

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of a military uniform. It features a camouflage pattern in shades of brown, tan, and white. A green and black woven patch is visible on the right side, partially obscured by a dark blue text box. The patch has a red circular outline and some text that is difficult to read. A zipper pull is visible on the left side of the uniform.

Justifications, (Dis)Advantages and Implications of Designating Proxy Actors: The Case of the Wagner Group/Africa Corps

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Introduction

In recent years, the alarming scale at which proxy actors (also referred to as ‘proxies’) have engaged in armed conflicts and counter-terrorism (CT) contexts has generated serious concerns. The use of proxies indeed has the potential to increase the intensity of a conflict,¹ undermine peace efforts and prolong conflicts, and result in widespread human rights abuses, as observed in several African countries.² Such concerns have become particularly acute in relation to Russia’s Wagner Group (henceforth also referred to as ‘Wagner’).

Since its emergence in the context of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Wagner Group has operated in multiple countries, supporting Russia’s intervention in Syria and particularly extending its grip across the African continent. Wagner’s activities in Africa have included backing Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (NLA) in Libya, providing training for local security personnel, protecting gold sector investments, and supporting the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – accused of having committed genocide in Sudan, offering security for state officials, training and operational support in the Central African Republic (CAR), and deploying forces to Mali to assist the ruling junta’s counter-terrorism efforts.³ Following a brief uprising against the Kremlin in June 2023 and the suspicious death of Wagner’s leader Yevgeny Prigozhin two months later, the group was restructured and more directly integrated into Russia’s state military structure. Rebranded the Africa Corps (AC) in late 2023, its paramilitary branch in Africa now operates under the direct control of the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) and military intelligence (GRU).⁴ Far from disappearing, the group has only expanded its operations since then, including recent deployments in Burkina Faso⁵ and Niger,⁶ and continues to provide a wide spectrum of security-related services, including personal protection for political elites, protection of key infrastructure, logistical support and training to state or non-state armed forces, direct participation in combat, as well as disinformation campaigns and influence operations.⁷ Yet, the group’s limited strategic success, combined with a consistent pattern of civilian targeting and a track record of human rights abuses, further underscores risks associated with the proliferation of proxies and private military companies.⁸

Against this backdrop, several countries have started stepping up sanctions against the group and are increasingly considering designating it as a terrorist organisation. In the United States (US), following a number of targeted sanctions against front companies held by Wagner’s former head Prigozhin, the group has been designated as a transnational criminal organisation. Alongside growing political attention, academic research on Wagner and its potential designation has also

1 Aliyev H. Why Are Some Civil Wars More Lethal Than Others? The Effect of Pro-Regime Proxies on Conflict Lethality. *Political Studies*. 2020;68(3):749–67.

2 Rondeaux C, Sterman D. Twenty-first century proxy warfare: confronting strategic innovation in a multipolar world. *New America*. 2019.

3 Bowen AS. Russia’s Wagner Private Military Company (PMC). Congressional Research Service (CRS). 2023 Mar 13. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF12344.pdf>; Rukanga B, Hashim, M. US accuses RSF of Sudan genocide and sanctions its leader. *BBC*. 2025 Jan 8. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8j9j72lvdvo>

4 Bryjka F, Czerep J. Africa Corps—A new iteration of Russia’s old military presence in Africa. Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) Report. 2024 May. https://www.pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20Africa%20Corps_.pdf; Serwat L, Nsaibia H. Q&A: The Wagner Group’s new life after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin. *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED)*. 2024 Aug 21. <https://acleddata.com/2024/08/21/qa-the-wagner-groups-new-life-after-the-death-of-yevgeny-prigozhin/>

5 Schwikowski M, Tiassou K, Koena JF. After Wagner, Russia makes new military plans in Africa. *DW*. 2024 Feb 9. <https://www.dw.com/en/after-wagner-russia-makes-new-military-plans-in-africa/a-68213643>; Le Cam M, Eydoux E, Savoye L, Bellanger E. AU Burkina Faso, la première base militaire russe d’Afrique Corps. *Le Monde*. 2024 Mar 6. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2024/03/06/au-burkina-faso-la-premiere-base-militaire-russe-d-africa-corps_6220477_3212.html

6 Sylvestre-Treiner A. Au Niger, l’arrivée de l’Africa Corps consacre le rapprochement de la junte avec la Russie. *Le Monde*. 2024 Apr 12. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/04/12/l-arrivee-de-l-africa-corps-au-niger-consacre-le-rapprochement-de-la-junte-avec-la-russie_6227440_3212.html

7 Katz B, Jones SG, Doxsee C, Harrington N. Moscow’s Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies. Centre for Strategic & International Studies. Sept 2020, <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>; Walsh D. Putin’s Shadow Soldiers: How the Wagner Group Is Expanding in Africa. *The New York Times*. 2022 May 31. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/world/africa/wagner-group-africa.html>

8 Ghaedi M. Who are Russia’s mercenary Wagner Group?. *DW*. 2023 Jun 27. <https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-russias-mercenary-wagner-group/a-64429380>; Clarke CP. How Russia’s Wagner Group is Fuelling Terrorism in Africa. *Foreign Policy*. 2023 Jan 25. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/25/russia-wagner-group-africa-terrorism-mali-sudan-central-african-republic-prigozhin/>

expanded. Yet, significant gaps persist, with existing literature often failing to provide a thorough analysis of how Wagner would meet the legal criteria for such a designation, typically pointing instead to the group's violence and atrocities as justification.⁹ However, the perpetration of human rights abuses and atrocities is not exclusive to terrorist organisations and cannot in itself justify a terrorist designation. Moreover, much of the current research concentrates on immediate consequences for the group itself – such as impacts on its capacity to secure funding or recruit members, with little consideration for the broader, long-term impact of setting this precedent for other state-sponsored groups.

This report aims to address these gaps by providing an in-depth examination of both the legal grounds for and far-reaching implications of designating a state-sponsored proxy like the Wagner Group/Africa Corps.¹⁰ While it will consider both a potential terrorist designation in the EU and/or the US, it will primarily focus on the group's activities in Sub-Saharan Africa. It aims to deepen the understanding of the potential implications of designation related to the complex role and challenges posed by proxies in modern conflicts.

Justifications: Does Wagner Group/Africa Corps Meet the Criteria for Designation?

Current Sanctions Imposed on Wagner

At the time of writing, the Parliaments in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania¹¹ have already adopted a resolution calling for the designation of Wagner as a terrorist group, while the issue has been the subject of parliamentary debates in France and at the European Union level as well. These resolutions are not binding but reflect a growing consensus in several countries regarding the designation as a terrorist organisation. Before addressing whether Wagner could and should be designated as a terrorist group, it is helpful to look at the types of designations and sanctions that have been imposed on Wagner so far.

In the US, Wagner has already been designated since 2017 under numerous sanctions regimes, mainly in connection with its activities in Ukraine. In January 2023, Wagner was “re-designated under Executive Order (E.O.) 13581, as amended by E.O. 13863” as a transnational criminal organisation (TCO).¹² To be designated as a TCO, the criminal organisation must be engaged in a serious pattern of criminal activities in at least two foreign jurisdictions by one or more foreign persons. Considering the nefarious activities of Wagner, ranging from exploitation of natural resources, money laundering, to illicit financing in several countries in Africa, Wagner clearly meets the criteria for this designation.¹³ In addition, Wagner has also been re-designated for serious human rights abuses, in particular sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) crimes in the CAR and Mali, under E.O. 13667.¹⁴ In light of these designations, all property, assets, and

9 MacBride J. Making the Case for a Wagner Group Terrorist Designation. Geopolitical Monitor. 2022 Nov 10. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/wagner-group-the-case-for-a-terrorist-designation/>

10 ‘Wagner’ will be used thereafter to refer to the pre-Prigozhin’s death period, while ‘Africa Corps’ will be used to refer to the group since its restructuring following Prigozhin’s death. The term ‘Wagner/Africa Corps’ will be used when discussing elements that apply to both.

