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AFTER THE FALL

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE ON AFRICA'S
ILLICIT ECONOMIES POST-WAGNER

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
BIR	Bataillon d'intervention rapide (Rapid Intervention Battalion)
CAR	Central African Republic
CNSP	Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie (National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland)
CPC	Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (Coalition of Patriots for Change)
CSP	Cadre stratégique permanent (Permanent Strategic Framework)
FIR	Force d'intervention rapide (Rapid Intervention Force)
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
GRU	Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie (Main Intelligence Directorate – GRU)
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims – JNIM)
MoD	Ministry of Defence
PMC	Private military company
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's engagement in Africa has evolved in the aftermath of Yevgeny Prigozhin's aborted march on Moscow in June 2023 and his death in an aeroplane crash two months later. His private military company (PMC), the Wagner Group, had built up operations in several African countries over the preceding decade by providing mercenary troops, conducting political influence campaigns and by establishing a network of companies in the extractives sector.

Would these arrangements survive the death of Wagner's influential leader? If so, what shape would they take?

Moscow acted quickly after Prigozhin's death by sending high-level officials to several countries to reassure Wagner's former clients that support would continue uninterrupted. But it was clear that Russia also had larger plans, and was seeking to expand its presence in new arenas.

A clear picture is now emerging as to how Russia's strategy in Africa is developing. It consists of four thematic (and at times overlapping) strands, namely rebranding, maintenance, expansion and diversification.

Rebranding Wagner was a priority for the Russian state, as part of its efforts to assert control over an entity that had embarked on a march against the seat of power. Various pathways were created to assimilate Wagner personnel, but the establishment of the Africa Corps, under the direct supervision of Russia's military intelligence service (GRU), was the most pertinent to Wagner's Africa operations. Other aspects of Wagner's operations have also continued under new titles. For example, the African Initiative in Burkina Faso, which disseminates pro-Russian messaging in the region, is in many ways another iteration of Wagner's media and political influence work, and includes several former Wagner or Wagner-linked staff. The Africa Corps has benefited from direct state assistance – ships delivering tonnes of materiel for this outfit have been recorded arriving in Libya, for example. However, it has not been an entirely painless transition. The Africa Corps has struggled to generate momentum, with recruitment targets being revised downwards and personnel transferred to Russia. This difficulty may in part explain the somewhat contradictory second theme: that of maintaining the Wagner brand.

Maintenance of Wagner as an entity – at least in name – has been a key consideration in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), where the brand is strong due to entrenched involvement in economic activities and security services, as well as Wagner's high public profile. This reflects Moscow's pragmatism regarding the requirements of local contexts, plus recognition that Wagner's original interventions were coherent with Russian state interests, and thus did not need to be radically overhauled. 'Wagner'

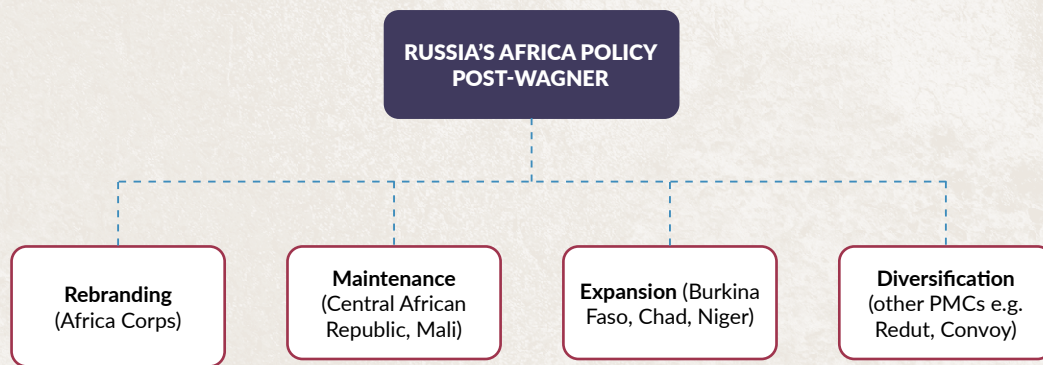


FIGURE 1 Components of Russia's Africa strategy since the death of Wagner's leader.

Telegram channels also continue to post recruitment advertisements for personnel to work in Africa, highlighting the ongoing power of the brand. However, this continuity may also mask how much has changed behind the scenes: while Wagner 'lives' in the CAR and Mali, it is now much more tightly under Moscow's control.

At the same time, the policy space has not been static, and new opportunities for intervention emerged for Russia in 2023–2024. This has led to expansion into several countries in West Africa – Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger – where governments have sought to explore economic and security alternatives to their long-standing Western partners, particularly France. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) research has also highlighted the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Senegal as potential future areas of Africa Corps intervention.

In part, this more expansionist approach speaks to the step change in the visibility of Russian policy from the early Wagner days, when deniability was a key consideration. (Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Wagner's existence was always denied, both by Moscow and Prigozhin.) Russia has long explored state level partnerships with African countries, but now there is greater confidence in and visibility of Russian intentions on the continent, even if the partners on the ground have not changed dramatically from Prigozhin's stewardship.

As a result, what was, under Wagner, a patchwork of local engagements is being knitted together in an overt and more coherent geopolitical vision. Coming out of the shadows allows Russia to cast itself as a backer of African attempts to escape Western neo-colonialism. This is achieved in part by highlighting the West's failed attempts to tackle Islamist extremism in Africa (and its attempts to super-impose Western values that are sometimes at odds with local culture).

Only in Sudan has there been something of a recalibration from Prigozhin's approach. Prigozhin had partnered closely with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), while the Russian government maintained ties with the government and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), driven by a long-term goal of acquiring a naval base on the Red Sea. This contradiction became sharper when war broke out between Sudan's military and the RSF in April 2023. Sudan's emergence as a proxy battleground in the Russia-Ukraine conflict may also have shifted Moscow's thinking and explain the pivot away from the RSF to more closely align with the SAF, which has sought Russian materiel to fight its paramilitary enemy.



A memorial to Yevgeny Prigozhin, former head of the Wagner Group, in Novosibirsk, August 2023. © Vladimir Nikolayev/AFP via Getty Images

This may come at a small cost to Russia, given that the Wagner-RSF relationship was useful for the smuggling of gold and for the accumulation of non-dollar reserves, helping Russia circumvent sanctions imposed after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. (That said, the realignment will bring far greater rewards, should Russia secure its desired Red Sea base – and this indeed may be the principal reason for the shift.)

Finally, there has been a diversification of actors in the post-Prigozhin period, from the above-mentioned Africa Corps to other Russian PMCs, such as Redut and Convoy. Unlike Wagner under Prigozhin, these PMCs are tightly controlled by the Kremlin; they are all required to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence (MoD), which Prigozhin resisted. They are financially backed by a close ally of President Vladimir Putin, but in many cases they are also led by former Wagner officers, representing a marriage of state control and Wagner expertise.¹ As such, Russian engagement in Africa is increasingly multilayered, consisting more of a Russian ‘military-business complex’ than a single entity. After the experience of Wagner, this diversification may have the added benefit of preventing too much power becoming concentrated in one organization.

This report assesses what the post-Prigozhin period has meant for Wagner assets in Africa, how Russia’s strategic objectives have become more ambitious, and how these two aspects intersect with the changing political climate in West and Central Africa. Its arguments and conclusions draw upon the GI-TOC’s expertise and networks, coordinated through three regional observatories in Africa and the Observatory of Illicit Markets and the Conflict in Ukraine, permitting a big picture view of the impact of Russia’s invasion on the criminal ecosystem. The authors drew on reporting and interviews by the GI-TOC’s field network, based in all of the countries of study; reviews of international and national media, including Russian- and French-language outlets; reviews of content on relevant groups on Telegram and X (formerly Twitter), corporate database searches on Wagner-controlled companies

and key personnel, and finally a literature review of publications and reports. Research centring on all these streams has continued since the release of 'The grey zone', a GI-TOC report published in February 2023, and was stepped up after Prigozhin's death in August 2023.²

Key points

- Wagner, an enduring brand: Even while the Russian state explicitly begins to control and direct Wagner assets, the entity lives on, at least in name. In the CAR and Mali, it is a case of business as usual, with the local power and influence of the Wagner brand seen as more valuable than bringing all Russian engagement under the Africa Corps banner. Wagner is also once again being used in recruitment messages, highlighting its strong legacy in Russia.
- Applying the Wagner playbook: Russia has expanded its role and influence in the Sahel since Prigozhin's death to new countries that formerly had little or no Wagner presence: Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger. But the Wagner playbook has been exploited – including through the establishment of the African Initiative in Burkina Faso – to project Russian-friendly narratives in the region.
- Libya, a strategic base: Libya remains arguably the most strategically useful country in terms of Russian engagement, providing a logistical base for operations further afield.
- Russia maintains the 'grey zone': In some countries, notably Sudan and to a much lesser extent Libya, Russia has engaged with both sides in an ongoing conflict, enabling it to maximize its leverage and position itself to best advantage as needs dictate. Wagner (or the Africa Corps) may facilitate this dual policy approach by pursuing objectives that are a counterpoint, rather than a complement, to 'official' Russian state policy.
- Growing influence carries growing vulnerability: As Russia's influence and operations in Africa have grown, so too have grievances among communities and local conflict actors in areas targeted by Wagner/Africa Corps operations, and consequent atrocities, notably in northern Mali. These are being amplified in narratives propagated by local conflict actors. Russia's increasingly contentious presence in the region could constitute a vulnerability that could be exploited both by local conflict actors and international players.

RESTRUCTURING WAGNER AFTER PRIGOZHIN

Wagner first formed in the Donbas in 2014, when a group of ‘volunteers’, or mercenaries, coalesced around a Russian former GRU officer named Dmitry Utkin, call sign Wagner, and worked closely with the Russian military to support the insurrectionist movements in Luhansk and Donetsk.³ After Ukraine, the group fought in Syria (from 2015) and Africa (from 2017), in the latter developing a spectrum of engagement from the supply of mercenaries to economic activities and assistance with political influence.⁴

Wagner subsequently became an important source of boots on the ground in the war Russia launched against Ukraine in February 2022. However, tensions mounted between Prigozhin and Russia’s military high command, ostensibly over the botched coordination of Moscow’s war effort. On 23 June 2023, Prigozhin launched his ‘march for justice’, which consisted of his personnel marching towards Moscow, but called it off 24 hours later.

