



## Student Paper

# The Wagner Group in Africa

## A Challenge to the West<sup>1</sup>

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Russian private military companies (PMCs) today operate in nineteen African countries. The Wagner Group, formerly the private army of Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, is now subordinated and commanded by the GRU, Russia's military intelligence organization. In some countries the Wagner Group mines precious resources, such as gold and diamonds, which are used to help defray the costs of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In others the Wagner Group provides security for the ruling regime. Some African countries may well become client states, as Mali is already. The Wagner Group has displaced French and American forces engaged in counterterrorism operations in Niger and Chad. Wagner's soldiers are often cited for war crimes and human rights violations while increasingly developing capabilities for disinforma-

tion with the intent to influence local government and populations.

## The Wagner Group

The Wagner Group, established in 2014 during the annexation of Crimea, rapidly grew to an estimated 50,000 personnel by 2022. Founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of Vladimir Putin, Wagner has emerged as a key tool in Russia's geopolitical strategy. The group has been active in conflict zones such as Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic and Mali, providing Moscow with plausible deniability for its actions abroad.

In Ukraine, Wagner played a significant role until Prigozhin's short-lived rebellion against Russian military leadership in June 2023, which ultimately led to his demise and the group's re-subordination to the Russian Ministry of Defence.<sup>2</sup> The Russian state now

maintains tight control over Wagner, its former members now utilizing GRU passports and military aircraft for their deployments.

Wagner's reach has extended significantly across Africa; by the end of 2019, it had established offices in 20 countries, including Eswatini, Lesotho, and Botswana. Erik Prince, the founder of the US PMC, Blackwater, reportedly sought collaboration with Wagner in Libya and Mozambique. By 2021, Wagner opera-



Source: Google Maps

tives were also active in Zimbabwe, Angola, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and possibly the Democratic Republic of Congo.

1. This article is the result of a student research project at Brunel University in London.

2. Former Wagner soldiers have been absorbed into the Russian national guard (Rosgvardia) according to the UK Ministry of Defence. <https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/1752975835710046472?s=20>.

Other Russian PMCs, such as AVC, Redut, and Convoi also operate in Africa, but Wagner remains Russia's preferred choice, indicating a strategic favoritism towards this group. These other PMCs, while smaller, complement Russia's broader military objectives, ensuring a sustained and diversified presence on the continent.

### Activities Across Africa

The scope of Russian PMCs in Africa has grown dramatically since 2017, as depicted in Figure 1. The scope has given the Kremlin greatly expanded influence and freedom to evade Western sanctions related to the Ukraine War.

[See chart on next page].

CAR has been a testbed for Wagner operations. 1,000-2,600 Wagner fighters have been deployed in the region via shell companies, such as the Sewa security service.<sup>3</sup>

The CAR, Mali, Libya and Sudan are major operating grounds for Wagner forces. Other PMCs are being used as sub-organizations during operations and mostly do not have significant distinguishing factors.<sup>4</sup>

In Libya, the Russian MOD has taken control over Wagner's operations. Russian military equipment and pilots have been deployed and around 800 Russian contractors are supported by 1,000 Syrian militiamen based in Benghazi.<sup>5</sup>

In Mali, 1,000 Russian contractors have been deployed as well. After Prigozhin's death, Wagner's base at Modibo Keita International Airport (formerly Bamako) has expanded as Wagner is providing a 'regime survival package' to Mali's military junta.

In Sudan, Wagner is supporting the rebel Reconnaissance Strike Force (RSF) by providing equipment. It is unknown if Russian contractors are deployed in this civil war. The construction of a Russian Navy base at Port Sudan on the Red Sea is apparently supported by

Wagner, which may have positioned up to 300 Russian troops there. Recently, Ukrainian special forces have been deployed to counter Russian influence.<sup>6</sup>

In late January 2024, 100 Russian servicemen arrived in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, indicating further Russian intervention in the region.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, the Niger government announced its desire that the US military depart the country and cease its counterterrorism activities from its airbase near Agadez. Russian troops have taken over the airbase.<sup>8</sup>

Wagner's expansion has largely occurred across West African countries that have had a series of military coups and subsequently been diplomatically isolated by the West. These include Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Niger and Burkina Faso could become similar to Mali shortly.

