

# The Wagner Group in the Central Sahel: Decolonization or Destabilization?

By Riza Kumar

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**COUNTER  
EXTREMISM  
PROJECT**

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## The Wagner Group in the Central Sahel: Decolonization or Destabilization?

### Introduction

Since 2012, the central Sahel region has been plagued by protracted insurgencies: in northern and central Mali, al-Qaeda affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and its affiliate Katiba Macina carry out almost daily attacks, whereas the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) more commonly targets northern Burkina Faso and western Niger.<sup>1</sup> Despite drastically transforming their counterinsurgency approach in the past two years, the three Sahelian countries have yet to contain the longstanding conflict. As violent jihadist groups remain undeterred, the counterterrorism response from the central Sahel trio has shifted towards Russia and away from the West. This report explores the implications of the presence of the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-based private military company (PMC), across the multiple conflict theatres of the central Sahel and determine whether the PMC has increased or deteriorated security across the region.

Initially, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger enlisted support from France, their former colonial power. In January 2013, France launched Operation Serval, a successful mission that significantly contained the violent extremist threat in Mali's north. Operation Serval transitioned into Operation Barkhane in August 2014. Barkhane, which encompassed not only Mali but the former French colonies of Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, lacked a clear counterterrorism direction and resulted in a protracted occupation of the region.<sup>2</sup> Although France continued to revise and expand their military and development operations across the Sahel,<sup>3</sup> violent extremists persisted, leading to an ongoing—and in Mali's case, a decade-long—overlapping insurgency.

The resilience of the insurgency could be due to the organizational deficiencies of Sahelian counterterrorism campaigns, but it should also be noted that the year prior to the start of the insurgency, an influx of funding was allocated towards these Islamist movements in 2011 by the Qatari government. On November 29, 2023, the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), published leaked documents by Project Raven, a confidential surveillance initiative that assists the United Arab Emirates in surveilling other governments, militants, and human rights activists. According to the document, in 2011, the Emir of Qatar instructed that \$15 million be allocated to burgeoning Islamist movements across northern Mali and the Sahel. The funds were reportedly marked as humanitarian support and were allocated via the state security service under the representation of Abdullah bin Hamad Al-Nue'eimi, a Qatari official.<sup>4</sup> Further information detailing the distribution of these funds is limited; however, the significant donation

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<sup>1</sup> "Violent Extremism in the Sahel," Center for Preventative Action, August 1, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel>.

<sup>2</sup> Wassim Nasr and Raphael Parens, "France's Missed Moments in Mali," The Soufan Center, July 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/TSC-Insights-Frances-Missed-Moments-In-Mali.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> "Operation Barkhane," European Council on Foreign Relations, [https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/operation\\_barkhane](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/operation_barkhane).

<sup>4</sup> "The Raven Project Leaks: \$15 Million Reportedly Paid To Islamist Movements In Northern Mali And The Sahel In 2011," Middle East Media Research Institute, November 29, 2023, [https://www.memri.org/reports/raven-project-leaks-15-million-reportedly-paid-islamist-movements-northern-mali-and-sahel#\\_edn1](https://www.memri.org/reports/raven-project-leaks-15-million-reportedly-paid-islamist-movements-northern-mali-and-sahel#_edn1).

could explain the speed and intensity at which Islamist opposition movements countered security forces and claimed control over large swathes of the Sahel.

Additionally, as the insurgencies continued, resentment towards foreign forces grew, leading to diplomatic tension and disagreements. Consecutive military coups in Mali between 2020 and 2021, a double coup in 2022 in Burkina Faso, and a July 2023 coup in Niger further compromised relations between France and the Sahel nations. The resulting junta governments in all countries claimed that French troop inadequacies and the previous administration's lack of progress in confronting terrorist groups justified their seizure of power.

The coup governments regularly pointed to misaligned goals with international troops, particularly French troops. Diplomatic tension between the juntas and France came to a head when Mali and Burkina Faso both ordered French troops to withdraw in 2022 and 2023, respectively.<sup>5</sup> French and British troops withdrew from Mali in 2022. In June 2023, the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) also announced a six-month withdrawal process from Mali of its estimated 14,000 troops.<sup>6</sup> France first deployed troops to Burkina Faso in 2018, but in a similar vein to Mali, the Burkinabe military junta demanded the withdrawal of French troops in early 2023.<sup>7</sup> Although France maintained 1,400 troops and attack drones in Niger,<sup>8</sup> following the 2023 coup Niger's junta was quick to revoke five military deals with France.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after in October 2023, France began withdrawing its troops from the southern region of the country.<sup>10</sup>

Following this series of withdrawals and despite the lofty promises of the juntas, as of October 2023, approximately 40 percent of Burkina Faso's territory was controlled by non-state armed groups.<sup>11</sup> Mali controls even less of its territory, governing about 22 percent of its central and

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<sup>5</sup> "French army officially ends operations in Burkina Faso," France 24, February 20, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230220-french-army-officially-ends-operations-in-burkina-faso>; "Mali's ruling junta asks France to withdraw troops 'without delay'," France 24, February 18, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220218-mali-asks-france-to-withdraw-troops-without-delay>.

<sup>6</sup> David Lewis and Edward Mcallister, "U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali set to end on June 30," Reuters, June 27, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/un-peacekeeping-mission-mali-end-june-30-french-draft-resolution-2023-06-27/>; "August 2023 Monthly Forecast," United Nations Security Council, July 31, 2023, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-08/mali-24.php>.

<sup>7</sup> John Irish, "France to withdraw troops from Burkina Faso within a month," Reuters, January 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-withdraw-troops-burkina-faso-within-month-foreign-ministry-2023-01-25/>.

<sup>8</sup> Nabila Ramdani, "The Niger crisis shows France's quasi-empire in Africa is finally crumbling," The Guardian, August 5, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/05/niger-crisis-france-empire-africa-coup-colony>.

<sup>9</sup> Boureima Balima, Abdel-Kader Mazou, and Bate Felix, "Niger junta revokes military deals with France," Reuters, August 4, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-african-defence-chiefs-mull-response-niger-coup-2023-08-03/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Niger junta says French withdrawal will begin with 400 soldiers in southwest," Reuters, October 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/french-troop-withdrawal-niger-will-begin-with-400-soldiers-southwest-niger-junta-2023-10-06/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Burkina Faso: Coups and conflict drive crisis," International Rescue Committee, April 8, 2023, <https://www.rescue.org/article/burkina-faso-coups-and-conflict-drive-crisis>.

northern regions.<sup>12</sup> In western Niger, civilians have been targeted more often since the coup: more than half of violent extremist attacks targeted communities that refused to pay exorbitant taxes imposed by ISGS.<sup>13</sup>

Following the removal of French forces, the Wagner Group, has attempted to fill the security gap left by France and the United Nations. The PMC has justified their intervention with anti-colonial rhetoric. As the late Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed, “the former colonizers [the French] are filling these countries with terrorists...creating a colossal security crisis.”<sup>14</sup> Since their deployment in Mali in 2021, the PMC has drastically altered conditions in the field, making counterinsurgency less about protecting civilians and more about promoting self-serving agendas. Wagner has entrenched itself as a security service within the dictatorial echelons of the central Sahel nations, but more often has become a destabilizing force. In carrying out its counter-extremism missions, the PMC has been accused of indiscriminately massacring civilians, committing countless crimes against humanity, and propping up the respective juntas of Burkina Faso, Mali,<sup>15</sup> and most recently, Niger.<sup>16</sup>

As the juntas continue to claim that their takeovers were necessary, the disturbing reality is that since the second half of 2022, the Liptako-Gourma zone—an intersection between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—is now considered the “epicenter of violence in the Sahel.”<sup>17</sup> JNIM and ISGS have quickly expanded their operations and are competing to outperform the other as the predominant threat across three countries. To further increase their troop numbers and operational capabilities, ISGS absorbed the violent extremist group Ansar al-Islam, and by August 2023, Burkina Faso faced an escalation of attacks attributed to ISGS.<sup>18</sup>

By aligning with Wagner, the central Sahel will limit itself to military responses as the only remedy for violent extremism. Wagner’s counterinsurgency strategy lacks the infrastructure and long-term development initiatives that were incorporated into both the French and the U.N.’s counter-extremism programs and peacekeeping missions in the central Sahel.<sup>19</sup> Decades of

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<sup>12</sup> Louisa Brooke-Holland, “UN ends peacekeeping force in Mali,” House of Commons Library, July 3, 2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9827/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Five Zones of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 26, 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/five-zones-militant-islamist-violence-sahel/>.

<sup>14</sup> Tim Lister, “Prigozhin celebrates Niger coup, says his Wagner group can help,” CNN, August 29, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/29/africa/prigozhin-niger-coup-wagner-intl/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Sam Mednick, “Russian role in Burkina Faso crisis comes under scrutiny,” Associated Press, October 22, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-africa-france-west-a6384d7134e8688c367a68721f657857>.

<sup>16</sup> Sam Mednick, “Niger’s junta asks for help from Russian group Wagner as it faces military intervention threat,” Associated Press, August 5, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/wagner-russia-coup-niger-military-force-e0e1108b58a9e955af465a3efe6605c0>.

<sup>17</sup> “Five Zones of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 26, 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/five-zones-militant-islamist-violence-sahel/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Islamic State group ‘trying to control’ Mali-Niger border with series of attacks,” France 24, May 25, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220524-islamic-state-group-trying-to-control-mali-niger-border-with-series-of-attacks>; “ISGS Attacks On Civilians Increase Despite Burkina Faso’s Auxiliary Efforts,” Africa Defense Forum, August 1, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/08/isgs-attacks-on-civilians-increase-despite-burkina-fasos-auxiliary-efforts/>.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Millon, “Mali’s struggle for stability,” Geopolitical Intelligence Services, May 19, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/mali-french-intervention/>.

research on insurgencies and experience has demonstrated the need for a multi-disciplinary approach, encompassing both kinetic campaigns and developmental programs, to sustainably and safely contain violent extremism.<sup>20</sup> An exclusively militaristic response is often counterproductive and results in a very high number of civilian casualties.

