



THE DOSSIER

The Wagner Group: A Model for Future Russian Foreign Policy in Africa

By Riley Moeder



A Russian flag rests on a statue commemorating Russian mercenaries as demonstrators show support of Russian and Chinese presence in the Central African Republic on March 22, 2023. After the withdrawal of French troops, Moscow sent military instructors in 2018, followed by Wagner mercenaries in 2020. (Barbara Debout / AFP via Getty Images)

Executive Summary

Russian private military company the Wagner Group has been active in more than 20 countries across the Middle East and Africa since as early as 2010, engaging in counterterrorism missions and providing security assistance. However, once in a country, Wagner has been known to exploit natural resources and commit human rights abuses and mass atrocities. Reports from news outlets, Russian media, and open-source

intelligence indicate that after a small number of Wagner fighters were pulled from Libya and the Central African Republic to fight in Ukraine – and after taking severe losses in Ukraine – Wagner is refocusing on Africa. The group's goal is to recoup its financial and personnel losses.

However, Wagner's future came into question in June 2023 when the group's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, attempted a coup against Russia's military leadership and is now presumed dead.



A redistribution of Wagner's authority to both Russian military and political elites is likely. However, this does not necessarily mean there will be a consolidation in organizational structure; rather, there could be a decrease in oversight of Wagner contractors, and thus greater chances of increased human rights abuses and exploitation across Africa in the name of profit and expansion of Russian foreign policy.

Key Takeaways

- The Wagner Group sustained significant financial and personnel losses during the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine. The group refocused on Africa to recoup these losses. This may result in increased human rights violations and exploitation, as there will be a greater profit motive and less oversight of Wagner activities than before.
- Wagner has created a cyclical market of counterterrorism and security services. The group enters a country, often on contract with a host government, to provide security support, then often commits human rights abuses. This creates resentment among the locals, who then act out against the host government, thus reaffirming the need for Wagner security support.
- The aftermath of Wagner's mutiny probably will involve a reorganization of the group's leadership. This reorganization will likely occur based on Wagner's established shell companies that exploit natural resources and funnel money to Wagner and Russian oligarchs. These companies, which serve

to circumvent sanctions, will probably be given to Russian elites residing in Europe.

Policy Recommendations

- The United States and its international partners should consider writing new legislation modeled after the 1970 American Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act to increase punitive measures for those participating in Wagner's financial arm. This would stymie any financial gain for Wagner's affiliates in Africa, thus disincentivizing their presence there.
- The U.S. and international community should help strengthen African countries employing Wagner to remove the need for its employment. This should be done at the local, national, and international levels to ensure that all groups affected by Wagner are included in capacity-building measures.
- Capacity building should include investments in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to build economic resilience against food shortages and climate-related events and ultimately build financial independence so these countries can move away from Russian influence.
- The United States and Europe should strengthen the African Union's security sector to ensure it is adequately equipped to handle counterterrorism and rebellions as a collective, thus removing the need for countries to employ Wagner and reducing the destabilizing effect of foreign government interference.



THE DOSSIER

The Wagner Group: A Model for Future Russian Foreign Policy in Africa

By Riley Moeder





Table of Contents

Executive Summary Front Page
 Key Takeaways
 Policy Recommendations

Introduction 3

Wagner’s Origins 3

The Invisible Arm of Russian Foreign Policy 4

Wagner’s Breakdown in Authority 5

Wagner’s Business Model and the Threats It Poses 5

The Consequences of Continual Exploitation in Africa 7
 Central African Republic 7
 Mali 8

Wagner’s Operations in Other Countries 9

Current U.S. Efforts 9

Policy Recommendations 10
 Financial Tools 10
 Strengthening Civil Society and Capacity Building 11

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute.

COVER PHOTO: Demonstrators carry banners and Russian flags in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, on March 22, 2023. Wagner paramilitary troops were sent by Russia in 2020 at the request of Bangui when the country faced a rebellion. (Barbara Debout / AFP via Getty Images)

The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.





