



Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Issues for Congress

Overview

The Wagner Group, a nominally private military company (PMC) that the U.S. government has referred to as a “proxy military force of the Kremlin,” provides security services in several African countries. Wagner affiliates are also involved in mining and commerce, and in propaganda and influence operations. Wagner’s activities in Africa appear to support a broader effort by Moscow to challenge Western influence at relatively low cost. Politically connected Russian elites may also seek personal profits. In addition to leveraging Moscow’s Cold War-era ties, Wagner has exploited the vulnerabilities and ambitions of particular African leaders. It also has leveraged (and sought to stoke) local grievances and resentment of Western influence, particularly that of former colonial power France.

U.S. officials have accused Wagner of “predatory” behavior in Africa and of trading security services for access to natural resources. In early 2023, the Biden Administration designated Wagner a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO), citing, in part, abuses in Africa. U.S. officials have accused Wagner of using gold from Africa to finance operations in Ukraine, and of seeking to move weapons via Mali for use in Ukraine. See also: CRS In Focus IF12344, *Russia’s Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)*.

Wagner’s future in Africa is uncertain in the wake of its June 2023 mutiny in Russia. Given Wagner’s existing connections and footprint, and a lack of ready alternatives, Moscow likely finds it difficult to fully divest or replace Wagner in the region. Russian officials have asserted that support to Wagner’s African partners will continue, but who will control these activities and financial flows is unclear. For his part, Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin has vowed to continue operations in Africa. In light of Wagner’s role in Russia’s regional strategy, the evolving situation is of interest to U.S. policymakers.

Key Areas of Activity

Wagner is primarily active in the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Mali, and Sudan, per U.S. officials. Wagner has also engaged in outreach to Burkina Faso, and has reportedly sought to destabilize the government of Chad. Prigozhin cheered the military seizure of power in Niger in July 2023 via social media, and floated Wagner’s services. Wagner previously deployed to Mozambique in 2019 to aid counter-insurgency operations but withdrew after taking heavy casualties. Some reports suggest that Wagner may be active in other African countries in less visible ways.

The countries where Wagner openly operates share some attributes, notably insurgencies and fraught relations with traditional donors. Mali and Sudan are under military rule, while CAR and Mali are former French colonies that once hosted French military operations. Burkina Faso and Chad, fit both latter categories, as may Niger. In Libya, Wagner is aiding an armed group that has sought state power.

Figure 1. Key African Countries with Wagner Activity



Source: Public statements by U.S. officials in 2022.

U.S. officials have asserted in statements and testimony that Wagner abuses and economic exploitation undermine stability in Africa. Wagner personnel have been implicated in atrocities against civilians in CAR, Mali, and Sudan. Firms tied to Wagner have reportedly exploited gold mines in these countries, along with diamonds and timber in CAR. Several African leaders, including the President of Ghana, have voiced concern about Wagner’s regional activities.

At the same time, some leaders in Africa appear to view Wagner as furnishing valuable assistance that other partners are unwilling or unable to provide. In CAR and Mali, Wagner’s logistics support appears to have enabled national militaries to expand operations against insurgents—albeit accompanied by significant abuses. Some leaders appear to share with Wagner a preferred scorched-earth approach to counterinsurgency. Leaders chafing at arms embargoes (as in CAR) or human rights criticism (as in Mali) may view Wagner—and Russia more generally—as a counterweight to Western donor influence. Wagner’s partnership with the Malian junta against French postcolonial influence may also appeal to other leaders or contenders. The group’s activities appear to vary based on local context.

CAR. The Wagner Group reportedly entered CAR after Russia obtained an exemption to the U.N. arms embargo in 2017 to provide weapons to CAR’s military, and offered to train local soldiers in their use. Wagner’s numbers swelled as high as 2,000 as the group came to play a key role in military operations against rebel groups. Wagner personnel provide personal protection to President Faustin-Archange Touadera and serve as his advisors. Wagner has also reportedly worked with some rebel factions. Wagner affiliates are allegedly active in private security, mining, and other commercial sectors. Several hundred Wagner personnel left CAR shortly after the June 2023 mutiny, which CAR officials characterized as a rotation rather than a drawdown. More Wagner personnel appeared to arrive ahead of a controversial constitutional referendum in July.

Libya. Wagner personnel reportedly began providing support in 2018 to Libyan National Army (LNA) leader

Khalifa Haftar, a rival to Libya's internationally-recognized government in Tripoli. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) described Wagner forces as integral to the LNA's failed 2019-2020 campaign to seize Tripoli and asserted that Wagner personnel "almost certainly" downed an unarmed U.S. drone "using a sophisticated Russian air defense system" in November 2019. According to AFRICOM, Wagner's presence totaled about 2,000 as of 2020, but declined in 2022 as some personnel left for Ukraine.

