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برلمان البحر الأبيض المتوسط

Internal Note

**Prepared by PAM Researchers, based on the information available
on open sources**

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Disclaimer: This document was prepared by the researchers of the International Study Centre of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) in San Marino, in their personal capacity. The opinions expressed in the note are the authors' own and do not reflect the views of PAM.

Executive Summary

1. Over the years, the **Wagner Group** has extended its influence globally, interfering in internal affairs and fueling violence within the countries in which is present, especially in Ukraine, the MENA region and the Sahel.
2. In **Syria**, the Wagner Group is mainly used to carry out military offensives in difficult areas. There, it controls oil and gas fields in various cities. In **Libya**, the Group's initial objective was to provide training and support to the Libyan National Army (LNA). At present, Wagner is also overseeing on a number of military bases and energy infrastructure in the country.
3. The Wagner Group has also expanded its activities in the **Sahel** region, namely in **Sudan, Mali, and the Central Africa Republic**, where it has contributed to the destabilization of the area supporting authoritarian regimes, to secure the access of Russia to primary resources.
4. In addition, evidence has been found that the Wagner Group is providing Russia with **financial support**, coming from the revenues of gold mines and the trafficking of natural resources, **to sustain the unlawful aggression against Ukraine**.
5. Recently, U.S. leaked documents revealed that the Wagner Group planned also to travel to **Haiti** to assess the potential for contracts with the Haitian Government. The presence of the Wagner Group in the country would have potentially opened a new phase of the Group's operations in **Latin America**.

6. In January 2023, the U.S. Treasury Department designated the Group as a **transnational criminal organization**. In Europe, discussions are underway to label the Wagner Group as a terrorist organization.
7. At the time of the writing, an **armed mutiny**, staged by Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder and owner of the Wagner Group, represented a direct challenge to President Putin, and exposed the divisions that exist within the Russian military camp, the fragility of both its military and auxiliary forces, as well as the weaknesses of the regime.
8. This report has the aim to provide a **brief overview** of the presence of the Wagner Group in the PAM regions, and in PAM's geographical and geopolitical proximity.

Introduction

9. The Wagner Group plays a significant role in armed conflicts across the Euro-Mediterranean region, and beyond.
10. Combining hard and soft power strategies, the Wagner Group is contributing to the destabilization of countries, utilizing, among other methods, human rights abuses, rapacious resource extraction, and covert disinformation efforts that meddle with internal political dynamics.
11. The Wagner Group first appeared as an entity in 2014, during the so-called mobilization of volunteers in the eastern regions of Ukraine, as well as during the operations of the Russian army to seize and occupy the Ukraine's region of Crimea. Since then, the Group has evolved into a network of mercenaries deployed throughout the globe, intending to advance and defend Russian national interests. Recent declarations by Wagner's chief himself, have confirmed that both operations were financed by the Kremlin.
12. In this regard, although under Russian law, mercenary activity is punishable with a prison term up to 15 years (Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code, 1996), there are important loopholes in the Russian legislative system. For instance, while individuals are not allowed to serve as mercenaries, state-run enterprises are allowed to have private armed forces and security foundations.¹
13. In 2022, the Wagner Group was registered as a legal entity in Russia, listing itself as a management consultant company. Additionally, in November 2022, Wagner opened an office building in St. Petersburg. Wagner's ability to operate openly suggests high-level official support. The office was temporarily closed by Russian authorities as result of the failed mutiny.