Introduction

Conflict, civil wars, colonial meddling, and exploitation by private military companies (PMCs) have plagued the African continent for the past decade. The roles of PMCs in Africa vary from country to country, but their presence has resulted in increased democratic backsliding, violence against civilians, and increased proxy warfare.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, PMC Wagner has made headlines for its human rights abuses, swift violence, and ability to conduct irregular and hybrid war practices outside international norms. Though it didn't become well-known until 2022, Wagner has been active in as many as [18 countries](#) in Africa since as early as 2010. Its exploits have varied from rare earth mining to counterterrorism missions and government support services.

However, Wagner's future is in question. The group's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, led an attempted mutiny against Russia's military leadership in June 2023 and is now [presumed dead](#) after a plane crash outside Moscow in August 2023. This series of events will have long-lasting effects on Russian political dynamics involving the Wagner Group; however, any future actions will have little impact on the PMC's business in Africa. Most likely, the Russian state will divide Wagner's existing missions into multiple independent entities based on current arrangements with Wagner's various shell companies and distribute control of these entities among Russian military officers and political elites. Powerful Russians are already in control of some Wagner entities; distributing control of the other shell companies among the elite provides more assurance that the profit from the lucrative businesses still flows to the Russian leadership.

Any consolidation of Wagner's leadership will only give more operational control to the Russian government, which seeks to expand its influence in Africa. However, as the continent is vast and Wagner's operations are varied, it is unlikely that any transfer of Wagner's authority to Russian elites or the Ministry of Defense would greatly increase organizational oversight. A key component of the Russia-Wagner relationship is



Image from an Aug. 21, 2023, online video shows Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin speaking for the first time since his June rebellion against the Russian administration. The footage from an unspecified African location was shared on the Telegram channel "Wagner's evacuation." Prigozhin is now presumed dead following an Aug. 23 plane crash. (Wagner Telegram Account / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

plausible deniability for the Kremlin, which, with any shift in power, Putin will likely want to maintain.

The fracturing of Wagner – which likely will be in name only – could lead to less oversight of the group's activities and organizational structure. In turn, this is likely to increase illicit activities in Africa, resulting in more human rights violations and more robust crime networks in the U.S. and Europe. The potential for greater numbers of human rights violations and political disruption could, in turn, increase political and extremist violence in African countries where Wagner has a presence.

Wagner's Origins

Though Russian PMC affiliates such as Wagner have become prolific in their activities and areas of operation, their origins are relatively humble. [The U.S. National Security Council](#) reports Wagner's numbers at around 50,000, with most members being [Russian convicts](#). Wagner first appeared in the Western media – and as a foreign policy tool for Russia – in



“ With minimal sustainable investment from the United States and inconsistent investment from the European Union, these countries have turned to Russia and Wagner to fill security gaps. ”

2014, when unnamed rebel groups began operating in Ukraine after the [invasion of Crimea](#). Prigozhin, former private chef to Putin, created Wagner in 2010. It has since served as a war machine for the Kremlin, often engaging in Russian proxy wars in Eastern Europe. However, Russian PMCs are said to have [been active in Africa since 2010](#) under a different name: Moran Security Group. Currently, mercenary groups are illegal in Russia, but the Russian government disregards PMCs such as Wagner when they contribute financially to the state and are aligned with Russian interests.

Wagner is defined as a group of entities that act as PMCs; however, Wagner’s exploits are not limited to military operations. Wagner has engaged in activities ranging from rare earth mining to money laundering and counterterrorism support services. Wagner has operated in Eastern Europe and has [supported the Russian army in Syria](#). It unofficially supports the Assad regime – avoiding any direct connection with Russia – and occasionally [clashes with U.S. forces](#).

Though Wagner gained more widespread attention in Syria, it has been far more active in Africa. Many countries in Africa are plagued with terrorism, political insecurity, and humanitarian crises. With minimal sustainable investment from the United States and inconsistent investment from the European Union, these countries have turned to Russia and Wagner to fill security gaps. Though many countries recognize that this is not an ideal solution, they feel that there is no other option and often offer Wagner lucrative compensation packages and mining rights to secure the deal.