11 *Resolution on Designating the Private Military Company Wagner as a Terrorist Organisation. Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. Resolution XIV-1788 2023* (Seimas Of The Republic Of Lithuania) <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/ce881f32c26b1ed924fd817f8fa798e?jfwid=-kellxi6v>

12 US Department of the Treasury. Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization [Internet]. U.S. Department of the Treasury; 2023. Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization | U.S. Department of the Treasury

13 Gartenstein-Ross D, Chace-Donahue E, Clarke CP. Understanding the US Designation of the Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organisation. International Centre for Counter Terrorism. 2023 Jan 25. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/understanding-us-designation-wagner-group-transnational-criminal-organisation>

14 *Executive Order 13667 of May 12, 2014 Blocking Property of Certain Persons Contributing to the Conflict in the Central African Republic 2014* (Presidential Documents). <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/5836/download?inline>

interests of the designated persons and entities located in the US are blocked. Furthermore, all US citizens are no longer permitted to conduct any financial transactions with those designated entities and persons.

The EU has also sanctioned Wagner. In total, eleven persons and seven entities are listed by the European Council under different regimes. One person is listed under the Mali sanctions regime, two under the Ukraine regime, and the other eight persons and seven entities under the relatively new EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (EU GHRSR). This new sanctions regime was created in 2020 with the aim of addressing serious human rights violations, no matter where they have been committed. It recognises three layers of serious human rights violations: first and foremost this includes genocide and crimes against humanity, and then it considers, serious human rights violations such as torture, slavery, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention. The third level includes sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and violations of freedom of peaceful assembly, association, and freedom of expression as long as they are widespread, systematic, or otherwise serious. The list does not include war crimes. The sanctions can be imposed against natural persons or entities and can include state actors and not only target those responsible for the violations, but also those providing financial, technical, or material support, as well as persons who are associated with the previous groups or persons.¹⁵ The sanctions consist of an asset freeze and a travel ban, and EU citizens and companies may not finance or make funding available to those listed.

At the time of writing, the UK is, in fact, the only country that designated Wagner as a terrorist group under the Terrorism Act of 2000. This means that an organisation commits or participates in, prepares, promotes or encourages terrorism. To determine whether a group can be proscribed as a terrorist group the following criteria are taken into account: the nature and scale of activities, the threat it poses to the UK and to British nationals overseas, the footprint of the organisation in the UK, and finally the need to support the international community in the fight against terrorism. The explanatory memorandum states that Wagner acted as a proxy of the Russian government, but it does not address the implications of being a proxy for proscription. Instead, the memorandum focuses on the terrorist acts that Wagner has committed, in particular in Ukraine, to advance Russia's political cause.¹⁶ At the time that Wagner was proscribed, it was not part of Russia, implying that Wagner would have some agency in determining its own agenda. In addition to the freezing of assets, a range of proscription offences become applicable. Membership of a proscribed group is a criminal offence, as well as supporting, promoting, encouraging, knowingly arranging a meeting that supports the activities of a proscribed group, and wearing clothing or other signs in public.¹⁷

Assessing the Legal Grounds for the Wagner Group/Africa Corps' Designation in the EU and US

The EU can list individuals, entities, and groups that are involved in terrorist acts which are defined as intentional acts which may seriously damage a country or an international organisation when committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population, unduly compelling a government or international organisation to act or refrain from acting, or seriously destabilising the fundamental structure of a country or international organisation.

¹⁵ Council of the European Union. Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/1999 of 7 December 2020 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuse [Internet]. Official Journal of the European Union; 2020. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02020D1999-20230908>

¹⁶ Explanatory Memorandum To The Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2023 (UK Home Office) https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/1003/pdfs/ukxiem_20231003_en_001.pdf

¹⁷ See section 11 to 13 of the Terrorism Act 2000.

Infamous for its extreme brutality, Wagner has repeatedly been accused of grave human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, summary executions, and mass killings of civilians, in countries where the group operates.¹⁸ Wagner/Africa Corps has been “accused of using booby traps and land mines in violation of international law” in Libya.¹⁹ In CAR, UN experts have expressed serious concerns over “reports of mass summary executions, arbitrary detentions, torture during interrogations, forced disappearances, forced displacement of the civilian population, indiscriminate targeting of civilian facilities, violations of the right to health, and increasing attacks on humanitarian actors.”²⁰ Similarly, in Mali, Wagner has been accused of human rights violations, notably exemplified by the massacre of over 500 people by national armed forces and Wagner operatives in Moura, central Mali, in late March 2022²¹—standing out as “the worst single atrocity reported in Mali’s decade-long armed conflict.”²² An investigation conducted by the UN Human Rights Office revealed that summary executions, rapes and other forms of sexual violence, and acts of torture have been carried out during the five-day operation.²³ Many of the crimes Wagner has allegedly committed fall within the EU definition of a terrorist act, such as causing death and attacking the physical integrity of a person, kidnapping or causing destruction.²⁴

This pattern, evident under Prigozhin-led Wagner, has persisted with the group rebranding as the Africa Corps. The level of civilian targeting has been maintained, if not increased, since Prigozhin’s death, with ACLED data showing that the number of civilians killed by Wagner in CAR in the first half of 2024 exceeded the total for the previous year.²⁵ Since its rebranding, numerous allegations have surfaced against Malian forces and Russian operatives for rounding up civilians in villages and summarily executing them, including in January 2024 in Attara and Welingara.²⁶ Wagner operatives have moreover been accused of employing particularly brutal tactics, including torture and heinous methods. Between January and November 2024, at least three incidents allegedly involving Russian operatives were reported in Mali, where bodies were found mutilated, decapitated, dismembered, or burned.²⁷ Additionally, Wagner/Africa Corps’ targeting of civilians appears to follow ethnic lines, with groups such as the Fulani, Tuaregs, and Arabs in Mali,²⁸ and the Gbaya, Fulani, and Muslims in general in CAR,²⁹ being disproportionately affected. SGBV also seems to be a significant aspect of the group’s modus operandi, with accusations of mass rapes and sexual violence during operations in CAR, and for instance, a

18 Ghaedi M. Who are Russia’s mercenary Wagner Group? DW. 2023 Jun 27. <https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-russias-mercenary-wagner-group/a-64429380>; Broekaert C, Clarke CP. Wagner’s Brand Was Built on Extreme Violence. Foreign Policy. 2023 Aug 24. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/24/prigozhin-dead-plane-crash-russia-wagner-group-putin-violence/>

19 Faulkner C. Undermining Democracy and Exploiting Clients: The Wagner Group’s Nefarious Activities in Africa. CTC Sentinel. Volume 15. 2022 Jun 6. p.30. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CTC-SENTINEL-062022.pdf>; Human Rights Watch. Libya: Russia’s Wagner Group Set Landmines Near Tripoli. 2022 May 31. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/31/libya-russias-wagner-group-set-landmines-near-tripoli>

20 OHCHR. CAR: Experts alarmed by government’s use of ‘Russian trainers’, close contacts with UN peacekeepers. 2021 Mar 31. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/03/car-experts-alarmed-governments-use-russian-trainers-close-contacts-un?LangID=E&NewsID=26961>

21 OHCHR. Malian troops, foreign military personnel killed over 500 people during military operation in Moura in March 2022 – UN human rights report. 2023 May 12. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/malian-troops-foreign-military-personnel-killed-over-500-people-during>

22 Human Rights Watch. Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers. 2022 Apr 5. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>

23 OHCHR. Rapport sur les événements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022. 2023 May. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/mali/20230512-Moura-Report.pdf>

24 Council Common Position of 27 December 2001 on the application of specific measures to combat terrorism (2001/931/CFSP) [Internet]. Official Journal of the European Union; 2001. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02001E0931-20240221>

25 Serwat L, Nsaibia H. Q&A: The Wagner Group’s new life after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2024 Aug 21.

