



External Non-State Actors As A Source Of Instability In West Africa: Hezbollah And Wagner/Africa Corps

July 2025

Dr. Matthew Levitt | John Lechner



External Non-State Actors As A Source Of Instability In West Africa: Hezbollah And Wagner/Africa Corps

DR. MATTHEW LEVITT | JOHN LECHNER

Executive Summary and Introduction

This special paper in the series of policy papers by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Counter Extremism Project focusing on the key security challenges in West Africa highlights the current challenges represented by malign foreign non-state actors in the region. Chiefly among these are the activities of the Lebanese terror group Hezbollah and the operations of the Russian private military company (PMC) the Wagner Group and the semi-official newly formed Russian Africa Corps.

Both Hezbollah and the Wagner Group/Africa Corps are entrenched causes of insecurity in the region. Therefore, any new strategic planning for the region must take their influence into account. Of course, each of these malign non-state actors presents a distinct set of challenges both to the region itself as well as to any regional engagement by European or German stakeholders. This paper will address these challenges individually and present tailored recommendations for each of them.

Hezbollah, as a regionally oriented but globally operating terror group, has long standing ties to the region, based on its reach into the regional Lebanese expat community. While West Africa is not primarily a target area for Hezbollah's terrorist operations, the region is a key network node for its global financial operations. Taking advantage of weak governance structures in several countries of West Africa, Hezbollah collects funds through donations, has set up money laundering and sanctions evasion operations, and uses West Africa as one of the key nodes in its global drug smuggling and distribution network. Therefore, mitigating the corrosive effect of Hezbollah's activities on the rule of law in the region primarily requires engagement that targets the strengthening of governance structures, law enforcement, and judicial cooperation—all of which will enable both regional as well as multilateral investigations and disruption of operations.

The activities of the Wagner Group and the semi-official Russian Africa Corps present a dual challenge. On the one hand, although framed as counter-terrorism operations, the brutality and disregard for civilian casualties that are characteristic of Wagner

Group/Africa Corps-led military operations in the region, tend to exacerbate rather than mitigate the threat posed by Islamist terrorist groups. In several cases, terrorist propaganda used this violence to enhance recruitment among the local population, portraying terrorist groups as self-defense forces. On the other hand, the presence of the Wagner Group/Africa Corps and its support for some of the military regimes in the region can present a hurdle for any increased European or German engagement. However, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the fall of the Assad regime and the resulting reduced engagement of Russian military operations in a key airbase and military harbor in Syria, used for the resupply of the Wagner Group /Africa Corps, could present a window of opportunity for a potential push-back of Russian influence in the security sector in the region. Given the increasing diversity of international stakeholders active in the region, joint initiatives with additional partners, such as India or Turkey, could be contemplated, should sufficient common interest be identified.

Lebanese Hezbollah

Hezbollah's Illicit Financial Networks in Africa

Lebanese Hezbollah has operated in Africa for decades, including executing or plotting sporadic terrorist attacks, from hijackings and assassinations to kidnappings and bombings across the continent.¹ But the continent is far more important to Hezbollah as a place where it can raise significant funds and launder the proceeds of its illicit financial schemes around the world, than as a venue for operations. In October 2024, the U.S. Department of the Treasury reported that Hezbollah's revenue generation activities are "global in scale, extending to Africa" and other corners of the world.² As the group seeks to resurrect itself after a series of devastating Israeli attacks, compounded by the loss of a critical ally in the Assad regime, Hezbollah's international financing schemes in places like Africa are likely to take on even greater importance.

Background

Hezbollah supporters in Africa raise significant amounts of money for the group through a variety of illicit financial schemes involving both official Hezbollah representatives and unofficial financial supporters. So much so that a post-October 7, 2023 bulletin issued by the U.S. Department of the Treasury for the purpose of assisting financial institutions in identifying and reporting suspicious activity supporting Lebanese Hezbollah specifically warned that the organization "draws revenue and launders funds through networks of businesses in West Africa, Europe, and South America."³ Increasingly,

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

Hezbollah's illicit financial activities outside of Lebanon span these continents, largely due to the international ties of prominent Shia Lebanese business people who raise funds and launder money for Hezbollah using their companies and assets in Africa. This is especially pronounced today in West Africa, where Hezbollah representatives and financiers raise funds and run businesses that generate income for Hezbollah and launder the proceeds of illicit income for the group. In many cases, such activities are enabled through bribery and relationships with corrupt politicians and law enforcement.⁴

Hezbollah Official Representatives

Hezbollah maintains a network of official, local representatives around the world who operate as part of the group's Foreign Relations Department (FRD)⁵ which, according to the U.S. government, "engages in covert terrorist operations around the world on behalf of Hezbollah, including recruiting terrorist operatives and gathering intelligence."⁶ In 2013, Nigerian authorities arrested several Hezbollah FRD operatives plotting an attack there.⁷ Hezbollah FRD officials also raise funds for the group, including in Africa, as noted in an October 2013 Financial Action Task Force (FATF) report on "Terrorist Financing in West Africa." That report called out the illicit fundraising activities of several Hezbollah FRD officials in Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Cote d'Ivoire. These included soliciting donations (including those raised through intimidation and mafia-style shakedowns) and arranging for the transfer of funds to Hezbollah in Lebanon, using businesses they own to raise funds for the group, and coordinating travel of Hezbollah officials for fundraising trips to the region. In one case, the FRD representative in Senegal also "led secret meetings to devise ways to increase Hezbollah's fundraising efforts."⁸

One of the most prominent Hezbollah officials in Africa has been Abd Al Menhem Qubaysi, based in Cote d'Ivoire, who was designated as a Hezbollah supporter and personal representative of Hezbollah's Secretary General at that time Hassan Nasrallah. Qubaysi helped establish an official Hezbollah foundation in Cote d'Ivoire which, according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, is used "to recruit new members for Hezbollah military ranks in Lebanon."⁹ Qubaysi hosted senior Hezbollah officials on visits to several African countries who came to raise funds for the group and spoke at Hezbollah fundraising events himself. The activities of Hezbollah's FRD representatives have drawn the attention of officials in Africa, where the regional body of the FATF

