

# **PRIGOZHIN'S DEATH AND WAGNER'S FUTURE IN AFRICA**



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# **A CDD Security Brief**

In a violent end to the life of an entrepreneur of violence, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner private military company (PMC), died in a jet crash on 23 August 2023 in Russia. Aboard the airplane were six other Wagner top leaders including Dmitry Utkin and Valery Chekalov. An admirer of the Third Reich, Dmitry Utkin allegedly played a key role in the founding of the PMC.<sup>1</sup> He was, for example, rumored to have named the group “Wagner” in honor of Wilhelm Richard Wagner, Adolf Hitler’s favorite composer.<sup>2</sup>

Yevgeny V. Prigozhin was a controversial figure known for his close ties to the Russian government. His operations as a leader of Wagner have raised concerns about human rights violation, accountability, and their impact on global security. In June 2023, however, Prigozhin staged a mutiny against the Russian military leadership prompting observers to question the linkages between Wagner and the Kremlin.

While Prigozhin’s death is a major blow to the Russian PMC, it would be extremely dangerous and short sighted to conclude that it marks the end of Wagner’s security and economic influence in Africa. This brief strategically discusses the scope of Wagner legacy in Africa before the death of its founder. It presents future possible scenarios and their implications for Africa.

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<sup>1</sup>Official Nazi designation for the regime in Germany from January 1933 to May 1945

<sup>2</sup>Helen Livingstone and Sauer Pjotr, “Who Are the Other Wagner Group Leaders Presumed Dead in Plane Crash?,” The Guardian, August 24, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/24/who-was-dmitry-utkin-wagner-commander-plane-crash-yevgeny-prigozhin>.



# Prigozhin's Legacy in Africa

Though Wagner's activity in Africa has only become a subject of frequent discourse in the wake of the proliferation of coups in West Africa, Prigozhin's Wagner has been active in Africa since at least 2017 and the continent was one of the last places he made a public appearance before his death.<sup>3</sup> With a notable political and military footprint, Africa is Wagner's foremost operational theater.<sup>4</sup> The Wagner enterprise extends its influence from the Libyan ruins, where it collaborates with General Marechal Aftar since 2018, to war-torn Sudan, where it backs the Rapid Support Force (RSF) of General Mohamed Hamdan, also known as Hemedti.<sup>5</sup> Wagner is active in the Central African Republic (CAR) where it supports the containment of rebel forces while propping up President Touadéra's government. Touadéra's authority was largely confined to the capital Bangui before Wagner's arrival in the country.<sup>6</sup> Even in Mali, Wagner's involvement in countering extremist violence is apparent following a deal signed in September 2021.<sup>7</sup>

In these contexts, being the flagbearer of Russia, a country with no colonial baggage within Africa, the Wagner group has positioned itself as the "best" alternative security arrangement with the instrumentality of its disinformation machinery and propaganda tools. It poses as a group who is genuinely interested in the emancipation of Africa from the colonial baggage of its former colonial masters. It also emerged as the least expensive security solution for African countries with ailing militaries and limited defense budgets, and little to no liquidity, when it comes to hiring a PMC.

This strategic positioning worked out well so far for Wagner as it became the PMC of choice for alienated African governments. Under mounting pressure from ECOWAS to release and reinstate the ousted President Bazoum, Niger coup leaders recently approached Wagner for military support.<sup>8</sup> The regional and international crackdown on non-civilian governments may also be doing more to foster Wagner's influence than cause it to dwindle. Though the West and other actors continue to warn against the use of PMCs like Wagner, trapped African leaders with no alternatives and prevailing insecurity challenges have shown an inclination to hire them. The organization has adeptly harnessed the discontent of African citizens amid security challenges related to terrorism, strategically enhancing Russia's popularity in the region. The Russian flag has increasingly been used as a symbol in protests, notably in Francophone Africa. However, their reach is not only restricted to illiberal regimes. Wagner has also worked in more liberal democracies like Mozambique to help fight rising violent extremists in the Cabo Delgado province, though its intervention in the country was short-lived. Ramifications of Wagner's enterprise were allegedly stretched to Nigeria and Ghana where the organizations' operations remain a subject of debate.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>William Rampe, (2023, May 23), [What Is Russia's Wagner Group Doing in Africa?](#), Council on Foreign Relations; Pjotr Sauer, "Wagner Making 'Africa Even More Free', Says Prigozhin in First Post-Rebellion Video," *The Guardian*, August 22, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/22/wagner-prigozhin-recruiting-post-russia-rebellion-video-africa-putin>.