26 Human Rights Watch. Mali : Army, Wagner Group Atrocities Against Civilians. 2024 Mar 28. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/mali-army-wagner-group-atrocities-against-civilians>

27 Baché D. L’armée malienne et le groupe Wagner exécutent 25 personnes à Welingara. RFI. 2024 Jan 30. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20240130-l-arm%C3%A9e-malienne-et-le-groupe-wagner-ex%C3%A9cutent-25-personnes-%C3%A0-welingara>; Baché D. Mali: six bergers exécutés par Wagner près de Nara, à la frontière avec la Mauritanie. RFI. 2024 Nov 8. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20241108-mali-six-bergers-ex%C3%A9cut%C3%A9s-par-wagner-pr%C3%A8s-de-nara-%C3%A0-la-fronti%C3%A8re-avec-la-mauritanie>; Baché D. Mali: l’armée et Wagner exécutent sept civils à Lerneb, dans la région de Tombouctou. RFI. 2024 Nov 13. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20241113-mali-l-arm%C3%A9e-et-wagner-ex%C3%A9cutent-sept-civils-%C3%A0-lerneb-dans-la-r%C3%A9gion-de-tombouctou>

28 Serwat L, Nsaibia H, Gurcov N. Moving out of the shadows: shifts in Wagner Group operations around the world. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2023. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ACLED_Report_Shifts-in-Wagner-Group-Operations-Around-the-World_2023.pdf

29 The Sentry. Architects of terror: The Wagner Group’s blueprint for state capture in the Central African Republic. June 2023. <https://thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ArchitectsTerror-TheSentry-June2023.pdf>

video depicting Wagner's operatives in Mali threatening a woman to strip her naked unless she provides information about insurgents.³⁰ Furthermore, Wagner has reportedly been implicated in pillaging, including "large-scale, organised cattle theft" in Mali³¹ and the systematic looting of "gold, livestock, home goods and appliances, and motorcycles" in CAR.³²

Seriously Intimidate a Population

For these acts to be qualified as terrorist acts, they must be committed with the aim to seriously intimidate a population, to compel a government or an international organisation to act (or refrain from acting), or to seriously destabilise or destroy fundamental structures of a country. Wagner/Africa Corps' brutal tactics have instilled fear among local populations, with, for instance, research into the group's activities in Mali indicating that Russian operatives "have shifted the balance of fear," leaving civilians "more scared of being arrested or killed by Wagner than jihadist and other armed groups."³³ While one may argue that such intimidation is an incidental consequence of particularly abusive CT operations, some evidence suggests it might rather be the result of a deliberate strategy. Investigations of abuses committed by the group in Mali highlighted its "deliberate cruelty against Malian civilians."³⁴ Observers, moreover, point to tactics that, if confirmed, would leave little doubt as to their aim to terrorise populations, such as the reported beheading of five individuals whose heads were later displayed on sticks in the centre of a Malian village.³⁵ Wagner operatives have filmed and disseminated online propaganda showcasing atrocities committed by the group, a tactic that is deliberately intended to amplify fear.³⁶ Spreading such fear might serve several objectives. Research argues that the group's "campaigns of terror have served as psychological warfare" to submit populations to its authority, with Russian commanders in CAR reportedly justifying the killings of women and children as a necessity "to terrorize the other rebels, who will be afraid to settle in the villages."³⁷ There might be an even more cynical objective behind the group's brutality, with Wagner reportedly using horrific violence to "suppress populations living in mining areas and enforce a de facto monopoly in the mining sector."³⁸ Local testimonies confirm systematic abuses aimed "to sow terror" and forcibly displace artisanal miners and residents out of gold and diamond-rich areas to eliminate any competition.³⁹ Similar patterns were reported in relation to Wagner's involvement in the timber industry in CAR. All these elements combined suggest that Wagner/Africa Corps is indeed committing terrorist acts to intentionally intimidate populations.

30 Triebert C, Peltier E, Mellen R, Varghese S. How Wagner's ruthless image crumbled in Mali. The New York Times. 2024 Nov 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/01/world/africa/russia-wagner-mercenaries-mali.html>

31 Serwat L, Nsaibia H, Gurcov N. Moving out of the shadows: shifts in Wagner Group operations around the world. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2023. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ACLED_Report_Shifts-in-Wagner-Group-Operations-Around-the-World_2023.pdf

32 The Sentry. Architects of terror: The Wagner Group's blueprint for state capture in the Central African Republic. June 2023. <https://thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ArchitectsTerror-TheSentry-June2023.pdf>

33 Triebert C, Peltier E, Mellen R, Varghese S. How Wagner's ruthless image crumbled in Mali. The New York Times. 2024 Nov 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/01/world/africa/russia-wagner-mercenaries-mali.html>

34 Human Rights Watch. Mali : Army, Wagner Group Atrocities Against Civilians. 2024 Mar 28. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/mali-army-wagner-group-atrocities-against-civilians>

35 Serwat L, Nsaibia H. Q&A: The Wagner Group's new life after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2024 Aug 21.

36 Triebert C, Peltier E, Mellen R, Varghese S. How Wagner's ruthless image crumbled in Mali. The New York Times. 2024 Nov 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/01/world/africa/russia-wagner-mercenaries-mali.html>; Freeman L. War Crimes for Fun and Profit. Lawfare. 2025 Jun 23. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/war-crimes-for-fun-and-profit>

37 The Sentry. Architects of terror: The Wagner Group's blueprint for state capture in the Central African Republic. June 2023. <https://thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ArchitectsTerror-TheSentry-June2023.pdf>

38 Ibid.

39 Patta D, Carter S. Russia's Wagner Group accused of using rape and mass-murder to control an African gold mining town. CBS News. 2023 May 25. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-wagner-group-central-african-republic-bambari-massacre-rape-mass-murder/>; African Defense Forum. Russia's hunger for gold leads to violence in the CAR. 2022 Apr 19. <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/04/russias-hunger-for-gold-leads-to-violence-in-the-car/>; Obaji P. 'We now face guns': Small-scale miners fear Wagner's advances in CAR. 2024 Jul 10. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/7/10/we-now-face-guns-small-scale-miners-fear-wagners-advances-in-car>

Compel a Government or International Institute to Act or Refrain from Acting

Wagner has moreover engaged in a wide spectrum of activities beyond military training and support,⁴⁰ and notably has a history of conducting influence operations, including shaping public opinion through online propaganda and (dis-)information campaigns. On the African continent, this has notably consisted of advancing anti-West narratives, particularly anti-French rhetoric. While tensions between African states and their Western partners often pre-dated Wagner's deployment, its operations have, in many instances, sought to exacerbate tensions and diplomatic ruptures, as seen in Mali and CAR. For instance, in CAR, Wagner's online propaganda "has primarily focused on the 2020 elections to ensure the reelection of Touadéra, Russia's ally; praised Russian military and diplomatic power and Touadéra's actions; criticized France's neocolonial system and fueled anti-French sentiment; and targeted anyone considered pro-West with threats and intimidation."⁴¹ Influence operations can also include inciting violence offline, with alleged mercenaries caught throwing Molotov cocktails into a French-owned brewery in March 2023.⁴² The group's role in stoking diplomatic rifts with Western partners is illustrated by incidents such as the attempted framing of French forces in Mali, where Wagner proxies were exposed for staging fake evidence of mass graves near a former French military base in Gossi in April 2022.⁴³ Beyond its focus on undermining Western influence, Wagner has moreover exerted political pressure to further Russia's interests in host countries across different industrial sectors. For instance, in CAR, "a part of its efforts to organize a monopoly in the mining sector, Wagner has also attempted to influence the revision of mining legislation so that the legal framework would serve its own economic interests, particularly its control over production."⁴⁴ While this might be aimed at securing funds, some argue that the group's operations in CAR has followed "a well-defined political and ideological framework that consists of restoring a Russian sphere of influence on the African continent."⁴⁵

Seriously Destabilise or Destroy Institutions

Hiring proxies can threaten national sovereignty in third states, as these groups can evolve into entities with considerable influence, effectively becoming "a state within the state."⁴⁶ Some of Wagner's actions could, to a certain extent, be considered as endangering state institutions, including undermining democracy and sovereignty.

