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Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group

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Another Tool for the Kremlin

Russia's return to the global stage as a major power relies on an array of diplomatic, information, security, and economic tools that help the Kremlin punch above its weight. One of the newest instruments in that toolbox is the Wagner Group—a shadowy band of mercenaries loyal to the Kremlin and controlled by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a member of President Vladimir Putin's coterie. Russian and Western media have been following the group's expanding footprint from Ukraine and Syria to Sudan, the Central African Republic, and now possibly Libya and Venezuela. But despite the significant attention, Western understanding of Wagner's role and capacity is still incomplete at best. This is partly due to Moscow's relentless disinformation campaigns and efforts to deny responsibility for Wagner's operations. Adding to the confusion is a false perception that Wagner is a private military company (PMC) no different than Western outfits like Academi (formerly Blackwater) and DynCorp International.

A detailed analysis of the group—including its origins, ties to the Putin regime, political and economic drivers, and capabilities—is essential for Western policymakers to better gauge the threat Wagner poses and how to respond. The group may not offer the Kremlin entirely new ways to wage war or build influence, but its existence is emblematic of how a more assertive Russia often—and at times implausibly—tries to evade responsibility for actions beyond its borders. Wagner is also a window into the broader dynamics of the Putin regime, including how it harnesses the ambitions and self-interests of elites like Prigozhin to create deniable and flexible tools. The West should not overreact to the challenge from Wagner, but a multilateral, low-cost campaign to shed light on the group and constrain its options will reduce the risk.

An Improvised Imitation of a PMC

Wagner is a vehicle the Kremlin uses to recruit, train, and deploy mercenaries, either to fight wars or to provide security and training to friendly regimes. Western and Russian sources often call it a PMC, but it falls outside widely used definitions despite performing some similar functions.¹ It is not a true commercial entity operating in a global marketplace; no one who runs it will admit to doing so, and it is [not a legally registered](#) company in Russia.

Wagner's place outside the market—and the secrecy around it—stems from its origins as a covert creation of the Russian military, built to serve the needs of the Putin regime. Still, it was not part of a Kremlin masterplan. Moscow's penchant for ad hoc decisionmaking shaped the group's formation, and it developed in fits and starts as the Kremlin looked for advantageous and politically palatable ways to fight the wars in Ukraine and Syria in 2014–2015.

Moscow first deployed Wagner in Ukraine at a time when the Kremlin needed to fight a covert war, hide casualties from the Russian public, and mitigate the international repercussions of a gross violation of a neighbor's sovereignty. The use of mercenaries or proxies is a tactic with [deep roots in Russian history](#), most notably during the Cold War. By using so-called volunteers and other groups of irregulars in Ukraine, Moscow nominally reduced the number of active duty personnel and concealed their presence, at least initially. The recruitment of these groups happened quickly in 2014, and the Kremlin turned to private and state actors to finance and organize the effort.

One of the first groups of irregulars that Moscow mobilized included the men who later formed Wagner. With the probable support of Russian military intelligence (GRU), they [augmented](#) the ranks of Russia's so-called little green men, the unmarked troops who seized Crimea in 2014. This precursor unit of Wagner operated under the leadership of Dmitry Utkin, a retired veteran from the GRU's special operations troops. Later that spring, Utkin and his band stayed under [GRU control](#) as they moved with the war to eastern Ukraine, where they were one of many disparate and often unruly groups of Russian-backed mercenaries. Utkin's group, which at this point started calling itself Wagner, was based in [Luhansk](#) and fought in the [major battles against Ukrainian forces](#).²

In 2015, Moscow started to demobilize some of the irregular groups in eastern Ukraine, as it put the war on simmer and consolidated its forces. But the looming intervention in Syria gave Wagner new life. The Kremlin was worried about casualties and wanted to avoid an official ground combat presence. The Russian General Staff of the Armed Forces saw this as an opportunity to push forward its long-standing plans to create a [permanent mercenary force](#). By turning Wagner into its vision of a PMC, the General Staff could help Syrian forces on the ground and take casualties without public acknowledgment.