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142>

14. After deployment in Crimea, the presence of the Wagner Group was reported in Syria in 2015, following the Russian military intervention in the country's civil war. At that time, it was highlighted that the Wagner Group was employed by the Russian Ministry of Defense. Despite the attempts of the Kremlin to dismiss these claims as "information attack", sources within the Russian Federal Security Services (FSB), and the Ministry of Defense itself, confirmed that the Group was supervised by the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU).
15. In addition, there have been several documented occasions in which Wagner operatives used transport infrastructures related to the Ministry of Defense of Russia. As an example, when Wagner operatives were deployed in 2019 to Venezuela to protect President Maduro from any opposition protests, they arrived onboard Russian Air Force transport aircrafts, an Ilyushin Il-62M and an Antonov An-124.² In Libya, Russian military Ilyushin Il-76 cargo aircraft supplied Wagner operatives fighting on the ground.³
16. Transport is not the only sector where it can be documented that Wagner relied on Russian military infrastructure. Multiple investigative reports confirm that operatives of the Wagner Group are treated and rehabilitated in Russian military hospitals.
17. Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch and, until recently, close confidant of President Putin, is the founder and owner of the Wagner Group. Prigozhin also oversees a broader network of entities beyond Wagner, comprising, for example, the Internet Research Agency, designated as a "Russian troll farm" by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. He is under U.S. sanctions and indictment for numerous activities, including interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Prigozhin has, until the mutiny, served as main contractor to supply food to the Russian Army occupying forces in Ukraine.
18. According to analysts, he sought to expand the Wagner Group with a more institutionalized power base within Russian politics. In January 2023, the U.S. National Security Council Spokesperson, John Kirby, stated that "Wagner is becoming a rival power center to the Russian military and other Russian ministries."

In Syria

²<https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/27143/russian-transport-aircraft-deliver-men-and-materiel-to-venezuela-direct-from-syria>

³ <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2287821/russia-wagner-group-continue-military-involvement-in-libya/>

19. In Syria, the Wagner Group is mainly used to carry out military offensives in difficult areas, including supporting the Syrian Armed Forces to retake the city of Aleppo from rebel groups in 2016, and fight against ISIL.
20. In 2017, the Russian and the Syrian governments signed several agreements, in which it was stated that companies seizing oil and gas wells, as well as mines, from ISIL forces, would acquire rights for those same sites, receiving a 25% share of the production. The first companies to take advantage of this new policy were the Wagner-linked Russian security contractors: Evro Polis and Stroytransgaz.⁴
21. Over the years, Russian companies, partnering with the Wagner Group, have gained control of oil and gas fields in Badia al-Bukamal, Deir ez-Zor's countryside, Raqqa and Homs, along with all the marine areas adjoining the Syrian coast. In particular, the economic activities of the Group expanded at the extent to control several phosphate fields in the Palmyra region.
22. With the expansion of its activities beyond Syria, the Wagner Group took advantage of the dire living conditions in the country to recruit thousands of Syrians and deploy them to work in operations abroad, especially in Libya.
23. In 2022, for the first time, human rights groups filed a case before the European Court for Human Rights (ECtHR) against the Wagner Group, accusing it of human rights abuses in Syria. At the core of the complaint against the Wagner Group, there was a video footage dated 2017, which circulated on social media in 2019, showing members of Wagner beating, beheading, and burning the body of a Syrian national.⁵
24. The appeal before the ECtHR addresses the violation of articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which respectively protect the right to life and the right not to be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. According to these articles, and the jurisprudence derived from them, States must protect individuals against any violations of these rights on their national territory but also on the territory of another State, if they exercise effective control over it. In the absence of a territorial tie, a State may also be held responsible if State agents act contrary to the rights protected by the Convention.
25. In their application, lawyers allege that Russia had effective control over the part of Syrian territory, where the events took place in 2017. The appeal before the ECtHR was made after the exhaustion of all domestic remedies in Russia, as per Article 13 of the ECHR.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/world/middleeast/russia-syria-oil-isis.html>

⁵ https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/wagner-cedh-q_a-en.pdf

26. However, the submission came one day after the Russian Parliament passed two bills, which provide that, upon signature by President Putin, Russia would have withdrawn from the jurisdiction of the ECtHR and not implemented any decisions by the Court rendered after 15 March 2022. That is the date on which Russia announced its withdrawal from the Council of Europe (CoE) simultaneously with the Council's announcement to expel Russia as a member⁶.
27. Recently, following the brutal Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, sectors of the Syrian Army were accused to recruit mercenaries for the Wagner Group, in order to deploy them in Ukraine to fight alongside Russian forces. In this regard, last year, the European Union sanctioned 10 Syrian nationals for recruiting soldiers to fight in Ukraine.
28. According to a number of U.S. classified reports, published on the Washington Post, the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine was planning to launch an attack on the Wagner Group in Syria, using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and together with local Kurd units. The plan seemed to be halted by President Zelensky, in order not to raise the threat level to the point where the Russians would need to call for reinforcements⁷.

