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# Russian Mercenary and Paramilitary Groups in Africa

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Examining Changes and Impacts Since the  
Wagner Rebellion



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# About This Report

We examine the activities of Russian mercenaries in Africa since summer 2023, when the Wagner Group rebelled against the Kremlin and when Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner's founder, died. In this report, we examine how Russia's presence, activities, and control over its armed groups has changed in Africa since those events. Although these groups had previously been referred to as private military contractors, the Kremlin now exerts direct control over these groups, leading us to call them *mercenary and paramilitary groups*. In this report, we examine the role of Russian mercenaries in Africa from mid-2023 to September 2024 and the resulting implications of their use for African governments, economies, and civilian populations. This report was developed using publicly available information during the time frame in question and is intended to be a resource for officials and policymakers in Africa and for the research community focused on military privatization and mercenaries to demonstrate where Russian mercenaries are present and the wide-ranging implications of their activities.

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# Summary

In this report, we describe how Russia's armed presence in Africa has changed from mid-2023 to September 2024. We seek to identify where Russian mercenaries have a presence in Africa and what types of activities they perform. We also examine how publics in countries where these mercenaries are present—as well as publics in neighboring countries—feel about and discuss Russian mercenaries and Russia.

## Key Findings

Our key findings are as follows:

- Russian mercenaries have a clear presence in six African countries.
- Russian mercenaries serve as an important mechanism by which Moscow seeks to reduce its growing international economic and political isolation. Mercenaries help accomplish this by expanding Russia's global footprint and influence at a relatively low cost.
- Although Russia has sought to capitalize on its ambiguous relationships with mercenaries to ignore international norms, Moscow has taken public and direct control over these groups, undermining the ability to deny these formal connections.
- Despite the creation of the Africa Corps (an entity created after Wagner's failed 2023 rebellion, intended to resume Wagner's efforts in Africa), the Wagner Group's structure and brand continue to be used in several countries to sustain existing operations. This structure can vary depending on the country.
- Rather than addressing security issues and building defense capacity for countries they operate in, Russian mercenaries seek to exploit and profit off insecurity.
- The security situations in countries employing Russian mercenaries are worsening. The number of attacks and fatalities committed by militant Islamist groups have increased significantly since Russian merce-

naries have replaced United Nations (UN) and Western African security forces.

- An analysis of public sentiment shows that publics in several African countries hold more negative than positive views of Russian mercenaries.<sup>1</sup>
- Russian mercenary activities not only affect the countries that employ them but also surrounding countries. Both mercenary-perpetrated violence and illicit economic activity are not constrained by borders and have affected entire regions.

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<sup>1</sup> The African countries are Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Togo.

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# Russian Mercenary and Paramilitary Groups in Africa

Since 2018, Russian private military contractors have proliferated across Africa. In 2022, RAND assessed that from 2018 to 2021, such contractors were active in 33 African countries (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The majority of activities occur under organizations controlled by the Wagner Group (Wagner) and, until his death in 2023, its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Moscow has sought to develop or revive its relationships with African partners to undermine western sanctions, access minerals and other raw materials, cultivate allies in international forums, advance its own political narratives, and increase military pressure on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) southern flank.<sup>2</sup> One important means by which Russia has sought to accomplish these goals is by exporting mercenaries. Russian mercenaries serve as an important mechanism by which Moscow seeks to reduce its growing international economic and political isolation. Mercenaries help accomplish this by expanding Russia's footprint and influence in Africa at a relatively low cost while providing an important source of revenue.<sup>3</sup> Russian mercenaries have operated as a nimble expeditionary force, seemingly unencumbered by international rules of war, and have bolstered authoritarian regimes in Africa at the expense of the civilian populations' and the countries' overall security. Under Yevgeny Prigozhin's leadership, Wagner operated on behalf of Moscow's interests but with flexibility to pursue the group's own goals and methods of operation. This indirect relationship with the Russian central

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<sup>1</sup> Cortney Weinbaum, Melissa Shostak, Chandler Sachs, and John Parachini, *Mapping Chinese and Russian Military and Security Exports to Africa*, RAND Corporation, TL-A2045-3, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Liam Karr, "Africa File Special Edition: Russian Diplomatic Blitz Advances the Kremlin's Strategic Aims in Africa," Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute, June 6, 2024c.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Detrow, Emma Klein, and Tinbete Ermyas, "How 'Blood Gold' from Africa Is Funding Russia's War on Ukraine," NPR, December 27, 2023.

FIGURE 1

# Assessment of Russian Mercenary Presence in Africa Before the Wagner Rebellion, 2018–2021



SOURCE: Features information from U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Relations with Somalia,” fact sheet, March 18, 2022.

NOTE: This map does not show an internal border between Somalia and Somaliland. The United States recognizes Somaliland as part of Somalia. PMC = private military contractor.

government offered Russia the financial and diplomatic benefits from Wagner's client relationships without Moscow incurring direct responsibility for casualties or human rights abuses.<sup>4</sup>

In 2023, two significant changes occurred. In June, Wagner rebelled against the Russian government by marching toward Moscow to protest Russia's failures in the war in Ukraine. And two months later, in August, Prigozhin died in a plane crash for which the Kremlin was likely responsible. After these events, Russian defense and intelligence officials visited several African countries to reassure African partners that Russian mercenary units would continue their operations, now under the formal purview of the Russian government.<sup>5</sup> The quick effort by the Russian government to reinforce these relationships demonstrates their importance to Moscow. This change in operational control over the mercenary groups marked an important shift in the nature of the relationship between Russian mercenaries and the Russian government; Moscow took direct ownership of Russian mercenaries. This stance undermines Moscow's ability to deny its formal connections to these entities or eschew responsibility for their actions. With Russia maintaining public and direct control over these groups, we will not refer to these groups as *private* entities, but we will instead refer to them broadly as *mercenaries*.

This report describes how Russia's armed presence in Africa has changed from mid-2023 to September 2024. We seek to identify where Russian mercenaries have a presence in Africa and what types of activities they perform. We also examine how publics discuss Russian mercenaries, and we identify major themes associated with these discussions to help understand the publics' sentiments of Russian mercenaries, particularly in countries where these mercenaries are present.

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<sup>4</sup> Catrina Dooxsee, "Putin's Proxies: Examining Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," statement before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Security of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, U.S. Government Printing Office, September 15, 2022, pp. 7–8.

<sup>5</sup> Filip Bryjka and Jędrzej Czerep, *Africa Corps—A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa*, Polish Institute of International Affairs, May 2024, p. 10.

## Research Methods and Approach

We searched open-source information, including journal articles, news reports, and social media posts in English, French, and Arabic, to identify where Russian mercenaries have a presence in Africa and the types of activities they perform. It can be challenging to definitively indicate where Russian mercenaries are operating and what types of activities they are engaged in for multiple reasons, including efforts by Russia or host countries to obscure this information and the degree to which information is available in the open-source literature.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this report focuses on instances in which there was clear and consistent information about a Russian mercenary presence in a given country. If we were unable to corroborate a single-source mention with additional evidence, we excluded that instance. In addition, if there was information indicating a previous presence in a country but an absence of more-recent sources to indicate a continued presence, we opted not to include these because of the uncertainty of whether the mercenaries maintained a presence in the country.

We partnered with VoxCroft, an analytics company that specializes in analyzing open-source information using machine learning and natural language processing, to conduct a sentiment analysis of how Russian mercenaries were perceived by local populations. We and VoxCroft obtained approximately 685,000 posts, primarily from social media sources X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook and also from online local news sources in English, French, and Arabic for eight countries in West Africa between January 2022 and August 2024.<sup>7</sup> This analysis examined how publics discuss Russian mercenaries, including Wagner and Africa Corps (an entity created after Wagner's failed 2023 rebellion, intending to resume Wagner's efforts in Africa), and identifies major themes associated with these discussions. The eight countries are Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea,

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<sup>6</sup> Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric McQueen, and Joe Moye, *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Approximately 94 percent of the collected posts were from social media, predominantly from X (VoxCroft, *West Africa: PMCs Viewed as a Reputational Liability for Russia in the Region*, report provided to authors, August 30, 2024).

Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Togo. To provide a wider picture of sentiment, the analysis includes countries that have and have not experienced coups, are with and without Russian mercenary presence, have had a Russian mercenary presence for varying lengths of time, and countries to which Russian mercenaries are actively seeking to expand. We used a large language model, specifically OpenAI's GPT-4 Omni (or GPT-4o) through the Azure OpenAI API, to analyze, interpret, and categorize thematic patterns and insights from the data.

Unlike public-opinion polling, sentiment analysis does not employ sampling methods that allow for generalizability or support broad claims about public opinion. Instead, sentiment analysis relies on social media and online media data that might be generated by a population of users who do not reflect society at large or who might be seeking to manipulate public discourse through dis- or misinformation.<sup>8</sup> The availability of historical sentiment data is limited for African publics, which makes it difficult to contextualize the findings to determine how meaningful a given positive or negative sentiment rating might be. Therefore, we limited our use of the sentiment analysis findings to (1) determine whether the Russian mercenary presence was a topic that prompted public discussion in social media and online media, (2) use as indicators of shifts in discourse that aligned with significant contemporary events (e.g., Prigozhin's death), and (3) identify trends for additional research.

## Organization of This Report

This report is organized into five sections. In the second section, we examine where Russian mercenaries are present in Africa and the types of military activities they conduct. We then discuss the various types of damaging impacts from these military activities, focusing on four of the major concerns about Russian mercenaries highlighted in the public sentiment analysis: human rights abuses, ineffectiveness in addressing security prob-

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<sup>8</sup> Jin-ah Kwak and Sung Kyum Cho, "Analyzing Public Opinion with Social Media Data During Election Periods: A Selective Literature Review," *Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research*, Vol. 5, No. 4, August 31, 2018.

lems, public manipulation, and increased instability. We conclude the section by highlighting the broader regional implications of military activities conducted by Russian mercenaries.