Russian military officials had been [debating Western PMCs](#) and whether they could imitate them for years. Moscow's reflex is to copy the tools and tactics it believes the West is using against it, but often does so based on misperceptions of how Western countries operate. The Kremlin viewed PMCs cynically as powerful tools to hide the role of states rather than true private entities. Putin, in a revealing comment on PMCs in 2012, [said](#) such firms were an "instrument for realizing national interests without the direct participation

"If you call us [Wagner fighters] 'mercenaries,' then aren't our soldiers mercenaries? . . . They're also on contracts, like we are. I can't even call American PMCs mercenaries, because they also work for the state—for the State Department, for the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], for the Pentagon, or for some of the special services."³

—Self-identified Wagner fighter, URA.RU
interview, October 19, 2018

of the state.” A year later, Russia’s chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, [alleged](#) that PMCs were part of Western efforts to destabilize Libya during the Arab Spring.

Given this view of PMCs, it is not surprising that the Russian imitation was first mobilized as a secret arm of the state. The Russian military already had a loyal, GRU-controlled cadre in Wagner. In 2015, it started relocating them and other mercenaries from eastern Ukraine to a covert, well-equipped [training base](#) next to a GRU special operations facility in southern Russia. Utkin remained in military command, and [Wagner expanded](#) over time for the Syria mission, with the addition of several reconnaissance and assault groups. The expansion gave Wagner more men and allowed Moscow to avoid reintegrating some potentially troublesome mercenaries back into civilian life in Russia.

The Russian General Staff also [recruited Prigozhin](#) to be the group’s patron and sell Putin on the idea, according to a press account. In return, Prigozhin received lucrative [defense contracts](#) worth hundreds of millions of dollars to provide cleaning, catering, construction, and other services for military facilities; some of this money reportedly helped [finance Wagner’s expansion](#). By fall 2015, the Putin regime’s new mercenary force was ready for action, and Moscow secretly sent [hundreds of Wagner fighters](#) into Syria in the early days of its intervention.

Wagner, Russian PMCs, and the Law

Unlike Wagner, there are companies in Russia that can be called PMCs. Russia’s RSB-Group and Moran Security Group, for example, [predate Wagner](#) and are more comparable to Western counterparts. The founders of these groups are ex-employees of the Russian military and security services. They maintain [connections to the state](#) but work on a mostly commercial basis.

Other organizations that emerged from Russia’s war in eastern Ukraine are more nationalist leaning, including a so-called PMC named E.N.O.T. Corp. It now runs [youth paramilitary camps](#), including ones abroad. The Kremlin may see such groups as useful tools of influence if kept small and controlled, but it has long-standing fears about the risks posed by virulently nationalist propaganda and activism.

Russia has no legal or regulatory framework for PMCs, and the [Russian criminal code](#) outlaws the participation of mercenaries in armed conflict or hostilities. Within parts of the defense

establishment, there is support for explicitly [legalizing PMCs](#), but several attempts to pass legislation in the Duma, including one in 2018, have failed. Concerns about a new class of armed groups, and who should regulate and profit from them, have stymied the initiatives. Keeping Wagner outside the law may also be advantageous for the Kremlin by helping maintain deniability.

In terms of international norms and standards, the Kremlin is neither a signatory to the [Montreux Document](#), nor a member of the [International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers' Association](#). The former outlines how international law applies to PMCs and is supported by fifty-five countries, including the United States. The latter sets standards for PMCs to adhere to international law and human rights, as well as best practices in management.

Power, Profit, and Denial: Understanding Prigozhin's Role

Understanding Wagner requires taking a closer look at Prigozhin, his position inside the Putin regime, and how the pursuit of power and profit drive his stewardship of Kremlin tools. He is the primary financier and manager of Wagner, although he denies any association with it. His [biography](#) does not make him an obvious candidate to run mercenaries for the Kremlin. He has no military or security service background, nor does he have decades-long personal ties to Putin that are common in the inner circle. After a prison stint for robbery and fraud in the late Soviet period, he became a successful restaurateur running high-end eateries in St. Petersburg. But by the mid-2000s, after [hosting Putin](#) at his restaurants, Prigozhin had wormed his way into the president's circle, eventually catering Kremlin events and earning the moniker "Putin's chef."