In the immediate aftermath, Putin offered a clear choice to those who had made the ‘tragic mistake’ of turning on him: sign official contracts with Russia’s MoD, return home or go into exile in Belarus.⁵ Large quantities of Wagner weaponry and heavy equipment were transferred to the MoD.⁶ Wagner recruitment billboards disappeared.⁷

Prigozhin’s private jet crashed in Russia in August 2023, two months after he had staged an abortive mutiny against Russian military commanders. © Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



Prigozhin chose exile in Belarus and appeared to remain in control of Wagner's Africa operations for a short period. However, he and several other high-ranking Wagner commanders died when a private plane they were travelling in crashed about 30 minutes after taking off from Moscow en route to St Petersburg on 23 August.⁸ Two days later, Putin issued a decree ordering Wagner fighters to sign an oath of allegiance to the state.⁹ Behind the scenes, a struggle was underway for control of the group between the GRU and the Rosgvardiya (National Guard),¹⁰ since Prigozhin's son Pavel reportedly offered the group to the National Guard.¹¹ An arrangement was finally reached that would see Wagner dismantled and reconfigured. The National Guard and the GRU would serve as clearing houses for Wagner fighters in Russia and Ukraine. Meanwhile, the GRU alone would oversee an expeditionary force that would continue (and expand) the PMC's African operations, under the name Africa Corps.¹²

Those Wagner fighters who did not wish to sign contracts directly with the National Guard or MoD could instead sign up with PMCs that would operate under a new Volunteer Corps umbrella, under the ultimate authority of the GRU. On 28 September 2023, Putin met with and tasked Andrey Troshev – a former high-ranking Wagner official, an MoD employee and a man closely associated with the PMC Redut (itself linked with the GRU) – with setting up the Volunteer Corps. Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov also attended this meeting, and was tasked with overseeing the development of the Africa Corps.¹³

The post-Prigozhin pathways – first sketched in the days after the revolt – were now fully in place and integration was rapid. By late September, former Wagner fighters were reportedly once again actively fighting in areas around the Ukrainian cities of Bakhmut and Donetsk, after an absence of six months from the front line.¹⁴ Reports emerged of Wagner fighters joining new units of the National Guard¹⁵ or the affiliated Akhmat unit (under the direction of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov),¹⁶ while others joined PMCs such as Redut.¹⁷

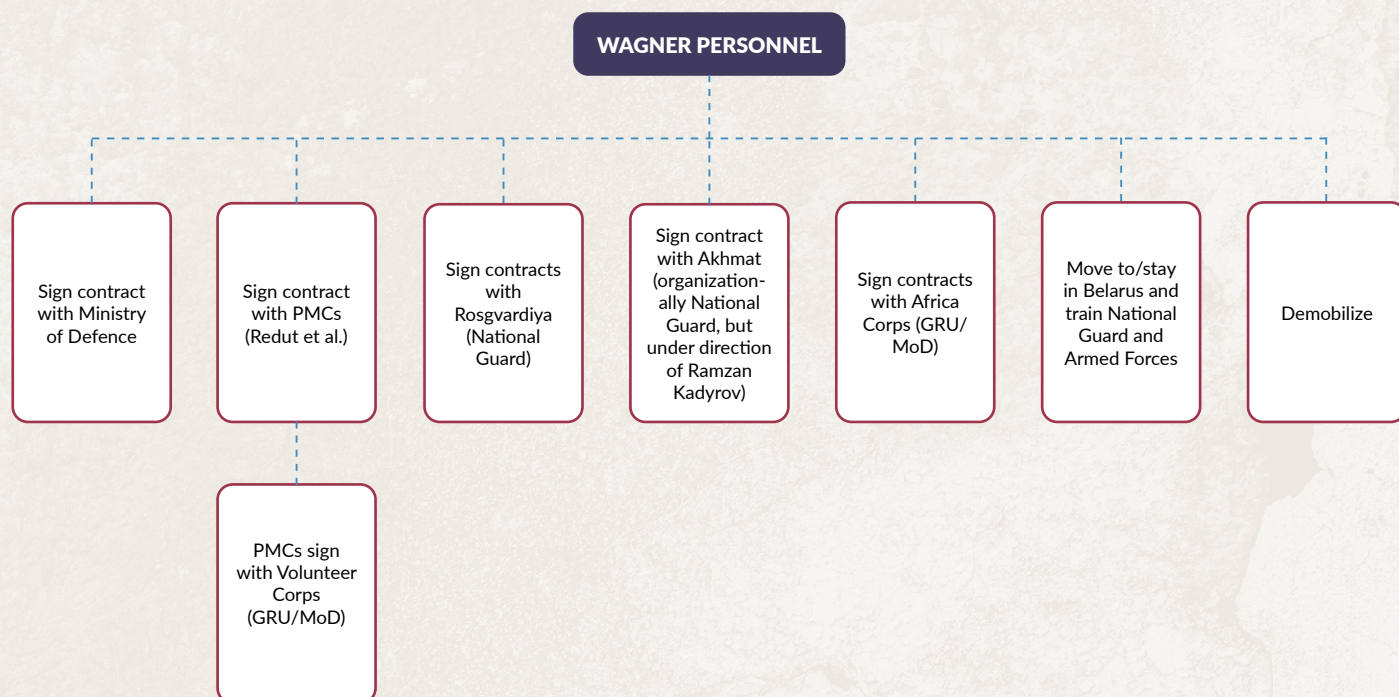


FIGURE 2 Post-Prigozhin pathways for Wagner personnel.

Others chose to stay in or go to Belarus, where many fighters had been based since Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko brokered a deal between Prigozhin and Putin to end the Wagner mutiny, and where these fighters began training the Belarusian armed forces.¹⁸ Their numbers swiftly declined, however, from a peak of 8 000 directly after the revolt in June 2023 to less than a thousand in February 2024.¹⁹

On 2 November, State Duma deputy Andrei Kartoplov declared:

It [Wagner] has been completely disbanded, most of the fighters are in the process of moving to other structures ... Some continue to carry out tasks in African countries, but under, let's say, a different brand and under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence. Some have signed a contract with the armed forces, some have joined the Russian Guard.²⁰

But while Wagner in Russia has been assimilated entirely by the Russian state and its affiliates, the story in Africa is more complex.²¹



THE CHANGING FACE OF RUSSIA'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA

The grey zone: Russia's military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa', published by the GI-TOC in February 2023, described the Wagner Group as 'the most influential form of Russian engagement in Africa today'.²² Wagner provided mercenary troops to train national militaries and help regimes secure territorial control, along with political strategists to influence public opinion, including through disinformation.

The group tailored its service offerings to best exploit local opportunities, exerting the greatest influence in the CAR, Libya, Sudan and Mali, above more limited engagement in Mozambique and Madagascar. For these services, Wagner was compensated not only with cash, but through access to natural resources, including gold, timber, oil and critical minerals – arrangements that led the US to designate it a transnational organized crime group in February 2023.²³ Although Wagner's existence was officially denied, in reality the Kremlin's provision of funding, logistics and strategic guidance was constant.²⁴

After Prigozhin's death, Russia immediately embarked on a concerted campaign of diplomacy in Wagner's stamping grounds. In late August and early September, Yevkurov and General Andrei Averyanov (of the GRU) visited several African nations, including Burkina Faso, the CAR, Libya and Mali.²⁵ They came to deliver one message – that all commitments made by Wagner would now be honoured by Russia's MoD.²⁶

Averyanov's presence conveyed the new status quo. He had been the head of GRU Unit 29155, a notorious special unit associated with multi-faceted Russian interference in Europe, including assassination plots, attempts to manipulate elections, hacking and data theft.²⁷ Now, the GRU would be taking charge of Wagner's overseas operations.

The GRU's establishment of the Africa Corps was crucial to facilitating the transfer of Wagner personnel and assets to the state. Following a visit by Yevkurov to Libya, a military blogger close to the MoD on 20 November 2023 quoted Igor Korotchenko, a former colonel, as stating that an Africa Corps had come into being.²⁸ Africa Corps troops were on the ground a little over two months later. On 24 January 2024, a video was published on a Telegram channel referring to the Africa Corps being deployed to Burkina Faso.²⁹



FIGURE 3 Some of the African countries where the Wagner Group exerted the most influence.

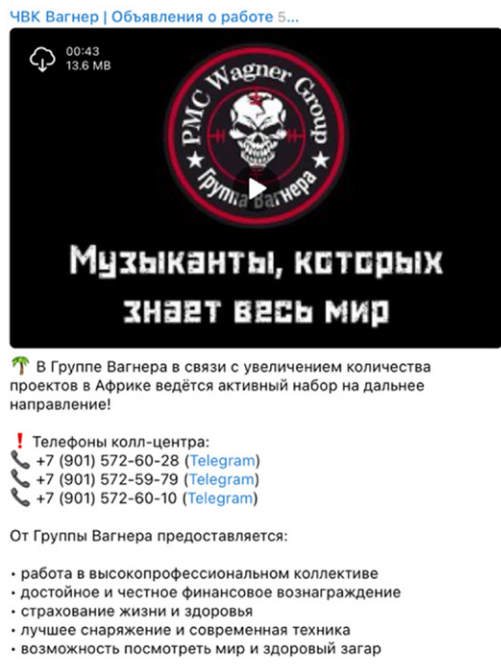
More than just a rebranding, the creation of the Africa Corps signalled an ambitious stepping up of Russia's footprint on the ground. Originally, the Corps was intended to comprise some 40 000 contractors. While this ambition was subsequently scaled back to 20 000, it still represents a major statement of intent, especially when compared to the number of Wagner personnel previously stationed in Africa (estimated at approximately 5 000 in early 2023).³⁰

Yet Wagner remains an attractive recruitment brand for the state: more than a year after Prigozhin's mutiny, the name was still being used to recruit for positions in Africa.³¹ (According to the VChK-OGPU Telegram channel, the 'activation' of Wagner to recruit for Africa was due to Africa Corps fighters being relocated to the Russian city of Belgorod to fight in Ukraine.³²) Fighters in Mali and the CAR still refer to themselves as Wagner personnel. Telegram channels that are closely linked to Wagner (and share information around their activities) claim that, in Mali and the CAR, Wagner works independently of Russia's MoD (and that any credit for their dubious achievements belongs to them alone).³³

Moscow appears to have settled on a policy of strategic ambiguity so far as Wagner is concerned in Africa – to be denied officially, but tolerated when useful locally. One North African security expert who frequently travels to Russia said:

The Wagner name still evokes fear in Mali, so they still allow it, but they themselves use it carefully. I was at a conference where someone asked [Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei] Lavrov about Wagner in Sudan, and he said that 'Wagner doesn't exist in Sudan, and indeed doesn't exist any more'. That's a bit of a cheat as it's Redut who are in Sudan, but you see from there that they aren't keen to use the Wagner name officially.

This is anecdotal, but I think it goes to show the arc the logo has undergone. I went to Russia four times in 2023, and in the first half of the year all those military souvenir stalls were selling Wagner patches. Then after the uprising all the Wagner memorabilia from those stands were gone. But when I was there last week the Wagner things were back on the souvenir stands – it was like they were temporarily banned and then unbanned. It's ... like they rehabilitated the brand.³⁴



A screenshot posted on Telegram in April 2024 advertises work opportunities with the Wagner Group in Africa. Photo: Telegram

As Russia worked through the fallout of the Prigozhin mutiny, the political trajectories of several African nations continued to generate new geopolitical opportunities. In a sense, Wagner had served its turn when subtlety and discretion were required, but now there was more appetite for an overt approach.

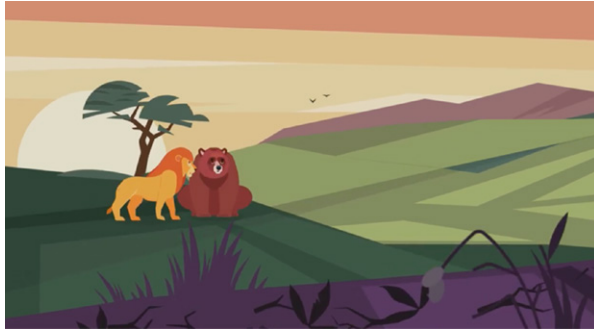
Opportunities for increased Russian intervention were generated by a variety of factors. Violent extremism has been a long-standing issue for the G5 Sahel countries (Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger), all former French colonies that since 2014 had participated with French forces in the long-running counter-insurgency Operation Barkhane (and Operation Serval before that). But a spate of coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have brought to power new actors who have sought a different policy direction, highlighting France's perceived failings in tackling the extremist threat.³⁵

Two coups in Mali, in 2020 and 2021, for example, gave rise to a marked hostility to French influence in the country. Mali's then interim prime minister, Colonel Abdoulaye Maiga, in September 2022 criticized France's 'neo-colonialist, condescending, paternalist and vengeful policies'.³⁶ In August 2022, the last French troops left Mali, and two months later French President Emmanuel Macron announced that Operation Barkhane would end.³⁷

In January 2024, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States, a bloc designed to promote free trade and good governance. They also withdrew from the G5 security collation and established their own security compact called the Alliance of Sahel States.

