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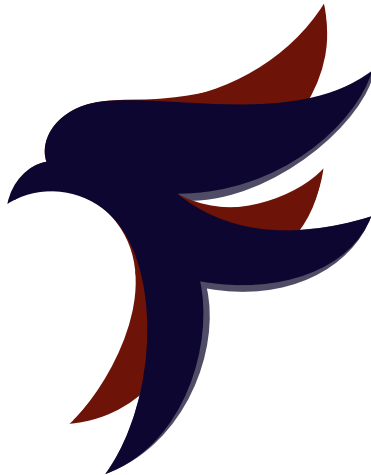
EURASIA PROGRAM



Raphael Parens

The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa:

MALI



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THE WAGNER GROUP'S PLAYBOOK IN AFRICA: MALI

Raphael Parens

INTRODUCTION

What is the Wagner Group doing in Mali? Since it rose to prominence after its involvement in the Syrian Civil War alongside the Assad regime, Wagner Group, a Russian-owned Private Military Contractor (PMC), has expanded its footprint into Africa.¹ Wagner has immersed itself in Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Central African Republic (CAR), and Sudan, leading training exercises, fighting anti-government forces, and brutally quelling protests. Wagner Group often overlaps with Russian state foreign policy aims, but its position as an independent contractor lends it unpredictability, while giving Russia plausible deniability. The group offers the Russian state a valuable tool: the ability to test new environments for military cooperation without appearing heavy-handed or overtly involved.

Wagner has established a pattern of political, military, and economic involvement in Sudan and CAR since 2015. Wagner Group and its founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, have followed this strategy successfully in Mali, contributing to France's recent decision to withdraw its military forces from the country. Although Wagner group still needs to adapt its strategy to succeed in a new environment in Mali, the Kremlin has strong-armed a key competitor out of the country. This creates potential contagion effects for the rest of the Sahel, particularly those countries facing long-term insurgencies, such as Burkina Faso.



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¹ Wagner Group remains the most involved in Africa, but other PMCs may complement or compete with them.

WAGNER GROUP'S AFRICA PLAYBOOK

Wagner Group has pursued the same playbook Mali that it previously executed in Sudan and CAR, demonstrating a strategic outlook and approach designed specifically for African states.² This strategy is based on Wagner's response to African governments' requests for security assistance, particularly when African leaders feel that Western states have not done enough to help them via security cooperation, military sales, or through anti-terrorism operations.

Wagner's strategy involves a three-tiered approach. First, it conducts disinformation and pro-government information warfare strategies, including fake polls and counter-demonstration techniques. Second, Wagner secures payment for its services through concessions in extractive industries, particularly precious metal mining operations. Wagner uses a variety of organizations and companies to oversee these extraction projects. Third, Wagner becomes involved with the country's military, launching a relationship directly with Russia's military, usually through training, advising, personal security, and anti-insurgency operations. Throughout the process, the Russian foreign policy establishment's involvement is clear, particularly as the beneficiary of military-to-military relationships with a new potential client state.

As many as 80 percent of Sudan's weapon's have come from Russia since 2003.

Wagner Group deployed fake news and disinformation actions in 2019 Sudan, followed by similar operations in CAR. In Sudan, Wagner attempted to keep President Omar al-Bashir in power, was aimed at protestors against his regime. Protesters were smeared as anti-Islamic, pro-Israel, and pro-LGBT in the news and videos, borrowing tactics from similar operations in Russia. Demonstrating Russian involvement, one leaked memo even included the accidental switch of the word "Sudan" with "Russia."³

² Other Russian-owned PMC groups may be involved in a limited capacity. Individual PMC behavior is difficult to differentiate without identifying individuals, a hard task in remote locations where these groups often appear.

³ Luke Harding and Jason Burke, "Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa?CMP=share_btn_tw.