Over the years, Prigozhin made himself useful to Putin in more novel ways. His leadership of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), or "troll factory," beginning in 2013 gave the Kremlin an important mechanism for manipulating the political debate online and trashing the reputation of internal critics. The [troll factory](#) pioneered the use of fake internet personas to promote the Kremlin's agenda inside Russia, and, over time, it expanded its operations to stir political tensions and divisions abroad, including in the United States. In 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice [indicted Prigozhin](#) and the IRA for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

As with Wagner, Prigozhin's IRA provided the Kremlin with off-the-books capabilities and unlocked privileges and revenue streams in return, including [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) in state contracts for catering and other services. His role is emblematic of the dual power structure in Russia. Putin sits

at the top of two overlapping political structures: one that is acknowledged and another that is hidden. The first is a hierarchical, bureaucratic, and organized state that functions within clear lines of nominal authority. The second is opaque and lacks a clear structure. It resembles a [feudal court](#), populated by elites around Putin who curry favor and help protect his political control in return for patronage.

Prigozhin's motivations are largely tied to membership in Putin's court. By using Wagner and the troll factory to support Putin's domestic and geopolitical ambitions—and prove his personal worth—Prigozhin can strengthen his claim on valuable state resources and power. The more Prigozhin pleases Putin, the more he gets. At the same time, Putin always looms above Prigozhin, presiding over the broader system of control. Wagner cannot exist without Putin's blessing, and Prigozhin probably needs the Kremlin's approval for strategic-level decisions, like where and when Wagner is deployed.

Keeping Wagner in Prigozhin's hands provides obvious advantages for the Kremlin. First, it gets a mercenary force without having to pay for it. Second, the Kremlin can deny responsibility for Wagner's actions by keeping it outside state control. [Putin himself argued](#) in a 2018 interview that Russia has no responsibility for what Prigozhin does because he has no official position. This is not credible given Prigozhin's well-documented informal position inside Putin's regime. Yet, time and again, the Kremlin clings to a shred of deniability even when its words are no longer believable. Whether it be the 2018 attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom or the downing of the MH17 flight over Ukraine in 2014, even empty denials offer Moscow room to maneuver and to create an impression that it operates within the normal bounds of statecraft.

Prigozhin uses Kremlin connections to profit from natural resources in areas where Wagner operates. This started in Syria in 2016–2017, when the [Bashar al-Assad regime agreed](#) to pay for the military services of a [Wagner front](#) company [controlled by Prigozhin](#). The agreement also gives Prigozhin's company one-quarter of the profits from oil and gas fields it seizes on behalf of the Assad regime. When Wagner subsequently deployed to Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), the Russian government helped reach [agreements](#) for the rights to potential diamond and gold deposits for Prigozhin-linked companies. These [deals are miniscule](#) within the broader Russian economy. They are best understood as payoffs to Prigozhin, helping him to finance and profit from Wagner in return for aiding the Kremlin's foreign policy ambitions.

Prigozhin's deals for resources became important to finance Wagner, because his relationship with Russia's defense leadership became strained in the early days of Moscow's intervention in the Syrian war. [Prigozhin feuded](#) with Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, reportedly over whom Putin should give credit for military successes in Syria and possibly over [contracts](#) as well. Amid growing tensions between the two men, the military's deliveries of [weapons and supplies to Wagner](#) dried up, as did the lucrative [defense contracts](#) that had been flowing to Prigozhin's companies. This was not a

complete divorce, however, as the Kremlin's needs demanded some cooperation between the military and Wagner. Operational coordination continued to take place in Syria at a reduced level. Today, Wagner continues to use its [covert base](#) near a GRU facility, suggesting that it maintains a relationship with Russia's military intelligence in particular.

Wagner's operations were noticeably affected as military support declined and Prigozhin developed more commercial interests around the group. In Syria, for example, Wagner took on two roles. On the one hand, it focused on seizing and defending [oil and gas assets](#), in which Prigozhin now had a financial stake. On the other hand, Wagner was still a Kremlin tool, and Moscow used it to support broader military goals, with [mercenaries fighting](#) alongside pro-Assad forces in major battles. Wagner's personnel, which reportedly numbered as many as [2,000](#) in Syria, also suffered as the financial and material burden shifted to Prigozhin via payments from the Assad regime.⁴ Prigozhin, who is not known for [lavish spending](#) on his projects, reportedly armed the mercenaries with [subpar weapons](#) and little heavy or sophisticated equipment. [Salaries](#) for the fighters also supposedly declined over time.

