

## **Written Submission on Wagner's Activities in Libya Submitted by [Organisation name redacted] (WGN0014)**

*Note from the Foreign Affairs Committee: The details of the organisation that provided this evidence have been redacted on request, prior to publication.*

*This submission reflects the views of the contributor, who is responsible for the accuracy of all claims made in the submission. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the Foreign Affairs Committee. As a written submission accepted by a parliamentary committee, it is protected in the usual way by parliamentary privilege. No legal or other action may be taken against any person on any grounds arising from the fact that they have provided such material.*

### **Summary**

1. Russia uses the Wagner Group PMC to achieve certain strategic objectives in Libya. These objectives are predicated on Russia consolidating its geostrategic presence in North Africa. This is achieved through:
  - building command-and-control systems in military bases across Libya;
  - retaining leverage over Libya's energy infrastructure;
  - forming logistics bridges to facilitate the transfer of equipment and personnel to the Sahel, Sub-Saharan Africa, and possibly Ukraine.
2. Wagner's initial presence in Libya was in service of joint Russian, UAE, and Saudi strategic priorities, in addition to those of its Libyan host the Libyan National Army (LNA). During the period covering the LNA's military campaign against Tripoli (April 2019 to June 2020), Wagner is understood to have received funding from the UAE and possibly Saudi Arabia.
3. Following the failure of the LNA's Tripoli campaign in October 2020, coordination with the LNA, UAE, and Saudi diminished as Wagner operated increasingly as an independent agent in Libya at the service of Russian strategic priorities, likely under Moscow's payroll.
4. Wagner's activities have evolved over the course of its engagement in Libya, but it has maintained a constant presence in the country before, during, and after the Tripoli conflict. Wagner's activities in Libya have been multifarious, ranging from specialised military operations, physical security provision at Libya's oil facilities, political advisory services, and social media influence operations. The hybrid nature of the group's operations has enabled it to further penetrate Libya's political landscape to fulfil certain Russian objectives.

### **About [Organisation]**

5. [Organisation redacted]
6. [Organisation redacted]

### **Wagner's initial presence in Libya was in service of joint Russian, UAE, and Saudi strategic objectives**

7. The Wagner Group's main interactions in Libya have been through the LNA and directly or indirectly with the broader international alliance supporting the LNA during its military offensive against Tripoli. The international coalition supporting the LNA included Russia, the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent France and Jordan (the UN's Panel of Experts has demonstrated that Jordan breached Libya's arms embargo in providing military equipment to the LNA). Members of this coalition had different strategic priorities that an LNA victory would help achieve. For example, the UAE's political aims in Libya centred on its ambitions to expand its regional influence, defeat the Muslim Brotherhood, and acquire

Libya as a prospective ally against Qatar. Saudi Arabia prioritises its regional hegemony and dominance over oil production, while Egypt's primary concern is the security of its western border and the ability of Egyptian workers to take up contracts in Libya.

8. During the Tripoli offensive, Wagner's activities in Libya were believed to be funded, at least in part, by the UAE and possibly Saudi Arabia. In November 2020, the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed in the 'Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress on US counterterrorism operations in East, North and West Africa' covering the reporting period 1 July 2020 – 30 September 2020 that 'the United Arab Emirates may provide some financing for the group's [Wagner's] operations'. The UAE funding of Wagner in Libya, at least in part, reduced the financial burden on Russia for its Libyan operations. Saudi Arabia is understood to have provided funding to the LNA for its assault on Tripoli. It is possible that these funds were used to pay for the salaries of Wagner operatives.
9. Wagner first appeared in Libya in October 2018 to provide technical support for the repair and maintenance of armoured vehicles for the Libyan National Army (LNA). Wagner operatives in Libya are understood to be predominantly of Russian nationality, but they are also recruited from Ukraine, Belarus, Serbia, and other post-Soviet states. They have frequently operated alongside Sudanese Rapid Support Forces or Janjaweed mercenaries as well as Syrian mercenaries.
10. In April 2019, the LNA launched its military offensive against the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and Wagner arrived on the frontlines a few months later. On the Tripoli frontlines, Wagner provided tactical assistance and Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR) for artillery and aerial strikes. Contrary to media reports, there were never more than 350-400 Russians directly engaged in the battle for Tripoli, most of whom were not involved in frontline duties, with their most important contributions being aircraft maintenance, specifically of helicopters close to the frontline. During this period, 3,000 Wagner operatives were estimated to be in Libya, in addition to a number of Syrian mercenaries recruited and commanded by Wagner. Turkey employed thousands of Syrian mercenaries to fight for the GNA (not within the scope of this evidence submission). Wagner operations during the Tripoli campaign have been well documented by the UN and news outlets including the BBC.
11. The 23 October 2020 Libyan Ceasefire Agreement stipulated that all foreign fighters and mercenaries were to withdraw from the Libyan territories. Libya's 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC) gave a 90-day deadline for this to be completed. To date, there has been no indication that foreign fighters and mercenaries have left Libya, with the exception of approximately 300 LNA-aligned mercenaries understood to be of Syrian nationality. Thousands of mercenaries of Russian, Syrian, Sudanese, and Chadian nationality remain in-country.