Iterations of Wagner fill various roles, such as personal protection of local elites and government officials and security for resource extraction, including

[rare earth minerals, gold, and diamonds](#). Wagner’s other activities include training indigenous forces and serving as a force multiplier for indigenous militias, as with counterterrorism operations in [Mali](#) and [Madagascar](#).

The Invisible Arm of Russian Foreign Policy

Since its inception, Wagner has been a discreet form of proxy Russian foreign policy, operating under the protection of a legal gray area; PMCs are not explicitly defined in any international or humanitarian law, making it difficult to regulate their activities. Wagner [originally contracted operations](#) to Dmitry Utkin, a former Russian intelligence officer, to build its operational military strategies to further Russian foreign policy in Africa.

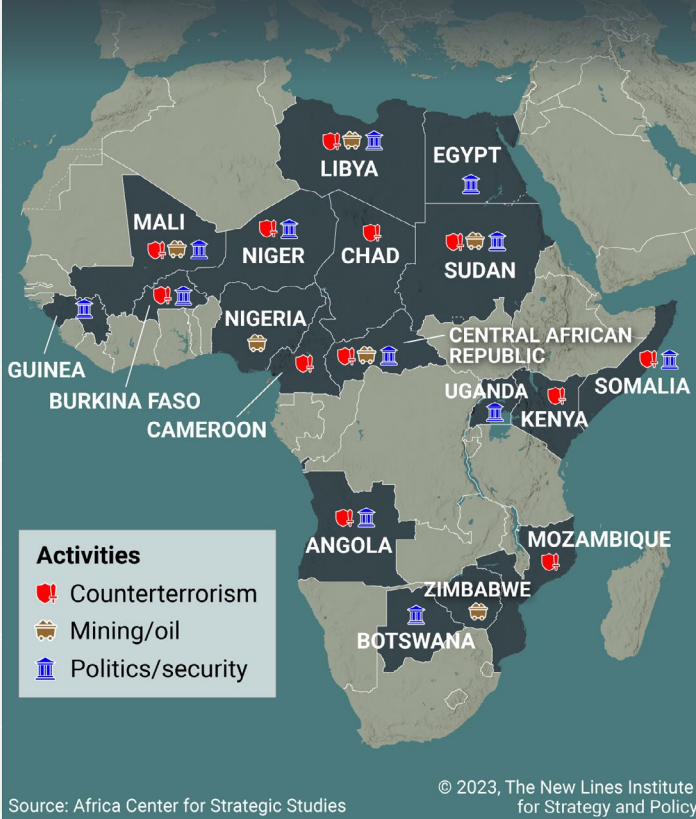
Africa is strategically important to both Russia and Wagner. They rely on exploited resources to fund proxy warfare and on Russian influence with African nations – dating from the decolonization process, when Russia supported these countries – to support [Russian foreign policy](#). Specifically, Russia relies on African countries to vote in its favor on key U.N. resolutions and to expand its foreign policy in the region by allowing Moscow to engage in all aspects of society, from education reform to diplomacy.

Wagner brings in the equipment and manpower to alleviate security concerns with the understanding that Wagner affiliates will benefit from lucrative mining deals and large [compensation packages](#). For example, in June 2023, the Wagner Group reaffirmed its relationship with the Central African Republic (CAR) by signing a military support deal with Russia



Wagner Interests in Africa

As of July 2023



the attempt [to take Moscow](#) was called off, and Prigozhin was exiled to Belarus. Though the origins and motivations behind this attempted mutiny are disputed, the attempted march on Moscow represents a fundamental breakdown in Russian authority. This was not the first instance of a rupture between the Kremlin and Wagner leadership. Prior to the June revolt, Prigozhin was engaged in several high-stakes feuds over the losses Wagner sustained in Ukraine and outwardly accused the Russian government of not providing Wagner with sufficient supplies to combat the Ukrainian forces. Prigozhin even [threatened to remove his troops](#) from strategic towns in Ukraine.