Prigozhin's business interests in Wagner's operations have also created more serious risks. In early 2018, for example, several hundred [Wagner fighters attacked](#) an outpost manned by U.S. special forces personnel and their allies at a Conoco gas plant in Deir Ezzor Province in Syria. As the Wagner fighters and their Syrian allies advanced, U.S. military officials warned their Russian counterparts to pull them back. The Russian military denied any knowledge of the advancing force. At the direction of the Pentagon's leadership, the U.S. military and its allies killed as many as [200 Wagner fighters](#).

Much remains unknown about why and how this attack took place, but the best [explanation](#) is that Prigozhin wanted to capture more energy assets. The lure of profit caused him to overlook or underestimate the risk of plunging Moscow into a conflagration with the United States and the potential for high casualties. This type of periodic mistake—albeit on a deadly and calamitous scale in this case—is not an aberration; it is inherent to the feudal court system that Putin controls. Autonomy from the state's bureaucratic decisionmaking process and wide latitude to pursue one's self-interest can lead elites like Prigozhin to overreach. In this case, Prigozhin risked sparking the ire of Putin, who can take away his contracts and privileges. In the aftermath of Deir Ezzor, [Prigozhin reportedly](#) had to convince angry Kremlin aides that the mistake would not happen again.

There would have been fewer losses [in Syria] . . . if the PMC's equipment hadn't been so rotten."⁵

—Self-identified Wagner fighter, Sovershenno Sekretno interview, December 19, 2017

The debacle at Deir Ezzor also deepened tensions between Wagner and the Russian military, which [distanced itself](#) from the attack. [Wagner members interviewed](#) by journalists disputed the military's claim of ignorance and voiced suspicions that Russian officers let U.S. forces decimate Wagner fighters to embarrass Prigozhin. One former member even [claimed](#) that a Russian military officer pledged air cover for the operation, but nothing materialized.

Who Are Wagner's Mercenaries?

The secrecy around Wagner makes it difficult to determine who its members are, their total number, and their capabilities. Press reports indicate that most of its 3,600 to 5,000 fighters are [Russian citizens](#) (mostly ethnic Russians and Cossacks), but the group also includes [Ukrainians](#) and some citizens of other countries.⁶ Informal and online [networks](#) of veterans and other groups help recruit candidates. Prospective fighters go to Wagner's base

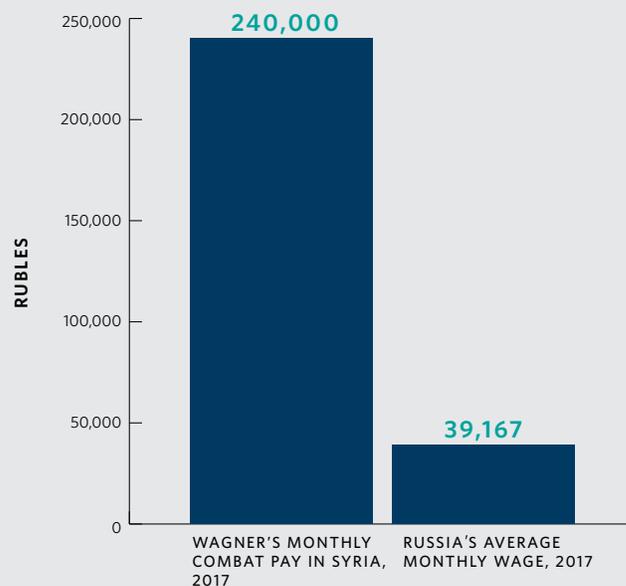
"[The Wagner fighters] who showed up in Syria were mostly unlucky in life . . . As a rule, they were former cops, convicts, and soldiers. About 40 percent of them had been in prison for serious crimes—murder, robbery, etc."⁷

—Self-identified Wagner fighter, Sovershenno Sekretno interview, December 19, 2017

in southern Russia for evaluation, and if accepted, they pledge to maintain secrecy and sign short-term renewable [contracts](#) of three to six months. The [fighters vary in age](#) (from early twenties to mid-fifties), and some have [impressive military backgrounds](#) while others are much [less experienced](#). Nevertheless, [training](#) appears to be limited.