The most telling example is likely CAR, where the group reportedly "has perfected a blueprint for state capture", allowing CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and his inner circle, along with Wagner, "to hijack CAR's state institutions."⁴⁷ While the group has been able to "infiltrate CAR's military chain of command," Wagner seemed to be in control of the national forces, particularly when operating outside of the capital, Bangui. However, Wagner's grip on state institutions

40 Katz B, Jones SG, Doxsee C, Harrington N. Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies. Centre for Strategic & International Studies. Sep 2020. <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>

41 The Sentry. Architects of terror: The Wagner Group's blueprint for state capture in the Central African Republic. June 2023. <https://thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ArchitectsTerror-TheSentry-June2023.pdf>

42 Serwat L, Nsaibia H, Gurcov N. Moving out of the shadows: shifts in Wagner Group operations around the world. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2023. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ACLED_Report_Shifts-in-Wagner-Group-Operations-Around-the-World_2023.pdf

43 Doxsee C, Thompson J. Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali. CSIS. 2022 May 11. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>; Serwat L, Nsaibia H, Gurcov N. Moving out of the shadows: shifts in Wagner Group operations around the world. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2023. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ACLED_Report_Shifts-in-Wagner-Group-Operations-Around-the-World_2023.pdf

44 The Sentry. Architects of terror: The Wagner Group's blueprint for state capture in the Central African Republic. 2023 Jun. <https://thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ArchitectsTerror-TheSentry-June2023.pdf>

45 Ibid.

46 Cascas A, Koubakin R. Mercenary armies in Africa. Deutsche Welle. 2022 Apr 15. Available from: <https://www.dw.com/en/the-rise-of-mercenary-armies-in-africa/a-61485270>

47 The Sentry. Architects of terror: The Wagner Group's blueprint for state capture in the Central African Republic. June 2023. <https://thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ArchitectsTerror-TheSentry-June2023.pdf>

extends beyond the military sphere.⁴⁸ The group has moreover infiltrated the country's economic and political system, as illustrated by the appointment of a former GRU official, Valery Zakharov, later replaced by Vitali Perfilev, and more recently by Denis Vladimirovich Pavlov, as CAR's national security advisor.⁴⁹ In parallel, politicians expressing opposition to Wagner's presence have been ousted, such as the former foreign minister Charles-Armel Doubane,⁵⁰ and replaced by political figures more supportive of Russia. Such practices have enabled the group to "gain influence over the country's decision-making processes,"⁵¹ contributing to the maintenance of an authoritarian leader and undermining democracy.⁵² Wagner's destabilisation effect may extend beyond CAR. For instance, leaked US intelligence documents revealed an attempt by Wagner to foment a rebellion in Chad by recruiting and training rebels to conduct a coup to overthrow Chadian President Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno in February 2023.⁵³ The group moreover has a history of interference in elections, such as in the 2016 US presidential elections and 2018 midterm elections, the 2018 Madagascar presidential elections, and the 2020 re-election of Taoudéra in CAR.⁵⁴

Ultimately, whether Wagner/Africa Corps' activities might meet the substantive criteria to be listed as a terrorist group depends on how their activities are interpreted. Clearly, the type of brutal acts that Wagner commits in several countries qualify as terrorist acts, but their aims are less clear. There seems to be compelling evidence indicating that the terrorist acts were intentionally committed to spread fear among the civilian population. However, the group's ability to influence state actions or its destabilising effects are not exclusively – nor always directly – tied to acts of violence committed by the group. Many of these objectives are achieved through influence operations, such as manipulating public opinion to fuel anti-West sentiments or infiltrating state institutions. Technically, most of these activities do not fall within the list of terrorist acts of the EU Directive, but it is plausible they are being committed with the intent to compel a government or international organisation to act, refrain from acting, or destabilise a government. To be listed, only one of the aims needs to be met. This means that if the violent acts are committed with the intention of spreading fear among the population, the substantive criteria are met.

In addition to the substantive criteria for listing, the procedural criteria for listing need to be met. The procedure of listing dictates that this can only be based on a decision of a competent authority – in general, a judicial authority – in one of the member states or third countries concerning investigations or prosecution of terrorist offences. In practice, this would mean that a conviction of Wagner for terrorist offences could be used to initiate a listing procedure in the EU. Only a few convictions of individuals affiliated with Wagner outside of Ukraine have been convicted. In November 2024, Piotr K. was arrested in the UK for wearing combat clothing associated with Wagner in public admitted to fighting for Wagner in Ukraine and was convicted to a 2.5 year

48 Ibid.

49 Serwat L, Nsaibia H, Gurcov N. Moving out of the shadows: shifts in Wagner Group operations around the world. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2023. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ACLED_Report_Shifts-in-Wagner-Group-Operations-Around-the-World_2023.pdf; Mohamedou K. The Wagner Group, Russia's foreign policy and Sub-Saharan Africa. Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). Geneva Paper 32/24. 2024 Mar. p.24.

50 Siegle J. Russia in Africa – Undermining democracy through elite capture. Democracy in Africa. 2021. <https://democracyin africa.org/russia-in-africa-undermining-democracy-through-elite-capture/>

51 Mohamedou K. The Wagner Group, Russia's foreign policy and Sub-Saharan Africa. Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). Geneva Paper 32/24. 2024 Mar. p.25. <https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/wagner-group-russias-foreign-policy-and-sub-saharan-africa>

52 Ewoker C, Armstrong K. Russian troops arrive in Niger as military agreement begins. BBC. 2024 Apr 12. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68796359>

53 Chason R. As Russians plot against Chad, concerns mount over important U.S. ally. The Washington Post. 2023 Apr 24. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/23/chad-wagner-russia-leaked-documents/>

54 Walsh D. Putin's Shadow Soldiers: How the Wagner Group Is Expanding in Africa. The New York Times. 2022 May 31. <https://www.ny-times.com/2022/05/31/world/africa/wagner-group-africa.html>; Bowen AS. Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC). Congressional Research Service (CRS). 2023 Mar 13. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF12344.pdf>; Faguy A. Where Does Wagner Get Its Money? How Russia's Mercenaries-Turned-Rebels Earned Millions From Contracts And Mining Deals. Forbes. 2023 Jun 25. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anafaguy/2023/06/25/where-does-wagner-get-its-money-how-russias-mercenaries-turned-rebels-earned-millions-from-contracts-and-mining-deals/?sh=7502a803cf9e>; Mehra T, Demuyneck M. Raising the stakes against the Wagner Group: From mercenaries to a designated terrorist group? International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. 2023 Jan 17. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/raising-stakes-against-wagner-group-mercenaries-designated-terrorist-group>

prison sentence for being a member of Wagner after it has been proscribed as a terrorist group.⁵⁵ Under the new National Security Act of 2023 several men in the UK have now been convicted for arson as part of plot to sabotage.⁵⁶ In Norway an ex-member of Wagner was convicted in April 2023 and was sentenced to 14 days in jail for disorderly conduct and for carrying an air gun in a public place, but not on terrorism charges.⁵⁷ More recently, in February 2025 two Russians were convicted to 5.5 years prison sentence by Polish court for espionage and the recruitment of mercenaries for Wagner.⁵⁸ More noteworthy is the fact that a Russian member of Wagner has been convicted to life imprisonment for the first time for war crimes in Finland in March 2025.⁵⁹ After initiating the listing procedure, the decision to list must be approved by all EU members. In the US, a group can be designated if it is a foreign organisation, it engages in terrorist activity and threatens the security of US nationals or the national security, which includes national defence, foreign relations, or the economic interests of the US.⁶⁰ Terrorist activities include a wide range of mainly violent offences such as killing, hijacking and the use of explosives with the intent to harm persons or property. The criteria are broad, although mainly non-violent activities carried out by Wagner/Africa Corps in creating an anti-Western sentiment can be perceived as harming US interests. The US-based private military company (PMC) Bancroft Global Development, which has been engaged in training the Somali army, has secured a small contract with CAR in an attempt to “diversify” security relations.⁶¹ This could be seen as an attempt by the US to challenge Wagner and Russia’s influence in the country.