Wagner's track record is notably bloody and lacking in clear success stories. But the PMC continues to establish itself as an ally—and increasingly the *only* ally—to coup leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Below, this paper further documents how Wagner's presence in the central Sahel has fueled insurgencies rather than contained violent extremism, creating greater challenges in the fight against the global networks of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

## The Wagner Group and Their Objectives in the Sahel

The Wagner Group is a Russia-based PMC comprised of a network of businesses and mercenary groups operating across the globe. At the time of this writing, Wagner is present in Ukraine, Libya, Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, and has likely begun to establish a presence in both Burkina Faso and Niger.<sup>21</sup> Involved in multiple protracted conflicts, Wagner contracts have included deploying troops for combat operations, disseminating disinformation campaigns,<sup>22</sup> and providing security for administrations seeking indefinite terms in power. In combat operations, Wagner sometimes operates independently from a national army and sometimes works alongside a country's military.<sup>23</sup> Since its founding in 2014, the Wagner Group and the Kremlin have had an interdependent relationship, leading analysts to believe that Wagner acts as a proxy for Russia. Notably, Wagner maintains close relationships with Russia's Chief Intelligence Office (GRU), Federal Security Service (FSB), and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).<sup>24</sup> However, a threatened Wagner mutiny against the Kremlin over the war in Ukraine in June 2023 signaled tensions between the entities. The rebellion resulted in the exile of Wagner

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<sup>20</sup> "Countering terrorism," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, July 19, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_77646.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_77646.htm); "Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism," United Nations Institute for Training and Research, <https://unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/peace/our-portfolio/preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-conducive-terrorism>.

<sup>21</sup> "Wagner Group: Council adds 11 individuals and 7 entities to EU sanctions lists," Council of the European Union, February 25, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/wagner-group-council-adds-11-individuals-and-7-entities-to-eu-sanctions-lists/>; William Rampe, "What Is Russia's Wagner Group Doing in Africa?," Council on Foreign Relations, May 23, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-russias-wagner-group-doing-africa/>; "Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity," U.S. Department of the Treasury, July 15, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1058>; Sam Mednick, "After Burkina Faso ousts French, Russia's Wagner may arrive," Associated Press, April 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546>; Kathryn Armstrong, "Niger coup: Wagner taking advantage of instability - Antony Blinken," BBC News, August 8, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66436797>.

<sup>22</sup> Amy Mackinnon and Robbie Gramer, "Russian Mercenaries Staged Atrocities in Mali, France Says," *Foreign Policy*, April 26, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/26/russian-mercenaries-staged-atrocities-mali-france-says/>

<sup>23</sup> Tanya Mehra and Meryl Demuynck, "Raising the stakes against the Wagner Group: From mercenaries to a designated terrorist group?," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), January 17, 2023, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/raising-stakes-against-wagner-group-mercenaries-designated-terrorist-group>.

<sup>24</sup> Colin P. Clark, "What Happens Next with the Wagner Group?," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 18, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/05/what-happens-next-with-the-wagner-group/>; "Annual Threat Assessment Of The U.S. Intelligence Community," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 6, 2023, <https://www.odni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

leader Yevgeny Prigozhin to Belarus. His subsequent death in a plane crash in August cemented Moscow's absorption of the Wagner Group into the Russian army, and its role in the scramble for influence in Africa.<sup>25</sup>

### The Central Sahel: The Kremlin's Quest for Financial and Geopolitical Power Gains

Publicly, the growing relationship between Wagner and the countries of the central Sahel is an attempt to mitigate the security vacuum left by French and international forces, as well as to protect the fragile military juntas from further coups.<sup>26</sup> However, international relations experts point to alternative goals: Wagner has aligned with the Sahel to further Russia's great power ambitions; the Sahel has had a long history with France, a Western power, that once pushed out of the region will benefit Russia's geostrategic portfolio; and establishing a profile in the Sahel further reduces the area's dependence on Western allies and international institutions, further isolating key competitors to Russia's global ambitions. In varying degrees throughout the three countries, Wagner has ramped up anti-Western sentiment and discredited international forces for their less-than-successful counterinsurgency campaigns.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the central Sahel is a lucrative, resource-rich area, and Wagner has its sights set on securing them without interference. The financial projections are also significant—Russia's defense industry exported around 24 percent of all arms to sub-Saharan Africa between 2010 and 2021 and would expect to increase those figures.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile Wagner stands to gain unprecedented access to lucrative mining and forestry contracts.<sup>29</sup>

Wagner's presence in Africa also indirectly benefits Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The PMC's access to Africa's reserves of gold, diamonds, uranium, and oil provide Russia with resources to compensate for international sanctions imposed on the Kremlin since its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, to mitigate significant military losses, Russia has previously freed African prisoners and with minimal training deployed them to fight in Ukraine in 2022. Evidence indicates that this tactic was also used previously in the Central African Republic (CAR), another country where Wagner was deployed.<sup>31</sup> In February 2023, Mali's support for Russia extended to voting against a U.N. resolution calling for an end to the war in Ukraine and

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<sup>25</sup> "Russia rebellion: Wagner Group troops to be absorbed into Russian military as mercenary boss Yevgeny Prigozhin heads to Belarus," Sky News, June 25, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-rebellion-wagner-group-troops-to-be-absorbed-into-russian-military-as-mercenary-boss-yevgeny-prigozhin-heads-to-belarus-12909128>.

<sup>26</sup> "Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation," International Crisis Group, February 9, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/b185-mali-eviter-le-piege-de-lisolement>.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Sany, "Great Power Competition Implications in Africa: The Russian Federation and its Proxies," United States Institute of Peace, July 18, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/great-power-competition-implications-africa-russian-federation-and-its-proxies>.

<sup>28</sup> Kate Bartlett, "Russia Sanctions a Boon for Chinese Arms Sales to Africa?," Voice of America, March 17, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-sanctions-a-boon-for-chinese-arms-sales-to-africa-/7010383.html>.

<sup>29</sup> "IntelBrief: Russia Making Inroads in Africa as the Sahel Spirals Out of Control," The Soufan Center, April 27, 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-april-27/>.

<sup>30</sup> George Clooney, Justyna Gudzowska, and John Prendergast, "Putin's Exploitation of Africa Could Help Him Evade Sanctions," *Time Magazine*, April 8, 2022, <https://time.com/6165246/putin-africa-evade-sanctions/>.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Obaji Jr., "Putin's Prison Recruiting Scheme Takes a Big, Desperate Turn," *The Daily Beast*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/wagner-group-accused-of-recruiting-prisoners-from-the-central-african-republic-for-russias-war-in-ukraine>.

Russia's withdrawal from Ukrainian territory. Other holdouts included Nicaragua and Syria, two countries that also have ties to Wagner.<sup>32</sup>

### The Disturbing Reality of Wagner's "Counterterrorism" Operations

Russia's financial and power gains due to Wagner's involvement across the central Sahel are punctuated by a glaring oversight: the mercenary company's ambitions are primarily transactional, and do not actually prioritize the containment of violent extremism. Effective counterterrorism operations have been more of an afterthought in Wagner's approach to securing African resources. Since Wagner's deployment across this tri-border area of the Sahel, the number of terrorist attacks has increased, as has the deadly targeting of civilians.<sup>33</sup> In Mali, Wagner's attempt at targeting alleged members of JNIM resulted in the March 2022 massacre of at least 500 civilians in Moura.<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch has further claimed that Malian armed forces and Wagner are together responsible for "executing" dozens of civilians during "counterinsurgent operations" carried out since late 2022.<sup>35</sup>

Recent figures reveal the grave reality haunting the central Sahel. Since January 2023, there have been a record number of terrorist deaths in the three countries; 2,725 in Burkina Faso, 844 in Mali, and 77 in Niger.<sup>36</sup> Disturbingly, since 2022, the Liptako-Gourma zone—the border intersection of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—has been labeled by the Africa Center as the "epicenter of violence in the Sahel."<sup>37</sup> JNIM has further spread its operations into Burkina Faso and Niger, and ISGS is also competing with JNIM for dominance in the three countries. In August 2023, media sources cited a drastic increase in ISGS attacks in Burkina Faso following the group's absorption of another violent extremist group, Ansar al-Islam.<sup>38</sup> Since the series of coups in the central Sahel, violence has not subsided but has become more normalized and more deadly.

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<sup>32</sup> Niha Masih, "U.N. resolution to end Ukraine war: How countries voted and who abstained," *Washington Post*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/24/un-ukraine-resolution-vote-countries/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Wagner Group Operations in Africa," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), August 30, 2022, <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/#s6>.

<sup>34</sup> "Rapport sur les événements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, May 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/mali/20230512-Moura-Report.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> "Rights group says Mali army, foreign fighters executed civilians," Al Jazeera, July 24, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/24/rights-group-says-mali-army-foreign-fighters-executed-civilians>.

<sup>36</sup> "West Africa Had 1,800 Terrorist Attacks in First 6 Months of 2023, Official Says," Associated Press, July 26, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/west-africa-had-1-800-terrorist-attacks-in-first-6-months-of-2023-official-says-7199939.html>.

<sup>37</sup> "Five Zones of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 26, 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/five-zones-militant-islamist-violence-sahel/>.

<sup>38</sup> "Islamic State group 'trying to control' Mali-Niger border with series of attacks," France 24, May 25, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220524-islamic-state-group-trying-to-control-mali-niger-border-with-series-of-attacks>; "ISGS Attacks On Civilians Increase Despite Burkina Faso's Auxiliary Efforts," Africa Defense Forum, August 1, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/08/isgs-attacks-on-civilians-increase-despite-burkina-fasos-auxiliary-efforts/>.