Russia has sought to exploit this receding tide of Western influence in a manner reminiscent of the Soviet playbook. Through Wagner and its own troops, it has sought to offer Africa a security alternative to the West, but it has also sought to strengthen formal diplomatic ties.

At the second Russia–Africa summit, held in St Petersburg in July 2023, Moscow announced military cooperation agreements with 40 of the 49 attending Africa states, and pledged to wipe out US\$23 billion of debt.³⁸ (Interestingly, Prigozhin was also seen at the summit, just a month after his mutiny.)³⁹ Russia has also sought to play on nostalgia for Soviet assistance to Africa, using disinformation to paint an unflattering picture of the West as neo-colonialists (and casting Russia as helping African countries throw off the yoke).



A 2019 illustration depicts a union between a bear, symbolizing Russia, and a lion, representing the Central African Republic produced by Lobaye Invest, a Wagner-linked mining company that was later sanctioned by the US. Photo: YouTube; Department of the Treasury, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1133>

That said, Russia is not always successful in projecting this image locally, most obviously where Wagner is engaged in fighting. In northern Mali, for example, where Wagner has been fighting insurgents (and killing civilians) for years, there is a growing wave of Russophobia among Tuaregs and Arabs, many of whom regard Russians as invaders.

The next section provides an overview of the changing local landscapes, Wagner assets and local attitudes towards the Russian presence in countries where the former PMC and/or Russia have been most active in the post-Prigozhin period. It traces how this evolution of Russian influence operations has intersected with changing political and security dynamics, and the consequences arising from these interactions.

Central African Republic

Following a long absence in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, by the late 2010s the Kremlin was thoroughly assessing the opportunities Africa presented for its reawakened foreign policy ambitions – and developing plans accordingly. The CAR presented an attractive opportunity for Russia to road test its geopolitical ambitions in Africa.⁴⁰

The tipping point for Russia's engagement in the CAR arguably dates back to the departure of 2 000 French troops in 2016, which created a security gap that Wagner could fill (the last French troops, fewer than 200, left in December 2022).⁴¹ The 2017 withdrawal of US special forces from eastern CAR quickly followed, widening Wagner's opportunity.⁴²

At a bilateral meeting in Sochi in October 2017, the arrangements for Wagner's intervention were decided: Russia agreed to send security personnel to Bangui in exchange for access to gold, diamonds and uranium.⁴³ Russian military trainers and weapons followed in January 2018, before Russia's security provision was assimilated by Sewa Security Forces, reportedly a Wagner front company.⁴⁴ Over the following years, Wagner grew more and more influential due to its key role in supporting President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in his struggle against rebel groups; the PMC secured access to diamonds and gold in return.

A key rebel grouping, the Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (Coalition of Patriots for Change – CPC), attacked Bangui in January 2021, prompting a counter-offensive. This was characterized by Wagner leading punitive military operations throughout the country, indiscriminately targeting combatants and civilians and committing – or helping facilitate the perpetration by national

armed forces and various aligned militia groups – widespread war crimes. Under the guise of the counter-offensive, Wagner pushed miners out of lucrative mining sites, using terror to retain control and quash reporting of its extractive activities.⁴⁵ However, the Russian PMC's reputation varied from region to region within the CAR. While people in the provinces often associate Wagner with fear, the group was frequently feted by Bangui residents.⁴⁶

Russia ensured that Wagner's presence in the CAR would survive post-Prigozhin. Not only did Moscow immediately reassure Bangui that it would honour Wagner's commitments, but the Kremlin also quickly tightened its grip on the PMC's local activities.⁴⁷

Prigozhin's death coincided with the need for Russia to secure its investments in the country. Ensuring the Touadéra regime remained in power beyond the end of his current mandate in 2025 was critical. After an initial exodus of Wagner personnel immediately after the mutiny in Russia, an unspecified number of fresh Wagner mercenaries arrived in the CAR on 20 July 2023. In the words of a CAR government spokesperson, this renewed deployment would 'secure the constitutional referendum' that would abolish a two-term limit and enable Touadéra to run for office again.⁴⁸ This Russia-backed political manoeuvre proved successful.⁴⁹

On the ground, little has changed in terms of the infrastructure Wagner maintains. The PMC appears to have kept most of its original bases, and it is continuing its political and economic advisory work. Similarly, Bangui – and specifically La Maison Russe (Russia House), a cultural centre near the Russian embassy – remains a hub for Wagner's pan-African non-military operations.⁵⁰ Wagner also maintains an in-country administrative base in Mali, reportedly in the Russian embassy's compound.⁵¹ However, the majority of administrative support for Mali is reportedly provided in the CAR, at Wagner's office in Bangui. According to one security expert who focuses on Wagner:

CAR is where the information analysis is done and the information war happens. They have an OSINT [open source intelligence] team there working on different media sources, and another team that does intelligence analysis, although the military intelligence gathering for Mali is obviously done in Mali. But the team does disinformation campaigns for Mali from CAR – it's a mix of Russians and Africans working on it, on producing web content to suit their narrative. They work in collaboration with the media team in Libya too, to produce Arabic-language content for there and for northern Mali.⁵²

Russia's tightened grip on Wagner's operations in the CAR after Prigozhin's death has been reflected in the group's in-country command and control structures. Immediately before Prigozhin's death, the lead Wagner men in the CAR had been Vitali Perfilev, who focused on security and military aspects and operated as a security adviser to President Touadéra, and Dimitri Sytyi, who led all non-military activities. Both met regularly with security and military chiefs, and were close to Prigozhin.⁵³

December 2023 saw the arrival of Denis Pavlov, purportedly a Russian diplomat but in reality an intelligence officer from Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, who assumed control of the security partnership with the General Directorate of the Central African National Police.⁵⁴ Pavlov is based in the Russian embassy, where he supervises all Wagner activity.⁵⁵ He was sanctioned by the Canadian government in February 2024, along with nine others who 'represent nodes of direct and indirect support of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine through finance, logistics and sanctions evasion'.⁵⁶ Sytyi remains in Bangui, where he continues to lead business activities and the propaganda/disinformation campaigns in the CAR and elsewhere, under Pavlov's supervision.

A former officer in the CAR's military, who also works as a security adviser, explained the changing Russian dynamics in the capital city:

Since the change of leadership and the arrival of new fighters, as well as the appointment of new figures such as Denis Pavlov ... the Wagner group has kept a low profile in the Central African capital. So far, the other members of the group have adopted a different approach to those they have replaced. This variation could be explained by the time needed to adapt and familiarize themselves with the environment, being newly deployed in a new context.

Rebels and gold

Operationally, Wagner activity has since August 2023 gravitated eastwards in the CAR, where it has also trained and sponsored several local militia groups to operate as proxies. These moves sought to counteract heightened activity by the CPC rebel coalition in the last quarter of 2023, particularly around Bria, Bambari and Kaga-Bandoro. Accordingly, Wagner has reportedly substantially reduced troop concentrations in western CAR, including in Berberati, Carnot and Lobaye.⁵⁷

The CPC was weakened in November 2023 when Mahamat al-Khatim's Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique (Patriotic Movement for the Central African Republic) withdrew from the coalition and resumed dialogue with the government.⁵⁸ However, high numbers of CPC attacks on the CAR's military continued until the end of 2023, prompting Wagner to repel CPC factions from north-eastern towns including Kabo and also from Moyenne-Sido on the Chadian border.⁵⁹ In August 2024, CPC leader Ali Darassa said he was open to peace talks with the government. If meaningful talks transpire, this would represent a propaganda coup for Russia, which could claim that Wagner pressure was instrumental in forcing the CPC to the negotiating table.



Miners at the Ndassima gold mine. Wagner secured access to mineral resources in Chad in return for providing military support to help the Bangui government fight rebel groups. © Ousmane Makaveli/AFP via Getty Images

Wagner's redeployment to the centre-east and eastwards largely mirrors the strategic priorities of the CAR's government, given that this is where rebel control remains stronger, but it also reflects Wagner's awareness that CPC leaders pose a threat to Russia's economic interests in the country. Wagner has reportedly reinforced its presence at the Ndassima gold mine to prevent attacks by armed groups,⁶⁰ especially elements of Ali Darassa's Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique (Union for Peace in the Central African Republic), which resents Wagner seizing control of the mine and ejecting its personnel in 2021.⁶¹ Wagner invested heavily in Ndassima in late 2022 and early 2023, turning what was once an artisanal mine into an extensive fortified production zone, complete with truck-mounted anti-aircraft guns.⁶²

Wagner's activities in Ndassima have long been the subject of scrutiny. According to a Ministry of Mines official: 'Since Midas Ressources [a Prigozhin-affiliated CAR mining company] took over the Ndassima gold mine, operations have been totally opaque. Even the ministry's staff can't go there to carry out environmental checks. To this day, no one knows how many tonnes of gold they are taking out of Ndassima.'⁶³ In June 2023, the US sanctioned Midas Ressources along with several other Prigozhin-linked companies based in the CAR, Dubai and Russia involved in the trade in gold and diamonds.⁶⁴ Midas is also connected to individuals who were involved in mining activities directed by Prigozhin in Madagascar.⁶⁵

Clipping Russia's wings?

In December 2023, President Touadéra issued a decree creating a Bataillon d'intervention rapide (Rapid Intervention Battalion – BIR). Operating under the military's high command, it is mandated to defend Bangui and its environs, although it can also support other battalions in military operations. On 7 February 2024, this corps' first graduates were presented with their berets at Camp Kassai in Bangui.

Three sources confirmed to GI-TOC that the BIR soldiers have been trained by Rwanda rather than by Russia.⁶⁶ The BIR appears to be modelled on Cameroon's BIR, and one source said that Touadéra created it on the advice of Cameroon's President Paul Biya when he received him in September 2023. The BIR reportedly numbers 700–800 troops.⁶⁷ There are reportedly plans to expand the existing BIR and add more operational battalions, perhaps as many as 13.⁶⁸

According to two sources, the BIR will not operate under Russian command. This is because Rwanda wishes to avoid being associated with Wagner and its controversies, according to a local journalist.⁶⁹ Indeed, Rwanda, which has a long history of its own deployments in the CAR, is competing with Russia for local influence. Rwanda has in recent years expanded its economic interests (especially in mining and agriculture) in the CAR alongside security assistance. However, the creation of the BIR might also be a way for Touadéra to hedge his bets and ensure that no single security partner has too much power. The BIR is reportedly led by Captain Lazaret Michael Listher, a graduate of the Saint Cyr military academy in France, and he is assisted by Lieutenant Evrard Kparambeti, a nephew of Touadéra.⁷⁰

Western partners, most prominently the US and France, have also stepped up attempts to reduce Wagner's influence in the country, albeit with limited success. Bancroft, a US military contractor, began talks with the CAR's government in July 2023 with a view to providing a security alternative to Wagner, exploiting a period of détente between the CAR and the West. These talks came as Touadéra was reportedly dissatisfied with Wagner's apparent prioritization of its local business interests above the security needs of the Central African state.⁷¹

Presidential advisers in the CAR confirmed to a GI-TOC source that Touadéra has held constructive talks at least twice with Western states in the last year or so. The first such talks were with President Macron in September 2023, a month after a coup in Gabon. This came as Touadéra played an important mediating role in regional talks over Gabon's transition, in a context where both the CAR and Gabon are members of the Economic Community of Central African States.⁷² The meeting reportedly went well, leaving Touadéra increasingly convinced that he could work with Paris and apparently inspiring him to meet several times with US representatives during the December 2023 COP28 summit in Dubai.⁷³

However, Wagner has vigorously guarded its turf. A Bancroft official based in East Africa told the GI-TOC that the CAR deal did not go ahead because Wagner threatened Bancroft's leadership in the CAR (and in other African countries where Russia is active).⁷⁴ A US military source stationed in Central Africa could not confirm that a threat was made, but agreed that discussions were derailed when Wagner began to, in their words, 'play hardball'. The discussions had been going well, but then Wagner reportedly objected and began obstructing the progress of US representatives in the CAR.