(Dis)Advantages of Listing the Wagner Group/Africa Corps

Advantages of Designation

Many scholars and experts believe that designating Wagner as a terrorist organisation is the appropriate response to deal with the group’s nefarious activities and widespread human rights violations. Regardless of whether Wagner meets the substantive and procedural criteria, this section will address some of the advantages of designating Wagner as a terrorist group.

One of the most compelling reasons to designate Wagner as a terrorist organisation is that such a listing has far-reaching consequences. Indeed, a designation in the US could trigger material support to terrorism prosecutions. The scope of providing material support to terrorism is a very broad offence and would include a person who supplies support to designated groups with the knowledge of the intended use. In addition, this offence has extraterritorial jurisdiction, and thus any person or company, even outside the US, that provides support – whether financial services, lodging, transport, logistics, communication, or documents – to a designated terrorist organisation commits a criminal offence.⁶² While in the EU, a terrorist designation will not lead

55 CPS. News Terrorism [Internet]. 2024 Nov 1. Wagner Group supporter jailed for terrorist offences. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/wagner-group-supporter-jailed-terrorist-offences>

56 How the CPS used new National Security Act legislation to prosecute the plot to sabotage Ukrainian aid warehouses on UK soil, 2025 Jul 8. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/how-cps-used-new-national-security-act-legislation-prosecute-plot-sabotage-ukrainian-aid>

57 Asylum-seeking ex-member of Wagner Group sentenced in Norway. AP News. 2023 Apr 27. <https://apnews.com/article/wagner-group-russia-norway-bar-brawl-c0d17165d1d81a97b8d16f747c6f44ce>

58 Polish court convicts two Russians of spying, Wagner Group recruitment. Polskiego Radio. 2025 Feb 14. <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/artykul/3484503,polish-court-convicts-two-russians-of-spying-wagner-group-recruitment>

59 Fatima Z. Russian sentenced to life for war crimes in Ukraine. BBC News. 2025 Mar 14. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy83g975vyko>

60 US Department of State. Foreign Terrorist Organizations: Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations [Internet]. Bureau of Counterterrorism. <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>

61 Gutiérrez O. US security company challenges Wagner group’s hegemony in its African stronghold. El País. 2024 Mar 20. <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-03-20/us-security-company-challenges-wagner-groups-hegemony-in-its-african-stronghold.html>

62 Doyles C. Terrorist Material Support: An Overview of 18 U.S.C. § 2339A and § 2339B [Internet]. Congressional Research Service. 2023. R41333. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41333>

to additional or different sanctions, a compelling reason to list Wagner is that it would lead to increased law enforcement and judicial cooperation. If a person or entity is only listed at the national level, it will be more difficult to obtain and share relevant information from a member state that has not designated the organisation.

Another argument put forward by supporters of Wagner's designation is that listing could send a strong message to foreign – non-Russian – entities and persons to refrain from supporting Wagner. Research advocating in favour of Wagner's designation emphasises the additional pressure it would put on third countries considering to engage Wagner's services to avoid any ties with a group labelled as a terrorist entity. It would moreover push those already in business with the group to reconsider their ties with Wagner. This sends a strong message which would deter individuals' and states' affiliation to the group, weakening its ability to maintain its current contracts with African states, to secure new ones, and to attract members.⁶³ However, this would only affect the Wagner-affiliated individuals or their counterparts abroad who want to conduct business with the West.

In the US, unlike in the EU, states can be designated for sponsoring terrorism. Currently, four countries are listed: Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. The sanctions are different from an FTO designation and basically restrict foreign assistance, trade and defence with designated countries. These designations are often shaped by (geo)political considerations, as exemplified by the case of Pakistan. Despite its well-documented ties to various terrorist organisations, the country is not listed as a state sponsor of terrorism – likely due to its strategic importance in regional counter-terrorism efforts and the necessity of maintaining diplomatic relations. Similarly, Sudan was removed from the state sponsor list after it agreed to normalise its relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords. Similar dynamics may influence deliberations around Wagner. By designating Wagner as an FTO, rather than designating Russia as a country, the US would still be able to keep the diplomatic channels open with Russia. Yet, given Wagner's strategic importance to Russia's foreign interests, designating the group might already seriously damage relations with Moscow. Another possibility is to consider designating Wagner-affiliated states for sponsoring terrorism. Looking at the criteria mentioned for listing states for sponsoring terrorism, it would mean that these countries are supporting international terrorism, thus acts of terrorism on foreign soil, provide training, financial support or safe harbour for terrorists. As several of the countries that are engaging with Wagner/Africa Corps are carrying out counter-terrorism operations against designated terrorist groups, it would be difficult to argue that they are providing support, training or safe harbour to terrorists, especially if Wagner/Africa Corps is not considered a terrorist organisation.

Another argument is that Wagner would not be the first state-sponsored group to be designated as a terrorist organisation. The US has designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Some argue that state-backed groups that "act as a de facto governing authority" are already listed, such as Hamas by the US and the EU, and Hezbollah by the US and its military wing by the EU. Some even argue that the fact that such actors are state-sponsored should "not exonerate their behaviour."⁶⁴ Proponents of the group's designation moreover argue that "governments have sanctioned PMCs and militias as terrorist groups," referring for instance to the designation by the US of United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), which reportedly "made it more difficult for parts to the Colombian state to maintain a relationship with the group."⁶⁵

63 Petrila C., Waielewski P. The Case for Designating Wagner Group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization Is Still Compelling. Lawfare [Internet]. 2023 Aug 15. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/case-designating-wagner-group-foreign-terrorist-organization-still-compelling>; Blazakis J. Written evidence submitted by Jason Blazakis (WGN0023) [Internet]. Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, California Director, Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism. 2022 Oct. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/112217/pdf/>; Blazakis J M. Sanctions: Bringing the Wagner Group and State Proxies into the CTF Fold [Internet]. The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies. 2023.

64 Currie I, Sussex M. It's time Australia branded Russia's Wagner Group a terrorist organisation: A record of abuses in conflicts from Ukraine to Africa makes designating the Russian group the right choice. The Lowy Institute. 2023 May 23. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/it-s-time-australia-branded-russia-s-wagner-group-terrorist-organisation>

65 Blazakis J. Written evidence submitted by Jason Blazakis (WGN0023) [Internet]. Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, California Director, Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism. 2022 Oct. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/112217/pdf/>

Disadvantages of Designation

The most obvious reason for not designating Wagner in Europe is that it may be time-consuming. The process of listing a group within the EU is consensus-based. This means that all 27 countries must agree; there is a risk that Hungary may not agree, considering the close ties between Orbán and Putin.⁶⁶ Furthermore, designating would not lead to additional measures or offences than those already imposed on Wagner.

Another argument is that listing Wagner in the EU is “diluting” the terrorist list as it is a very different type of organisation than ISIL or AL-Qaeda.⁶⁷ The list is relatively short in the EU and contains 22 organisations, whereas the UK has listed 81 groups, and the United States 67 organisations as of June 2025. For the first time, the EU listed a far-right group, the Base, in July 2024, which was previously only listed in a few countries like Australia, Canada, and the UK.⁶⁸ All groups on the EU list maintain their own political agenda, with perhaps the Directorate for Internal Security of the Iranian Ministry for Intelligence and Security as exception. It remains unclear whether Wagner, after the rebranding of the group, is driven by its own political agenda rather than merely financial gains or advancing Russian state objectives. The group was already closely linked to the Kremlin before, but operating with a degree of autonomy and able to blend state interest with its own financial interests,⁶⁹ the newly rebranded Africa Corps seems to be more closely aligned with Russia’s foreign policy goals. The non-violent activities of Wagner in Africa, such as spreading disinformation campaigns, influencing elections and instigating anti-Western sentiment, are considered to be part of Russia’s policy. Moreover, unlike most designated terrorist groups, Wagner does not have a manifesto or declaration which articulates its political agenda.