The break between Prigozhin and the Russian government will have ramifications for the future of the Wagner Group. The Russian government will likely disband Wagner, as the group is currently not acting in Moscow's interest. Then, the Russian government is likely to hand Wagner shell companies to Russian elites who will operate them as they see fit to maximize profit. Meanwhile, a decentralized organizational structure for Wagner could give the group (which will likely have been disbanded in name only) more latitude to harm civilians in the name of counterterrorism and carry out more human rights abuses and exploitation of resources.

Wagner's Business Model and the Threats It Poses

Wagner channels its funds through a complex network of [shell companies](#), many of whose funds are held in the United Arab Emirates. These shell companies are essential to Wagner's operational structure because they serve as [intermediaries](#) centered on business models of exploitation, extraction of natural resources, smuggling, and security operations. Through these shell companies, Wagner and Russian elites can circumvent Western sanctions. Wagner's shell companies also make the group more dangerous, as it values large profits over laws and respect for human rights.

The war in Ukraine had minimal impact on Wagner's operations in Africa, despite Wagner serving as a key component to the Russian offensive. In the early days of the Russian invasion, Wagner pulled troops from Libya and Syria and sent them to Ukraine;

to secure the constitutional referendum vote in July 2023. In response to this deal, [Russia sent Wagner troops to CAR](#). This deal maintains ties CAR has had with Wagner since 2018, when the mercenaries entered the country to provide the government support against an ongoing rebel conflict. This support, however, came with a steep cost, as CAR gave Wagner direct access to the [country's natural resources](#). The structure of Wagner allows for the successful mining and exploitation of resources in the African continent that are then run through a complex network of shell companies that funnels funds back to Wagner's leadership and ultimately to the Kremlin, often circumventing sanctions from the West.

Wagner's Breakdown in Authority

On June 23, 2023, Wagner's future was called into question when Prigozhin marched troops from Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine into southern Russian cities en route to Moscow. However,



Charting the Wagner Group's African Operations

Wagner's complex network of shell companies enables its array of activities, including rare earth mining, counterterrorism support services, money laundering, and private security contracting. These entities have strong ties to the Russian government and several other foreign governments, and their dispersed nature will make it exceedingly difficult for policymakers to target the group with sanctions.



Source: Insight Threat Intelligence (<https://newsletter.insightthreatintel.com/p/wagner-groups-web-of-companies>)

© 2023, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

however, the vast majority of Wagner troops in Africa [remained in Africa](#).

Despite the size of the Wagner contingent that went to Ukraine from Africa, in a video published on July 19, 2023, Prigozhin indicated that Wagner was headed back to Africa to recoup losses sustained in Ukraine.

Reports estimate that Wagner [lost up to 21,000 troops](#) in Ukraine, with millions of dollars lost in revenue. Wagner aims to make up for those losses through its shell companies – mainly mining and security firms.

Wagner's renewed emphasis on Africa will result in more resource extraction, increased security



operations, and a potential for more human rights abuses. The end goal for the PMC is financial gain, regardless of the human cost. A breakdown in Russia's authority over Wagner – as well as decentralization of Wagner's leadership – will decrease any oversight over the group, which could lead to greater human rights abuses by the group. Further, the breakdown caused by Prigozhin's attempted mutiny could increase money laundering and illicit crime networks in the U.S. and Europe as Wagner affiliates attempt to capitalize on resources from Africa.

[Wagner is not registered](#) as one entity but as an estimated 64 shell companies. These companies, which are notoriously hard to trace, have strong ties to [Russian and foreign governments](#). Wagner's refocus on Africa means the group will implement previously successful [business structures](#). Even if Wagner is restructured, these models will persist.

The United States and the European Union have labeled Wagner as a transnational criminal organization in recognition of its criminal enterprises – particularly the smuggling of gold, diamonds, other natural resources, and other goods. This designation allows the U.S. and EU to enact sanctions against these shell companies. In the past year, the United States, in particular, has put in place targeted sanctions against companies such as [Dimaville](#), a Wagner diamond mining company in the CAR, and [various gold mining companies](#), in addition to [sanctioning individuals](#) who have been associated with human rights abuses in Mali.

