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My name is Jason Blazakis and I am the executive director of the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism (CTEC) at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (MIIS) in Monterey, California. Additionally, I am a professor at MIIS and I am also a senior research fellow at The Soufan Center (TSC). In all of these roles, I am researching the activities of the so-called Wagner Group. At TSC, I've authored multiple intelligence briefs and have been a contributor to reports relevant to the Wagner Group. Most notably, I was a contributor to the TSC Special Report titled, "Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, and Mercenaries: Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine." This testimony will build on the findings of these TSC products and research I've conducted at CTEC.

Since the Russian Federation's illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Wagner Group has fundamentally altered. Once a semi-deniable mercenary force to exert Russian influence in far-flung corners of the world, the organization has become a key node within Russia's conventional fighting force in Ukraine. Indeed, on September 26 the founder of the group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, broke his silence regarding his role in Wagner's formation. In a post over VKontakte (Russia's equivalent to Facebook), Prigozhin, explained, "I cleaned the old weapons myself...found specialists to help me...from that moment, on 1 May 2014, a group of patriots was born, which later came to be called the Wagner Battalion."¹ This is Wagner's origin story and Prigozhin is talking about Wagner's activities in Ukraine when the Russian Federation illegally invaded Crimea, Ukraine, in 2014. Yet, for more than 8 years Prigozhin was unwilling to publicly take responsibility for the group's formation, despite the fact that academics and governments long knew of his involvement. This begs a very important question, why now? And, just importantly, what does this mean for the future of the Wagner Group?

First, it is important to explain, briefly, what Wagner has been doing since its first foray in Ukraine more than eight years ago. Second, it is important to also explain where Wagner has engaged in these activities. Between 2014-2022, the Wagner Group has not acted like a traditional private military company (PMC). Indeed, the idea that the Wagner Group is a PMC is a bit of a misnomer. It is my assessment that the Wagner Group is a cut-out for the Russian Federation. It is doing the state's bidding but uses the very thin PMC-veneer to provide the Russian state a modicum of plausible deniability.

In the intervening eight years between Russia's invasions of Ukraine, the Wagner Group has been busy. The African continent is among the most important places the Wagner Group has operated. In multiple countries, Wagner has provided services to protect strongman, train

¹ Pjotr Sauer, "Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin admits founding Wagner Mercenary group," The Guardian. September 26, 2022

security services, while also exploiting Africa's natural resources. Most notably, in Mali, as the Soufan Center has noted, in April 2022 the Wagner Group has trained Malian soldiers as part of an effort to counter the al-Qaeda affiliated entity called the Group for Supports of Islam and Muslims (JNIM).² It has been also alleged that Wagner Group members played a role in the Moura massacre where between March 27-31, 200 individuals were summarily executed.³ This would not be the first time where members of the Wagner Group has been accused of crimes against humanity. For example, in 2021, three NGOs announced that they were assisting a Syrian man suing members of the Wagner Group for war crimes in Syria.⁴ The Wagner Group's indiscriminate violence, sadly, goes beyond Syria and Mali. It includes crimes in Libya, the Central African Republic, Ukraine, and many other places.⁵

Elsewhere in Africa, in 2019, Wagner Group members were deployed to Libya as part of an effort to prop up Khalifa Haftar, a Libya warlord.⁶ This deployment is quintessential of the activities of the Wagner Group – they identify war-torn or geographic locales stricken by civil strife and seek to exploit the situation. In the case of Libya, it is no accident that the Wagner Group personnel are located near, among other things, critically important oil facilities in the country. For instance, more than two years ago, the Libyan National Oil Corporation announced in a statement that, “Wagner...mercenaries are camped within the vicinity of the Sharara oil field, preventing Libyan oil from flowing.”⁷ In July 2022 *Foreign Policy* analysis explained that the Wagner Group has a chokehold over the Libya's natural resources and export facilities. As a result, Libyan oil output has drastically decreased.⁸ Libya, in many ways, is emblematic of the Wagner Group's strategy (and Russia's) – prop up desperate political/military figures while gaining power and influence over the key nodes of natural resource production. In the case of Libya, just as we've seen during the recent Russia's illegal incursion into Ukraine, the Wagner Group has weaponized oil.