Even after a failed contract in Mozambique, it is possible that Wagner is still present.<sup>9</sup> Wagner possesses influence in Chad, due to its strategic location between Niger and the CAR.<sup>10</sup> In Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Madagascar and South Africa, very little of Wagner's presence in these areas has been reported.<sup>11</sup>

### Sanctions on Russia and PMC Finances

Western sanctions imposed on Russia have targeted 1,718 individuals and 419 entities in an attempt to weaken Russia's strategic capabilities in its ongoing war with Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Despite these sanctions being implemented, since February 2022, Ruia and Wagner have earned more than \$2.5 billion by using illicit gold smuggling techniques across the CAR and Sudan.<sup>13</sup>

3. Interview with Grey Dynamics [05 March 2024]. See also, *The Kiyv Independent*. "Russia's influence on Africa exaggerated, experts say" accessed July 9 2024. <https://kyivindependent.com/russias-influence-on-africa-exaggerated-experts-say/>; and "Russia paid Iran 'in gold bullion' for drones used in attacks on Ukraine, *The Telegraph*." <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/02/07/russia-paid-billions-gold-bullion-shahed-drones-ukraine-war/>.

4. CNN. "Murdered journalists were tracked by police with shadowy Russian links, evidence shows" accessed July 9 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/10/africa/russian-journalists-car-ambush-intl/index.html>.

5. *Albawaba*. "Putin Plants Troops, Weapons in Libya to Boost Strategic Hold" accessed 4 March 2024. <https://www.albawaba.com/news/putin-plants-troops-weapons-libya-boost-strategic-hold-1197206>; and US Department of Defense. "Russia, Wagner Group Continue Military Involvement in Libya" accessed 8 January 2024. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/article/article/2287821/russia-wagner-group-continue-military-involvement-in-libya/>.

6. *Euronews*. "Why is Russia's Wagner Group in Sudan, and what does it have to do with the war in Ukraine?" accessed July 22 2024. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/04/27/why-is-russias-wagner-group-in-sudan-and-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-the-war-in-ukraine>.

7. *Telegram*, DShRG in the CAR, accessed 15 Feb 2024.

8. *Reuters*, "Russian troops enter base housing US military in Niger, US official says," May 3, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russian-troops-enter-base-housing-us-military-niger-us-official-says-2024-05-02/>.

9. *Global Policy*. "Mozambique's 'War on Terror': Why are Regional Troops Withdrawing?" accessed 5 June 2024, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/15/05/2024/mozambiques-war-terror-why-are-regional-troops-withdrawing>.

10. *Reuters*. "Putin meets Chad junta leader as Russia competes with France in Africa" accessed 23 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/putin-meets-chad-junta-leader-russia-competes-with-france-africa-2024-01-24/>.

11. *RUSI*. "Where Next for Wagner Group in Africa?" accessed 10 December 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/where-next-wagner-group-africa>.

12. European Council. "EU sanctions against Russia explained" accessed 3 July 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>.

13. *Blood Gold Report*. "The Blood Gold Report" accessed 13 January 2024, <https://bloodgoldreport.com/>.

