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IN FOCUS

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Russia's Security Operations in Africa

Thousands of Russian security personnel have deployed to Africa over the past decade, offering security support in exchange for payment or access to natural resources, in what some analysts refer to as a "military-business model." Initially, the Wagner Group—a nominally private military company (PMC) linked to the Russian government—spearheaded such activities in Africa, starting around 2017. Russia formally disbanded the Wagner Group in 2023 and has since rebranded and restructured Wagner's Africa operations as the "Africa Corps," overseen by Russia's military intelligence agency. On the ground, Africa Corps activities may involve a mix of Russian state, ex-Wagner, and other PMC personnel. Russia has also reportedly pursued military basing, including in Sudan and Libya.

Some African leaders appear to view Russian personnel as furnishing valuable support (such as regime protection and combat assistance) that others are unwilling or unable to provide. For Moscow's part, security missions in Africa—paired with information operations—appear to fit within a global strategy to undermine the West and its image as a reliable security partner. The U.S. Treasury Department reported in 2023 that gold and other resources from Africa helped Russia evade sanctions. Russia has also recruited African nationals for its war in Ukraine, including by using what some reports describe as deceptive campaigns.

Many African countries have warm ties with Russia, with which over 40 reportedly have military cooperation agreements—though most have not openly partnered with the Wagner Group or Africa Corps. Some African leaders, including in Algeria and Ghana, have voiced concerns about Russian deployments in neighboring countries.

Key Areas of Activity

As of April 2026, the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, and Mali appear to host the largest Russian deployments in Africa, totaling thousands of personnel along with military logistics facilities. The Wagner Group initiated activities in those countries, as well as Sudan, between 2017 and 2021. Libya's importance as a Russian logistical hub may have increased following regime change in 2024 in Syria, which hosted Russian military bases.

Since Wagner's demise in 2023, smaller Russian contingents have arrived in new countries (**Figure 1**), including Burkina Faso and Niger, where military juntas seized power in 2022-2023 and formed a Russian-backed alliance with Mali. Russian forces arrived in 2024 in Niger, which previously hosted the second-largest U.S. military presence in Africa, as the United States withdrew its more than 1,000 troops under pressure from the ruling junta. In early 2026, Russian personnel reportedly helped repel a militant attack on Niger's international airport. Russian personnel have also deployed to Equatorial Guinea, where they have reportedly trained presidential guard forces.

Figure 1. Russian Security Operations: Key Countries



Source: CRS, from U.S. government statements and news reports.

Some reports suggest that Russia's Africa Corps may expand (or has already expanded) into more countries, such as Chad in the Sahel; Madagascar, which had a military coup in 2025; and/or Togo, which in 2025 signed a military cooperation agreement with Moscow that reportedly provides for port access. One analyst has posited that Russia's appeal in the Sahel may nonetheless have reached a "high-water mark," given Russia's economic constraints and apparent inability to fully curb security challenges. The Wagner Group sent counterinsurgency forces to Mozambique in 2019 but withdrew after heavy casualties.

Russia's security partnerships have leveraged Cold War-era ties in Africa and the vulnerabilities and ambitions of individual leaders. Russian operators also have exploited, and stoked, local grievances and resentment of Western powers and UN peacekeeping operations. In CAR and Mali, Russian support has enabled state forces to retake territory from rebel groups—albeit accompanied by human rights abuses. In Libya, Russia has aided an armed group that has sought state power. Russian forces' scorched-earth counterinsurgency tactics may appeal to some leaders struggling to reverse insurgent gains. Leaders chafing at arms embargoes or human rights criticism may view Russia as a counterweight to Western donor pressure. In the Sahel, Russian partnership has become a symbol of leaders' populist rejection of French postcolonial influence. Some surveys suggest that positive views of Russia are rising in Africa, although evidence is mixed.

CAR. About 175 Russian "instructors," including Wagner personnel, entered CAR in late 2017, after Russia obtained a UN arms embargo exemption to provide weapons to the military. The number of Russian personnel reportedly rose to some 2,100 in 2021 as they played a key role in military operations to retake territory from rebel groups, then fell to about 1,500 as of early 2026. Russians have reportedly provided personal security to President Faustin-Archange Touadera and served as his advisors. Former Wagner-affiliated firms are reportedly active in private security, mining, timber, and other commerce. President Touadera was reelected in late 2025 to a third term, with apparent Russian support, after removing constitutional term limits

and cowing the opposition. Africa Corps since appears to have wrested control of ex-Wagner networks in CAR, something President Touadera reportedly resisted amid pressure from Moscow to pay directly for defense services, versus Wagner's self-funding model.