<sup>4</sup>Benoît Faucon and Joe Parkinson, (2023, February 13), [Russia's Wagner Deepens Influence in Africa. Helping Putin Project Power](#), *Wall Street Journal*

<sup>5</sup>How Wagner supported Aftar to lead an anti-democratic fight

<sup>6</sup>Federica Saini Fasanotti, "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, Commercial Concessions, Rights Violations, and Counterinsurgency Failure," *Brookings*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>.

<sup>7</sup>TheAfricaReport. "Mali- Russia: Bamako to Sign Contract with Wagner Group." *The Africa Report.com*. Accessed November 6, 2023, <https://www.theafricareport.com/127421/mali-russia-bamako-to-sign-contract-with-wagner-group/>.

<sup>8</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/5/nigers-military-rulers-ask-for-help-from-russian-group-wagner>


<sup>9</sup>William Rampe, (2023, May 23), [What Is Russia's Wagner Group Doing in Africa?](#), Council on Foreign Relations

But Wagner's African involvement is not confined to the security realm alone. It also includes the economic and political spheres, where a nebulous network of companies are deployed to manipulate elections through the fabrication and distribution of disinformation online and to exploit natural resource wealth by mining and exporting minerals.<sup>10</sup> However, the links between Wagner and Russia have not always been clear, a reality further complicated by Wagner's mutiny within Russia in June. Following the Wagner mutiny, Prigozhin was allegedly confined to Belarus until his last appearance in Africa. During that visit, he recorded a Telegram video in which he articulated his mission as being to enhance Russia's stature while promoting greater freedom in Africa. While this statement on the one hand reflects the centrality of Africa in the Wagner plan, it could also have been an attempt to appease the Kremlin by promising to make Wagner Russia's foremost soft power machinery on the continent.

While his relationship with the Kremlin was not always clear, one of the notable peculiarities of Prigozhin's leadership of Wagner was his remarkable closeness to field operatives. In a dynamic geopolitical context with looming uncertainty, this particular trait gave him firsthand knowledge of what fighters were going through. He ensured that they were paid well and on time, boosting their morale to keep fighting. Furthermore, his proximity on the battlefield underscored a leadership style that not only contributed to operational success but also cultivated a sense of camaraderie crucial for navigating the unpredictable and hazardous environments where fighters are engaged.

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<sup>10</sup>Africa Defense Forum. "Attack On CAR Brewery Hints At A New Strategy For The Wagner Group," Africa Defense Forum, May 15, 2019, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/04/attack-on-car-brewery-hints-at-a-new-strategy-for-the-wagner/><https://adf-magazine.com/2023/04/attack-on-car-brewery-hints-at-a-new-strategy-for-the-wagner-group/-group/>.



# The future of Wagner post-Prigozhin

Following Prigozhin's death, the future of the Wagner PMC hangs loose. Four scenarios of what becomes of Wagner following the death of Prigozhin are detailed below. Each one of them increases uncertainty for African countries where the militia operates but also may present opportunities for African leaders to reclaim the upper hand in their relationship with Wagner, if there is a desire to do so.

## **Wagner's Decline and Eventual Disintegration**

Prigozhin's death might have weakened the cohesiveness and leadership structure within Wagner, possibly triggering internal power struggles and fragmentation. This outcome could significantly reduce the company's operational effectiveness, eroding its presence in African countries. The complex ties with the Kremlin could further complicate matters, raising questions about funding and support. Although this might lessen Russian influence, it could also result in a power vacuum and potential security risks in the nations where Wagner is operating. However, the likelihood of this scenario is quite low especially if the Kremlin, as many believe, orchestrated Prigozhin's exit, as it is probable that it has devised a plan for the aftermath. In this case, Wagner would likely align more closely with official Russian ambitions in Africa and existing contracts with partner nations would remain intact despite the loss of its unconventional leader.

This scenario emphasizes the central role Prigozhin's leadership played in maintaining Wagner. However, it underestimates the regenerative capacity of the organization as well as the intricate ties it has with the Kremlin. If, indeed, Wagner is a pet project of the Kremlin the death of its de facto leader will not mean its disintegration.