Since Wagner's shell companies often stay under the radar, many are unaffected by sanctions. When one shell company is sanctioned, Wagner opens another and funnels funds and resources through the new company. This model of revolving shell companies ensures the success of the Wagner crime syndicate and continues to threaten the U.S. and its European partners as these networks spill over into Western economies and threaten to increase organized crime, which can metastasize into security concerns. Creating new legislation to move away from sanctions and targeting individuals orchestrating these networks for prosecution would disincentivize Wagner's activities in Africa and thus reduce its exploitation of natural resources and subsequent human rights abuses.

The Consequences of Continual Exploitation in Africa

The Wagner Group adapts its tools to the unique geopolitical situation of each country that it enters, resulting in general destabilization in every instance of Wagner's involvement. For example, Wagner's involvement in Libya and Sudan requires different geopolitical tools for resource exploitation from the tools used elsewhere. In countries with active conflicts, Wagner supports whichever side will better suit its long-term, profit-centered goals and aid Russian foreign policy.

CAR and Mali are case studies showing the levels of engagement involving Wagner's most destructive elements. The human rights atrocities Wagner has carried out under the aegis of counterterrorism or security have created tensions that reaffirm the country's need for security, and thus Wagner entrenches itself and negotiates access and control over lucrative natural resources. If Wagner is split up, the decentralization of its leadership will lead to lax oversight, which could worsen conflicts in CAR and Mali.

Central African Republic

In return for its security services and training support for pro-government militias starting in 2018, Wagner received lucrative rights to CAR's diamond, gold, and timber extraction operations. This dynamic changed due to a coup attempt launched by the Coalition of Patriots for Change rebel forces from late 2020 to early 2021. Wagner played a decisive role in defending the capital city and keeping the president in power. Through this victory, Wagner cemented itself as an essential security asset to CAR's governing elites and began conducting counterterrorism missions. Wagner's success, however, came at a [heavy cost to civilians](#). Wagner's part in halting the coup and its subsequent role in the counterterrorism efforts served the CAR government, so the country's leaders gave [Wagner more operational autonomy](#). As a result, Wagner began to operate with extreme violence, clearing anti-government rebel groups and, in many cases, civilians from mining regions.

One example of such violence is [February 2021's Bambari massacre](#), where Wagner and CAR state



Wagner's Cycle of Abuse in the Central African Republic

From 2018 to the present day



Source: Author's research

© 2023, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

forces killed 17 people, including six civilians. Bambari is less than 40 miles south of the Ndassima gold mine, which the Wagner shell company [Midas Resources](#) has had preferential mining access to [since 2020](#). The Ndassima mine is vital to Wagner, as it finances [Wagner's activities](#) in the CAR. The Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) coalition was active in the region containing both Bambari and the Ndassima mine and thus was the focal point of the [counteroffensive](#) that Wagner and CAR state forces launched to combat the rebels after their failed coup. The Bambari massacre illustrates Wagner's willingness to commit human rights atrocities to maintain control of its mining

exploitations in CAR. As of February 2023, Wagner was [expanding operations at the Ndassima mine](#), increasing its operational capacity and thus revenue flows. This is expected to continue, demonstrating Wagner's renewed focus on Africa and increasing resource exploitation.

Mali

The government in Mali also has employed Wagner for security and counterterrorism reasons but has not maintained proper oversight, to the detriment of civilians. In the past two years, Mali has faced several



transitions. In 2021, current President Assimi Goïta led a coup to seize control of the country. Then, the French withdrew their counterterrorism mission, Operation Barkhane. Following that, the U.N. withdrew its peacekeeping mission due to increasing anti-Western rhetoric and actions by the Malian government that [decreased the effectiveness of Western counterterrorism support](#). The lack of consistency and proper security measures have led to exploitation by the Islamic State and al Qaeda affiliates. To combat this extremist threat, Goïta has continued to partner with the Wagner Group. Wagner mercenaries commonly operate alongside Malian state forces when [conducting violence against civilians](#).

