

THE SOUFAN CENTER

SPECIAL REPORT

WAGNER GROUP:

The Evolution of a Private Army

June 2023



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
CAR	Central African Republic
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CTC	Combatting Terrorism Center, West Point
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EO	Executive Order
EU	European Union
FSB	Federal Security Service
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate
IRA	Internet Research Agency
ISCAP	Islamic State – Central Africa Province
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr-al Islam wal Muslimin
LNA	Libyan National Army
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NSAG	Non-state Armed Groups
PMC	Private Military Company
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service
TCO	Transnational Criminal Organization
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
USIP	United States Institute of Peace

KEY FINDINGS

- Following the mutiny of the Wagner Group and its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin against the Russian state, which developed at lightning speed and ended just as quickly through negotiations mediated by Belarus, the situation remains questionable as to the future of the Wagner Group, both in Ukraine and abroad.
- Wagner functions like a Swiss army knife: Wagner has demonstrated effective expeditionary skills and logistical capabilities that many PMCs could not marshal, continuously diversifying its portfolio. Beyond the military training that Wagner provides, which includes conducting offensive combat operations and, in some cases, serving as regime security, the group also advises government leadership on political issues and conducts information campaigns.
- Wagner poses a catch-22 in many ways: while its forces are invited to stabilize fragile states, its actions actively invite further instability, creating more opportunities and a greater demand signal for its services.
- Russia's use of Wagner proved at one point to be highly effective for the Kremlin. Wagner generates profits, operating through a series of shell companies. It has invested in extractive industries across Africa, reportedly receiving access and rights to commodities in exchange for its security services. Wagner's opaque structure allows it to carry out Russian foreign policy objectives while insulating Moscow from significant blowback.
- Wagner is involved in a range of illicit activities beyond security services, from commercial and extractive industries that reportedly support sanctions evasions to facilitating the trafficking and destruction of cultural property.
- Wagner is more than just a PMC. Throughout Africa, it has appeared as an extension of Moscow's foreign policy and influence, enhancing the Kremlin's objectives on the continent and displacing Western influence. Wagner has been associated with disinformation campaigns discrediting Western and multilateral counterterrorism partners, as well as the United Nations and its peacekeeping missions, posing challenges to conflict prevention and mitigation efforts.
- Wagner's brutality against civilians and its support for predatory governments could further exacerbate the very conditions and grievances that can be exploited by violent extremist groups to drum up recruits and support. By perpetuating violence and uncertainty, they prolong and even expand the instability and insecurity that led governments to seek their assistance.
- The final chapter of Wagner's saga is yet to be written, but the legacy of PMC use by Russia is deeply entrenched and has proved successful in many ways. Russia has already expanded the use of PMCs, and will likely continue to do so in the future, given Wagner's ability to raise funds, deploy effectively as cannon fodder combat forces, displace Western influence and presence, and otherwise evade sanctions through dozens of front companies.

INTRODUCTION

In an astonishing turn of events starting 23 June 2023, the Wagner Group's leader Yevgeny Prigozhin declared all-out war on the Russian state, leading a convoy of mercenaries to march straight toward Moscow. The mutiny, which embarrassed Russian President Vladimir Putin and caught the Russian military and security services completely off guard, developed at lightning speed and ended just as quickly, leading to widespread confusion and chaos. After storming through towns and cities in southern Russia, largely unopposed and in many cases welcomed by locals, Wagner troops announced a sudden return to their field camps, following a deal cut by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. Under the terms of the deal, Prigozhin accepted exile in Belarus, leaving the future of Wagner very much in question. This special report puts the Wagner Group into perspective and foreshadows the factors that will shape what happens next.

The Wagner mutiny had been building over months, generated by lingering grievance and resentment related to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Citing corruption and greed as the Russian military's chief motivations, Prigozhin blamed Russian battlefield setbacks in Ukraine on the Russian Ministry of Defense, suggesting that the war has been a racket to enrich the Russian elite. Prigozhin's ongoing feud with Russian military leaders finally spilled out into the open, prompted by what Prigozhin declared was a Russian military missile attack on a Wagner camp in Ukraine.

As Wagner forces advanced on territory in southern Russia, including the military logistic hub of Rostov-on-Don, some observers speculated the developments could portend the opening stages of a Russian civil war, a situation which has historically had profound implications for the Russian state. After an initial period of quiet, Putin finally responded to the Wagner-led coup, labeling it treasonous and "a stab in the back of our country and our people." Wagner's seizure of Rostov-on-Don and march to Voronezh rattled the Kremlin, as Prigozhin threatened to march straight to Moscow. There were even numerous reports of Russian military soldiers defecting to Wagner's side.

The Wagner Group provided the lion's share of muscle in Russia's battle of attrition in Bakhmut. But Prigozhin himself became the story, enmeshed in ongoing feuds with other high-profile figures on the Russian side. This infighting served as a distraction and overshadowed Russia's few gains on the battlefield. Prigozhin's mutiny was in part a response to an order that would compel his fighters to sign a formal contract, along with dozens of other "volunteer formations," with the Russian Ministry of Defense, a move by the Russians to streamline the Kremlin's manpower. The fallout from the announcement led to the aborted coup attempt, but it remains difficult to see how Prigozhin survives his current predicament after exposing the vulnerability of Putin and his regime and humiliating the Russian leader, tarnishing his image of strength.

While Putin has long fashioned himself as Peter the Great, the evolving events made it look like he may very well end up becoming Tsar Nicholas II. Putin's failure in Ukraine might be manageable, but his failure in Russia could be fatal. Still, as Putin said in a statement before the negotiations were announced, "Anyone who consciously went on the path of betrayal, who prepared the armed mutiny, went on the path of blackmail and terrorist actions, will take an inevitable punishment." Prigozhin may have survived the recent coup attempt, but his days are likely numbered, living in exile in Belarus and plotting his next move, leaving the future of Wagner uncertain. This special report provides an analytic framework to understand the evolution of Putin's private army and a blueprint for the inner workings of the Wagner Group.

Since emerging onto the international community's radar back in 2014, the Wagner Group has grown more prominent in lockstep with Russian President Vladimir Putin's increased appetite for international military expeditions. Today, its presence extends across Russia's European backyard, the Middle East, Africa, and South America, with rumored interest in moving its operations into the Caribbean and Central America, as well. While Wagner is hardly the first modern private military company (PMC) to operate in coordination with state forces – lest we forget, even the United States had turned to groups like Blackwater during its own military engagements in the Middle East – this group is not merely a collective of soldiers offering its services to the highest bidder.

Beyond the usual mercenary offerings – military training, protection services, and joint combat operations – Wagner presents a full suite of services to its clients, including information operations, political advisory services, natural resource extraction, and other financial and commercial services. In addition, the group's deep connections to Putin make it, in the eyes of most Western analysts, more of an extension of the state than an independent mercenary organization. As such, Wagner has become a useful tool for the Kremlin to deploy abroad in the name of securing resources, influence, and objectives without being subject to the same scrutiny or limitations that an official military deployment might generate. Or so it might have once hoped.

Between its graphic brutality in Ukraine, alleged participation in a massacre and violence against civilians in Mali, and its growing prominence in the unstable and violent Sahel region of Africa more broadly, Wagner faces more international scrutiny today than ever before. As a result, various Western states have designated the group as either a criminal or terrorist organization, while UN human rights experts and at least one UN Security Council member have called for the group to be investigated for alleged human rights abuses. Some Western states have even reportedly begun considering how and when to take lethal action against Wagner.¹

Still, the international community and the experts hoping to guide it must remain sober-minded while assessing this threat. While Wagner has demonstrated certain operational capabilities in particular domains, its effectiveness should not be overstated. Its humiliating defeat by U.S.

¹ Greg Miller and Robyn Dixon, "Wagner Group Surges in Africa as U.S. Influence Fades, Leak Reveals," Washington Post, April 23, 2023.

special forces in Syria, the countless lives it sacrificed as cannon fodder in Ukraine, and the group's failure to curb an insurgency in Mozambique all attest to this.

Yet the group's complicated status as a not-quite-private, not-quite-state force operating in complex conflict zones makes it worthy of policy consideration. While the question of how militaries, foreign ministries, or international organizations should respond to Wagner's presence is far from settled, every interaction between Wagner and militaries, government actors, paramilitaries, militias, terrorist groups, international peacekeepers, and civilians is another toss of the die. Each of these new interactions threatens to ignite deadly conflict or undermine human rights in areas already under extreme duress. And as tensions between Russia and the West reach dangerous heights, any lack of clarity over how to treat this so-called private military company with regard to the Russian state could further escalate this adversarial relationship. Meanwhile, allowing Wagner free reign to kill and plunder with impunity could undermine peace-building, democratization, governance, and both international and local security.

This special report offers a detailed overview of the Wagner Group, as well as important considerations for international peace and security efforts. The first section introduces the group and examines its organizational structure and its relationship with the Russian state, President Putin, and other government stakeholders. The second section explains how and where the group operates around the globe, breaking down the military, political, economic, and informational activities it has been involved in previously and currently. The third section considers what this all means for peace and security efforts, including peacekeeping missions and UN engagements. Finally, the report concludes with recommendations for how U.S. and other policymakers can contain and counter Wagner, or at the very least, hold it accountable for its actions.

WHO IS WAGNER?

The Wagner Group began as a private military company created in 2014 by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch with close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Over time, Wagner has expanded to become a conglomerate that includes not only a PMC, but also a constellation of shell companies connected to Wagner's activities throughout the Middle East and Africa. Prigozhin oversees this vast transnational network, which provides him with financial resources that he can funnel to



Visitors wearing military camouflage stand at the entrance of the 'PMC Wagner Centre' (AP Photo)

Moscow. What started as a mercenary force of merely five thousand contractors has grown to more than 50 thousand members, as the PMC's numbers have become bloated by the conscription of criminals, felons, and convicts plucked from Russian jails and prisons and deployed to the Ukrainian front lines.²

From Ukraine to Syria to sub-Saharan Africa, as this manpower has grown, so, too, has Wagner's infamy and the long list of crimes allegedly perpetrated by the group. Whether labeled a PMC or a heavily armed mercenary group, Wagner is used by Russia as a tool to advance the Kremlin's geopolitical interests while offering Moscow deniability in its operations.³ Back in 2014 when "little green men"⁴ helped Russia seize the Crimean Peninsula in a surprising show of force, there was some initial confusion about the identity of these 'shock troops.' Although they were professional-looking soldiers wearing Russian-style combat uniforms and equipped with Russian-made weapons, they lacked any visible formal insignia. This veil – as unconvincing as it may have been for some – was pulled back in September 2022, when Prigozhin publicly acknowledged the group and his leadership role within it.⁵

While the Wagner Group is frequently covered in the news for their paramilitary activities in Africa and Ukraine in support of Russian aggression, what has often evaded closer scrutiny is

² "What Is Russia's Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?" BBC News, January 23, 2023.

