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Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Issues for Congress

Overview

The Wagner Group, nominally a private military company (PMC) with ties to the Russian state, has expanded its presence in Africa over the past six years. Wagner provides security services in several African countries, and affiliates are reportedly involved in mining and commercial activities. Wagner has been implicated in human rights abuses in Africa, including killings and torture. In January, the United States designated Wagner as a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO), citing, in part, its activities in Africa. See also: CRS In Focus IF12344, *Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)*.

The Wagner Group's role in Africa appears to support a broader effort by Moscow to challenge and disrupt Western influence at relatively low cost. Politically connected Russian elites may also benefit from Wagner's economic activities. 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 countries, particularly former colonial power France.

U.S. officials have criticized the Wagner Group's "predatory" activities in Africa, asserting that they are destabilizing, exploitative, and an extension of Russian official policy. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland testified to Congress in January 2023 that Wagner's access to gold mines in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) "directly funds" operations in Ukraine.

Key Areas of Activity

U.S. State Department and Defense Department officials have stated that Wagner is active in CAR, Libya, Mali, and Sudan. Wagner also has engaged in outreach to Burkina Faso, and reportedly has sought to destabilize pro-Western leaders in countries such as Chad. In 2019, Wagner personnel deployed to Mozambique to aid counterinsurgency operations against a local Islamic State affiliate, but withdrew after heavy casualties. Some reports suggest Wagner may be active in other African countries in less visible ways. Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin reportedly oversees a wider network of entities involved in disinformation and electoral processes in Africa.

The countries where Wagner openly operates share some attributes, notably domestic insurgencies and fraught relations with traditional donors. Mali and Sudan are under military rule, as are Burkina Faso and Chad. CAR and Mali are former French colonies, as are Chad and Burkina Faso. Malian and Burkinabè officials have cited frustrations over France's counterterrorism operations, and diplomatic tensions led French troops to exit both countries in 2022–2023. In CAR, France ended a military stabilization mission prior to Wagner's entry. 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, 2022.

U.S. officials have asserted in statements and testimony that the Wagner Group's abuses and economic exploitation undermine stability in countries where it operates. Wagner's difficulties in Mozambique may also have hurt its reputation. Several African leaders, including the presidents of Ghana and Niger, have publicly expressed concern about Wagner's activities in neighboring countries.

At the same time, some leaders may view the Wagner Group as furnishing valuable assistance that other partners are unwilling or unable to provide. Wagner's support to the fragile government of CAR helped defend the capital against rebel assault in early 2021; in both CAR and Mali, Wagner's logistical support appears to have enabled national militaries to expand operations against insurgents—albeit accompanied by significant abuses. Leaders chafing at arms embargoes (as in CAR) or human rights criticism (as in Mali) may view the Wagner Group as a counter-balance to Western donor influence. Some leaders appear to perceive Wagner as sharing a preferred scorched-earth approach to counterinsurgency. Wagner's partnership with the Malian junta against French postcolonial influence may also appeal to other leaders or contenders.

CAR. The Wagner Group reportedly first entered CAR after Russia obtained an exemption to the U.N. arms embargo in 2017 to provide weapons to CAR's military. Russia then sent "instructors" (including Wagner personnel) to train local soldiers. Press and think-tank reports estimate that 1,000 to 2,000 Wagner personnel operate in CAR, where they have played a prominent role in military operations against rebel groups since 2021. Wagner personnel also provide personal protection to President Faustin-Archange Touadera and serve as his advisors. Wagner affiliates are reportedly active in private security, mining, and other commercial sectors.

Mali. Mali's military junta reportedly contracted the Wagner Group in late 2021 to support combat operations against Islamist insurgents. This followed an increase in official Russian arms sales to Mali. About 1,000–1,500 Wagner personnel may operate in Mali, per press reports.

Malian officials deny that Wagner is present, asserting that its personnel are official Russian advisors. AFRICOM stated in 2022 that Bamako had agreed to pay Wagner \$10 million per month. Wagner's entry aggravated a diplomatic crisis with France, culminating in France's military withdrawal after a decade of U.S.-backed counterterrorism operations. Since Wagner's arrival, Bamako has increasingly restricted the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali, impeding its ability to report on abuses. Wagner's support to the military may also be fueling strains in a long-running peace process with northern separatist groups.

Libya. Wagner group 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.

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 concessions—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 April 2023, after fighting broke out between Sudan's rival security forces, some press reports suggested that Wagner and Libya's Haftar were supplying ammunition and surface-to-air missiles to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which is fighting to take over the country from the Sudanese military. Russia's foreign minister has claimed Wagner is helping Sudan to fight terrorism.

U.S. Sanctions

In January 2023, the Treasury Department designated the Wagner Group as a TCO under Executive Order 13863, citing, in part, "serious criminal activity" (including human rights abuses) in CAR and Mali. Treasury simultaneously designated Wagner under the sanctions program for CAR (Executive Order 13667). Treasury made several additional Wagner-linked designations under the CAR program:

- Sewa Security Services in CAR;
- the Officers Union for International Security (OUIS) in CAR and the OUIS director, a Russian national;
- Kratol Aviation, based in the United Arab Emirates and active in CAR, Libya, and Mali; and
- the former National Security Advisor in CAR, a Russian national and "Wagner Group employee."

The Wagner Group was designated previously for other U.S. sanctions. These actions freeze any Wagner Group assets under U.S. jurisdiction, block transactions with U.S. persons, and impose visa and entry restrictions. Treasury has also designated several entities active in CAR and Sudan for links to Wagner and/or Prigozhin, under non-Africa-specific sanctions programs.

Potential Issues for Congress

Congressional Oversight. Congress has enacted legislation requiring the executive branch to report on Russian PMC activities and influence worldwide (see, e.g., §1243 of P.L. 117-263). Congress may consider whether these and other reporting requirements enable sufficient review of Wagner's Africa activities and U.S. responses, or whether new or amended requirements are warranted.

Sanctions Impact and Effectiveness. Congress may seek to assess the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions related to Wagner in Africa and resources devoted to enforcing them. Congress may consider the impact of the January 2023 TCO designation on African governments' perceptions of the Wagner Group and Russia. Congress may examine the extent of U.S. sanctions coordination with partners such as the European Union, which has made additional Wagner-related designations in Africa. Members may also weigh the potential implications for U.S. relations in Africa of bills seeking to prompt the executive branch to designate the Wagner Group a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

Conditionality. Congress may consider whether to restrict or condition U.S. aid to governments in Africa that pursue contracts or relationships with Wagner. (Currently, U.S. aid to the governments of Mali, Sudan, and Burkina Faso is subject to some legal restrictions due to military coups and other factors.) Legislative conditions on U.S. support for multilateral lending are another potential tool. Either option may have unintended consequences, such as the possible loss of U.S. leverage or contacts with local partners.

Alternatives to Wagner. News reports suggest 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). Congress may consider whether to authorize, fund, or condition the use of such tools. Congress may also consider the potential for unintended consequences. For example, African 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 influence has emerged as a U.S. policy priority in Africa. At the same time, African leaders and publics have chafed at perceived U.S. pressure, amid enduring sensitivities over state sovereignty and the legacy of the Cold War. For example, some African leaders assailed the Countering Malign Russian Activities Globally Act (H.R. 9374), which passed the House in 2022. In announcing its Africa strategy in 2022, the Biden Administration asserted that, "the United States will not dictate Africa's choices." Framing U.S. diplomatic engagement in Africa with regard to Russia and Wagner is likely to remain challenging.

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