There is no single motivation to join. [High salaries](#) are a major attraction, given combat pay is several times higher than the average Russian wage. Fighters quoted in the press also espouse [patriotism](#) and service to Russia. Some adhere to [Russian nationalism](#), but no clear ideological dogma drives the group as a whole.

Money Draws Recruits to Wagner



SOURCES: Wagner: Denis Korotkov, "Spisok Vagnera [The Wagner List]," Fontanka, August 21, 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.

Russia: "Srednemesyachnaya nominal'naya nachislennaya zarabotnaya plata rabotnikov po pol'nomu krugy organizatsiy v tselom po ekonomike Rossiyskoy Federatsii v 1991-2019 [Average, Nominal Monthly Wage for All Employees of the Russian Federation, 1991-2019]," Russia's Federal State Statistics Service, www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/trud/sr-zarplata/t1.docx.

Why Wagner Is in Africa

Wagner's deployments to Sudan and CAR in late 2017 mark an important evolution of the group, which adapted to satisfy Russian geopolitical aims and Prigozhin's ambitions. In these countries, Wagner is not operating in a combat role as it was in Ukraine and Syria. Instead, it is acting as a security provider, helping regimes with training, site defense, and the protection of high-level officials. This shift to operating outside Russian war zones made Wagner a more useful and flexible tool for Prigozhin and the Kremlin. Prigozhin has a pattern of expanding the writ and capabilities of his tools as Kremlin priorities evolve. The [IRA's focus on the United States](#), for example, began in 2014, after Russia's war in Ukraine increased tensions with Washington. [Prigozhin even sent](#) two employees to the United States in June of that year to gather intelligence for the campaign.

Wagner's arrival in Africa coincided with [Russia's push to expand](#) its presence on the continent, largely on the cheap. A slew of military and economic agreements with African states reflects the Kremlin's

attempt to fill vacuums where the West is absent, with an eye toward developing security relationships and gaining access to resources. Like much of Russia's foreign policy, Moscow's outreach to Africa involves multiple political, economic, and security actors and is opportunistic. It gains the most traction in weak or isolated states open to the Kremlin's advances.

Prigozhin sees personal opportunities within Russia's geopolitical ones. Much of his recent activity has [focused on Africa](#), where he also peddles political consulting services (including meddling in elections) on behalf of the Kremlin. People working under him have shown up in a number of countries, including [Zimbabwe](#), [Madagascar](#), and [South Africa](#), to conduct polling and support political campaigns, despite lacking [detailed expertise](#) on the countries in which they operate.

Details on Wagner's deployments in Sudan and CAR are scarce, but based on what is available, they follow a similar pattern. Leaders in both countries welcomed ties to Moscow, having few options to obtain security assistance from other sources. This opened the door for [Wagner personnel](#) (reportedly a [few hundred in CAR](#) and around [100 in Sudan](#)) to train local forces, protect mining sites, and guard government officials. At the same time, Sudan and CAR have granted [companies linked to Prigozhin](#) the rights to survey and/or mine mineral resources. [Moscow admits](#) that Russian contractors are in both countries but does not acknowledge them as Wagner employees. Prigozhin, for his part, [denies](#) any links to Wagner or [financial interests](#) in these countries.

Both Prigozhin and Moscow likely see Wagner's presence as a toehold, from which they can expand into other spheres. For example, in 2018, [Prigozhin pressed](#) for increased military cooperation between Russia and Sudan. News reports also show that people working under Prigozhin advised Sudanese officials on a wide array of topics, from countering [protests](#) to economic development and reform of the [financial sector](#). Given the coup against former president Omar al-Bashir in April, it is unclear whether this work continues, but the current military government maintains friendly ties to Moscow.