The US representative's access to the CAR's president, the prime minister and a key presidential adviser – all previously readily available for discussions – dried up. Flights for US representatives into Bangui were also blocked.⁷⁵ According to a journalist, at least seven Americans had their visas cancelled upon arrival at Bangui airport and were forced to fly back out of the country. On 7 January 2024, Wagner arrested Prince Borel Yaounga Yiko, a CAR presidential adviser who was reportedly involved in the Bancroft talks. It took a personal intervention by Touadéra to get him released.⁷⁶

Looking ahead, it is likely that Wagner will remain in a powerful position in the CAR, helped by fairly strong popular support in larger cities stemming from its largely effective reduction of rebel control in urban areas, where people are less exposed to the PMC's brutal methods. Wagner has also sought to win over urban youth through propaganda campaigns.

In rural areas, and particularly around mining communities, perceptions are likely to be very different, with Wagner seen much like other non-state armed groups (i.e. willing to use violence for control and profit). Wagner ensures that nobody sees and documents its activities in these areas by denying access to journalists and foreigners. Fear keeps the rural population quiet. If Wagner can maintain urban support – far more important to governing authorities than rural opinions – then it will be well placed to continue profiting from illicit economies.

Sudan

Wagner's initial entrance into Sudan came on the heels of bilateral engagements between Putin and long-time Sudanese strongman Omar Hassan al-Bashir. A series of agreements struck at a bilateral meeting in the Russian resort of Sochi in 2017 paved the way for the Wagner Group to enter Sudan both as security contractors and through commercial arrangements.

The Bashir regime granted M Invest, a Prigozhin-owned company, concessions to explore gold mining sites, and also authorized it to obtain weapons and equipment from Aswar Multi Activities, a company controlled by the SAF's intelligence arm.⁷⁷ Some of the agreements had extraordinarily favourable terms, such as a clause that waived the Sudanese Ministry of Mining's normally mandatory 30 per cent stake in Wagner's mining exploration venture, Meroe Gold.⁷⁸ Wagner also used M Invest for propaganda efforts in support of al-Bashir.⁷⁹



Prigozhin was a backer of Hemedti (right), the Sudanese deputy chair of the Transitional Sovereignty Council.

© Mahmoud Hjjaj/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

After the military overthrew Bashir amid enormous street protests against his rule in April 2019, Russia pursued a dual track, working with both the SAF and the RSF paramilitary.⁸⁰ While the Russian state supported the SAF, Wagner supported RSF leader General Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, who notably took control of gold mines at Jebel Amer.⁸¹ Numerous reports indicated that Wagner and the RSF were engaged in systematic gold smuggling.⁸² The Russian military was also allegedly involved in gold smuggling with the protection of Sudanese officials.⁸³ Indeed, gold smuggled by Wagner often made its way out of the country via Russian military airfields, indicating convergence in the dual policy.⁸⁴

Prigozhin was a staunch backer of Hemedti right up until the Russian mercenary's mutiny, even reportedly supplying the RSF with surface-to-air missiles in April 2023.⁸⁵ However, a year later, there appears to have been something of a policy shift, with Moscow increasingly engaging with the SAF and the SAF-controlled interim government.⁸⁶

In part, this may be due to a curious proxy war that has been playing out in Sudan between Russia and former Wagner mercenaries on the one hand and Ukrainian special forces on the other. Evidence suggests that Ukrainian forces have carried out drone strikes against Wagner-backed RSF units and have even taken a Wagner mercenary captive.⁸⁷ According to a Ukrainian security source speaking in late 2023, Ukrainian operations in Sudan are designed to 'clean up the Wagner PMC, their local terrorists and the Russian Federation's special services'.⁸⁸

Sudan's military had reportedly been cooperating with the Ukrainians, prompting Russia, in one assessment, to make a choice between unequivocally partnering with the SAF (and forcing the latter to terminate its partnership with the Ukrainians), or continuing to support the RSF and retain access to gold concessions in RSF-controlled territory, which is useful for sanctions evasion.⁸⁹ Another factor shifting Russian perceptions could be that a pro-SAF stance would align Russian policy with that of Iran, a close partner in its war in Ukraine.⁹⁰

That said, it is also possible that the conflict in Ukraine has had little bearing on Moscow's decision to shift the weight of its support in Sudan. Moscow has long sought a naval base on the Red Sea – an idea first floated during al-Bashir's rule – and it may have judged that the timing was opportune to further that goal. Desperate for ammunition and weapons in its fight against the RSF, the SAF-dominated government announced at the St Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2024 that it was open to granting Russia a Red Sea logistics base – an important stepping stone towards establishing a naval base.⁹¹

Russia and Sudan were quick to publicize the new status quo, and an exploration deal for gold in Sudan's Block 24 has already been struck.⁹² That said, the complex nature of the historical relationship suggests that Russia's engagement will probably not be exclusive; it may well engage with both Sudan's main protagonists, including by using former Wagner personnel to continue working with the RSF.⁹³ Indeed, in September 2024 reports emerged that the Africa Corps had been helping coordinate deliveries of weapons to the RSF via Chad and the CAR.⁹⁴

This represents an interesting use of Russian mercenaries – now directly under state control – to achieve a policy objective that in some ways is at a slant to the Kremlin's public policy. It also highlights how the official rebranding of Wagner has given rise to a misleading impression of a unification of policy. In fact, the Africa Corps and other Russian PMCs could still operate according to 'shadow' or parallel policy lines. While this could derive from complex strategic approaches by Moscow, there is also a substantial risk of it being fuelled by bureaucratic fragmentation and in-fighting in the Russian defence establishment and the PMCs.

Mali

Wagner's engagement in Mali came relatively late, at the end of 2021, as it (and Russia) exploited the implosion of the country's ties with its long-time partner France, a process that accelerated after a coup in May 2021 and saw Mali expelling the French ambassador in January 2022.⁹⁵

Under pressure from Mali's new military government, France ended Operation Barkhane, its decade-long counterterrorism mission in the Sahel, resulting in all French personnel withdrawing by mid-August 2022. Wagner filled the resultant security vacuum, deploying a peak of 2 000 personnel in Mali in early 2023, under the command of Ivan Aleksandrovich Maslov.⁹⁶ Maslov was sanctioned by the US in May 2023.⁹⁷ Any international oversight in Mali was effectively ended in June 2023, when the United Nations Security Council agreed to Mali's request to drawdown the UN peacekeeping mission.⁹⁸

Wagner's initial engagement in Mali was primarily military in nature. It was hired by Mali's government for US\$10 million a month, according to US diplomatic sources.⁹⁹ A document leaked in June 2022 (containing details of Mali's provisional budget) stated that the commitment authorizations for a security organ attached to the presidency climbed from CFA2 billion (US\$3.2 million) to CFA71.4 billion (US\$114.6 million); the latter figure equates to more than US\$9 million per month.¹⁰⁰

As noted in the GI-TOC's 'Grey zone' report, this would – if honoured in cash – have represented a significant outlay for the government, so it is very possible that Wagner was granted resource concessions, specifically three gold mines, as part payment, although this could not be confirmed.¹⁰¹ Still, Wagner's operations in Mali's resource sphere have been dwarfed by its involvement in the CAR.

In the post-Prigozhin period, there have been reports that Wagner has also established itself at the gold mine in Tessalit.¹⁰² A source at the Ministry of Mines confirmed that Wagner had visited the lithium mine in Bougouni and mines (likely gold mines) in the Kayes region.¹⁰³ These concessions, if they are exploited, might yet go to Wagner-linked companies, but might instead be granted to other Russian state-linked enterprises. It is also likely that Russia's interests are shaping a wave of Malian state attempts to nationalize mining interests, and an increasingly hostile stance towards Western mining companies operating in the country, a policy trend mirrored in neighbouring Burkina Faso.¹⁰⁴

Mali was also the focus of official overtures from Russia before Prigozhin's mutiny. In 2022, Putin pledged US\$100 million in fuel, food and fertilizer assistance to Mali.¹⁰⁵ Only weeks before Prigozhin



Protesters during a demonstration to celebrate France's February 2022 announcement that it was withdrawing its troops from Mali. The end of the French operation enabled greater Russian involvement in Mali. © Paul Lorange/For The Washington Post via Getty Images

died, Foreign Minister Lavrov visited the country, pledging military support to the junta. Putin has also regularly spoken with Mali's leadership by phone since 2022.

Russian state support has continued in the post-Prigozhin period, characterized by a flurry of bilateral activity. In March 2024, Putin spoke with junta leader Colonel Assimi Goita to discuss strengthening cooperation over counterterrorism and energy, agriculture and mining.¹⁰⁶ Cooperation agreements swiftly followed on oil and mining, including lithium and uranium, as well as bilateral plans to construct the largest solar power plant in West Africa.¹⁰⁷ Russia and Mali have also begun talks about civil nuclear power cooperation through Rosatom, the Russian Atomic Energy Agency.¹⁰⁸

In terms of Wagner, little appears to have changed beyond the formal registering of Wagner fighters in Mali with Russia's MoD. There is nothing to indicate that Ivan Maslov has been replaced, although there have been signs that the state has consolidated control. A security expert who has access to Wagner sources described the process of personnel change in Mali after Prigozhin's death as follows:

When Yevkurov came to visit Mali in September, he brought two new commanders. One had been deployed in Syria and the other in CAR, but they were both Russian MoD, probably GRU. The man who had been in CAR was former Wagner, but had quit in June 2023, around when [Russia's former Defence Minister Sergei] Shoigu proposed making them sign new contracts with the Russian MoD Their mission was to get the Wagner troops to sign new contracts with the MoD. Very few, maybe only 20 or so refused and were sent home, and the rest signed annual contracts. There are still lots of rotations – they only do two or three months before going home for a month or so.¹⁰⁹

Wagner's brand remains strong in Mali, at least among the group's former fighters. A fighter in the Menaka region confirmed that they still referred to themselves as Wagner and carried their flag and wore insignia with their logos on it, and said they had never referred to themselves as anything other than Wagner.¹¹⁰

The true extent of Wagner's activity in Mali is difficult to gauge. In February 2024, satellite images emerged of construction work at Wagner's former base at Modibo Keita International Airport near Bamako, hinting at possible expansion.¹¹¹ Notably, Wagner's presence in Bamako, and at the airport in particular, appeared unable to stop an assault in September by the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims – JNIM), in which it held the airport for several hours before retreating.¹¹² However, the number of Wagner personnel in-country subsequently halved, to 1 000 as of February 2024.¹¹³ That said, as discussed below, the personnel who remained were highly active.