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

noted the activities of Ali Ahmed Chehade, a Hezbollah FRD in Africa, in a report on terrorist financing in West Africa.¹⁰

Within Lebanese diaspora communities in Africa, Hezbollah imposes an informal tax—which the group levies both on Lebanese businesses as well as expatriates in the region. The group typically describes this “tax” as tithing, or zakat—that is effectively a shakedown and is not limited to Lebanese Muslims, Shia or Sunni. “If you don’t pay, you are excluded from all ceremonies”, a Maronite Christian in Cameroon told *Le Monde*.¹¹

Hezbollah Financiers

Far more significant to Hezbollah than grassroots donations from (or shakedowns of) individual supporters are the group’s wealthy donors who raise funds for the group through their companies and investments in Africa.

One example is Kassim Tajideen, who together with his brothers ran a string of “cover companies for Hezbollah,” according to U.S. investigators, which he used to raise and contribute tens of millions of dollars to Hezbollah.¹² After being arrested in 2003 for fraud, money laundering and diamond smuggling in Belgium, where he held citizenship, Tajideen moved his business empire to West Africa, according to U.S. prosecutors.¹³ By virtue of holding Belgian, Lebanese, and Sierra Leonean citizenship, Tajideen was able to leverage connections and financing on three continents. Despite being sanctioned in 2009 for his ties to Hezbollah, Tajideen would later admit that he conspired with others to engage in sanctions evasion, including conducting over \$50 million in transactions with U.S. businesses.¹⁴ Tajideen was extradited to the U.S. from Morocco, where he ultimately pleaded guilty to a money laundering conspiracy to evade sanctions.¹⁵ In a sign of how important Tajideen was to Hezbollah and their Iranian patrons, persons tied to Iran allegedly sought to bribe Moroccan authorities to release Tajideen, but instead they expedited his extradition.¹⁶ Tajideen ultimately pleaded guilty to conspiracy to launder funds for Hezbollah in violation of U.S. sanctions, was jailed, and was ordered to forfeit \$50 million.¹⁷

Within a matter of months, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated two of Kassim Tajideen’s brothers, Ali and Husayn, targeting “two of Hezbollah’s top financiers in Africa” whose “multinational network generates millions of dollars in funding” for Hezbollah.¹⁸ The network of businesses targeted by the U.S. Department of the Treasury included entities as far afield as The Gambia, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, the

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Angola, and the British Virgin Islands. These included Hezbollah “cover companies” in the food and diamond industries, a supermarket, and multinational businesses like Tajco Ltd. in The Gambia. Proceeds from such companies were used to provide millions of dollars to Hezbollah, according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury.¹⁹

In most cases, the Hezbollah financiers operating in Africa are based there, but there are exceptions. Consider the case of Ali Mohamed Qansu who is based in Lebanon but ran companies that helped finance Hezbollah in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Liberia.²⁰ Qansu was sanctioned by the United States in 2018 for acting for or on behalf of Hezbollah members and financier Adham Tabaja or his company, Al-Inmaa Engineering and Contracting, which were themselves sanctioned in 2015.²¹ According to the U.S. government, aside from his extensive financial support of Hezbollah, Tabaja “maintained direct ties to senior Hezbollah officials and Hezbollah’s operational component, the Islamic Jihad, which is responsible for executing Hezbollah’s terrorist attacks worldwide.”²²

Tabaja plays a central role in Hezbollah’s transnational financial support network, with direct ties to many of the key Hezbollah financiers identified by the U.S. and others. Indeed, many of these financiers have come to light since Tabaja was designated in 2015, as a result of the financial or sanctions evasion services they provided him and his companies. So, while the U.S. Department of the Treasury described Nazem Said Ahmad as “one of Hezbollah’s top donors,” who generated funds for the group through the trade in African “blood diamonds,” personally provided funds to then-Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and laundered funds for the group through his high-end art collection, Ahmad also stands out for helping Tabaja secure bank loans.²³ Ahmad laundered money from a DRC-based associate, Saleh Assi, who was one of Tabaja’s business partners and raised funds for Hezbollah through a series of DRC-based companies.²⁴ In April 2023, Nazem Ahmad and eight associates were indicted by the U.S. Department of Justice and charged with money laundering and sanctions evasion tied to Hezbollah, among other charges.²⁵

Hezbollah, Kleptocracy and Corruption

One of the reasons so many Hezbollah illicit financial activities occur in Africa is that corruption runs rife throughout the region and Hezbollah financiers exploit this to their advantage. While most Lebanese in Africa avoided direct participation in local politics, the CIA reported in 1998, some who became financially successful translated some of their “economic dominance” into political influence. “In its most direct form, some Lebanese businessmen provide financial ‘gifts’ to officials—including to heads of state—that enable them to sway government policy and protect their financial interests.”²⁶ This continues today, with Hezbollah financiers who “have leveraged political connections or bribe law enforcement officials to facilitate the movement of funds.”²⁷

As of at least March 2022, Kassem Tajideen’s “primary political contact” in Guinea was Hezbollah financier Ali Saade, according to U.S. information.²⁸ Together with Ibrahim Taher, another Hezbollah financier in Guinea, Saade facilitated the transfer of funds raised for Hezbollah in Africa to the group in Lebanon “through bribes and other corrupt activity.”²⁹ Saade provided Tajideen with “unrestricted access to corrupt members of the former Guinean administration at the highest levels and the rest of the Guinean government.”³⁰ Taher, meanwhile, employed people associated with Hezbollah and used his status as Honorary Consul of Lebanon to Cote d’Ivoire to travel across Africa under diplomatic cover and therefore minimal scrutiny.³¹ Similarly, Ali Saade served as Lebanon’s Honorary Consul to Guinea.³²

Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi held the title of Honorary Consul of The Gambia to Lebanon.³³ Bazzi would be sanctioned by U.S. Department of the Treasury as a Hezbollah financier in 2018 but had already come up in earlier Hezbollah investigations.³⁴ Bazzi’s illicit financial activities, which occurred across several West African countries, were facilitated by his close association with the corrupt former leader of The Gambia, Yahya Jammeh who “plundered The Gambia’s state coffers” for his own benefit.³⁵ Bazzi’s corrupt relationship with Jammeh is used as an example in a 2018 U.S. Department of the Treasury’s memo, entitled “Advisory on Human Right Abuses Enabled by Corrupt Senior Foreign Political Figures and their Financial Facilitators.” Jammeh would use facilitators acting under his instructions, including Bazzi, “to direct the unlawful withdrawal of at least \$50 million of state funds from The Gambia.”³⁶ As “the most influential businessman in Jammeh’s inner circle,” Bazzi and his energy companies played a unique role in Jammeh’s corruption and as a result he enjoyed a monopoly over Gambia’s fuel sector.³⁷ According to the U.S. Department of

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

the Treasury, Bazzi's businesses generated funds for Hezbollah: "Bazzi is a major donor to Hezbollah" who provided the group "financial assistance for many years and has provided millions of dollars to Hezbollah generated from business activities."³⁸ The Janneh Commission of Inquiry, which investigated Jammeh's looting of The Gambia, details Bazzi's role in Gambian corruption.³⁹

A year after Mohammad Bazzi's designation, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated his son, Wael Bazzi, through whom Mohammad continued to conduct business.⁴⁰ Bazzi was arrested in Romania in 2023 and extradited to stand trial in the United States. In September 2024 he pleaded guilty to sanctions evasion charges for his efforts to evade sanctions through other means after his son's designation.⁴¹

Laundering Proceeds Of Narcotics Trafficking

Hezbollah financiers raise significant funds for the group through front companies in West Africa, but these also serve "to disguise the movement of funds associated with Hezbollah or to receive shipments of goods as part of trade-based money laundering (TBML) schemes."⁴² Over time, Hezbollah leveraged these front companies to raise significant funds by laundering the proceeds of narcotics trafficking. "Hezbollah uses financiers like Bazzi who are tied to drug dealers, and who launder money to fund terrorism," as then-U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Mnuchin explained, in reference to Bazzi's ties to the Ayman Joumaa Drug Trafficking and Money Laundering Organization.⁴³

The Bazzi and Tajideen cases fell under the rubric of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)'s Project Cassandra, which targets Hezbollah's global criminal support networks.⁴⁴ At its peak, Project Cassandra involved multiple parallel operations, including Operation Cedar, a transnational case involving law enforcement agencies from seven countries targeting a Hezbollah drug trafficking and money laundering criminal enterprise, the proceeds of which financed the purchase of weapons for Hezbollah fighters in Syria.⁴⁵ The DEA referred to this global Hezbollah criminal network as the group's Business Affairs Component (BAC), founded by none other than Hezbollah terrorist leader Imad Mughniyeh (killed in Damascus in 2008) and then run by Abdallah Safieddine, Hezbollah's representative to Tehran (and key interlocutor between Hezbollah and Iran on financial issues), as well as Adham Tabaja.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most significant case to date involved the now-defunct Lebanese-Canadian Bank (LCB), which the U.S. Department of the Treasury identified as a Primary Money

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

Laundering Concern in 2011. LCB facilitated money laundering for Joumma's narco-trafficking network, with some of the proceeds benefiting Hezbollah. The U.S. Department of the Treasury revealed that the Joumaa "network moves illegal drugs from South America to Europe and the Middle East via West Africa and launders hundreds of millions of dollars monthly through accounts held at LCB, as well as through trade-based money laundering involving consumer goods throughout the world, including through used car dealerships in the United States."⁴⁷

According to court documents, "cash from the sale of the cars, along with the proceeds of narcotics trafficking, were funneled [from Africa] to Lebanon through Hezbollah-controlled money laundering channels."⁴⁸ Key to the network's success, however, was the ability to launder drug money by investing its profits in other business – such as corrupted banks and money exchange houses that are trusted by the network – before ultimately sending those funds back to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In this case, funds were used to purchase used cars in the United States that were then shipped to West Africa, among other destinations. These transactions were facilitated through LCB and its subsidiaries, including Prime Bank Limited, a private commercial bank in The Gambia which was partly owned by "a Lebanese individual known to be a supporter of Hezbollah."⁴⁹ Two Lebanon-based money exchange houses picked up the money laundering facilitation from LCB, processing millions of dollars in payments to U.S.-based used car dealerships involved in the Joumaa network narcotics money laundering scheme.⁵⁰

In the wake of the September 2024 targeted killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and the overall impact of the Israeli campaign to degrade Hezbollah, the group is sure to try and reconstitute its capabilities. That is complicated not only by the loss of infrastructure and key personnel, but of funds as well. The Israeli air campaign targeted pallets of cash and gold in Hezbollah headquarters, as well as key branches of the group's unofficial bank, Al-Qard al-IHassan, which held cash deposits.⁵¹ As Hezbollah seeks to replenish its financial resources, the group is likely to look to its financial supporters in Africa, among other places, to generate revenue, something the U.S. Department of the Treasury warned financial institutions to be on the lookout for in an October 2024 alert.⁵²

Recommendations

1. Anti-corruption and law enforcement training

With established front companies functioning in Africa, and facing relatively little pressure from under-resourced and poorly trained local law enforcement, it is hardly surprising that criminal syndicates see the continent as an attractive place to do business. Rampant corruption enables criminals of all stripes to buy favors and protection, which further shields them from exposure or prosecution. Hezbollah supporters active in this type of under-governed space enjoy the same benefits when they engage in criminal activities as well.

Therefore, German and European policy stakeholders could examine expanding, and where not yet present, establishing, law-enforcement cooperation, including through multilateral organizations such as Europol and Interpol, with those governments in the region that are still willing to engage.