## Wagner's Reception in the Central Sahel

Despite the recent spike in violence and Russia's generally abhorrent human rights record in Africa, governments and anti-colonial civilians in the central Sahel have welcomed Wagner and sought out a greater role for Russia in the region.<sup>39</sup> Niger's connection to Wagner is relatively new, although Nigeriens have voiced support for the PMC based on propaganda disseminated by Mali's junta extolling the group's supposed success.<sup>40</sup> Following the Mali coup, the junta's supporters marched in the streets brandishing Russian flags and denouncing France. It is unknown to what extent Russia contributed to the coup, but the Kremlin has already amassed a following in Niger.<sup>41</sup> Niamey's coup government also received an immediate show of support from its neighbors. The juntas in Burkina Faso and Mali warned the nations of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that any attempt to restore Niger's former president via military intervention would be viewed as a declaration of war.<sup>42</sup>

According to ECOWAS President Omar Alieu Touray, the key drivers of insecurity are terrorism, armed rebellion, organized crime, unconstitutional changes of government, and fake news including misinformation and disinformation.<sup>43</sup> Wagner has a history of contributing to these destabilizing factors throughout the central Sahel. As counterterrorism scholars note, insecure environments are vulnerable to radicalization.<sup>44</sup>

Although Wagner has not faced many obstacles in gaining favor from the juntas across the central Sahel, the future is less certain. Heightened hostility to foreign intervention in domestic matters could shift allegiance away from the new leaders and towards militant Islamist groups, with Wagner's brutal tactics ultimately contributing to radicalization. Violent extremists have proven skillful in exploiting cultural differences, especially in their portrayal of outside forces as the region's true enemy, in order to foment political unrest while gaining widespread support and potential recruits. As Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger prioritize Wagner's role in "restoring" regional security, the three countries will have to determine how long mounting civilian casualties, further isolation from the international community, and increasing community support for violent extremists can be justified.

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<sup>39</sup> Declan Walsh, "After Coup in Burkina Faso, Protesters Turn to Russia for Help," *New York Times*, January 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/africa/burkina-faso-coup-russians.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Gare Amadou, "Explainer: What's behind the Niger coup?," *Guardian*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/aug/08/explainer-whats-behind-the-niger-coup>.

<sup>41</sup> "Supporters of Niger's coup march, waving Russian flags and denouncing France," July 30, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/30/1190969703/supporters-of-nigers-coup-march-waving-russian-flags-and-denouncing-france>.

<sup>42</sup> Nabila Ramdani, "The Niger crisis shows France's quasi-empire in Africa is finally crumbling," *The Guardian*, August 5, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/05/niger-crisis-france-empire-africa-coup-colony>.

<sup>43</sup> "West Africa, Sahel Requires Tangible, Long-Term Support to Eliminate Terrorism, Address Humanitarian Crisis, Special Representative Tells Security Council," United Nations, July 25, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15365.doc.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> "West Africa Had 1,800 Terrorist Attacks in First 6 Months of 2023, Official Says," *Associated Press*, July 26, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/west-africa-had-1-800-terrorist-attacks-in-first-6-months-of-2023-official-says-/7199939.html>.

## Mali's Domino Effect

### Background and Preliminary Military Responses

Since 2012, Mali has suffered from a protracted insurgency that has resulted in thousands of deaths and the displacement of almost 400,000 civilians.<sup>45</sup> Violent extremists proved to be a significant threat, quickly taking control of half of Mali's territory before foreign troops were enlisted to support Mali's national counterterrorism units.<sup>46</sup> Three groups featured prominently in the insurgency: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); the ethnic Tuareg militant group Ansar Dine; and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Ansar Dine merged with AQIM's Sahara branch to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) in 2017, and MUJAO went through a number of permutations following its pledge of allegiance to ISIS in 2015 and is now known as Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel).<sup>47</sup> According to Wassim Nasr of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, as of late December 2022, JNIM remained the leading threat to Mali's junta, as JNIM surrounded the north, south, and east of the country's capital, and was also prevalent across the northeast and central regions.<sup>48</sup>

At the onset of jihadist violence, France deployed troops to support Mali's counterterrorism operations. In January 2013, France launched Opération Serval, a clearly defined, defense driven, and locally supported anti-terror campaign in the northern region of Mali. The campaign repelled violent extremists whose ambitions were advancing towards the country's center. In the short term, Serval was a successful campaign. The timeline was specific, the geographic mandate was realistic for a troop size of 1,700, and the military's response was flexible enough to counter evolving conditions on the ground.<sup>49</sup> The U.N. simultaneously launched the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in April 2013, employing a peacekeeping force of more than 15,000 military and police personnel to support political processes, security and stabilization tasks, as well as the promotion and protection of human rights.<sup>50</sup> As far as short-term counterterrorism campaigns go, Serval was successful in ousting large numbers of violent extremists and provided the north with a reprieve from what was to become a decades-long insurgency.

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<sup>45</sup> "Amid Endless Violence, Stabilization Mission in Mali Essential for Region's Stability, Special Representative Tells Security Council," United Nations, June 16, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15325.doc.htm>; "Mali Junta Slams Rights Report," Agence France Presse, November 25, 2022, <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/mali-junta-slams-rights-report/6850080.html>; "In central Mali, victims and persecutors live together," International Federation for Human Rights, November 24, 2022, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/in-central-mali-victims-and-persecutors-live-together/>.

<sup>46</sup> "France in Mali: A year of hunting jihadists in West Africa," France 24, November 1, 2014, <https://www.france24.com/en/20140111-france-mali-military-intervention-operation-serval-anniversary-timeline>.

<sup>47</sup> "Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)," National Counterterrorism Center, August 2022, [https://www.dni.gov/ncct/ftos/ansar\\_al\\_dine\\_fto.html](https://www.dni.gov/ncct/ftos/ansar_al_dine_fto.html); "The Islamic State Sahel Province," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), January 13, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/01/13/actor-profile-the-islamic-state-sahel-province/>.

<sup>48</sup> Wassim Nasr, "How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>49</sup> Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, "Operation Serval: The French Intervention in Mali," Universiteit Leiden, July 28, 2015, <https://www.leidensecurityandglobalaffairs.nl/articles/operation-serval-the-french-intervention-in-mali>.

<sup>50</sup> "MINUSMA Fact Sheet," United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>.

Ten years later, of the almost 400,000 displaced civilians, 55 percent are in central regions, and 40 percent are in the northern and northeastern areas of Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, and the eastern area of Ménaka.<sup>51</sup> The areas with the highest levels of displacement are unfortunately the original jihadist hotspots from which Serval successfully evicted terrorists.

France's 2014 follow-up mission to Serval, Opération Barkhane, involved a larger geographic focus beyond just Mali. The campaign of 4,500 personnel featured combat patrols alongside Malian forces, intelligence gathering, defense training, and local development activities. Additional countries under Barkhane's purview included Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.<sup>52</sup>

Despite Opération Barkhane's larger military footprint, conflicting security priorities precipitated political instability throughout Mali. Historically, Mali has contended with ongoing interethnic rivalries that are further exploited by violent extremists during periods of political and economic unrest. The intersection of an aggressive counterinsurgency policy and intercommunity grievances placed Mali's government in a precarious position and led to consecutive coups in August 2020 and May 2021. The juntas justified their takeover by blaming the previous administration's unsuccessful attempts at containing the insurgency.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, the ongoing insurgency enflamed other grievances within the Malian public. The bloody conflict created greater divisions between the ethnic Tuareg and Fulani communities—with the latter being accused of and punished for supposedly empathizing with militant Islamists.<sup>54</sup> The persistent attacks also wore on public morale and promoted anti-French sentiment that was further publicized by the ruling junta.<sup>55</sup> By August 2022, France withdrew the remainder of their troops from Mali, effectively terminating French-Malian bilateral relations. In June 2023, the junta also called for the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali (MINUSMA) to withdraw.<sup>56</sup>

### Wagner's Entrance and Activities in Mali

Anti-Western attitudes were not the only factor contributing to the evolution of Mali's counterterrorism approach and security framework. At the height of anti-colonial protests and disinformation campaigns targeting France,<sup>57</sup> Mali's ruling junta in December 2021 enlisted the security services of the Wagner Group. France and the United Nations decried the closer association with the Kremlin, further damaging cooperation between Bamako and international

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<sup>51</sup> "Amid Endless Violence, Stabilization Mission in Mali Essential for Region's Stability, Special Representative Tells Security Council," United Nations, June 16, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15325.doc.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> "Mapping Armed Groups In Mali And The Sahel," European Council on Foreign Relations, [https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/operation\\_barkhane](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/operation_barkhane).

<sup>53</sup> Ena Dion and Joseph Sany, "After Two Coups, Mali Needs Regional Support to Bolster Democracy," United States Institute of Peace, December 9, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/12/after-two-coups-mali-needs-regional-support-bolster-democracy>.

<sup>54</sup> Modibo Ghaly Cissé, "Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, April 22, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>.

<sup>55</sup> "Yevgeniy Prigozhin's Africa-Wide Disinformation Campaign," U.S. Department of State, November 4, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/yevgeniy-prigozhins-africa-wide-disinformation-campaign/>.

<sup>56</sup> Frank Kuwonu, "UN in Mali: We respect government's decision for mission withdrawal," United Nations, July 6, 2023, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2023/un-mali-we-respect-government%E2%80%99s-decision-mission-withdrawal>.

<sup>57</sup> "Yevgeniy Prigozhin's Africa-Wide Disinformation Campaign," U.S. Department of State, November 4, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/yevgeniy-prigozhins-africa-wide-disinformation-campaign/>.

security and peacekeeping personnel. U.S. officials also accused Wagner of engineering MINUSMA's exit.<sup>58</sup>

Mali entered a contract with the Wagner Group on the basis of training forces and providing security services amid political instability and a growing Salafi-jihadist threat. Bamako attempted to downplay the role of Wagner, stating "Russian trainers are in Mali as part of the reinforcement of the operational capacities of the National Defense and Security Forces."<sup>59</sup> In the Wagner Group, Bamako's ruling junta found an ally unbound from moral conduct and the rule of law. The bureaucratic and moral limitations of French and U.N. operations were deemed insufficient by the junta to combat violently advancing extremists.<sup>60</sup>

Per the agreement, Mali provided monthly payments of \$10 million to maintain Wagner's 1,000 troop members and operations in the country.<sup>61</sup> Not long into Wagner's deployment, it was evident that the PMC leveraged the relationship to ensure access to Mali's natural resources and the promotion of the Kremlin's global power ambitions.<sup>62</sup> On the defensive front, Wagner provided critical air support. According to on-the-ground sources, "most of [Mali's] military aircraft and combat helicopters are flown by Wagner's men."<sup>63</sup>

Although employed for security, regional scholars have noted that Wagner's tactics have verged towards unchecked hostility and indiscriminate aggression towards civilians.<sup>64</sup> The strategies employed by Wagner's troops have had a reverberating effect across the security sector. National troops have been accused of torturing, raping, and looting from villages, and from internally displaced people (IDP) camps, introducing further insecurity to every facet of society.<sup>65</sup>

### Wagner's Intervention and Ensuing Violence

Wagner's deployment has not resulted in significant gains against violent extremists. Despite being brought in as "trainers," according to the Soufan Center, the PMC "does not appear to

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<sup>58</sup> "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, August 3, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12389>.