Civilian casualties surge in northern Mali

Northern Mali was a focus for Mali's military and Wagner during the Prigozhin era, and joint operations in the north continued after his death. Security in the north deteriorated during the UN peacekeeping mission's 2023 withdrawal, and due to fighting breaking out between Mali's military and the Cadre stratégique permanent (Permanent Strategic Framework – CSP-PSD, now CSP-DPA).¹¹⁴ Violent extremist groups including JNIM also stepped up their activities in the north.

Mali's military and Wagner launched an offensive in August 2023 in Foita with the goal of retrieving northern territories controlled by CSP-DPA and JNIM. The offensive progressed towards Léré and Timbuktu and culminated in a three day battle in Ber, a stronghold of a founding faction of the CSP; the joint forces also took a former UN base.¹¹⁵ A subsequent phase of this offensive saw Mali's military take Kidal in November without a fight, since the CSP had already left.

Wagner has also focused its efforts in Mali to the south, along the border with Mauritania in the north of the Ségou and Kayes regions. While Wagner's presence in these areas has been reported since early 2022, operations intensified from the fourth quarter of 2023. The PMC operates from Malian army bases in Léré Niono and Nampala. Sources indicate that Wagner often operates alone (without Mali's military) and targets the Fulani, Arab and Tuareg communities, including through the killing and kidnapping of elders (without specific intelligence that they are associated with JNIM), burning shops and stealing cattle, with devastating consequences for local livelihoods.¹¹⁶ This is driving significant displacement into neighbouring Mauritania: between January and July 2024, more than 91 000 Malians arrived in Mauritania's Hodh Chargui region.¹¹⁷

During Prigozhin's time, joint operations conducted by Mali's military and Wagner utilized widespread violence, extrajudicial killings and collective punishment, frequently against civilians; one massacre in the village of Moura in 2022 killed hundreds of civilians.¹¹⁸ Wagner appears to have driven this tactic. When operating independently, Wagner targeted civilians at much higher rates than when it worked alongside state forces, according to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED).¹¹⁹ This modus operandi has continued in the post-Prigozhin era, highlighting the extreme brutality of the counter-insurgency strategy. After an operation on 19 February 2024 in Almousttrat, Gao region, in which five villagers were killed, Wagner operatives booby-trapped the bodies with improvised explosive devices, a tactic that they now frequently employ.¹²⁰

Levels of violence also appear to have increased. ACLED calculates that violence involving Russian mercenaries in Mali increased by 81 per cent in the 12 months since Prigozhin's death, alongside a 65 per cent increase in reported fatalities.¹²¹ Mali's military and Wagner were implicated in 160 violent incidents against civilians in the first nine months of 2023,¹²² and Human Rights Watch reported the summary execution of dozens of civilians by these two entities in 2024.¹²³ ACLED data also shows that in the year since Prigozhin's death, Wagner was implicated in the killings of more than 1 000 civilians in Mali.¹²⁴

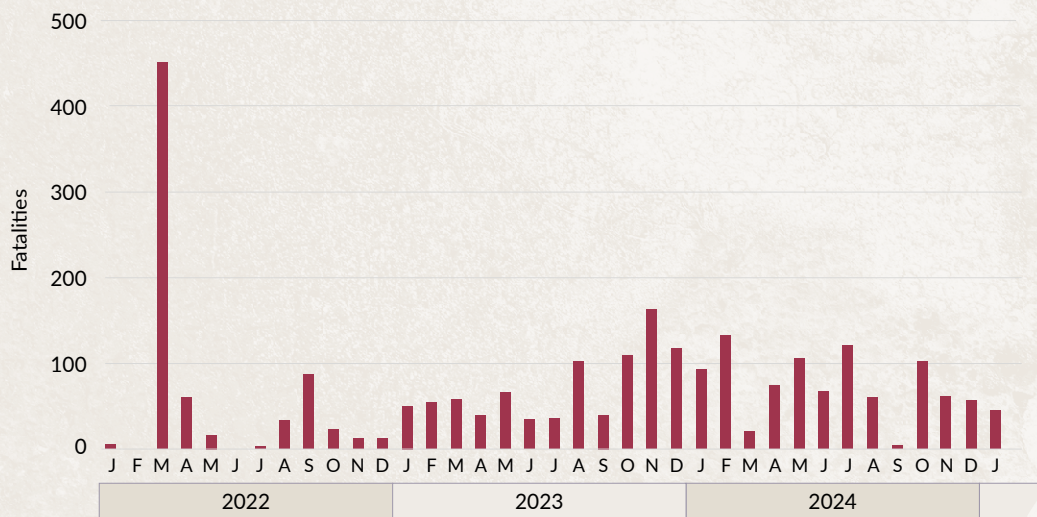


FIGURE 4 Civilian fatalities perpetrated by Wagner in Mali, January 2022–January 2025.

SOURCE: Based on data from ACLED

Wagner has also reportedly made extensive use of airstrikes and drones, which has been critical in limiting the CSP's ability to launch counter-offensives. Expert observers note that the psychological effects of drone strikes, alongside paranoia about informants in its ranks, has severely damaged the CSP's operational effectiveness.¹²⁵

Wagner has its own set of surveillance drones (the Orlan-10 model); one source states that the group keeps at least 15 in Mali. When Wagner operatives identify a target, they then deploy the Malian military's Turkish-made Bayraktar drones to carry out airstrikes.¹²⁶ These drones have also been implicated in attacks on civilians, including one in March 2024 against a wedding in central Mali's Segou region that killed at least seven people, including two children.¹²⁷

There is growing popular anger towards the Russian contingent, particularly among Tuareg and Arab communities in the north. According to a security expert who focuses on Wagner, 'There's also a change in jihadist narratives, with these now focusing on the Russians. They refer to them as Christians – JNIM is doing this as well as IS [Islamic State] Sahel. The focus is once again on an invading enemy, like with the French.'¹²⁸

In December 2023, JNIM's leader Iyad Ag Ghaly spoke publicly for the first time in two and a half years to announce a new phase in the jihadist group's war, one in which the enemy is now Mali's military and Wagner.¹²⁹ The rising popular resentment is likely to become a long-term obstacle to the Malian state's control of the north, even if the CSP is temporarily subdued.

The war in Ukraine has been leveraged by the CSP in its conflict with Mali's military and Wagner. In July 2024, CSP-DPA and jihadist fighters ambushed a column of Wagner and Malian military personnel, killing 84 of the former and 47 of the latter, as well as downing a helicopter.¹³⁰ In a widely shared photo, the Tuareg fighters were seen posing with a Ukrainian flag; two days after the battle, the spokesperson for Ukraine's military intelligence service commented that the Tuareg had 'received necessary information, and not just information, which enabled a successful military operation against Russian war criminals'.¹³¹ Ukraine's foreign minister subsequently denied his country's involvement and claimed that there was no evidence implicating Ukraine in the fighting.¹³²



Tuareg rebels posing with the Ukrainian flag. Photo: Saint Javelin on Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/saintjavelin/p/C-A0eHrsAA8>

However, Mali responded by breaking diplomatic ties with Ukraine on 4 August. Niger followed suit two days later; Burkina Faso (the third member of the Alliance of Sahel States and a country that did not have existing diplomatic relations with Ukraine) backed these moves.¹³³ In a joint letter to the UN Security Council, these three countries requested it investigate Ukraine's 'open and assumed support for international terrorism'.¹³⁴

While the photograph featuring the Ukrainian flag might have been an attempt by the CSP to attract more international attention to the conflict in Mali's north, rather than evidence of Ukrainian involvement,¹³⁵ the optics have proved powerful. In the short-term it appears to have solidified support for Russia among the alliance, but it also reveals the extent to which Russian activity in Africa is becoming increasingly contentious in some areas. This could in turn motivate resistance, both among local conflict actors and more distant geopolitical opponents.

Libya

In 2017, Wagner began to provide support to General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), based in Benghazi in the country's east. Initially, this largely entailed support and training. This shifted in 2019, when the LAAF launched an attempt to seize Tripoli from an internationally recognized government. In the wake of LAAF setbacks in the conflict, Wagner forces became directly involved in combat, with a noticeable impact on the battlefield. However, the LAAF were ultimately defeated in 2020, reportedly in part after a deal between Russia and Türkiye, which led Wagner forces to pull out of front line combat.¹³⁶

In the wake of this, Wagner's forces pulled back to a handful of remote bases in the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan. While Russia's presence endured – including notably through continued deployment of fighter jets – it has generally kept a very low profile.

Under Prigozhin, Wagner's involvement in Libya remained primarily military, accompanied by very little resource exploitation. Controlling either oil resources or illicit economies in Libya would mean dislodging armed groups in eastern and central Libya, which are heavily armed and are deeply invested in such resources.¹³⁷ That said, Libya had other advantages for Wagner, providing 'a logistical airbridge to the group's deployments in the Sahel and central Africa, enabling both its combat-linked and illicit economic interests in those contexts'.¹³⁸

Oil smuggling: an in-house affair

There has been speculation about Wagner's involvement in the illicit smuggling of Libyan fuel, particularly to Sudan.¹³⁹ However, this is off the mark.

Instead, the trade is driven by local Libyan interests and power dynamics. According to GI-TOC research, there was a low-volume fuel trade between Libya and Sudan before 2022. Volumes ramped up when high-level LAAF figures took a new approach, trucking fuel down from the coastal cities of Benghazi and Tobruk to Kufra, and partnered with a local armed group to move it to the border, ahead of delivery to the RSF.¹⁴⁰ Deliveries continued even after the RSF retreated from the border region in mid-2023, but to the SAF and an allied Sudanese faction. Libyan actors kept shipping fuel, just to the opposing side in Sudan's conflict.

Rather, Russia's illicit involvement in the Libyan oil sector appears to be more secondary. The volume of Russian fuel oil legally exported to Libya since 2021 has skyrocketed, in part as the country has sought to diversify export partners owing to European restrictions.¹⁴¹ In turn, a substantial amount of imported fuel oil – including from Russian and non-Russian sources – is subsequently smuggled out of the country.¹⁴² In addition to growing smuggling to Sudan, clandestine shipments of fuel have also reportedly been routed towards European ports.¹⁴³

This secondary approach to fuel smuggling stands in contrast to the more direct role Russia and the Wagner Group have sought to take on economic resources in other countries. However, it continues a broader theme of Russia leveraging economic engagement alongside Wagner military presence to glean heightened influence. ■

The fall of Prigozhin has coincided with a period of remarkable stability in Libya, with no clashes between the LAAF and forces aligned with a newer incarnation of the Tripoli-based government in the year to 31 October 2024. This relative security has reduced demand for mercenaries in the country, including Syrian outfits, Chadian groups and Sudanese organizations. Notably, the LAAF has cut or halted pay to the Sudanese and Chadian groups, while it has also downgraded support to merely providing logistical supplies.

The ability of Wagner – now rebranded as the Africa Corps – to operate in Libya has not been affected. In part, this is due to its centrality to Russian hard power in the country and its role as a channel between the LAAF and Moscow. Furthermore, apart from its combat activities in the Tripoli war, Wagner has been an important trainer of LAAF forces and maintenance provider for advanced systems the militia holds, a role that continues to be in demand. Finally, it remains an important stakeholder that could influence LAAF succession planning, in a context where reports have swirled about Khalifa Haftar's health and as his son, Saddam Haftar, continues to position himself as the anointed successor.

