

Russian Mercenary Forces: Impact on Human Rights and on Global Stability

Written Testimony of:

Candace Rondeaux

Director, Future Frontlines Program, New America Foundation

Professor of Practice, School of Politics and Global Studies, Arizona State University

Before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and  
Global Human Rights

July 7, 2022

Chairman Bass, Ranking Member Smith and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony and to appear before you today.

A little more than four months ago, in late March, armed forces loyal to the government of Mali and Russian mercenaries summarily executed an estimated 300 civilian men in the rural town of Moura.<sup>1</sup> Long a center of clashes between Malian government forces and pro-Islamist extremists affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Mahgreb (AQIM), the country's central Mopti region has since become a flashpoint in a churning debate in the UN Security Council about increased reports of war crimes and human rights violations in the country and the role of Russia's influence on the security situation in Mali and other parts of Africa caught in the vice-grip of insecurity.

In June, the situation became so acute that it sparked tensions between the five permanent members of the Security Council—Russia, China, France, Britain and the U.S.--over the future of the UN peacekeeping mission to Mali and very nearly derailed the UN's largest effort to stabilize the Sahel region of Africa. The departure of French army troops and influx of Russian mercenary forces has rightfully raised concerns for the U.S. and its allies that rogue military operations that target innocent civilians could further contribute to escalating violence and instability in Mali. Like many other experts who have tracked the activities of Russian mercenaries around the world, I believe those fears are well founded. Known colloquially as the Wagner Group, Russian

---

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, "[Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers.](#)" April 5, 2022.

backed contingents of contract soldiers of fortune have emerged as serious threats to the protection of civilians, peace and stability in more than a dozen countries around the world, many of which are in Africa.

The Wagner Group connection to war crimes and human rights violations is not coincidental. Everywhere they go Russian soldiers of fortune are trailed by allegations of horrific atrocities. In Sudan, Russian-backed mercenaries involved in illicit profiteering from gold mining have complicated efforts to broker the transition to stable civilian led democratic governance. In the Central African Republic, UN rapporteurs have reported concerns about Russian involvement in the systemic use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war. The number of alleged Wagner Group human rights violations in the North African country of Libya, meanwhile, is so high that it is easy to lose count.

It is no accident either that whenever allegations of Russian violations of the Geneva Conventions and international law are raised the Wagner Group is almost always mentioned in the same breath. One minute they are reportedly involved in mass executions in Mali, the next they are accused of conducting assassination campaigns aimed at taking out Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky. The next they seem to be in Bucha burying the bodies of hundreds of civilians that they've summarily executed in mass graves while a continent away in the Central African Republic Russian contract military instructors stand accused of looting homes and indiscriminate killings. Then they are sighted in remote military redoubts in parts of Africa or the Middle East that are relatively obscure to the rest of the world. Conveniently for Russia's ministry of defense, the Wagner Group seems to be both everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and that is by design.

It is also not a coincidence that when the Wagner Group is involved in military action a profusion of confusing narratives seems to crop up about who they are, what they do, who they work for and why. That is because the Wagner Group is one part instrument of psychological warfare, one part deception operation and one part deniable proxy force for sketchy missions the Kremlin wants to keep secret and deniable. Strategically speaking, their covert operations—real and imagined—are critical in shaping Russia's strategy for managing the risks of conflict escalation. Tactically, speaking Russian mercenaries run reconnaissance operations deep behind enemy lines; they provide targeting intelligence, military training, logistical support,

infrastructure protection, and backstop proxy militias and Russian military missions in key hotspots around the world. Their area of operations is global, encompassing any part of the world where Kremlin controlled state run enterprises in the fossil fuel, mining and arms industries have struck deals with local governments and warlords.

Above all, however, the purpose of the Wagner Group is to hide the real world connections between Russia's military-industrial complex, state run energy and mining enterprises and the Kremlin-backed contract military contingents who support Russian President Vladimir Putin's wider geopolitical aims. For several years running now, fantastical stories about who really runs the Wagner Group have provided Russia political cover for military operations that bend—and in many cases—break international laws and norms on the conduct of war. The Wagner Group mythos simultaneously helps the Kremlin avoid accountability for war crimes while creating confusion in the minds of Russia's rivals about how to respond to Russian aggression. The resulting confusion has also stymied the efforts of international fact-finding bodies at the UN which have struggled for several years to pin down the elaborate network of shell companies and gray market transport providers that help facilitate Russian mercenary movements and missions abroad.