Prior to Wagner's adventurism in Libya, the group parked itself in the Central African Republic (CAR), another unstable country. In the CAR, Wagner Group members propped up President Faustin-Archange Touadera.⁹ Wagner Group's support to high-level figures in CAR, just as in Mali, comes with dangerous consequences – especially for innocent civilians. In a recent study by the non-profit Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, Wagner Group members were involved in nearly 40% of the acts of political violence against civilians in the CAR between December 2020-July 2022.¹⁰ In CAR, as in other parts of Africa, Wagner Group mercenaries not only train host-country personnel. They are also operational, carrying out joint

² The Soufan Center, “IntelBrief: The Moura Massacre in Mali and the Role of Russian Mercenaries,” April 15, 2022.

³ Ibid.

⁴ International Federation For Human Rights, “Complaint filed in Moscow against Wagner paramilitary fighters, on behalf of Syrian victim,” March 22, 2021.

⁵ Jason Blazakis, Colin Clarke, Mohamed El Shawesh, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Stephanie Foggett, Mollie Saltskog, and Amanda Schmitt, “Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, and Mercenaries: Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine,” The Soufan Center. April 2022.

⁶ The Soufan Center, “IntelBrief: Taking Stock of the Wagner Group's Expanding Footprint in Africa,” May 2, 2022.

⁷ National Oil Corporation, “NOC condemns renewed blockade of Libyan oil exports,” July 12, 2020.

⁸ Robert Uniacke, “Libya Could Be Putin's Trump Card,” *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2022.

⁹ The Soufan Center, “IntelBrief: The Wagner Group: A Russian Symphony of Profit and Politics,” April 21, 2020.

¹⁰ ACLED, “Wagner Group Operations in Africa,” August 30, 2022.

operations with government security forces. Wagner Group personnel also partake in unilateral operations – which can be even deadlier. The same ACLED study explained that Wagner Group targeting of civilians while on unilateral operations increases considerably.¹¹ The use of political violence by the Wagner Group in countries where it operates has become a dangerous hallmark of the organization in Africa.

It should come as no surprise that the Wagner Group has deployed its henchmen to Sudan – a crucible for conflict for too long. Now, Wagner Group members are propping up Lt. General Mohamed Hamdan. Wagner, as in other parts of the world, is supporting Sudanese security forces and Hamdan as part of an effort to suppress efforts to bring democracy to Sudan.¹²

Glomming onto strong-men like Hamdan, as elsewhere in Africa as already noted, has been a time-honored tactic of the Wagner Group as it seeks to leverage relationships and allies for tangible returns. What is the Wagner Group getting out of these relationships? Or, perhaps more accurately, what is the Russian Federation getting out of the Wagner Group's militarism? First, it is important to underscore that the Wagner Group operates beyond the contours of Africa and Ukraine. It operates in Latin America and Asia. The U.S. Department of the Treasury, for example, sanctioned Prigozhin's companies in Thailand and Hong Kong. It is highly likely, based on my assessment of the Treasury's Department press release, that these Asia-based companies, Shine Drago Group Limited, Shen Yang Jing Cheng Machinery Imp&Exp. Company, and Zhe Jiang Jiayi Small Commodities Trade Company Limited facilitated transactions on behalf of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group.¹³

In order to counter the Wagner Group global enterprise, it is vitally important to understand its objectives. First, in this regard, the Wagner Group's objectives are the Russian Federation's objectives. Wagner pursues its activities with an eye towards advancing Russia's national security interests in two primary ways: 1) undermining democracy, and; 2) benefiting from the profits derived from the exploitation of the natural resources it has gained access to. As described heretofore, the Wagner Group contributes to Russia's efforts to undermine efforts of individuals and organizations to democratize by backing authoritarians and engaging in human rights abuses. In doing this, the Wagner Group gains access to important resources that advance Russia's geopolitical interests. In essence, objective one, undermining democracy naturally feeds into profiteering, the second objective, the Wagner Group engages in. How have the Wagner Group and the Russian Federation profited from the deployment of Wagner operatives?

The Wagner Group does not operate in Africa, or elsewhere for that matter, unless it provides benefits to the Russian Federation. In Libya, the group's deployment in proximity to Libyan oil assets provides the Russian Federation unique leverage in a strategically important country. This coupled with the Wagner Group's forward presence at multiple military bases throughout the country gives Russia political power over the endgame in Libya. In Sudan, the Wagner Group has exchanged its support for Sudanese strongmen for access to gold.¹⁴ Gold, which in

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Declan Walsh, "From Russia With Love: A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan," [The New York Times](#), June 5, 2022.