The Africa Corps does not appear to have suffered salary arrears, and it has maintained a base at Jufra, central Libya. In February 2024, there were an estimated 800 contractors working under the Africa Corps banner, largely clustered at three air bases.¹⁴⁴ Materiel support has not flagged either: in April 2024, reports emerged that 6 000 tonnes of military hardware – including artillery, armoured personnel carriers and rocket launchers – had been delivered by Russian ships at the Libyan port of Tobruk (a cargo that had reportedly come from Syria).¹⁴⁵ That same month, more Russian military personnel arrived, some for Libya, others in transit to Niger.¹⁴⁶

As elsewhere, the Russian state has been keen to smooth the post-Prigozhin transition. Soon after the death of Dmitry Utkin – a founder of Wagner in 2014 who oversaw its Libya arm – in the same plane crash as Prigozhin, Yevkurov and GRU chief Averyanov came to Benghazi to assure Haftar of the continuity of Russian support.

Indeed, Russia's engagement with the LAAF, and to a lesser degree the Tripoli-based government, has increased since Prigozhin's death. In September 2023, Khalifa Haftar flew to Moscow to meet with Putin.¹⁴⁷ Between August and December 2023, Yevkurov visited eastern Libya three times.¹⁴⁸ In January 2024, Yevkurov returned to Benghazi for more talks.¹⁴⁹

These talks have mainly focused on reorganizing and formalizing Russia's presence in Libya, negotiating a capacity-building agreement with the LAAF, and transferring assets and human capital on the ground in Libya to the Africa Corps. (Soviet-era weapons systems form the bulk of LAAF stocks, dating back to the rule of long-time dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and creating a degree of dependency on Russia for servicing and support.)

Notably, there are claims Russia is seeking to officially establish a naval base in the country.¹⁵⁰ This would be contentious in Libya, particularly given that the LAAF's jurisdictional scope to honour any such agreement is unclear and very highly disputed. Equally, it is not clear that Russia would ultimately take that step given the damage it could cause to its relationship with the Tripoli-based government.

Russia has an interest in keeping a line of communication open to Tripoli. It has put much diplomatic effort into opening an embassy in Tripoli, after shuttering its previous mission in 2014. It succeeded in late 2023.

GI-TOC field sources have indicated that the Russian charge d'affaires in Tripoli is actively reaching out to key people. Reportedly, he is also very strategic in his approach, angling to cement Russia's permanent presence there. Antagonizing Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba, the Tripoli-based prime minister, would risk tanking this.

Greater involvement with Russia also comes with risks for the LAAF, especially given talk about the potential creation of a unity government. If Haftar moves to further formalize the Russian presence, such as by offering naval basing rights, he would antagonize the Tripoli-based government and likely torpedo any realistic move towards a unity government.

Succession planning within the LAAF might also be shaping Russia-LAAF relations. Reportedly, Saddam Haftar is sidelining many LAAF stalwarts and forging a direct bilateral relationship with the Africa Corps. He has been seen, for example, at the Russian base in Jufra. This is likely to be helpful for Saddam in his bid to cement a hereditary transition, potentially including through him leaning on the Russians to neutralize growing frictions within the LAAF.

However, the main Russian interlocutor in Libya is Khaled Haftar, another son. As of late 2024, there was little indication that Saddam had supplanted him in managing the relationship. Although the ramifications of this on the transition are unclear, it could augur a more competitive transition process than expected, and one in which Russia could have important leverage. This would be a shift from the previous state of play, in which Wagner had forged relations with senior LAAF commanders. However, it could pose a longer-term risk to whichever son triumphs, leaving him vulnerable to becoming overly beholden to Russia, quite unlike Khalifa Haftar's largely balanced relationship with the Russians.

Despite media claims that Russia's greater presence in Africa might allow it to instrumentalize irregular migration to Europe via Libya as a means of destabilizing the European Union, there is no concrete

information suggesting they are playing a meaningful role.¹⁵¹ Any such effort by Russia would face practical impediments, due to the relatively decentralized migration pathways through the country and Libyan actors' entrenched influence over this phenomenon. Also, the LAAF has sought to build its legitimacy with European states by positioning itself as able to control migrant flows.

A logistics hub and strategic base

As indicated above, Libya's main utility to the Africa Corps is logistical, since Libyan airfields serve as key nodes for supplying operations in the Sahel. However, Libya's geographic position means that it intersects with multiple key Russian interests and goals in the Mediterranean (Europe and the Levant), which extend well beyond the economic and limited great power dynamics driving Russian engagement in the Sahel and Central Africa. This means that while Russia might assertively push its interests in Libya, its overall approach is likely to be fairly conservative, gradual and strategically coherent.

This approach in part also reflects the position of Russia and the Africa Corps in Libya, which is different from its engagement in other African countries (with the possible exception of Sudan).

In Mali, Burkina Faso and the CAR, Wagner/Africa Corps operates unequivocally at the behest of internationally recognized governments. In Libya, the Africa Corps is there at the bidding of the LAAF and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, which maintains a rival administration to the Tripoli-based government. Both the legislature and the parallel administration remain unrecognized by the international community.

This might not have operational consequences, but it does have legal and diplomatic implications. These include a lack of immunity for Russian mercenaries from Libyan law, their consequent potential prosecution and questions surrounding the long-term enforceability of any agreements between the House of Representatives and Russia on the latter's right to maintain military bases in Libya. All this puts the Africa Corps in a vulnerable position and means that Russia faces a far more complicated political balancing act than elsewhere.

Chad

Chad is one of the last countries in the Sahel region to have resisted Russia's growing influence, which has seen Wagner deploy to most of Chad's neighbours: Libya, Sudan, the CAR and Niger. However, recent developments suggest that this is changing.

Chad has experienced major political and security upheaval in recent years, in particular since President Mahamat Idriss Déby came to power in a military coup after his father, the long-ruling Idriss Déby Itno, was killed while heading a military operation against rebels in 2021. However, it remains an island of relative stability within the broader region, given repeated coups, conflict and violent extremist group expansion in the Sahel, Libya, Sudan and the CAR.

Chad's stability has long depended on its long-standing partnership with its former colonial power, France. The French military historically intervened repeatedly to eliminate and deter rebel forces threatening Déby senior's government, most recently in February 2019.¹⁵² In return, French military bases in Chad have been key to the country's military operations in the Sahel, and even more so since their troops were expelled from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.¹⁵³



A minibus in Chad's capital city, N'Djamena, displays support for Putin and Wagner, September 2024.

© Denis Sassou Gueipeur/AFP via Getty Images

However, Chadian authorities have also sought to harness their country's relatively stable relations with international partners. Foreign policy under Mahamat Déby has diversified diplomatic, military and economic partnerships.

Among Chad's new partners, Hungary stands out as an ambiguous ally given its position as a pro-Russia member of the EU. Chad and Hungary are reportedly working on several partnerships, including the planned deployment of Hungarian troops to Chad, reportedly to help curb irregular migration and violent extremism.¹⁵⁴

Yet it is Chad's burgeoning relationship with Russia that has attracted the most attention. This follows a period of tensions between Chad's government and Russian actors. Before Prigozhin's death, Wagner's role in Chad was one of subtle opposition to the government, rather than support.

While Prigozhin denied that he was meddling in Chadian politics, Wagner is reported to have provided support to Chadian rebels in the CAR and even attempted to assassinate Mahamat Déby in February 2023, according to a leaked communication between the US and Chad.¹⁵⁵ At the same time, Wagner is reported to have courted influential actors who may have sway within the government.¹⁵⁶

The Kremlin appears to have adopted a more diplomatic approach since the death of Prigozhin.¹⁵⁷ Less than a year after the alleged assassination attempt, Déby met with Putin in Moscow in January 2024 to 'develop our bilateral ties'.¹⁵⁸ This was followed by a visit by Lavrov to N'Djamena in June 2024, when he met with Déby.¹⁵⁹ While the contours of Chad's incipient partnership with Russia remain unclear, persisting rumours claim that Russian troops may have already arrived on Chadian soil.¹⁶⁰

According to two contacts in the region, Russian trainers may have arrived as early as January or February 2024 at a military camp near N'Djamena airport. Sources claim these troops were hired to train the newly formed Force d'intervention rapide (Rapid Intervention Force – FIR).¹⁶¹ This elite military unit was reportedly created by the president as part of a reconfiguration of the national security and defence apparatus he inherited from his father. The unit is envisioned as Déby's new

presidential guard, as a counterweight to the powerful Direction générale de service de sécurité des institutions de l'État (General Direction of the Security Services of State Institutions).¹⁶²

The creation of this new force was kept discreet and was first acknowledged publicly when it was deployed to the Lake Chad region in July.¹⁶³ However, the FIR was also reportedly behind a raid in February of the Parti socialiste sans frontières (Socialist Party Without Borders) headquarters in N'Djamena during which Yaya Dillo – the party's leader and a key Déby opponent – was killed.¹⁶⁴

Training of the FIR by Russian trainers is particularly problematic given their tendency in the broader region to deliver elite instruction unfettered by human rights considerations. In the absence of counter-vailing initiatives to ensure human rights compliance, it could presage approaches to the FIR's mission of countering political opposition and defending the president against the risk of internal insurrection that are out of line with international norms.¹⁶⁵

At the same time, the presence of traditional Western allies in Chad is under threat. Initially, France's relationship with Chad was somewhat soured by the former's pressure to hold elections quickly after the 2021 coup, and more recently by the opening in July of a judicial investigation in France into alleged embezzlement by Chad's president.¹⁶⁶ By 29 November 2024, Chad had put an end to its military cooperation agreement with France, under which the latter had stationed around one thousand troops in Chad.¹⁶⁷ Although Chad's foreign minister stated it did not intend to break ties with France completely, the move will entail the departure of French troops and equipment from Chad, which began on 10 December with the departure of two French fighter jets from the capital.¹⁶⁸

Furthermore, US forces stationed at a French military base in N'Djamena were forced to withdraw in April 2024 at the request of Chadian officials, who questioned the legality of the Status of Forces Agreement, which enabled US forces to operate in Chad.¹⁶⁹ US officials have claimed the issue was largely administrative and that the withdrawal is temporary. However, this represents a symbolic distancing from the US.

Russia's attempt to position itself as a strategic partner of Chad in the region was also highlighted by an unusual incident in May involving the liberation of Chadian soldiers held by Chadian rebels in Libya. Russian authorities claimed they had freed 21 Chadian soldiers held by 'illegal armed groups' in southern Libya in a joint operation with Chad's military, and facilitated their transfer to Niamey, the capital of Niger. Russian media reported that Chad's defence minister had thanked Russia for its involvement.¹⁷⁰

However, Chad did not make any official statement on the episode and Chadian officials reportedly denied being involved in this operation. Further, the Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la république (Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic), the group that had captured and detained the Chadian soldiers in northern Chad in August 2023, denied the Russian claims. Indeed, this insurgent group announced that it had in fact negotiated the release of the prisoners with Russian forces stationed in Jufra in southern Libya in exchange for military equipment.¹⁷¹

Another sign of increasing Russian involvement in Chad was the arrest of two Russian political influencers close to the Wagner Group, Maxim Shugalei and Samir Seïfan, when they arrived at N'Djamena airport on 19 September 2024.¹⁷² Shugalei, who is under European and US sanctions for his ties to Wagner, has been an influential in Russia's expansion in Africa. He and Seïfan were previously accused of electoral interference in Libya and detained for six months in Libya in 2019.¹⁷³ Shugalei had already reportedly made several trips to Chad, including during elections held in May.¹⁷⁴

The two men were later released by Chadian authorities and returned to Russia alongside two other individuals (a Russian and Belarussian) who were arrested at the same time.¹⁷⁵ While this incident appears at first sight to signal friction between Chad and Russia, it may in fact be an arrangement that benefits both parties. Shugalei was close to Prigozhin and has continued to express admiration for the deceased Wagner leader. He has also reportedly been vocal about his prediction that the new architecture of Russian engagement in Africa will fail.¹⁷⁶ This suggests that the Kremlin played a role in the incident, as it seeks to counter pro-Prigozhin actors in the region.