³ Molly Dunigan, n.d. "Russian Mercenaries in Great-Power Competition: Strategic Supermen or Weak Link?" RAND, March 9, 2021.

⁴ Steven Pifer, "Watch Out for Little Green Men." Brookings, July 28, 2016.

⁵ "Russia's Wagner Group Opens Defence Tech Centre in St Petersburg." The Guardian, November 7, 2022.

their role in facilitating antiquities smuggling. Cultural heritage experts have warned that Wagner has been engaged in the illicit trafficking in antiquities in Syria since 2016. These experts say this has also been taking place in other regions of north and northeast Africa, as well as Ukraine. The Wagner Group, as a senior cultural heritage expert noted, is “the archetype of crime-terror nexus at play with the broad sector of illicit antiquity trafficking in warzones and politically fragile environments.” The Wagner Group operates both in the shadows and openly, he said, adding that these are “playbook requirements necessary to trade illicit antiquities, for facilitating smuggling networks, financing looting operations and promoting illicit antiquity trade deals.”⁶ It is widely known that Wagner has taken Palmyra, said another journalist and investigator of antiquities trafficking. ISIS was smart, she said; they blew up the site for propaganda value, but then smuggled the pieces. Now it is unclear if Wagner has taken over the site, or if Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is profiting from the trade.⁷

In its early days, the group fielded a modest contingent of fighters, which served to advance Wagner’s goals from Syria to Libya to Mozambique and the Central African Republic (CAR). As Wagner’s role in Russia’s war in Ukraine expanded to include frontline combat – at times, the group has even been made entirely responsible for securing Ukrainian towns like Bakhmut – the group enlarged its recruitment drive. To meet a manpower shortage in Ukraine, Prigozhin aggressively mounted the aforementioned prison recruitment campaign, dispatching forces directly to the battlefield with minimal training and equipment.⁸ At the same time, the group has continued to expand overseas, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it trains the personnel of military juntas and warlords and conducts heavy-handed counterinsurgency-style operations against African rebel groups and terrorist organizations. According to recently leaked documents (the so-called “Discord leaks”) from the U.S. intelligence community, as reported by the *Washington Post*, Wagner has “gained strategic footholds in at least eight African countries, among 13 nations where Prigozhin has operated in some capacity.”⁹

Wagner has demonstrated effective expeditionary skills and logistical capabilities that many other PMCs would be unable to marshal. As discussed throughout this paper, Wagner’s expansion throughout Africa has caught many off guard, with its tentacles spreading much further than initially believed, even as demand for its services have simultaneously grown in Ukraine. Wagner also continues to diversify its portfolio. Beyond the military training and other related services that Wagner provides, which includes conducting offensive combat operations and, in some cases, serving as regime security, the group also advises government leadership on political issues and conducts information operations campaigns. Operating through a series of

⁶ Discussions with senior expert on cultural heritage and antiquities trafficking, Spring, 2023.

⁷ Discussions with journalist and investigator focused on antiquities trafficking, Spring 2023.

⁸ Colin P. Clarke, “What Will Become of Russia’s Convict-Soldiers?” *WSJ*, February 26, 2023.

⁹ Greg Miller and Robyn Dixon, “Wagner Group Surges in Africa as U.S. Influence Fades, Leak Reveals.” *Washington Post*, April 23, 2023.

shell companies, it has invested in extractive industries across Africa, reportedly receiving access and rights to commodities in exchange for its security services.¹⁰

In Ukraine, Wagner fighters have mostly served as cannon fodder, sent in human waves toward Ukrainian fighting positions and considered expendable by Russian military commanders.^{11,12} Beyond Wagner's role in Ukraine, the Kremlin sees the group's greatest value in other theaters, where it eagerly fills power vacuums created by a decreasing Western military footprint, particularly in Africa.¹³ Most recently, the breakout of conflict in Sudan in April 2023 raised concerns about the role and influence of Wagner in the country, as the group already has established relationships with Sudanese warlords and operates a gold extraction firm in the country. As will be discussed, several elements of Wagner's operations in Sudan are indicative of how it operates elsewhere in the continent. Beyond these theaters, Wagner's presence has also been felt in Syria and Venezuela, and it has demonstrated interest in expanding to Central America and the Caribbean. Wagner poses a catch-22 in some respects—its forces are invited to stabilize fragile states, but its actions actively invite further instability, creating more opportunities and a greater demand signal for its services.¹⁴

KEY FIGURES

When discussing Wagner, the most notorious and visible figure is Prigozhin, a former hot dog vendor who went on to run a catering business with contracts in the Kremlin, earning him the nickname "Putin's cook."¹⁵ Although his star has risen within Putin's broader constellation of oligarchs, Prigozhin has also become a vocal critic of the Russian military's war effort in Ukraine, testifying to his sense of security as other critics have met fatal ends after saying less. Due to a lack of ammunition provided to Wagner fighters, most recently in Bakhmut, Prigozhin filmed an invective-filled video that castigated the Chief of Staff of Russian Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov, and Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, threatening to pull Wagner forces from the area before reversing course shortly thereafter. Since then, he has warned of a coming revolution akin to that of 1917, as Russia's poor continue to die on the frontlines while the children of the elite are left free to "shake their arses in the sun."¹⁶ While some speculate that Prigozhin might be angling for an influential role in Russian domestic politics in the near future,

¹⁰ Candace Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare." n.d. New America.

¹¹ Andrew E. Kramer, "Russian Prisoners of War in Ukraine Recount 'Gigantic' Losses." The New York Times, February 13, 2023.

¹² Louise Nordstrom. "Wagner Group's Bloody Year in Ukraine: From Murder Squad to Cannon Fodder." France 24, February 22, 2023.

¹³ Colin P Clarke, "Opinion | Russian Mercenaries Are Destabilizing Africa." The New York Times, January 31, 2023.

¹⁴ Houreld, Katharine, Dalton Bennett, and Robyn Dixon. "Russian Mercenaries Closely Linked with Sudan's Warring Generals." Washington Post, April 22, 2023.

¹⁵ Neil MacFarquhar, "Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russian Oligarch Indicted by U.S., Is Known as 'Putin's Cook.'" The New York Times, February 17, 2018.

¹⁶ Kate Nicholson, "Wagner Boss Warns A Revolution Is Coming – And Kremlin Could 'F***ing Lose Russia.'" Yahoo Finance, May 24, 2023.

others have suggested that his diatribes about the war are designed to get Wagner redeployed to the Middle East and Africa, which works to the group's comparative advantage as an expeditionary force.¹⁷ Some experts on the region have suggested that even his oppositional remarks are carefully orchestrated with the Kremlin to create a semblance of debate and tension and a suitable foil for the more formalized communications of the Kremlin.¹⁸ In any case, Prigozhin's growing public profile has put him into the ring of political consideration. A poll surveying the electoral prospects of possible presidential candidates conducted by a Russian TV news station in June 2023 found Prigozhin was the second-most favored potential candidate. While his numbers were lightyears behind Putin's (Putin came in with 61.9 percent of the imaginary vote, compared to Prigozhin's 8.9 percent), they were more than double that of even the most popular political party leader featured in the survey.¹⁹

Prigozhin has been indicted and sanctioned numerous times by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of the Treasury for charges ranging from interfering in U.S. elections to his role in the Ukraine war.²⁰ Wagner's operational commander, Dmitry Utkin, is a former Russian special forces (*Spetsnaz*) soldier in the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) with combat deployments to Chechnya in both the First (1994-1996) and Second Chechen War (1999-2000).²¹ The Wagner Group's motivations are a mix of pecuniary and nationalistic, although Utkin's motivations are likely more complex — he is festooned with numerous Nazi tattoos, including a swastika, a Nazi eagle, and SS lightning bolts.²² Utkin was also sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Treasury in 2017 under EO 13660. He is said to have named the group after his call sign, which is a reference to his favorite composer, Richard Wagner, who was also Adolf Hitler's favorite musician, making a close and public association with violent far-right movements.²³ He was photographed receiving the Order



Yevgeny Prigozhin (AP Photo, file)

¹⁷ Christopher Faulkner & Colin P. Clarke, "Wagner Group's Battlefield Demotion Is Good—for Wagner | Opinion." *Newsweek*, March 10, 2023.

¹⁸ Discussions with experts conducting fieldwork in the region and a close knowledge of Russian and Ukrainian military and political dynamics.

¹⁹ "'Wagner' Pulls Ahead. A Sensation Is Possible In The Presidential Elections In Russia," *Tsargrad*, June 5, 2023.

²⁰ "IntelBrief: The Wagner Group: A Russian Symphony of Profit and Politics." *The Soufan Center*, April 2020.

²¹ "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State." n.d. *The Post-Soviet Post* | CSIS.

²² Sergei Khazov-Cassia and Robert Coalson, "Russian Mercenaries: Vagner Commanders Describe Life Inside The 'Meat Grinder.'" *RadioFreeEurope/Radioliberty*, March 15, 2018.

²³ "Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, and Mercenaries: Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine" *The Soufan Center*. April 12, 2022.

of Courage, one of the Russian military's highest decorations, at a Kremlin ceremony in December 2016.²⁴

Aleksandr Sergeevich Kuznetsov (callsign "Ratibor"), the commander of the 1st Attack and Reconnaissance Company within the Wagner Group, took command in 2014. In September 2019, he was reportedly injured while fighting in Libya alongside Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).²⁵ Sanctioned by the European Union (EU) in 2021, Kuznetsov has directed Wagner's access to Sudanese gold mines in recent years, helping to process and transit the gold. Like Utkin, Kuznetsov is also a recipient of Russia's Order of Courage award.²⁶

AMBITIONS AND ACTIVITIES

As a PMC, Wagner's purported objectives are transactional in nature, providing security and other previously mentioned services in return for access to gold, diamonds, uranium, and other valuable resources.²⁷ In addition to its connections to the Kremlin, Wagner serves as a critical node in Russia's irregular warfare campaigns, maintaining close relationships with the GRU, Federal Security Service (FSB), and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).²⁸ As detailed in the U.S. Intelligence Community's 2023 Annual Threat Assessment, Russia uses the Wagner Group for myriad ends, including to "try to undercut U.S. leadership; present itself as an indispensable mediator and security partner; and gain military access rights and economic opportunities."²⁹

As noted above, Wagner has operated in multiple countries, including more than a dozen in Africa, as well as Venezuela, Syria, and Ukraine, where the group got its start. The "Discord leaks" also show that Wagner has flirted with sending forces to Haiti and even attempted to insert itself in a discussion with "Turkish contacts" about securing weapons and equipment for its forces fighting in Ukraine.³⁰ As evidenced by this attempted outreach, Wagner is becoming even more crucial to Russia's operations, particularly as Moscow attempts to survive sanctions levied by Western nations in response to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

²⁴ Aleksandr Gostev,, and Robert Coalson, "Russia's Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge From The Shadows." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 19, 2016.