In the third section, we discuss the economic activities that Russian mercenaries conduct in Africa and the types of damage these activities cause, focusing on two of the major themes highlighted in the public sentiment analysis: human rights abuses and economic exploitation.

In the fourth section, we provide more detail on the public sentiment analysis. This includes how some in Africa view Russian mercenaries and Russia. We highlight the major themes driving negative sentiment of Russian mercenaries and the sources of pro-Russia narratives circulated in affected countries' media environments.

The report concludes with suggestions for countries that are weighing whether to employ Russian mercenaries and considerations for the broader region.

## Russian Mercenaries in Africa and Military Implications

Reports indicate that Russia created an entity called Africa Corps in summer 2023, after the Wagner Group's rebellion, which has taken over Wagner's military operations in Africa. Africa Corps is controlled by Russia's Main Directorate (still often referred to by the Russian acronym of its predecessor organization, the GRU)—under the leadership of Russia's Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov<sup>9</sup>—to ensure that these personnel are focused solely on pursuing the Kremlin's interests.<sup>10</sup> Although

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<sup>9</sup> The Main Directorate serves as the military intelligence body to Russia's Ministry of Defense and armed forces. See Alexis A. Blanc, Alyssa Demus, Sandra Kay Evans, Michelle Grisé, Mark Hvizda, Marta Kepe, Natasha Lander, and Krystyna Marcinek, *The Russian General Staff: Understanding the Military's Decisionmaking Role in a "Besieged Fortress,"* RAND Corporation, RR-A1233-7, 2023, p. 22; John A. Lechner and Sergey Eledinov, "Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group?" *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Bryjka and Czerep, 2024, p. 7; Ryan Bauer and Erik E. Mueller, "Russian Private Military Companies Thriving Due to War with Ukraine," *Moscow Times*, June 14, 2023.



there is clear evidence of Wagner's ties to the Russian government—including a reliance on such military infrastructure as bases and transportation systems, and, by Putin's own admission, providing funding to the group—Wagner was treated as a semi-autonomous entity that offered Moscow a degree of separation and plausible deniability.<sup>11</sup> In the Central African Republic (CAR), for example, Wagner decided that it would shift to a more offensive posture in battling insurgents, and it decided who it would do business with in the country.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the Africa Corps is under the direct supervision of Russia's Ministry of Defense and will take its orders directly from Moscow.

To ensure control of these forces, Africa Corps has required that many Wagner mercenaries sign new contracts to officially operate under the purview of the Russian government. Although Africa Corps serves as the overarching organization responsible for Russia's mercenary activities in Africa, and some reports assess that it operates more as an umbrella entity that encompasses Wagner and other Russian mercenary activities,<sup>13</sup> Moscow continues to use the Wagner Group's structure and brand in several countries to sustain existing operations while Russia seeks to expand into new countries.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Wagner and Africa Corps are used interchangeably, and the structure can vary depending on the country.

## Presence

We found six countries with a clear presence of Russian mercenaries: Burkina Faso, CAR, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Sudan. These groups include a combination of Wagner and Africa Corps personnel and, in Burkina Faso, a new paramilitary entity called Brigade Bear, which is providing security

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<sup>11</sup> András Rácz, "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 21, 2020; Nicolas Camut, "Putin Admits Kremlin Gave Wagner Nearly \$1 Billion in the Past Year," *Politico*, June 27, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Kupfer, "Over a Year After Wagner Group Leader's Death, Russian Mercenaries Aren't Going Away," *Voice of America News*, November 29, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Elian Peltier, "Year After Failed Mutiny, Russia Tightens Grip on Wagner Units in Africa," *New York Times*, June 25, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Lechner and Eledinov, 2024.

and training for junta leaders, reportedly as part of the Africa Corps contingent.<sup>15</sup> In Chad and Mauritania, Russian mercenaries are conducting “spill-over operations”—crossing the borders from neighboring CAR and Mali, respectively. Figure 2 shows the variety of activities in each country, and Table 1 describes how Russia’s presence in each country has changed since the Wagner rebellion.

In Libya, which is a priority for Moscow because of the country’s oil wells and its geostrategic importance as a transit hub, there has been a more seamless transition of operational control to Africa Corps by rebranding operations.<sup>16</sup> Russia might be strengthening its presence in the country: There have been reports of additional personnel (potentially 1,800 people) arriving in April 2024 to support Africa Corps’ operations in Libya and to use Libya as a staging ground to reinforce other military operations in West Africa.<sup>17</sup>

In CAR, structural changes have been more ad hoc. As of early 2024, Wagner forces operating in CAR have not yet been required to sign contracts with the Russian government to continue operations,<sup>18</sup> and Moscow has replaced some top leadership in CAR while maintaining the existing structures.<sup>19</sup>

In Mali, where the security situation is significantly more challenging, Africa Corps has continued to use the Wagner brand while transitioning fighters to contracts with the Russian government. Continuing to use the Wagner brand has enabled Africa Corps to capitalize on the close ties

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Margolin (@Jack\_Mrgln), “The 81st Volunteer Spetsnaz Brigade ‘Bears’ is present in Burkina Faso as at least part of the Africa Corps contingent in that country. They are under MoD and affiliated with military unit 35555, which I’ve previously documented supplying Wagner as far back as 2014,” X post, June 13, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Angela Stent, Christopher M. Faulkner, Mark Galeotti, John Lechner, and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The Wagner Group and Russia in Africa One Year After Prigozhin’s Death,” panel conversation, Brookings Institution, August 20, 2024.

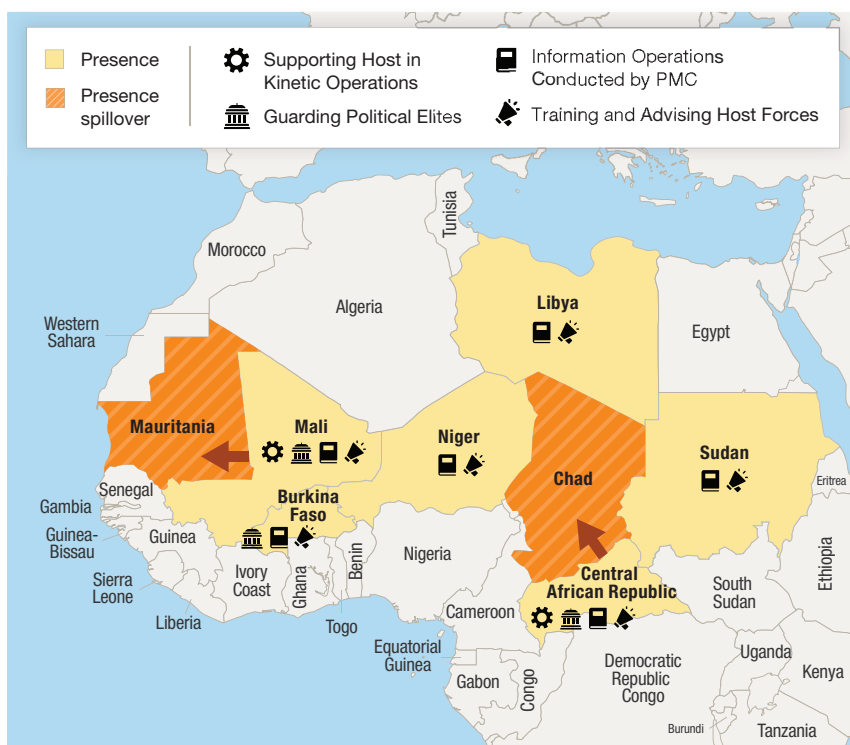
<sup>17</sup> Karr, 2024c; “‘A Big Mess Is Being Prepared.’ Russia’s Military Expansion in Libya,” [“‘Готовится большая заварушка.’ Военная экспансия России в Ливии”], *Radio Liberty* [Радио Свобода], May 10, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Bryjka and Czerep, 2024, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Lechner and Eledinov, 2024.

FIGURE 2

## Russian Mercenary Presence and Military Activities in Africa



SOURCES: Features information from Bryjka and Czerep, 2024; "Mali, Wagner Incursions into Mauritania Spark Tension," Africa Defense Forum, May 21, 2024; "Sudanese Armed Forces Agrees to Russian Red Sea Base in Exchange for Weapons," Africa Defense Forum, June 25, 2024; Lechner and Eledinov, 2024; Samer al-Atrush and Jane Flanagan, "Chad Rebels Trained by Russia March on Heart of Africa," *The Times*, April 23, 2021.

Wagner previously established in the country while providing some shielding for Moscow in case the mercenaries take too many casualties or need to leave Mali.<sup>20</sup> Wagner personnel continue to accompany Malian Armed

<sup>20</sup> Stent et al., 2024; Peltier, 2024.

TABLE 1

**Presence and Structural Changes of Russian Mercenaries in Africa**

Country	Presence	Structural Changes
CAR	Since 2017	Maintains existing Wagner structures while replacing some of the top leadership; reports of mercenaries not yet signing contracts with Russian government.
Sudan	Since 2017	Wagner brand is still present, but the formal structure is unclear because there has been limited but continued reporting on Wagner and Africa Corps activity since Prigozhin's death.
Libya	Since 2018	Transitioned operational control from Wagner to Africa Corps structure and leadership.
Mali	Since 2021	Maintains the Wagner brand, with mercenaries under contracts with the Russian government.
Niger	Since 2024	Africa Corps in country where Wagner has previously not had a presence
Burkina Faso	Since 2024	Africa Corps in country where Wagner has previously not had a presence

Forces (FAMa) conducting “stabilization operations” in the country.<sup>21</sup> These operations include the Battle of Tinzawaten near the Algerian border in late July 2024, during which an alliance of Azawad separatists (Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l’Azawad [CSP-DPA]) and the local al-Qaeda franchise (Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin [JNIM]) killed dozens of FAMa soldiers and Wagner personnel.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Faulkner, “Undermining Democracy and Exploiting Clients: The Wagner Group’s Nefarious Activities in Africa,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 15, No. 6, June 2022.