In Libya

29. The Wagner Group first appeared in Libya in 2018. The Group's initial objective was to provide training to the Libyan National Army (LNA) to use and maintain Russian and Soviet weapon systems, including advanced air defence and command control systems. In addition, Wagner was hired to assist the LNA in de-mining services, in Benghazi and Dema.
30. Wagner Group operatives in Libya are predominantly from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Serbia, and other post-Soviet states. They are known to have frequently operated along with the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces and Syrian mercenaries.
31. In 2019, the Wagner Group supported the LNA to launch its military offensive against the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. By early 2020, up to 1,200 Wagner mercenaries were on the ground in Libya, and their monthly salary amounted to 1,500 U.S. Dollars⁸.
32. From September 2019, and after the arrival of the first Turkish military advisers in Tripoli to assist the GNA, the fighting became more intense, and Wagner began to count its first casualties.

⁶ https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/wagner-chedh-q_a-en.pdf

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/20/russia-ukraine-war-syria-attacks/>

⁸ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-next-front-russias-expanding-military-footprint-libya>

33. In October 2020, the LNA and GNA reached a Ceasefire Agreement, in which they called for the withdrawal of all foreign fighters and mercenaries.⁹ To date, there has been no indication that foreign fighters and mercenaries have left Libya. Thousands of mercenaries of Russian, Syrian, Sudanese, and Chadian nationality remain in the country.
34. After the Ceasefire Agreement, the objectives of the Wagner Group in Libya started to shift, marking the increase of autonomous activities of the Group in the country, with the direct financial support from the Russian Ministry of Defense.
35. According to a report, drafted by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK Parliament in May 2022¹⁰, over the past years, the Russian Federation has focused on the fulfilment of three objectives in Libya: building command-and-control systems in military bases across the country, retaining leverage of Libyan energy infrastructures, and forming logistic bridges to facilitate the transfer of equipment and personnel to the Sahel, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Ukraine.
36. Wagner has assessed control over military bases in Libya by building command-and-control systems in the Qardabiyah, Al-Khadim, Brak Al-Shati, and Jufra airbases. This has allowed Russia to be present in the country, without being overexposed¹¹.
37. Regarding the control of energy infrastructures, Wagner has a clandestine presence at a number of oil and gas facilities in the country. Sources have attested the presence of Wagner operatives at Ras Lanuf, Brega, and Sidra oil terminals, as well as at El Feel and Sharara oilfields (the latter being the largest oilfield in Libya). The Group's presence in the vicinity of oil facilities is not extractive but instead enables Russia to hold Libya's assets to ransom and potentially influence international oil markets.¹²
38. Wagner's presence in Libya has also served to establish logistic bridges to facilitate the transfer of weapons and personnel in Africa and in occupied regions of Ukraine.
39. Over the time, the operations of the Wagner Group in Libya have extended beyond the activities of a traditional private military company (PMC), including political advisory services and social media influence operations. Such activities are conducted through linked shell companies that are difficult to trace.
40. Last year, Human Rights Watch exposed the use of landmines and booby traps in Libya, especially around Tripoli, during the 2019-2020 conflict. Antipersonnel landmines, which are designed to explode in the presence, proximity, or contact of a person, violate International Humanitarian Law, because they cannot discriminate

⁹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/108429/pdf/>

¹⁰ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/6641/the-wagner-group-and-beyond-proxy-private-military-companies/>

¹¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/108429/pdf/>

¹² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/08/wagner-group-libya-oil-russia-war/>

between civilians and combatants. The use of such explosive ordnances was linked to the Wagner Group¹³.