<sup>59</sup> "Mali denies deployment of Russian mercenaries, says only 'trainers' present," Reuters, December 25, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/mali-denies-deployment-russian-mercenaries-says-only-trainers-present-2021-12-25/>.

<sup>60</sup> "Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation," International Crisis Group, February 9, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/b185-mali-eviter-le-piege-de-lisolement>.

<sup>61</sup> "Mali Paying Wagner Group \$10 Mn A Month, US General Says," Barron's, February 3, 2022, <https://www.barrons.com/news/mali-paying-wagner-group-10-mn-a-month-us-general-says-01643901009>.

<sup>62</sup> Maria Ilyushina, "Wagner mercenary group to focus on Africa, Prigozhin says in new video," *Washington Post*, August 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/22/prigozhin-africa-wagner-russia/>.

<sup>63</sup> Jean Fernand Koena, Chinedu Asadu, and Zane Irwin, "Failed Wagner revolt leaves a question in Africa: Will the ruthless mercenaries remain?," Associated Press, June 27, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/wagner-africa-mali-car-russia-prigozhin-bb6f41ea75bf95b2c1da2c4e05ea09a8>.

<sup>64</sup> Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 11, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

<sup>65</sup> Nick Roll, "Russia's Wagner Group in Mali spurs refugee spike in Mauritania," *Al Jazeera*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/6/28/russias-wagner-mercenaries-in-mali-drive-refugees-to-mauritania>; "Experts seek investigation of Wagner Group, Mali forces," Associated Press, January 31, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-mali-government-russia-geneva-b0b34285fdf2d039b45196152e35c038>

focus its investments on building the capacity of Malian security forces.”<sup>66</sup> Although lauded as the heavy-handed solution, Wassim Nasr of the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point reported that Wagner mercenaries are not much better equipped than their Malian counterparts. In fact, since September 2022, Wagner soldiers have not received significant logistical support or supplies other than guns, ammunition, and rations, that would serve as an advantage to Malian counterterrorism troops.<sup>67</sup>

Wagner’s footprint across Mali is severely bloody, as indiscriminate violence against civilians has surged since the PMC’s deployment. Data provided by ACLED reveals that in the period between December 2021 and June 2023, 21 percent of Wagner’s 298 political violence activities were directed at JNIM and 6 percent were directed towards IS Sahel. Horrifically, 69 percent of Wagner’s engagement in Mali involved civilian targeting. ACLED highlights that, “Wagner’s level of engagement makes it the fourth most active armed actor in Mali,” after JNIM, the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), and IS Sahel.<sup>68</sup> Between 2022 and 2023, 2,000 civilians have been killed—four times the number of casualties seen in 2021.<sup>69</sup> Further investigation into Wagner’s operations reveals that direct engagements with militants are limited. By December 2022, there were only nine encounters between Wagner and JNIM, and only one Wagner encounter with IS Sahel.<sup>70</sup> Given the low number of violent engagements between Wagner and terror groups, and the high number of civilian casualties, it seems questionable that the PMC takes the necessary preparatory steps critical to preventing large scale collateral damage.

The logistics behind Wagner’s counterinsurgency operations make one thing clear: its efforts have been focused on exploiting the country’s mineral resources and facilitating the trafficking of weapons, cigarettes, drugs, and illegal immigrants.<sup>71</sup> While Wagner has fostered alliances with civilian self-defense militias, this cooperation will hardly result in improved protection for civilians. Although civilian counterterrorism militias are formed to protect local communities from violent extremists, if left unchecked, these local troops often become platforms for carrying out self-serving political and economic agendas—a strategy that resembles and is likely encouraged by Wagner.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> “Wagner Group: The Evolution of a Private Army,” The Soufan Center, June 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/TSC-Special-Report-The-Wagner-Group-The-Evolution-Of-Putins-Private-Army-V3.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>68</sup> “Moving Out of the Shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World,” ACLED, August 2, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/02/moving-out-of-the-shadows-shifts-in-wagner-group-operations-around-the-world/>.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Harding, “Wagner’s African clients left to pick up the pieces as ISIS profits,” The National, June 30, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/weekend/2023/06/30/wagners-african-clients-left-to-pick-up-the-pieces-as-isis-profits/>.

<sup>70</sup> Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Millon, “Mali’s struggle for stability,” GIS Reports, May 19, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/mali-french-intervention/>.

<sup>72</sup> “Moving Out of the Shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World,” ACLED, August 2, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/02/moving-out-of-the-shadows-shifts-in-wagner-group-operations-around-the-world/>.

## Impact: Frequent Attacks and Recruitment Opportunities for Insurgents

The political fragmentation and corrupt agendas found throughout Bamako's security sector leave Malians vulnerable to recruitment by armed Islamist groups. The coup government maintains control of only 60 percent of Malian territory, while 40 percent is controlled by insurgent or militant ethnic groups, exposing millions of people to violence without state services or aid in the aftermath of attacks.<sup>73</sup>

Human Rights Watch reported that since January 2023, civilians in the northeastern Gao and Ménaka regions have seen an increase in killings, rapes, and lootings carried out by violent extremists. According to experts at the United Nations, the Malian Armed Forces have not protected Ménaka's civilians from attacks by IS Sahel since June 2022.<sup>74</sup> Even in areas where Wagner is stationed, IS Sahel and JNIM remain undeterred and continue to wage violence on civilians, security forces, and one another as they seek control. IS Sahel and JNIM reportedly block supply roads, forcing civilians to defer to their control to access aid and basic services.<sup>75</sup> Reports in April 2023 revealed that in the absence of government armed forces and JNIM militants in northeastern Mali, IS Sahel jumped on the opportunity to expand in the Menaka region, ultimately claiming an additional 50,000 square miles, doubling its area of control in Mali. IS Sahel rules with a heavy hand, controlling supply routes, distributing the Quran to residents, and imposing taxes on the local population.<sup>76</sup> The departure of French troops and resources has allowed Islamist groups, and more importantly their leaders, to move freely and travel between regions without the fear of French airstrikes.<sup>77</sup> Even with Wagner's presence in Tessit, Gao, and Menaka, these regions are still under direct threat from IS Sahel, which previously attacked military barracks and facilities in Tessit.<sup>78</sup> JNIM has also proven well versed in adapting its strategy to retain influence, despite changing military conditions. According to ACLED, JNIM avoids direct confrontations, relies on ambushes and mine warfare, and targets the less capable civilian counterterrorism units.<sup>79</sup> Lacking the fear of targeted attacks, militant Islamists can also openly engage in fundraising activities—documented in September and

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<sup>73</sup> Daphne Benoit, "Niger Coup Weakens Fight Against Terror In Africa: France," Barron's, August 5, 2023, <https://www.barrons.com/news/niger-coup-weakens-fight-against-terror-in-africa-france-ca36a14a>.

<sup>74</sup> "Letter dated 3 August 2023 from the Panel of Experts on Mali established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, August 3, 2023, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2023\\_578.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2023_578.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> "Mali: Mounting Islamist Armed Group Killings, Rape," Human Rights Watch, July 13, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/13/mali-mounting-islamist-armed-group-killings-rape>.

<sup>76</sup> Dr. David Doukhan, "Islamic State is Expanding its Areas of Influence in Mali," International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, April 2023, [https://ict.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Doukhan\\_ISIS-is-expanding-influence-in-Mali.pdf](https://ict.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Doukhan_ISIS-is-expanding-influence-in-Mali.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Wassim Nasr, "How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>78</sup> Wassim Nasr, "How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>79</sup> "Moving Out of the Shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World," ACLED, August 2, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/02/moving-out-of-the-shadows-shifts-in-wagner-group-operations-around-the-world/>.

October 2022 across markets and mosques—to diversify their funding streams and support their operations.<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, Mali is a country that suffers from uneven resource distribution between the northern and southern regions and has historically contended with conflicts among dozens of diverse ethnic groups. These divisions have precipitated feelings of unfairness, discrimination, and victimization.<sup>81</sup> Mali’s army focuses its operations close to cities, leaving remote villages vulnerable to extremists. The inability to guarantee security for all civilians has led to a number of negative consequences, including growing resentment towards the state, the army, and closer connections to insurgent organizations.

Violent extremists have been adept at turning these grievances into effective recruitment tools.<sup>82</sup> According to on-the-ground interviews conducted by Wassim Nasr, jihadist recruitment throughout central Mali increased in May and July 2022, coinciding with the time Wagner was accused of carrying out a massacre of 500 civilians in Moura.<sup>83</sup> Such blatant disregard toward civilians is a particularly persuasive piece of evidence for jihadists to use when trying to convince the local population to shift its allegiance away from state-supported armed groups. Militant Islamists generate support through vilifying, but sometimes disseminating truthful accounts of state-sponsored violence. Additionally, as there are multiple competing violent extremist groups, if civilians resist the propaganda of one militant group, that does not necessarily mean they will be immune to the efforts of a rival organization. Local leaders have also been noted to support the enlistment of community members into one extremist group to offset threats from a competing terrorist organization.<sup>84</sup>

## Challenges Ahead

Wagner is far from a stabilizing force in Mali. Despite the promises of short-term security gains, the PMC has yet to prove it can contain violent extremism. More than a year and a half since it was deployed, Mali is now faced with long-term challenges that the state is ill-equipped to address and resolve anytime soon. Rather than contain the threats of violent extremism, Wagner and its allies have increased them. The ambitions of Wagner, as well as the central government’s lack of accountability, will continue to provide violent extremists with the ammunition necessary

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<sup>80</sup> Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>81</sup> Charles Millon, “Mali’s struggle for stability,” GIS Reports, May 19, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/mali-french-intervention/>.