<sup>22</sup> “Mali Says Cutting Ties with Ukraine over Alleged Involvement in Rebel Attack,” Reuters, last updated August 13, 2024; Guillaume Maurice, “Battle of Tinzawaten: The Final Hours of Wagner Mercenaries in the Sahara,” *France 24*, September 13, 2024; Wassim Nasr, “Wagner Mercenaries Clash with Rebels and Jihadists in the Sahel,” Soufan Center, September 13, 2024.

## Activities

Across the six countries previously listed, Russian mercenaries conduct four types of military activities:

- accompanying host-country armed forces in military operations
- guarding local political elites in the country
- training and advising functions for the host-country armed forces
- conducting information operations targeting the country.

These military activities consist of forces that are primarily intended to protect the coupist regime in power. Although the activities involve security assistance and advising functions for the host-country armed forces to combat terrorism and insurgent groups, the results of these efforts are mixed. In fact, the activities contribute to the growing insecurity and instability in these countries because of the brutality of the mercenaries' tactics, such as committing human rights abuses by targeting and torturing civilians,<sup>23</sup> which we discuss in a later section.

The most common activities that mercenaries engage in are training and advising the armed forces in the host country. Because several countries in Africa face growing threats from terrorism, particularly in the Sahel,<sup>24</sup> Russian mercenaries advertise their ability to train local armed forces to stem these threats. For some African countries in which Russian mercenaries are present, these groups also support the local armed forces by participating directly in combat operations, including conducting operations independent of host-nation forces, which have had detrimental results. In CAR, for example, Wagner mercenaries have increasingly conducted operations independent of the Central African Armed Forces; these operations account for the overwhelming majority of targeted civilian violence between December 2020 and July 2022.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "If Your Country Is Falling Apart, the Wagner Group Will Be There," *New York Times*, August 11, 2023b.

<sup>24</sup> "Africa's Constantly Evolving Militant Islamist Threat," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, August 13, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Ladd Serwat, Héni Nsaibia, Vincenzo Carbone, and Timothy Lay, *Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali*,

The perception of mercenary success in such countries as CAR and Mali has led other countries in Africa to invite the Africa Corps.<sup>26</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the 2022 coup in Burkina Faso, those who protested in support of the coup called on the junta to partner with Russia, claiming that Moscow had achieved positive results in fighting against terrorism in other African countries.<sup>27</sup> However, in the countries in which Russian mercenaries operate, there has been a variety of damaging effects.

## Human Rights Abuses

We found considerable evidence that Wagner and its successor, the Africa Corps, have been responsible for significant human rights violations and harm to civilians in the areas where they operate. Russian mercenaries' use of excessive force is a deliberate part of their strategy.<sup>28</sup> Because Russia's war in Ukraine has depleted its military manpower, the Russian military and mercenary groups have turned to other sources of recruitment, including within Russian prisons, although former prisoners typically join the fight in Ukraine rather than participate in Africa deployments. However, Africa Corps prioritizes recruiting those who previously fought in Ukraine, and at least half of Africa Corps' personnel are Wagner veterans, so there likely is an indirect pipeline from Russian prisons to African theaters.<sup>29</sup> UN experts cite Wagner's practice of recruiting prisoners as a worrisome devel-

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Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, August 30, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Lechner and Eledinov, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Declan Walsh, "After Coup in Burkina Faso, Protesters Turn to Russia for Help," *New York Times*, January 25, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 11, 2022; "Russian Military Crimes in Mali Highlight Propensity for Sadism and Atrocities by Russian Expeditionary Groups," Robert Lansing Institute, August 6, 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Jake Epstein, "A New Russian Military Formation in Africa with the Same Name as a Nazi Unit Is Trying to Recruit Former Wagner Fighters and Ukraine War Vets," *Business Insider*, December 22, 2023.

opment that only exacerbates a cycle of impunity and violence and decreases accountability for human rights abuses.<sup>30</sup>

In Mali, Wagner's arrival in late 2021 coincided with a sharp spike in civilian casualties.<sup>31</sup> The most worrisome example of an attack against civilians was a joint FAMa-Wagner five-day counterterrorism operation in Moura starting on March 2022, during which the forces killed over 500 people. The Human Rights Watch described the event as the single worst atrocity in Mali in over a decade.<sup>32</sup> The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that the "vast majority" of those killed in the operation carried out by FAMa and Wagner were executed. Additionally, it was reported that FAMa and Wagner personnel raped or committed other acts of sexual violence against at least 58 women and girls, at times taking turns raping the same people.<sup>33</sup>

These counterterrorism operations, which seek to quell insurgencies with escalating and indiscriminate violence,<sup>34</sup> have resulted in the torture and rape of civilians and the death of what has been estimated to be more than 2,000 civilians in Mali in 2022, demonstrating the damaging effects of these operations, which have continued through 2024.<sup>35</sup> In CAR, the UN

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<sup>30</sup> "Rights Experts 'Deeply Disturbed' by Russian Wagner Group Recruitment of Prisoners," *UN News*, March 10, 2023; "Mali: Independent Rights Experts Call for Probe into Wagner Group's Alleged Crimes," *UN News*, January 31, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> "Debunking the Malian Junta's Claims," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, April 12, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> "Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers," Human Rights Watch, April 5, 2022; "Moura: Over 500 Killed by Malian Troops, Foreign Military Personnel in 2022 Operation," *UN News*, May 12, 2023; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Malian Troops, Foreign Military Personnel Killed over 500 People During Military Operation in Moura in March 2022—UN Human Rights Report," press release, United Nations, May 12, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Sam Mednick, "Violence Soars in Mali in the Year After Russians Arrive," AP News, January 13, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "How Russia's Wagner Group Is Fueling Terrorism in Africa," *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2023a; Jason Burke, "Russian Mercenaries Behind Slaughter of 500 in Mali Village, UN Report Finds," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2023; Zane Irwin and Sam Mednick, "Mali's Army and Suspected Russia-Linked Mercenaries Committed

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern over widespread abuses by Wagner forces after reports of “indiscriminate killings” and violence against civilians at the hands of “Russian instructors.”<sup>36</sup>

Concern about human rights abuses was one of the most prominent themes in public sentiment related to the discussion of Russian mercenaries, and it was as a significant driver of negative sentiment. This theme was particularly prevalent for the publics in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, where Russian mercenaries are present. In Mali, for example, users on X circulated reports of a civilian massacre and videos and stories depicting atrocities that Wagner mercenaries committed, including videos purportedly showing the aftermath of a Wagner bombing campaign against Tuareg herders. Citizens have highlighted other atrocities Russian mercenaries have committed, and citizens have condemned Wagner as a terrorist organization. Reports of human rights abuses in Mali drove negative public sentiments in other countries, including Niger and Nigeria, in which the public similarly expressed anger and disgust about Russian mercenaries and their atrocities.

Russian mercenaries’ predatory behavior harms civilians and undermines institutions and governance within the countries in which they operate by capitalizing on the democratic recession in the region to grow their list of possible clients.<sup>37</sup> Rather than addressing security issues and building capacity for countries they operate in, Russian mercenaries seek to exploit and profit off insecurity. As scrutiny of Wagner’s human rights abuses has grown, the group and Africa Corps have sought to shift blame and implicate

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‘New Atrocities,’ Rights Group Says,” AP News, July 24, 2023; “UN Rights Chief Decries Death of 50 People in Mali Attack,” *Al Jazeera*, February 1, 2024.

<sup>36</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “CAR: Experts Alarmed by Government’s Use of ‘Russian Trainers,’ Close Contacts with UN Peacekeepers,” press release, United Nations, March 31, 2021; United Nations Security Council Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, “Letter Dated 25 June 2021 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Resolution 2536 (2020) Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2021/569, June 25, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Faulkner, 2022, pp. 33–34.



others for their crimes.<sup>38</sup> For instance, Wagner personnel were found digging mass graves in the northern part of Mali in an effort to frame departing French forces for crimes against civilians that Wagner had committed.<sup>39</sup>

## Ineffectiveness in Addressing Security Problems

Russian mercenaries have engaged in extensive information campaigns to stoke demand for their services in junta governments, often by spreading anti-Western disinformation. In the lead-up to the coup in Niger in 2023, Wagner sparked rumors of a coup, including when then-President Mohamed Bazoum took a trip out of the country. In the coup's aftermath, Wagner denigrated the French and promoted itself as capable of addressing Niger's security needs.<sup>40</sup> These campaigns have been critical to mercenaries gaining a foothold in African countries by portraying the mercenary groups as effective security partners compared with the West. This narrative likely had particular resonance in such countries as Niger and Burkina Faso, where coup leaders cited the previous governments' failures to stem terrorism as a primary justification for the takeovers.<sup>41</sup> These targeted information campaigns have seized on and manipulated public grievances to support opportunities for Russian intervention. The Africa Initiative, a private information agency with ties to the Russian government and a heavy social media presence on Telegram,<sup>42</sup> has been particularly prevalent in spreading such mis- and disinformation on the continent. The organization defines

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<sup>38</sup> Nicodemus Minde, "Russia's Africa Corps—More Than Old Wine in a New Bottle," Institute for Security Studies, March 7, 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Amy Mackinnon and Robbie Gramer, "Russian Mercenaries Staged Atrocities in Mali, France Says," *Foreign Policy*, April 26, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> "Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 13, 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Megan Duzor and Brian Williamson, "Coups in Africa," *Voice of America News*, last updated October 3, 2023; Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné and Ornella Moderan, "What Caused the Coup in Burkina Faso?" Institute for Security Studies, February 3, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> "African Initiative: Russia's New Mouthpiece in Africa," African Digital Democracy Observatory, February 6, 2024.

itself as an “information bridge between Russia and Africa”<sup>43</sup> and serves as a media arm for Africa Corps.<sup>44</sup>

Russian mercenaries continue to push their messaging despite their failures to address the growing security challenges in countries in which they operate.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to the claims of military juntas and Russian mercenaries, the security situation in countries employing Russian mercenaries continues to worsen. The number of attacks and fatalities committed by militant Islamist groups have increased significantly since Russian mercenaries replaced UN and West African security forces; there has been a record-high number of fatalities reported across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in the first half of 2024.<sup>46</sup> Fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups in Burkina Faso account for nearly half of the violence from such groups in the entire Sahel region.<sup>47</sup>

In Mali, the security situation regarding militant Islamist groups has deteriorated, despite some limited territorial gains that Russian mercenaries have supported.<sup>48</sup> In September 2024, for the first time in nine years, a jihadist armed group conducted an attack in Mali’s capital, Bamako: The local al-Qaeda franchise (JNIM) carried out attacks targeting security facilities, killing 77 people and injuring hundreds.<sup>49</sup> Such attacks and the increasing capabilities of militant Islamist groups (e.g., JNIM and the Islamic State—

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<sup>43</sup> Chiagozie Nwonwu, Fauziyya Tukur, Olaronke Alo, and Maria Korenyuk, “War ‘Tour’, Football and Graffiti: How Russia Is Trying to Influence Africa,” BBC News, September 9, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> “A Year After Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Death, Russia’s Influence Campaign in Africa Continues Apace—but It May Have New Competition,” *Meduza*, September 12, 2024.