²⁵ "COUNCIL IMPLEMENTING DECISION (CFSP) 2021/2198 of 13 December 2021 Implementing Decision (CFSP) 2015/1333 Concerning Restrictive Measures in View of the Situation in Libya.". *Official Journal of the European Union*, December 13 2021.

²⁶ "Russia Is Plundering Gold in Sudan to Boost Putin's War Effort in Ukraine." CNN, July 29, 2022.

²⁷ Greg Miller and Robyn Dixon, "Wagner Group Surges in Africa as U.S. Influence Fades, Leak Reveals." Washington Post, April 23, 2023.

²⁸ Karen Philippa Larsenz "Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies." *South African Journal of International Affairs* 29 (4): 575–78. 2022

²⁹ "Annual Threat Assessment Of The U.S Intelligence Community." 2023. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February. p.12

³⁰Michael Schwartz, "What Leaked Pentagon Documents Show About Wagner's Influence." The New York Times, April 13, 2023.

The war in Ukraine has had a major impact on Wagner. The organization's size has grown dramatically, but it has also taken reputational hits as a result of this growth. Once portrayed as an elite fighting force, Wagner is now suffering an identity crisis and a branding problem, as its ranks have filled with untrained convicts fed into the meat grinder that is the Ukrainian battlefield. Former special forces soldiers are tasked with leading conscripted hordes of miscreants to their slaughter. One reason why the casualty count is purportedly so high among Wagner recruits is that these personnel are considered low priority in terms of receiving medical care on the battlefield.³¹ However, the war's effects have not all been bad for Wagner, as it has received a share of the credit for capturing of the city of Bakhmut – a long-fought battle considered symbolically valuable to both sides of the conflict.

Even with its track record of human rights abuses, Wagner remains in fairly high demand, at least for the time being. As French President Emmanuel Macron noted, Wagner serves as the “life insurance of failing regimes in Africa.”³² A recent survey in Mali – the “Mali Mètre” – also indicated that for some populations, the immediate respite offered by Wagner from widespread violence is considered worth the cost of its reported human rights abuses, though it remains unclear how long that will remain the case. For the leaders of failing and fragile states that call in the Wagner Group, the attractiveness of hiring a mercenary outfit like Wagner to defend a regime is that there are no strings attached — no human rights preconditions and no expectations of transparency, accountability, or sustainability.

WAGNER'S SIGNIFICANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF NON STATE ARMED GROUPS

Within the broader ecosystem of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) – whether jihadist terrorist organizations, rapacious warlords, or paramilitaries – the Wagner Group is arguably among the most important as of mid-2023. There are several reasons for this. First, after more than two decades of fighting against Salafi-jihadist groups like Al-Qaida and Islamic State, Western countries, in general, are relatively unprepared to counter PMCs. Second, the United States is now paying more attention - though not necessarily in terms of counterterrorism resources - to Africa, as evidenced by its efforts to strengthen fragile states in the Sahel and coastal West Africa. The United States has transitioned to a more “partner-led, U.S.-enabled” approach to security and civilian partnerships on the continent, rather than a proactive securitized approach

³¹ Zolan Kanno-Youngs, “U.S. Says 100,000 Russian Casualties in Ukraine in Past 5 Months.” The New York Times, May 2, 2023.

³² “France's Macron Calls Wagner Group ‘life Insurance of Failing Regimes’ in Africa.” Reuters, February 27, 2023.

which did not yield a lot of positive results over the past 20 years.³³ But these U.S. efforts in Africa may be too late. Russia and mercenary forces have already embedded themselves across the region and are rapidly working to expand their influence. Despite this fact, Wagner was not mentioned by name in the U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa, published by the White House in August 2022. In fact, Russian private military companies merit just a single mention in this document.³⁴ This hints at a lack of strategy to deal with Wagner. After two decades of fighting Sunni extremists, the U.S. and its allies appear flummoxed by how to think about countering a private military company that operates globally.

Speaking in March 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: “Where Wagner’s been present, bad things inevitably follow We’ve seen countries find themselves weaker, poorer, more insecure, less independent as a result of their association with Wagner.”^{35,36} To contain Wagner’s spread in Africa, the United States and some of its European allies have met with diplomats from Bangui to Kigali.³⁷ As of May 2023, U.S. officials had agreed to share intelligence on Wagner with officials in Chad, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and CAR.³⁸ In January, the U.S. declared Wagner a transnational criminal organization (TCO) under EO 13581, established in 2011 to block any assets that might pose “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States.”³⁹ Many experts have called for the United States to go even further and designate Wagner as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), particularly as the group’s activities inside zones of armed conflict can constitute terrorism, war crimes, or other violations of international humanitarian law by non-state armed groups. An FTO designation would provide U.S. policymakers with an even broader set of tools to combat the group.⁴⁰ In what would be its most dramatic step, however, the U.S. has reportedly begun considering coordinating with its allies to take offensive lethal action against Wagner, although there is little evidence so far that such actions have materialized yet beyond Ukraine, other than the destruction of a single logistics aircraft in Libya.⁴¹

³³ “PANEL ‘Africa & The Spectrum of Conflict’ at the 2023 Global Security Forum.” Global Security Forum. Video. March 28 2023.

³⁴ “U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa.” The White House. Executive Office Of The President National Security Council, August 2022.

³⁵ “Blinken Warns African Nations That Russia’s Wagner Mercenary Group Endangers Them.” South China Morning Post. March 17 2023

³⁶ Erin Banco, Sarah Anne Aarup and Anastasiia Carrier, “Inside the Stunning Growth of Russia’s Wagner Group.” POLITICO. February 18, 2023.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Erin Banco and Anastasiia Carrier, “To Counter Russia in Africa, Biden Deploys a Favored Strategy.” POLITICO. May 7, 2023.

³⁹ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Emelie Chace-Donahue and Colin P. Clarke. “Understanding the US Designation of the Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organisation.” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT. January 25 2023.

⁴⁰ “U.S. Lawmakers Want Terrorist Designation For Russia’s Wagner Group,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, February 16, 2023.

⁴¹ Greg Miller and Robyn Dixon, “Wagner Group Surges in Africa”

WHERE'S WAGNER?

Like the protagonist of the British puzzle book series *Where's Wally?*, the Wagner Group's members appear with relentless regularity across the globe. Unlike Wally, whose trademark red and white camouflage makes him difficult to pick out of the background, Wagner members have a much more difficult time disguising their presence. Reports from 2019 suggest Wagner Group contractors have been operating in Venezuela since as early as 2018 as part of an effort to prop up Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, who has been under considerable duress due to U.S. sanctions and hyperinflation.⁴² Moscow's interests in Venezuela are crystal clear, as both the Russian energy giant Rosneft and the Russian arms company Rosoboronexport hold significant investments in the country.⁴³

More recently, and much closer to the United States, recent documents associated with the Discord leaks show that the Wagner Group has explored the possibility of providing services to the government of Haiti. Specifically, the group was interested in traveling to Haiti in February 2023 to gain government-funded contracts to fight Haitian gangs.⁴⁴ While it remains unclear if the Wagner Group has had any success in cultivating government support in Haiti, the group's interest in the Western hemisphere is not new. Indeed, the Wagner Group tried to expand into Mexico, according to a *Politico* report based on a review of U.S. diplomatic cables, though this effort reportedly stalled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁵ While Wagner's interests in the Caribbean, South America, and Mexico seem far-fetched, they are in line with the group's strategic targeting of areas of instability and countries battling western sanctions, or in the case of Haiti and Mexico, violent actors that are creating chaos.

The Wagner group has been pushing videos over known Russian government-linked social media outlets to lure U.S. military veterans into joining the Wagner Group,⁴⁶ which claimed without evidence to have received more than 10 million U.S. applications to join the group.⁴⁷ While there are no credible reports that Wagner has been able to successfully recruit Americans, the group's use of videos and social media are fit the group's and Prigozhin's history.⁴⁸ Prigozhin in fact admitted in November 2022 to have meddled in U.S. elections, noting, "we have interfered [in U.S. elections], we are interfering, and we will continue to

⁴² Andrew Roth, "Russian Mercenaries Reportedly in Venezuela to Protect Maduro." *The Guardian*, January 25, 2019.

⁴³ Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian Mercenaries on the March: Next Stop Venezuela?," *ECFR*, October 22, 2020.

⁴⁴ Dan De Luce, "Leaked documents: Russian Wagner Group mercenaries look for business close to U.S." *NBC* April 12, 2023.

⁴⁵ Erin Banco, Sarah Anne Aarup and Anastasiia Carrier, "Inside the Stunning Growth of Russia's Wagner Group." *POLITICO*. February 18, 2023.

⁴⁶ Erin Snodgrass, "Wagner Group Employs 'Trumpian Tactics' in Bizarre Video That Appears Aimed at Recruiting US Veterans to Fight for Russia, Historian Says." *Business Insider*, February 13, 2023;

⁴⁷ Aila Slisco, "Wagner Group 'Absurdly' Claims 10 Million U.S. Applicants: ISW," *Newsweek*, February 10, 2023.