2. Coordinate investigations across jurisdictions

The U.S.-led Law Enforcement Coordination Group (LECG) has brought together countries from around the world to foster cooperation on Hezbollah-related investigations, including in Africa. Much more needs to be done in this space, especially when it comes to major financiers who hold citizenship in multiple countries, typically including Lebanon, one or more African countries, and often a European country as well.

With Europol as well as Eurojust, the European security architecture has established appropriate multilateral mechanisms through which cross-jurisdictional engagement could be increased. Given the Trump administration's reluctance to play as forward-leaning an international role as its predecessors, there is both a need and an opportunity for Europe to play a more active role in curbing Hezbollah's activities at home in Lebanon and around the world, including in Africa.

3. Establish and enforce AML-CTF regulations and laws

Anti-money laundering and counter-terror financing (AML-CFT) regulations are not uniformly established, let alone enforced, across Africa. GIABA, the West African FATF-style regional body (FSRB), has made significant progress in this regard, but needs financial and expert support from the West to help build an AML-CFT regulatory culture that can better protect African national financial systems from abuse. Many of these

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

cases discussed in this report involved past illicit activities that could have been identified earlier had anyone engaged in standard due diligence checks.

Therefore, German and European decision-makers could examine increasing cooperation and targeted capacity-building efforts with GIABA. For German decision-makers, one potential avenue to operationalize such increased cooperation could be the German International Development Agency's (GIZ) Global Program Combating Illicit Financial Flows, which is engaging various FSRBs, including in Africa.

4. Crack down on abuse of honorary consul abuse

Hezbollah, along with a long list of other criminal and terrorist organizations, have abused the honorary consul system to facilitate a wide range of criminal activities. New rules are required to regulate this system, and increased law enforcement efforts are needed to address the abuse. In addition to work on establishing common standards for the appointment and accreditation of honorary consuls as well as common minimum standards for their mandate and work, this could also involve a tactical use of sanctions targeting those misusing the current system.

5. Designate Hezbollah in its entirety within the European Union

Since so many of the major Hezbollah financiers and money launderers active in Africa also have a European footprint—citizenship, legal residency, homes, businesses, etc.—an EU designation of Hezbollah in its entirety would have trickle-down effects on countering Hezbollah financing in Africa. According to Europol, Hezbollah “has been using the EU as a base for fundraising, recruitment and criminal activities from which they obtain significant profits.”⁵³ An EU designation of the entire group rather than just a part of it, as is currently the case, would open the doors for European law enforcement to more proactively investigate Hezbollah's transnational illicit financial activities, including those with touchpoints in Europe and Africa.

The Influence of Wagner Group / Africa Corps in West Africa

Wagner's Arrival in the Sahel

The presence of the Wagner Group/Africa Corps on the African continent is less than a decade old. In 2016, Russians affiliated with Yevgeny Prigozhin and his private military company (PMC) Wagner Group first touched down in Sudan to conduct feasibility studies for gold-mining operations.⁵⁴ In November 2017, Russia and Sudan signed a number of bilateral agreements on both gold-mining and military instruction, paving the way for the arrival of Wagner's military instructors.⁵⁵ Affiliates of Prigozhin were already conducting fieldwork in the Central African Republic (CAR) as well, culminating in another series of economic and security agreements in late 2017, and the arrival of Wagner instructors in Bangui in early 2018.⁵⁶

Almost immediately, Prigozhin's consultants, Russian advisors, and members of Sudan's security services began working on a peace agreement between the CAR government and more powerful armed groups in the countryside. The internationally recognized 2019 Khartoum Agreement was the result. Prigozhin used this as a launch pad for additional activities on the continent and his participation in African affairs exploded. Within a few months, Wagner was providing logistical support to eastern-based Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's surprise campaign to take Libya's capital,⁵⁷ Tripoli, and negotiating to keep its investments in Sudan following the coup that ousted Omar al-Bashir.

The Khartoum Agreement could not survive tense presidential elections in CAR in December of 2020, which saw six of the fourteen armed groups that were signatories of the agreement form a new rebel alliance, the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), and attack the capital, Bangui.⁵⁸ Wagner, together with Rwandan forces and UN peacekeepers, defended the capital, then launched a counteroffensive that saw most major towns come under government control.

The success of that counteroffensive in CAR caught the attention of both African governments and Russian officials elsewhere in Africa. For example, over the past two decades there has been a small group of advisors from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) in Mali.⁵⁹ These advisors, not subordinate to military attachés, forged relations with the local Malian officer corps. Together with like-minded Malian officers, they noted that Western military-humanitarian initiatives, including Operation Barkhane,

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

lacked both specific goals and adequate communication between the Malian military and Western forces.⁶⁰

Russian military advisors and their contacts in the Malian military decided conditions were ripe for a Russian intervention, though there was no consensus on what such an intervention would look like, even among the pro-Russian officers within the Malian military. “It was decided that for the external audience, the intervention would be a private company initiative. For internal consumption, it would be a government initiative.”⁶¹ Once the terms were agreed with the Russian MoD, the initiative was transferred to Prigozhin’s organizations.

The Structure of Russian Intervention in Mali

The Russian MoD decided on a force structure similar to the Wagner units that fought the CPC in CAR. The basis of the intervention would be built around instructors who could simultaneously take part in combat operations as commanders. Such instructors would be integrated within units of the national army, and these units would be the tip of the spear against the “illegal armed formation.”⁶² They were provided with heavy equipment and weapons, as well as communications and reconnaissance equipment. Unlike in CAR, however, the Russian military would have a more meaningful presence in Mali. The intervening force would utilize aviation, including Russian pilots and technical personnel, and employ military advisors for planning operations.⁶³

Indeed, the Russian MoD would be responsible for ensuring the activities of forces on the ground. Russian military officials handled analytical work, planning, and coordination with the Malian military. Prigozhin’s men would be responsible for the replenishment of personnel as well as more quotidian problems: the functioning of the military police or daily interactions with the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa).⁶⁴

In December 2021, the U.S. government announced that Goïta’s regime had reached an agreement with the Russian PMC worth \$10 million per month.⁶⁵ This is disputed by a source close to the deal. “There weren’t exact figures. It was obvious that the Malian government was making some payments, including for the supplied weapons and equipment, but the volume and form of this material remuneration is unknown. It was understood, however, that Wagner did not receive money directly from the Malians; this money went to Russia’s account.”⁶⁶ As in Sudan and CAR, Prigozhin’s men sought access, this time rather unsuccessfully, to gold-mining concessions.⁶⁷ Equipment and

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

weapons were shipped in from China and Turkey, likely paid for by the Malian government.

