



**The Wagner Group:
Untangling the Purposes of
a Russian Power Tool**

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Introduction

Beginning in 2014, with the war in eastern Ukraine, the Russian state has frequently used the “Wagner Group” as a security tool abroad, including in Syria, Libya, and throughout sub-Saharan Africa. We know that the Wagner Group has been present in the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mozambique, and Mali, at a minimum. But what precisely is the Wagner Group, and how can U.S. policymakers respond to Russia’s use of private military companies? This memo pinpoints Russia’s use of methods that are frowned upon and hard to attribute, thus allowing for plausible deniability and furthering state goals of sowing discord and heightening the Russian footprint and areas of intervention around the globe.

What is the Wagner Group?

While some call the Wagner Group a private military company, it is not a typical PMC. It has a very close relationship with the Russian state, training next door to the Russian military intelligence agency (GRU) special operations (*spetsnaz*) training center in Molkino, Krasnodar. In 2015 and 2016, some of its members killed in action were buried with military honors, something usually reserved for uniformed soldiers. And in December 2016, its founder, former GRU *spetsnaz* officer Dmitry Utkin, received a medal for bravery from Putin at the Kremlin.

Some call the Wagner Group “mercenary,” but its members are not true mercenaries. While they fight for profit on contract, they are also fiercely patriotic to the Russian state (even though some are friends of Russia, rather than Russian citizens, hailing from Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, and Serbia). Indeed, the Wagner Group has morphed so much over time that it may be nothing more than a name, rather than a distinct entity with an organizational chart. A better term for it, rather than a PMC or mercenary outfit, might be an informal semi-state security group.[1]

Why is the Wagner Group Employed by Russia?

In one sense there is no mystery about why Russia uses the Wagner Group abroad. It brings the same benefits to the Russian state that other states, including the U.S., get out of using PMCs. It saves state budgetary resources by employing people on contract, obviating the need to pay long-term benefits to employees. It sometimes adds skill sets to regular troops, as in the case of the sharpshooters deployed to Libya on behalf of warlord Khalifa Haftar in 2019.[2] It provides plausible deniability for state actions—although this may be less true with time, as investigative journalists are now on the lookout for Wagner wherever it goes. Perhaps most important for Putin’s Russia, it allows the state to take military action abroad while avoiding casualties for regular troops. Putin can bask in the successes of his Syria operations, for example, without putting conscripts on the ground and worrying about lost public support. Indeed, Ivan Safranchuk, an analyst at

MGIMO with connections to the Russian military, said at a Harriman Institute event in early 2019 that we should think of the Wagner Group as a form of proxy warfare, since few in Russia care about what happens to its members.[3]

Yet a number of puzzles remain. Wagner is illegal, even unconstitutional by some interpretations, in Russia. The Russian state resoundingly made that decision, following many months of Duma debate about PMCs, in March 2018.[4] Why then, did Putin publicly mention the

Wagner Group in Dec. 2018, saying “If they comply with Russian laws, they have every right to work and promote their business interests anywhere in the world”?[5]

The answer may be that illegality is, first, a form of market restriction—only Putin’s friends are allowed to operate in the sector—and, second, a mechanism for maintaining control. Anytime the Wagner Group gets out of hand, it can be prosecuted and imprisoned for “mercenary” behavior, as the leaders of its predecessor group, the Slavonic Corps, were in 2013.[6] That prosecution occurred even though the Slavonic Corps’ members were recruited by an FSB reserve officer, and even though its activities in Syria were probably contracted through an arrangement that involved the Russian Energy Ministry.

The Wagner Group can also be disowned by the Russian Defense Ministry, as it was during its February 2018 assault on natural gas fields protected by US special operations forces in the Kurdish region of Deir el Zour, Syria. Wagner Group forces there emerged from Russian-controlled territory, and were known to be working under contract to the Syrian energy ministry, through an arrangement made by the Russian Energy Ministry. After a battle that killed at least dozens (and maybe hundreds) of Wagner Group members, the remainder were eventually flown home by Russian military airplanes. But during the battle, the Russian military told its U.S. counterparts on the deconfliction hotline, “They’re not ours”—and afterwards, the Russian military refused to help evacuate the wounded with helicopters.[7]

Why might the Russian military have wanted to disown those fighters? It may have been an effort at plausible deniability, testing the mettle of U.S. forces to stay in Syria while denying that Russia was participating in that test. But there may have been something more, too.

Who is Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Man Behind the Mercenaries?

We learned in 2016 (from reporting by Denis Korotkov[8]) that Wagner’s primary contractor is Yevgeny Prigozhin, famous to American audiences because he is under both sanctions and indictment for the role his St. Petersburg Internet Research Agency played in interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

Who is Prigozhin? He began his young adult life imprisoned for nine years in Soviet times for organized criminal behavior.[9] He got out two years early, probably indicating that he made some kind of deal with the state (and in those years, that deal was probably with Putin’s colleagues in

the KGB). He started a hot-dog kiosk in St. Petersburg and turned it into a successful restaurant chain, this during the time that Putin had high-level responsibilities in the St. Petersburg mayor's office related to business deals and contracts. When Putin moved to the Kremlin, so did Prigozhin, becoming the primary Kremlin caterer and even serving George W. Bush. Prigozhin also became the primary caterer for the Russian public school system, and then the primary food and cleaning contractor for the Russian military.

Despite his apparent breadth of power, there are clues of military displeasure with Prigozhin. He was known to cheat the military, so in 2017 they stopped paying his contracts—and he sued them, in several cases successfully, indicating that his “roof” in Russia was bigger than that of the defense ministry.[10] The resentment against him—an oligarch interloper with no military experience in the Russian battle space in Syria, and a cheat no less—may explain why the Russian General Staff did nothing to come to the group's assistance at Deir el Zour.