The U.S. and EU have sanctioned the Wagner Group and individuals suspected of being involved in Russian mercenary operations, but it is not entirely clear what effect those moves have had on constraining Russia's deployments of such contingents. All this is to say that recent events in Ukraine and across Africa make it obvious that the U.S. and its allies need to change how they think about Russia's use of contracted military security contingents and how to respond to threats Russian mercenaries pose to stability in areas where they operate. To make headway on this challenge, the U.S. government and its allies and partners abroad are going to need to do two things: learn the problem set and right-size the strategy for managing it.

### ***Learning the Problem Set: What the Wagner Group Is, What It Isn't & Its Origins***

A year ago, if you'd asked most Americans what they knew about the Wagner Group many would probably say they have no idea. Now, nearly six months, after Russia invaded Ukraine in February, the Wagner Group may not quite yet be a household name, but stories about their operations have grabbed plenty of headlines. The fact that Russia has deployed mercenaries

to fight its battles abroad is now almost common knowledge, and more avid readers of the news may have even a sense of just how important Russian mercenaries are to fulfilling the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions. In most media accounts, Russian soldiers of fortune are portrayed as stealthy covert operatives who work in the shadows at the behest of a Kremlin insider named Yevgeny Prigozhin. A St. Petersburg based catering magnate whose long-time role as caterer to Putin's inner circle have earned him the sobriquet "Putin's Chef," Prigozhin is also believed by U.S. authorities to be the financier of the Internet Research Agency, the Russian troll farm behind Kremlin schemes to interfere in U.S. elections in 2016 and 2018. Prigozhin, who has been placed on the FBI's most wanted list, has publicly dismissed any suggestion that he is involved in Russian mercenary operations, and he has more recently flat out denied the very existence of the Wagner Group.

Denying the existence of the Wagner Group is easy enough to do since, in fact, the Wagner Group is neither a legally registered private company nor is it a group of ragtag Russian soldiers of fortune operating at the behest of a singular Russian oligarch with no known military background. Deniability is the point. As I and others have written, Wagner Group is not a private military security company in the classic sense and comparisons with U.S. firms like Blackwater are a misnomer.<sup>2</sup> Technically, under Russian law, Russian citizens are prohibited from fighting as soldiers in foreign armies. Instead, the Russian military operatives who are training, equipping and fighting alongside local forces from Mali to Sudan are part of a network of military contingents contracted through intermediary front companies that provide services to the Russian Ministry of Defense via its primary logistics and procurement arm the Russian Joint Stock Company (JSC) Garnizon.

What we are really talking about when we refer to the Wagner Group is really the elaborate schema of shell companies, offshore money launderers, shipping charter companies, customs and warehousing traders, and wet lease air transport firms that make up the backbone of the logistics pipeline for Russia's military-industrial complex and energy industry. In fact, the best way to think about how Russian soldiers of fortune conduct operations is by comparing it to a state backed organized crime cartel. In much the same way that the Sinaloa Cartel of Mexico is

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Candace Rondeaux, "[Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare](#)," *New America*, Nov.7, 2019; Candace Rondeaux, "[Inquiry into the Murder of Hamdi Bouta and Wagner Group Operations at the al-Shaer Gas Plant, Homs, Syria 2017](#)," *New America*, June 8, 2020; Candace Rondeaux, Oliver Imhof and Jack Margolin, "[The Abu Dhabi Express: Analyzing the Wagner Group's Logistics Pipeline and Operations](#)," *New America*, Nov.3, 2021.

a network of large and small organizations—some legitimate and above board, and some criminal and underground—that trafficks in illicit goods or trades with entities that have been sanctioned, then launders the money made on those deals. The only difference between the Sinaloa Cartel and Russian military contractor contingents is that while the Mexican businesses involved in Sinaloa are all ostensibly private in the Russian case they are only nominally private on paper. In the Russian case, security agencies such as the FSB and GRU and other organs of the state under Kremlin control are involved in every aspect of the cartel. In the Russian case, it is the country's President Vladimir Putin and the presidentially appointed heads of state owned companies like Gazprom, Russia's largest gas producer, StroyTransGaz, the country's largest energy engineering firm, and Rostec, Russia's state arms company, who reap the profits from Russian mercenary operations.

