

## The Influence of the Wagner Group on Regional Security in the Sahel Region

Michael Mashal Jemlak & Zekeri Momoh

Department of Political Science,  
Karl Kumm University, Vom-Nigeria  
*Corresponding author: momohzekeri@gmail.com*

### Abstract

The Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization, has increasingly influenced the security dynamics of the Sahel region, where weak governance, terrorism, and inter-communal conflicts persist. This study examines the influence of Wagner's presence on regional stability, focusing on its role in counterterrorism operations, regime protection, and resource exploitation in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic. This study revealed that Wagner provides military support to Sahelian governments facing jihadist insurgencies, its operations have been linked to human rights violations, civilian casualties, and further destabilization. Additionally, its engagement often weakens democratic institutions by reinforcing authoritarian rule and reducing Western influence in the region. The group's involvement in economic sectors, particularly in resource-rich areas, raises concerns over neo-colonial extraction practices and the financing of armed conflicts. The study highlights how Wagner's activities exacerbate regional security challenges by deepening divisions between local governments and their Western allies, increasing the risks of prolonged conflicts. Moreover while Wagner may provide short-term military advantages to host states, its long-term impact threatens sustainable peace and governance in the Sahel. On the whole, strengthening regional security frameworks, enhancing governance, and promoting multilateral security cooperation are essential to mitigating the destabilizing effects of foreign private military actors.

**Keywords:** Wanger, Insecurity, Sahel, Africa, Russia

### Introduction

Foreign mercenaries are fighters hired to serve in a foreign army for financial gain—have been part of global warfare for centuries. Their use spans ancient civilizations, medieval conflicts, colonial conquests, and modern proxy wars. Mercenaries were prominent in antiquity. In Ancient Greece, city-states frequently hired foreign soldiers, especially during the Peloponnesian Wars. Similarly, Carthage employed mercenaries during its wars against Rome, notably in the First Punic War (Head, 1993). The Roman Empire, while initially relying on citizen soldiers, increasingly employed auxiliaries and mercenary tribes as it expanded (Goldsworthy, 2003).

In medieval Europe, mercenaries became indispensable during feudal wars. The Swiss pikemen, for instance, gained a reputation for discipline and effectiveness and were hired across Europe. The Italian Condottieri in the 14th and 15th centuries operated as professional military contractors, often switching allegiances based on pay (Mallett, 1974). European colonial powers also relied on mercenaries during imperial expansion. The British employed Hessian mercenaries during the American Revolutionary War (Atwood, 2002). Similarly, the Dutch and French used foreign soldiers to secure and expand colonial holdings.

In the 20th century, foreign mercenaries featured prominently in post-colonial conflicts. During the Congo Crisis in the 1960s, mercenaries from Europe and South Africa were used to support secessionist movements and defend government interests (Mockler, 1985). The French

Foreign Legion, though technically a national military unit, has functioned as a form of state-sanctioned mercenarism by recruiting foreigners to fight France's wars (Windrow, 1999).

The post-Cold War era has seen a shift from traditional mercenaries to private military companies (PMCs). Firms like Blackwater (now Academi), Executive Outcomes, and Wagner Group offer military services to states, corporations, and non-state actors. These groups operate in conflicts from Iraq and Afghanistan to Syria and the Sahel, often blurring the line between state military forces and mercenaries (Singer, 2003; McFate, 2017). Though modern PMCs claim legal legitimacy, critics argue they embody mercenarism under a new label, with similar risks of accountability gaps, human rights violations, and profit-driven warfare (Avant, 2005).

However, the Wagner Group is a Russian private military company (PMC) that emerged around 2014, widely believed to be connected to the Kremlin through opaque networks of patronage and state-aligned interests. It gained prominence during Russia's annexation of Crimea and has since been involved in numerous conflicts across the globe, particularly in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan (Sukhankin, 2019). Although the Russian government has officially denied ties to the group, substantial evidence links Wagner to the Russian military and intelligence services, particularly the GRU (Galeotti, 2017). The group was reportedly founded by Dmitry Utkin, a former GRU officer whose call sign was "Wagner," a nod to his admiration for Nazi Germany's military culture and the composer Richard Wagner (Weir, 2022).