What is Russia up to in Africa?

Far from marking the end of Prigozhin and Wagner, though—even though by that point its founder, Utkin, with nom de guerre “Wagner,” had disappeared from public view—the scandals around Prigozhin coincided with Wagner's deployment to Africa. Two African cases are worth describing in depth.

The first is in the Central African Republic (CAR), where Wagner is providing military training to CAR special forces (completely separately from the UN-mandated EU training mission, part of the MINUSCA peace operation), and protecting some diamond and gold fields via a Prigozhin contract in return for a cut of the profits. Simultaneously, CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra has accepted as his “national security advisor” a retired GRU officer, Valery Zakharov, who (according to a CNN investigation) has been paid by Prigozhin's company and is living on property owned by Prigozhin.[11] 80% of CAR is controlled by rebel militia, not the state—and that 80% is where the diamond and gold mines are located. In 2019, Zakharov and Prigozhin worked together to jump-start a peace process in CAR. They succeeded where the UN and the African Union had failed, but at a steep cost, because now rebels are being welcomed into government and military posts in CAR without adequate vetting, according to the International Crisis Group.[12]

What we see here is a new model playing out: Russia has become the crucial linchpin for stability in CAR, through the actions of Prigozhin, who is rewarded by contracts involving mineral deposits. While CAR may not matter much to Russia, we could imagine this being a test case for similar models to be used in more geopolitically strategic areas, including Syria and Libya. And because CAR matters so little to the rest of the world, it's a low-cost experiment for Russia. If it fails, and Russia goes home again, few will notice.

The second major case is in Libya. Wagner has been operating there

since 2018, and a huge new influx of Wagner forces were flown in during fall 2019, according to a leaked UN report.[13] They played a crucial role in the efforts of eastern warlord Khalifa Haftar to seize the capital of Tripoli in the months that followed. Now it looks like Haftar has failed, pushed back to his home base in the east-central coastal region of Libya. But Russia's experiment may have "worked" nonetheless, because Russia, by May 2020, appeared to be in a position to fashion a deal with the Turkish military-supported (and internationally recognized) Libyan government, for some sort of "unity" bargain with Haftar. In mid-May, Russia flew in (from Syria) some advanced fighter and bomber jets to the Haftar-controlled airfield in Jufra. Moscow's goal may very well be to protect Haftar's oil- and gas-rich territory from Turkish and Libyan government incursions. If so, then once again Russia may be on its way to becoming the crucial linchpin for security between state and opposition militias, this time in Africa's north. Russia's ultimate goal here may be to build a permanent naval and air base on Haftar's territory, giving Moscow the ability to interfere with NATO operations in the Mediterranean.

What are the Implications for the United States and Its Allies?

On the one hand, what Russia is doing in these operations is experimental: it's throwing spaghetti against the wall to see what sticks. Despite the claims of some detractors, there is no

real evidence of some kind of Soviet-style masterplan to make Moscow a dominant player on the African continent.

But as we saw in Deir el Zour in February 2018, sometimes the experiments can get out of hand. This leads to several key questions for the United States and its allies.

First, how risk-acceptant is Putin, really? Does he think about the Wagner Group as a disposable proxy force, whose casualties don't matter? If so, then how far will he dare go, in his efforts to provoke?

Second, what message does Putin take away about the "red lines" that the US has set for this security competition in out-of-area operations? Will he remember February 2018 and be more cautious? Or will he instead concentrate on the more recent evidence, that the U.S. is not particularly interested in staying in foreign military operations (whether in Syria, Libya, or Afghanistan), and treat this as a green light to push further?

Third, and perhaps most crucially: will Putin continue to use the Wagner Group as a wedge to insert himself into warlord-driven civil wars, as he has appeared to do in the Central African Republic and Libya, and may be doing in Syria? Will he become the great negotiator of the Middle East and Africa in the absence of the United States—and will that allow him to build new military bases in places like Libya that can threaten vital US and NATO interests?

At a time when the US military is likely to have minimal resources available for foreign deployments, no matter who the next president is,

it is time to get creative. The key question for US military, diplomatic, and intelligence planners should be: what actions can the US take to tweak Putin's calculations in the Middle East and Africa, in a direction more favorable to the US and its allies?

Policy Recommendations

1. The U.S. should reengage with Africa and the Middle East to present a clear alternative choice for people whose countries are considering an alliance with Russia and Wagner Group forces. By once again taking up the mantle of leadership on behalf of democratic development, free speech and free elections, and support for human rights and individual freedoms, as well as training and equipping programs designed to develop military forces that are subject to civilian control, the U.S. (in cooperation with its like-minded allies) can provide a clear contrast with Russia's corrupt patronage model and its uncaring attitude towards civilian lives.
2. The Wagner Group has had a number of prominent failings in recent years, including the debacle in Deir el Zour, Syria, its bloody defeat and subsequent withdrawal from Mozambique, and its failure to help Haftar seize Tripoli in Libya. The Wagner Group has also demonstrated a consistent disdain for human rights and civilian lives. Meanwhile, the lifelong criminal Yevgeny Prigozhin is plundering foreign natural resources on behalf of the Kremlin elite. The U.S. should advertise the Wagner Group's weakness and odiousness to populations in Africa and the Middle East, to sap any local support for Russian military adventurism.
3. U.S. forces in the field should maintain situational awareness about the Wagner Group's activities, and be on guard for their own safety and well-being given Russia's history of broken agreements and attacks on U.S. personnel.

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