<sup>45</sup> Torianna Eckles, “The Consequences of Russian Disinformation: Examples in Burkina Faso,” Wilson Center, January 22, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> “Africa’s Constantly Evolving Militant Islamist Threat,” 2024; Héní Nsaibia, *Newly Restructured, the Islamic State in the Sahel Aims for Regional Expansion*, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, September 30, 2024.

<sup>47</sup> “Africa’s Constantly Evolving Militant Islamist Threat,” 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Faulkner, Jaclyn Johnson, and Zachary Streicher, “Africa Faces the Unintended Consequences of Relying on Russian PMCs,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 30, 2024.

<sup>49</sup> “Militant Islamist Groups Advancing in Mali,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 24, 2024.

Sahel Province [IS-SP]) and militant Azawad separatist groups (e.g., CSP-DPA) pose continuing and growing concerns for the country. Data from the Uppsala Data Conflict Program's (UCDP's) Global Event Dataset and Candidate Events Dataset show that between 2021 and October 2024, JNIM has been involved in 662 violent events in Mali.<sup>50</sup> The same datasets also show that IS-SP has been involved in 230 events, and CSP-DPA in 29.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, JNIM has participated in violent activity in other West African countries, including Niger, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Togo. Islamic State elements, most likely as part of IS-SP, have been involved in violent activity in counties neighboring Mali, such as Niger and Burkina Faso.<sup>52</sup> Despite this, the number of civilian deaths linked to Malian forces and Russian mercenary forces is projected to *exceed* that from militant Islamic groups in 2024.<sup>53</sup>

The worsening security situation and brutal tactics that Russian mercenaries employ provide fertile ground for terrorist groups, further fueling insecurity.<sup>54</sup> Conducting large-scale indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations is standard practice for Russian mercenaries, and these attacks

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<sup>50</sup> Håvard Hegre, Mihai Croicu, Kristine Eck, and Stina Högladh, "Introducing the UCDP Candidate Events Dataset," *Research and Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3, July 2020; Stina Högladh, "UCDP Candidate Events Dataset Codebook Version 1.3," Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, 2023; Stina Högladh, "UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset Codebook Version 24.1," Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, 2024; Ralph Sundberg and Erik Melander, "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 4, July 2013.

<sup>51</sup> The CSP-DPA figure comes from combining CSP-DPA and CSP-PSD activities in the UCDP datasets; CSP-DPA is a rebranding of CSP-PSD. See David Baché, "Mali: Northern Rebels Create the Strategic Framework for the Defense of the People of Azawad" ["Mali: les rebelles du Nord créent le Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l'Azawad"], Radio France Internationale, April 25, 2024.

<sup>52</sup> The information is based on UCDP's Georeferenced Event Dataset and its Candidate Events Dataset. UCDP does not disaggregate Islamic State branches, but Niger, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Togo are adjacent to or near Mali and are countries in which UCDP records Islamic State activity between 2021 and October 2024. See Sundberg and Melander, 2013; Högladh, 2024; Hegre et al., 2020; Högladh, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> "Militant Islamist Groups Advancing in Mali," 2024.

<sup>54</sup> Clarke, 2023a; Kimberly Marten, "Where's Wagner Now? One Year After the Mutiny," *PONARS Eurasia*, June 21, 2024.

can exacerbate grievances among the population and facilitate recruitment efforts by terrorist groups, fueling greater and more-lethal attacks.<sup>55</sup>

Our analysis of public sentiment toward mercenary groups revealed that the perceived ineffectiveness of Russian mercenaries to address security threats and improve stability drives negative sentiment, which corresponds to other analyses on this topic.<sup>56</sup> For example, citizens have circulated stories about atrocities committed by Mali's military and have blamed Wagner for failing to fulfill its promises of improved security and safety within the country. The worsening security situations in these countries could likely affect the longevity of the regimes that have seized power and have "based their credibility on curtailing Islamist violence."<sup>57</sup>

## Increasing Instability and Unreliability

The notion that Wagner has failed to address security issues and instead promotes destabilization was another prevalent theme among the publics in West Africa. Examples of this notion include claims that Wagner intentionally attacks civilians to create an insecure climate and position itself as indispensable, therefore creating a cyclical business model. In Nigeria, for example, we found that public sentiment questioned Russia's value as a strategic partner: One popular tweet, in 2024, held Russia responsible for "disorder" in West Africa because of the deployment of Wagner forces and the use of disinformation to mislead Africans.

In developing their disinformation campaigns, Russian mercenaries create and leverage different narratives to suit their interests, including supporting unconstitutional regime changes in African countries that could be favorable to Russia. During the 2023 coup in Niger, Wagner worked in coordination with Russian state media to aid the coup by bombarding

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<sup>55</sup> Wassim Nasr, "How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 15, No. 11, November–December 2022, p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> VoxCroft, 2024; Antonio Giustozzi, "A Mixed Picture: How Mali Views the Wagner Group," Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, March 27, 2024.

<sup>57</sup> "With Bear Brigade, Russia Boosts Brutal Sahel Footprint," Africa Defense Forum, August 27, 2024.

media channels with fake content and promoting the suppression of pro-democracy groups as an anticolonial and pro-African endeavor.<sup>58</sup> Such activities demonstrate how Russian mercenaries promote instability in countries to create more-favorable situations for partnering with new leadership, in turn making these junta leaders rely on the mercenaries' services to maintain a grip on power.

These activities undermine claims that Russian mercenaries address security concerns and promote stability. As a result of the Russian mercenaries' tactics and behavior, the balance of fear is shifting in Mali: Civilians are now increasingly more afraid of being killed by Russian mercenaries than jihadist groups.<sup>59</sup> This is evidenced in frustrations that Malian officers expressed about their desire for a "more professional and disciplined" partner than Russian mercenaries.<sup>60</sup>

Moscow's continued prioritization of personnel for the war against Ukraine further demonstrates the degree to which African countries can actually rely on Russia.<sup>61</sup> Two months after a Russian paramilitary entity called the Bear Brigade arrived in Burkina Faso in June 2024 to provide protection services and training to the military junta, the brigade's leader announced that the group was partially withdrawing to redirect forces to defend Russia's Kursk region from Ukraine.<sup>62</sup> The departure created a gap in the security services that were supporting the Burkina Faso authorities amid concerns about internal challenges, which could have repercussions for Burkina Faso's relationship with Russia.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa," 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Christiaan Triebert, Elian Peltier, Riley Mellen, and Sanjana Varghese, "How Wagner's Ruthless Image Crumbled in Mali," *New York Times*, last updated November 2, 2024.

<sup>60</sup> Triebert et al., 2024.

<sup>61</sup> Liam Karr, "Africa File, May 9, 2024: America and Russia's Shifting Roles in West Africa; IS Africa Media; Russia's Morphing Stance in Sudan," Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute, May 9, 2024b.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Njie, "Russian Fighters to Leave Burkina Faso for Ukraine," BBC News, August 30, 2024.

<sup>63</sup> Souleymane Anne, "Sudden Withdraw from Burkina Faso: The Bear Brigade and Russia's Commitment Amidst the Ukrainian Offensive," *SeneNews*, August 29, 2024.

Russian mercenary groups have provided an unreliable presence and created instability, and Russia's arms sales have similarly been disappointing to African regimes. Moscow has prioritized weapon deliveries to its own forces in Ukraine, and international sanctions against Russia have degraded Russian arms production and quality—two factors that have contributed to a decline in Russian arms sales globally, including in Africa, since 2019.<sup>64</sup> For African countries that have already placed orders with Russia or that operate Russian weapon systems, buyers are left in uncertainty as Russia struggles to fulfill orders and deliver spare parts. Russia has not been able to provide desired military equipment to Benin or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); similarly, Algeria, Cameroon, the DRC, and Ghana have not been able to secure spare parts and necessary maintenance for Russian military systems in their arsenals.<sup>65</sup> Customers in Africa have experienced quality issues with Russian equipment in their arsenals. Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Uganda have all lost Russian military aircraft because of technical malfunctions.<sup>66</sup> A Ugandan official reportedly referred to a Russian Mi-24 helicopter as “garbage” after it crashed shortly after its acquisi-

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<sup>64</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain, and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2024.