To understand how this arrangement works it is important to understand the origin story of what we now know today as the so-called Wagner Group. The genealogy of the Wagner Group and affiliated Russian military contractor contingents can be traced directly through the networks of strategic state-enterprises and security agency connected power brokers that have grown in influence under Putin during his 20-plus years in power. The Anti-Terror Orel group was among Wagner's progenitors. It was in essence, a confederation of small cadres of military intelligence veterans and retired and reserve special operators—or *spetsnaz* officers. Antiterror-Orel's central link was to five men listed in Russian company registries as stakeholders in the Orel Airborne Forces and All Union Special Forces Association of Paratroopers: founders Igor Iliyev, Oleg Maslov, Alexander Filipinkov, Pavel Ovsyannikov, and Director Sergey Epishkin. As appears to be typical for many Russian military contractor contingents in the 1990s, the veterans organization linked to Antiterror Orel served as a nexus for several quasi-private security enterprises, several of which were, at one time or another, registered under Epishkin's name and appear to reference a connection to anti-terrorist units within the Russian FSB and other *spetsnaz* units, according to Russian company registry information.

Later over time, as Russia strove to reorganize and modernize its military, this nascent network of contractor contingents also morphed in form, a trend that was paralleled by Russia's expanding role under Putin's direction as one of the world's largest purveyor of military arms, energy production and mining services. By 2010, the consortium of Russian veterans'

associations that once made up the Orel Anti-Terror Group came to intersect with another important player in Russia's military contractor industry: the Moran Security Group. It is in the origin story of the latter organization, where the myths about who runs the Wagner Group today and the realities of Russia's military logistics pipeline intersect.

Officially registered as a corporate entity in Moscow in 2011, the Moran Security Group bills itself as a group of companies specializing in maritime security, risk assessment, VIP security, and infrastructure protection.<sup>3</sup> As the Arab Spring rocked the Middle East region, Moran's security presence and that of another Russian security firm RSB Group became more pronounced with contingents variously deployed to Syria and Libya to provide protection for oil, gas, and mining infrastructure owned and operated by state run enterprises like Gazprom, Lukoil, Tatneft, and StroyTransGaz. These contingents also overtime became crucial for the protection of the strategic interests of local strongmen. And, the more conflict in the region escalated due to democratic uprisings there and later in Ukraine and elsewhere the more prominent roles were given to Russia's two leading state sanctioned contractor security contingents—Moran Security Group and RSB Group.

By 2013, these circumstances raised the profile of both Moran and RSB considerably and when the UN placed Libya under an arms embargo and U.S. and European Union imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime then sanctioned Russia in connection with its military incursion in Ukraine both Russian contractor contingents became vulnerable to interdiction of their operations. Seizures on the high seas of Russian weapons bound for Syria, Libya, and eventually the Central African Republic and other hotspots under international embargo was not only costly for Russian mercenary contingents but for the internationally sanctioned Russian state enterprises that had hired them to make illicit deliveries of weapons, oil, gold and other goods that were also under international embargo. That is where Yevgeny Prigozhin comes in. Inventing the fiction of the Wagner Group and hiring Prigozhin's network of firms to promote false narratives and propaganda about Putin's ghost army emerged as a critical part of ensuring