Wagner's involvement in Africa includes a state military-to-military component, establishing or rebuilding Russian military sales, training programs, and/or agreements with involved states, including CAR, Mali, and Sudan. In Sudan, Russia's relationship with the Sudanese military has flourished, as 80% of Sudan's weapons have come from Russia since 2003.⁴ Yet, the relationship advanced once Wagner Group became involved. Wagner contractors were officially deployed to guard Sudanese gold mines, but their involvement acted as a kick-starter for Russia's project to establish naval facilities at Port Sudan.⁵ According to expert Samuel Ramani, this operation was intended to help Russia "transit from a transactional relationship with Sudan based on arms sales to a more comprehensive security partnership."⁶ Given the recent coup in Sudan, the port facilities agreement remains tentative, as Sudanese security officials reexamine the deal established with Russia.⁷

In CAR, between 170 and 670 "civilian advisors" believed to be Wagner contractors arrived between March and July 2018, some along the border with Sudan. These and other Wagner contractors have trained both CAR government forces and pro-government militias.⁸

Wagner provides escort protection to senior officials, including President Touadéra.⁹

In related shipping operations, open-source investigators have found Ural 4230 transportation vehicles both in Sudan and CAR, corresponding to sales made to Lobaye Invest and Meroe Gold, two organizations tightly linked with Wagner Group.¹⁰ The CAR example becomes more confusing, though, due to Russia's involvement on both sides of the country's internal conflict, as Russia arms both the government and the insurgent Selaka alliance. The latter threatens oil deposits owned by Chinese firms, creating tensions between Russia and China and potentially each state's PMCs.¹¹ On the whole, though, Wagner's involvement in CAR is aimed at supporting Russian political-military interests, including a willingness to butt heads with China.

Wagner Group and Russian PMC activity in Africa generally involve payment through mining concessions, operated by companies such as Lobaye Invest, M Invest/Meroe Gold,

4 As of December 2020.

5 Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Port Sudan Naval Base: A Power Play on the Red Sea," RUSI, December 7, 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-port-sudan-naval-base-power-play-red-sea>

6 Ramani, "Russia's Port Sudan Naval Base: A Power Play on the Red Sea," 2020.

7 Samy Magdy and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Sudan general: Military to review navy base deal with Russia," AP News, June 2, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-middle-east-africa-sudan-ea6d67264535d5caa01b21ef01a04b47>.

8 Neil Hauer, "Russia's Favorite Mercenaries," The Atlantic, August 27, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/russian-mercenaries-wagner-africa/568435/>.

9 Thompson, "The Wagner Group has its Eyes on Mali: A New Front in Russia's Irregular Strategy," 2021.

10 Jack Margolin, "Paper Trails: How a Russia-Based Logistics Network Ties Together Russian Mining Companies and Military Contractors in Africa," C4ADS, <https://c4ads.org/blogposts/2019/6/13/paper-trails>.

11 Samuel Ramani, "Engaged Opportunism: Russia's Role in the Horn of Africa," FPRI, July 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/engaged-opportunism-russias-role-in-the-horn-of-africa.pdf>.

Wagner Group and Russian PMC activity in Africa generally involve payment through mining concessions.



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and their affiliates. In CAR, Lobaye Invest manages “activities ranging from mining to beauty pageants and the screening of Russian movies.” Three journalists were killed before an attempt to film Wagner contractors at Lobaye Invest-operated gold mines in July 2020.¹² Lobaye gained the gold and diamond mining concessions due to the PMC contract with Touadéra’s government, using PMC contractors as mine guards. Further, Touadéra employs Valery Zakharov as national security advisor, a Russian national with Russian military intelligence ties and Prigozhin financial links.¹³

In Sudan, M Invest and Meroe Gold conduct mining operations, which were agreed upon at talks which Putin, Foreign Minister Medvedev, Defense Minister Shoygu, and former President al-Bashir attended.¹⁴

Another Prigozhin company operated as the event’s catering service.¹⁵ PMCs guarding Meroe Gold’s mining operations also attacked local protestors.¹⁶

¹² Margolin, “Paper Trails.”

¹³ Thompson, “The Wagner Group has its Eyes on Mali: A New Front in Russia’s Irregular Strategy,” 2021.

¹⁴ “Treasury Targets Financier’s Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, July 15, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1058>; Margolin, “Paper Trails.”

¹⁵ Anastasia Yakoreva, “Putin’s Cook” Set Out to Mine Gold in Africa,” The Bell, June 5, 2018, <https://thebell.io/en/putin-s-cook-set-out-to-mine-gold-in-africa/>.

¹⁶ Margolin, “Paper Trails.”