<sup>65</sup> Ekene Lionel, “Benin’s Plans to Buy Russian Mi-171 Helicopters Delayed by Ukraine War,” *Military Africa*, July 5, 2023; “Algerian Army in Disarray as Russian Supplies Plummet,” *North Africa Post*, May 16, 2023; Maxime Paszkowiak, “Kinshasa’s Thorny Kyiv-Moscow Balancing Act over Armaments,” *Africa Intelligence*, October 2, 2023; “Ghana Air Force Struggling Due to International Sanctions on Moscow,” *Africa Intelligence*, July 29, 2024; “Mi-17 Army Helicopters Remain Grounded Despite Military Cooperation Agreement with Moscow,” *Africa Intelligence*, June 12, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Kazim Abdul, “Last Remaining Malian Air Force Su-25 Aircraft Crash,” *Military Africa*, September 11, 2023; Ebu Bekir Aşkın, “Algerian Air Force MiG-29 Crashed” [“В Алжире упал МИГ-29 ВВС страны”], Anadolu Agency [Anadolu Ajansı], March 29, 2022; Aleksei Brusilov [Алексей Брусилов], “Flying Safe: Mi-17 Helicopter Carrying Money Crashed in Libya” [“Летающий сейф: вертолет Ми-17 с деньгами упал в Ливии”], *Russian Weapons* [Русское оружие], October 25, 2021; Patrick Kenyette, “Uganda Loses New Mi-28N Attack Helicopter in Fatal Crash,” *Military Africa*, January 3, 2024; Ekene Lionel, “Nigérien Air Force Mi-17 Helicopter Crashes in Burkina Faso,” *Military Africa*, January 8, 2024.

tion.<sup>67</sup> Public reports about the performance of Russian weapon systems in Ukraine have further contributed to negative perceptions of the systems' quality.<sup>68</sup>

## Spillover of Violence into Neighboring Countries

The destabilizing effects that Russian mercenaries created have extended into neighboring countries in the Sahel.<sup>69</sup> In Mali, operations by Wagner and FAMA forces have led some residents to flee and seek refuge in Mauritania, and at least 43 Mauritanian citizens inside Mali were detained, tortured, interrogated, or killed by FAMA and Wagner, which Mauritania has openly protested.<sup>70</sup> These tensions increased significantly in April 2024, when FAMA and Wagner forces ventured into southeastern Mauritania, following individuals who had crossed into Mauritania from Mali.<sup>71</sup> Once in Mauritania, Wagner and FAMA forces committed human rights abuses in two villages, Dar Al-Na'im and Med Allah, which included looting properties and injuring three people. FAMA and Wagner also temporarily detained four

<sup>67</sup> Kim Aine, "Exclusive: Shs 45bn UPDF Chopper Malfunctions in Somalia; Grounded at Airbase," *Chimp Reports*, January 7, 2024.

<sup>68</sup> Grant Rumley and Louis Dugit-Gros, *How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Is Reshaping the Global Arms Market: Implications for the Middle East and Beyond*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 2023.

<sup>69</sup> "Conflicts Causing Record Level of Forced Displacement in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 4, 2022.

<sup>70</sup> Muhannad Sharaf El-Din [مهند شرف الدين], "Learn About the Reasons Behind the Tension Between Mali and Mauritania" ["تعرّف على أسباب التوتر بين مالي وموريتانيا"], *Erem News* [إرم], April 28, 2024; Sakina Ibrahim [سكينة ابراهيم], "After Repeated Incursions by Wagner, Mauritania Counts Its Losses" ["متكررة من فاغنر.. موريتانيا تحصى خسائرها"], *The Event* [الحدث], May 1, 2024; "Survived Death: Mauritanian Narrates Details of His Torture in Mali" ["تجا من الموت.. موريتاني يروي تفاصيل تعذيبه في مالي"], *Sky News Arabia* [عربية], April 25, 2024; "Malian and 'White' Soldiers Involved in 33 Civilian Deaths—UN Experts," *Africa News*, May 8, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Clionadh Raleigh, Roudabeh Kishi, and Andrew Linke, "Political Instability Patterns Are Obscured by Conflict Dataset Scope Conditions, Sources, and Coding Choices," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, Vol. 10, No. 74, 2023; Nick Roll, "Russia's Wagner Group in Mali Spurs Refugee Spike in Mauritania," *Al Jazeera*, June 28, 2022.

people.<sup>72</sup> This incursion introduced additional strain to Mali's relationship with Mauritania and prompted the Mauritanian government to publicly announce that it would respond with military force against future violations of its sovereignty.<sup>73</sup> Although the leaders of the two countries have engaged in talks to reduce tensions along their 2,000-kilometer-long border,<sup>74</sup> the Mauritanian government has signaled its intent to actively defend its sovereignty by increasing its military acquisitions,<sup>75</sup> conducting military exercises along its Malian border,<sup>76</sup> and engaging further with NATO partners.<sup>77</sup> This signaling is likely meant to show Mauritania's citizens that its government is willing to protect them and will respond accordingly to future violations. Mauritania's signaling also warns Mali and Wagner that it is prepared to and will respond with force to future encroachments, which could deter similar actions.

In Chad, the situation has been more complex. Chad is surrounded by Russian mercenaries on four separate fronts: Libya, Sudan, Niger, and

<sup>72</sup> "Mauritania Threatens Russian Wagner Forces (Video)" ["موريتانيا تتوعد قوات فاغنر"] ("الروسية" فيديو), *The Days 24* [24 الأيام], April 10, 2024; "The Malian Army, Supported by the Wagner Group, Attacks a Village East of the Shared Border with Mauritania" ["الجيش المالي تدعمه مجموعة 'فاغنر' يهاجم قرية شرق الحدود المشتركة مع موريتانيا"], *Anbaa Info* [أنباء إنفو], April 29, 2024.

<sup>73</sup> "Nouakchott Comments on Wagner Attack: The Mauritanian Army Will Respond Forcefully to Anyone Who Deliberately Tries to Enter Our Borders" ["نوكشوط تعلق على"] "هجوم 'فاغنر': الجيش الموريتاني سيرد الصاع صاعين لمن حاول دخول حدودنا عن قصد [24 ساعة], April 10, 2024.

<sup>74</sup> "'Wagner' Video Shows Raid on Mauritanian Village, Raising Concerns of Expanding Activity" ["'هبطاشن عسوت نم فواخمو.. فيناتيروم فيرق محتقت 'رنغاف' ويديف"], *Sky News Arabia* [سكاي نيوز عربية], May 13, 2024.

<sup>75</sup> "Wagner Ignites a Drone Arms Race in the Sahel and Sahara" ["فاغنر تشعل سباق التسلح"] ("العرب" *Al-Arab*), June 11, 2024; Shahid Muhammed and Ismail Al-Mahi [محمد، شهد و اسماعيل الماحي], "The World Today—Mauritania's Acquisition of Drones: To Whom Is the Message of Deterrence Directed?" ["العالم اليوم—اقتناء موريتانيا"], *Dot Gulf* [دوت الخليج], June 12, 2024.

<sup>76</sup> Ghaya Ben Mbarek, "Mauritania Holds Border Military Drills Amid Increasing Tensions with Mali," *The National*, May 6, 2024; "Mali, Wagner Incursions into Mauritania Spark Tension," 2024.

<sup>77</sup> "Chair of NATO Military Committee Visits Mauritania," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last updated May 3, 2024.



CAR.<sup>78</sup> Wagner has sought to enable and cooperate with Chadian violent nonstate actors who have operated in Libya and CAR and have tried to topple the Chadian government during several incidents since 2021. One of these groups, the Front for Change and Concord in Chad, killed Chadian President Idriss Deby Itno in April 2021, and advanced to within a few hundred kilometers of Chad's capital, N'Djamena, before the Chadian Armed Forces stopped the offensive.<sup>79</sup> At the time, there was public speculation that Wagner participated in this offensive against Chad, but Chadian officials denied there was any evidence of Wagner entering Chadian territory.<sup>80</sup> Although Wagner does not appear to have entered Chadian territory during this operation, there is evidence that the Front for Change and Concord in Chad received training and possibly military equipment from Wagner.<sup>81</sup> In May 2021, an additional incident resulted in Chadian military casualties after Central African Armed Forces, with the support of Wagner, crossed into Chad pursuing local rebels.<sup>82</sup> In early 2023, a plot was leaked that Wagner and a Chadian rebel group were planning to destabilize Chad's government and assassinate Chadian Transition President Mahamat Idriss Déby and four other senior Chadian officials. Wagner assisted Chadian rebels through training and "material and operational support" and helping

<sup>78</sup> "France to Reduce Troops in West and Central Africa to 600, Say Sources," *France 24*, June 17, 2024.

<sup>79</sup> "Chad FM Warns Against Russian Interference," Radio France Internationale, September 24, 2021; "Chad Military Claims Victory over Rebels in the North," Reuters, May 9, 2021; "Will Chad Be the Next Western Ally in Africa to Fall?" *The Economist*, November 23, 2023.

<sup>80</sup> Camille Tawil [كميل الطويل], "Norland: Haftar Insisted on the Tripoli Attack . . . And My Mission Was to Stop It" ["نورلاند: حفتر أصر على هجوم طرابلس... ومهمتي كانت وقفه"], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* [الشرق الأوسط], April 25, 2021; Mahamat Kabaro, "Chad: Foreign Minister Chérif Mahamat Zene Warns Against Any Russian Intervention in the Country" ["تشاد: وزير الخارجية شريف محمد زين يحذر من أي تدخل روسي في البلاد"], *TchadInfos*, September 24, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> al-Atrush and Flanagan, 2021.

<sup>82</sup> "Chad Accuses the Army of the Central African Republic of Having 'Removed and Executed' Five of Its Soldiers" ["Le Tchad accuse l'armée centrafricaine d'avoir 'enlevé et exécuté' cinq de ses soldats"], *franceinfo Afrique*, June 1, 2021.

rebels assemble inside CAR along the border, although the plan was ultimately abandoned.

The potential for spillover violence seems to pose the greatest threat to the neighbors of CAR and Mali, but the threat could expand to other countries if Russian mercenaries become directly involved in kinetic activities elsewhere. Militant Islamist groups operating in Mali are pushing further toward the country's borders with its western neighbors; there has been an increase in incidents near the borders of Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Senegal, further increasing the potential for violence to spill over into neighboring countries.<sup>83</sup>

## Putting Peacekeepers in Danger

Other corrosive effects of Russian mercenary presence in Africa are exacerbating internal displacement and hindering international peacekeepers and peacekeeping missions and regional institutions, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union. The atrocities that Russian mercenaries commit have worsened the significant displacement of people from the Sahel.<sup>84</sup> The added influx of individuals is increasing the strain on neighboring countries' capacity to absorb these vulnerable populations, presenting a growing challenge for countries in the region.<sup>85</sup> Both CAR and Mali hosted UN peacekeeping missions prior to the Wagner Group's arrival. Wagner's activity—and now Africa Corps'—in these same areas is undermining UN missions by eroding popular support through disinformation campaigns that capitalize on the host nation's frustration with peacekeepers' defensive mandate.