In Ukraine

41. Within Ukraine, the Wagner Group has been active since 2014, when, paid by Russia, its operatives supported the Russian illegal annexation of portions of eastern provinces and Crimea. At that time, members of the Group were called “little green men”, due to the color of their masks and uniforms, and the fact the nobody could trace their origin.
42. After Crimea, some 300 “volunteers” men, all members of the Wagner Group were sent to the Donbass, to join pro-Russian separatist forces in the conflict, which started against the Ukrainian Army. With their help, the pro-Russian forces were able to destabilize government security forces in the region, immobilize operations of local government institutions, seize ammunition stores and take control of towns.
43. According to the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the Wagner Group was involved in the shoot-down of the II-76 airplane at the Luhansk International Airport that killed 40 Ukrainian paratroopers, as well as in the 2015 Battle of Debaltseve (Donetsk Oblast), which involved one of the heaviest artillery bombardments in recent history.
44. Since then, a sizable number of Wagner mercenaries remained in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, to guarantee Russian control over the territories and kill and eliminate any people considered “undesirable” by Russia.
45. Recently, the role of the Wagner Group in Ukraine became a key element in the brutal Russian aggression against Ukraine. In this regard, reports indicate that, to prepare the Russian invasion, the Group flew contractors from the Central African Republic to Ukraine, in January 2022, on a mission to assassinate President Zelensky and members of his Government¹⁴. The Ukrainian Government received information on 26 February, after which it declared a 36-hour “hard” curfew in Kiev, to sweep the capital for “Russian saboteurs”¹⁵.
46. Since the beginning of the invasion, the number of Wagner operatives in Ukraine grew exponentially, including mercenaries with combat experience in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Chechnya and Afghanistan¹⁶. According to Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service (BND), the Wagner Group played a leading role in the Bucha massacre of civilians, and intercepted incriminating radio communications suggested that the

¹³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/31/libya-russias-wagner-group-set-landmines-near-tripoli>

¹⁴ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-k-says-russian-mercenary-group-aims-to-assassinate-ukraines-president-11648137870>

¹⁵ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/volodymyr-zelensky-russian-mercenaries-ordered-to-kill-ukraine-president-cvcksh79d>

¹⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20220327112928/https://www.yahoo.com/news/more-russian-mercenaries-deploying-ukraine-143421204.html>

killings were part of a Russian plan to instill fear in the population, thus reducing the will to resist¹⁷.

47. In addition, from July 2022, the Group started recruiting new members from prisons in Russia, to support military operations in Ukraine. New recruits were offered from 100,000 to 200,000 rubles and amnesty after six months of “voluntary service”, or 5 million for their relatives if they died¹⁸. On 5 January 2023, the first group of 24 prisoners recruited finished their six-month contract and were released with full amnesty for their past crimes¹⁹. After the mutiny, the Russian Ministry of Defence has replaced Wagner in this practice.
48. In the last few months, Prigozhin, founder of Wagner, started expressing growing opposition and criticism towards the Russian Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, for not receiving the necessary support to fight, especially in Bakhmut, where the Group reported several deaths.²⁰
49. In fact, before the mutiny, Wagner was requesting 4,000 shells per day to operate efficiently in Ukraine. Despite this, the Group was only receiving 800 shells per day.²¹ Experts considered this request highly inflated.
50. On 4 May 2023, Prigozhin posted a video on Telegram, in which he was standing next to a pile of corpses that he claimed to be Wagner operatives. In the video, he accused the Russian Ministry of Defense of failing to provide the necessary military support to fight, also threatening to pull his forces out of Bakhmut within the week. Prigozhin regularly and routinely denounced top senior officials in the Kremlin, while abstaining from directly criticizing President Putin.
51. A recent report of the United States claims that the Wagner Group has suffered an estimated 30,000 casualties in Ukraine, with 9,000 of those being killed in action. The report estimates that 90% of killed mercenaries were recruited convicts²².
52. In April 2023, the European Council decided to add the Wagner Group and RIA FAN (part of the Patriot Media Group, a Russian media organization whose Board of Trustees is headed by Prigozhin) to the list of those subject to EU restrictive measures for actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.

¹⁷<https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/possible-evidence-of-russian-atrocities-german-intelligence-intercepts-radio-traffic-discussing-the-murder-of-civilians-in-bucha-a-0a191c96-634f-4d07-8c5c-c4a772315b0d>

¹⁸ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/07/05/russian-prisoners-offered-2800-freedom-serve-ukraine-come/>

¹⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/5/russian-ex-prisoners-released-from-ukrainian-frontline>

²⁰ <https://www.newsweek.com/how-prigozhin-turned-putin-bakhmut-wagner-group-ammunition-1799224>

²¹ <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-29-2023>

²²<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/white-house-wagner-group-has-suffered-over-30000-casualties-ukraine-2023-02-17/>