One of the most extreme cases of violence against civilians in the name of counterterrorism in Mali was the March 2022 Moura massacre, in which Wagner and state forces killed an estimated [500 civilians](#), mainly women and children. This event has served as jihadist propaganda and a recruiting tool as civilians look to jihadist groups for community protection or, more likely, for an opportunity to [target Wagner and state forces for retribution](#).

This trend reflects the cycle of Wagner deployments exacerbating the insurgency the group was brought in to combat, which then – from the government’s perspective – necessitates a larger Wagner force, which leads to increased profits for Wagner.

Wagner’s Operations in Other Countries

As established through Mali and CAR, Wagner uses security and counterterrorism missions to exploit resources and practice unsolicited and unprovoked attacks on civilians. However, Wagner is also in the business of political destabilization to [increase Russian influence](#). A prime example is Wagner’s support for Gen. Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). Since 2018, the Wagner Group’s operations have helped the LNA retain control of key oil fields, oil facilities, and an oil-exporting port that Wagner uses for its profits. Wagner was found responsible for targeting and intentionally killing civilians who posed a threat to the group’s operations in order to secure and maximize profits. At a more systematic level are the atrocities perpetrated by the LNA with the support of Wagner’s arms and training.

Wagner also has engaged in [political meddling](#) in Libya, which has contributed to the stalling of the national reunification process and any future elections. The group’s goal of making up for its losses in Ukraine will likely cause Wagner to put more money and resources behind the LNA to preserve its oil holdings, which will lead to increased atrocities against civilians.

One of Wagner’s longest-term involvements is its gold mining operations in Sudan. These have remained relatively [unaffected by the 2023 Sudan war](#) and have increased Wagner’s operational capacity in the country. Sudan has served as a point of Russian foreign policy interest, and the gold coming out of the mines has served as a way to finance long-term infrastructure projects such as [a Russian naval base on the Red Sea](#). Though nothing has been built yet, this remains a key part of Russian foreign policy.

Wagner originally came to Sudan to support former [President Omar al-Bashir starting in 2017](#), but it used the 2023 war to back the Rapid Support Forces with weapons, troops, and tactile support. The rebels have used this support to prolong the conflict. The war in Sudan is [getting worse from a humanitarian perspective](#), with thousands of refugees fleeing to bordering states, minimal medical supplies and aid available, and increasing attacks on civilians and aid workers alike.

A reduction in Wagner’s oversight will give powerbrokers of the ongoing Libyan and Sudanese conflicts an increased ability to abuse human rights using the aid Wagner provides. Without policy steps that remove Wagner’s incentives for operating in Africa, African nations where Wagner is present will become, or remain, unstable.

Current U.S. Efforts

The malign influence and destabilization effect of Wagner directly threaten [U.S. national security interests](#). The Biden administration’s decision to declare Wagner a Transnational Criminal Organization in January 2023 allowed for expanded targeting of Wagner’s financial activities throughout multiple African countries, as well as Syria and Ukraine. Federal lawmakers have gone a step further, putting forth the HARM ([Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries](#)) Act



“ Instead of focusing on labels and sanctions, the United States and Europe should turn their attention to other means of weakening Wagner by combating the financial structure and working with host countries to disincentivize the use of Wagner contractors. ”

to change that designation to Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), asserting that Wagner’s human rights abuses meet the legal threshold for terrorism. An FTO designation would make it [unlawful](#) for anyone associated with the United States to be affiliated with Wagner contractors and, more importantly, would require the Department of the Treasury to seize the group’s financial assets. Another component of the federal legislation is the use of targeted sanctions packages against Wagner affiliates and governments that employ the mercenaries.

As Wagner operates mainly through shell companies, and with a potential restructuring coming, it is unlikely that any sanctions will be effective. Moreover, the fact that a previous version of the HARM Act stalled indefinitely during the 117th Congress and the act’s status in House and Senate committees casts doubt on whether it will be passed. Also, pressuring countries to disengage from Wagner using the FTO label does not address the political and security rationale for why authoritarian and transitioning regimes sought the group’s services in the first place. Instead of focusing on labels and sanctions, the United States and Europe should turn their attention to other means of weakening Wagner by combating the financial structure and working with host countries to disincentivize the use of Wagner contractors.