A potential risk of labelling Wagner as a terrorist organisation is that it may conflate the applicable legal framework and “obscure” the type of crimes they have committed. As noted earlier, Wagner has an extensive track record of human rights violations in Mali, CAR and Sudan, often in the context of an armed conflict. Even after the rebranding, allegations of mass killings, arbitrary executions and arrests of civilians by both government armed forces and Wagner continue to deteriorate the security situation in several countries. Many of these underlying crimes could qualify as war crimes or as crimes against humanity, provided that all the elements of the crime are met. In addition to a mental element (*mens rea*) referring to intent, and a material element (*actus reus*) referring to underlying criminal act that has been committed, the contextual element needs to be met. For war crimes, this means that the underlying criminal act needs to have a nexus with an armed conflict. For crimes against humanity, the contextual element is that the underlying criminal acts are part of widespread or systematic attacks. While prosecuting terrorism cumulatively with war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide, also referred to as core international crimes, has several advantages – such as being able to prosecute for certain preparatory acts or for membership in a terrorist group,⁷⁰ the tendency is to solely focus on terrorism charges. In most countries that have criminalised core international crimes, the maximum penalties for core international crimes tend to be higher to reflect the seriousness of these crimes, which are considered to be of concern to the international community. International humanitarian law (IHL) is a body of law that regulates the means and methods of warfare, which

66 Johnson K. How Orbán Became Putin’s Pawn: Among all of Russia’s useful idiots, few have sought to make themselves more useful than the Hungarian prime minister. *Foreign Policy*. 2024 Jul 11. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/11/orban-putin-hungary-russia-war-politics-eu/>

67 Blazakis J M. Sanctions: Bringing the Wagner Group and State Proxies into the CTF Fold [Internet]. The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies. 2023. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e399e8c6e9872149fc4a041/t/6419cd244bc83c210fff97a2/1679412517125/CRAAFT_RB12_final-web.pdf

68 Craanen A. Breaking Ground: The EU’s First Far-Right Designation of ‘The Base’ and Its Impact on Online Content. *Vox-Pol*. 2024 Aug 2. <https://voxpoleu/breaking-ground-the-eus-first-far-right-designation-of-the-base-and-its-impact-on-online-content/>

69 TV5 Monde, AFP. Quel avenir pour la présence de Wagner en Afrique ? 2023 Jul 25. <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/quel-avenir-pour-la-presence-de-wagner-en-afrique-2660399>

70 Saul B. From conflict to complementarity: Reconciling international counterterrorism law and international humanitarian law. *IRCC*. 2022; No. 916-917. <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/from-conflict-to-complementarity-916>

seeks to limit the effects of war. IHL is applicable to both parties involved in an armed conflict, regardless of who started the war or violates IHL. Under IHL, not all conduct is unlawful, whereas under counter-terrorism laws, all acts of violence are unlawful. For example, under IHL, targeting a military objective by a non-state armed group is lawful, even if it is designated as a terrorist group. The risk of applying terrorism legal frameworks is that lawful conduct under IHL becomes unlawful, thus removing the incentive of the parties – in this case Wagner – to respect IHL. While the likelihood that Wagner/Africa Corps would abide by IHL is minimal in any case, this is no justification to ignore IHL or refrain from prosecuting the group for war crimes.

Regardless of whether these acts will be labelled as terrorist acts or as international crimes, the reality is that the African countries where the crimes are being committed have no intention of holding Wagner accountable. In many cases, these armed forces were complicit or facilitated these crimes as noted above in the example of CAR, and illustrated by the reported involvement of a Central African gendarme in the killing of three journalists investigating Wagner's activities in the country in 2018.⁷¹ If Wagner is not being held accountable, there is little to no incentive to disengage from their brutal patterns of violence, nor for other states to use proxies similar to Wagner. Furthermore, in several African countries, the criminal justice systems are compromised, not functioning, or even collapsed. After the military coup in Sudan in 2019, the judiciary has been left crippled. Labelling the crimes solely as terrorism may deflect the potential pathways to prosecution for serious human rights violations. Other countries that have criminalised core international crimes could prosecute Wagner for crimes that have been committed based on universal jurisdiction.

Furthermore, a key argument for refraining from designation in Europe is that Wagner is state-sponsored and also closely tied to the effectiveness of designation. Contrary to common arguments suggesting that designating Wagner as a terrorist group would significantly weaken its capacities to secure funding, recruit members, and deter states from engaging with the organisation, the actual impact remains uncertain, particularly due to state-sponsorship. While it goes beyond the scope of this paper to provide a theoretical framework to assess the level of state-sponsorship, instead, three factors will be addressed: the degree of state influence over the organisation's command structure, financing, and recruitment.

With respect to the Russian state influence's on the group's command structure, as a result of Prigozhin's death, Wagner was restructured and its activities in Africa were rebranded as the Africa Corps (AC) in late 2023, which now operates under the direct control of the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) and military intelligence (GRU).⁷² Although not formally part of the Russian armed forces, and despite this transition having unfolded unevenly across countries, its operations are increasingly integrated into the state's structure. The head of the group is none other than General Andrei Averyanov, Deputy Chief of the GRU. In order to retain the benefits that a structure like Wagner brought to the Russian state, providing it with "a low-cost strategy to increase its foothold in Africa,"⁷³ while avoiding risks of a future mutiny, it appears that Russia has reportedly strengthened its control over the group. In Mali, for instance, although the structure appears largely unchanged, with the incumbent commander-in-chief Ivan Maslov reportedly still in charge, he now operates under greater oversight from Russian military intelligence.⁷⁴ It is

71 Lister T, Shukla S. Murdered journalists were tracked by police with shadowy Russian links, evidence shows. CNN. 2019 Jan 10. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/10/africa/russian-journalists-car-ambush-intl>

72 Bryjka F, Czerep J. Africa Corps—A new iteration of Russia's old military presence in Africa. Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) Report. 2024 May. https://www.pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20Africa%20Corps_.pdf; Serwat L, Nsaibia H. Q&A: The Wagner Group's new life after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2024 Aug 21. <https://acleddata.com/2024/08/21/qa-the-wagner-groups-new-life-after-the-death-of-yevgeny-prigozhin/>

73 Minde N. Russia's Africa Corps – more than old wine in a new bottle. Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Today. 2024 Mar 7. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/russias-africa-corps-more-than-old-wine-in-a-new-bottle>

74 Serwat L, Nsaibia H. Q&A: The Wagner Group's new life after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). 2024 Aug 21.

particularly revealing that, on the Russian social media platform VK, the description of the account 'Afrika Korps' created in December 2023 presents the group as the "official group of the African Corps of the Russian Defense Ministry."⁷⁵ Additionally, it is interesting to note that the non-military aspects of Wagner's operations, including its propaganda and cultural activities, have also been restructured under separate entities, overseen by different Russian institutions, including the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Federal Security Service (FSB).⁷⁶ The division and redistribution of these various functions among Russian state institutions aims to strengthen the state's grip on its activities and prevent the concentration of power which Wagner once enjoyed under Prigozhin's leadership.

As regards financing, an examination of Wagner's primary funding sources suggests that a designation may have limited influence on the group's revenue streams. Under Prigozhin's leadership, Wagner received substantial funding from the Russian state, both directly and through lucrative public contracts awarded to Prigozhin-linked companies. These contracts reportedly amounted to over 10 billion dollars between 2014 and 2023.⁷⁷ Following Wagner's aborted rebellion in late June 2023, President Vladimir Putin publicly admitted that the Russian state fully financed the group, revealing that "the maintenance of the entire Wagner Group was fully provided for by the state."⁷⁸ Between May 2022 and May 2023, Wagner allegedly received nearly one billion dollars in public funds to cover fighters' wages and compensation.⁷⁹ In addition to direct state funding, Wagner has benefited from payments from states where it operates, as well as in-kind compensation through concessions to exploit natural resources. The group is notably believed to have benefited from the profit generated from oil and gas fields in Syria,⁸⁰ from diamond⁸¹ and gold mining,⁸² and forestry concessions in CAR,⁸³ as well as from gold mining in Sudan.⁸⁴ Although obtaining precise figures remains challenging, a *Financial Times* investigation estimates that Wagner's holdings in natural resources in the Middle East and Africa might have generated up to 250 million dollars between 2018 and 2021.⁸⁵ The Africa Corps seems to engage in similar activities, notably natural resources exploitation, although with a longer-term vision and greater

75 Akwei E, Knight T. Africa Corps: Russia's new force in Africa. African Digital Democracy Observatory. 2024 Apr 24. <https://disinfo.africa/africa-corps-la-nouvelle-force-de-la-russie-en-afrique-eda6586987ce>

76 Bryjka F, Czerep J. Africa Corps—A new iteration of Russia's old military presence in Africa. Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) Report. 2024 May.