53. The decision added new substance to the so-called “Wagner package” of sanctions, adopted on 25 February 2023, and underscores the international dimension and gravity of the Group’s activities, as well as its destabilizing impact on the countries where it is active.
54. On 15 May 2023, the Washington Post revealed to have found evidence of an offer made by Mr. Prigozhin to the Ukrainian Government, in which he would have revealed Russian military positions, in exchange of the Ukrainian withdrawal from Bakhmut. When asked, he denied all rumors and claims.²³

In the Sahel region

55. The presence of Wagner in the Sahel is causing alarms across the international community for its practices on the ground. In fact, the Group has been working with authoritarian regimes to secure the access of Russia to primary resources, completely disregarding human rights. In addition, proofs have been found that the Wagner Group is providing Russia with financial support, coming from the revenues of gold mines and trafficking of natural resources, to sustain the invasion of Ukraine²⁴.
56. Besides its presence in the countries, which are mentioned below, the Wagner Group is aiming at further expanding in the region, namely in Mozambique, Tchad²⁵ and Burkina Faso²⁶, where Wagner operatives fuel tensions and violent protests against established governments.

Sudan

57. Since 2017, evidence has been published on international media outlets regarding the presence of the Wagner Group in Sudan. Initially, Wagner operatives were sent to Sudan to support the Army against attacks from South Sudan, and defend gold, uranium and diamond mines in the country. At the beginning of its activity in the country, the Group was working under the cover of “M-Invest” or “Meroe” company, linked to Prigozhin.
58. Between 2019 and 2021, Wagner operatives were reported to have played an important role in the political turmoil within the country, supporting the military in its path towards the power. The Wagner Group was also accused of the killings of many civilians in the protests.

²³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/15/wagner-boss-offered-up-russian-positions-to-kyiv-washington-post>

²⁴ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-wagner-group-ukraine-war-putin-prigozhin-africa-plundering-resources/>

²⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-intelligence-points-to-wagner-plot-against-key-western-ally-in-africa-29867547>

²⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546>

59. Between 2021 and 2023, the Wagner Group increased its connections with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which is currently fighting Sudan's Regular Army (SRA). Some Sudanese and regional diplomatic sources claimed that the Wagner Group had provided surface-to-air missiles to the RSF against the SAF²⁷.
60. In exchange for the services of Wagner, over the years, the Sudanese authorities have ceded to the Russian government rights over lucrative gold mines all around the country²⁸.

Central African Republic

61. The Wagner Group arrived in Central African Republic (CAR) in 2018, as a result of a series of agreements between the Russian Federation and the government of the country. According to Russia's official version, military instructors had been sent to train Central African armed forces to use weapons delivered by the Russian Federation, after the authorization of the United Nations Security Council²⁹.
62. In the first three years of Wagner's presence in CAR, President Touadéra appointed Valery Zakharov, Wagner's top representative in the country, as his security advisor³⁰. His role was similar to the position of a Russian Ambassador "who keeps close links with the Russian authorities". As a result, serious leadership rivalries between Zakharov and Vladimir Titorenko, the appointed Russian Ambassador to CAR at that time, were reported. In the meanwhile, Mr. Zakharov was also representing President Touadéra in various national political and security fora, with the aim of strengthening the CAR regime's power and securing Wagner's long-term prospects in the county.
63. Wagner has successfully maneuvered to increase its grip over CAR's national sovereignty, by securing President Touadéra's reelection in 2021, also ensuring a government and parliamentary majority favorable to him.
64. Over the years, to finance its presence in CAR and to benefit Wagner's international network, the Group has worked to control CAR's most lucrative economic sectors.
65. In this regard, in the country, Wagner is mainly operating and is financed through its security and mining activities, which are carried out under the umbrella of three identified Central African registered companies: Sewa Security Services, Lobaye Invest, and Midas Resources. These Wagner-linked companies operate in total opacity,

²⁷ <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2023/04/20/africa/wagner-sudan-russia-libya-intl/index.html>

²⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/more-than-mercenaries-russias-wagner-group-in-africa/a-64822234>

²⁹ N1821863.pdf

³⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32021D2197>

with Lobaye Invest and Midas Resources controlling important mineral deposits, including gold and diamonds, and not declaring their exports³¹.