Wagner's Counterterrorism Operations

Starting in December 2021, Wagner mercenaries touched down in Bamako and began building a base close to Bamako's international airport. Wagner personnel understood their enemy to be al-Qaeda and ISIS.⁶⁸ Information on the counter-terrorism operation, strategy, and the enemy largely came through word-of-mouth. As Wagner operations spread from Bamako throughout the center of the country, it became clear that Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), the regional affiliate of al-Qaeda, and Islamic State Greater Sahara (IS-GS), one of the regional affiliates of the Islamic State (IS), were very different from the CPC.⁶⁹ In January 2022, Wagner suffered its first casualties following the explosion of an improvised explosive device (IED) in the Mopti region. In interviews, a Wagner mercenary noted frustration with IEDs and ambushes. The Islamist terrorist fighters knew every movement of the Wagner forces through informants, and cleared out of villages before they arrived.⁷⁰ In March 2022, FAMa, backed by Wagner forces, launched an operation on Moura, a town in central Mali, where over the course of several days FAMa and Wagner forces executed hundreds of men, predominantly Fulani, in small groups.⁷¹ The events in Moura and other human rights abuses drove even more Fulani men into the arms of Islamist terrorist groups, who were able to present themselves in their propaganda as akin to self-defense forces. Islamist groups have been heavily recruiting among Fulani men who work as cattle herders and often get discriminated against by the state and farmers in access to water and land.

A Wagner source interviewed noted that their force, always less than 2,000 contractors, could do little to hold territory against the fighters of the Islamist terrorist groups.⁷² Small towns and forests cleared as Wagner and FAMa fanned throughout the center were retaken by Islamist terrorist fighters only weeks later.⁷³ In March and April 2022, Prigozhin's focus shifted to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A number of talented Wagner commanders and volunteers were redeployed to the so-called "Special Military Operation" against Ukraine.⁷⁴

Prigozhin's Mutiny and Africa Corps

Within a short time after the appearance of the Wagner PMC in Mali, it became obvious that the scale of the counter-terrorism operation in Mali exceeded the capabilities of Prigozhin's structures. Even prior to Prigozhin's mutiny, plans for an "Africa Corps" as a

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

specialized structure within the Russian Ministry of Defense were made.⁷⁵ This structure could also, if needed, act as a counterweight to Prigozhin's more independent position. The war in Ukraine tabled plans for the Africa Corps (AC), but Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023 and subsequent death in August 2023 accelerated the formalization of Wagner structures.

With full subordination of the Russian MoD, the AC is provided with a special status of an expeditionary force, with simplified personnel recruitment and an increased degree of initiative compared to conventional units of the armed forces.⁷⁶ Neither the Russian MoD nor the Kremlin were satisfied with the overly independent, and in some cases uncontrollable initiatives of Wagner PMC. Some dissatisfaction was also caused by the fact that Wagner PMC was directly involved in economic activities exclusively for personal private purposes. A number of Wagner's operations, such as taking control of gold mines, were viewed by the Kremlin as completely commercial operations, not counter-terrorism. But due to the remote nature of African operations, it was difficult to rein in the PMC.⁷⁷

Indeed, the handover of Wagner operations to the AC has proven difficult. After the death of Prigozhin, a group of military advisers in Bamako took over the leadership of Wagner personnel on the ground.⁷⁸ This group, reinforced by a number of officers from the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, carried out planning of operations to capture Kidal from Tuareg separatists in November 2023.⁷⁹

The capture of Kidal paved the way for small detachments of the AC to arrive in Burkina Faso and Niger. In Burkina Faso, in particular, an informal group of political technologists focused on soft power, creating a new regional alliance, the Africa Alliance (AA), in order to support the intervention of Africa Corps.⁸⁰

Burkina Faso and Niger were greenfield projects for the AC. But in Mali, the handover was even more difficult. Assault detachments retained their partial independence, as it was difficult to quickly replace them with regular units. Moreover, within the Russian MoD and the Kremlin the use of regular military units in the African theater is seen as controversial.⁸¹

This ambiguity, unclear command and control during the handover, and a degradation in quality of personnel began to have a serious effect on Wagner operations in Mali throughout 2023. The capture of Kidal led Wagner commanders to underestimate the coalition of Tuareg separatist groups (CMA) and JNIM in northern Mali, leading to the

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

July 2024 ambush of Wagner in Tinzaouaten, which killed dozens of Wagner fighters.⁸² Ukrainian claims to have participated in the events at Tinzaouaten are still unconfirmed, given Kyiv's clear efforts to disrupt Russian influence in the informational sphere.

The defeat at Tinzaouaten has been leveraged by those military advisors lobbying for a decrease in direct participation in combat operations, and there are now discussions on a paradigm shift in Russian intervention in the Sahel, from direct combat operations to training missions.⁸³ Indeed, in June 2025, Wagner assault detachments operating in Mali were finally subordinated to the Africa Corps structure.⁸⁴ While a number of Wagner contractors simply signed new contracts with Africa Corps, more independent-minded assault detachment commanders were removed. A more rigid, risk-averse bureaucracy is expected to take Wagner's place.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and reduced operations in Russia's air base in Khmeimim and the Russian naval base in Tartus, will also give more cause for scaling back Africa operations in the near-term.⁸⁵ Abandoning partners in the Sahel, however, is not an option for Russia. The narrative that Russia is a force for de-colonization in the Global South, and the necessity that Russia is not isolated internationally, have become too important to the Kremlin following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. From 2017 to 2023, Prigozhin and his operatives worked hard to convince the Kremlin of the merits of intervention in Africa.⁸⁶ They have largely succeeded. Despite Prigozhin's mutiny, the ambush at Tinzaouaten, and the fall of Assad, Russia's operations in the Sahel are very likely here to stay in some form.