WAGNER'S ARRIVAL IN MALI

Mali, a former French colony in the western Sahel, is Wagner's most recent expansion target. Mali sits on the fault line between North and West Africa, with religious and political divisions fueling a decade-long conflict. Mali's central government has fought a long-term insurgency by a variety of fundamentalist Islamist insurgent groups, including an Al Qaida branch (AQIM) and Ansar Dine. In 2012, France intervened to support the government against these insurgencies, in Operation Serval and subsequently Operation Barkhane. France also cooperated with other UN member states in conducting United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), under UN Resolution 2391.¹⁷ However, these operations have not succeeded in quelling Mali's insurgencies. In 2021, Wagner Group became involved in Mali as France began withdrawing its forces from the Sahel. If Russia successfully replaces France as the principle security partner in Mali, this could be the first shift in a West African cascade toward Russia.

In Mali, Wagner has deployed its African playbook once again. Prigozhin associate Maxim Shugaley conducted another disinformation operation, releasing a public opinion poll "purporting to show 87 percent support among Malians for the government's outreach to Wagner" by the Foundation




Visit of Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations and MINUSMA head El-Ghassim Wane, December 2021. MIMUSMA/HARANDANE DIKO

for National Values Protection (FZNC). This organization is sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for disinformation activities. The operation, along with an interview by another Prigozhin associate, Alexandre Ivanov, to Malian media, demonstrate Wagner Group's involvement in a bid to enhance its own reputation in Mali.¹⁸

¹⁷ "France's Action in the Sahel," Ministère de L'Europe et des Affaires Etrangères, Government of France, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/terrorism-france-s-international-action/article/france-s-action-in-the-sahel>.

¹⁸ Jared Thompson, "The Wagner Group has its Eyes on Mali: A New Front in Russia's Irregular Strategy," Modern Warfare Institute, October 14, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/the-wagner-group-has-its-eyes-on-mali-a-new-front-in-russias-irregular-strategy/>.

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The military-to-military relationship between Mali and Russia is nascent but reflects the recent introduction of Wagner to the country. Around September 2020, Mali's transitional government agreed to accept 1000 Wagner group contractors “to conduct training, close protection, and counterterrorism operations.” In 2019, Mali's then-government agreed to receive four Russian attack helicopters, MI-171s with weapons and ammunition, which were allegedly delivered as a “donation” on January 9, 2021, as part of a Mali-Russia military cooperation convention.¹⁹ Given the chronological proximity of these two actions, Wagner appears intimately involved in the growing military-to-military relationship between Mali and Russia.

¹⁹ John Irish and David Lewis, “Deal Allowing Russian Mercenaries into Mali is Close – Sources,” Reuters, September 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-deal-allowing-russian-mercenaries-into-mali-is-close-sources-2021-09-13/>. The exact date is not public. Andrew Lebovitch, “Russia, Wagner Group, and Mali: How European Fears Weaken European Policy,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2, 2021 <https://ecfr.eu/article/russia-wagner-group-and-mali-how-european-fears-weaken-european-policy/>. This agreement entered into force in June 2021. “La Russie Fournit des Armes et des Hélicoptères au Mali,” October 1, 2021, Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/la-russie-fournit-des-armes-et-des-h%C3%A9licopt%C3%A8res-au-mali/2380211>

OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES IN MALI

Although Wagner Group has pursued a similar strategy to that exercised in Sudan and CAR, Mali has presented a unique challenge to the group. Mining investment exchanges are more difficult to obtain and less profitable in Mali, the Western response to Russian actions in Mali appears stronger, and until 2022, France appeared to maintain deeper ties to Mali than it had with Sudan or CAR.

Mining and other investment infrastructure, one of the key financing tools for Russian PMCs in Africa, are limited in Mali and are governed by strict control at the government and tribal levels. Western diplomats in Mali have noted that “the mines Wagner emissaries inspected proved insufficient to pay for the group’s services, a reminder of the economic motive behind some Russian power projection as well as its limits.”²⁰ Mali’s mineral resources are harder to exploit than those in Sudan or CAR. Government regulations are much stricter than in CAR and are not easily outmaneuvered by private companies. Artisanal mines, particularly those in northern Mali, are controlled by armed groups, such as the Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad, who have disapproved of Wagner Group’s arrival.²¹ In CAR and Sudan, Wagner relied on mining

agreements to secure payment for its military operations. In Mali, the company lacked a clear funding stream and faced Western sanctions, too.

Western responses to PMC deployments in Mali have been noticeably tougher than in CAR or Sudan.