NAME	STATUS	LOCATIONS	DETAILS OF ACTIVITIES	SOURCES
 <p>Wagner Group (now rebranded as 'Africa Corps')</p>	Active	Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Sudan, Libya, Mozambique, and Niger, Cameroon, Kenya, Madagascar, Equatorial Guinea, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo.	<p>PMC first established in 2013</p> <p>Mali: December 2021 – Present Day</p> <p>Central African Republic: 2018 – Present Day</p> <p>Sudan: December 2017 – Present Day</p> <p>Libya: 2018 /19 – Present Day</p> <p>Mozambique: 2019 – Present Day</p> <p>Niger: April 2024 – Present Day</p>	<p>Abdreas Heinmann-Grüder, <i>Dogs of War: Russia's corporate warriors in armed conflicts</i>, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), published: online, 2023, p. 4</p> <p>Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), <i>Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali</i>, published: online, August 30, 2022</p> <p>Catrina Dooxsee, <i>How Does the Conflict in Sudan Affect Russia and the Wagner Group?</i>, Center for Strategic and International Studies, published: online, April 20, 2023</p> <p>Simon Rynn and Kieran Cockayne, <i>Where Next for Wagner Group in Africa?</i>, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), published: [online], August 2, 2023</p>
 <p>DShRG (The Sabotage Reconnaissance Group)</p>	Active	CAR. Have traveled to Sierra Leone	<p>Central African Republic: PMC was established in 2014. Unsure when the group first became operational in Africa but photos on their Telegram channel show that DShRG are active in the CAR as of 2024.</p>	<p>ДШРГ Русич [DShRG Rusich Official Telegram Channel], post of DShRG leader in Sieria Laione, dated: November 20, 2022</p> <p>ДШРГ Русич [DShRG Rusich Official Telegram Channel], 'Африка 2024,' post is of DShRG member likely to be in CAR, Telegram post (date and upload time): February 27, 2024, 20:45.</p>
 <p>Russian Imperial Movement (RIM)</p>	Active	Libya and CAR	<p>In April 2019, RIM began to send fighters to other conflicts outside of Ukraine including to the CAR and Libya. A 2020 report pointed out that reports of the RIM in CAR could not be verified.</p>	<p>The Soufan Center, <i>Special Report: Inside the Russian Imperial Movement Practical Implications of US Sanctions</i>, published: online, April 2020, p. 9</p>
 <p>Sewa Security Service</p>	Active	CAR	<p>Established in 2017. Active in the CAR from 2017 – Present Day.</p>	<p>Open Sanctions, <i>Sewa Security Services</i>, published: [online], undated, accessed July 22, 2024.</p>
 <p>PMC RSB-Group LLC – Military Consulting Company</p>	Active	Libya, Burkina Faso and elsewhere	<p>RSB-Group was created in November 2005. "RSB-Group has provided global services for Russian companies in close coordination with the FSB, including services for military aircraft in Libya"</p> <p>Unknown when PSB first became active in Libya</p> <p>20 members from the RSB-Group arrived in Burkina Faso in November 2023 to assist in combating JNIM in the country</p> <p>"Tens of RSB-Group security teams can simultaneously operate in Africa, Middle East, Central Asia, in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans"</p>	<p>US Department of Treasury, Press Releases, <i>U.S. Treasury Sanctions Nearly 100 Targets in Putin's War Machine, Prohibits Russian Gold Imports</i>, published: [online], June 28, 2022</p> <p>Filip Bryjka and Jędrzej Czerep, <i>Africa Corps – New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa</i>, Warsaw: Poliski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych [The Polish Insitute of International Studies], 2024, p. 17</p> <p>РСБ ГРУПП [RSB-Group] official website, <i>ВООРУЖЕННАЯ ОХРАНА И ОБЕСПЕЧЕНИЕ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ</i> [Armed Protection and Security], published: [online], accessed July 22, 2024), <a href="https://rsb-group.ru/">https://rsb-group.ru/</a></p>
 <p>PMC Redut</p>	Active	Operates in Africa and Somalia	<p>Unclear when Redut first became operational in Africa</p>	<p>Molfar, <i>Catalog of Russian PMC's: 37 Private military companies of the Russian Federation</i>, published: [online], undated, accessed July 22, 2024</p>
 <p>PMC Convoy</p>	Active	Operates in Africa but unclear where exactly	<p>Unknown, PMC was established relatively recently in 2022</p>	<p>Newsweek, <i>Putin's Allies Scavenge the Remains of Wagner Group</i>, Published: [online], September 6, 2023</p>
 <p>PMC Yastreb</p>	Active	Operates in Libya	<p>PMC Yastreb was founded in 2018 in St. Petersburg. Unknown when the group first became operational in Libya</p>	<p>Molfar, <i>Catalog of Russian PMC's: 37 Private military companies of the Russian Federation</i>, published: [online], undated, accessed July 22, 2024</p> <p>List Org, Организация ООО «ЧВК «ЯСТРЕБ» [Organization of LLC "PMC "YASTREB"], published: [online], undated, accessed July 22, 2024</p>
 <p>PMC Patriot</p>	Active	Operates in CAR, Sudan, Gabon, and Burundi Patriot Is run by Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu	<p>Unclear when exactly they became operational in CAR, Sudan, Gabon, and Burundi</p>	<p>Molfar, <i>Catalog of Russian PMC's: 37 Private military companies of the Russian Federation</i>, published: [online], undated, accessed July 22, 2024</p>

**FIGURE 1. RUSSIAN PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES' ACTIVITIES IN AFRICA**

In the CAR, Wagner was granted the right to operate the country's largest mine, the Ndassima mine. Gold from Ndassima is smuggled out annually, with Russia in prime position to take advantage of this. In Mali, Wagner has earned lucrative financial profits, with the Malian junta paying Wagner a monthly fee of \$10.8 million. This demonstrates how Wagner and Russia benefit financially from their operations across the continent. It should be noted that tracking down Wagner's financial network is no easy task.