⁴⁸ Nabih Bulos, "Inside Russian Military Contractor Wagner's Propaganda Machine," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2023.

interfere.”⁴⁹ While Prigozhin’s admission was newsworthy, four years prior, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted the Prigozhin-founded IRA, various Prigozhin-linked companies and associates, and Prigozhin himself for improperly trying to influence the 2016 election.⁵⁰

Wagner’s recruitment operations aim beyond Russia and the United States, however. Significant battlefield losses during the current conflict in Ukraine have strained the organization’s ability to sustain its military activities. As such, reports indicate that as early as March 2022 – mere weeks after the war in Ukraine began – the Wagner Group was recruiting Syrians⁵¹ to fight in urban operations in Ukraine.⁵² Later in the year, multiple reports emerged that Wagner was recruiting former Afghan commandos trained by the United States. In October 2022, the *Associated Press*, reported that the Wagner Group was offering a “steady \$1,500-a-month payment” to join the fight.⁵³ Multiple reports out of Europe indicate Wagner has tried to recruit Serbians, and videos released by the group in early 2023 showed Serbian nationals training with Wagner, sparking a concerned statement from a U.S. diplomat.^{54,55}

While bringing in new members to serve as cannon fodder in Ukraine has been an area of emphasis for the Wagner Group, the organization has not overlooked the importance of gaining access to materiel to assist in its war effort. In December 2022, the U.S. government said that the Wagner Group had received an arms shipment from North Korea that included “infantry rockets and missiles.”⁵⁶ Given that both parties in this exchange face heavy sanctions, the North Korean-Wagner Group connection highlights how subjects of UN and non-UN sanctions can bypass these controls by building links with fellow pariahs and other rogue entities.

Beyond North Korea, Wagner’s business connections run deep in Asia. In January 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated the China-based Spacety company for providing the Wagner Group with satellite imagery, likely obtained to benefit Wagner’s military operations in Ukraine.⁵⁷ Prior to this designation, the U.S. Treasury also designated multiple entities in Hong Kong and Thailand for supporting Prigozhin’s war efforts by facilitating hundreds of transactions valued at over \$7.5 million, which the department said were used for aircraft maintenance.⁵⁸ In 2023, Treasury also designated UAE-based Kratol Aviation for providing aircraft to the Wagner

⁴⁹ “Russia’s Prigozhin Admits Interfering in U.S. Elections,” Reuters, November 7, 2022.

⁵⁰ United States Of America * v. * Internet Research Agency LLC [and 15 Others]. The United States District Court For The District Of Columbia February 16, 2018.

⁵¹ On recruitment from Syria and Africa, also: Fink, Naureen Chowdhury. “Putin Is Calling in Favors from Syria and Africa. It’s a Dangerous Move.” CNN, March 16, 2022.

⁵² Gordon Lubold,, Nancy A. Youssef, and Alan Cullison. “Russia Recruiting Syrians for Urban Combat in Ukraine, U.S. Officials Say.” WSJ, March 7, 2022.

⁵³ Bernard Condon, “Russia Recruiting U.S.-Trained Afghan Commandos, Vets Say,” AP NEWS, October 31, 2022.

⁵⁴ Guy Delauney, “Ukraine War: Serbia Uproar over Wagner Mercenaries Recruiting for Russia,” BBC News, January 19, 2023.

⁵⁵ Dusan Stojanovic, “US Envoy Says Russian Wagner Group’s Activities Intolerable,” AP NEWS, January 12, 2023.

⁵⁶ Steve Holland, “Exclusive: US Says Russia’s Wagner Group Bought North Korean Weapons for Ukraine War,” Reuters, December 22, 2022.

⁵⁷ “Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization,” U.S. Department of The Treasury. May 18, 2023.

⁵⁸ “Treasury Targets Financier’s Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity,” U.S. Department of The Treasury. May 18, 2023.

Group that were used to move personnel and equipment between CAR, Libya, and Mali.⁵⁹ Simply put, the Wagner Group's web of front companies and independent support networks has allowed the group to unite global activities for the benefit of its actions in Ukraine. Yet while objectives in Ukraine may be the grand target of Russia's strategy vis-a-vis Wagner, Asia, Africa, Europe, and the western hemisphere have not been immune to the Wagner Group's penchant for profiteering, recruitment, and violent misdeeds.

The Wagner Group's operations – financial, online, and security-oriented – are global, regional, and local. As mentioned earlier, the Wagner Group first operated under a thin veneer of plausible deniability during Russia's first illegal invasion of Ukraine in April 2014.⁶⁰ Russia claims those soldiers in unmarked uniforms were serving as a self-defense force to protect ethnic Russians and Crimeans perceived to be under duress. However, Russia's true objectives were little-related to this stated objective, as Wagner personnel and other little green men served to destabilize and influence Ukraine's political system as part of a deliberate Kremlin effort to exert political dominance of Ukraine, allowing Russia to seize and hold large chunks of territory.

In those eight years between Wagner's formation and Prigozhin's public acknowledgment of the organization in 2022, the group rapidly expanded and transformed into a global organization. The group's members deployed to the Middle East and Africa, explored possibilities for engagement in the Western hemisphere, and ultimately are playing pivotal role in Russia's war in Ukraine. All the while, the group continued to lurk in online spaces and, in late 2022, pivoted again by creating a very public military technology hub in St. Petersburg, Russia. The Wagner Group's engagements allowed the organization to accrue considerable wealth as it gained footholds in several countries that would allow it – and by extension, the Russian Federation – to gain political influence that would further broader geo-strategic objectives, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.⁶¹

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

In 2015, as the terrorist group Islamic State rose to its apex, the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria benefitted from Wagner's deployment, which predated Russia's military intervention in the country.⁶² The Russian Federation was desperate for Assad, its regional ally, to retain power. ISIS, the Al-Qaida-linked Jabhat al-Nusrah, and a wide array of more moderate opposition groups posed an existential threat to the Assad regime. If the regime was deposed, not only would Russia lose out on the billions of dollars of arms it regularly sold to Syria, it also could

⁵⁹ "Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy...", U.S. Department of The Treasury.

⁶⁰ Vitaly Shevchenko. "'Little Green Men' or 'Russian Invaders'?" BBC News, March 11, 2014.

⁶¹ "Nathalia Dukhan and Naureen Chowdhury Fink on the Wagner Group," ACAMS Today, February 15, 2023.

⁶² "IntelBrief: The Wagner Group: A Russian Symphony of Profit and Politics." The Soufan Center, April 2020.

have lost access to the Mediterranean port in Tartus.⁶³ Losing this port would have been a crushing military blow to Russia's regional aspirations, as Tartus is Russia's only warm-water port in the Mediterranean and, as such, it allows the Russian Navy to counter NATO and repair vessels more efficiently, amongst other benefits.

As a 2021 United States Institute of Peace (USIP) analysis explained, Russia's endgame in Syria is also possibly shaped by a "Spheres of Influence" model.⁶⁴ The model posits that Russia's interests in Syria are driven by a desire to: 1) achieve geo-political advantages in the region; 2) ensure the territorial integrity of the Syrian regime; 3) serve an example of Russian power projection, thereby demonstrating its ability to influence the larger global order.⁶⁵ However, the Wagner Group's limited success in Syria does not mean that Russia's broader objectives, as outlined in the USIP report, have been achieved. Nonetheless, the Wagner Group made important contributions, to include gaining access to Syria's natural resources (specifically, oil and gas).⁶⁶

Wagner's provision of security in exchange for access to and exploitation of natural resources has become part of the group's playbook in countries throughout the MENA region. A few years after deploying to Syria, Wagner took advantage of Libya's fluid security environment amid a civil war to prop up the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. As its engagement with Haftar continued, media reports often spotted Wagner members near Libya's critical energy infrastructure, again under the pretext of providing security.⁶⁷ In July 2022, a *Foreign Policy* analysis explained that the Wagner Group held a chokehold over the Libya's natural resources and export facilities, resulting in a drastic decrease in Libyan oil output.⁶⁸ The Libyan National Oil corporation also stated that Wagner had encamped near the Sharara oil field, preventing oil flows.⁶⁹ As co-author and Soufan Center Senior Research Fellow Jason Blazakis testified to the UK Parliament, what played out in Libya was "emblematic" of both Russia and Wagner's strategy, as the group "prop[ped] up desperate political/military figures while gaining power and influence over the key nodes of natural resource production."⁷⁰

Wagner's meddling in North African civil conflicts has not been confined to Libya. While the group's presence in Sudan has recently gained international attention resulting from its role in the country's spring 2023 conflict, Wagner established a significant presence in the country long before the ongoing fighting. It has operated in Sudan since 2019 and has been able to retain

⁶³ Russia built this port for the Syrian state in 1971 and it serves as a key warm water port that the Russian Federation has had access to for more than 50 years.

⁶⁴ "What Is Russia's Endgame in Syria?" n.d. United States Institute of Peace.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "IntelBrief: The Wagner Group." The Soufan Center

⁶⁷ Jason Blazakis, "Written Evidence Submitted by Jason Blazakis (WGN0023)."

⁶⁸ Robert Uniacke, "Libya Could Be Putin's Trump Card," *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2022.

⁶⁹ "NOC condemns renewed blockade of Libyan oil exports," National Oil Corporation, July 12, 2020.

⁷⁰ Jason Blazakis, "Written Evidence Submitted by Jason Blazakis (WGN0023)."



Three Russian mercenaries, right, in northern Mali (French Army via AP)

significant influence since the ouster of the country's long-time president, Omar al-Bashir.⁷¹ Currying favor with Sudan's military elites has been a long-term investment of the Wagner Group, and the group had already established a relationship with Rapid Support Forces' (RSF) General Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo prior to the conflict. Concerns that Wagner would leverage the instability of Sudan's civil strife so worried the U.S. Department of State that it called on both Hemedti and Sudanese Army General Abdel Fattah al-Buran to reject Wagner Group support.⁷² Nonetheless, the RSF may have received missiles from the Wagner Group, according to CNN.⁷³ While reports of these missile deliveries, as well as reports that Wagner has gained important access to Port Sudan^{74,75} have not been corroborated, arming Sudanese military elements would be in keeping with Wagner's playbook in the country, and there is widespread belief that Wagner retains close ties to Hemedti.

Indeed, the Discord leaks revealed that the Wagner Group has provided equipment, training, and counsel to Sudan's security forces.⁷⁶ In addition to Wagner's security-related activities, the group has also reaped profits from access to Sudanese gold mines. Further, the group has sought to influence Sudan's efforts to democratize. Wagner's strategy of profiteering and

⁷¹ "Russian Mercenaries in Sudan: What Is the Wagner Group's Role?" Al Jazeera, April 17, 2023.

⁷² David Brennan, "U.S. Warns Sudan's Warring Generals Against Hiring Wagner Mercenaries." Newsweek, May 3, 2023.

⁷³ Nima Elbagir, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Tamara Qiblawi and Barbara Arvanitidis, "Exclusive: Evidence Emerges of Russia's Wagner Arming Militia Leader Battling Sudan's Army." CNN, April 21, 2023.