#### **Wagner's presence in Libya shifted to further serve Russian objectives**

12. When the Tripoli conflict formally ended in October 2020, Wagner operatives remained in Libya likely under Moscow's payroll serving Russian objectives. This assessment is based on changes to the Group's financing and its divergence from the LNA.
13. **Financing:** It is understood that at some point after the October 2020 Ceasefire (in late 2020 or early 2021) the UAE ceased or heavily reduced its funding of Wagner's activities in Libya just as it re-evaluated its role in the country and relationship with LNA leader Khalifa Haftar. It is likely that the Group's activities in Libya are currently being funded by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian state. When the UAE discontinued its funding of Wagner, the group's

activities shifted from previously fulfilling joint Russian, Emirati, and possibly Saudi strategic priorities, to solely fulfilling those of the Russian state.

14. **Divergence from the LNA:** Moscow is a reluctant backer of the LNA. Relations, specifically with the head of the LNA Khalifa Haftar, have been frequently strained. Haftar reportedly walked out of a meeting during a diplomatic summit hosted by Moscow in January 2020. The move was interpreted as a snub by the Kremlin and Moscow reached out to Haftar's eastern political rival the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Aquila Saleh. There is evidence to suggest that the failure of the Tripoli offensive further soured relations between the LNA and Moscow and in turn relations on the ground in Libya between Wagner operatives and the LNA also suffered. Wagner began acting increasingly autonomously in Libya having outgrown the LNA and becoming disillusioned by its military incompetence. During this period, reports from western media claimed that Wagner PMCs 'no longer pretend to work for Haftar and the LNA' and that senior commanders within the LNA wanted them to leave.

#### **Russia uses Wagner to achieve its strategic priorities**

15. Russia has sought to use Wagner to consolidate its geostrategic presence in Libya and North Africa through:
  - building command-and-control systems in military bases across Libya;
  - leveraging its presence at Libya's oil and gas facilities;
  - forming logistics bridges to facilitate the transfer of personnel and equipment to the Sahel, Sub-Saharan Africa and possibly Ukraine.
16. **Control of military bases:** Wagner has built command-and-control systems in four military air bases in Libya: Qardabiyah, Al-Khadim, Brak al-Shati, and Jufra, as well as operations rooms in Sokna and Hun. Local sources have reported that Brak al-Shati has been used by Wagner for training exercises, recalling that in the mornings they would frequently hear extended periods of gunfire and explosions from the bases. In the last quarter of 2020, Wagner significantly strengthened their numbers at Brak. Local sources have also reported that both women and men have been present at the base. Unconfirmed reports indicate that Wagner has sought to expand its control of military bases further South.
17. **Control of energy infrastructure:** Wagner has a clandestine presence at a number of oil and gas facilities in Libya. Sources have attested to the presence of Wagner operatives at Ras Lanuf, Brega, and Sidra oil terminals as well as El Feel and Sharara oilfields (the latter being the largest oilfield in Libya). In June 2020, the US Embassy in Libya condemned the presence of Wagner at Sharara as 'shameful interference' following reports that armed convoys of Wagner operatives had arrived at the field. The Group's presence in the vicinity of oil facilities is not extractive but instead enables Moscow to hold Libya's assets to ransom and potentially influence international oil markets.
18. **Access to Africa:** Wagner's foothold in Libya has directly aided its operations in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, most notably in Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Mali. This support takes the form of using Libyan airfields to create airbridges and the provision of training in Libya. Access to Libyan airbases facilitates the easy rotation of personnel and equipment. Wagner uses its presence and partial control of Libyan airbases such as Qardabiyah, Jufra and Al-Khadim to create airbridges between Libya and Sahel and Sub-Saharan areas of operation. For example, flight tracking social media accounts recently monitored an Ilyushin Il-18 (TL-KBR) at Jufra Air Base in Libya in January 2022. The same aircraft had been seen at Bangui M'Poko International Airport in CAR in October 2020. The aircraft is understood to be operated by the Wagner Group. In April 2021, allegations were made that Wagner operatives were involved in supporting the Chadian rebel group Front

pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT). In April 2021, the US Ambassador to Libya, Richard Norland, stated that he believed some members of FACT were trained by Wagner in Libya. He cited unconfirmed reports that Wagner contractors were present in the FACT convoy that advanced into northern Chad during the 2021 Northern Chad Offensive.

