



Russia's Wagner Group Expanding Influence in Africa

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The likely finalisation of a contract between the government of Mali and the private military company (PMC) known as the Wagner Group threatens the future of the EU's military cooperation with this country. The Wagner Group's engagement in Mali would be another major intervention by the PMC on the continent. The deployment of these informal Russian forces will not resolve the jihadist threat, but would help Russia present itself as an alternative to the West in Africa.

Wagner Group mercenaries are instrumental in assisting Russia's military-political expansion into Africa. They have been present or are still in [Libya](#), [Sudan](#), [Central African Republic \(CAR\)](#), and Mozambique. The African interventions came after the experience in Syria of assisting the Russia-allied and embattled government, which, thanks to the Russians' help regained the military initiative and territory. These interventions have, in turn, allowed Russia to build up dependencies and win far-reaching concessions for Wagner-related companies or for Russia itself. The formally private nature of the formation headed by Dimitriy Utkin, a former GRU officer, makes it possible for Russia to deny it controls the group and avoid criticism of its actions, including accusations the mercenaries terrorised civilians in the CAR. Russia also benefits from the group's financial independence. It is self-financed by funds from the governments that contract it, along with the patronage of the [oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), who is close to Russian President Vladimir Putin, along with additional profits made on the ground, especially by exploiting resources. Interestingly, Russia's state actions uncannily parallel Wagner operations. In the case of Mali, the [expected finalisation of the contract with the mercenaries](#) was accompanied by the delivery of weapons under a government-to-government military agreement.

Front-Line Support in Exchange for Resources. In Syria, the Wagner Group was promised 25% of the profits from the exploitation of gas and oil fields they recovered and protected from ISIS or the opponents of the Assad regime. In the CAR, companies associated with Prigozhin obtained from the

government and some opposition factions the rights to diamond and gold mines. The scale and details of the practice have not been disclosed, and in 2018, people with ties to Wagner were involved in the murder of three journalists from Russian opposition media who tried to investigate it in the CAR. The Russian-backed peace process in the country, which ended with the Khartoum agreement (2019), was based on the allocation of resources in individual provinces between the militias present there, the central government, and the Wagner Group. In Sudan, Wagner Group used its shell companies, structured identically as those in the CAR, to enter gold mining, dominated by enterprises linked to the pro-government, paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). They enjoyed a privileged position both during the rule of Omar al-Bashir and [after his overthrow in 2019](#). In Libya, in June 2020, Wagner personnel took over control of the country's largest oil field, *Sharara*. Later, they carried out fortifications of roads leading from this area to the port in Sirte to ensure the future continuity of exports through areas controlled by the forces of Gen. Khalifa Haftar, which they supported. The group's mission in the Cabo Delgado province in Mozambique took place in an area rich in natural resources, including ruby mines, and near gas fields in which the Russia state was interested.

Against this background, Mali seems to be an exception, as the most important areas affected by extremist activity lack proven, quick-profit-generating natural resources. Only gold mining in the Kayes region near the border with Senegal offers such prospects. Mali is nominally the third-largest producer on the continent (after Ghana and South Africa), and gold accounts for

75% of its export profits. However, the mining sector is fragmented, which would force Wagner to search for a place of their own in a market dominated by private, international players.

Consolidating Power Against “Colourful Revolutions”. The presence of Wagner contractors is often part of an agreement to protect the government from internal threats and includes propaganda support. The Russians share their experience from the post-Soviet area. In Sudan, Russian mercenaries assisted the suppression of [protests against the government of Omar al-Bashir](#), and their related entities advised his government, and later the Transitional Military Council (April-August 2019), on how to discredit the opposition, for example, by characterising them as anti-Islamic or pro-LGBT+. In Mozambique, the Wagner Group won a contract in the pre-election period. Simultaneously with its deployment on the front, Prigozhin associates conducted online activities in support of the re-election of President Filipe Nyusi, including presenting false polls aimed at demobilising the opposition. In CAR, Wagner forces helped to protect President Faustin-Archange Touadéra by repelling a militant offensive against the capital at the turn of 2020 and 2021.

In Mali, Russia is betting that the [junta of Assimi Goïta](#) will maintain control, and therefore, it is interested in supporting allied groups as the elections scheduled for 2022 approach. They may turn to the existing pro-Russia factions such as the anti-French street movement “Yerewolo” to fight opposition critical of the military junta, or to persuade junior officers to remove “non-patriotic” forces from the army.

Fighting Jihadists as an Export Commodity. The Russians are trying to specialise in fighting jihadists directly, like in Syria. Their offers of support include equipment, advisers, and mercenaries and have been made to, among others, Nigeria, Niger, and Burkina Faso where armed Islamists are active. However, [Wagner’s first major operation of this kind in Africa](#) was launched in Mozambique in September 2019 and was a failure. The Russian mercenaries overestimated their capabilities, could not withstand the harsh climatic conditions, and were unable to communicate and coordinate movements with government forces. Drones, the primary tool used by the Wagner forces, were of no use in the dense forests where they were supposed to pursue the Islamists. At least seven mercenaries were killed in ambushes and they withdrew after about two months of ineffective actions.

The attempt to move into Mali with about 1,000 personnel is intended to restore their—and Russia’s—credibility in this area.

It will most likely require the involvement of PMC contractors with experience in Syria, where the territory is similar to that of Mali. The insinuations by Maxim Shugaley, a former Russian informal political envoy to Libya and others, that the French in Mali collaborated with ISIS, or Malian Prime Minister Choguel Maïga’s accusation in an interview in Russian for *Ria Novosti* that the French created a safe space in the north for the Al-Qaida-linked Ansar Dine group, create the impression that with an honest approach it will be easy to win against the Islamists. However, such a belief will be stripped bare when the Russians actually enter the area. If, as announced, the French forces withdraw, followed by the Germans (UN MINUSMA mission) and Estonians (European *Takuba* mission), the space for the extremists to operate will increase, which will make the Russian operation more difficult. Also, Tuareg and Arab autonomists from the north of the country have declared their intention to fight the Russians.

Prospects for the EU and the UN. To prevent the arrival of the Wagner mercenaries, France, the U.S., and the EU will need to threaten Mali with cutting off their support programmes. However, there is no guarantee that this measure will be effective, as rejecting such “blackmail” would increase the popularity of the Malian military, especially in the face of growing anti-Western sentiment. The subsequent withdrawal of French forces from Mali will hinder the operations of the *Takuba* European special forces mission composed of troops from France and several EU countries, including Czechia, Estonia, Sweden, and Italy, whose goal is to support the Malian forces. The scope of the *Takuba* mission could be narrowed to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso. With the extremists moving freely between the three countries, it will undermine the mission’s ability and core objectives. All that in turn may give Russia some pretext to present the next scenes of the crisis in Mali as a result of the mistakes of France and the EU, and to mask the controversy surrounding its and Wagner’s actions, particularly any violence against civilians.

While the UN working group on mercenaries has harshly criticized Wagner contractors for incidents in which civilians were killed (in CAR, Libya), the UN Military Mission in the CAR, at the working level, cooperates with the group as a force capable of counteracting the collapse of the state. In Mali, Russia will strive to develop a similarly close relationship with MINUSMA to break the ostracism of its mercenaries. EU countries should counteract this in talks with the mission’s leadership and representatives of contributing countries.