At the same time, the arrest allows Chadian authorities to appear to be curbing Russian influence in Chad. This illustrates the discreet nature of Chad's rapprochement with Russia. According to a political adviser close to the Chadian presidency:

This is a strategic approach for our government, which is seeking to consolidate its power by diversifying its allies. For many of the president's advisers, Russian support is seen as a lever not only to strengthen the country's defence and security capabilities, but also to ensure a certain internal stability in the face of local threats. By joining forces with Russia like the other Sahel states, or Hungary, our country is determined to reduce its dependence on its traditional partners such as France, while ensuring that it obtains long-term military and political support from Russia.¹⁷⁷

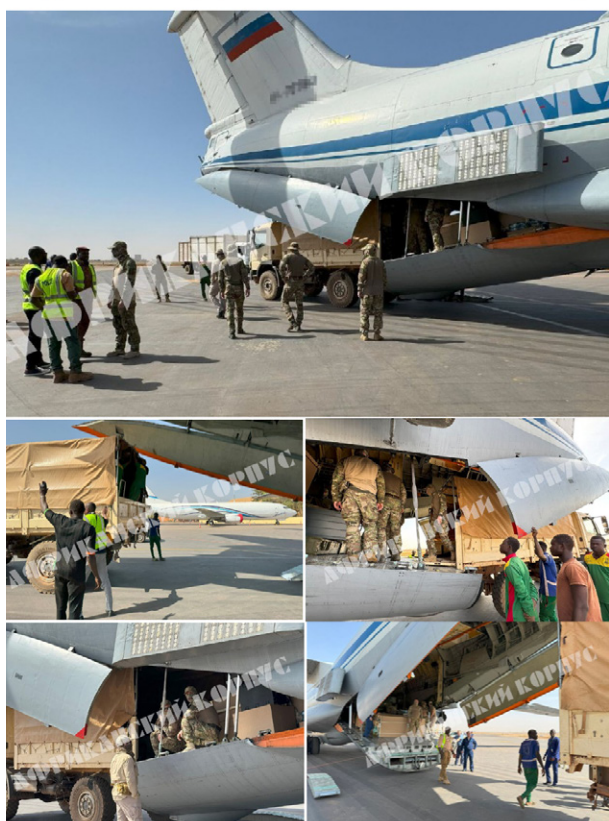
Growing Russian involvement in Chad's political and security environment heralds a significant risk of an escalation of political violence, particularly in terms of the repression of opposition and civil society voices. It could also trigger an escalation of conflict should Chadian authorities seek Russian military support in volatile areas, including the country's north. Should Chad's emerging partnership with Russia develop, this could also pave the way for economic partnerships centring on the country's lucrative natural resources. In particular, it is likely that Russia would covet gold mines in northern Chad. This would significantly increase the risk of localized violence breaking out in an area with a history of violent conflict over control of gold mining and where deep-rooted grievances persist.¹⁷⁸

Burkina Faso

In 2022, Burkina Faso experienced two military coups, ultimately resulting in Ibrahim Traoré, a military officer, assuming the presidency. The coups were to a significant extent driven by popular anger at the government's failure to address JNIM's growing territorial expansion, and to a lesser extent that of Islamic State Sahel, alongside the consequent mass displacement of local communities. Currently, swathes of territory are under JNIM control. As in Mali, the coups accelerated a rapid shift in policy away from France – the country's long-time security partner in the fight against Islamist insurgencies – towards Russia.

There was much speculation in 2022 and early 2023 as to how Wagner would react to this change in strategic direction, and indeed whether it had been working behind the scenes to bring it about.¹⁷⁹ Certainly Wagner appeared to be making overtures to Traoré: Prigozhin publicly supported the coups, describing Traoré at one point as 'a truly worthy and courageous son of his motherland'.¹⁸⁰

Prigozhin's death had no bearing on Burkina Faso's willingness to explore a security partnership with Russia, and the switch from France to Russia was complete in little over nine months, effected through official channels. In February 2023, a contingent of 400 French special forces, which had been based in the country since 2009, left at the instruction of the junta.¹⁸¹ Putin met Traoré at the July 2023 St Petersburg summit, before Yevkurov visited Traoré at the end of August to discuss potential military



⚡ Первые подразделения Африканского Корпуса МО РФ прибыли в Буркина-Фасо

Сахельская галерея:

"Африканская инициатива" публикует первые кадры выгрузки российских военных в аэропорту Буркина-Фасо.

Российский контингент из 100 человек обеспечит безопасность лидера страны Ибрагиму Траоре и буркинийского народа от нападений террористов. В ближайшее время подразделения пополнят еще 200 военнослужащих из России.

Африканский Корпус.

t.me/KorpusAfrica/210

183.4K 👁 Jan 24 at 14:55

A Telegram post reads 'The African Initiative publishes the first footage of the unloading of Russian military personnel at Burkina Faso airport. A Russian contingent of 100 will ensure the safety of the country's leader, Ibrahim Traoré, and the Burkinabe people from terrorist attacks. In the near future, the units will be replenished with another 200 military personnel from Russia.' This was possibly the first time that troops were deployed under the Africa Corps brand. *Photo: Telegram*

cooperation.¹⁸² The Traoré regime withstood an attempted coup in September, which may have helped to expedite the acceptance of Russia's offer. A Burkinabe military source said that a senior official in Russian intelligence and Russian deputy minister of defence Yunus-Bek Yevkurov both visited the Burkinabe capital of Ouagadougou in October 2023, and the former began an official relationship in intelligence cooperation with Burkina Faso.¹⁸³

The first Russian troops arrived around the same time.¹⁸⁴ A militarily connected Burkinabe source said that in October or November 2023, a group of about 10 Russian soldiers arrived discreetly in Ouagadougou, and stayed in the Lancaster Ouaga 2000 Hotel.¹⁸⁵ *Jeune Afrique* similarly reported a contingent of 20 Russian troops staying in the same hotel that November.¹⁸⁶ A Burkinabe journalist said that some Russian instructors were lodged in quarters adjoining the Presidency. The area is part of a compact, compartmentalized block housing the prime minister's office, the foreign ministry and what was until recently the headquarters of the National Gendarmerie's honorary escort squadron.¹⁸⁷

The Russian presence has been highly visible in the country. On 11 January 2024, a Russian delegation, most of whom were wearing military uniforms, visited the Muraz epidemiological centre in Bobo Dioulasso.¹⁸⁸ On 26 January, Yevkurov was photographed attending a service in the Sunnite Mosque in Ouagadougou alongside senior Burkinabe transition officials.¹⁸⁹

There is very little clarity on what the troops will be doing, although most sources agree that at least some of them will be part of Traoré's presidential guard.¹⁹⁰ This is logical, given the attempted coup in September and the perceived vulnerability of his position, which has extended to Traoré and his coterie clearly expressing concerns about being unseated.

Notably, Burkina Faso represented the first conspicuous deployment of Africa Corps personnel, which may make the country something of a 'shop window' for the brand, according to the Polish Institute of International Affairs.¹⁹¹ There was another influx of Russian mercenaries in May 2024, reportedly led by Vitalij Nikolaevich Ermolaev, or 'Jedi'.¹⁹² Just three months after arriving in Ouagadougou, half of this Russian mercenary force, known as the Bear Brigade, was sent back to Russia to fight against Ukraine in Kursk. It is not clear what impact this will have on Traoré, as the prime goal of the brigade's local deployment is to ensure his personal security.¹⁹³

Arguably one of the most interesting developments in Burkina Faso has been the establishment in September 2023 of the African Initiative by a local NGO run by pan-Africanists. Officially a media organization, the African Initiative in reality acts as a propaganda machine to share information about the Africa Corps and promote the Russian narrative across Africa. In many ways, the outlet is the latest iteration of the media/political organizations that have been a hallmark of the Wagner strategy (such as the Prigozhin-affiliated Foundation for the Protection of National Values). Several of its staff members are former Wagner personnel or from Prigozhin-backed political groups like AFRIC. One of the African Initiative's staff – Anna Zamaraeva – is Wagner's former press officer.¹⁹⁴

However, as with other areas of Wagner activity, state control is tight. The African Initiative's editor-in-chief is Artem Kureyev, an FSB officer with the Department for Operational Information and International Relations and who has allegedly run influence operations in Europe centring on Russia's war in Ukraine.¹⁹⁵ The Initiative's activities are also allegedly coordinated by Viktor Lukovenko, a GRU agent.¹⁹⁶

Since its establishment, the African Initiative has not only broadcast pro-Russian propaganda, but also promoted a series of conspiracy theories designed to undermine regional trust in the West. These have included stories that Western pharmaceutical companies were running covert biological experiments, and that genetically modified mosquitos, designed to reduce malaria transmission, were in fact increasing malaria and dengue fever.¹⁹⁷ According to a study by the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, West Africa was the region 'most targeted by disinformation – accounting for nearly 40 per cent of documented disinformation campaigns in Africa' since 2018, approximately half of which were connected to Russia.¹⁹⁸



Scene from a training class given by the African Initiative for the staff of Burkina Faso's National Gendarmerie.
Photo: African Initiative

Niger

Since the military coup that overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum in July 2023, Niger's transitional authorities – the Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie (National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland – CNSP) – have developed strong ties to Russia as they turn away from former partners such as France and the US. News of the coup was welcomed by Prigozhin, who said:

What happened in Niger is nothing other than the struggle of the people of Niger with their colonizers. With colonizers who are trying to foist their rules of life on them and their conditions and keep them in the state that Africa was in hundreds of years ago.¹⁹⁹

French troops, who numbered around 1 500, departed Niger in December 2023.²⁰⁰ Since then, Russia's direct involvement in Niger has increased with the deployment of Russian trainers and advisers, specifically members of the Africa Corps, primarily stationed in Niamey.²⁰¹ The same month as the French departure, a Russian delegation visited Niamey to meet with Nigerien military officials, resulting in the signing of military cooperation agreements.²⁰² By April 2024, Russian military equipment and personnel had arrived in Niamey, as documented by Nigerien state television.²⁰³ In May 2024, Russian troops were deployed to an airbase where US troops were previously stationed, after Niger's junta ordered the US personnel (numbering nearly a thousand) to leave.²⁰⁴ However, numbers remain low: Africa Corps personnel in Niger reportedly numbered between 150 and 300 as of August 2024.²⁰⁵

The Russian presence in Niger remains concentrated in Niamey, along with a modest deployment in Tillabéri and no presence in Agadez. Although Agadez is considered as a potential area for future Russian involvement due to its gold mines, the issue remains divisive among CNSP leaders.²⁰⁶ Concerns have been raised about the potential destabilization of the region, given its history of rebellion and the negative experiences associated with Wagner's activities in northern Mali.²⁰⁷ As a result, the Africa Corps has reportedly not yet been sent to Agadez, with the Nigerien authorities prioritizing their presence in Niamey, where they can more effectively support the regime.²⁰⁸

Regarding Tillabéri, there are reports suggesting that Russian personnel may be present in the region, but their activities appear to be focused on the mining sector rather than direct involvement in military operations against insurgent groups.²⁰⁹ The abduction of two Russian geologists by JNIM in the Mbanga area of Tillabéri lends support to this thesis.²¹⁰ The incident suggests that the Russian presence in Tillabéri may be driven more by economic interests than by counter-terrorism efforts.

