

Forces of Destabilization: Countering Wagner Group in the Sahel

Description

This piece was selected as a finalist in the undergraduate category of an essay contest co-sponsored by IWI and the Joint Staff J7 Office of Irregular Warfare and Competition (OIWC). Due to the nature of the contest, this piece is published with only minimal inputs from our editorial team. The views expressed do not represent the position of IWI or the the US Government, including the Joint Staff J7 OIWC.

On 15 August, the last French army unit crossed Mali's border into Niger, ending a [nine year](#) expeditionary counterinsurgency effort. Hours later, al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) claimed it had [killed four Russian mercenaries](#) from Wagner Group in the Bandiagara area of central Mali. The day's events bode poorly for the struggling Northwest African state, whose campaign against the [Islamic State in West African Province \(ISWAP\) and JNIM](#) has already seen numerous atrocities. With the Malian junta turning from France to the Russian private military company (PMC) for support, and jihadist militants pivoting to take on this previously secondary adversary, the security situation in Mali may be on the cusp of significant deterioration. Western governments with interests in the region's security need to formulate an appropriate response.

A History of Violence: Wagner Group and PMCs as Security Partners

Wagner Group is a PMC that provides [site security, military training, protective services, intelligence, information operations, and a direct action capability](#) to both state and non-state actors. The organization, comprised primarily of former Russian soldiers, serves as an unofficial tool of the [Russian Defense Ministry, Federal Security Service \(FSB\), Main Intelligence Directorate \(GRU\), and Spetsnaz](#). These ties are discrete, affording the Russian government some element of deniability while its private proxy pursues the Kremlin's strategic interests.

Wagner Group first [arrived in Mali](#) in December 2021. In the ensuing months, [human rights violations](#) increased tenfold. By mid 2022, joint operations between the Russian mercenaries and the Malian military had killed 500 civilians. The massacre of [300 civilians](#) in Moura was the most gruesome incident. Despite Wagner's relatively recent arrival in the African security environment, the organization's record of human rights abuses already extends across the continent. With several African governments and increasing swaths of terrain under Wagner's influence, the Russian

PMC's presence portends exacerbation of the country's refugee crises and jihadist insurgencies in a region already plagued by instability.

Within fragile states, Wagner regularly fosters instability by committing acts of indiscriminate violence and human rights abuses. In the Central African Republic (CAR), President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's government [hired Wagner in 2017](#) to assist with the country's ongoing civil war. The group committed egregious human rights violations, including [indiscriminate killings and sexual violence](#). In February 2021, Wagner contractors gunned down fleeing civilians from a combat helicopter while hunting rebels in the town of Bambari. Wagner also targeted ethnic minorities like the Fulani in CAR, intensifying ethnic strife and driving recruits to [Fulani-based rebel groups](#).

Wagner has an affinity for large-scale direct-action missions, which, when used by PMCs, have historically not brought positive or lasting change. In 2015, the Nigerian government hired contractors from Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment, and Protection International (STTEP), a South African PMC, to combat Boko Haram. STTEP consists of personnel highly trained and experienced in counterinsurgency missions. The contractors used a strategy of annihilation to recapture [10 out of 14 local governments](#). Following STTEP's departure, terrorism in Nigeria returned to [pre-existing levels](#). The intervention temporarily suppressed Boko Haram but failed to achieve any political resolution to the insurgency.

Wagner's direct-action campaigns are equally ineffective to those of STTEP. In 2020, Mozambique hired Wagner to conduct direct-action strikes against [ISIS-linked insurgents](#). Wagner's intervention suffered a [series of setbacks](#) and the PMC was ultimately [replaced due to a lack of local expertise](#) and an inability to coordinate with the Mozambican military. In Syria, according to [news reports](#), 500 pro-Syrian government soldiers, augmented by Wagner contractors, [failed in an assault on a US-supported Kurdish opposition outpost](#). Following the four-hour attack, [200 to 300 of Wagner's Syrian partners lay dead](#).

Countering Wagner in Africa: A Possible Western Response

Preventing adversaries from dominating key regions and sustaining a stable and open international system are [key objectives of US security policy](#). Wagner's violence in northwest Africa threatens both goals, while reliance on PMCs further weakens the legitimacy and military capacity of already fragile African governments. As USAFRICOM commander, General Stephen J. Townsend, asserted in his [March 2022 posture statement](#), "[w]here Wagner goes instability follows."• Wagner and other PMCs amplify regional instability, creating fertile, permissive environments for transnational threats while driving refugee flows. In Mali, the fight against ISWAP and JNIM has already displaced [400,000 people](#). Russian mercenarism there, like that in CAR, drives a segment of this displaced population

toward violent extremist groups. [According to a civilian in Mali](#), “We fear Wagner much more than the terrorists, really. The terrorists, they have never come to destroy a market.”•

Stemming these problems early is critical. In East Africa, decades of instability enabled the morphing of al-Shabaab into an organization seeking to attack [US citizens and interests](#). In 2019, an al-Shabaab operative was arrested by [Philippine authorities](#) for conspiring to hijack an aircraft and conduct a terrorist attack within the United States. West Africa could present similar radicalization risks. Burkina Faso experienced an increase from [80 to 1,800 local terrorism-related casualties from 2016 to 2019](#). In Mali, with Wagner on the ground, [more violent civilian deaths occurred](#) during this year’s first quarter than all of last year. A month ago, JNIM conducted a car bomb attack on a Mali military camp within 15 kilometers of the capital city Bamako. Following the attack, [JNIM issued a statement](#): “We say to the Bamako government: if you have the right to hire mercenaries to kill defenseless innocent people, then we have right to destroy you and target you.”•

The US and its NATO partners can counteract the impact of Wagner by increasing foreign internal defense (FID) efforts with stable regional partners. [FID](#) leverages civilian and military agencies to enhance a host nation’s ability to fight off insurgencies, violent extremism, and terrorism with indirect support, direct support, or combat operations. FID is not a panacea and US efforts in Africa have had problems. In Burkina Faso, American military aid [empowered](#) a military system that recently overthrew the democratic government. The new government, led by pro-Wagner Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damibia, already [maintains an ongoing security dialogue](#) with Wagner.

Niger [is a more stable, promising partner](#) than its neighbors and one of the last countries independent of Wagner in the Sahel. Though US effort there [has suffered setbacks](#), this is the time to apply a whole-of-government approach to strengthening Niger’s security independence and building its capacity to stave off expansionary jihadist movements. Successful cooperation in Niger would re-assert the primacy of American partnership in the region and provide a contrast to Wagner’s deleterious tendencies. American forces certified [124 Nigerien NCOs](#) in an enhanced training program in March. They have also engaged with local officials over security matters around the city of [Agadez](#). Although minor strides, these efforts demonstrate the US tendency for cooperation and treating local governments as equitable partners. Niger could well be the cornerstone for reversing the deterioration of security in the Sahel.

The declining security situation in northwest Africa renders US and NATO involvement less and less attractive to policymakers. Concerns are not unfounded. However, the United States regularly outlines [obligations to regional stability](#) and conflict prevention. Inaction in the Sahel invites questions about NATO’s espoused commitment to international order and its ability to achieve security objectives. Policymakers must reconcile the complexities of the region and the risks of doing nothing. Though

enacting a larger-scale, long-term regional approach to FID comes with inherent risks, it would restore Western credibility in the region and offer an alternative to governments seeking to avoid the destructive effects of outsourcing to PMCs. Ceding regional security dominance to Wagner and other mercenary groups may condemn northwest Africa to greater violence and instability, and may require a more robust and even less attractive Western intervention in the future.

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