Recommendations

1. It seems unlikely that the European Union (EU) or Germany can offer alternative bilateral security partnerships to replace the operations of the AC/Wagner Group in Africa. Given the extremely difficult bilateral relationship with several key countries in the region, it is also not clear if this would be strategically wise. Rather than focus on "countering" the supply side of security provision, especially in the information sphere, where it would be difficult not to fall into the trap of paternalistic criticism, policy decision-makers at the level of the European Union and Germany could focus on decreasing the demand side for Russian military intervention in Africa. The extension of the European Union Capacity Building (EUCAP) police mission in Mali is a compromise step in the right direction, and the EU should continue to pursue this type of non-military engagement.

2. Wagner Group did not start any of the civil wars or conflicts in which it participated; mercenaries are a symptom of conflict, not its cause. To limit the demand for Russia, the EU should increase funding for government-sponsored humanitarian initiatives and development in areas vulnerable to Wagner and other forms of Russian intervention. There is space for the EU and Germany to step up its programing, or even to step in to replace other Western countries cutting aid to the region, such as the United States.
3. Providing incentives for continued EU and German private investment in critical infrastructure in West Africa, when supported by positive messaging and buy-in from local communities, is likely to have far greater impact than sanctions and isolation.
4. Any decision to maintain or increase European presence in West Africa will have to take into consideration that the current level of competition for influence by foreign malign state actors, such as Russia, means that all regional governments feel that they have alternatives. The case of the Wagner Group/ AC is indicative of a larger trend: multipolarity has already arrived in Africa. African governments can partner with a host of great and middle powers on infrastructure and economic development, manufacturing, trade, and security provision. African governments will very likely continue to diversify their international partnerships with emerging players such as China, Russia, India, and Turkey. While this will present an additional challenge for European and German policy planners, it may also offer opportunities for joined initiatives and burden sharing with new partners, such as India or Turkey, if sufficient common interests, including security interests in the region, can be identified.

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

Endnotes

-
- ¹ From the hijacking of Air Afrique flight 56 in the Republic of the Congo in 1987 to the 2013 bombing plot thwarted by Nigerian authorities, Hezbollah plots in Africa (and around the world) can be tracked via the author's interactive map and timeline "Lebanese Hezbollah Select Worldwide Activity," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/>
 - ² "FinCEN Alert to Financial Institutions to Counter Financing of Hizballah and its Terrorist Activities," Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 23, 2024, <https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/shared/FinCEN-Alert-Hizballah-Alert-508C.pdf>
 - ³ "FinCEN Alert to Financial Institutions to Counter Financing of Hizballah and its Terrorist Activities," Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 23, 2024, <https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/shared/FinCEN-Alert-Hizballah-Alert-508C.pdf>
 - ⁴ "FinCEN Alert to Financial Institutions to Counter Financing of Hizballah and its Terrorist Activities," Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 23, 2024, <https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/shared/FinCEN-Alert-Hizballah-Alert-508C.pdf>
 - ⁵ Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's 'Diplomats' Go Operational," PolicyWatch 2734, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahs-diplomats-go-operational>
 - ⁶ "State Department Terrorist Designations of Ali Damush and Mustafa Mughniyeh," Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, January 9, 2017, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/01/266729.htm>
 - ⁷ "Treasury Targets Africa-Based Hizballah Support Network," U.S. Treasury Department, February 26, 2015, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl9982>
 - ⁸ "Terrorist Financing in Africa: FATF Report," Financial Action Task Force and Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA), October 2013, p. 27 <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/content/dam/fatf-gafi/reports/TF-in-West-Africa.pdf.coredownload.inline.pdf>
 - ⁹ "Treasury Targets Hizballah Network in Africa," U.S. Treasury Department, May 27, 2009, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg149>
 - ¹⁰ "Terrorist Financing in Africa: FATF Report," Financial Action Task Force and Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA), October 2013, p. 27 <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/content/dam/fatf-gafi/reports/TF-in-West-Africa.pdf.coredownload.inline.pdf>
 - ¹¹ Noe Hochet-Bodin, Arnaud Deux, and Cyril Bensimon, "How Hezbollah Raises Funds in West Africa," Le Monde, October 12, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/10/12/how-hezbollah-raises-funds-in-west-africa_6729206_124.html
 - ¹² "Treasury Targets Hizballah Network in Africa," U.S. Treasury Department, May 27, 2009, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg149>
 - ¹³ Joe Palazzo, interviewed on "Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule" podcast, Season 2, Episode 4, "Blood Diamonds, Picassos, and Illicit Financing in Africa," October 18, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/6872>
 - ¹⁴ "Lebanese Businessman Tied by Treasury Department to Hezbollah Pleads Guilty to Money Laundering Conspiracy in Furtherance of Violations of U.S. Sanctions," U.S. Department of Justice, December 6, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/lebanese-businessman-tied-treasury-department-hezbollah-pleads-guilty-money-laundering>
 - ¹⁵ "Lebanese Businessman Tied by Treasury Department to Hezbollah Pleads Guilty to Money Laundering Conspiracy in Furtherance of Violations of U.S. Sanctions," U.S. Department of Justice, December 6,

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

2018, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/lebanese-businessman-tied-treasury-department-hezbollah-pleads-guilty-money-laundering>