77 Faguy A. Where Does Wagner Get Its Money? How Russia's Mercenaries-Turned-Rebels Earned Millions From Contracts And Mining Deals. *Forbes*. 2023 Jun 25. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anafaguy/2023/06/25/where-does-wagner-get-its-money-how-russias-mercenaries-turned-rebels-earned-millions-from-contracts-and-mining-deals/?sh=7502a803cf9e>; Bellinccat. Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed. 2020 Aug 14. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>; Watling J, Danylyuk OV, Reynolds N. The threat from Russia's unconventional warfare beyond Ukraine, 2022-24. Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Special Report. 2024 Feb. p.15. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>

78 Camut N. Putin admits Kremlin gave Wagner nearly \$1 billion in the past year. *Politico*. 2023 Jun 27. <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-yevgeny-prigozhin-russia-kremlin-gave-wagner-group-nearly-1-billion-in-the-past-year/>

79 Watling J, Danylyuk OV, Reynolds N. The threat from Russia's unconventional warfare beyond Ukraine, 2022-24. Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Special Report. 2024 Feb. p.15. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>; Camut N. Putin admits Kremlin gave Wagner nearly \$1 billion in the past year. *Politico*. 2023 Jun 27. <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-yevgeny-prigozhin-russia-kremlin-gave-wagner-group-nearly-1-billion-in-the-past-year/>

80 Faguy A. Where Does Wagner Get Its Money? How Russia's Mercenaries-Turned-Rebels Earned Millions From Contracts And Mining Deals. *Forbes*. 2023 Jun 25. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anafaguy/2023/06/25/where-does-wagner-get-its-money-how-russias-mercenaries-turned-rebels-earned-millions-from-contracts-and-mining-deals/?sh=7502a803cf9e>

81 Diamville, a company reportedly linked to Wagner, is alleged to "exported 132,000 euros of diamonds to Belgium in November 2022," evading Russia's sanctions by trading with shell companies located in Dubai. See Blazakis J, Glick K, Shepard A. The Changing Face of the Wagner Group: From Military Adventurism to Venture Capitalism. The Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism. 2023 Mar. https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/sites/www.middlebury.edu.institute/files/2023-03/The-Changing_Face_of_the-Wagner_Group_0.pdf?fv=d44yuUA0

82 The Wagner-affiliated company "Midas Resources" has reportedly been awarded contracts to explore gold mines, particularly the Ndassima mine, previously exploited by the Canadian company Axmin. See Blazakis J, Glick K, Shepard A. The Changing Face of the Wagner Group: From Military Adventurism to Venture Capitalism. The Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism. 2023 Mar. https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/sites/www.middlebury.edu.institute/files/2023-03/The-Changing_Face_of_the-Wagner_Group_0.pdf?fv=d44yuUA0

83 Faguy A. Where Does Wagner Get Its Money? How Russia's Mercenaries-Turned-Rebels Earned Millions From Contracts And Mining Deals. *Forbes*. 2023 Jun 25. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anafaguy/2023/06/25/where-does-wagner-get-its-money-how-russias-mercenaries-turned-rebels-earned-millions-from-contracts-and-mining-deals/?sh=7502a803cf9e>

84 Ibid.

85 Johnson M. Wagner leader generated \$250mn from sanctioned empire: Yevgeny Prigozhin's natural resources interests outside Russia barely hit by years of western sanctions. *Financial Times*. 2023 Feb 21. <https://www.ft.com/content/98e478b5-c0d4-48a3-bcf7-e334a4ea0aca>

focus on strengthening formal economic cooperation between Moscow and African states.⁸⁶ This shift from the short-term predatory practices of Wagner is reportedly illustrated by plans to invest in local transformation of mining products, such as the construction of a gold refinery in Mali, with a similar project under discussion in Burkina Faso, and agreements signed between the Russian company *Rosatom* with both countries' civil nuclear and solar plants.⁸⁷ In addition, the deployment and operations in conflict-affected countries in Africa and the Middle East have been greatly facilitated by the Russian Ministry of Defence. The MoD has contributed weapons and equipment, allowed Wagner operatives to use its infrastructure and/or facilities to train, and facilitated their transport to countries of operation.⁸⁸ Thus, the freezing of the group's assets in the EU and the US, and the prohibition for EU and US nationals from financing Wagner in case of a designation would be unlikely to cut the group from its most vital sources of income.

Similarly, the potential effects of designation on the group's ability to recruit members remain rather uncertain due to the state's influence. In mid-2023, Wagner was believed to comprise as many as 50,000 operatives according to the British Defence Ministry,⁸⁹ with about 5,000 believed to be stationed in Africa,⁹⁰ rising to 6,000 in mid-2024.⁹¹ Given Wagner/Africa Corps' attempts at operational secrecy, many members of the chain of command are unknown to the public. Yet, a large share of the newly created Africa Corps, reportedly around half of its recruits, are believed to be former Wagner staff, including former high-ranking officials. Apart from Wagner veterans,⁹² an investigation by the African Digital Democracy Observatory highlighted interesting elements regarding the Africa Corps' online recruitment, which is believed to have started in November 2023.⁹³ Although not mentioning Africa Corps explicitly, a recruitment notice published on the website *Krasdonar News* announced recruitment "for a unit of the Russian Army to perform tasks outside the Russian Federation (Middle East and African continent)." The message specified that two types of contracts could be offered, either a 12-month "volunteer contract" or a 3-year "contract of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation." Even more telling are the indications that active-duty Russian soldiers can now be seconded to the Africa Corps, retaining their military ranks and social benefits while serving with the group.⁹⁴ The analysis of leaked internal documents, records, and personnel data revealed the direct involvement of Russian government agencies in Wagner's administration, logistics, and personnel recruitment.⁹⁵ Such elements lead some experts to conclude that the African Corps constitutes "a de facto

86 Akwei E, Knight T. Africa Corps: Russia's new force in Africa. African Digital Democracy Observatory. 2024 Apr 24. <https://disinfo.africa/africa-corps-la-nouvelle-force-de-la-russie-en-afrique-eda6586987ce>; <https://disinfo.africa/africa-corps-la-nouvelle-force-de-la-russie-en-afrique-eda6586987ce>; Agence Ecofin. Africa Corps rompt avec le « modèle économique » de Wagner. 2024 Jun 10. <https://www.agenceecofin.com/docutheque/1006-119351-africa-corps-rompt-avec-le-modele-economique-de-wagner-rapport>

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90 Agence Ecofin. Africa Corps rompt avec le « modèle économique » de Wagner. 2024 Jun 10. <https://www.agenceecofin.com/docutheque/1006-119351-africa-corps-rompt-avec-le-modele-economique-de-wagner-rapport>

91 Akwei E, Knight T. Africa Corps: Russia's new force in Africa. African Digital Democracy Observatory. 2024 Apr 24. <https://disinfo.africa/africa-corps-la-nouvelle-force-de-la-russie-en-afrique-eda6586987ce>; Bryjka F, Czerep J. Africa Corps—A new iteration of Russia's old military presence in Africa. Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) Report. 2024 May. <https://disinfo.africa/africa-corps-la-nouvelle-force-de-la-russie-en-afrique-eda6586987ce>

92 Bryjka F, Czerep J. Africa Corps—A new iteration of Russia's old military presence in Africa. Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) Report. 2024 May. <https://disinfo.africa/africa-corps-la-nouvelle-force-de-la-russie-en-afrique-eda6586987ce>

93 Akwei E, Knight T. Africa Corps: Russia's new force in Africa. African Digital Democracy Observatory. 2024 Apr 24. Available from: Africa Corps: Russia's new force in Africa | by ADDO | African Digital Democracy Observatory

94 Bryjka F, Czerep J. Africa Corps—A new iteration of Russia's old military presence in Africa. Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) Report. 2024 May.