⁷⁴ Port Sudan has been touted to become a future Naval base for the Russian Federation. In February 2023, the Sudanese military completed, and approved, a review of a Russia-Sudan agreement that would provide the Russian Federation permission to start building a Naval Base in Port Sudan. The agreement is pending review at some future point by a Sudanese civilian government. Magdy, Samy. 2023. "Sudan Military Finishes Review of Russian Red Sea Base Deal." AP NEWS, February 11, 2023.

⁷⁵ David Brennan, "U.S. Warns Sudan's Warring Generals Against Hiring Wagner Mercenaries." Newsweek, May 3, 2023.

⁷⁶ Katharine Houeild, Dalton Bennett, and Robyn Dixon "Russian Mercenaries Closely Linked with Sudan's Warring Generals." Washington Post, April 22 2023.

election-meddling was led by a Prigozhin front company, M Invest. In July 2020, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated M Invest pursuant to EO13848 for suppressing protestors seeking democratic reforms and for “using social media-enabled disinformation campaigns similar to those deployed by the IRA [Internet Research Agency].”⁷⁷ At the same time, Treasury designated M Invest’s subsidiary, Meroe Gold, and in its explanation, said that M Invest and its subsidiary organizations had been awarded concession agreements to explore gold-mining sites since 2017.⁷⁸ Consistent access to gold and diamond mines in CAR has cemented Wagner’s presence in that country.⁷⁹ In turn, access to resources throughout sub-Saharan Africa has reportedly helped soften the blow of crushing Western sanctions levied against Russia.⁸⁰ As much as 90 percent of Sudan’s gold is smuggled out of the country, most of it through the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁸¹

Nearly three years after these designations by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the European Union followed suit by designating M Invest, linked subsidiaries such as Meroe Gold, and individuals operating Prigozhin’s Wagner Front companies. The EU explicitly noted that “Meroe Gold is a cover entity for the Wagner Group.”⁸² While precise details of the scale of Wagner’s profits in Sudan are unclear, the EU statement made clear that not only were the profits benefiting Wagner, but that Sudanese gold was being directly exported to Russia. The EU’s February 2023 sanctions also explained that Wagner’s front companies supported the Wagner Group’s engagement of human rights atrocities in the country.⁸³

In CAR, Wagner Group members propped up President Faustin-Archange Touadéra.⁸⁴ Wagner’s support for high-level figures in CAR, just as in Sudan, comes with dangerous consequences, especially for innocent civilians. According to a recent study by the non-profit Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, Wagner Group members were involved in nearly 40% of the acts of political violence against civilians in CAR between December 2020 and July 2022.⁸⁵ Wagner’s human rights abuses have been noted on multiple occasions by various UN bodies and experts. In October 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner issued a press release stating that “journalists, aid workers and minorities in the Central African Republic (CAR) have been violently harassed and intimidated by so-called ‘Russian instructors’ from the Wagner Group.”⁸⁶ In CAR, as in other parts of Africa, Wagner Group mercenaries not only train host-country personnel, but also carry out joint operations

⁷⁷ “Treasury Targets Financier’s Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity.” U.S. Department of The Treasury. May 18, 2023.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ “Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization.” U.S. Department of The Treasury. May 18, 2023.

⁸⁰ Marcena Hunter, “GOING FOR GOLD: Russia, Sanctions and Illicit Gold Trad.” *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, April 2022.

⁸¹ Michael Albanese, “Russia’s Gold Diggers Destabilize Africa.” CEPA, May 2023.

⁸² “Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2023/430 of 25 February 2023” *Official Journal of the European Union*.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ “IntelBrief: The Wagner Group: A Russian Symphony of Profit and Politics.” The Soufan Center, April 2020.

⁸⁵ “Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali,” ACLED, August 30, 2022.

⁸⁶ “CAR: Russian Wagner Group Harassing and Intimidating Civilians – UN Experts.” OHCHR. 2021

with government security forces as well as unilateral operations, which can be even deadlier. The same ACLED study explained that Wagner Group targeting of civilians increases considerably during its unilateral operations.⁸⁷

The fact that a Wagner operative served as Touadera’s national security advisor speaks to just how deeply entrenched the Wagner Group is within the CAR government⁸⁸ According to investigative reports by The Sentry, the Wagner Group’s exchange of security services has allowed the group to tap into the country’s natural resources, including gold and diamonds,⁸⁹ as well as timber from CAR’s forests.⁹⁰ Similar to its information operations in Sudan, the group has pushed propaganda over CAR’s airwaves as part of an effort to embellish Russia’s reputation in the country.⁹¹



In Mali, the Wagner Group’s information operations and financial activities mimic its playbook in CAR and Sudan. Additionally, the group’s alleged human rights atrocities in Mali intersected with disinformation when the group attempted to pin the blame for a massacre of civilians in Moura

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Justyna Gudowska. “Countering Russia’s Terroristic Mercenaries.” Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission, 2023.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Roger Cohen,, and Mauricio Lima, “Putin Wants Fealty, and He’s Found It in Africa.” The New York Times, December 27, 2022.

⁹¹ Ibid

on French forces. The French government released imagery depicting Wagner mercenaries dumping bodies into a mass grave in Gossi, Mali in an effort to “prebunk” these disinformation operations, which have increasingly targeted Western actors in the region, including France and the United Nations and its Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).⁹² Both France and a collection of UN human rights experts have called on the UN system to investigate the Moura massacre.⁹³ Wagner’s barbaric actions in Mali, including its involvement in the Moura massacre, have been deemed by many as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Indeed, the United Nations highlighted this concern in January 2023, noting, “we are particularly worried about credible reports that over the course of several days in late March 2022, Malian armed forces accompanied by military personnel believed to belong to the Wagner Group executed several hundred people, who had been rounded up in Moura, a village in central Mali.”⁹⁴

Beyond its brutal killing of innocent civilians, the Wagner Group’s provision of security services to Mali’s government, also have counterproductive effects for curtailing the terrorist threats the group is hired to eliminate. Ostensibly, Wagner was brought in to address the threat to Mali posed by Al-Qaida and ISIS-linked groups. In Mali, as the Soufan Center has previously noted, in April 2022 the Wagner Group trained Malian soldiers as part of an effort to counter the Al-Qaida affiliated entity called the Group for Supports of Islam and Muslims (JNIM).⁹⁵ Wagner’s failed services, according to a recent report by the Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, have had a destabilizing effect on Mali and have provided fuel to the violent jihadist movements. The group does not appear to focus its investments on building the capacity of Malian security forces, which remain challenged in addressing the multitude of security challenges across the country.⁹⁶ Despite these failures, however, the Wagner Group reportedly makes a tidy sum of \$10 million per month from the junta.⁹⁷

While the Wagner Group has managed to profit despite being unable to achieve its employer’s objectives in Mali, elsewhere in Africa, the group’s mercenaries have experienced deadly and severe failures without accruing reaping the same benefits they’ve seen in Mali. In Mozambique, seven Wagner Group mercenaries and 20 Mozambican military personnel⁹⁸ engaged in a counterterrorism mission were killed in an ambush by terrorists associated with

⁹² Catrina Doxsee, and Jared Thompson, “Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group’s Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 29, 2022.

⁹³ “Mali: UN Experts Call for Independent Investigation into Possible International Crimes Committed by Government Forces and ‘Wagner Group,’” OHCHR, January 31 2023.

⁹⁴ “Mali: UN Experts Call for Independent Investigation into Possible International Crimes Committed by Government Forces and ‘Wagner Group.’” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. January 31, 2023.

⁹⁵ “IntelBrief: The Moura Massacre in Mali and the Role of Russian Mercenaries,” The Soufan Center, April 15, 2022.

⁹⁶ Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel. *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point.*, Volume 15. Issue 11, November/December 2022.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Eric Sof, “7 Contractors from Wagner Group Killed in an Ambush in Mozambique.” *Spec Ops Magazine*, March 2022.

ISIS's Central Africa Province (ISCAP) in 2019. ISCAP's successes ultimately resulted in the Wagner Group's retreat from Mozambique.⁹⁹

Madagascar, meanwhile, has been a mixed bag of failure and success for the group. In 2018, the Wagner Group sought to influence Madagascar's 2018 presidential election via information operations, but ultimately, its early (and favored) candidates were unsuccessful. According to analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Wagner failure here was rooted in its struggle to understand of local context and its overall lack of political experience.¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, the group's efforts to gain access to the country's mines were met with stiff opposition, resulting in local workers engaging in strikes.¹⁰¹ More recently, the Wagner Group's persistence has paid off, with the group gaining access to mines, as Prigozhin's Ferrum Mining company now operates as a joint venture with the state-owned Kraomita.¹⁰² According to a report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), which documented its mining success, the Wagner Group is purportedly looting and smuggling diamonds.¹⁰³ This outcome could suggest that the Wagner Group has learned from its early missteps in Madagascar, as the CSIS report noted the group ultimately created more successful news platforms to distribute propaganda.¹⁰⁴ With Madagascar set to hold elections in November 2023, the international community should expect more election meddling by Prigozhin's assets in the months ahead.

Ultimately, Wagner Group's footprint in Africa has been significant, having engaged in political, economic, and military activity. While the Wagner Group's actions have resulted in mixed successes and failures, it is undeniable that Prigozhin has gained more clout in Africa over the past six years by virtue of the group's expansion. Given France's withdrawal from the Sahel and the U.S. government's general disinterest in the African continent, this influence is unlikely to recede in the near-term.