Russian mercenary operations in CAR and Mali have increased the risk to peacekeepers, especially because UN forces and mercenaries do not

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<sup>83</sup> "Militant Islamist Groups Advancing in Mali," 2024.

<sup>84</sup> "Conflicts Causing Record Level of Forced Displacement in Africa," 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Lalla Sy and Fidelia Bohissou, "Rising Violence Drives Refugees from Burkina Faso to Neighbouring Countries," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, July 20, 2023.

deconflict operations or maintain consistent communications.<sup>86</sup> Wagner, in particular, has demonstrated a disregard for UN personnel's security and safety and has interfered with the peacekeepers' freedom of movement, sometimes by using influence to prevent overflight clearances required for resupply and troop rotation.<sup>87</sup> The political and diplomatic cover that Russian mercenaries enjoy because of their association with the Russian government increases the stakes and potential geopolitical consequences of any confrontation. Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Côte d'Ivoire have withdrawn early from UN missions because of Wagner's presence in Mali.<sup>88</sup>

ECOWAS is arguably the strongest regional bloc in Africa, serving as an economic union to promote economic cooperation and development and regional stability among its 15 member states.<sup>89</sup> The series of coups in West Africa, however, have weakened ECOWAS's ability to promote and support democracy in the region or conduct its own stabilization missions. After 50 years of membership, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger announced their withdrawals from ECOWAS in favor of creating their own Alliance of Sahel States.<sup>90</sup> Russian mercenaries have helped the West African juntas defy ECOWAS sanctions and mediation efforts, weakening the organization's ability to respond to coups and instability, and creating disincentives for the juntas to negotiate.<sup>91</sup> Wagner's presence has increased tensions between ECOWAS member states, leading to some members embracing Russia's support and others preferring to remain aligned with Western partners.

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<sup>86</sup> Dirk Druet, "Wagner Group Poses Fundamental Challenges for the Protection of Civilians by UN Peacekeeping Operations," *Global Observatory*, International Peace Institute, March 20, 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Park, "Deal with the Devil: How Wagner Created an Alternative to Peacekeeping," Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Jean-Hervé Jezequel, Franklin Nossiter, and Ibrahim Maiga, "MINUSMA at a Crossroads," International Crisis Group, December 1, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> ECOWAS, "About ECOWAS," webpage, undated.

<sup>90</sup> Rachel Chason and Michael Birnbaum, "U.S. Struggles for Influence in West Africa as Military Juntas Rise," *Washington Post*, February 25, 2024.

<sup>91</sup> Sergey Eledinov and John Lechner, "Wagner, Mali, and Prospects for Peace in Africa," *Responsible Statecraft*, December 27, 2023.

## Economic Implications

Russian mercenaries conduct a variety of economic activities in the countries they operate in as a means of obtaining funds and extending their influence (Figure 3).<sup>92</sup> These economic activities include mining natural resources, smuggling drugs, creating local enterprises, and trafficking people.<sup>93</sup> These economic activities serve as additional revenue streams to help finance Moscow's full-scale aggression against Ukraine and help alleviate sanctions' effects.<sup>94</sup> These economic endeavors have often been managed not by Russian mercenaries directly but by registered (including locally registered) companies with links to Wagner and Prigozhin, thus helping mask these connections and reduce the potential for sanctions.<sup>95</sup> In CAR, companies linked to Wagner that operate gold and diamond mines and forestry operations have been sanctioned by the U.S. government because of their roles in supporting Wagner's destabilizing operations. These companies include Lobaye Invest, Midas Ressources [sic] SARLU, and Wood International Group SARLU, which rebranded from Bois Rouge to avoid sanctions.<sup>96</sup> In Sudan, companies linked to Wagner that conduct gold mining operations have similarly been sanctioned by the United States and the European Union because of their involvement in spreading malign information and their support of Wagner operations.<sup>97</sup> These companies include

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<sup>92</sup> "Wagner, Like Nobody's Business," All Eyes on Wagner, September 2, 2024.

<sup>93</sup> Debora Patta and Sarah Carter, "How Russia's Wagner Group Funds Its Role in Putin's Ukraine War by Plundering Africa's Resources," CBS News, May 16, 2023; Rachel Chason and Barbara Debout, "In Wagner's Largest African Outpost, Russia Looks to Tighten Its Grip," *Washington Post*, September 18, 2023; Simon Speakman Cordall, "Under New General, Russia's Wagner Makes Deeper Inroads into Libya," *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2024.

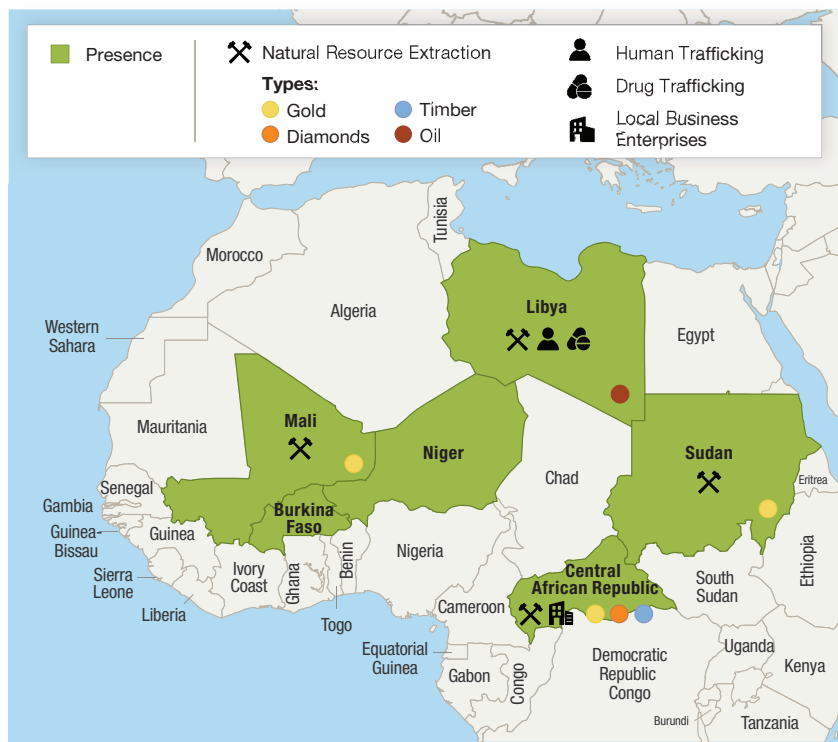
<sup>94</sup> Detrow, Klein, and Ermyas, 2023.

<sup>95</sup> C4ADS, *Unearthed: How Wagner's Mining Operations Entangled with Global Systems*, September 24, 2024, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Wagner Group-Linked Companies in the Central African Republic," press release, May 30, 2024b.

<sup>97</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity," press release, July 15, 2020; Council of the European Union, "Wagner

**FIGURE 3**  
**Russian Mercenary Presence and Economic Activities in Africa**



SOURCES: Features information from Cordall, 2024; Simon Marks and Stephanie Baker, “What Wagner’s Mutiny Means for Its Sprawling Business Empire,” *Bloomberg*, June 27, 2023; Patta and Carter, 2023; U.S. Department of State, “The Wagner Group’s Atrocities in Africa: Lies and Truth,” February 8, 2024.

M-Invest and its locally registered subsidiary Meroe Gold, which rebranded as Al-Solag Mining to avoid sanctions.<sup>98</sup>

Group: Council Adds 11 Individuals and 7 Entities to EU Sanctions Lists,” press release, February 25, 2023.

<sup>98</sup> C4ADS, 2024, p. 11.

These economic activities have had widespread and well-documented negative impacts. One example involves the human rights abuses and atrocities that Russian mercenaries have committed when taking over mining operations. In seizing control over mining operations from locals in such countries as CAR and Sudan, Russian mercenaries have committed violent acts to induce locals to flee, including torture, rape, murder, and stealing locals' possessions.<sup>99</sup> In some cases, local miners are told to leave after mercenary-linked mining companies purchase, from the government, the land on which a mine is located.<sup>100</sup> Although many of these activities have been attributed to Wagner, recent reports describe Africa Corps-linked organizations similarly taking control of mining operations, which has resulted in civilian casualties.<sup>101</sup> For example, in March 2024, Russian mercenaries carried out several attacks on mining locations in Kotabara and Zaranga in CAR, killing approximately 60 people and injuring others.<sup>102</sup> Russian mercenaries have also reportedly stolen mined gold or diamonds from local miners and processed the minerals.<sup>103</sup>

When Russian mercenaries take over these operations, local companies lose revenues and workers lose their livelihoods. One individual described how Russian mercenaries seized gold mines that supported the local community near the town of Bambari in CAR, killing local miners and forcing one person to flee to Cameroon after her family's gold-trading business was

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<sup>99</sup> Patta and Carter, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2024.

<sup>100</sup> Philip Obaji, Jr., "'We Now Face Guns': Small-Scale Miners Fear Wagner's Advances in CAR," *Al Jazeera*, July 10, 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Obaji, 2024; Joe Inwood and Jake Tacchi, "Wagner in Africa: How the Russian Mercenary Group Has Rebranded," BBC News, February 19, 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Ladd Serwat, "Regional Overview, Africa: March 2024," webpage, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, April 8, 2024.