CAR is a more stark case study in how Moscow and Prigozhin are using Wagner's presence to generate political influence. Less than two years after Wagner's deployment began, Moscow is challenging France's role as CAR's primary partner. The relationship runs through Prigozhin, who usurped roles normally reserved for diplomats and security personnel. For example, President Faustin-Archange Touadera's national security adviser is a [Russian national](#) who reportedly works for Prigozhin. Prigozhin has attended CAR peace talks in [Sudan](#). Companies linked to Prigozhin have sponsored a panoply of [soft power initiatives](#), including a beauty pageant and a new [radio station](#). Prigozhin's network also reportedly worked with a [CAR security official](#) to surveil three Russian journalists who were murdered in the country last year.

So why is Moscow using Wagner and Prigozhin instead of official organizations that can provide similar training? In venues like CAR, plausible deniability seems far less important. Cost savings may

be part of the answer, since Wagner seems to rely on creative forms of self-financing. Other structural factors in Russian foreign policy may play a role as well. The seemingly peripheral or heavy commercial interests of regime insiders can take on an outsized role in parts of Russian foreign policy (Rosneft Chief Executive Officer [Igor Sechin's role](#) in Venezuela is a particularly telling example). The Kremlin's desire for a more nimble approach gives advantages to fast and aggressive foreign policy actors over slow, deliberate ones. This is particularly true in marginal regions for Russian foreign policy, where there is less senior bureaucratic oversight.

Still, Moscow's strategic gains to date from deploying Wagner in Sudan and CAR are not obvious. The Kremlin may have gained influence in remote locales such as CAR at a relatively small price, but its opportunities in Africa are likely to be rather meager when stacked up against China's massive checkbook and commercial and infrastructure capabilities. It also remains unclear what Moscow wants from these relationships beyond planting its flag in the heart of Africa. In Sudan, it wanted to leverage Wagner and other forms of assistance to foster a deeper security relationship, but the recent coup illustrates the risks of courting isolated and weak regimes. Russia's opportunistic brand of foreign policy allows it to move quickly to fill vacuums, but such forays will not always improve the Putin regime's position domestically or on the world stage.

Wagner as a Threat to U.S. Interests

Wagner's twin roles—in other words, to provide the Kremlin with plausible deniability when deploying fighters in war zones and a ready-made capability for building influence with receptive states—pose different problems for the United States. Each should be evaluated within the context of what is known about Wagner's capabilities.

Russia's covert war in Ukraine sparked [Western alarm](#) over Moscow's use of mercenaries and other deniable instruments of subversion, which are often lumped together as part of so-called [hybrid warfare](#). Concern remains that Moscow might secretly deploy Wagner or similar forces elsewhere in the post-Soviet space to start another covert war or destabilize a country through sabotage and subversion. By using mercenaries as it did in Ukraine, Moscow would hope to sow confusion around its involvement, keep the West divided, and stay below obvious thresholds for a robust response.

While it is doubtful that Moscow wants another covert war on its borders, recent history demonstrates that the Kremlin will use force to defend its perceived interests in the post-Soviet space. The region is Moscow's primary security concern, and it is determined to stop the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and limit Western influence around Russia's periphery. The Kremlin remains highly sensitive to losing control—or at least veto power—over the political and security policies of its neighbors. A fear of catastrophic geopolitical loss drove Moscow to act in Ukraine in 2014, and it would do so again under similar circumstances.

Within the broad rubric of covert war, Moscow could use Wagner in a variety of ways—to launch a limited-objective incursion into a neighboring country, to train proxy forces to destabilize a pro-Western government, or to hide a secret Russian military presence. Wagner would likely be more organized than the nationalist mélange of irregular fighters that Moscow chaotically pushed into Ukraine. The infrastructure for at least some basic training, deployment, and command and control is now in place, so Moscow could deploy a few thousand mercenaries quickly without significant new investment and recruitment.

Still, Wagner is more of an expendable force than an elite one. Its casualty rates in Syria were high, with some units losing up to 30 percent of their men over the course of a single contract according to fighters interviewed in the press. The military experience of Wagner’s members, including those in command positions, varies widely. Wagner is also one of Moscow’s worst kept secrets, and the Kremlin’s hand is now assumed wherever it appears. In a crisis, the Kremlin would cling to the cloak of deniability around Wagner and this would create some level of confusion. But the West would be able to discern Moscow’s involvement in time.