The illicit smuggling techniques used include mixing African gold with other legitimate sources of gold, transporting gold via third-party countries, using criminal networks to covertly smuggle gold and private jets as well as cargo planes. Wagner is also believed to be using maritime smuggling techniques.<sup>14</sup>

Moscow's warm relations with various African countries have created an opportunity for sanctions evasion to be exploited via the gold sector. Russia has capitalized on this for its financial benefit. Ultimately, Russia uses Wagner's illicit gold smuggling to assist in financing its war in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the last stop for Russian-extracted African gold before it gets sold to the West. Wagner's smuggling is significant and critical to Russia's ability to withstand Western sanctions and help in financing the Russo-Ukraine war.<sup>16</sup>

### Human Rights Violations and War Crimes

Russian PMCs are tied to a range of human rights violations and war crimes, including sexual violence, pillaging, looting, abductions, extrajudicial killings, unlawful imprisonment, torture, and genocide.<sup>17</sup> Its mercenaries also support regimes that carry out these illegal activities.<sup>18</sup> Some Russian mercenaries, such as The Sabotage Assault Reconnaissance Group (DSHRG), which operates in the CAR as part of the Wagner PMC group, openly call for and showcase civilian atrocities, genocide, and torture and sexual violence against prisoners. There is an increasing trend of Russian mercenaries conducting these attacks on civilians.

14. Interview with a confidential source [5 March 2024].

15. Global Initiative. "Going for Gold" accessed 25 January 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GITOC-Going-for-Gold-Russia-sanctions-and-illicit-gold-trade.pdf>

16. UK Government. "Written evidence submitted by Jason Blazakis" accessed 20 June 2024, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/112217/html>.

17. ACLED. "Curated Africa Data Set" accessed 16 February 2024, <https://acleddata.com/curated-data-files/>

18. GCRP. "Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)" accessed 30 November 2023, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/mali/#:~:text=The%20Office%20of%20the%20UN,Experts%20on%20Mali%20warned%20that>

The accurate scale of human rights and international law violations by Russian PMCs is challenging to estimate due to attempts by Russian PMCs to remove witnesses and the lack of reporting incidents by local populations.<sup>19</sup> Further, the Wagner Group shows no mercy in silencing journalists reporting, even their own, as demonstrated by the killing three Russian journalists in CAR who were reporting on Russian PMC contractors.<sup>20</sup>

### Disinformation

Russian PMC's have created networks for information sharing which they use to disseminate propaganda in order to influence local governments and populations. These networks include SMS messaging, local media outlets, church gatherings, posters, and rallies. Russian military intelligence also monitors and targets foreign journalists attempting to cover Russian PMC activity.<sup>21</sup> One rationale for this is that it could impact voting in the UN, as well as create political pressure on NATO to restrain contacts with African and Asian countries, as Russia sets up being the most popular option – especially for weaker economic countries.<sup>22</sup>

### The Future

The outlook for Western states' interests in Africa, in light of Russian activities, suggests a complex and shifting geopolitical landscape. Within the next 12-18 months, it is highly likely that Burkina Faso and Niger will become client states for Russian PMCs, similar to Mali. However, cracks in Russia's influence are becoming evident, exacerbated by its ongoing challenges in Ukraine. The recent Russia-Africa Summit in 2024, which had decreased attendance by heads of state compared to the 2019 summit, indicates a diplomatic setback for Moscow.

Russian PMCs have been promoting a "regime survival package," crucial for countries like Burkina Faso and Niger, where terrorist groups such as Jama'at

19. *Middle East Eye*. "Russian mercenaries in Libya: 'They sprayed us with bullets'" accessed 20 October 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/libya-russia-wagner-mercenaries-sprayed-bullets>.

20. CNN. "Murdered journalists were tracked by police with shadowy Russian links, evidence shows" accessed July 9 2024 <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/10/africa/russian-journalists-car-ambush-intl/index.html>.

21. *Reuters*. "France targets Russian and Wagner disinformation in Africa" accessed 26 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa-france-targets-russian-wagner-disinformation-2023-06-21/>.

22. *The Kyiv Independent*. "Russia's influence on Africa exaggerated, experts say" accessed July 9 2024 <https://kyivindependent.com/russias-influence-on-africa-exaggerated-experts-say/>

Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are active. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of Russian PMCs in countering such security threats remains doubtful. The vast geographical expanse of the Sahara Desert and the Sahel and high levels of civil dissent pose significant operational challenges.

The stability of military juntas in Africa, historically precarious, is further threatened by deteriorating economic conditions and societal fragmentation. This instability undermines Russian efforts to expand its influence, suggesting potential failures in securing these regimes. Should the current regimes distance themselves from Russian support, Wagner's operations in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) could face significant setbacks. Such a shift would provide Western nations with an entry point into the "Sahel Coup Belt," adversely affecting both the reputation and the practical extent of Russian foreign influence in West Africa on all levels.

Instances of Russian PMCs being replaced by Western PMCs, as has occurred in Mozambique and currently is ongoing in CAR, underscore a shifting

security landscape. CR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's consideration of the US PMC Bancroft to replace some contracts previously held by Wagner highlights this trend. This shift opens opportunities for Western states to reassert their influence and counterbalance Russian activities in Africa, potentially leading to a more significant Western presence in the region.

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