<sup>103</sup> Jessica Berlin, David Clement, Lanre Peter Elufisan, Elizabeth Hicks, and Zoltán Kész, *The Blood Gold Report: How the Kremlin Is Using Wagner to Launder Billions in African Gold*, 21 Democracy, December 2023, pp. 15, 26; Kemal Mohamedou, *The Wagner Group, Russia's Foreign Policy, and Sub-Saharan Africa*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva Paper 32/24, March 2024, p. 26; Liam Karr, "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, February 15, 2024: Wagner Strikes Gold in Mali, and al Shabab Terrorizes Mogadishu," Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute, February 15, 2024a.

seized.<sup>104</sup> In Sudan, Russian mercenaries (or their associated companies) smuggle gold out of the country, bypassing customs and regulations and likely depriving the country of hundreds of millions of dollars in critical state revenue.<sup>105</sup> In Mali, Russian mercenaries have obtained revenue from conducting gold mining operations and from taxes the Malian government collects on gold mines, which have been funneled to Russian mercenaries as a form of payment.<sup>106</sup> Estimates of the revenue that Russian mercenaries have obtained from African mining operations vary widely, although one estimate states that Wagner and its associated companies have received more than \$2.5 billion in gold from Africa since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>107</sup>

In Libya, Russian mercenaries conduct several illicit economic activities, including drug smuggling and human trafficking. Mercenaries were also involved in counterfeiting local currency (dinar). Russia printed fake dinars that it shipped to Libya, at which point the fake currency was converted to "hard currency on the black market or through local banks" and used to pay for Russian mercenary services in the country. The illicit dinars flooding the market became a significant concern because they destabilized the local currency.<sup>108</sup>

Concern about economic exploitation by Russian mercenaries was another prevalent theme among the publics in West Africa. Examples of such concern include assertions that Russian mercenaries are paid for undelivered services and steal from African countries, and that Wagner's overall strategy in such countries as Mali has been to infiltrate the security, economy, and politics of the country to ultimately rule it. Experts highlight this latter point when describing these economic activities as part of a larger objective of "state capture," in which mercenaries seek to further control the

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<sup>104</sup> Patta and Carter, 2023.

<sup>105</sup> Nima Elbagir, Barbara Arvanitidis, Tamara Qiblawi, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Mohammed Abo Al Gheit, and Darya Tarasova, "Russia Is Plundering Gold in Sudan to Boost Putin's War Effort in Ukraine," CNN, last updated July 29, 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Karr, 2024a.

<sup>107</sup> Berlin et al., 2023, p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Maya Gebeily and Angus McDowall, "Illicit Banknotes in East Libya, Some Made by Russia, Hit Dinar," Reuters, July 24, 2024.

country's economy and shape "the government's decision-making to [Russia's] advantage."<sup>109</sup> Russian mercenaries are increasing their control over economic institutions, including mining and other industries, as a means of further embedding themselves into the country's establishment.

At a global level, the mercenaries' exploitation of resources and capture of critical minerals serves Russia's interests and supports Moscow's objective of limiting western access to strategically significant and rare African natural resources.<sup>110</sup> Since Niger revoked a French company's access to a uranium mine in June 2024, Russia has sought to negotiate a contract to take over operations at the mine, both to ensure access to support Russia's economy and to provide leverage against countries that have imposed sanctions against Moscow.<sup>111</sup>

Several of the countries in which Russian mercenaries operate are landlocked (e.g., Burkina Faso, CAR, Mali, Niger), which makes it necessary for the mercenaries to develop and use a network of routes to smuggle out minerals, precious metals, timber, and other goods. Smuggling sometimes involves the flow of goods from one host country into another, which has been the case with the flow of gold from CAR into Sudan and vice versa.<sup>112</sup> Diamonds, gold, and other valuable minerals that require less space have been routinely flown out of CAR and Sudan to countries outside Africa, such as Russia, the United Arab Emirates, and Syria—although the Sudanese Civil War may have disrupted these pathways from Sudan.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Joel Hellman and Daniel Kaufmann, "Confronting the Challenge of State Capture in Transition Economies," *Finance and Development*, Vol. 38, No. 3, September 2001; Ellen Iones, "Wagner's Real Money Never Came from Diamonds and Gold," *Vox*, last updated July 2, 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Inwood and Tacchi, 2024.

<sup>111</sup> Liam Karr, "Africa File, June 27, 2024: Niger Reallocates Uranium Mine; IS Strengthens in the Sahel; AU Future in Somalia," *Critical Threats*, June 27, 2024d.

<sup>112</sup> Elbagir et al., 2022; "Re-Examining Russia's Presence in West Africa's Gold Sector," Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime, March 2022.

<sup>113</sup> Walsh, 2022; Elbagir et al., 2022; Mathieu Olivier, "CAR—Cameroon: An Investigation into the Wagner Group's African Financial Model," *Africa Report*, January 18, 2023a; Mathieu Olivier, "How Wagner, Prigozhin Teamed Up with the CAR's Diamond Mafia," *Africa Report*, July 7, 2023c.



Wagner has used Cameroon as a logistics hub to import and export goods and capital that are connected to the mercenary group's economic activities inside CAR,<sup>114</sup> which likely assists Wagner in evading western sanctions.<sup>115</sup> For example, Wagner has transported large quantities of timber from CAR through Cameroon, and Wagner's influence over customs agents at the Cameroon-CAR border—and Wagner's use of affiliated companies it has established in Cameroon and CAR—aided the transport.<sup>116</sup> Wagner's now-sanctioned Wood International Group (a rebrand from Bois Rouge, which allowed Wagner to bypass sanctions) is one such affiliated company and served as a mechanism to export timber harvested in CAR. This timber was shipped via Cameroonian ports at Douala and Kribi to China, Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia; this movement highlights transit companies' roles in smuggling and the importance of monitoring this pathway to mitigate illicit activities.<sup>117</sup>

The goods and capital that Wagner imports from the Douala port include equipment and materials needed for mining, logging, alcohol production, and mineral processing. Wagner imports these into CAR duty free

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<sup>114</sup> Lou Osborn and Dimitri Zufferey, *Wagner: Investigation at the Heart of the Prigozhin System* [Wagner: Enquête au cœur du système Prigojine], Éditions du Faubourg, 2023, p. 254; Mathieu Olivier and Benjamin Roger, "The 'Africans' of Wagner: Combatants, Propagandists, Engineers . . . The Lieutenants of Evgeny Prigozhin" ["Les 'Africains' de Wagner: combattants, propagandistes, ingénieurs . . . Les lieutenants d'Evgeny Prigojine"], *Young Africa* [Jeune Afrique], July 2, 2023; Julia Stanyard, Eleanor Beevor, and Thierry Vircoulon, *Port of Call: Regional Illicit Flows Through Douala, Cameroon*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, May 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Eleanor Beevor and Julia Stanyard, "Organised Criminals Make Douala Their Gateway to Global Markets," ISS Today, Institute for Security Studies, March 5, 2024; Marks and Baker, 2023; Osborn and Zufferey, 2023, pp. 279–280.

<sup>116</sup> Patta and Carter, 2023; Marks and Baker, 2023; Mathieu Olivier, "From Bangui to Douala, How the Ex-Wagner Group Continues to Extend Its Canvas" ["De Bangui à Douala, comment l'ex-groupe Wagner continue d'étendre sa toile"], *Young Africa* [Jeune Afrique], June 7, 2024.

<sup>117</sup> Beevor and Stanyard, 2024; C4ADS, 2024, p. 21; Marks and Baker, 2023; Osborn and Zufferey, 2023, pp. 279–280; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Companies and Individuals Advancing Russian Malign Activities in Africa," press release, March 8, 2024a.

because of a concession from the CAR government.<sup>118</sup> However, since September 2023, Cameroon has reportedly cracked down on Wagner's export of timber and other materials from its territory, likely because of the pressure of U.S. sanctions.<sup>119</sup> It is unclear how much this crackdown has disrupted Wagner's overall economic activity in Cameroon.

## Public Sentiments of Russian Mercenaries

Russian mercenaries have been implicated in a variety of repressive activities in Africa, from torture, illegal detentions, and the killing of civilians to disinformation campaigns and the violent suppression of protests. To better understand how these activities have shaped the way those in the region view Russian mercenaries and Russia, VoxCroft obtained and analyzed public sentiment expressed through online and social media in eight West African countries, including countries with and without Russian mercenary presence. Most of the media in the dataset are from 2022 through August 2024 and were neutral in sentiment, but comments that were not neutral were considerably more unfavorable than favorable toward Russia and its mercenaries. Figure 4 shows these data.

We identified five themes of concern the publics of countries employing Russian mercenaries expressed, which we have described previously. These themes depict the major drivers of citizens' negative sentiment (Figure 5).

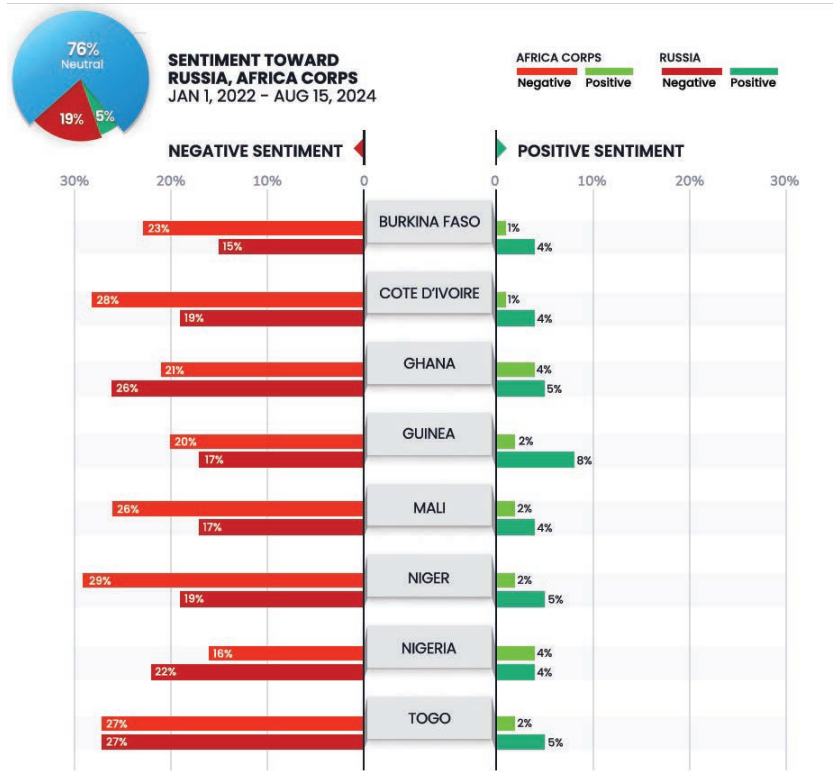
The analysis revealed that pro-Russia narratives originate more often from bots and government representatives than from local populations. Positive references to Russia often referred to military support, includ-

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<sup>118</sup> Olivier, 2023a; Mathieu Olivier, "At the Heart of the Wagner System, from Douala to Bangui," *Africa Report*, August 16, 2022; Marks and Baker, 2023; Mathieu Olivier, "Wagner Against Castel: In the Central African Republic, the Russians Trigger the Beer War" ["Wagner contre Castel: en Centrafrique, les Russes déclenchent la guerre de la bière"], *Young Africa [Jeune Afrique]*, February 9, 2023b.