<sup>82</sup> “Dynamics Of Violent Extremism In Africa: Conflict Ecosystems, Political Ecology and the Spread of the Proto-State,” UNDP March 2023, [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/Dynamics%20of%20VE%20in%20Africa%20-%20Report%20-%20English%20-%20Final\\_.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/Dynamics%20of%20VE%20in%20Africa%20-%20Report%20-%20English%20-%20Final_.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>; “Moura: Over 500 killed by Malian troops, foreign military personnel in 2022 operation,” United Nations, May 12, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136607>.

<sup>84</sup> “Letter dated 3 August 2023 from the Panel of Experts on Mali established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council” United Nations Security Council, August 3, 2023, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2023\\_578.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2023_578.pdf).

to persuade vulnerable communities to join their networks. The ramifications of Wagner’s activities will not be limited to Mali, as neighboring countries will have to contend with growing numbers of refugees and the geographically expanding operations of violent extremists. Additionally, the nebulous structure of Wagner’s operations and leadership creates room for competing agendas and infighting, which will make it harder for the Kremlin to control the group from afar. According to media sources, the Russian Defense Ministry is already struggling to seize control over Wagner’s Africa networks.<sup>85</sup> The past decade has presented Bamako with unprecedented challenges. Unfortunately, Mali will not fare better in the decade ahead unless significant changes are made to its military strategy and diplomatic partnerships.

## Burkina Faso and the Wagner Group

### Background and Preliminary Military Responses

Burkina Faso has a recent history similar to that of its west African neighbor Mali: both countries have experienced cycles of political unrest and consecutive coups, JNIM and IS Sahel have waged years-long insurgencies, and both have turned away from Western military and diplomatic partners towards Russia and the Wagner Group. Wagner’s ambitions across Burkina Faso have not yet been confirmed, although media sources and the U.K. parliament have stated with “medium confidence,” that the two parties are cooperating in “non-military activities.”<sup>86</sup> As far as Wagner’s ambitions go, the group sees Burkina Faso as more or less an extension of Mali and will provide the PMC with resource gains in exchange for rudimentary security services.<sup>87</sup>

Since 2015, Burkina Faso has been ravaged by the homegrown Ansarul Islam and two other groups also rampant across Mali—the al-Qaeda-linked and Mali-based JNIM and IS Sahel. The unrelenting violence committed by these groups has led to the deaths of thousands of people and the displacement of about two million others.<sup>88</sup> In order to offset the violence occurring in neighboring Mali, France signed a military accord in 2018 with Burkina Faso that allowed French troops to fight insurgents on its territory.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Levent Kemal, “Wagner: Without Prigozhin, Russia is set to lose big in Africa,” Middle East Eye, August 25, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/wagner-russia-prigozhin-africa-without-set-lose-big>.

<sup>86</sup> “Guns for gold: the Wagner Network expose,” UK Parliament, July 26, 2023, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmfaff/167/report.html>

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Harding, “Wagner’s African clients left to pick up the pieces as ISIS profits,” The National, June 30, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/weekend/2023/06/30/wagners-african-clients-left-to-pick-up-the-pieces-as-isis-profits/>.

<sup>88</sup> “Burkina Faso: Perpetrators of Nouna killings must face justice,” Amnesty International, January 10, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/01/burkina-faso-perpetrators-of-nouna-killings-must-face-justice/>; Moussa Bougma, “Sahel internal displacement tops 2 million as violence surges,” UNHCR, January 22, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2021/1/600a85bd4/sahel-internal-displacement-tops-2-million-violence-surges.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Cyril Bensimon, Elise Vincent and Morgane Le Cam, “France’s Operation Sabre in Burkina Faso: From a quiet arrival to a bitter withdrawal,” Le Monde, February 25, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/02/25/france-s-operation-sabre-in-burkina-faso-from-a-quiet-arrival-to-a-bitter-withdrawal\\_6017245\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/02/25/france-s-operation-sabre-in-burkina-faso-from-a-quiet-arrival-to-a-bitter-withdrawal_6017245_124.html).



## Wagner's Activities in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's political environment has been shaky at best since 2022, when army officers carried out two coups in January and September, echoing the narratives pushed by Mali's coup leaders.<sup>90</sup> According to coup leaders, their mutinies were necessary due to the inability of heads of state and their foreign partners, particularly France, to contain the threat of violent extremism.<sup>91</sup> Hostility towards France was aided by a concerted anti-Western information campaign begun by Russia as early as November 2021 that encouraged Russian military intervention.<sup>92</sup> According to the Daily Beast, the ousted president reportedly opposed requests by the Burkinabe military to hire Wagner.<sup>93</sup> U.S. officials acknowledged Russia's potential connection to Burkina Faso's January 2022 coup.<sup>94</sup> By mid-2022, the Prigozhin-affiliated media group RIA FAN further fanned the flame of anti-French sentiment and pro-Russian alignment by cultivating disinformation campaigns in the build-up to the second coup in September 2022.<sup>95</sup> The disinformation campaigns were pivotal to Burkina Faso's decision in 2023 to terminate the 2018 French accord. French troops were given one month to vacate.<sup>96</sup>

In May 2023, Burkina Faso's interim President Ibrahim Traoré denied that Russian units were supporting Burkinabe forces in their fight against militant Islamists. Traoré did state that Russia had become a key strategic ally, as "Russia is a major supplier of military equipment and would remain so." However, reports further substantiated military cooperation between the two. Media sources noted that the Burkinabe government was expecting Russian instructors to train soldiers "about weapons, military techniques as well as culture."<sup>97</sup> Further solidifying the extent of Wagner interest in Burkina Faso, the official representative of Russian military trainers in the Central African Republic previously offered to train the Burkinabe military.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> "Understanding Burkina Faso's Latest Coup," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, October 28, 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-burkina-faso-latest-coup/>.

<sup>91</sup> "Burkina Faso to Raise 150M Euros for War Fund," Defense Post, December 12, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/12/12/burkina-faso-war-fund/>.

<sup>92</sup> "Russia in Africa: How disinformation operations target the continent," BBC News, February 1, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64451376>; "Africa File," Critical Threats, February 1, 2023, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/africa-file-wagner-group-in-burkina-faso-will-help-the-kremlin-and-hurt-counterterrorism>.

<sup>93</sup> Philip Obaji Jr., "African President Was Ousted Just Weeks After Refusing to Pay Russian Paramilitaries," Daily Beast, January 25, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/burkina-faso-president-ousted-after-refusing-to-pay-wagner-mercenaries>.

<sup>94</sup> Jeff Seldin, "US Aware of Allegations of Russian Links to Burkinabe Coup," Voice of American, January 27, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-aware-of-allegations-of-russian-links-to-burkinabe-coup-/6415668.html>.

<sup>95</sup> "Guns for gold: the Wagner Network expose," UK Parliament, July 26, 2023, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmcaff/167/report.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Cyril Bensimon, Elise Vincent and Morgane Le Cam, "France's Operation Sabre in Burkina Faso: From a quiet arrival to a bitter withdrawal," Le Monde, February 25, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/02/25/france-s-operation-sabre-in-burkina-faso-from-a-quiet-arrival-to-a-bitter-withdrawal\\_6017245\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/02/25/france-s-operation-sabre-in-burkina-faso-from-a-quiet-arrival-to-a-bitter-withdrawal_6017245_124.html).

<sup>97</sup> Sam Mednick, "After Burkina Faso ousts French, Russia's Wagner may arrive," Associated Press, April 7, 2023, <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/burkina-faso-ousts-french-russias-092421246.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Jeff Seldin, "US Aware of Allegations of Russian Links to Burkinabe Coup," Voice of American, January 27, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-aware-of-allegations-of-russian-links-to-burkinabe-coup-/6415668.html>.

## Impact: Frequent Attacks and Recruitment Opportunities for Insurgents

The change in Burkina Faso's political and security framework has not improved civilian safety. In fact, civilians are at greater risk of being the victims of terrorist attacks or falling under the influence of violent extremists. As of 2023, the coup government only controlled about half of the country's territory, leaving large numbers of civilians vulnerable to the control of opportunistic violent extremists seeking to exert their control.<sup>99</sup> According to the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, more than one million Burkinabe citizens are living in areas fully or partially controlled by militant groups that impose taxes, strategically destroy necessary state services and infrastructure, and specifically target humanitarian workers and MINUSMA peacekeepers.<sup>100</sup> In the first three months of 2023, Burkina Faso suffered around 3,000 deaths from terrorists. The figure represents a sharp increase in terrorist violence, given that in all of 2022, there were 4,200 deaths attributed to terrorism.<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, prospects for additional counterterrorism support from Western partners to offset the growing security vacuum seems unlikely. Burkinabe officials called for the withdrawal of Burkinabe troops from MINUSMA and claimed "MINUSMA seems to have become part of the problem by fueling community tensions exacerbated by extremely serious allegations which are highly detrimental to peace, reconciliation, and national cohesion."<sup>102</sup>

As Burkina Faso supported Mali's demands for the withdrawal of Western forces and peacekeeping units, the neighbors have positioned themselves as an easier target for violent extremists. Power competition is a significant factor in the JNIM-IS Sahel dyad, and Burkina Faso is pivotal in each group's quest for influence across the Liptako-Gourma zone that is located on the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. In particular, Burkina Faso saw a dramatic increase in activity from IS Sahel along its border with Mali in 2020 when France began withdrawing its troops.<sup>103</sup> Recent attacks have also gotten deadlier. In September 2023, 53 soldiers and civilian counterterrorism forces were killed in clashes with militants.<sup>104</sup> Efforts by the national army and civilian troops to retake territories claimed by violent extremists have been unsuccessful and have resulted in large numbers of casualties. IS Sahel has been particularly successful in seizing territory and have expanded their presence across the north, east, and west of the country.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Carlota Ahrens Teixeira, "Burkina Faso: Another Russia-West hotspot?," Geopolitical Intelligence Services, January 3, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/burkina-faso/>.