66. Wagner has also made its presence felt in the lucrative border control business in CAR. In fact, in 2021, the Central African Government called on the services of the Wagner Group at the border with Cameroon. However, this agreement lasted for a short period of time, due to the complains of traders, who denounced “surcharges” by Russian officials, and the request of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for more information about the kind of cooperation established.
67. According to international reports, the Wagner Group has become one of the dominant agents of political violence in CAR. Over the years, multiple UN bodies have tabled concerns or opened investigations into alleged abuses perpetrated by Wagner mercenaries³². In June 2021, the UN Panel of Experts on CAR reported to the UN Security Council cases of “indiscriminate killings” and violence against civilians at the hands of “Russian instructors”³³.
68. In this regard, in May 2022, Human Rights Watch called on national authorities, the CAR Special Criminal Court (SCC) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate these incidents and other credible allegations of abuse by Russia-linked forces with a view to possible prosecution³⁴.
69. The United States, at the Africa-US Summit last December, offered to help CAR to separate itself from Wagner by increasing its military and humanitarian aid to the country³⁵.

Mali

70. The Wagner Group arrived in Mali in 2021. According to some sources, at least 1,000 mercenaries were deployed in the country, with a financial reward for the Group of approximately 10,8 million U.S. dollars per month³⁶. At its arrival, the Group had the objectives to train the Malian military and providing protection for government officials.
71. In December 2021, France published a statement³⁷, signed by 14 countries, condemning the deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali. Mali denied the claim,

³¹ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3899092?ln=en>

³² <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2021/03/1093112>

³³ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1636854?ln=en>

³⁴ <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/central-african-republic-hrw-denounces-abuses-by-forces-linked-to-russia/>

³⁵ https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/centrafrique/wagner-en-centrafrique-les-etats-unis-engagent-une-strategie-pour-evincer-les-mercenaires_5803661.html

³⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-deal-allowing-russian-mercenaries-into-mali-is-close-sources-2021-09-13/>

³⁷ <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/mali/news/article/statement-on-the-deployment-of-the-wagner-group-in-mali-23-dec-2021>

asking for proof by independent sources, but acknowledged that “Russian trainers” were in the country to train military and security forces³⁸.

72. On 15 August 2022, the last military unit of the Operation Barkhane left the country, after 9 years of presence, due to the deterioration of political and diplomatic relations between France and the new Malian military junta³⁹.
73. At the end of Operation Barkhane, Russia was present in Mali with a thousand of mercenaries from the Wagner Group to train Malian armed forces, support their efforts in fighting against jihadi armed groups and ensure protection for ruling authorities. In return, Russia obtained financial compensation and mining concessions⁴⁰.
74. Moreover, in countries where the Wagner mercenaries operate, data about civilian targeting/killing have reached record levels as of mid-2022⁴¹.
75. In May 2023, a fact-finding report from the UN Human Rights Office⁴² has concluded that there are strong indications that more than 500 people were killed – the vast majority summarily executed – by Malian troops and foreign military personnel during a five-day military operation in the village of Moura in the Mopti region of central Mali back in March 2022.
76. Again in May 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Ivan Aleksandrovich Maslov, the Head of Wagner Group in Mali. The reason is that the Wagner Group may be attempting to obscure its efforts to acquire military equipment to use in Ukraine, including by working through Mali and other countries where it has a foothold⁴³.
77. On 16 June, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mali made the request at the UN Security Council for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to leave the country, due to a crisis of confidence.⁴⁴

Wagner Group attempts to illegally purchase weapons in Türkiye

³⁸ <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20211225-mali-denies-deployment-of-russian-mercenaries-from-wagner-group>

³⁹ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/08/16/france-s-barkhane-military-operation-discreetly-withdraws-from-mali_5993721_124.html

⁴⁰ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1401128/politique/le-burkina-faso-a-conclu-un-accord-avec-wagner-selon-nana-akufoaddo/>

⁴¹ <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/>

⁴² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/malian-troops-foreign-military-personnel-killed-over-500-people-during>

⁴³ <https://ru.usembassy.gov/treasury-sanctions-the-head-of-the-wagner-group-in-mali/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-urges-orderly-responsible-drawdown-un-peacekeepers-mali-2023-06-19/>

78. According to the leaked Pentagon documents, the U.S. Government, through signal intelligence, intercepted communications between Wagner personnel and some Turkish “contacts”, dated to February 2023, in which they attempted to illegally purchase weapons in the country.
79. According to the report, Wagner, under cover, tried to procure in Türkiye, through international arms dealers, some weapons for the Malian Army, which would later transfer those weapons to Wagner operatives in Ukraine. It remains unclear who those “contacts” were. It seems however that Wagner was not able to circumvent the U.S. imposed sanctions on this occasion thanks to preventive action by relevant authorities⁴⁵.