The U.S. State Department condemned Mali’s \$10 million monthly fee deal with Wagner Group, followed by France, Germany, and the EU.²² The EU then enforced sanctions, asset freezes and travel bans, against Wagner Group on December

²⁰ Lebovitch, “Russia, Wagner Group, and Mali,” 2021.

²¹ Particularly as it might be targeted by Wagner under Malian government orders. Lebovitch, “Russia, Wagner Group, and Mali,” 2021.

²² “US and Brussels sanctions on Moscow’s mercenaries will be tested in Africa,” Africa Confidential, December 17th 2021, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/13724/US_and_Brussels_sanctions_on_Moscow%27s_mercenaries_will_be_tested_in_Africa. Lebovitch, “Russia, Wagner Group, and Mali,” 2021.



MAX POWER/ADOBE STOCK

13, 2021, due to human rights violations in Libya, Syria, Ukraine (Donbas), and CAR. The EU accused Wagner Group of “malign influence, elsewhere, notably in the Sahel region.”²³ The EU also adopted a sanctions regime related to Mali on the same day, leaving out any individual names.²⁴

Until February 2020, most analysts believed that France maintained stronger ties with Mali, similar to its relationship with other West and North African states, than it did with CAR, where Wagner had made inroads. France’s long-term involvement in Mali with Operations Serval, Operation Barkhane, and the Takuba taskforce along with the Malian UN mission, far outweighed its involvement in CAR’s own UN mission, for example. In Mali, France deployed between 3,000 and 5,100 troops, while only 100 to 260 French

23 “EU Imposes Restrictive Measures Against the Wagner Group,” Council of the EU, December 13, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/13/eu-imposes-restrictive-measures-against-the-wagner-group/>.

24 Robin Emmott, EU Hits Russian Mercenary Group Wagner with Sanctions, Reuters, December 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-hits-russian-mercenary-group-wagner-with-sanctions-2021-12-13/>



troops support various missions in CAR.²⁵ As of January 2022, France had suffered dozens of casualties in Mali, far higher than any other French conflict on the continent.²⁶ Yet France has now begun a withdrawal of its forces that will change the power dynamic in Mali—and perhaps the rest of the Sahel.

Wagner's path forward in Mali is not clear cut, however, given that the group must now face a potential shift of resources to Ukraine. Wagner Group forces allegedly already moved from CAR to Western Russia before the invasion of Ukraine began.²⁷ Other sources have suggested that Wagner troops from Libya have returned to Russia to participate in the invasion, too. They were allegedly assigned high profile assassination assignments in Ukraine, including Ukrainian President Zelensky.²⁸ Given the heavy casualties endured by Russian forces, the Kremlin may reassign more Wagner forces to Ukraine. Moreover, the sanctions imposed on Russia significantly impact Russia's ability to access funds and equipment, which may impact Wagner's infrastructure, finance, and resupply capabilities in Africa.

Given the heavy casualties endured by Russian forces, the Kremlin may reassign more Wagner forces to Ukraine.

25 Anne-Fleur Lespiaut, "French Forces Begin Northern Mali Drawdown: 'The Idea is Not to Create a Vacuum,'" France24, October 14, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20211014-french-forces-begin-northern-mali-drawdown-the-idea-is-not-to-create-a-vacuum>; Angela Charlton, "France freezes military ties with Central African Republic," AP News, June 8, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/central-african-republic-africa-central-africa-europe-france-e00cbffd3052c79e003eac997a62f5ca>.

26 "French Soldier Killed in Attack on Military Camp in Northern Mali," France24, January 23, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220123-french-soldier-killed-in-mortar-attack-on-military-camp-in-gao-mali>.

27 Phillip Obaji Jr., "Notorious Russian Mercenaries Pulled Out of Africa Ready for Ukraine," The Daily Beast, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/wagner-group-mercenaries-pull-out-of-africa-ready-for-ukraine>.

28 Borzou Daragahi, *The Independent*, Guns for Hire: How Shadowy Wagner Group Mercenaries Support Russian Soldiers in Ukraine Conflict, March 5, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-wagner-group-mercenaries-soldiers-b2028799.html>.

