



THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE WAGNER GROUP IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Date: February 16, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On February 16, 2023, Royce de Melo, an independent security and defense consultant, presented *The Implications of the Wagner group in Africa and the Middle East*. The key issues discussed were the history of Wagner group operations, current activities in Africa and the Middle East, and the relationship between the group and the Russian state.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

The presentation explained the role of international law in defining and regulating activities by mercenaries. The relationship between Wagner Group and the Kremlin was explored in the context of Wagner group as a foreign policy tool. The presentation concluded with highlights on various Wagner group activities in African and Middle Eastern countries.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Mr. De Melo highlighted that the United Nations (UN) Mercenary Convention and Geneva conventions state that mercenaries are not recognized as legitimate combatants; thus, are not required to be treated as legitimate prisoners-of-war. Only 46 out of 191 UN member states ratified the UN Mercenary Convention as of August 2021; reflecting a lack of consensus regarding a universal mercenary definition. Some member states wish to avoid the legal liability the conventions would place on states for using their own mercenaries. Other parties who ratified the UN Mercenary Convention, such as Belarus, continue to train and use mercenaries while disregarding their international obligations.

Mr. De Melo asserted that western countries prefer the term PMC as opposed to mercenaries. Western nations used PMCs in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars to avoid recruiting additional military personnel, with the individuals fulfilling roles ranging from administration to operations. PMC casualties were not counted within coalition casualty counts; thus, avoiding the political repercussions of military service personnel casualties.

Mr. De Melo observed that the Russian-based Wagner group maintains an arm-length relationship with the Russian-state to create a degree of plausible deniability. Created by Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin, the Wagner group has been a critical tool used by President Vladimir Putin to further Russian foreign policy in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. The group was used in the 2014 annexation of Crimea as “little green men”, then went on to support pro-Russia locals in the War in the Donbas. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has inserted Wagner group into an overt role to further Russian military objectives, which saw Wagner group resort to recruiting criminals from Russia penal system to supplement the group's high-casualties rate. Subsequently, the group has been designated by the US Department of Treasury as a Transnational Criminal Organization.

Mr. De Melo stated that, previously, the Wagner group's domain resided in Africa and the Middle East, engaging in criminal, political, and economic activities. The group continues to conduct operations in Mali, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya, and Madagascar, often operating on the behalf of African and Middle Eastern governments in exchange for mineral resources and/or military operations. It has been rumored that the group is currently seeking contracts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Wagner Group's public relations (PR) division has been instrumental with securing the successful election of Madagascar's current President in addition to supporting the military coup d'état in Mali.

In the Middle East, specifically Syria, Mr. De Melo stated that Wagner Group has fought on behalf of the Assad regime, despite the state being a ratified party to the UN Mercenary Convention. At one point, Wagner mercenaries became engaged with US forces stationed at a Free Syrian Army position, and Russian military forces failed to acknowledge the presence of Wagner mercenaries during the ongoing assault. US forces killed between 100–200 mercenaries through airstrikes and artillery, assuming them to be Assad forces. Despite this fact, Mr. De Melo stated that there was no diplomatic fallout because, technically speaking, US forces were not engaging the Russian military but a group of

mercenaries. He noted that this exemplifies both the usefulness and expendability of Wagner in pursuit of Russian interests.

Mr. De Melo asserted that Russian foreign policy is driven by nationalism, *realpolitik*, and profits in the Middle East and Africa, and the state has sought to cultivate spheres of influence within Africa and the Middle East. Narratives of anti-colonialism, trade offerings, and assistance without conditions have been key to Russia's diplomacy on the continent. Mr. De Melo noted that African states that have received Russian support have in turn supported Russia in the UN with regards to the War in Ukraine.

Mr. De Melo highlighted various successes and failures of Wagner's activities in Mozambique, Central African Republic, Mali, and Libya. Wagner mercenaries were hired to counter Islamic State-Mozambique; however, Wagner pulled out after the group's inadequacy in bush warfare became clear. In the Central African Republic, Wagner mercenaries were hired as advisors to government forces for the ongoing civil war in exchange for key concessions to diamond mining rights and profits. Wagner has been a key supporter of Colonel Assimi Goita's Mali military coup and the group's PR division have propagated anti-western propaganda to bolster public support in spite of alleged massacres and torture allegations. Wagner forces have supported General Khalifa Haftar in Libya, smuggling arms around an international embargo.

Question and Answer

Mr. De Melo stated that Wager group will continue to use conventionally brutal tactics within their operational regions. A high degree of brutality and state abuses occurred within former Soviet Union states during and after the Cold War and Mr. De Melo does not believe this brutality will hinder Wagner operations in Africa, as a similar degree of brutality occurs in the region in spite of Wagner's presence.

Mr. De Melo asserted that Wagner group is an extension of Putin's interests, and that Putin used the ambiguous relationship with Wagner to further foreign policy objectives by other means. Despite Wagner's important relationship to the Kremlin, Putin likely keeps Mr. Prigozhin constrained to prevent Prigozhin threatening the legitimacy of his office, while also utilizing the relationship to send a message to the military to keep them in check. Mr. De Melo contended that the status of the Putin-Prigozhin relationship remains somewhat unclear.

Mr. De Melo suggested that western nations will not allow the use of PMCs within Ukraine as the political risk remains high and Ukraine likely cannot afford

contracting western PMCs. Additionally, the Ukrainian government hiring PMCs would delegitimize their cause rather than using a volunteer and national military.

Mr. De Melo stated that the best approach western nations can use to counter Russian soft-power in Africa is by offering trade deals that directly benefit local and foreign direct investment.

Mr. De Melo contended that what differentiates Wagner group from western PMCs is that Wagner is an extension of the Russian state, while western PMCs are entirely separate from the state, being privately owned and operated.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- The United Nations (UN) Mercenary Convention and Geneva conventions state that mercenaries are not recognized as legitimate combatants; thus, are not required to be treated as legitimate prisoners-of-war.
- Western countries prefer the term Private Military Company (PMC) as opposed to mercenaries and have used PMC in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars to avoid recruiting more military personnel.
- The Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin created Wagner Group maintains an arm-length relationship with the Russian-state to create a degree of plausible deniability.
- The Wagner group continues to conduct operations in Mali, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya, and Madagascar on behalf of the governments in exchange for mineral resources and/or military operations. The Wagner Group has been involved in the Middle East, specifically Syria, fighting jihadist and rebels on behalf of the Assad regime.
- Russian foreign policy is driven by nationalism, realpolitik and profits in the Middle East and Africa.



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