Policy Recommendations

Financial Tools

To effectively counteract Wagner entities that may succeed in any potential restructuring, the United States should focus on effectively counteracting the group’s financial arm. This would limit any

mechanisms that Wagner contractors and Russian elites use to move financial and material assets from entities that have been exploited in Africa. The United States, in cooperation with its partners in Europe, should create new legislation and policies, modeled after the [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act of 1970 \(RICO\)](#), that would solely target individuals and companies instead of applying sanctions.

The legislation’s goal should be twofold. First, it should aim to aggressively pursue banks, legal services, and other entities that create an umbrella within international financial markets for Wagner to operate and author its funds. Second, it should work to prosecute the individuals involved financially with the Wagner Group. Many of the Russian elites who stand to gain from acquiring ownership of Wagner-related entities have an extensive interest across Europe and the broader West. Legislation using the RICO Act as a model would make these elites’ financial interests, even if they are not directly affiliated with Wagner-like entities, subject to seizure as part of an ongoing corrupt practice. Additionally, Wagner contractors and affiliates could be prosecuted for specific crimes if they are identified as having been involved in transnational criminal activity that somehow touched the shores of Europe or the United States.

The RICO Act has been used to dismantle organized crime operations by linking crimes that were otherwise thought to be unrelated through racketeering charges. A key example of this is the 2015 [FIFA corruption case](#), in which 14 individuals were indicted under the RICO Act on 47 counts of racketeering and conspiracy, among other offenses, for a decades-long scheme to corrupt international soccer for profit. Tackling



the financial arm of Wagner through new legislation modeled after RICO allows the United States to use a historically proven model for a new issue set.

If successful, such legislation would negate the advantage Wagner and the Russian state see in using shell companies to move funds into the Russian government and elites' hands, thus circumventing sanctions. Moreover, it would be a transnational enforcement mechanism that would discourage other would-be mercenaries from exploiting the African continent and committing human rights violations in the name of profit.

Strengthening Civil Society and Capacity Building

In addition to tackling the financial aspect of Wagner's exploits, the U.S. and the broader international community should work to strengthen African internal institutions. Countries that employ Wagner often do so as a last resort due to a lack of resources, Western investment, and incentive to work with Western countries. The United States and its partners should invest in African economies and the broader financial sector to strengthen African countries' ability to respond to emergencies such as food shortages, climate-related disasters, and access to foreign aid. This would reduce the need for support and investment from Russia, thus reducing the need for Wagner. As African countries are still recovering from post-colonial legacies, Western nations must work toward building capacity and providing solutions that encompass both security concerns and civil society growth. Capacity building should be approached locally, nationally, and internationally.

At the national level, Western countries should increase their diplomatic missions to states where Wagner is operating. These missions should build strong ties with these governments to establish rapport and disincentivize countries from using Wagner or other PMCs. This should also be used as a tool to understand better what is driving countries to Russia and Wagner and as an opportunity to find a middle ground of cooperation. An FTO designation, as proposed by U.S. legislation, would make this more difficult. The United States and the international community should also look to increase partnerships with USAID and the U.N. Development Programme to



A supporter of Malian Interim President Colonel Assimi Goïta wears a face mask of Russian President Vladimir Putin during a pro-junta/pro-Russia rally in Bamako, Mali, on May 13, 2022. (Ousmane Makaveli / AFP via Getty Images)

grow the civil and military branches of government proportionally – as opposed to the recent policy, which saw civil society funding [cut as much as 80%](#) in some African countries. The EU and the U.S. cannot continue to cut civil society funding and expect countries to shift away from Russian influence.

