



NATO Foundation
Defense College



***Threat from the South: the Wagner Group and Russian
policies in North Africa***

Andra Cellino

Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute Switzerland,
and Executive-in-Residence at the Geneva Center for Security Policy

While much attention is focused on the aftermath of the June 2023 mutiny by the Wagner Group in Russia, questions are still lingering on the future of the Russian private military company's (PMC) long-time engagement in the African [continent](#). On 26 June, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has [confirmed](#) that Wagner operations in Africa “will continue”. In a rare, though indirect, admission that the mercenary outfit is part and parcel of the Russian security machine, Lavrov added that they were doing “a good job” in countries with strong relations with Moscow. Although more recently [doubts](#) have been raised on the PMC's future, it seems clear that Russia will continue to use the “Wagner approach”, even if under a different [name](#).

Given that Wagner's role in the Ukraine conflict has already been reduced as result of recent developments, there are good reasons why policymakers in Europe should be concerned about Russian impact and influence on the security of key countries, more specifically in North Africa and the Sahel. European countries have an interest in taking very seriously the Wagner presence and activities, as the security of North African countries has a direct impact on theirs. More worryingly, Western neglect of Wagner's role in North Africa, in parallel to multiple other challenges, may open dangerous opportunities for Russia's aggressive anti-Western actions in Europe's backyard.

The Russian regime has relied on Wagner for many years now, in countries where it did not want to commit official resources or troops but sought to maintain a presence, exert influence, or disrupt Western policies. The template of Wagner's modus operandi in the Middle East and North Africa was established in Syria. As of October 2015, the Russian government used Wagner mercenaries to uphold Bashar al-Assad's army, when the situation or the dangers recommended not to directly commit the Russian military.

In Africa, Wagner could rely upon a historic presence and footprint established by criminal gangs and organizations in post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s and 2000s. Under Putin's regime, Russian criminal organizations in general had to increasingly align themselves with Moscow's political goals and strategies.

The Wagner Group exemplifies this trend, in which private and state foreign policy interests converge. Not surprisingly, its alleged head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, emerged from the Russian criminal underworld in the 1990s. Recognized as the founder of Wagner, he indeed controls through a series of companies all the profitable businesses related to Wagner.

In its operations across the African continent, Wagner has focused on either autocratic regimes or on countries with weak governance. Such involvement has been aligned with Russian political goals, as well as more or less legitimate business interests, most frequently in mining such as gold and diamonds, but also in arms [smuggling](#). The most successful cases of Wagner's involvement are Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), where Russian security personnel appeared in around 2017 to 2018 and has now a large footprint. In addition to its involvement in security services and mining, the group has successfully provided leaders in Africa with influence and disinformation campaigns, political strategy and advice, as well as interfered with election processes. In most of these cases, Wagner's operations have been conducted at the expense, if not openly against Western interests.

In North Africa, Wagner has established its stronghold in Libya, where its fighters appeared in April 2019 when they joined Haftar's forces in their unsuccessful attack on the UN-backed government in Tripoli. Following that defeat, the group began to diversify its [activities](#), still keeping its support for the authorities in the East but enlarging to more multi-faceted operations: military hardware maintenance, political advisory services, as well as social media disinformation and influence operations. They have established themselves in military bases in the East and the South, but also installed near oil fields and other [infrastructures](#).

A recent concerning factor related to Wagner's presence in Libya is the country's proximity and relations with Sudan, ravaged in recent weeks by an internal violent conflict between different factions within the military. The mercenary group's presence and extensive activities in Sudan have a strong connection with Libya. Although both Sudanese warring factions have benefited from Russia's support, one of them, the Rapid Support Force (RSF)—originally stemmed from a militia group in Southern Libya and still maintaining rear bases there—is actively [supported](#) by Wagner. Therefore, risks of spillovers from the Sudan conflict into neighbouring Libya are extremely high.

The services Wagner offers to autocratic leaders and warlords across Africa have naturally found fertile ground in anti-Western environments, something which is perfectly in line with the Russian de facto policy of supporting authoritarian conservatism. In Mali and CAR, Wagner has been able to ensure the weakening and then the demise of the role of France in its former colonies, as well as dwindling the role of the United Nations.

Countering Wagner's presence in Libya should be a priority for Western policy makers but by no means their sole concern. If we combine the Wagner presence across the continent with Russia's

official economic, military or political ties with North African countries in particular, the picture of a potentially wide-spanning Russian strategy is apparent. In addition to Libya, both Algeria and Egypt are relevant for their links with Moscow. Although Algeria and Egypt have both strong ties to Europe and the latter being a main recipient of US military support in the region, they maintain excellent relations with Moscow. Algeria still relies [mainly](#) on Russian weapons and military imports. During a recent visit to Moscow, Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune reiterated in very warm terms the two countries' close and friendly [relations](#). Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, has never made a secret of his sympathy for Vladimir Putin, and has recently been [accused](#) of planning to provide military support to Russia. In addition, Egypt's overall arm imports from Russia have [increased](#) by 44% between 2017 and 2022, making it Moscow's third largest recipient, behind India and China.

In sum, all the above points to several opportunities for Russian diplomacy and its anti-Western stance, considering its continued war of aggression against Ukraine and efforts to thwart Western support to Kyiv. And while the US seems to have in part understood the challenge – at least judging from an increased diplomatic and security [attention](#) to the North African region – European leaders appear much more concerned about halting swelling migrations flows from the South or securing contracts for new oil and gas routes and supplies. Something happening chiefly through deals with and concessions to the region's strongmen, at the expense of pushing for economic reforms, respect for the rule of law and human rights and better governance. Precisely the opposite of the kind of reforms which would help shrink the fertile ground where Wagner has been able to thrive.

Andrea Cellino

Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute Switzerland, and Executive-in-Residence at the Geneva Center for Security Policy, Geneva

Andrea Cellino is Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute Switzerland and Executive-in-Residence at the Geneva Center for Security Policy. He was the Head of the North Africa Desk at DCAF, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, from 2015 to 2023, managing operations in Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. Before joining DCAF, Andrea spent six years leading fieldwork for the OSCE in the Balkans and in Ukraine. Previously, he was Deputy Secretary General for Policy at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Brussels, directing the PA's outreach programs with parliaments in the MENA region and in Eastern Europe. He is a member of NDCF Scientific Board.



NATO Foundation
Defense College