- ¹⁶ John Fernandez, "The DEA's Targeting of Hezbollah's Global Criminal Support Network," PolicyWatch 3240, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deas-targeting-hezbollahs-global-criminal-support-network>
- ¹⁷ "Lebanese Businessman Tied by Treasury Department to Hezbollah is Sentenced to Prison for Money Laundering Scheme Involving the Evasion of U.S. Sanctions," U.S. Department of Justice, August 8, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/lebanese-businessman-tied-treasury-department-hezbollah-sentenced-prison-money-laundering>
- ¹⁸ "Treasury Targets Hizballah Financial Network," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 9, 2010, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg997>
- ¹⁹ "Treasury Targets Hizballah Financial Network," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 9, 2010, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg997>
- ²⁰ "Treasury Targets Hizballah Financial Network in Africa and the Middle East," US Department of the Treasury, February 2, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0278>
- ²¹ "Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Front Companies and Facilitators in Lebanon and Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, June 10, 2015, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl0069>
- ²² "Treasury Designates Prominent Lebanon and DRC-Based Hizballah Money Launderers," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 13, 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm856>
- ²³ "Treasury Designates Prominent Lebanon and DRC-Based Hizballah Money Launderers," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 13, 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm856>
- ²⁴ "Treasury Designates Prominent Lebanon and DRC-Based Hizballah Money Launderers," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 13, 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm856>
- ²⁵ "OFAC-Designated Hizballah Financier and Eight Associates Charged with Multiple Crimes Arising Out of Scheme to Evade Terrorism-Related Sanctions," U.S. Department of Justice, April 18, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/ofac-designated-hizballah-financier-and-eight-associates-charged-multiple-crimes>
- ²⁶ "The Lebanese in Sub-Saharan Africa," CIA Intelligence Assessment, January 1988 (declassified June 1999), https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258637.pdf
- ²⁷ "FinCEN Alert to Financial Institutions to Counter Financing of Hizballah and its Terrorist Activities," Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 23, 2024, <https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/shared/FinCEN-Alert-Hizballah-Alert-508C.pdf>
- ²⁸ "Treasury Sanctions Hizballh Financiers in Guinea," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 4, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0631>
- ²⁹ "Treasury Sanctions Hizballh Financiers in Guinea," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 4, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0631>
- ³⁰ "Treasury Sanctions Hizballh Financiers in Guinea," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 4, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0631>
- ³¹ "Treasury Sanctions Hizballh Financiers in Guinea," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 4, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0631>
- ³² "Debbie Cenziper, Will Fitzgibbon, Eva Herscowitz, Nicole Sadek, "Consul Cases: Details of Troubled Diplomats Around the World," ProPublica, November 14, 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/honorary-consuls-shadow-diplomats-profiles>

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

- ³³ “Debbie Cenziper, Will Fitzgibbon, Eva Herscowitz, Nicole Sadek, “Consul Cases: Details of Troubled Diplomats Around the World,” ProPublica, November 14, 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/honorary-consuls-shadow-diplomats-profiles>
- ³⁴ “Treasury Targets Key Hezbollah Financing Network and Iranian Conduit,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 17, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0388>; In the case against the Lebanese Canadian Bank, it was Bazzi who owned a portion of Prime Bank, in The Gambia, through which Hezbollah was laundering funds. See “Finding that the Lebanese Canadian Bank SAL is a Financial Institution of Primary Laundering Concern,” Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 10, 2011. http://www.fincen.gov/statutes_regs/patriot/pdf/LCBNoticeofFinding.pdf
- ³⁵ “Treasury Targets Key Hezbollah Financing Network and Iranian Conduit,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 17, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0388>
- ³⁶ “Advisory on Human Right Abuses Enabled by Corrupt Senior Foreign Political Figures and their Financial Facilitators,” Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), U.S. Department of the Treasury, June 9, 2018, https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/advisory/2018-06-09/PEP%20Facilitator%20Advisory_FINAL%20508.pdf
- ³⁷ Khadija Sharife and Mark Anderson, “The Inner Circle that Helped Jammeh Steal a Billion Dollars,” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, March 27, 2019, <https://www.occrp.org/en/project/the-great-gambia-heist/the-inner-circle-that-helped-jammeh-steal-a-billion-dollars>
- ³⁸ “Treasury Targets Key Hezbollah Financing Network and Iranian Conduit,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 17, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0388>
- ³⁹ <https://www.moj.gm/downloads>
- ⁴⁰ “Treasury Targets Sanctions Evasion Conduits for Major Hezbollah Financiers,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, April 24, 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm668>
- ⁴¹ “Specially Designated Global Terrorist Mohammad Bazzi Pleads Guilty to Sanctions Evasion,” U.S. Department of Justice, September 20, 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/specially-designated-global-terrorist-mohammad-bazzi-pleads-guilty-sanctions-evasion>
- ⁴² “FinCEN Alert to Financial Institutions to Counter Financing of Hezbollah and its Terrorist Activities,” Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 23, 2024, <https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/shared/FinCEN-Alert-Hezbollah-Alert-508C.pdf>
- ⁴³ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0388>
- ⁴⁴ “Lebanese Businessman Tied by Treasury Department to Hezbollah is Sentenced to Prison for Money Laundering Scheme Involving the Evasion of U.S. Sanctions,” U.S. Department of Justice, August 8, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/lebanese-businessman-tied-treasury-department-hezbollah-sentenced-prison-money-laundering>
- ⁴⁵ Matthew Levitt, “Episode 6: Hezbollah Narco-Money Laundering,” Breaking Hezbollah’s Golden Rule, March 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/5452>
- ⁴⁶ “DEA and European Authorities Uncover Massive Hezbollah Drug and Money Laundering Scheme,” U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, February 1, 2016, <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2016/02/01/dea-and-european-authorities-uncover-massive-hezbollah-drug-and-money>
- ⁴⁷ “Treasury Identifies Lebanese Canadian Bank Sal as a Primary Money Laundering Concern,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 10, 2011, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1057>
- ⁴⁸ “Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces \$102 Million Settlement of Civil Forfeiture and Money Laundering Claims against Lebanese Canadian Bank,” U.S. Department of Justice, June 25, 2013, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-102-million-settlement-civil-forfeiture-and->