Wagner has operated in both combat and non-combat roles, including training local forces, protecting resource assets (such as mines), and influencing political outcomes in fragile states (Marten, 2019). These activities have raised concerns over human rights violations, with credible reports of torture, extrajudicial killings, and other war crimes (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In recent years, Wagner's role has expanded significantly in Africa, where it has been used as a tool of Russian foreign policy, exchanging military support for resource concessions and political loyalty (Stronski, 2020). In 2023, following the group's brief rebellion against the Russian government led by its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner's future came into question. Prigozhin died in a suspicious plane crash shortly afterward, which many analysts viewed as a sign of the Kremlin reasserting control over the group (BBC News, 2023).

Despite Prigozhin's death, Wagner's operations have continued in some capacity, possibly under new leadership or absorbed into the Russian state's formal security apparatus. Its model of hybrid warfare—combining military force, information operations, and economic exploitation—remains a cornerstone of Russia's asymmetric influence strategy (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019). In the light of the following this study examines the impact of Wagner's presence on regional stability, focusing on its role in counterterrorism operations, regime protection, and resource exploitation in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic.

## **Literature Review**

The growing presence of the Wagner Group—a Russian private military company (PMC)—in the Sahel has prompted significant academic and policy concern regarding its impact on regional security. Empirical studies and security reports indicate that Wagner's involvement in countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) has had complex implications, influencing counterinsurgency operations, state stability, and human rights conditions.

In Mali, the transitional government turned to Wagner in 2021 following the withdrawal of French troops from Operation Barkhane. Empirical evidence suggests that Wagner's

deployment was linked to increased military offensives against jihadist groups; however, it also coincided with an escalation of civilian casualties. For instance, the massacre in Moura in March 2022, where over 300 civilians were reportedly killed, was attributed to joint operations by Malian forces and Wagner operatives (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These findings point to a paradox in Wagner's contribution—intensified military action with significant human rights concerns.

Moreover, empirical field data collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) shows that violence against civilians increased sharply in areas with confirmed Wagner presence, particularly in central Mali (ACLED, 2023). This correlation suggests that rather than improving security, Wagner's tactics may exacerbate insecurity and weaken the social contract between the state and local populations. In the Central African Republic, Wagner has been credited with helping to recapture territories from rebel groups, thereby providing short-term security improvements (Kjeksrud & Skaar, 2023). However, longitudinal studies indicate that these gains have not translated into lasting stability. The heavy-handedness of Wagner forces, often marked by extrajudicial killings and forced displacements, undermines peacebuilding efforts and risks fueling cycles of violence.

Furthermore, some empirical research points to the Wagner Group's involvement in resource exploitation as a security threat in itself. By securing mining concessions and natural resources in exchange for military assistance, Wagner reportedly fuels local grievances and corruption, thereby contributing to long-term instability (Maru, 2023). A comparative analysis by Demarest and Titeca (2023) illustrates that Wagner's strategy often lacks community engagement and overlooks root causes of conflict, such as ethnic tensions and economic marginalization. This approach contrasts with more development-oriented security models and has limited effectiveness in building local resilience.

The implications of Wagner's presence in the Sahel are not confined to security dynamics alone. Political scientists argue that their engagement supports authoritarian regimes, thereby weakening democratic institutions and accountability (Habiyaemye, 2022). Empirical trends across Mali and CAR show increased repression of civil society and media since Wagner's arrival.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand the activities and implications of the Wagner Group on regional security in the Sahel, the Realist theory of international relations offers a foundational lens. Realism posits that the international system is anarchic and that states—and increasingly, non-state actors—prioritize survival, power, and self-interest. Realism recognizes the importance of military capabilities, strategic alliances, and the competition for influence among global powers, which is highly applicable in assessing the Wagner Group's involvement in Africa (Waltz, 1979; Morgenthau, 1948).

The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC), operates in alignment with Russian state interests, often in areas where direct Russian state military presence might be diplomatically or politically sensitive. This supports the realist notion of using proxy actors to pursue state interests without direct confrontation. In the Sahel region, the Wagner Group has been involved in countries like Mali, where its presence correlates with the withdrawal or decline of Western military actors, such as French forces (Fasanotti, 2022). The Security Dilemma, a concept within realism, is particularly useful. It suggests that one state's (or actor's) efforts to