At the local level, the United States and Europe should conduct information-gathering sessions that include all aspects affected by the state's use of PMCs. This should include religious leaders, civil society leaders, tribal leaders, and women. This will help entities craft locally led policy solutions to combat the need for a government to employ Wagner or any other PMC. Policy options should include mechanisms that create inclusive governance and push for democratic reform and elections at a suitable rate of change. Historically, Western countries have pushed for rapid democratic change that has only backfired. An understanding of the main issues among the populace can lead to sustainable democratic reform.

Additionally, the U.S and Europe should focus on building up a middle class. This would include increasing foreign direct investment to countries employing Wagner to strengthen their capacity and remove the need for Wagner's employment. Foreign direct investment and micro-finance loans should be gender inclusive and designed to incentivize



change, meaning that groups receiving loans should have concrete targets they must meet to continue receiving funds. This kind of investment will benefit democratic transitions.

At the international level, the U.S. and Europe should focus on strengthening African regional partnerships. For example, [the Economic Community of West African States](#), known as ECOWAS, supports economic integration to increase financial stability and regional strength, but it has recently struggled with legitimacy among African nations. Providing strategic partnerships with both U.S. and EU economic branches as well as U.S. military support can strengthen the ability of ECOWAS to intervene and manage conflicts as they arise, limiting the need for Wagner support.

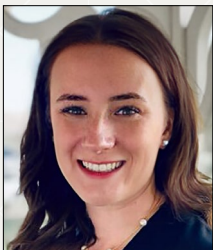
The international community can also support the [African Free Trade Agreement](#), designed to minimize tariffs between participating nations to increase trade and decrease global dependence on goods and services. If the international community were to support African states in strengthening these networks by providing training, education, and investment that support more regional trade within Africa, states could build stronger financial backgrounds. This, in turn, can assist in building up civil society and increase capacity building. Although economic prosperity will not be enough to reduce Wagner's influence on its own, it will reduce the pressure that some states feel about outsourcing security functions to foreign contractors.

Finally, the United States and the international community should support security solutions for the

African Union, specifically helping to strengthen the [Defense and Security Division](#). This would include building up military strength within the African Union to avoid the need for additional international engagement on the continent that causes destabilization. This, in turn, could be done with the [U.S. Africa Command](#), as they are already [doing reform work on their policies to prevent mass atrocities](#). A targeted partnership to improve defense mechanisms within the African Union would strengthen the organization's ability to respond to political crises and terrorism threats. It would also be a positive financial move for the United States, as it would allow for eventual divestment in military spending for the continent, which could free up more funds for civil society and capacity building. Strengthening existing African institutions with long-term sustainable investment is critical to enhancing capacity and allowing African states to strengthen from within. This will disincentivize the need for contracting with Wagner or other PMCs.

The international community could hobble Wagner financially through new legislation while strengthening the capacity of African countries that employ Wagner. Working with these countries at the local, state, and international levels could remove Wagner forces from Africa, reducing the human rights abuses and exploitation that occur on the continent.

Note: This report was produced with contributions from Carolyn Moorman, an analyst and content coordinator at the New Lines Institute; and Jeff Hawn, a New Lines Institute non-resident fellow.



Riley Moeder is a Senior Analyst for the Special Initiatives program at the New Lines Institute, focusing her research on North Africa and Strategic Rivalries. Prior to joining the institute, Riley was a program assistant for the United States Institute of Peace in the Middle East and North Africa department. She previously worked at American Enterprises Institute in the Critical Threats Department, researching non-state actors in the Sahel. She attended Lewis & Clark College, where she received her B.A in International Relations. She also studied in Strasbourg, France, where she researched international human rights law and refugee policy.

She received her M.A in International Relations in Security Studies focusing on conflict resolution in North Africa in 2022 from George Washington University.

Contact



For media inquiries, email media@newlinesinstitute.org



To submit a piece to the New Lines Institute, email submissions@newlinesinstitute.org



For other inquiries, send an email to info@newlinesinstitute.org



1776 Massachusetts Ave N.W. Suite 120
Washington, D.C., 20036



(202) 800-7302

Connect With Us



@newlinesinst



@New Lines Institute
for Strategy and Policy



Subscribe



Sign up