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

[money#:~:text=From%20approximately%20January%202007%20to,then%20shipped%20to%20West%20Africa.](#)

- 49 “Finding that the Lebanese Canadian Bank SAL is a Financial Institution of Primary Laundering Concern,” Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 10, 2011. http://www.fincen.gov/statutes_regs/patriot/pdf/LCBNoticeofFinding.pdf
- 50 “Treasury Identifies Kassem Rmeiti & Co. for Exchange and Halawi Exchange Co. as Financial Institutions of Primary Money Laundering Concern,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, April 23, 2013, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl1908>
- 51 Arthur Sullivan, “How Israel Treis to Destroy Hezbollah’s Financial Network,” DW, October 24, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/hezbollah-finance-israel-attacks-funding-network-of-the-terrorist-militia/a-70579683>
- 52 “FinCEN Alert to Financial Institutions to Counter Financing of Hizballah and its Terrorist Activities,” Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 23, 2024, <https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/shared/FinCEN-Alert-Hizballah-Alert-508C.pdf>
- 53 “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2022,” Europol, 2022, https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Tesat_Report_2022_0.pdf
- 54 For an overview of Wagner Group’s arrival in Sudan, and Africa more broadly, see: Lechner, John. *Death is Our Business: Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare*. Bloomsbury, 2025.
- 55 See: Russian Government. 2017. Russia-Sudan Talks. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56163>. See also: Russian Government. 2017. Dmitry Medvedev’s Meeting with the President of the Republic of the Sudan Omar al-Bashir. <http://government.ru/en/news/30259/>
- 56 Interview with Wagner official in Bangui. 2024.
- 57 See: Rondeaux, Candace; Margolin, Jack; Imhof, Oliver. 2021. The Abu Dhabi Express. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/the-abu-dhabi-express/>
- 58 Council on Foreign Relations Center for Preventive Action, Conflict in the Central African Republic, 9 July 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-central-african-republic>
- 59 Interview with Russian PMC source close to Russian intervention in Mali. 2023.
- 60 Interview with source in Russian MoD in Mali. 2023.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Interview with Russian PMC source close to Russian intervention in Mali. 2023.
- 64 Interview with source in Russian MoD in Mali. 2023.
- 65 <https://2021-2025.state.gov/potential-deployment-of-the-wagner-group-in-mali/>
- 66 Interview with source in Russian MoD in Mali. 2023.
- 67 Roger, Benjamin. “Wagner’s Mercenary Gold Rush.” *The Africa Report*. <https://www.theafricareport.com/313362/wagners-mercenary-gold-rush-in-mali/>
- 68 Interview with Wagner contractor operating in Mali. 2024.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 “Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers.” *Human Rights Watch*. April 5, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>
- 72 Interview with Wagner contractor operating in Mali. 2024.

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

⁷³ Interview with Wagner contractor operating in Mali. 2024.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Also confirmed by Russian MoD official working in Mali. 2023.

⁷⁵ Interview with Russian PMC source close to Russian intervention in Mali. 2023.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ See: Lechner, John; Eledinov, Sergey. "Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/07/africa-corps-wagner-group-russia-africa-burkina-faso/>

⁸⁰ Interview with Russian PMC source close to Russian intervention in Burkina Faso. 2024.

⁸¹ Interviews with sources in Russian PMC space. 2024.

⁸² See: Lechner, John. "Why Moscow's Operations in Africa May Be Far from Over." *The Moscow Times*. August 12, 2024. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/08/12/why-wagners-operations-in-africa-may-be-far-from-over-despite-mali-setback-a85886>

⁸³ Interviews with sources in Russian PMC space. 2024.

⁸⁴ See: Lechner, John & Eledinov, Sergey. "Wagner Mercenaries Declare 'Mission Accomplished' in Mali." *Responsible Statecraft*. June 16, 2025. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/wagner-group-africa-2672360360/>

⁸⁵ See: Lechner, John. "The Role of Syria in Russia's Africa Operations." *Behind the Front*. December 6, 2024. <https://behindthefront.substack.com/p/the-role-of-syria-in-russias-africa>

⁸⁶ For an overview of Wagner Group's arrival in Sudan, and Africa more broadly, see: Lechner, John. *Death is Our Business: Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare*. Bloomsbury, 2025.

About the Authors

Dr. Matthew Levitt

Dr. Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy where he directs the Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. Previously, he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis at the U.S. Department of the Treasury and before that as an FBI counterterrorism analyst. Levitt teaches at Georgetown University and is the author of *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Georgetown, 2013 & 2024) and *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (Yale, 2006). Levitt hosts the podcast *Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule*.

John Lechner

John Lechner is a writer, researcher, and independent journalist concentrating on the politics of Russia, Turkey, and African nations, with a special focus on conflict in the Central African Republic and the Sahel. He is the author of *Death is Our Business: Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare* (Bloomsbury, 2025) and *Beginner's Chechen* (Hippocrene, 2024). Previously, he worked as an analyst for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and as an investment banking analyst for Lazard Freres and Deutsche Bank.

About the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS)

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. (KAS) is a German political foundation that started its international cooperation programs in 1962. The Foundation carries out assignments in the field of governance, parliamentary support and cooperation, rule of law, human rights protection and gender, civil society development, media promotion, decentralization and local democracy promotion in more than 110 countries on four continents. In this regard, KAS functions as a political think tank. KAS places a strong emphasis on dialogue and free exchange of views and ideas, the cornerstone of an open, democratic society.

About the Counter Extremism Project (CEP)

The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a nonprofit and non-partisan international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. CEP builds a more moderate and secure society by educating the public, policymakers, the private sector, and civil society actors about the threat of extremism. CEP also formulates programs to sever the financial, recruitment, and material support networks of extremist groups and their leaders. For more information about CEP's activities, please visit www.counterextremism.com.