<sup>119</sup> Christophe Châtelot, "In Central African Republic, Wagner Continues to Prosper," *Le Monde*, June 17, 2024; Olivier, June 7, 2024; Mathieu Olivier, "Wagner: Putin Negotiates After Prigozhin with Touadera" ["Wagner: Poutine négocie l'après-Prigojine avec Touadéra"], *Young Africa [Jeune Afrique]*, September 26, 2023d; Stanyard, Beavor, and Vircoulon, 2024.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Public Sentiments Toward Russia and Russian Mercenaries in West Africa**



SOURCE: Reproduced from VoxCroft, 2024.

NOTE: Although only Africa Corps appears in the figure, the data include publics' sentiments of Wagner and Africa Corps. VoxCroft considered the publics in the analyzed countries to not have made a distinction between the two mercenary groups when posting.

ing the provision of military systems, cooperation with counterterrorism efforts, and efforts to serve as a counterbalance to the West. These themes certainly align with the types of messaging that Russia has pushed elsewhere in Africa and suggest a concerted effort by some governments to propagate the perception that Russia and its mercenaries are beneficial to the countries in which they are active. The effects of this type of messag-

FIGURE 5

## Major Themes of Russian Mercenaries in Countries Hosting Them



SOURCE: Social media posts gathered by VoxCroft (VoxCroft, 2024).

ing are unclear, although the messaging could contribute to the high levels of neutral perceptions, and the messaging could certainly contribute to the degree of positive perceptions of Russia and Russian mercenaries.

In Burkina Faso, government-affiliated accounts were responsible for almost all positive discussions related to Russia and Russian mercenaries during the time frame of our analysis. Yet despite these positive posts, negative discussions accounted for nearly 25 percent of discussions about mercenaries; positive discussions accounted for just 1 percent of all analyzed posts. In Mali, government-affiliated accounts—along with inauthentic accounts (e.g., bots)—were similarly significant drivers of positive discussions related to Russia and Russian mercenaries, particularly in the final year and a half of the time frame of the analyzed posts. Despite these positive-messaging efforts, more than 25 percent of online messages related to Russian mercenaries were negative and only 2 percent were positive. In Niger, although authentic users accounted for a considerable portion of the positive sentiment related to Russia and Russian mercenaries between late 2022 and mid 2023, there was a significant decrease in the latter half of 2023 and through August 2024, possibly coinciding with the deployment of Russian mercenaries to Niger. Positive sentiment was also primarily driven by government-affiliated and bot accounts in Nigeria, although there was an increase of authentic sentiment in 2024, such as a post on the X platform portraying Wagner as a Christian ally that could rid Africa of terrorists.<sup>120</sup>

## Conclusions

Russian mercenaries in Africa have experienced considerable changes since 2023. African leaders who contract with Russian mercenaries frequently cite security challenges and terrorist or insurgent threats in their countries as justification for using the mercenaries. However, the increasing violence, human rights abuses, and negative public sentiment regarding mercenary tactics demonstrate that the presence of Russian mercenaries worsens the problems that they have been hired to address.

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<sup>120</sup> VoxCroft, 2024.

Russian mercenary activities affect not only the countries that employ them but the entire region: Russian mercenaries cross international borders, affecting countries and regions in which the mercenaries have no authority to operate. We found reports of both mercenary-perpetrated violence and illicit economic activity that have occurred across borders. In some cases, the violence was a direct violation of national sovereignty; mercenaries sometimes pursue targets—including civilians—as civilians seek sanctuary from rape, torture, and extrajudicial killings. It is increasingly possible that these violations will continue as Russian mercenary operations encroach on the territories of other countries in the region.

Moscow has sought to capitalize on its ambiguous relationship with mercenaries to flout international norms of respecting human rights and following the rules of armed engagement and to shield itself from accountability for military casualties. Our public sentiment analysis confirms that Moscow may have seen some success with this messaging. In the countries in which Russian mercenaries are active, publics feel more negatively about Russian mercenaries than they do the Russian government, as shown in Figure 4: In Burkina Faso, 23 percent of posts showed a negative sentiment toward mercenaries versus 15 percent of posts that were negative toward Russia generally; in Mali, the amounts were 26 percent versus 17 percent, respectively; and in Niger they were 29 percent versus 19 percent. As these mercenary groups continue to operate under the direct control of Russia's Ministry of Defense, such sentiment may shift as publics gain awareness of the relationship between mercenaries and the Russian government. Although the public sentiment analysis showed that there is some positive sentiment of Russia's involvement in local affairs—to serve as a counterbalance to western influence, particularly from France—African publics expressed considerable concerns about Russian mercenaries, including their human rights abuses, ineffectiveness in combatting terrorism, and economic exploitation.

This analysis indicates that mercenaries might undermine Moscow's portrayal of Russia as a reliable partner for regional stability. The failed Wagner mutiny was a watershed moment: Events in the aftermath cast a stark light on Moscow's direct-command relationship with Wagner and other such groups, a recent example of which is the deployment to Burkina Faso and then quick redeployment to Kursk of the Bear Brigade. The civilian targeting, human rights abuses, illicit economic activities, and violations of

state sovereignty in which Russian mercenaries engage should therefore be recognized for what they are: activities directed and controlled by the Russian government.

African leaders who oppose Russian mercenary deployments could hold Russia accountable by leveraging their diplomatic ties with Moscow and with international organizations. Institutions, such as ECOWAS and the African Union, might find ways to persuade Russia to act as a constructive rather than destructive security partner; i.e., one that operates within the bounds of international norms of armed conflict and human rights. The Russian mercenaries active in Africa have repeatedly demonstrated that they are willing to undermine their partners for their own gain; mercenaries have been unable to deliver on their promises of either regime or physical security, even for junta governments. Attacks increasingly occur in capital cities and state security forces take casualties as a result.<sup>121</sup> Whenever Russian mercenaries are, violence has increased, public dissatisfaction has grown, and African leaders have enjoyed fewer productive partnerships diplomatically, militarily, and economically. Russian mercenaries acting on behalf of Moscow reduce African leaders' strategic flexibility and close off important avenues of assistance and investment.

Russia might be expanding its paramilitary and mercenary presence to other countries in Africa. Reports indicate that, as of September 2024, Russian military or paramilitary personnel (possibly from the Africa Corps), are in Equatorial Guinea to provide regime protection to the president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, and the vice president, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue.<sup>122</sup> If this activity is confirmed to be an expansion of Russian mercenaries in Africa, then Equatorial Guinea would be a concerning case because a mercenary presence would not be in response to a terrorist

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<sup>121</sup> Tim Lister, Avery Schmitz, and Darya Tarasova, "Dozens of Russian Mercenaries Killed in Rebel Ambush in Mali, in Their Worst Known Loss in Africa," CNN, July 29, 2024.

<sup>122</sup> "Another Contingent of Russian Mercenaries Arrives in Bata—the Shadow of the Wagner Group Spreads" ["Llega a Bata otro contingente de mercenarios rusos—La sombra del Grupo Wagner se extiende"], *Diario Rombe*, September 14, 2024; David Lewis, Filipp Lebedev, and Giulia Paravicini, "Russian Power Creeps Across West Africa with Equatorial Guinea Mission," Reuters, November 12, 2024; "Russia Has Likely Deployed Mercenaries in Equatorial Guinea," *Militarnyi*, October 30, 2024.

or insurgent threat but an effort to coup-proof a regime seeking to maintain power.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> “Russian Mercenaries Arrive in Malabo to Ensure the Transition of Power in Favor of Teodorín” [“Llegan a Malabo mercenarios rusos para asegurar la transición del poder a favor de Teodorín”], *Diario Rombe*, August 23, 2024.



# Abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
CSP-DPA	Cadre stratégique pour la défense du peuple de l’Azawad
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAMa	Malian Armed Forces
IS-SP	Islamic State—Sahel Province
JNIM	Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UN	United Nations



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ECOWAS—See Economic Community of West African States.

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Since 2018, Russian private military contractors or mercenaries have proliferated across Africa. The largest mercenary outfit is the Wagner Group, which was led by Yevgeny Prigozhin until his death in 2023. Russian mercenaries serve as an important mechanism by which Moscow seeks to reduce its growing international economic and political isolation. Mercenaries help accomplish this by expanding Russia's global footprint and influence at a relatively low cost.

Although Russia has sought to capitalize on its ambiguous relationships with mercenaries to ignore international norms, Moscow has taken public and direct control over these groups in countries in Africa. Russian mercenaries have operated a nimble expeditionary force, seemingly unencumbered by international rules of war, which has bolstered authoritarian regimes in Africa at the expense of the civilian populations' and the countries' overall security.

The authors describe how Russia's armed presence in Africa has changed from mid-2023 to September 2024. The authors identify where Russian mercenaries have presences in Africa, what types of activities they perform, and the resulting implications of mercenaries' use for African governments, economies, and civilian populations. The authors also examine how publics in countries where these mercenaries are present—and publics in neighboring countries—feel about and discuss Russian mercenaries and Russia itself.

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