increase its security often leads to insecurity in others, prompting arms races or escalated tensions (Jervis, 1978). Wagner's operations have reportedly worsened local conflicts, intensified grievances, and contributed to destabilization, as their involvement often lacks transparency and is linked with reports of human rights abuses and mercenary economics (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Additionally, Neo-colonialism theory complements realism by explaining the influence of powerful states over weaker nations through indirect control mechanisms such as economic dependency and security partnerships (Nkrumah, 1965). Wagner's engagements in resource-rich but politically unstable Sahel states often include mining concessions and economic agreements, reinforcing patterns of exploitation and dependency reminiscent of colonial dynamics. On the whole, these theoretical lenses help explain why and how Wagner operates in the Sahel, its alignment with Russian geopolitical ambitions, and the implications for regional security. Their presence can be interpreted as a strategic move by Russia to fill power vacuums left by Western forces, thereby expanding its influence under the guise of counterterrorism. However, their impact tends to exacerbate instability due to opaque contracts, weak state institutions, and lack of accountability (Boeke, 2022). This, in turn, undermines multilateral peacekeeping efforts and contributes to the fragmentation of regional security.

### **Impact of the Wagner Group on Regional Security in the Sahel Region**

The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC), has adopted a variety of strategies in its operations across different regions, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. These strategies include hybrid warfare, disinformation campaigns, resource exploitation, and support for authoritarian regimes. The Wagner Group often operates alongside regular Russian military forces, providing a deniable presence that enables Russia to exert influence while avoiding direct attribution. This hybrid approach blends conventional military tactics with irregular warfare, including the use of local militias and proxy forces (Sukhankin, 2020). Wagner has been linked to extensive disinformation campaigns through affiliated media networks. These campaigns aim to manipulate public opinion, discredit democratic institutions, and bolster authoritarian allies of Russia in host countries (Grossman et al., 2019). The use of fake social media accounts and pro-Russian narratives is a recurring tactic.

Wagner's deployments are frequently tied to the control and exploitation of natural resources such as gold, diamonds, and oil. In countries like the Central African Republic and Sudan, Wagner has secured mining concessions in exchange for military support to embattled regimes (Stronski, 2020). Wagner often partners with governments facing internal instability, providing regime protection, training, and combat support. This includes operations in Libya for General Khalifa Haftar and in Syria for Bashar al-Assad's government (Marten, 2019). These relationships often bypass international norms and further Russian geopolitical interests. The group offers military training to local forces, militias, and paramilitary groups, creating a network of loyal actors aligned with Russian interests. This helps sustain long-term influence even after Wagner forces reduce their visible presence (Watling & Reynolds, 2021). However, the Sahel region, already plagued by terrorism, state fragility, and intercommunal violence, has seen growing influence from external actors, notably the Russian private military company (PMC), the Wagner Group. Their increasing presence in countries like Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Burkina Faso has had multifaceted implications for regional security.

Similarly, as at February 2023 Wagner or associated groups have been active in the following African countries as shown table 1 below:

**Table 1: The Wagner Group on Regional Security in the Sahel Region**

Country	Military Presence	Political Involvement	Linked Russian Companies
Libya	X	X	N/A
Mali	X	X	N/A
Burkina Faso	N/A	X	N/A
Cameroon	N/A	X	X
Equatorial Guinea	N/A	X	N/A
Democratic Republic Congo	N/A	X	N/A
Kenya	N/A	N/A	X
Zimbabwe	N/A	X	N/A
South Africa	N/A	X	N/A
Madagascar	X	X	X
Sudan	X	X	X
Central African Republic	X	X	X
Niger	X	N/A	N/A
Chad	X	N/A	N/A
Mauritania	X	N/A	N/A
Algeria	N/A	X	N/A
Eritrea	N/A	X	N/A
Mozambique	X	N/A	N/A

**Source:** Global Initiative Against Transnational organized crimes, (February, 2023), The Africa report, (2023)

Table 1 above shows that the Wagner group are present in Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Democratic Republic Congo, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Madagascar, Sudan, Central African Republic, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Algeria, Eritrea and Mozambique either in the form of Military Presence, Political Involvement or Russian Companies linked with one form of business activities. The implication of the above finding shows that there is increasing numbers of the Wagner forces in many countries in Africa. This has a negative consequence on the sovereignty and security of the African countries where the Wagner forces operate.

Consequently, Table 2 below shows the year Wagner group arrived some African countries.