95 Rondeaux C, Dalton B. The Wagner Group's Little Black Book: Decoding Command and Control of Russia's Irregular Forces. New America. 2024 Oct 17. Available at: <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/wagner-group-command-structure/>; Dalton B, Rondeaux C, Swit R. Paramilitary Paper Trails: Mapping the Wagner Group's Ties to Russia with Personnel Data. New America. 2024 Oct 2. Available at: <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/briefs/paramilitary-paper-trails/>

expeditionary part of the armed forces/military intelligence of the Russian Federation.”⁹⁶ The control that the Russian state seems to exert on the group’s recruitment makes it very uncertain how a designation would undermine its ability to recruit by deterring individuals’ affiliations. Even though some elements in the messages disseminated online to encourage militaries and citizens with combat experiences to apply, such as indicators of phone numbers to contact, suggest that recruitment efforts might be partially aimed at international audiences,⁹⁷ it remains very difficult to estimate how many internationals – including EU and US citizens – actually join the group.

Looking at other state-backed groups having been designated also seems to point to terrorist designations’ limited effectiveness. For instance, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was designated as an FTO by the US in April 2019. The IRGC, with an estimated number of over 150,000 troops, reports directly to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.⁹⁸ The IRGC has a strong internal influence and controls political institutions, media, judiciary, as well as the economic sectors in Iran to ensure funding.⁹⁹ The IRGC is known for supporting a vast network of non-state actors in the region to protect the “revolution”. While the country-specific sanctions may have had an economic impact, some experts indicate that the terrorism designation “has shown no meaningful change in conduct.”¹⁰⁰ While calls to designate the IRGC in Europe and the UK are becoming louder amid a growing number of plots and incidents across Europe that seem to implicate the group,¹⁰¹ IRGC has not yet been designated. Although more research is needed to understand how state-sponsorship will have a genuine impact on the functioning and capabilities of the group, it appears that sanctions emanating from a terrorist designation are likely to be ineffective when a group is state-sponsored.¹⁰²

Beyond Wagner Group/Africa Corps: Broader Implications for Other State-sponsored Proxies and Regional Security

While it may seem useful to designate Wagner in the short term, designating Wagner cannot merely be a matter of weighing potential impact and disadvantages on the group itself. Any decision to resort to terrorist designation should rather be grounded in an awareness of the full range of consequences – both intended and unintended – that it might have for future designations, particularly for other state-sponsored groups, and broader impact on regional security in Africa.

Debates around Wagner illustrate a growing support to list state-sponsored entities as terrorist organisations. Beyond the IRGC, other Iranian-backed groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis are coming under more scrutiny since the Israeli-Gaza conflict. Hamas has been designated by the US, EU, and, most recently, also by the UK in its entirety.¹⁰³ While Hezbollah in its entirety is already listed by the US, in the UK and the EU, only the military wing has been

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97 Akwei E, Knight T. Africa Corps: Russia’s new force in Africa. African Digital Democracy Observatory. 2024 Apr 24. Available from: [Africa Corps: Russia’s new force in Africa](https://www.africadigitaldemocracy.org/africa-corps-russias-new-force-in-africa/) | by ADDO | African Digital Democracy Observatory

98 Rampe W, Ibrahim S. Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Council on Foreign Relations. 2024 Nov 12. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/irans-revolutionary-guards>

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101 Levitt M, Boches S. Iranian External Operations in Europe: The Criminal Connection Centre for Counter-Terrorism. 2024 Oct 16. <https://icct.nl/publication/iranian-external-operations-europe-criminal-connection>

102 Rampe W, Ibrahim S. Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Council on Foreign Relations. 2024 Nov 12. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/irans-revolutionary-guards>

103 Ibid.

designated. Finally, the Houthis were listed and delisted by the US, and considering their hostile activities in the Red Sea, were again listed as a terrorist group earlier this year.¹⁰⁴ Unlike Wagner/Africa Corps, some of these organisations – or at least their political wing – are part of a ruling government, and if designated, would complicate entering into dialogue with them, but also providing humanitarian assistance, as currently exemplified by the situation in post-Assad Syria.¹⁰⁵ This raises the question of whether Wagner's designation would be a step forward to recognise state-sponsored terrorism in general, or whether designation is only considered when politically convenient. Moreover, Wagner's designation could open the door for other private security companies to be designated. While more closely associated with the Russian state, it appears that the Africa Corps now serves as “an umbrella for Russia's paramilitary activities on the continent – not just those of Wagner, but also of other private military companies” such as the smaller Bear Brigade PMC, deployed in Burkina Faso. The UK has, in fact, adopted a package of sanctions in November 2024 that not only targets Africa Corps but also two other private security companies, notably Espanola and the Bears Brigade PMC.

As regards broader implications on regional security, the designation of Wagner/Africa Corps could moreover impact relations with African countries that rely on Wagner for security support,¹⁰⁶ exacerbate the security crises that initially drove them to contract the group's services,¹⁰⁷ hinder the delivery of aid and worsen the broader humanitarian situation in affected regions.¹⁰⁸ While African states contracting Wagner/Africa Corps have already distanced themselves from Western partners, a designation could exacerbate these divisions as these states might themselves become subject to sanctions. Particularly, if Wagner would be listed by the US, that would mean that African countries engaging with the group are committing a criminal offence, with the US no longer providing foreign assistance to these states, many of which have limited economic resources¹⁰⁹ and are already grappling with armed conflicts and terrorist threats.¹¹⁰ Additionally, a designation could inadvertently play in favour of Russia's strategy of driving African regimes further away from their historical Western allies to position itself as a reliable alternative. By isolating these regimes, a designation could ultimately deepen African regimes' dependence on Wagner and Russia. This is particularly concerning, given Wagner's track record of worsening insecurity and instability,¹¹¹ its incentive to prolong conflicts from which it benefits financially¹¹² and its potentially enduring legacy on operational methods and tactics used by local forces. An in-depth investigation by *The Sentry* revealed that Wagner operatives not only commit abuses themselves but have moreover been teaching torture techniques as part of military training for CAR local forces.¹¹³ Overall, designating Wagner/Africa Corps risks entrenching their presence across African states, with potentially long-term consequences for regional peace and security.

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Conclusion

The murky legal status of Wagner, and its successor Africa Corps, poses significant challenges in imposing effective sanctions and holding the group accountable for the crimes it has committed. Against this challenge, the call to designate Wagner is becoming louder. Yet, such calls often fail to consider the legal grounds for such a designation and its broader implications.

The criteria and implications for designating, proscribing or listing a group vary across jurisdictions, but consistently aim to prevent terrorist activities by imposing financial, administrative, or criminal measures. In the UK, a group must advance a political agenda to be proscribed. One could argue that, at the time Wagner got proscribed, the group was aligned with the Russian state interests but also retained some degree of agency in determining its own agenda. In contrast, the US has designated Wagner as a TCO rather than an FTO. Although it could change under the current Trump administration, this could reflect efforts to maintain diplomatic relations with Russia and to preserve US foreign policy interests in Africa. The EU, for its part, applies criteria that leave rather broad margins of appreciation, based on which the group could technically meet the threshold for designation. Yet, the authors believe that designation is not desirable. While the state-sponsored nature of the group would significantly limit the effectiveness of a designation, it could moreover have broader implications for future designation of similar state-sponsored groups as well as severely impact security in countries employing these groups. Other options should be pursued to hold Wagner accountable for the crimes they have committed. Currently the International Criminal Court in the Hague is reviewing a confidential report pertaining to alleged war crimes that have been committed by Wagner in West Africa which could possibly be one of the avenues to hold Wagner accountable.¹¹⁴ Misusing terrorist designations could have serious political, legal and social risks. It could undermine the credibility of terrorism efforts, lead to oppressing political dissent and minorities, and intensify conflicts.

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