<sup>100</sup> "Central Sahel, Burkina Faso," Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, August 31, 2023, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/burkina-faso/>.

<sup>101</sup> "UNHCR POSITION ON RETURNS TO BURKINA FASO – UPDATE I," UNHCR, July 2023, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/64c2748c4.pdf>

<sup>102</sup> "Burkina hails Mali's 'courageous' call for exit of UN force," Agence France Presse, June 19, 2023, <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/burkina-hails-malis-courageous-call-for-exit-of-un-force-20230619>.

<sup>103</sup> Silvia D'Amato and Edoardo Balduino, "Counter-Terrorism in the Sahel: Increased Instability and Political Tensions," International Centre for Counterterrorism, July 7, 2022, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/counter-terrorism-sahel-increased-instability-and-political-tensions>.

<sup>104</sup> "Burkina Faso says 53 soldiers, volunteers killed in clashes with militants," Reuters, September 5, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-says-53-soldiers-volunteers-killed-clashes-with-militants-2023-09-05/>.

<sup>105</sup> "Letter dated 3 August 2023 from the Panel of Experts on Mali established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council" United Nations Security Council, August 3, 2023,

Burkinabe officials have claimed that counterterrorism operations have been placed in the hands of local units. However, the same civilian self-defense units, Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), have also perpetuated violence against communities historically discriminated against by the state. Since October 2022, about 90,000 VDP units have been deployed to protect Burkinabe communities, but according to *Le Monde*, in the period between January and April 2023, the national army and its civilian auxiliaries have killed more than a hundred civilians.<sup>106</sup> Civilian casualties may be even larger in number, as one particularly deadly ambush occurred in Karma, Yatenga province in April 2023, where “men in military uniforms killed more than 130 people.” The murderous raids then continued in several surrounding villages, claiming dozens of victims.<sup>107</sup>

As seen in Mali, the unchecked activities of armed civilian troops serve as a persuasive recruitment narrative for violent extremists. Even if violent extremists increase their activities, they can spin the violence carried out by civilian defense troops and the national army as the reason for increased attacks.<sup>108</sup> By shifting the narrative to identify themselves as protectors rather than aggressors, violent extremists position themselves as defenders of local communities.

### *Challenges Ahead*

Although Wagner has initiated efforts towards building an alliance with Burkina Faso, reports of their cooperation remain limited and speculative. With Prigozhin’s death in a plane crash in August 2023,<sup>109</sup> Wagner is now more closely controlled by the Kremlin. Meanwhile, dissatisfaction with the ruling government in Burkina Faso has not subsided: the Burkinabe junta faced a coup attempt in late September 2023. Despite foiling the attempted takeover, the ruling junta responded by further compromising promises to restore civilian rule, claiming that elections will only be held once the country is safe enough for everyone to vote and further delaying prospects of reconciliation with former Western, regional, and international partners.<sup>110</sup> It is unclear, however, if the direct links to Moscow will deter Burkinabe officials from further contracting with Wagner, as it would drastically impact Ougadougou’s prospects

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[https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2023\\_578.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2023_578.pdf).

<sup>106</sup> Morgane Le Cam, “Burkina Faso's surge in violence highlights limits of junta's counterterrorism strategy,” *Le Monde*, April 19, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/04/19/burkina-faso-s-surge-in-violence-highlights-limits-of-junta-s-counterterrorism-strategy\\_6023513\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/04/19/burkina-faso-s-surge-in-violence-highlights-limits-of-junta-s-counterterrorism-strategy_6023513_124.html).

<sup>107</sup> “Burkina Faso authorities under pressure after uniformed men massacre 150 villagers,” France 24, February 5, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230502-burkina-faso-authorities-under-fire-after-uniformed-men-massacre-150-villagers>.

<sup>108</sup> Morgane Le Cam, “Burkina Faso's surge in violence highlights limits of junta's counterterrorism strategy,” *Le Monde*, April 19, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/04/19/burkina-faso-s-surge-in-violence-highlights-limits-of-junta-s-counterterrorism-strategy\\_6023513\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/04/19/burkina-faso-s-surge-in-violence-highlights-limits-of-junta-s-counterterrorism-strategy_6023513_124.html).

<sup>109</sup> “Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin presumed dead after Russia plane crash,” BBC News, August 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66599733>.

<sup>110</sup> Wycliffe Muia and Beverly Ochieng, “Burkina Faso junta says it foiled coup attempt,” BBC News, September 28, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66945023>; “Burkina Faso junta leader says no elections until the country safe for voting,” Reuters, September 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-junta-leader-says-no-elections-until-country-safe-voting-2023-09-29/>.

of maintaining its remaining diplomatic ties with Western partners.<sup>111</sup> One result of Wagner's presence in Burkina Faso is certain: affiliation with the Wagner Group has drastically reduced the protection of Burkinabe civilians from militant Islamists. In the same period that the PMC has attempted to increase its footprint across Burkina Faso, insurgents have become even more empowered and capable of waging campaigns across the country and region.

## Wagner in Niger? Not Just Yet

### Niger's Response to Insurgencies

Although the incidence of domestic extremism is historically lower in Niger than in Mali and Burkina Faso, Niamey faced the implications of regional insurgency when militant Islamists spread their activities into the Lake Chad area between 2015 and September 2016.<sup>112</sup> As of 2023, IS Sahel is the dominant militant Islamist group in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions of Niger, although the group is also clustered along the border areas of Mali and Niger, establishing operational hubs in the villages of In-Araban, Akabar, and Infoukaretane. JNIM has been operating across the Niger-Burkina Faso border since at least 2017, when it carried out the majority of violent attacks in the Sahel.<sup>113</sup> Because of the overflow of JNIM activity stemming from Mali, Niger saw a drastic increase in violence in 2020, when extremist activity reached 292 incidents in the Tillabéri region, compared to 377 incidents between 2017 and 2019.<sup>114</sup>

However, jihadist organizations have also banded together at times to direct attacks at French, national, and regional troops.<sup>115</sup> The violent activities across the region led ethnic Fulanis to band together to protect themselves, especially from indiscriminate violence carried out by the Malian national army and the Tuareg ethnic group. The Fulani, a nomadic group historically disenfranchised by the state, and who experience prejudice from other ethnic groups, have been unduly targeted by security forces who claim the Fulani support or fill the ranks of violent extremist groups.<sup>116</sup> Given the degree of competition and conflict between JNIM and IS Sahel,

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<sup>111</sup> Thomas Harding, "Wagner's African clients left to pick up the pieces as ISIS profits," *The National*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/weekend/2023/06/30/wagners-african-clients-left-to-pick-up-the-pieces-as-isis-profits/>.

<sup>112</sup> "109 Boko Haram fighters dead' after first attack on Niger," Portail Opérationnel, February 7, 2015, <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/news/11190>; "The Islamic State Sahel Province," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), January 13, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/01/13/actor-profile-the-islamic-state-sahel-province/>.

<sup>113</sup> Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel," Africa Center, December 2020, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ASB-38-EN.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> Pierre Englebert and Rida Lyammouri, "SAHEL: Moving Beyond Military Containment Policy Report," Atlantic Council, February 2022, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving\\_beyond\\_military\\_containment.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving_beyond_military_containment.pdf).

<sup>115</sup> Pierre Englebert and Rida Lyammouri, "SAHEL: Moving Beyond Military Containment Policy Report," Atlantic Council, February 2022, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving\\_beyond\\_military\\_containment.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving_beyond_military_containment.pdf).

<sup>116</sup> Modibo Ghaly Cissé, "Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, April 22, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>; James Courtright, "Ethnic Killings by West African Armies Are Undermining Regional Security," *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/07/mali-burkina-faso-fulani-ethnic-killings-by-west-african-armies-are-undermining-regional-security/>.

Nigeriens, and particularly the Fulani, are susceptible to violence and recruitment efforts from both groups.<sup>117</sup>

Unlike in Burkina Faso and Mali, Niger is not only affected by al-Qaeda and Islamic State units. Niamey also contends with Boko Haram, the jihadist group that has subjected Nigeria to unrelenting violence for almost two decades.<sup>118</sup> Niger's southeastern regions see the most activity from Boko Haram, of which the Diffa region is the most affected.<sup>119</sup> Although the jihadist group has not extended its influence much further than the southeastern region, the group's activities have displaced an estimated 50,000 people within Niger.<sup>120</sup>

In 2015, Niger received military support from Chad to counter Boko Haram's along with its splinter group, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)'s,<sup>121</sup> geographical expansion across the Lake Chad region. U.S. troops were also deployed in October 2015 to train Niger's army to better combat the jihadist group.<sup>122</sup> Niger later joined five neighboring countries in the G5 Sahel—a regional security and development cooperative initiative—to launch the Joint Task Force in 2017, a multilateral peace and security initiative to facilitate military and police responses to violent extremists and other criminal threats.<sup>123</sup> Niger's defensive front was supplemented by France, its former colonial power, which also maintained an intelligence center in Niger as a part of Opération Barkhane.<sup>124</sup>

The Mali-based Opération Serval managed to temporarily contain the region's jihadists in 2013. However, the Fulani continued to face the negative repercussions of the insurgency long after the completion of Serval. In some instances, the Fulani were subjected to human rights abuses such as torture and extrajudicial killings. Malian troops treated Fulani communities as part of the insurgency. Although reports indicate that some Fulani in northern Niger and central Mali joined

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<sup>117</sup> Pierre Englebert and Rida Lyammouri, "SAHEL: Moving Beyond Military Containment Policy Report," Atlantic Council, February 2022, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving\\_beyond\\_military\\_containment.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving_beyond_military_containment.pdf).

<sup>118</sup> "Thousands newly displaced by Boko Haram in Niger," United Nations, January 19, 2023, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/thousands-newly-displaced-boko-haram-niger>.