The presence of Russian advisers and trainers within the CNSP appears to provide several strategic benefits to the junta, reflecting both internal and external considerations.

A primary benefit is the role these Russian advisers play in helping the CNSP maintain its grip on power. Internal dynamics within the Nigerien military are fraught with division, particularly due to the controversial leadership of General Abdourahmane Tchiani, who led the 26 July 2023 coup and is the CNSP's president. Regional sources suggest that Tchiani's leadership is highly polarizing, leading to a heightened risk of counter-coups. As one contact noted, the arrival of the Russian advisers has seemingly bolstered the CNSP's security, with the implication being that these foreign forces are less likely to be co-opted by internal factions and prove more reliable in safeguarding the current regime.²¹¹ The strategic positioning of the first wave of Russian instructors in villas adjacent to the presidential palace further supports the notion that their primary role is to protect against internal military dissent and potential coup attempts.²¹²



Supporters of Niger's transitional authority, established following the 2023 military coup, show their support for Russia and China, whom they view as their post-colonial allies. © AFP via Getty Images

Another regional contact indicated that these Russian advisers are working within the premises of the Direction générale de la documentation et de la sécurité extérieure (Directorate General of Documentation and External Security), Niger's main intelligence service, underscoring their integration into the core of the country's security apparatus.²¹³ This suggests that the Russian advisers are not merely providing surface-level training but are deeply embedded within intelligence and security operations, likely contributing to the CNSP's ability to pre-empt and neutralize threats to its rule.

The second advantage derived from the presence of Russian advisers is their capacity to fill the security vacuum left by the departure of European and US forces. Niger's military is widely seen as ill-equipped to handle the complex security challenges the country faces, a sentiment echoed by a former senior Nigerien official. 'The CNSP is not a group of individuals devoid of common sense,' they told the GI-TOC. 'They know well that one cannot ask all foreign armies to leave during such a critical period and expect the Nigerien army, given its known state, to do their work alone.'²¹⁴

The Russian advisers, therefore, represent a pragmatic and indispensable substitute for Western military aid. They also help the Nigerien forces operate certain military equipment and maintain a semblance of operational coherence.

For Russia, the alliance with the CNSP offers substantial strategic benefits. As the same former senior official notes, Russia stands to gain both financially and geopolitically. 'They [the Russians] are happy ... because they kill two birds with one stone; they make money and at the same time they extend their influence to a territory historically under enemy influence, that is, France and the US.'²¹⁵

However, Niger's partnership with Russia also heralds risks. By ousting French and US forces and framing this move as a reclamation of Niger's sovereignty from Western powers, the CNSP risks

undermining the very sovereignty it claims to defend. This strategic pivot, ostensibly aimed at curbing external influence, carries the inherent danger of substituting one form of external domination for another, potentially more pernicious one.

The analogy provided by a politician from the Agadez region – ‘We have undressed a villain to dress an even nastier villain’²¹⁶ – encapsulates the perceived irony of this situation. This observation reflects the deep-seated apprehension within Niger that the departure of Western forces could lead to an even more exploitative and destabilizing foreign presence.

The pattern of Russian military involvement in Africa, particularly in Mali and the CAR, also offers a cautionary historical tale. In Niger, Russian support could exacerbate existing governance challenges by creating a reliance on a partner whose primary interest lies in the extraction of resources rather than the establishment of durable peace and security.

This risk is compounded by the fact that Western partners, alarmed by the increasing presence of Russian forces, have begun to withdraw their diplomatic and development support in neighbouring countries. For instance, Denmark, a significant contributor to international aid in Niger, is closing its embassies in Mali and Burkina Faso due to the Wagner Group’s presence.²¹⁷

In Niger, the French embassy, previously the largest provider of development aid, has been closed since the 26 July coup, and other European embassies in Niamey have significantly scaled back their operations, reflecting caution in response to the new local political (and wider geopolitical) direction taken by Niger’s authorities.

This withdrawal of Western support is particularly concerning given that public development aid constitutes more than 50 per cent of Niger’s state budget, highlighting the potential economic and social fallout from this geopolitical shift. In fact, 55 per cent of Niger’s budget comes from external sources, notably the EU, Germany, China, the US, Belgium, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and African sub-regional banks.²¹⁸

Another significant risk associated with the CNSP’s strategy lies in a potential deterioration of the security situation, particularly given ongoing counterterrorism efforts. Neighbouring Mali’s experience is instructive in this regard. Should Niger follow a similar trajectory, the country could face a protracted and increasingly severe security crisis. The entanglement with Russian forces might lead to escalation rather than resolution of conflicts, particularly if the external forces prioritize the protection of an authoritarian regime or of resource extraction sites over comprehensive counter-insurgency operations.

There have been indications that Russian interests may be attempting to involve themselves in gold mining activities in Niger, although the evidence remains inconclusive. According to interviews with security, civil society and political sources, there is no confirmed presence of Russian companies at Niger’s gold mining sites. However, the above-mentioned kidnapping of two Russian geologists has raised suspicions.

These kidnapped geologists acknowledged that they were working for Russian companies, strongly indicating that Russia is attempting to establish a foothold in Niger’s gold mining sector, even if it is not yet actively exploiting sites. However, such Russian involvement, particularly in Agadez, would likely be met with significant hostility and resistance from local communities.

Home to a substantial Tuareg population, Agadez has a history of resistance to foreign interference, especially when it comes to the exploitation of natural resources. Several rebellions were stoked by

the Tuaregs' broad exclusion from uranium mining in Arlit in the 1990s and again in the first decade of the 2000s.²¹⁹ Recent attempts by Niger's government to formalize small-scale gold mining have already caused considerable tensions,²²⁰ which the arrival of Russian companies would likely exacerbate. Existing human rights violations by Russian and Malian forces in northern Mali against the Tuareg population run a substantial risk of further heightening tensions in Agadez.

Multiple interviewees suggest that Russia's broader strategic interest in Niger probably extend beyond gold mining; they believe that Russia's presence is also motivated by the country's uranium reserves, which had until now been mainly invested in by France. In June, the Nigerien government withdrew French state-owned company Orano's licence to exploit the Imouraren uranium deposit, one of the largest uranium reserves in the world.²²¹ Nigerien authorities also took operational control of the Somaïr mine in December 2024, Orano's only active uranium mine in the country, which has been a cornerstone of the company's operations for decades.²²² At the same time, Niger's mining minister, Ousmane Abarchi, called on Russia to invest in Niger's uranium and other extractive industries.²²³ Some reports suggest that Russia is actively seeking to take over France's uranium assets in Niger.²²⁴ According to the Critical Threats Project, the Kremlin has a 'continent-wide strategy to dominate the nuclear energy market and increase leverage over countries that aim to cut Russian energy purchases'.²²⁵ Notably, Russia has agreed to construct several nuclear power plants in Africa, including one in Mali and one in Burkina Faso.²²⁶



IMPLICATIONS: A TOOLKIT AND A TEMPLATE

The post-Prigozhin phase has been marked by a greater degree of confidence and directness on the part of the Russian state towards Africa, as shown by the new Russian presence in Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. However, Wagner's legacy remains useful to Russia, despite the taint of Prigozhin's mutiny.

The reasons for this are two-fold. First, there would be little value in discarding a Wagner toolkit – the experience and expertise built up by this PMC in many African countries over the years – that has enabled it to successfully fill a range of niches in many different contexts. In some cases – Mali and the CAR – it has been more prudent to continue under the Wagner banner than to attempt to replace this engagement with the Africa Corps, which has no brand loyalty or recognition.

Making use of both Wagner and the Africa Corps also remains a useful tool for Moscow when cultivating a diverse set of interests in a country, as has been seen in Sudan, where Moscow has increasingly supported the government, while the Africa Corps continues to work alongside the RSF. In Libya, the Africa Corps is Russia's primary means of engaging with the LAAF, while Moscow engages (albeit to a much lesser extent) with the internationally recognized government in Tripoli.

Secondly, and more strategically, Wagner has provided an influence template that Russia is building upon and expanding. In Burkina Faso – a new engagement for Russia, and the first conspicuous deployment of the Africa Corps – the Wagner playbook has been put into action, offering anti-Western disinformation campaigns alongside security provision.

However, while personnel and activities may exhibit many similarities with Wagner, it is clear that Russia has also stepped up its policy and resource focus on Africa. Where once Wagner mercenaries operated, Russian troops are on the ground with the full benefit of MoD logistics. The security-for-resources deals struck by Wagner may be scaled up to state level in the new era of the Africa Corps, feeding into Russia's attempts to erect an alternative financial and economic framework to overcome the sanctions imposed after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

And yet Russia continues to face significant challenges on the continent. As its influence and operations in Africa have grown, so have grievances among communities and local conflict actors in areas targeted by Wagner operations, especially given the atrocities perpetrated in northern Mali. Russia's increasingly contentious presence in the region could constitute a vulnerability which can be exploited both by local conflict actors and international players. Some African leaders might also seek alternatives to Russian security, although as seen in the CAR, Wagner would likely vigorously attempt to block such efforts.

Russia is also not the only country with interests in Africa. The US and France have grown increasingly concerned about the direction of travel and have the resources and connections to make significant efforts to counter it, although they must also be mindful of local preferences.

More challenging for Russia could be the interests of China, which has engaged more with Africa economically than any other major player so far this century. China is now Africa's biggest trading partner, with bilateral trade totalling more than US\$200 billion a year.²²⁷ China has also fronted the construction of massive infrastructure projects across the continent, including maritime ports. It has trained the militaries of several African nations, and established its only overseas military base in Djibouti.

Furthermore, Chinese companies are heavily involved in mining across many countries in West Africa, often outside regulatory frameworks. At present, Russia and China coexist in nominally distinct areas: Russia provides regime security, China economic cooperation. However, as their ambitions on the continent diversify and mature, these boundaries might increasingly blur. Mining in particular could be a sphere where competing interests emerge. Several other players are also vying for enhanced influence across Africa, notably Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, further complicating the landscape.

Whatever the future, it is clear that Wagner has played a key role in both achieving and shaping Russia's geopolitical ambitions over the past decade in Africa. Until Prigozhin's infamous mutiny, Wagner was the peak achievement of Russia's various experiments in influence operations – a quasi-independent, part-self-funding entity that could advance the Kremlin's agenda in a deniable and forceful manner. As an organization, it changed radically in the near-decade after its birth, from a mysterious mercenary outfit with a reputation for violence into an officially endorsed player that attempted to rebrand itself as a banner-carrier for Russian values.



Left: The original Wagner Group insignia, which reads: 'Nothing personal, we got paid.' Right: The redesigned logo of the Wagner Group, since April 2023, reads: 'Blood, honour, homeland, courage, justice.'

Photos: Social media

For a military organization that marched on Moscow, its rehabilitation has been nothing short of extraordinary. Mere months after Prigozhin's death, Wagner veterans were delivering lectures to schoolchildren on courage; a monument to Prigozhin and Utkin was unveiled in the Krasnodar region in April 2024.²²⁸

But even without the mutiny, Wagner had arguably outlived its use to the Russian state by mid-2023. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a decisive but badly miscalculated move by Moscow, but one that it remains committed to – a bold, overt attempt to reassert its status as a great power in the world. It seems unlikely that Moscow would create an entity that has the power and potential to slip the leash so dramatically again: a lesson will have been learned. But Wagner's legacy will live on, as the toolkit and template of Russia's new era of influence-projection in Africa.



NOTES

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