**Table 2 Wagner Group in Africa and years of Arrival**

Country	Years of Arrival
Sudan	2017
Central African Republic	2017
Libya	2018
Madagascar	2018
Mali	2021
Burkina Faso	2022
Cameroon	2022

**Source:** Global Initiative Against Transnational organized crimes, (February, 2023).

Table 2 above shows that Wagner forces that arrived Sudan in 2017, Central African Republic in 2017, Libya in 2018, Madagascar in 2018, Mali in 2021 and Cameroon in 2022. The implication of the above findings shows that the presence of Wagner forces in some African countries is relatively new. This further has implications on the security of the affected African countries where the Wagner forces are present Council of Foreign Relations, (2023)

The deployment of Wagner forces, particularly in Mali since 2021, followed the expulsion of French troops and a cooling of relations with Western allies. While the Malian junta claims that Wagner supports counterterrorism operations, several reports suggest that the group's presence has led to escalation in violence and human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The group's activities have allegedly included extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and civilian targeting under the guise of anti-insurgency operations (International Crisis Group, 2023). By supporting military juntas and autocratic regimes, the Wagner Group appears to undermine democratic norms and constitutional governance. In Mali, the group has been associated with the junta's consolidation of power, delaying democratic transition and marginalizing civil society actors (Thurston, 2023).

Wagner's expansion has been part of Russia's broader strategy to increase its footprint in Africa and counter Western influence. This has led to a strategic vacuum, where Western military and development actors withdraw, and Russia, through Wagner, steps in with security guarantees often tied to mining concessions and opaque deals (Stronski & Sokolsky, 2023). The loss of Western support has left some local forces ill-equipped and disconnected from established counterterrorism cooperation frameworks. Wagner's operations have reportedly involved aligning with certain local militias, thereby exacerbating existing ethnic and communal divisions. Their tactics, which include collective punishment, are believed to contribute to cycles of violence, further destabilizing regions like central Mali and northern Burkina Faso (ACLED, 2023). On the whole, the Wagner Group's involvement in the Sahel reflects a growing trend of securitization through non-state actors, with significant risks to regional stability, human rights, and democratic governance. While they may provide short-term military support to embattled regimes, the long-term consequences appear to be increased instability, weakened institutions, and erosion of international norms.

## Conclusion

The presence of the Wagner Group in the Sahel region has significantly altered the regional security landscape, bringing both short-term tactical gains and long-term strategic concerns. While some governments have turned to the Wagner Group as an alternative to traditional international military partnerships, particularly following the withdrawal or downsizing of

Western forces, the results have been mixed. On one hand, Wagner has provided immediate security support and helped governments reassert control in contested areas. On the other hand, its involvement has often been accompanied by reports of human rights violations, lack of accountability, and a focus on regime security rather than comprehensive counterinsurgency. Moreover, the group's opaque operations and alignment with Russian geopolitical interests have added new layers of complexity to already fragile security dynamics. Rather than stabilizing the region, Wagner's presence may be exacerbating existing tensions, undermining democratic institutions, and limiting the prospects for sustainable peace and development. In the long run, regional security in the Sahel will likely depend not only on military solutions but also on inclusive governance, socioeconomic development, and effective international cooperation—areas in which Wagner's approach appears limited. Therefore, while the Wagner Group has impacted regional security, its role raises critical questions about the balance between short-term stability and long-term resilience in the Sahel.

### Recommendations

- i. African countries in the Sahel (e.g., Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) should bolster existing frameworks like the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS to improve coordination, intelligence sharing, and joint security operations. This will help reduce reliance on external military contractors such as the Wagner Group.
- ii. African countries in the Sahel should investment in training, equipment, and oversight of national militaries is essential. A stronger, more accountable military apparatus can mitigate the appeal of foreign mercenary groups and foster domestic solutions to insecurity.
- iii. African countries in the Sahel should implement stricter regulations and oversight mechanisms when engaging private military companies (PMCs). Transparency in security agreements is vital to avoid violations of sovereignty and human rights abuses.
- iv. African countries should work closely with the African Union and the United Nations to design security strategies that emphasize African-led peacekeeping missions and sustainable development initiatives, limiting dependency on non-state military actors.
- v. African governments can pursue diplomatic engagement with Russia to discuss the activities and scope of the Wagner Group (or successor entities like Africa Corps), ensuring such engagements align with national interests and international norms.
- vi. African countries in the Sahel should avoid overdependence on any single external actor. Diversifying security partners—including African, Western, and multilateral institutions—can reduce strategic vulnerabilities and promote balanced development.
- vii. On the whole, long-term peace in the Sahel requires tackling poverty, youth unemployment, marginalization, and poor service delivery. Development-focused approaches can diminish the conditions that allow violent extremism and foreign military actors to thrive.