<sup>119</sup> "Thousands continue to flee Boko Haram attacks on Niger town – UN refugee agency," United Nations, June 7, 2016, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/thousands-continue-flee-boko-haram-attacks-niger-town-%E2%80%93-un-refugee-agency>; "Niger and Boko Haram: Beyond Counter-insurgency," February 7, 2017, International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/niger/245-niger-and-boko-haram-beyond-counter-insurgency>.

<sup>120</sup> "Thousands newly displaced by Boko Haram in Niger," United Nations, January 19, 2023, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/thousands-newly-displaced-boko-haram-niger>.

<sup>121</sup> "Niger: In Focus," Congressional Research Service, July 31, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12464>.

<sup>122</sup> Carla Babb, "US Training Niger Army to Resist Boko Haram," Voice of America, October 28, 2015, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-training-niger-army-to-resist-boko-haram/3026340.html>.

<sup>123</sup> "G5 Sahel," Interpol, <https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Terrorism/Counter-terrorism-projects/G5-Sahel>.

<sup>124</sup> Amandine Gnanguênon, "Operation Barkhane: a show of force and political games in the Sahel-Sahara," Institute for Security Studies, August 19, 2014, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/operation-barkhane-a-show-of-force-and-political-games-in-the-sahel-sahara>.

jihadist units such as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), information was not conclusive, nor did it claim all Fulani aligned with insurgent groups.<sup>125</sup>

Niger has not solely relied on military responses to violent extremists but has integrated other strategies to resolve interethnic conflicts and alleviate potential instability. In 2016, Niger established a disarmament and reintegration program for violent extremist defectors, providing former militants with professional training and pathways to rehabilitation. The constructivist security strategy was influenced in part by the government's successful mediation of ethnic Tuareg rebellions in the past.<sup>126</sup> Alleviating resentment and rebellion across Niger's multiethnic society is tantamount to preserving stability: jihadist groups often fan the flames of interethnic competition in their effort to divide the public and gain new recruits.<sup>127</sup>

Niamey further endorsed a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy when the government facilitated dialogue and negotiations with militant Islamist groups in Tillabéri in early 2022.<sup>128</sup> The talks were initiated to mitigate intercommunal conflicts between the Fulani and Zarma communities and to deter opportunities for terrorist recruitment. The talks culminated in a peace agreement between the two camps, potentially preventing violent extremists from stoking historical resentments as a recruitment tactic.<sup>129</sup> However, seasoned violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram are quick to exploit ethnic groups during times of economic unrest worsened by heavy-handed national counterinsurgency programs. In some cases, tens of thousands of civilians have been uprooted from their homes around Lake Chad due to hawkish counterterrorism operations, exacerbating competition between ethnic groups for food and resources. Poor economic conditions significantly drive alliances, as the most vulnerable communities have sought Boko Haram's help in securing food and other resources.<sup>130</sup>

### Wagner's Impact following Niger's Coup

Despite its variegated counterterrorism strategy, Niamey fell to a military junta on July 26, 2023.<sup>131</sup> Niger's coup government claimed its takeover was the result of President Mohamed

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<sup>125</sup> Andrew McGregor, "The Fulani Crisis: Communal Violence and Radicalization in the Sahel," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 2017, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-fulani-crisis-communal-violence-and-radicalization-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>126</sup> Hassane Koné and Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné, "Is Niger's counter-terrorism approach an exception in the Sahel?," Institute for Security Studies, April 5, 2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-nigers-counter-terrorism-approach-an-exception-in-the-sahel>.

<sup>127</sup> Pierre Englebert and Rida Lyammouri, "SAHEL: Moving Beyond Military Containment Policy Report," Atlantic Council, February 2022, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving\\_beyond\\_military\\_containment.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sahel-Moving_beyond_military_containment.pdf).

<sup>128</sup> Hassane Koné and Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné, "Is Niger's counter-terrorism approach an exception in the Sahel?," Institute for Security Studies, April 5, 2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-nigers-counter-terrorism-approach-an-exception-in-the-sahel>.

<sup>129</sup> Hassane Koné and Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné, "Is Niger's counter-terrorism approach an exception in the Sahel?," Institute for Security Studies, April 5, 2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-nigers-counter-terrorism-approach-an-exception-in-the-sahel>.

<sup>130</sup> "Rebellion and fragmentation in northern Mali," Clingendael Institute, 2015, [https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2015/the\\_roots\\_of\\_malis\\_conflict/2\\_rebellion\\_and\\_fragmentation\\_in\\_northern\\_mali/](https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/2_rebellion_and_fragmentation_in_northern_mali/).

<sup>131</sup> Niamh Kennedy and Pierre Bairin, "African Union suspends Niger in crackdown over coup," CNN, August 22, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/22/africa/african-union-suspends-niger-intl/index.html>.

Bazoum serving as a puppet to French interests as well as “the deteriorating security situation and bad social and economic governance,”<sup>132</sup> parroting the justifications voiced by juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso. Niger is a critical Western ally in the fight against violent extremists in the Sahel, especially as others in the region have shifted their military alliances toward Russia.<sup>133</sup> Ouagadougou and Bamako were quick to embrace Niger’s takeover government, claiming “any military intervention against Niger would be tantamount to a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali.”<sup>134</sup> The support eventually culminated in a September 2023 trilateral military agreement to be enacted in the event of any rebellion or external aggression.<sup>135</sup> Efforts to restore the duly elected president of Niger have been led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has authorized the use of a “standby force” to restore democracy in Niger if diplomatic efforts failed.<sup>136</sup>

Suspicion of Niger’s growing alliance with the Kremlin came just days after the coup, when the junta reportedly asked Wagner for help on August 5.<sup>137</sup> Although Wagner does not presently have an official contract with Niger, following the July 2023 coup, its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin congratulated the ruling junta and swiftly offered support.<sup>138</sup> Days before his death, Prigozhin marketed the PMC to Niger, releasing a statement through Telegram claiming that “a thousand Wagner fighters are able to restore order and destroy terrorists... preventing them from harming the civilian population.”<sup>139</sup> Prigozhin’s suspected assassination by the Russian government shortly after the Nigerien coup did not change Wagner’s ambitions. Wagner continued to disseminate anti-French narratives and content claiming the private military company was ready to deploy to Niger. According to the *Guardian*, Niger-related content increased 6,645 percent across 45 Russian Telegram channels following the coup (all on accounts associated with the Russian government or the Wagner group). Prior to the coup, there were reportedly only 11 pieces of content relating to Niger.<sup>140</sup> Russia’s intentions in Niger remain unclear, but Niger

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<sup>132</sup> Aaron Boxerman, “What’s Behind the Coup in Niger?” *New York Times*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/27/world/africa/niger-coup-president-bazoum.html>.

<sup>133</sup> “Mali, Burkina to send delegation to coup-hit Niger,” Africa News, August 7, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/08/07/mali-burkina-to-send-delegation-to-coup-hit-niger/>; “Burkina Faso, Mali say military intervention in Niger would be 'declaration of war',” France 24, August 1, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230801-burkina-faso-and-mali-say-intervention-in-niger-would-be-declaration-of-war>.

<sup>134</sup> “Burkina Faso, Mali say military intervention in Niger would be 'declaration of war',” France 24, August 1, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230801-burkina-faso-and-mali-say-intervention-in-niger-would-be-declaration-of-war>.

<sup>135</sup> “Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso sign Sahel security pact,” Reuters, September 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-burkina-faso-sign-sahel-security-pact-2023-09-16/>.

<sup>136</sup> “Ecowas orders deployment of force to restore constitutional order in Niger,” Euronews, August 10, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/10/ecowas-orders-deployment-of-force-to-restore-constitutional-order-in-niger>.

<sup>137</sup> Patrick Tucker, “Russian military actors went to Niger, Mali close to coup dates, data shows,” Defense One, September 7, 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2023/09/russian-military-actors-went-niger-mali-close-coup-dates-data-shows/390055/>.

<sup>138</sup> Tim Lister, “Prigozhin celebrates Niger coup, says his Wagner group can help,” CNN, July 29, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/29/africa/prigozhin-niger-coup-wagner-intl/index.html>.

<sup>139</sup> Vera Bergengruen, “Despite Rift With Putin, the Wagner Group's Global Reach is Growing,” *Time*, August 2, 2023, <https://time.com/6300145/wagner-group-niger-future/>.

<sup>140</sup> Jason Burke, “Russia uses social media channels to exploit Niger coup,” *Guardian*, August 27, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/27/russia-uses-social-media-channels-to-exploit-niger-coup>.

possesses vast mineral and oil reserves. According to All Eyes on Wager, an investigative project focusing on the activities of the private military company, the Kremlin’s “objective is not to support the junta or an alternative political approach but to sow discord, create chaos, destabilize.”<sup>141</sup>

In late September 2023, France began the process of withdrawing its 1,500 military personnel from Niger.<sup>142</sup> According to Insa Garba Saidou, a Burkinabe activist and an official who manages the junta’s communications, France was expected to withdraw for three reasons: France’s failure to contain the insurgency; French interference in Niger’s internal policies; and the CFA Franc, which is the currency of France’s former colonies, and is considered the basis of underdevelopment in Niger and Africa.<sup>143</sup> According to *New York Times*, increased support for the Kremlin has been further promoted on-the-ground by PARADE, a Nigerien civil society group created and funded by Russia’s foreign ministry.<sup>144</sup> Russian flags—distributed by PARADE—may not be the only physical reminder of Russia’s growing presence in the country. Discussions of opening a Russian embassy in Niger have also been promoted by PARADE’s senior officials.<sup>145</sup>

### Post-Coup Effects on Responses to Violent Extremism

Although experts believe Russia was not behind the coup, regional scholars have suggested it will not miss an opportunity to expand the Kremlin’s authority throughout the Sahel.<sup>146</sup> Since the July 2023 coup led by General Abdourahmane Tchiani, five military deals with France have been revoked by the junta, and counterterrorism military exercises between the United States and Niger have been suspended.<sup>147</sup> According to regional analyst Colin P. Clark, Niger is a critical U.S. partner and hosts a U.S. drone base. Should the base be forced to close, Washington would lose significant intelligence and surveillance capabilities to track the movement of insurgent groups across the Sahel.<sup>148</sup> Without diligent monitoring, al-Qaeda and ISIS-linked groups will continue to displace thousands of people in the border areas between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. There are currently 361,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and more than 255,000 refugees from Burkina Faso,

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<sup>141</sup> “Ecowas orders deployment of force to restore constitutional order in Niger,” Euronews, August 10, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/10/ecowas-orders-deployment-of-force-to-restore-constitutional-order-in-niger>.