Estimated Wagner Deaths Versus Russian Military Deaths in Syria, 2017



SOURCES: Wagner: Author estimate based on multiple Russian sources: <http://istrelkov.ru/interview/443-igor-strelkov-nemnozhko-o-vagnere.html>, <https://www.sovsekretno.ru/articles/id/5801/>, and <https://www.ridus.ru/news/271195?from=more>. Russian: “Spisok Pogibshikh Rossiyan s Nachala Kampanii VKS v Sirii [List of Russian Casualties Since the Beginning of the Air Campaign in Syria],” *RBK*, May 03, 2017 (updated regularly), <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/05/2017/58457c589a79473fa-152c4a2>.

Wagner's niche in any future conflict may therefore be more narrow than commonly assumed. Given its size and capabilities, the group's ability to act alone will be limited to small-scale operations against a weak adversary. In a covert war, its mercenaries are more likely to be used to augment conventional troops, helping to mask Moscow's official forces, at least temporarily. Wagner will also continue to help the Kremlin avoid official casualties, a role it played even within a broader expeditionary operation like Syria. Yet, there is little to suggest it will be a decisive factor on its own.

The more immediate challenge Wagner poses stems from its expanding role as a multipurpose security provider. Africa will remain important to the group, as Prigozhin positions himself to offer more security and political services on the Kremlin's behalf. Still, the secrecy surrounding the group, its murky deals for access to natural resources, and Prigozhin's pariah status in the West will help constrain Wagner to regimes without better options.

Libya is one particular country to watch. [Moscow maintains links](#) to multiple players in Libya, where it hopes to reestablish economic and security ties lost during the Arab Spring. It has [courted Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar](#), in particular, who is the dominant player in eastern Libya and aims to control Tripoli. Prigozhin himself joined a [Moscow meeting](#) between the Russian defense leadership and Haftar in late 2018, and there is a British press [report](#) that Wagner is already present in the east. Given the number of Russian bureaucratic players interested in Libya, as well as support to Haftar from other states, Wagner and Prigozhin seem unlikely to carve out the same kind of outsized role they created in CAR. But Prigozhin's mercenaries can be a cheap and deniable way for Moscow to support Haftar in a limited, rearguard role.

Wagner will continue to pose challenges to U.S. interests that go far beyond a zero-sum approach to geopolitical competition. It will subsist in areas with limited rule of law, weak democratic institutions, high levels of corruption, and problematic human rights records. Its presence—alongside Prigozhin's—will aggravate and perpetuate these problems and create potential for conflict, even if unintended. Wagner and Prigozhin can also help Moscow to entrench authoritarian rulers.

Policy Recommendations

Like many of the more confounding tools at Moscow's disposal, Wagner often operates on the margins of U.S. power—in areas where the United States has few interests or is at a comparable disadvantage to Moscow. Washington need not be overly concerned with Wagner in every locale it appears, but it should still aim to keep it marginalized and manage the overall challenge. U.S. policies should focus on three main objectives: creating stigma around Moscow's use of the group, pressuring its finances, and eroding its utility as a deniable tool.

Stigmatize Wagner

The United States can limit the markets available to Wagner by making it less attractive to potential clients. A public and private diplomacy campaign can be used to inform partners that Wagner is not a PMC but rather a group of extra-legal, unregulated, Kremlin-controlled mercenaries that do not adhere to even basic international standards and norms. Washington can target this campaign to Africa, since that is where Prigozhin is most active, and work with multilateral organizations like the African Union as well as bilateral partners.

Moral, legal, and political questions remain around PMCs and the countries that employ them, including the United States. Washington should nonetheless not shy away from pushing Moscow on this issue. Unlike Russia, the United States is a signatory to the limited international standards that exist; contracts only with legal, registered entities; and is not engaged in opaque deals to profit from natural resources in exchange for PMC services.

A diplomatic campaign to push back against Moscow's use of Wagner and stigmatize the group should focus on three core messages:

- 1. Wagner is not a real PMC.** Russia's criminal code outlaws groups like Wagner. There is no legally registered company operating under that name, and there is no accountability for the group or its employees.
- 2. Moscow and Wagner do not abide by international standards and norms for PMCs.** Moscow has not supported the Montreux Document and is not a member of the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers' Association. Wagner falls well short of the code's requirements, given its status outside the law and reported use of [convicts](#).
- 3. Employing Wagner is risky and could damage a country's international reputation.** Wagner has shown it can act in unprofessional ways. It conducted an unprovoked attack on U.S. forces in Syria, and suspicions remain that it was involved in the murder of [three Russian journalists](#) in CAR. Moreover, its key financier, Prigozhin, and some of his companies are under U.S. sanctions.