### References

- ACLED. (2023). *Wagner Group activity in the Sahel: Mapping the impact*. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Retrieved from <https://acleddata.com>
- Human Rights Watch. (2022, April 5). *Mali: Massacre by army, foreign soldiers*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>

- International Crisis Group. (2023, January 31). *The risky rise of Wagner in the Sahel*. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/wagner-sahel>
- Stronski, P., & Sokolsky, R. (2023, February 14). *Russia's Wagner Group: A threat to Africa's democratic stability*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org>
- Thurston, A. (2023). *Russia, Wagner, and political transitions in the Sahel*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org>
- BBC News. (2023, August 24). *Yevgeny Prigozhin: Wagner chief presumed dead after Russia plane crash*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66599733>
- Galeotti, M. (2017). *The modern Russian army*. Osprey Publishing.
- Human Rights Watch. (2021, May 27). *Central African Republic: Abuses by Russian-linked forces*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/27/central-african-republic-abuses-russian-linked-forces>
- Marten, K. (2019). Russia's use of semi-state security forces: The case of the Wagner Group. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(3), 181–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142>
- Polyakova, A., & Meserole, C. (2019). *Exporting digital authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/exporting-digital-authoritarianism/>
- Stronski, P. (2020). *Late to the party: Russia's return to Africa*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-82930>
- Sukhankin, S. (2019). Russian PMCs in the Gray Zone: Wagner's operations in the Middle East and Africa. *Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 16(18). <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-in-the-gray-zone-wagners-operational-model-in-the-middle-east-and-africa/>
- Weir, F. (2022, March 8). *Who are the Wagner Group, the mercenaries linked to Putin?* The Christian Science Monitor. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2022/0308/Who-are-the-Wagner-Group-the-mercenaries-linked-to-Putin>
- Grossman, S., Bush, H., & DiResta, R. (2019). *Evidence of Russia's Africa disinformation campaign*. Stanford Internet Observatory.
- Marten, K. (2019). Russia's use of semi-state security forces: The case of the Wagner Group. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(3), 181–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142>
- Stronski, P. (2020). *Implausible deniability: Russia's private military companies*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/02/implausible-deniability-russia-s-private-military-companies-pub-82236>
- Sukhankin, S. (2020). *Russian PMCs in the Middle East and Africa: A new tool of Russian 'smart power'*. Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-in-the-middle-east-and-africa-a-new-tool-of-russian-smart-power/>
- Watling, J., & Reynolds, N. (2021). *Operation Z: The death throes of an imperial illusion*. Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/wagner-groups-role-global-power-projection>
- Atwood, R. (2002). *The Hessians: Mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel in the American Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.
- Avant, D. D. (2005). *The market for force: The consequences of privatizing security*. Cambridge University Press.



- Goldsworthy, A. (2003). *The complete Roman army*. Thames & Hudson.
- Head, D. (1993). *Armies of the Macedonian and Punic Wars*. Wargames Research Group.
- Mallett, M. (1974). *Mercenaries and their masters: Warfare in Renaissance Italy*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- McFate, S. (2017). *The modern mercenary: Private armies and what they mean for world order*. Oxford University Press.
- Mockler, A. (1985). *The new mercenaries: The history of the mercenary from the Congo to the Seychelles*. Paragon House.
- Singer, P. W. (2003). *Corporate warriors: The rise of the privatized military industry*. Cornell University Press.
- Windrow, M. (1999). *French Foreign Legion 1831–71*. Osprey Publishing.
- ACLED. (2023). *Wagner Group Activity in the Sahel: Mapping Violence and Civilian Harm*. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.
- Demarest, L., & Titeca, K. (2023). *Private Military Companies in Africa: The Case of Wagner in the Sahel*. *African Affairs*, 122(486), 34-56.
- Habiyaremye, A. (2022). *Authoritarian Consolidation and External Security Assistance: The Wagner Group in Mali*. *Journal of African Politics and International Relations*, 18(2), 59-74.
- Human Rights Watch. (2022). *Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers*. <https://www.hrw.org>
- Kjeksrud, S., & Skaar, E. (2023). *Security for Whom? Evaluating Wagner's Impact on Stability in the Central African Republic*. PRIO Policy Brief, 14.
- Maru, M. T. (2023). *Resource Wars and Foreign Mercenaries: Wagner's Dual Role in Security and Exploitation in Africa*. *African Security Review*, 32(1), 12–30