HOW WAGNER CAN ADAPT FOR SUCCESS IN MALI

Wagner Group and other Russian PMCs have developed an effective model in CAR and Sudan, coupling fake news and disinformation campaigns, military aid, and payment through mining and extractive industries. This approach has increased Russia's footprint in both countries and can be utilized as the Kremlin sees fit for Russia's African strategies.

Wagner can continue to build the military-to-military relationship between Mali and Russia through its most recent deployment in the country. As of January 20, 2022, U.S. AFRICOM Commander General Stephen Townsend stated that Wagner Group has deployed several hundred troops to Mali from Russian aircraft and with Russian support.²⁹ In 2022, these forces have reportedly engaged with jihadi forces, suffered casualties, and deployed to several cities in central Mali, likely under a continued anti-jihadi mission.³⁰ If Wagner wishes to build a lasting presence in Mali, it will conduct training and high-profile security missions as it has in CAR and Sudan. To ensure its economic concessions, the group may need a neutrality agreement with Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad and various Tuareg groups. Further, given the continued Western military and international aid presence, Wagner needs to deploy a large amount of troops and make a significant financial investment in

Mali to contest its competitors. This raises the potential for escalation or conflict with French, UN, or related organizations, but this is the cost in Mali.

Wagner can damage Western security interests and public profile in Mali using tactics it developed in CAR.

Wagner can damage Western security interests and public profile in Mali using tactics it developed in CAR. By associating and working alongside with UN missions in military or support operations, Wagner could damage the credibility of these missions, as occurred in CAR. On the other hand, UN Mali and Takuba taskforce leadership may have learned lessons from CAR, and they may enforce stricter anti-Wagner procedures among UN and taskforce personnel.

29 Carla Babb, VOA News, January 20, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-exclusive-us-africom-commander-says-russian-mercenaries-in-mali/6406371.html>

30 Jared Thompson et al., Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali, CSIS, February 2, 2022, www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali.

Wagner's biggest challenge in Mali, though, may be funding. Sanctions remain a roadblock for the organization, limiting potential routes for investment. To secure mining concessions, Wagner must come to an agreement with state and non-state interests that control mines in Mali. The former will likely involve extensive litigation and significant payoffs in the judicial system.

The latter could include an alliance or neutrality pact in exchange for concessions, as discussed. Failing this, Wagner Group may turn to the Russian state for direct funding. The Kremlin will then need to determine how much it values a military relationship with Mali—and what price it places on the opportunity to challenge French interests in the region.



PAUL LORGERIE/REUTERS

BURKINA FASO AND BEYOND


The Wagner Group successfully strong-armed a large-scale French military mission out of Mali. This victory will have long-term effects on the rest of the Sahel, particularly in states suffering from coups or insurgencies. France now appears uninterested in combatting Islamist and other insurgencies in Africa, while Russia and the Wagner Group are willing to get involved.



PAUL-HENRI SANDAOGO DAMIBA/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

This development has already had ramifications in Burkina Faso, where coup leader Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba twice attempted to persuade President Roch Kabore to employ Wagner Group forces to fight against the country's insurgency. Shortly thereafter, Damiba led the coup to overthrow Kabore, after his last meeting failed to convince Kabore to employ Wagner.³¹ With Damiba in power, it seems plausible that Wagner and the Kremlin may intervene in Burkina Faso as well.

Wagner may have already begun a media and disinformation campaign in Burkina Faso. A protest held the day after the coup featured widespread pro-Russian comments and Russia flags. Declan Walsh points out that the origin of the Russian flags is unknown, particularly at such short notice after the coup.³²

Wagner's next steps could include resource exploitation and PMC deployment to support the military relationship with Russia, though no evidence of this has yet occurred. Wagner Group's appeal in the Sahel can be summed up by a water seller supporting the coup government protests in Burkina Faso: "We support the Russians. Our families are dying, and unemployment is rising, yet France hasn't helped much. At least we can try something new."³³ 

31 Phillip Obaji Jr., "African President Was Ousted Just Weeks After Refusing to Pay Russian Paramilitaries," Daily Beast, January 15, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/burkina-faso-president-ousted-after-refusing-to-pay-wagner-mercenaries>.

32 Declan Walsh, "After Coup in Burkina Faso, Protesters Turn to Russia for Help," New York Times, January 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/africa/burkina-faso-coup-russians.html>.

33 Walsh, "After Coup in Burkina Faso, Protesters Turn to Russia for Help," 2022.

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