---

<sup>3</sup> Columbia University professor Kimberly Marten in her March 26, 2019 article for Post-Soviet Affairs references two separate filings for Moran in Russian corporate registries. Records under links in rusprofile.ru that Marten included as references appear to have been expunged since. Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group." Old versions of the company's website dating back to January 2010 indicate Moran operated in Iraq near the Syrian border, Somalia, and Afghanistan and also advertise details about its land-based operations, which include mine clearance, reconnaissance and surveillance, and pipeline protection. An archived version of the Moran website can be found at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20100113155347/http://www.moran-group.org/?p=land\\_operations](https://web.archive.org/web/20100113155347/http://www.moran-group.org/?p=land_operations)

that Kremlin owned and operated companies like the shipping giant Sovcomflot, arms dealer Rostec and oil behemoths like Rosneft and Tatneft can continue to do business and drive hard currency revenues into Russia's state reserves. A simple way of putting all this is that the Kremlin needs the world to believe that it is the Wagner Group, not the state enterprises it owns, that profits from rogue operations in places like Mali, Sudan and the Central African Republic. And, so far, it has been quite successful in that endeavor. With little more forethought and applied analysis, there are policy options that could change these circumstances, however.

### ***Right-Sizing the Strategy for Managing the “Wagner Group” Challenge***

The over focus on Prigozhin has tended to encourage policy responses premised on the narrative that Wagner Group fighters are elusive “ghost warriors” carrying out hybrid warfare on far flung battlefields for an enigmatic businessman who allegedly is single-handedly responsible for Russia's resurgence. One effect of all the opacity surrounding Prigozhin and the Wagner Group is that media coverage and scholarly analysis has tended to inflate the reputation of Russian mercenaries and impute them with more military prowess than evidence would suggest they truly have. This is precisely the image of military strength and cunning that the Kremlin seeks to project out to the world. Instead, the Wagner Group is more a manifestation of the Kremlin's time-tested means of creating covert lines of communication to obscure Russia's illicit transactions with internationally sanctioned parties and using deceptive active measures to undercut champions of human rights and democratic institutions. Prigozhin's cameo appearances at meetings with strongmen like Gen. Khalifa Haftar in Libya and sightings of his private life in Chad and elsewhere have in the meantime produced a kind of “Where's Waldo” effect in the press that unfortunately has found echoes in the policy responses of U.S. government agencies. Technically, Prigozhin's reported ties to the Wagner Group might make him an unindicted co-conspirator in crimes committed by contract soldiers fighting in Russia's wars of choice in a variety of settings. But if that is the case, then it is equally likely that other Russian citizens and entities who have not yet been named in connection with atrocities and human rights violations by Russian mercenaries or who have not yet been sanctioned by U.S. or EU authorities may also be implicated. The over focus on Prigozhin also ignores the growing danger posed by the fusion of Russian mercenary culture with strident, anti-Western authoritarian and accelerationist militant movements bent on fomenting ethnic and racial violence beyond Russia's borders—a wedge that the Kremlin has proven to be all too eager to exploit over the last decade.

So what is to be done? The first step is to treat the problem for what it is: a Russian state backed organized crime cartel that relies on secrecy and covert networks to ship and equip dictators and strongmen who are under U.S. and international sanction with the arms, men, financial and technical means needed to consolidate political power and enrich their corrupt cronies. The second step is not that different from the steps we've seen U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies take when dealing with other networks of covert combatant operatives like al-Qaeda, ISIS or organizations like the Sinaloa Cartel. The U.S. needs to stand up a special interagency task force dedicated to generating actionable intelligence that will lead to sustained efforts to disrupt and degrade the networks that support Russian military contractor contingents.

This will mean an investment in educating, recruiting, and training skilled Russian area studies experts who understand how Russia's military-industrial complex works, who is up and who is down in the eyes of Kremlin leaders, how Russia wields its power and influence abroad in places like Africa. It will also require high-level diplomatic efforts to persuade U.S. partners in Europe, Africa and around the world that Russia's continued ability to profit from the illicit provision of embargoed goods and services through contract mercenary contingents will only aid Putin's regime and prolong the ongoing instability and disruptions to global markets and supply chains the world is now experiencing. As infeasible as it might seem now, it is quite likely that the only way to contain the threat from Russian mercenary forces is to stand up a multilateral task forces on a regional basis that are able to more nimbly navigate language and cultural barriers to taking joint action and to sharing information in real-time. That may seem like a tall order from where we are sitting now here in Washington but steps short of these risks even greater instability in Africa and around the world.

Thank you for listening and for your consideration. I look forward to your questions.