STEALING HOME ... AND AT HOME

While the Wagner Group's global footprint is deep, the organization's activities during the current conflict in Ukraine have been instrumental in the Russian Federation's theft of Ukrainian territory. Throughout the spring of 2023, Wagner played a key role in seizing significant sections of the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, leading to what appeared to be a Russian capture of the city in

⁹⁹ IntelBrief: Wagner Group Continues Expanding Through West Africa," The Soufan Center, December 20, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Catrina Doxsee, "Putin's Proxies: Examining Russia's Use of Private Military Companies." *Center for Strategic International Studies*, December 22, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon, and Julian Rademeyer. "The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa." *The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*. February 16 2023.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Catrina Doxsee, "Putin's Proxies: Examining Russia's Use of Private Military Companies." *Center for Strategic International Studies*, December 22, 2022.

late May. In many ways, Wagner’s role in the Bakhmut fighting represents a microcosm of Wagner’s wider activities in Ukraine. As a fighting force, Wagner produced more gains in Bakhmut than the conventional Russian military, yet the group has sustained significant losses by doing so. Prigozhin has spoken multiple times on the dire state of Wagner’s affairs in Bakhmut, noting that his group risked encirclement by the Ukrainian Armed Forces.¹⁰⁵ According to a February 2023 White House assessment, the Wagner Group has sustained more than 30 thousand casualties since the beginning of the conflict.¹⁰⁶ According to Prigozhin, 20

thousand of those casualties came out of Bakhmut alone.¹⁰⁷ Prigozhin’s rhetorical sniping at the Russian military establishment, specifically the vitriol directed towards Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov during the group’s difficulties in Bakhmut, are similar to his screeds directed at senior Russian government officials since the early days of the conflict. In late May 2023, however, Wagner’s extensive death toll in Bakhmut seemed to have helped Russia seize the city, as the group was reportedly turning control of the destroyed territory to the Russian military.¹⁰⁸



A man walks by a drawn again mural depicting the logo of Russia's Wagner Group on a wall in Belgrade, Serbia (AP Photo/Darko Vojinovic)

In Ukraine, the Wagner Group has also engaged in a broad range of criminal activity, such as murder, sabotage, rape, and pillaging. It has routinely used close-targeting improvised explosive devices (IEDs), been implicated in efforts to assassinate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and planted explosives around a nuclear facility.¹⁰⁹ The organization has also terrorized its own members: on at least two occasions, the group has executed deserters by sledgehammer and even filmed the executions to deter prospective deserters.¹¹⁰ Throughout the conflict, however, Ukrainian civilians have suffered the most at the hands of the Wagner Group. Time and again, videographic and direct testimony, including some delivered by Wagner Group defectors, have documented the horrors that Wagner has inflicted upon Ukrainians: beheadings, castrations, and the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians.¹¹¹ In the town of Bucha,

¹⁰⁵ Tim Lister, Uliana Pavlova, and Christian Edwards, “Wagner Boss Fumes That Russian Brigade ‘Fled’ from Bakhmut Area,” CNN, May 11, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ “White House: Wagner Group Has Suffered over 30,000 Casualties in Ukraine,” Reuters, February 17, 2023.

¹⁰⁷ “Latest in Ukraine: Wagner Chief Says 20,000 of His Forces Killed in Bakhmut Fighting,” VOA, May 24, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Pavel Polityuk, “Russian Wagner mercenaries handing Bakhmut to regular army,” Reuters, May 25, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ “Oral Evidence: The Wagner Group.” House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. November 1, 2022.

¹¹⁰ Dan Ladden-Hall, “Wagner Group Release Another Sledgehammer Execution Video.” Daily Beast, February 14, 2023.

¹¹¹ Anatoly Kurmanav and Henrik Pryser Libell, “A Wagner Fighter’s Escape to Norway Creates a Problem for His Host,” The New York Times, May 29, 2023.

Russian military and Wagner Group members have been accused of killing, torturing, and raping more than 400 people, including children.¹¹²

While stealing away the lives and territory of Ukraine has been the primary focus of the Wagner Group, its actions within Russia also merit attention. In early 2023, a terrorism research center at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies documented how the Wagner Group's popularity has grown on major Russian-language social media platforms like VK.¹¹³ While the buzz around the Wagner Group in Russia had already started to increase prior to the February 2022 invasion, its popularity increased even more dramatically once the war was underway.¹¹⁴ Two films were even released in August 2021 and October 2022 depicting Wagner Group members bravely fighting on behalf of the Russian Federation. These old-school propaganda films allowed "Prigozhin to serve as a broker for nationalist sentiment."¹¹⁵

Wagner's foray on the home front has not been limited to stoking nationalist sentiment via social media or film. The group's new military technology center in St. Petersburg¹¹⁶ may represent an effort by Prigozhin to put down firmer roots in a post-Ukraine conflict Russia; to stem off the brain-drain that occurred as Russian men fled the draft; to enhance the technology capabilities of Prigozhin's wider business empire;¹¹⁷ to develop more cyber capabilities that can project asymmetric threats to Russia's enemies while maintaining a degree of separation from the Russian government; and to spin propaganda to misinform the wider public regarding Russia's global activities, including those in Ukraine. Indeed, in December 2022, a Wagner-organized hackathon awarded a one-million-ruble prize to two contest winners,¹¹⁸ one of whom was identified as an FBI-wanted hacker.¹¹⁹ According to Molfar, an OSINT company, the purpose of the hackathon was to, "recruit specialists for further work on dual-use software and technologies."¹²⁰ The development of the technology center, and with it, the recruitment of specialists with expertise in cyber, is in keeping with Prigozhin's broad interests – all of which point to gaining power and money.

While Prigozhin has looked at home and abroad to accrue wealth and specialized expertise through his web of companies, he has also sought to expand the Wagner Group's domestic membership. A video circulated in September 2022 showed Prigozhin recruiting new members

¹¹² Louise Nordstrom, "Wagner Group's Bloody Year in Ukraine: From Murder Squad to Cannon Fodder," France 24, February 22, 2023.

¹¹³ Jason Blazakis, Kojin Glick, and Alice Shepard, "The Wagner Group's Social Footprint: A Time-Series Analysis of PMC World" Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey The Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, March 2023.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ "Outspoken Putin Ally Prigozhin's St Petersburg Defence Tech Centre Opens," Reuters, November 4, 2022.

¹¹⁷ Prigozhin has a wide array of businesses in Russia – including a major company, Concord, that has been awarded numerous contracts by the Russian government.

¹¹⁸ Digital Forensic Research Lab, "Russian War Report: Russian Hacker Wanted by the FBI Reportedly Wins Wagner Hackathon Prize," Atlantic Council, January 26, 2023.

¹¹⁹ "OSINT Analysts Identify Winners of PMC Wagner Hackathon." Yahoo News, January 3, 2023.

¹²⁰ "Hackathon of the 'PMC Wagner Center': Molfar Announces the Names of the Winners," Molfar, December 30, 2022.

directly from Russia's penal system,¹²¹ telling prospective recruits that they would have their sentences commuted if they joined the fight in Ukraine for six months.¹²² Yet for many of the Russian prisoners who decided to fight for Wagner in Ukraine, freedom was never realized, nor was the \$1,000 monthly salary they were promised.¹²³ 90 percent of the group's 30 thousand casualties between February 2022 and February 2023 were recruited convicts, according to the White House.¹²⁴ Some of these recruits also joined to receive anti-viral medication to deal with HIV.¹²⁵

Prigozhin's broken promises to Russians, Wagner Group members, and the countries to which he has agreed to provide security services have resulted in death and the plundering of wealth. The fractured skull that serves as the group's emblem has become a reflection of its internal reality: Wagner's losses are likely unsustainable in the long-term. It is bleeding person-power and its corrupt practices, while profitable in the short-term, are now widely documented and undermining the group's ability to expand its business base globally broadly. This, in part, can explain Prigozhin's inward turn.

While Prigozhin remains his own worst enemy, there is much more the international community can do to hasten his group's collapse. While the Wagner Group is sanctioned widely, more sanctions can be levied against the group to potentially curb its business enterprises outside of Russia, as discussed in the recommendation section. By increasing its own diplomatic and financial engagements – especially in Africa, where the Wagner Group may be eyeing new partnerships – the United States can do more.

¹²¹ "Putin Ally Prigozhin Reportedly Recruits Convicts to Fight in Ukraine," NBC News, September 16, 2022.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ "Wagner's Convicts Tell of Horrors of Ukraine War," Reuters, March 16, 2023.

¹²⁴ "Russia's Wagner Fighters Suffer 30,000 Casualties in Ukraine: US," Al Jazeera, February 18, 2023.

¹²⁵ Andrew E. Kramer, "'A Quick Death or a Slow Death': Prisoners Choose War to Get Lifesaving Drugs," The New York Times, April 21, 2023.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE & SECURITY

Wagner's emerging influence has led some to question the notion that security is primarily the purview of the state. The group has joined the burgeoning ranks of violent non-state actors that include insurgents, rebels, transnational organized criminal groups, and terrorist groups that play critical roles in shaping the nature of contemporary conflict. The group is not the first private military contractor to appear in conflicts – recall Executive Outcomes, DynCorps, and Blackwater, for example. Wagner's rise to prominence however, and its engagement in multiple failing – or precariously fragile – states in Africa, in parallel with its role in the conflict in Ukraine, highlight a particular set of challenges the group poses for international policymakers and practitioners, including those in the countries and regions in which the group is operating.

Wagner benefits from a lack of clarity about its organizational structure. In Ukraine, it appears as a private security force working in tandem with official military authorities. As noted earlier in this report, in Africa, however, Wagner operates like a conglomerate made up of different security and commercial entities, with an extensive focus on extractive industries. While its network of shell companies and commercial ventures is not unique to Wagner, or even necessarily illegal, it makes it more difficult for local and international investigators and monitors to track the movements of funds and goods, which has allowed Wagner to reportedly evade sanctions through their various companies.¹²⁶

The range of Wagner's activities across the globe highlight that its purpose and strategic priorities differ according to context. In Ukraine, Wagner appears to act as an extension of the Russian armed forces, as the recent battle for Bakhmut demonstrated.¹²⁷ In Africa, however, Wagner has demonstrated greater interest in commercial gain and has positioned itself as an indispensable security partner with advantageous access to economic resources. This complicates the assessment of its impacts and opportunities to mitigate its illegal activities. Moreover, Wagner has served as a premier partner for predatory authoritarian governments. In these environments, corruption and patronage networks dominate, and government/military officials favor collaborating with the mercenary group, given its willingness to overlook human rights violations. Beyond private soldiers and financial rewards, Wagner also offers its clients political access to Moscow.

Wagner is more than just a PMC. Throughout Africa, it has appeared as an extension of Moscow's foreign policy and influence, enhancing the Kremlin's objectives on the

¹²⁶ Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon, and Julian Rademeyer. "The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa." The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. February 16 2023.

¹²⁷ "IntelBrief: Wagner Group Preparing to Exit Bakhmut as Uncertainty Surrounds Prigozhin's Next Move," The Soufan Center, June 1, 2023.

continent.^{128,129} Wagner has been associated with disinformation campaigns discrediting Western and multilateral counterterrorism partners, whose narratives align strongly with those of Russia.¹³⁰ These also tend to draw on existing grievances. Wagner has also aligned its narratives with anti-French and anti-UN protests.¹³¹ Internal Wagner documents leaked in 2019 indicated a concerted Africa strategy aimed at displacing French, and more broadly, Western influence “out of the region and disrupt[ing] pro-Western political movement, an aim more in line with a Russian foreign-policy entity than a purely profit-seeking enterprise,” as explained by the Global Initiative on Transnational Organized Crime.¹³²

The close and public relationship between Wagner’s leader and senior military and political figures in Moscow also supports the view that a company of mercenaries requires senior state leadership support to exist, particularly in a country like Russia where mercenaryism is technically illegal. The close relationship between Wagner and the Russian state was reflected in Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s overtures to African leaders amidst isolation from the West following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In forums like the UN Security Council, Russia has also sought to protect both Wagner and African leaders from scrutiny, for example using its veto to block an investigation into the Moura massacre in Mali.¹³³ By displacing Western influence through disinformation and partnerships with autocratic leaders, Wagner has helped pave the way for Moscow to leverage that influence without requiring the state to put in substantial direct investment into defense or diplomacy partnerships.