Beyond the PAM regions

80. Wagner operatives seem to be active also in Georgia and Moldavia.
81. Contractors linked to the Group had been already identified a few years ago in Venezuela, although their activities seem to be limited to provide security services to President Maduro.
82. Recently, U.S. leaked documents revealed that the Wagner Group also planned to travel to Haiti to assess the potential for contracts with the Haitian Government, to fight against local armed gangs.
83. The presence of the Wagner Group in Haiti would potentially open a new phase of the Group’s operations in Latin America⁴⁶.

Terrorist Designation of the Wagner Group

84. In December 2022, with regard to the atrocities and crimes committed by the Wagner Group in Ukraine, in the Sahel, in Libya and Syria, three U.S. Representatives introduced the Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries (HARM) Act, a bipartisan legislation that would require the Secretary of State to designate the Wagner Group as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). A companion measure was also introduced in the U.S. Senate.
85. Instead, in January 2023, the U.S. National Security Council Spokesman, John Kirby, announced that the Treasury Department would have designated the Group as a transnational criminal organization.
86. The U.S. declared Wagner a transnational criminal organization under Executive Order (EO) 13581, established in 2011, to block the assets of “significant transnational criminal organizations” that pose “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national

⁴⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/12/politics/leaked-documents-wagner-group-turkey/index.html>

⁴⁶ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7be4x/leaked-pentagon-documents-wagner-group-haiti>

security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States.” What constitutes a significant transnational criminal organization under EO 13581 is broad, including any “group of persons ... that includes one or more foreign persons; that engages in an ongoing pattern of serious criminal activity involving the jurisdictions of at least two foreign states; and that threatens the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States.”

87. According to some analysts, the imposition of new multiple sanctioning mechanisms against the Wagner Group provides a new layer in countering the Group, targeting its financial assets. In addition, some States that are unwilling to take the diplomatic risk of cooperating with the United States on Ukraine-related sanctions on Wagner, may be more willing to cooperate on criminal sanctions.

88. Equally, on 13 October 2022, the Council of Europe adopted resolution 2463, declaring the current Russian regime as a terrorist one. While, on 23 November 2022, the European Parliament adopted resolution 2896, designating Russia as a State sponsor of terrorism and as a State that “uses means of terrorism”, also calling on the European Council to include the Wagner Group in the EU terrorist list.

89. In March 2023, the Parliament of Lithuania designated the Wagner Group as a “terrorist organization”, followed in May by the French Parliament⁴⁷. Parliaments in the United Kingdom and Germany are currently holding discussions on this matter.

Accusations of illegal migrations caused by Wagner

90. At the beginning of this year, the Italian Defense Minister, Guido Crosetto, said that the rising number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean is part of “hybrid warfare” waged by Russia using mercenaries as proxies on countries supporting Ukraine⁴⁸.

Latest Developments

91. On 23 June 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin accused the Russian Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, of ordering a rocket strike on Wagner’s camps in occupied Ukraine, and vowed to punish “those who destroyed our lands and the lives of many tens of thousands of Russian soldiers”.

92. He then started a “march on Moscow, and in a few hours was able to take control, without any interventions from the Russian armed forces, strategic military facilities in key Russian cities, such as Rostov-on-Don and Voronezh, where are located the military headquarters that oversee Russian logistic supplies to Ukraine.