¹³ U.S. Department of the Treasury. "Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity," July 15, 2020.

¹⁴ Declan Walsh, "From Russia With Love: A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan," [The New York](#)

my view, has been critical to Russia's ability to withstand the significant sanctions deployed against it for its illegal invasion in Ukraine. The long list of natural resources exploited in Africa was documented well by The Brookings Institution, a venerable think-tank based in the United States. Oil, gold, diamonds, uranium, and manganese have been extracted by the Wagner Group throughout the African continent.¹⁵ Access to these resources provides the Russian Federation an ability to circumvent the need to use the formal financial system to move money. Moreover, it has provided the Wagner Group opportunities to launder the proceeds of sales associated with precious metals and minerals, and otherwise skirt the significant sanctions that have been deployed against Russia for its illegal war in Ukraine.

The Wagner Group is an arm of Russia's foreign policy and military machine. It should not be treated, and thus countered, as a PMC. Efforts to counter the Wagner Group need to escalate. First, countering the Wagner Group as it pertains to its efforts to diminish democratic efforts in the countries it operates in requires two things: 1) tarnish the reputation of those who engage directly with Wagner personnel, and; 2) counter the financial activities of the group. Regarding the first, countries should use their diplomatic and public shaming might to focus on the individuals who have entered into agreements with the Wagner Group or have engaged in human rights atrocities with Wagner Group members. Simply put, sanctioning the Wagner Group or its members is not sufficient. Governments should sanction those individuals in Africa who are leading efforts to work with the Wagner Group. They are not useful idiots. They are willingly engaging in the exploitation of their own country's natural resources, selling off their military bases and ports, and facilitating the Wagner Group's hunting down, and killing, of their enemies. Second, governments should consider whether the sanctions deployed thus far against the Wagner Group, and the Russian Federation for that matter, are sufficient. I believe they are not.

While I do not consider the Wagner Group a PMC in the conventional sense, I recognize that many experts do. Setting aside semantics, I would note that governments have sanctioned PMCs and militias as terrorist groups. The United States, for instance, sanctioned the Colombian based United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 2001. The AUC was a paramilitary group that had links to parts of the Colombian Government and was used to hunt down the government's many enemies. The AUC was also a profiteering organization, enmeshed heavily in a range of criminal activities, including the drug trade. The labeling of the AUC as a terrorist group made it more difficult for parts of the Colombian state to maintain a relationship with the group. A group, by the way, which carried out human rights atrocities not dissimilar to the Wagner Group.

For more than ten years, I headed up an office at the State Department that sanctioned FTOs pursuant to U.S. law. I know firsthand that labeling groups as terrorist entities has vitally important signaling and normative effects. No government, to my knowledge, has decided to proscribe the Wagner Group as a terrorist entity. This is something governments should consider doing should their legal authorities allow for it. Labeling the Wagner Group as a

Times, June 5, 2022.

¹⁵ Federica Saini Fasanotti, "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, Commercial Concessions, rights violations, and counterinsurgency failure," Brookings, February 8, 2022

terrorist entity would change the cost of doing business with it. Countries, organizations, and strongman may reconsider having a relationship with a group that is treated as a terrorist organization. While there are a myriad of other benefits to labeling the Wagner Group as a terrorist entity, the stigma attached to the group could be leveraged by governments to limit Wagner's access to ports, natural resources, and corridors of power that the group has been able to exploit for the benefit of the Russian Federation.

There remains much that we do not know or understand about the Wagner Group. For example, how will Prigozhin's recent decision to publicly admit his leadership role within the group shape the way the group conducts its future activities. In this regard, my team at CTEC, thanks to funding from Middlebury College, is carrying out in-depth Russian language and a data analytic study of how the group perceives itself, how the Russian-speaking public sees it. Moreover, we are researching more deeply the Wagner Group's ideology, financing, and how the illegal war in Ukraine has changed its footprint overseas in places like Africa. This work will help inform policymakers as they decide which tools can best combat the Wagner Group's activities on behalf of the Russian Federation. I hope that I can soon share the preliminary results of our new research with the committee in the near future.

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