<sup>142</sup> Cyril Bensimon, Philippe Ricard, and Elise Vincent, “France starts process of withdrawing its forces from Niger,” *Le Monde*, September 6, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/09/06/france-starts-withdrawing-its-forces-from-niger\\_6125788\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/09/06/france-starts-withdrawing-its-forces-from-niger_6125788_124.html).

<sup>143</sup> Chinedu Asadu, “France’s withdrawal from Niger could jeopardize counterterrorism operations in the Sahel,” ABC News, September 27, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/frances-withdrawal-niger-jeopardize-counterterrorism-operations-sahel-103519891>.

<sup>144</sup> Elian Peltier, “The Hottest New Accessory in Niger? A Russian Flag,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/01/world/africa/russian-flags-west-africa-niger.html>.

<sup>145</sup> Elian Peltier, “The Hottest New Accessory in Niger? A Russian Flag,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/01/world/africa/russian-flags-west-africa-niger.html>.

<sup>146</sup> “Ecowas orders deployment of force to restore constitutional order in Niger,” Euronews, August 10, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/10/ecowas-orders-deployment-of-force-to-restore-constitutional-order-in-niger>.

<sup>147</sup> Leonard Mbulle-Nziege and Nic Cheeseman, “Niger coup: Is France to blame for instability in West Africa?,” BBC News, August 6, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66406137>.

<sup>148</sup> Colin P. Clarke, “If Your Country Is Falling Apart, the Wagner Group Will Be There,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/11/opinion/wagner-russia-prigozhin-bazoum-niger.html>.



Mali, and Nigeria residing in Niger, severely taxing the government's ability to provide for these vulnerable communities.<sup>149</sup>

Wagner's presence has made nonviolent solutions to violent insurgencies across the Sahel much more difficult. Despite the similar narrative that has consumed Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's security landscape, previous experiences can help inform international entities of practical and effective responses to Niger before the country officially aligns with Wagner. Preventing the formal alliance requires immediate multilateral alternatives in order to disengage Niger from cooperating with a security service that has been more destabilizing than corrective. Improving intercommunal ties and community bonds provides opportunities for long-term, sustainable solutions that advance collective action against insurgents, rather than fragmented approaches with questionable approaches and goals.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the Wagner Group presenting itself as the solution to the Sahel's insurgency woes, the value of the PMC in the Sahel, despite its abysmal track record, is likely due to its success in keeping coup governments in power. Colin P. Clark has stated that Wagner's relationship with the Sahel is "simple supply and demand: African putschists need the security that Wagner can provide, and the Kremlin needs the funding stream to soften the blow from biting Western sanctions."<sup>150</sup> Wagner's so-called security ambitions in the Sahel are driven by financial kickbacks that are lucrative enough for Wagner to keep one foot in the door, but their ambitions clearly go beyond stabilizing the Sahel.

What does the road ahead look like for Wagner and the Sahel? While there are no definitive outcomes, the three countries discussed in this report seem to be on a similar trajectory in terms of security strategy and the consequences of hastily aggressive military engagement. The impact on the Sahel's civilians is grave. In 2022, the Sahel accounted for more than 40 percent of global deaths due to terrorism. Projections for 2023 look no better.<sup>151</sup>

Although Wagner's agenda may not explicitly include the ruthless massacre of unarmed civilians, the vulnerable populations of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger cannot offset the bloody tactics of the PMC, and increasingly civilian counterterrorism militias, on their own. Wagner is unlikely to change their tactics nor will national armies and their respective governments likely monitor their operations. In the instance of the three countries, violence perpetuated by the security sector—albeit to varying degrees—has further compromised civilian confidence in the operation of the state and its counterterrorism units.<sup>152</sup>

Aside from rampant civilian casualties, Wagner's violent activities are increasing ammunition for violent extremist groups in their recruiting efforts across the Sahel. Whether or not Wagner

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<sup>149</sup> "Country Analysis: Niger," ACAPS, August 31, 2023, <https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/niger/>.

<sup>150</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "If Your Country Is Falling Apart, the Wagner Group Will Be There," *New York Times*, August 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/11/opinion/wagner-russia-prigozhin-bazoum-niger.html>.

<sup>151</sup> "Can peace ever return to the Sahel?," United Nations Institute for Training and Research, April 5, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTmTfKjnb28&ab\\_channel=UnitedNationsInstituteforTrainingandResearch%28UNITAR%29](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTmTfKjnb28&ab_channel=UnitedNationsInstituteforTrainingandResearch%28UNITAR%29).

<sup>152</sup> "Can Peace Ever Return to the Sahel?," United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), March 29, 2023, <https://unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/peace/our-portfolio/events/can-peace-ever-return-sahel>.

establishes formal ties with Burkina Faso and Niger, the PMC's impact is being felt across the region. As violent extremist groups expand their geographical scope, they have the potential to influence the communities on the border areas and potentially persuade them to see Wagner as predatory rather than protective. If Wagner continues to employ violent tactics at the expense of innocent civilians, support for the Kremlin will wane and would likely not recover despite the strength of disinformation campaigns. Prigozhin's last recording prior to his death in late August 2023 detailed his plans for Sub-Saharan Africa. He not only wanted to expand Wagner's activities across the continent, but he also intended to increase recruitment efforts in the process of "making Russia even greater on all continents, and Africa even more free."<sup>153</sup> Unfortunately, Wagner's activities have essentially made Africans less free as the ruling juntas, with the confirmed and suspected protection of Wager, are attempting to make their governments coup-proof. In a blow to democratic institutions, the power grab facilitated by a coup leader's personal arsenal of security guards renders democratic systems difficult to reinforce or implement in the long run. Unfortunately, even if Wagner abandons the Sahel, there are other Russia-based PMCs that could take its place and enforce the control of the juntas. Chief among them is Patriot, a group heavily linked to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. Patriot is considered Wagner's key competitor, and the group allegedly boasts operations in Burundi, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>154</sup>

## Recommendations

Limiting Wagner's activities means assiduously enforcing sanctions against Wagner and cooperating individuals and entities. Effective monitoring of the PMC will require mechanisms that can track the group's finances, the movement of troops, and the group's propaganda strategy. In September 2023, the U.K. became the first country to sanction the Wagner Group, as well as 13 individuals and businesses in Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan with links to the PMC.<sup>155</sup>

International governing bodies should continue to monitor and sanction individuals and entities that are enabling, supporting, or profiting from Wagner's presence in their countries. Those who have committed nefarious crimes and human rights violations should also be targeted. Citizens across the Sahel need to be reassured that violations will not be ignored and will be appropriately punished. Restoring faith in the criminal justice system and international institutions is critical when faced with the democratic backsliding currently on the rise in the region.

MINUSMA and ECOWAS were unable to contain either the insurgencies or the coups that followed. As of October 2023, dialogue between the leaders in the central Sahel and their former

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<sup>153</sup> Emily McGarvey, "Wagner making Africa more free, says Prigozhin," BBC News, August 22, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66576990>.

<sup>154</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "If Your Country Is Falling Apart, the Wagner Group Will Be There," *New York Times*, August 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/11/opinion/wagner-russia-prigozhin-bazoum-niger.html>; Heather Ashby, Ph.D.; Joseph Sany, Ph.D., "Russia's Wagner Uprising Will Force a Kremlin Reshuffle in Africa," United States Institute of Peace, July 13, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/russias-wagner-uprising-will-force-kremlin-reshuffle-africa>.

<sup>155</sup> "Britain sanctions Wagner-linked officials in three African countries," Reuters, July 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/britain-sanctions-wagner-linked-officials-three-african-countries-2023-07-20/>.

Western partners seems negligible. If ECOWAS troops are deployed to restore democratic institutions in Niger, it is tantamount that they recognize that defense strategies are not the only necessary component for mitigating insurgency. Comprehensive approaches that prioritize civilian wellbeing and safety might be just as important, if not more so, in curtailing the ambitions of violent extremists.

Interethnic and intercommunal relations are a key variable in mitigating the level of violence and questionable alliances that currently consume the region. Each ethnic group has a different security agenda and different affiliations with armed groups. This necessitates a flexible response that incorporates a variety of needs while fulfilling the general goal of restoring stability across the central Sahel area. According to the Clingendael Institute and Minority Rights Group International, if interethnic struggles are the greatest roadblock to peace in the Sahel, amelioration of cross-ethnic conflict would also require addressing and amending the national security policies that have inflamed community divisions, such as government-sponsored militias in the north and divide-and-rule tactics employed by Niamey and Bamako across the region.<sup>156</sup>

Clear gains against terrorism are essential in building legitimacy and public support for national armies. That objective is difficult to achieve, however, in the face of the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, which sell the Wagner Group as the key to success against the jihadists. As the military juntas have illustrated their propensity for aggressive counterterrorism campaigns, it is unlikely they will integrate a program that is both militarily strong but also realistic and in compliance with the guidelines of international humanitarian law on the use of force. Rather than waiting until the insurgency is contained, international aid agencies and organizations should be incorporated into national defense plans to improve humanitarian conditions for civilians. Additionally, security agendas are more likely to be successfully implemented if large-scale community support is prioritized and maintained. Guaranteeing consistent protection from a reliable security sector is more likely to restore regional stability than exploitative resource extraction contracts and heavily militarized but inconsistent security efforts.

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<sup>156</sup> "Rebellion and fragmentation in northern Mali," Clingendael Institute, 2015, [https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2015/the\\_roots\\_of\\_malis\\_conflict/2\\_rebellion\\_and\\_fragmentation\\_in\\_northern\\_mali/](https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/2_rebellion_and_fragmentation_in_northern_mali/); "Niger – Minority Rights Group," Minority Rights Group International, May 19, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1277741/download>.