pyrrhic success was the battle of [Dawlat Abad](#), where an Afghan commando unit fought the Taliban while waiting for reinforcements and resupplies that never came in June 2021. The U.S.-trained major who led the unit, Sohrab Azimi, became a national hero when it was revealed he'd had only three days' rest after fighting for 50 days straight before heading to his final battle.

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Now, they are jobless and hopeless, many commandos still waiting for resettlement in the United States or Britain, making them easy targets for recruiters who understand the "band of brothers" mentality of highly skilled fighting men. This potentially makes them easy pickings for Russian recruiters, said Afghan security sources. A former senior Afghan security official, who requested anonymity, said their integration into the Russian military "would be a game-changer" on the Ukrainian battlefield, as Russian President Vladimir Putin struggles to recruit for his faltering war and is reportedly using the notorious mercenary [Wagner Group](#) to sign up prisoners.

Wagner is a shady organization that officially doesn't exist but is believed to be run by [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), an associate of Putin who possibly funds it through the GRU military intelligence agency. It reportedly first [emerged](#) in Crimea after Moscow's 2014 annexation of the region from Ukraine, and it has since appeared in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere in Africa. Prigozhin was recently filmed signing up prisoners in return for canceled sentences to reinforce Russian lines in Ukraine.

A former official, who was also an Afghan commando officer, said he believed Wagner was behind Russia's recruitment of Afghanistan's special forces. "I am telling you [the recruiters] are Wagner Group. They are gathering people from

all over. The only entity that recruits foreign troops [for Russia] are Wagner Group, not their army. It's not an assumption; it's a known fact," he said. "They'd be better used by Western allies to fight alongside Ukrainians. They don't want to fight for the Russians; the Russians are the enemy. But what else are they going to do?"

Some former commandos report being contacted on WhatsApp and Signal with offers to join what some experts referred to as a Russian "foreign legion" to fight in Ukraine. News of the recruitment efforts has caused alarm in Afghanistan's former military and security circles, with members saying up to 10,000 former commandos could be amenable to the Russian offers. As another military source put it: "They have no country, no jobs, no future. They have nothing to lose."

"It's not difficult," he added. "They are waiting for work for \$3 to \$4 a day in Pakistan or Iran or \$10 a day in Turkey, and if Wagner or any other intelligence services come to a guy and offer \$1,000 to be a fighting man again, they won't reject it. And if you find one guy to recruit, he can get half his old unit to join up because they are like brothers—and pretty soon, you've got a whole platoon."

Since global attention switched to Ukraine following Russia's February invasion, the Afghan commandos have been left high and dry. Instead of helping them escape Taliban death squads, the United States and its allies have largely gone AWOL. Their vulnerability to recruitment by countries hostile to the United States was flagged in a [report](#) by Rep. Michael McCaul on last year's evacuation debacle. Referring to United States' intelligence assets—which include the Afghan commandos—he said they "could potentially present a risk to U.S. security should they be coerced or coopted into working with an adversary, including international terrorist groups such as [the Islamic State-Khorasan] or state actors like China, Russia, and Iran."

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A 35-year-old former commando captain in hiding in Afghanistan said he had helped a number of former colleagues connect with a recruitment office in Tehran. Recruits were flown from Afghanistan to Iran and then to Russia, he said. What happened next was unclear: "When they accept Russia's offer, the commando personnels' phones are turned off. They proceed very secretly," the former captain said.

He and other former commandos who spoke from Afghanistan and Iran described living in desperate conditions. "We are very disappointed. For 18 years, shoulder to shoulder, we performed dangerous tasks with American, British, and Norwegian consultants. Now, I am in hiding. I am suffering every second," said the 35-year-old. He didn't take up the offer, as he regards Russia as Afghanistan's enemy. The former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and fought a 10-year war against U.S.-supported mujahideen. More recently, Russia supported the Taliban's insurgency, and it has close ties with them now that they're in power, stopping short of diplomatic recognition.

Another commando who fought alongside British special forces said he fled to Iran to escape Taliban death squads and now worries he will be arrested by Iranian police. Both commandos said they wanted to resettle in Britain but have no idea how to contact the authorities to ask for protection.

Recruitment messages seen by *Foreign Policy* use the same wording, suggesting a centralized operation. "Anyone who would like to go to Russia with better treatment and good resources: please send me your name, father's name, and your military rank," the messages say. Recipients are asked to help recruit other members of their units. Afghan television reported that the recruitment offers include [Russian citizenship](#).

The 35-year-old captain, father to four young children, said he was still

hopeful that he would be resettled in Britain. "We fought the sworn enemies of Afghanistan for 20 years, all over the country, with high morale, on the side of Britain and the United States," the captain said. "We are hiding like prisoners now."