Intensify Sanctions on Prigozhin's Companies

Targeted, multilateral sanctions could disrupt Prigozhin's financial activities and further stigmatize him. He is already sanctioned under two separate U.S. executive orders—one related to Russian aggression in Ukraine and another related to cyber activities designed to influence U.S. politics. Evro

Polis, the Prigozhin-linked company receiving profits from oil and gas assets in Syria, has also been sanctioned.

The U.S. government should expand its targets and sanction all the companies it can link to Prigozhin and Wagner, including those active in Sudan and CAR ([press reports](#) have listed Lobaye Invest, M-Invest, and M-Finance). It should lobby the European Union (EU) and other allies to do the same, sharing the necessary information. The EU has not yet sanctioned Prigozhin.

Washington should also make its sanctions campaign nimble. As Prigozhin creates additional front companies, the United States should be prepared to build cases against them.

Share Information With Allies

If Moscow uses Wagner again in the post-Soviet space, it will likely try to create confusion and deny involvement, at least temporarily. A concerted effort among Western allies to build a common understanding of, and to better monitor, the group can mitigate this potential advantage. Regularly exchanging intelligence and other information can help Western governments pick up on preparations to use the group in future conflicts or training scenarios. Even if a crisis falls short of a Western military response, being able to identify Wagner's role and reach a quick, unified conclusion about Moscow's culpability will allow for a stronger, more rapid political response that may prevent further escalation.

About the Author

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The views expressed herein are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. government.

Notes

- ¹ An expert on PMCs (and a former employee of one), Sean McFate covers the confusing terminology of PMCs in his book, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (Oxford, 2014, 10–18). He argues that they are “expeditionary conflict entrepreneurs structured as multinational corporations that use lethal force or train others to do so.” Another expert, Peter Singer, defines “private military firms” as “private business entities that deliver to consumers a wide spectrum of military and security services, once generally assumed to be exclusively inside the public context”; see *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Cornell University Press, 2003, 8).
- ² According to a press report, “Wagner” is [Utkin's nickname](#), which stems from his fascination with Nazi Germany. Utkin even reportedly wore a *Wehrmacht* helmet in Luhansk.
- ³ Andrey Guselnikov, “Boetz ChVK Vagnera: Lafa Zakonchilas’ Posle Ssori Shoigu i Prigozhina [PMC Wagner Fighter: The Good Life Ended After Disagreement Between Shoigu and Prigozhin],” URA.RU, October 19, 2018, <https://ura.news/articles/1036276546>.
- ⁴ The size of Wagner’s presence in Syria changed over time (probably peaking in 2017/early 2018), and estimates in Russian press sources vary. On the low end, one Russian press source suggests [Wagner had 1,000–1,600 personnel](#) in Syria in 2016. On the high end, another source from 2017 claims [Wagner had 2,500 people](#) on the ground.
- ⁵ Aleksey Chelnokov, “Rossiyskie ‘Shturmy’ Siriyskoy Pobedy [The Russian ‘Assault Troops’ of the Syrian Victory],” *Sovershenno Sekretno*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.sovsekretno.ru/articles/rossiyskie-shturmy-siriyskoy-pobedy/>.
- ⁶ Estimates of Wagner’s overall size vary, which reflects the group’s secrecy and the fact that personnel are rotating through on short-term contracts. Most estimates in the press fall between [3,600](#) and [5,000](#) people. The higher-end range probably includes reserves—fighters who have finished contracts but can quickly rejoin the organization if needed.
- ⁷ Aleksey Chelnokov, “Rossiyskie ‘Shturmy’ Siriyskoy Pobedy [The Russian ‘Assault Troops’ of the Syrian Victory],” *Sovershenno Sekretno*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.sovsekretno.ru/articles/rossiyskie-shturmy-siriyskoy-pobedy/>.

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