## **Restructuring and Rebranding**

Wagner could undergo a structural transformation to shed its controversial image, attempting to reposition itself as a legitimate security contractor. The company might seek to distance itself from its founder's controversial reputation and create a more transparent operational structure. This scenario could lead to increased partnerships with African governments for security support, potentially offering a stable yet less covert approach. However, skepticism about its intentions and connections are likely to persist, hampering its acceptance. This scenario is also unlikely because the competitiveness of Wagner stems fundamentally from its nebulous nature and capacity to subtract itself from law and order despite international sanctions. To shed its controversial image would require that Wagner subscribe to international laws and answer to the allegations of crimes its is accused of.

More likely, outcomes of restructuring or rebranding efforts, will be a closer working relationship with the Kremlin. Assuming that Wagner did not have any ties with the Kremlin, Russia can take the opportunity to intervene and seek to rebrand the PMC. For African partners, a rebranding could also mean re-negotiating the terms of the contracts and seeking a better return on investment.



## **Proliferation of Proxy Groups**

In the absence of Prigozhin's leadership, various factions within Wagner might seek autonomy and adapt to new strategies. This scenario could lead to the rise of independent proxy groups under Wagner's umbrella, each vying for influence in different African countries. Such fragmentation could make the organization harder to monitor and control, exacerbating concerns about mercenary activities and potential destabilization. The proliferation of proxy groups may complicate efforts to limit Russian involvement in African conflicts. This scenario is the least likely to happen.

Considering Wagner's contributions to strengthening Russian interest in Africa, it would not be in the interest of the Kremlin to let it break apart. Even in a case where Wagner could be a threat to the Kremlin, in light of its 23 June, 2023 mutiny, the Kremlin would likely seek to redress it rather than terminate or let it break into smaller factions.

## **Strengthened Kremlin Control**

In this scenario, the Kremlin captures Wagner and takes a more direct, albeit still covert and unofficial, overseeing of Wagner's activities across Africa. Such a possibility holds credibility. Moscow might opt to strengthen its hold on Wagner to ensure sustained control and influence. This trajectory could foster enhanced collaboration with other PMCs. While this has the potential to yield more centralized command, it concurrently carries the risk of exacerbating contentions and accusations related to Russian intervention. Consequently, this may strain diplomatic ties with other international actors engaged in African affairs. But for African countries already working with Wagner, this scenario could be more beneficial for short-term stability.

A group of soldiers in camouflage uniforms are shown in a field setting. One soldier in the foreground is kneeling, looking towards the camera. Behind him, several other soldiers are standing, some holding rifles. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting a low-light or night environment. The overall tone is serious and focused.

# Conclusion

Almost three months have now passed since Prigozhin's death and there has not been any substantial change in Wagner which is public knowledge. However, the Kremlin has multiplied its official military visits in partnering countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso. While these official visits seek to re-inforce military cooperations with African countries, the Wagner question could not be off the discussion menu especially in Mali where the PMC is operating. This situation points to the likelihood that our last scenario of a strengthened Kremlin control of Wagner.

One last possible scenario is that the expansion of Wagner could indirectly popularize the use of corporate soldiers and PMCs in Africa. Other nations could decide to respond to it by also deploying their own shadowy proxy private military companies in the continent. Given the reluctance of some parts of the continent to host official Western military bases, it is not unlikely that they may opt to seek entry with the assistance of their own private military companies. In the current global landscape characterized by increasing insecurity and a shift towards a multipolar world, the involvement of private foreign security actors could become increasingly significant in shaping international security.

While Wagner is certainly not the first nor the only PMC to operate in contemporary Africa, the scope of its intervention in the continent is unprecedented. In the Sahel in particular, its presence is tied with the rise of violent extremist organizations and military regimes; and the fall of democratically elected governments. The Sahel crisis and political stability in West Africa in general are pivotal factors that could influence the eventual demise of entities like Wagner in the region. Prompt fortification of democratic institutions under elected civilian leadership, particularly in nations like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger holds the promise of rendering PMCs obsolete.

Prigozhin's death has raised discussions about the fate of the African countries who have come to be dependent on Wagner for their territorial security. The fact that the death of one man has generated such conversation and controversy is a big problem with deep implications for sustainable security in the West African region. It also highlights the fact that Africa's security infrastructure is heavily dependent on external actors. In response, more investment needs to be put into local defense capabilities and capacities. Until Africa's forces have the required capacity, private military companies like Wagner will continue to remain relevant security actors on the continent.

# ABOUT CDD

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The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

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