19. **War in Ukraine:** It has been suggested by European and Ukrainian intelligence agencies that Wagner operatives have been transferred from Libya by Russia to fight in Ukraine. Published UK MoD intelligence indicated that it is highly likely that Russia has been forced to re-prioritise Wagner personnel for Ukraine at the expense of its operations in Africa and Syria. On 20 April 2022, the Ukrainian Army's 24th Mechanized Brigade posted images on Facebook purportedly showing dead Wagner operatives that the Brigade had killed in Popasna, in eastern Ukraine. According to Ukrainian sources, they were carrying banknotes from Libya and Central African Republic (CAR) and a telephone number for the head of the LNA, Khalifa Haftar (written in Cyrillic). It is probable that Russia has transferred a small number of Wagner operatives from Libya to fight in Ukraine. However, Russia is unlikely to have withdrawn Wagner operatives in any number that would affect its tactical or strategic capabilities on the ground in Libya. In April 2022 local sources confirmed that Wagner operations in Brak al-Shaati, Sokna, and Qardabiyah remain ongoing.

#### **Wagner's operations in Libya have been extended beyond the scope of traditional PMCs**

20. Wagner's activities in Libya have extended beyond the traditional kinetic security operations conducted by PMCs. They have included political advisory services and social media influence operations. These activities are typically conducted through linked shell companies and are purposefully difficult to trace. They have served to further entrench the group within the Libyan political landscape in order to promote Russian objectives.
21. Wagner or Wagner linked entities and individuals have provided political advisory services to Libyan political actors, most notably Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. In 2019, two Russian election consultants, Maxim Shugaley and Samer Sueyfan, from the Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC) - an organization sanctioned by the US government for its ties to Wagner - arrived in Libya to present Saif Gaddafi with polling data indicating that he was one of the most popular candidates in the country. Shugaley and Sueyfan were promptly arrested in Tripoli by the GNA. To date, assistance to Saif Gaddafi has failed to yield any returns for Moscow. Nonetheless, Russia is likely to continue to seek out Saif, through whom they can manage and distort events in Libya.
22. The University of Stanford's *Internet Observatory* analysed Facebook influence campaigns in Libya attributed to entities tied to Yevgeny Prigozhin, including the Wagner Group. It identified Facebook pages and groups in support of Saif Gaddafi and Khalifa Haftar assessed to be created by the Wagner Group. In 2019, the *Daily Beast* published internal Wagner documents attesting to the creation of at least 12 different Facebook groups simultaneously working to promote both Haftar and Saif.

#### **Key Conclusions**

23. The Wagner Group has been, and continues to be, an important tool for Russia in its longstanding military engagement in Libya. It has always served Russia's strategic priorities but during the Tripoli campaign, it also served those of the LNA and its broader international coalition, in particular the UAE and Saudi Arabia.
24. Russia uses Wagner to pursue its goals in Libya because it reduces the economic burden of military engagement, expends less political capital, and decreases blowback from operations due to plausible deniability. Yet the employment of Wagner demonstrates that Russia is

either unable to engage in Libya in an overt or traditional manner through its extraterritorial army, or believes it would be less beneficial for it to do so - presumably as it would cause more counterreactions from Turkey, the USA, UK, and Italy.

25. Since it first appeared in Libya in 2018, Wagner has embedded itself in the country as a hybrid entity. Alongside traditional PMC activities, it has also conducted social media influence operations and been linked to political advisory assignments.
26. Through its control of airbases in Libya, Wagner has created a springboard by which fighters can be redeployed between Russia, the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel, and potentially Ukraine. However, reports that Wagner is withdrawing from Libya should be treated with caution. Russia is highly unlikely to relinquish its strategic presence in North Africa by redeploying Wagner operatives en masse. Routine redeployments or tactical adjustments between bases and strategic locations are frequently misinterpreted as withdrawals.
27. PMCs can weaken the effectiveness of transparency and accountability mechanisms, cornerstones of the rules-based international order. In Libya, the continued presence of PMCs undermines the October 2020 Ceasefire Agreement which calls for all mercenaries and foreign fighters to depart from the Libyan territories.
28. Wagner has been able to operate in eastern Libya with relative impunity. The international community is unwilling to interfere with the LNA's activities as it is perceived as the only viable security structure in eastern Libya.

### **Recommendations**

29. The UK government should prioritise detecting and understanding the activities of the Wagner Group, in particular the shell companies through which it operates.
30. The UK government and its partners, including the relevant Libyan authorities, should collaborate to develop aligned and meaningful responses to Wagner's activities in Libya with regard to sanctioning the flow of funds to the group. The UK is in an influential position to lead on such action as it sits at a hub of Libya's financial network via the corresponding banking system and is also the penholder on the Libya file at the UN.
31. Where appropriate, Wagner activities in Libya which challenge the 'rules-based international order' should be shared publicly by the UK government. The US Africa Command (AFRICOM) did this to great effect when it shared evidence of Wagner laying down landmines and IEDs in civilian areas in the outskirts of Tripoli in July 2020.