To summarize, there are three defining aspects of the Wagner Group: 1) It is an amorphous entity more akin to a conglomerate than a traditional PMC. 2) Its purpose differs depending on the context in which it is operating. Sometimes this purpose is commercial, sometimes it is military. 3) It is not just a PMC but, in many places, operates an extension of the formal Russian state.

These aspects pose several challenges in terms of national, regional, and international responses and engagement.

I. Challenges for accountability

Given Wagner’s close ties to a UN Security Council permanent member state, attempts to pursue accountability for their reported violations of human rights or crimes committed can face serious obstacles, particularly if such efforts are viewed as challenging a state that serves as an important international partner for many countries across Africa. Many African states

¹²⁸ Beverly Ochieng, “Lavrov in Africa: Have Wagner Mercenaries Helped Mali’s Fight against Jihadists?,” BBC News, February 7, 2023.

¹²⁹ Andrew Hilliar, “Mali’s Foreign Minister Accuses France of Violating Airspace, Supporting Militants,” France 24, October 19, 2022.

¹³⁰ Alan Boswell and Julia Steers, “Russia’s Wagner in Africa” International Crisis Group, March 23, 2023.

¹³¹ See for example: Souley M. Twitter Post. January 13, 2023. 7:36 PM, https://twitter.com/SouleyM25304454/status/1614058906921177088?t=guW8TVD6i-IenAwVi9wJ_g&s=19

¹³² Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon, and Julian Rademeyer. “The Grey Zone: Russia’s Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa.” The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. February 16 2023.

¹³³ “Mali: Russia Blocks UN Security Council Request for Investigation into Moura Massacre,” April 10, 2022.

remained non-aligned during the Cold War or maintain long-term defense and political relationships with Russia. There may be concerns among some governments that holding Wagner to account for their alleged crimes could also be seen as a direct challenge to the Kremlin. Exchanges between senior Malian officials and French diplomats in the Security Council have highlighted the complex interrelationships that shape the discourse about the roles and



Abdoulaye Diop, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Mali (UN Photo/Evan Schneider)

actions of the group,¹³⁴ with Malian officials framing their rejection of France and embrace of Russian support as a defense of sovereignty and a failure on the part of the former colonial power to guarantee security and sustainability. Responding to criticisms of Mali for its close relationship to Russia (and Wagner), a Russian diplomat said in the Security Council decried the "neo-colonial habits" of his country's critics, calling for them to respect Malians' sovereign right to "resolve their own problems with the partners they themselves have chosen."¹³⁵

Another complicating factor for accountability efforts is the fact that Wagner has been invited by, or is closely tied to, many of the states in which it operates. On the one hand, this means that they have support from the highest levels of political power within these environments and can operate in tandem with official military forces where needed; Mali's recent demand that UN peacekeepers leave the country highlights the important and complex roles of consent with regard to peace operations¹³⁶. On the other hand, however, states can claim (im)plausible deniability and blame the fallout from these operations on external actors like Wagner without assuming any responsibility. Wagner may also misconstrue the situation as one that offers the group impunity to behave with reckless abandon without fear of consequences or repercussions.

As a conglomerate of security, financial, and extractive businesses operating across several countries, often through shell companies or local "front" businesses, Wagner's organizational structure also makes it difficult for national or regional practitioners to hold the group to account, particularly when it does not appear to exist as a single consolidated group. Discussions with counterterrorism practitioners from Africa highlighted these concerns and led to suggestions that increased sanctions on states that do business with Wagner, or any known

¹³⁴ See for example: "Progress towards Peace in Mali Is Unfolding, Security Council Told, Despite Tough Security, Humanitarian and Human Rights Challenges | UN Press," October 18, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15066.doc.htm>.

¹³⁵ "Situation in Mali Remains Volatile amid Escalating Clashes between Armed Groups, Official Tells Security Council, Calling for Sustained International Engagement" UN Press, April 12, 2023.

¹³⁶ IntelBrief: Malian Junta Seeks to Eject UN Peacekeeping Force The Soufan Center, June 21, 2023

related commercial entities, could assist investigators, prosecutors, and other legal and criminal justice officials in monitoring and tracking Wagner's illicit activities.¹³⁷

II. Challenges for conflict prevention and resolution

Wagner's willingness to use force and target civilians makes it difficult for international and regional actors to develop conflict prevention and mitigation strategies when the group's efforts are directed at supporting specific parties to conflict rather than towards more comprehensive peace processes.¹³⁸ The reports of torture, sexual violence, and mass killings by Wagner run contrary to any efforts to promote dialogue, mediate disagreements, or foster comprehensive peace processes among parties to intra-state conflicts. Moreover, Wagner's failure to stem widespread violence could require or encourage neighboring countries to intervene or even deploy military forces to faltering states. In other cases, by creating instability, Wagner uses the resulting disorder to argue for its very presence, creating a dystopian feedback loop. In discussions with practitioners, speakers highlighted that Rwanda's intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo was precipitated by Wagner's indiscriminate violence and inability to stem conflict. While the Rwandan intervention may be seen as controversial by some experts, it highlights the fact that Wagner's track record has not been one of uniform success.¹³⁹

The presence of foreigners has been shown to exacerbate violence and prolong conflicts in other settings, creating additional reason to be concerned about Wagner's global activities. In Syria, for example, the unprecedented outflow of foreign fighters and supporters bolstered the leadership ranks of terrorist groups like Islamic State, empowering foreigners who had little connection or history with local communities to be especially brutal and destructive. One of the most notorious example of this phenomenon is Mohammed Emwazi, or "Jihadi John," a British member of an ISIS cell nicknamed "the Beatles" responsible for the detention, abuse, and murder of several hostages, including American journalist James Foley.

Many violent non-state armed actors, including terrorists and PMCs, operate in states suffering from chronic instability and insecurity, high rates of corruption, poor governance, porous borders, and a deep trust deficit between citizens and the state. Several states where Wagner is present have experienced democratic backsliding, with autocratic or military leaders assuming powers through coups (Mali being a notable example). However, as the Mali Mètre survey highlighted, combined with Malians' generally poor perceptions of MINUSMA,¹⁴⁰ it appears that

¹³⁷ Discussions with counterterrorism practitioners from several African states, International Institute of Justice and the Rule of Law (IJ), Malta, Spring 2023.

¹³⁸ Dirk Druet "Wagner Group Poses Fundamental Challenges for the Protection of Civilians by UN Peacekeeping Operations," IPI Global Observatory, March 20, 2023.

¹³⁹ Discussions with African criminal justice practitioners, International Institute for Criminal Justice and the Rule of Law, Malta, Spring 2023.

¹⁴⁰ For a breakdown of the findings in English see: Christian Clark. Twitter Post. May 3, 2023. 8:21AM, <https://twitter.com/chk2310/status/1653736640735592448>

the country's citizens welcome the appearance of stability that the transitional government and partners like Wagner seem to provide, despite their cost to democracy and reported abuses.¹⁴¹

This raises a critical question about the implications of Wagner's activities for international peace operations, and whether or how peacekeepers can operate in these environments¹⁴² – questions currently under active consideration by the UN Secretary-General and senior experts and stakeholders.¹⁴³ UN and regional peace operations are reliant on the consent of the host government. MINUSMA is mandated to support a comprehensive peace process. With the departure of French counterterrorism forces – first Operation Serval, then Operation Barkhane – MINUSMA could bear a heavier burden of attacks, both on its own personnel and on the civilians it is obligated to protect.¹⁴⁴ However, where missions are under attack by both governments and designated terrorist groups, the very feasibility and mandate of the mission may be called into question, as the adversarial relationship between MINUSMA and the government highlights. The Malian government's decision to invite Wagner as a security partner complicates the UN's role in the region, with many citizens ascribing ongoing violence and instability to the mission's failures. Moreover, some experts have seen France's decision to withdraw from Mali *after* the arrival of Wagner as confirming perceptions that it failed to stem the jihadist tide in the Sahel.¹⁴⁵ Whether or not Wagner delivers long-term stability and security, its brutality will undermine efforts to foster rule of law-based responses and processes.

Beyond Wagner's kinetic threats, its information operations appear designed to not only undermine the former colonial power, France, and Western allies, but also international actors like the United Nations. UN peace operations face a heightened threat from disinformation, as these campaigns circulate false allegations of peacekeepers killing civilians or engaging in corruption. Although every campaign targeting these operations cannot be traced back to Wagner, the International Peace Institute's Albert Trithart writes that the "increase in disinformation against MINUSMA coincides with both the growing involvement of Russian mercenaries in Mali and the withdrawal of French forces, which may be leading disinformation campaigns to pivot from anti-French to anti-UN messaging."¹⁴⁶

Campaigns undermining Western influence can build on very real and legitimate grievances that African stakeholders may hold against Western powers, particularly those who have partnered with autocratic governments in the name of promoting security, yet failed to stem terrorist threats or foster improvements in governance or development. These mis- or dis- information

¹⁴¹ Discussions with senior UN expert, New York, Spring 2023.

¹⁴² Arthur Boutellis and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "Waging Peace: UN Peace Operations Confronting Terrorism and Violent Extremism" International Peace Institute, October 2016.

¹⁴³ Discussions with senior UN expert, New York, Spring 2023. Also, see for example, the Future of Peacekeeping project and related set of policy papers and recommendations: "Future Of Peacekeeping," United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d., <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/future-of-peacekeeping>.

¹⁴⁴ Dirk Druet, "Wagner Group Poses Fundamental Challenges for the Protection of Civilians by UN Peacekeeping Operations," IPI Global Observatory, March 20, 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Wassim Nasr and Raphael Parens, "France's Missed Moments in Mali," TSC Insight, The Soufan Center, *forthcoming*.

¹⁴⁶ Albert Trithart, "Disinformation against UN Peacekeeping Operations," International Peace Institute, November 2022.

campaigns also serve to discredit the role of actors like the UN, with a view to replacing their role and influence with actors favored by Moscow. Yet as Western powers depart these regions, the UN and likeminded actors may be the last ones standing with some resource and mandate to protect civilians, mediate conflict, or foster dialogue.