⁴⁷ <https://www.france24.com/en/video/20230510-french-parliament-calls-on-eu-to-list-wagner-as-terrorist-group>

⁴⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italy-blames-surge-migration-russias-wagner-group-2023-03-13/>

93. President Putin accused him of treason, and the Russia's National Anti-Terrorist Committee announced the implementation of a "counter-terrorist operation regime" in the regions of Moscow and Voronezh.
94. At 200 kilometers from Moscow, Prigozhin accepted the offer of the Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko, to stop the movement of Wagner's armed men on Russian territory and not to take further steps to escalate tensions. According to what has been agreed, Prigozhin will move to Belarus, free of charge, while the Wagner troops will sign contracts to be integrated within the Russian Army and continue their fight in Ukraine.
95. Prigozhin claimed that he did not have the intention to overthrow President Putin, but to highlight the fragility of Russian military forces.
96. Following the Wagner mutiny, President Putin admitted that the Kremlin has funded the Wagner Group, and that in the last year it has provided PMC Wagner them with 86 billion Rubles (approximately \$ 1 billion) in public funds⁴⁹.
97. On 27 June 2023, the U.S. Department of Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned four companies connected to Prigozhin and Wagner. These companies are related to the activities of illicit gold dealing worldwide. The sanctioned companies are Diamville SAU, Industrial Resources General Trading, Midas Ressources SARLU and Limited Liability Company DM⁵⁰.
98. As a result of this action, all property and interests in property of the designated persons described above that are in the United States or in the possession or control of U.S. persons are blocked and must be reported to OFAC. In addition, any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, individually or in the aggregate, 50 percent or more by one or more blocked persons are also blocked. Unless authorized by a general or specific license issued by OFAC, or exempt, OFAC's regulations generally prohibit all transactions by U.S. persons or within (or transiting) the United States that involve any property or interests in property of designated or otherwise blocked persons.
99. Recently, NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg stressed that the Alliance is ready to defend itself from any Russian threat that might come related with the transfer of Wagner troops to Belarus. The statement came amid fears that the possible relocation of Wagner troops might cause instability for Easter European nations neighboring Belarus⁵¹.

⁴⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-yevgeny-prigozhin-russia-kremlin-gave-wagner-group-nearly-1-billion-in-the-past-year/>

⁵⁰ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1581>

⁵¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/28/nato-will-defend-members-from-threat-of-wagner-forces-in-belarus>

100. At present, it seems that Prigozhin has returned to Russia, and despite being under investigations, he has retrieved all cash (10 billion rubles and hundreds of thousands of dollars) and gold bars seized during the searches conducted in his properties in St. Petersburg by Russian police officers⁵².

Conclusion and Recommendations – update as of January 2024

101. Following the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin and two top commanders of the Wagner Group, on 23 August 2023, on a private plane crash from Moscow to Saint Petersburg, President Putin has ordered mercenaries of the Wagner Group to sign and swear “an oath of allegiance” to the Russian state⁵³. Former top commander of the Group, Andrei Troshev, has been tasked by President Putin with overseeing volunteer troops in Ukraine.

102. In December 2023, the establishment of the “Africa Corps”, under direct control of the Russian Ministry of Defence was announced, aimed at dismantling and subsuming the Wagner mercenary Group’s presence in Africa⁵⁴. The Africa Corps, consisting of former Wagner Group’s mercenaries, residents, and volunteers, began recruiting in December 2023, and by January 2024, it had already been taking over operations in Mali, Libya, and Burkina Faso. Negotiations to establish a Russian military base, for the Africa Corps, in the Central African Republic are reportedly underway⁵⁵.

103. Russia is also consolidating the operations of the Wagner Group in the Middle East. In Libya, Wagner mercenaries depend on the GRU, and rely on the Africa Corps.

104. PAM will closely follow the activities of the Wagner Group in the PAM regions, also counting on excellent relations and exchange of reports with its regional and international strategic partners.

⁵²<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/07/04/media-eur102-million-in-cash-gold-bars-returned-to-wagner-groups-yevgeny-prigozhin-en-news>

⁵³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-calls-accusations-it-killed-wagner-boss-prigozhin-an-absolute-lie-2023-08-25/>. The two commanders are Dmitry Utkin, the Wagner Group’s chief of operations and Valery Y. Chekalov, the Group’s logistics chief.

⁵⁴ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-01-31/wagner-forces-under-a-new-flag-russias-africa-corps-burkina-faso>

⁵⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/12/russias-wagner-group-expands-into-africas-sahel-with-a-new-brand.html>