Mali. Mali's military junta reportedly contracted with Wagner in 2021 to support operations against Islamist insurgents. This coincided with an increase in Russian arms sales to Mali. AFRICOM stated in 2022 that Bamako had agreed to pay Wagner \$10 million per month. Press reports indicate that 1,000-1,500 Wagner personnel were in Mali as of early 2023, although local officials have denied Wagner's presence. In 2022, citing concerns about Wagner and other diplomatic tensions, France decided to withdraw over 2,000 troops from Mali, ending a U.S.-backed counterterrorism mission. In June 2023, the junta called for the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali (MINUSMA) to withdraw. These developments have strained Mali's already fragile peace process with northern separatist groups. U.S. officials accused Wagner of engineering MINUSMA's exit.

Sudan. Wagner-affiliated entities have reportedly been active in Sudan since then-President Omar al Bashir struck a series of agreements with Russia in 2017. Prigozhin-linked firms have been involved in gold mining—in collaboration with elements of Sudan's security forces—and in training and provision of security services. In 2022, Wagner operatives were implicated in a scheme to smuggle gold from Sudan to Russia. In May 2023, after fighting broke out between Sudan's rival security forces, the U.S. Treasury Department reported that Wagner had supplied Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) with surface-to-air missiles to fight the military. Russia's foreign ministry, meanwhile, has sought to maintain "friendly" relations with the country's military government.

U.S. Sanctions

When designating the Wagner Group as a TCO in January 2023, the Treasury Department also designated Wagner under the U.S. sanctions program for CAR (Executive Order [EO] 13667). The Wagner Group and Prigozhin were previously designated under other U.S. sanctions programs.

Treasury has designated a number of other Wagner-linked individuals and entities under the CAR sanctions program. In addition, citing ties with Wagner, Treasury has designated individuals and entities active in CAR, Sudan, and Mali under Russia-related and other non-Africa-specific U.S. sanctions programs. Designees include three top Malian defense officials and at least two firms based in the United Arab Emirates, among others. These actions freeze any assets under U.S. jurisdiction, block transactions with U.S. persons, and impose visa and entry restrictions. In late 2022, the State Department also named Wagner as an Entity of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, citing actions in CAR.

Potential Issues for Congress

Oversight. Congress has enacted legislative provisions requiring the executive branch to report on Russian PMC activities and influence worldwide, often via defense

authorization measures. Congress may consider whether existing reporting requirements enable sufficient review of Wagner's Africa activities and U.S. responses, or whether new, amended, or consolidated requirements are warranted.

Sanctions Impact and Effectiveness. Congress may assess the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions, the resources devoted to enforcing them, and the impact of sanctions (if any) on regional perceptions of the Wagner Group and Russia—including as Wagner's relationship with Russia's government and defense sector evolves. Congress may examine the extent of U.S. sanctions coordination with partners such as the European Union and United Kingdom, which have also issued Wagner-related sanctions in Africa.

Members may also weigh the potential implications of bills that would seek compel the executive branch to designate the Wagner Group a Foreign Terrorist Organization (S. 416/H.R. 506) for U.S. interests in Africa—including with regard to countries, like Mali, that U.S. officials have accused of paying Wagner.

Conditionality. Congress may consider whether to restrict or condition U.S. aid, or support for multilateral lending, to governments in Africa that pursue contracts or relationships with Wagner. (U.S. aid to the governments of Mali, Sudan, and Burkina Faso, among others, is already subject to certain legal restrictions due to military coups and other factors.) Such conditions may have unintended consequences, such as the possible loss of U.S. leverage or contacts with local partners, or perceptions that the United States is depriving needy countries of support.

Alternatives to Wagner. News reports indicate that in a bid to decrease Wagner's influence in CAR, U.S. officials have offered President Touadéra alternative security arrangements and other incentives, in coordination with European countries and Rwanda (which has troops in CAR). U.S. officials have also reportedly weighed offering military aid to Burkina Faso to deter partnership with Wagner. Congress may consider whether to authorize, fund, or condition the use of such tools, as well as the potential for unintended consequences. For example, leaders might seek to attract or leverage U.S. offers by signaling a willingness to engage with Wagner, while policy risks may arise from U.S. support to authoritarian or abusive regimes.

African Perceptions. Countering the Wagner Group and Russian "malign influence" have emerged as U.S. priorities in Africa. Although the Biden Administration has asserted that "the United States will not dictate Africa's choices," some in Africa have chafed at perceived U.S. pressure, amid enduring sensitivities over state sovereignty and the legacy of the Cold War. For example, Southern African leaders assailed the Countering Malign Russian Activities Globally Act (H.R. 9374), which passed the House in 2022. Framing U.S. diplomatic engagement in Africa with regard to Russia and Wagner is likely to remain challenging.

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