III. Challenges for radicalization and mobilization

Wagner’s brutality against civilians and its support for predatory governments could further exacerbate the very conditions and grievances that can be exploited by violent extremists groups to drum up recruits and support. Research and practice have shown that one of the most important drivers of radicalization, or at least support for terrorist groups, is real or perceived human rights violations at the hands of the state. Of course, there is no single motivation that moves individuals to support terrorist groups or to commit terrorist acts themselves. It is often a complex mix of socioeconomic needs, kinship networks, online or offline communities, and ideological motivations that prompt radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization. However, narratives of oppression of communities based on race, ethnicity, religion, or violence against civilians – particularly against women and children – have often mobilized support for groups who portray themselves as seeking to rectify the situation or protect the vulnerable. Several studies by the United Nations Development Program have reaffirmed that broken social contracts and deep-seated grievances play a key role in African radicalization. These findings highlight the urgent need to improve the quality and accountability of security institutions and other service providers.¹⁴⁷

In Syria, for example, reports of Assad’s brutality – even if not directly experienced – proved critical to mobilizing the early wave of foreign supporters and fighters who flocking to join the Free Syrian Army.¹⁴⁸ When state or state-supported actors perpetrate violence against civilians or collaborate with groups that do so, this creates opportunities for terrorist groups to recruit, mobilize, and attract support. Allowing groups like Wagner to perpetrate mass atrocities against civilians with impunity could create a hospitable environment for terrorist recruitment, as terrorist groups highlight the atrocities and failures committed by external actors—and the governments that support them.

While it is critical to understand the dynamics and implications of Wagner’s rise to power, some experts and practitioners warn against ascribing them too much influence and overestimating their roles. As some African counterterrorism practitioners noted, “Wagner has been invited by many failed states to support failing governments, and they have not been successful in many places, look at Mozambique or DRC.”¹⁴⁹ There are concerns that other illicit groups may try and

¹⁴⁷ “Journey To Extremism In Africa: Pathways To Recruitment And Disengagement” United Nations Development Programme, 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Charles Lister, “The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand,” Brookings, March 9, 2022.

¹⁴⁹ Discussions with counterterrorism practitioners from several African states, International Institute of Justice and the Rule of Law (IJJ), Malta, Spring 2023.

replicate Wagner's setup, with shell companies and affiliates that make it difficult for national and regional criminal justice officials to trace them. However, given its close relationship to the Kremlin, Wagner's model will not be easy to mimic in all respects unless the Russian leadership finds another organization to replace it. Given reports of ongoing tensions between Prigozhin and the military leadership in Moscow, however, this remains a possibility.

CONCLUSION

The nature and scope of the Wagner Group's activities warrant close consideration for policymakers and practitioners focused on the myriad of challenges associated with violent non-state armed groups establishing global commercial interests. This is particularly noteworthy for those involved in conflict mitigation, peace-building, and security sector reform, especially in fragile states. However, Wagner's threat must be analyzed from a variety of perspectives, and not only according to Western geopolitical concerns. The Wagner Group poses a substantial threat to the lives of local civilians on the ground where it deploys, who may be caught in its crossfire or willfully targeted; it threatens the political freedoms of anybody who might oppose a leader who has invited Wagner's assistance to ensure his/her own physical and political security; it threatens the livelihoods of those who have seen Wagner vacuum up local resources and smuggled them beyond their borders; and it threatens any state neighboring Wagner operations, which may not welcome the PMC but will nonetheless be subject to its collateral damage should it inflame conflicts, topple democratically elected leaders, or send migrants fleeing across borders. By propping up predatory governments, the group also risks perpetuating the dynamics and grievances that terrorist groups and other illicit actors can exploit to drum up recruits and support. All of these perspectives should be taken into account while shaping local, national, regional or international responses to Wagner.

The legacy of international engagement in some of the areas where Wagner is now most prominent has itself been mixed. Many Western states have faced criticism for prioritizing security partnerships over human rights considerations in working with autocratic governments, and security services receiving counterterrorism support or capacity-building development have at times been implicated in abusive or predatory behaviors. It is therefore incumbent upon critics of Wagner's engagement to consider the reasons that this group has proved more appealing than Western powers to some governments – and even citizens. Given the reputational damage that many Western powers inflicted on themselves through their colonial and Cold War legacies, any calls for the international community to condemn, punish, or evict the Wagner Group will likely be met with resistance in the Global South. Instead, efforts to challenge Wagner's influence should focus on meaningful efforts to build civilian capacities and foster more equitable development. Russian stakeholders have often spun the legitimate condemnations of Wagner's human rights abuses and exploitations of states and civilians alike as yet another neo-colonialist attempt to interfere with the internal affairs of non-Western states. All of this must be factored into responses to Wagner, as well.

Given the environments in which it operates, Wagner should be dealt with in a way that values protecting civilians from Wagner's abuses as well as from the very real terrorist and other violent threats that Wagner has ostensibly called in to combat. And where its abuses cannot be

prevented, this response should ensure that those responsible for them are held accountable for their crimes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1- The U.S. government and allies should consider designating Wagner an FTO.

Building on the recent U.S. designation of the Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization, the United States should consider designating it as a foreign terrorist organization, particularly in light of its activities outside conflict zones, where its behavior is subject to international humanitarian law as a non-state armed group.

2- States should impose sanctions on Wagner-affiliated businesses where possible.

Sanctions should be enforced on Wagner subsidiaries which have already been identified, while proactive efforts should be made to identify additional companies underneath the Wagner umbrella that can be sanctioned.

3- Pursue accountability for war crimes and core international crimes in conflict zones.

Allowing groups like Wagner to perpetrate atrocities against civilians creates a hospitable environment for terrorist recruitment, in addition to corrosively impacting the state and citizens. States should work closely to advance investigations and prosecutions into potential terrorism and war crimes committed, including those related to genocide, sexual violence, and the destruction of cultural heritage.

4- Strengthen support to civil society organizations engaged in documenting Wagner's activities and human rights violations and providing support to their victims.

Building capacities and supporting civil society organizations engaged in documenting Wagner's activities and human rights abuses will be critical. Unfortunately, in countries Wagner is active, civil society often already faces a myriad of risks and challenges. While international and regional partners should provide capacity-building assistance, they should also work with governments and international organizations to enhance protections for civil society and ensure that governments uphold their human rights obligations.

5- Pursue an accountability call from UN experts

UN Security Council members should revisit recent calls by both France and UN human rights experts for an independent investigation into the Moura massacre in Mali.¹⁵⁰ Should similar calls arise elsewhere, states should proactively call for proactive investigations, with the possibility for necessarily follow-up action pending their results.

6- Strengthen international efforts to implement existing international PMC frameworks.

States should enhance efforts to implement policies and measures relevant to the framework of the Montreux Document on Pertinent Legal Obligations and Good Practices for States related to Operations of Private Military and Security Companies during Armed Conflict of 17 September 2008. States should proactively strengthen international cooperation and multi-stakeholder engagement, and develop a collection of lessons learned and good practices that applicable to Wagner and related groups.

7- Develop guidance and protocols for peace operations in complex contexts that involve non-state armed actors, like designated terrorist groups, and PMCs.

The UN, member states, and international stakeholders developing policy guidance and lessons learned on working with private military and security companies should also consider the development of guidance and lessons learned on working with proscribed armed groups. Beyond a focus on engaging with conflict actors, such guidance should include a focus on equipping missions and partners to effectively identify strategic risks, threats, and opportunities, including managing threats generated by the use of emerging technologies and disinformation. Should states designate the Wagner Group as a terrorist entity or FTO, this issue will be particularly salient in several contexts where both Wagner and the UN are active stakeholders.

8- Pursue accountability for the Wagner Groups' involvement in the destruction of cultural heritage.

States and international organizations should more closely scrutinize and record the Wagner Group's involvement in the destruction and trafficking of cultural heritage and antiquities, and work with investigators and civil society organizations to document cases that may be used to pursue accountability and enhance awareness among multiple stakeholder communities including the private sector, social media companies and internet platforms, legal and criminal justice practitioners, and governments.

¹⁵⁰ "Mali: UN Experts Call for Independent Investigation into Possible International Crimes Committed by Government Forces and 'Wagner Group,'" OHCHR.

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Prior to working at the Department of State, Jason served as a domestic intelligence analyst at the Congressional Research Service. In addition, he was the national security adviser to a United States Congressional Representative. He also has worked at the U.S. Department of Commerce's Technology Administration.

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Clarke has testified before Congress on numerous occasions as an expert witness on a range of terrorism-related issues, appears frequently in the media to discuss national security-related matters, and has published several books on terrorism, including his most recent, *After the Caliphate: The Islamic State and the Future Terrorist Diaspora*.

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Before joining the United Nations, she was head of research and analysis for the Global Center on Cooperative Security, leading on the multilateral security portfolio focused on international response to terrorism and violent extremism, armed conflict, political instability, and the role of international and regional actors. In doing so, she built on earlier work at the International Peace Institute, where she developed the portfolio on counterterrorism and transnational security threats. She has also been an active contributor to IPI's Global Observatory, writing on issues relating to terrorism, peace operations, and international diplomacy.

She has developed and implemented CT and CVE projects across the globe, in regions as diverse as West Africa and South Asia for example, and has published widely on counterterrorism, gender, peace operations, the UN, and deradicalization/reintegration efforts. She has been a key speaker in several high-level conferences and regularly briefs senior officials, experts, and the media on these issues.

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Sean comes from a background in policy research, analysis, communications, journalism, and filmmaking. Prior to joining TSC, he led a team consulting on behalf of the U.S. Department of State. Under his management, the team provided policy recommendations to guide NATO's response to Russia's military and hybrid pressure in the Black Sea and surrounding states. In other roles, he analyzed U.S. foreign policy for the Eurasia Group Foundation, helped produce their podcast, *None of the Above*, and crafted policy and communications for a U.S. Congressional campaign during the 2018 midterm elections. As an NYC[x] Innovation Fellow, Sean worked on technology issues in New York City at the Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer.

He has produced a half dozen documentaries on landmark cybersecurity events with an Emmy award-winning filmmaker, wrote a daily brief on global security events for Fordham Law's

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Acknowledgment:

The authors would like to thank all the experts and practitioners who took the time to speak with us about these issues, and express appreciation to Nicolette Lyubarsky, Mohammed El-Shawesh, and Stephanie Foggett for their support in bringing this report together.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent those of The Soufan Center or its Board.

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