Libya. Wagner personnel reportedly began providing support in 2018 to Libyan National Army (LNA) leader Khalifa Haftar, a rival to Libya's internationally-recognized government in Tripoli. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) described Wagner forces as providing vital support to the LNA's failed 2019-2020 campaign to seize Tripoli. According to AFRICOM, Wagner's presence totaled about 2,000 as of 2020, but declined in 2022 as some personnel left for Ukraine; current numbers are uncertain. At the time of Syria's regime change in 2024, the Biden Administration drew international attention to reported shipments of Russian weaponry to LNA-controlled areas; transfers of Africa Corps personnel also reportedly took place. Reports suggest such shipments were ongoing as of early 2026.

Mali. As many as 2,500 Russian personnel were reportedly deployed as of early 2026 in Mali, where they have supported combat operations against Islamist and separatist insurgents. Mali's military junta reportedly reached a deal with the Wagner Group in late 2021, at a cost of $10 million per month, according to the State Department. Wagner's entry intensified diplomatic strains with France, contributing to France's withdrawal in 2022 of thousands of troops that had conducted counterterrorism operations with U.S. support. In 2023, a UN peacekeeping mission ended at the junta's demand. Later that year, with Russian support, Malian state forces recaptured the separatist stronghold of Kidal, a long-standing goal. The Africa Corps formally took control of ex-Wagner networks in Mali in mid-2025. Russian forces have since reportedly helped protect fuel imports amid an Islamist militant blockade on Bamako.

In 2024, separatist and Islamist insurgents killed dozens of Russian forces and Malian soldiers in an ambush. A Ukrainian official asserted that Ukraine had aided the rebel attack. This claim sparked regional criticism of Ukraine and led several Sahel countries to cut diplomatic ties.

Sudan. Russia-affiliated entities reportedly became active in Sudan after then-President Omar al Bashir struck a series of deals with Moscow in 2017. Wagner-linked firms were involved in gold mining (in collaboration with elements of Sudan's security forces) and in training and security service provision. In 2022, Wagner was implicated in a scheme smuggling gold from Sudan to Russia. In 2023, after war broke out between Sudan's rival security forces, the U.S. Treasury Department reported that Wagner had supplied Sudan's Rapid Support Forces with surface-to-air missiles to fight the military. Russia later offered support to the military government, reportedly to secure access for a naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast. In late 2025, Russia's ambassador to Sudan said the base plan was on hold.

Potential Issues for Congress

Oversight Issues. The extent to which the United States should seek to counter Russia's security activities in Africa (if at all) is a potential issue for Congress. The Trump Administration's 2025 *National Security Strategy* states a goal to "reestablish strategic stability with Russia," and does not specify an approach to Russia's operations in Africa. More broadly, Congress may review the Administration's foreign assistance and diplomatic staffing policies, which could affect the tools and resources available to respond to Russia in the region.

Congress has enacted legislation requiring the executive branch to report on Russia's military footprint and influence in Africa and worldwide, which could inform oversight and legislative approaches (e.g., §1241 of P.L. 119-60, the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act). Congress may consider whether existing reports enable sufficient review of Russia's activities and U.S. responses; whether new, amended, or consolidated requirements are warranted; or whether to sunset this line of inquiry.

Sanctions. Multiple individuals and entities in Africa have been sanctioned under U.S. executive orders pertaining, among other things, to Russia's foreign activities and war on Ukraine, transnational organized crime, and the conflict in CAR. Many of these designations cite ties to the Wagner Group, which is sanctioned under several U.S. programs. In early 2026, amid efforts to improve security cooperation with Mali, the Trump Administration lifted Russia-related sanctions on three senior Malian officials who had been designated for facilitating Wagner's activities.

Potential issues for Congress include the effectiveness of current sanctions, the resources required to enforce them, and the impact (if any) on Russian and U.S. influence, respectively. Congress could also assess the potential need to amend or update Wagner-linked designations in light of Russia's restructuring of its Africa deployments. Congress may examine U.S. coordination with European countries, which maintain some similar sanctions in Africa.

U.S. Security Cooperation. How to approach security cooperation with African governments that have partnered with Russian forces is a possible issue for Congress, including whether to restrict cooperation—or, alternately, explicitly authorize and/or fund it. Legislative restrictions or conditions could deter some African governments from pursuing deals with the Africa Corps, or in some cases, could provoke backlash. Restrictions may also constrain U.S. cooperation on shared objectives, such as counterterrorism. (Certain U.S. security aid for some Africa Corps partner states is already subject to legal restrictions due to military coups or other factors.) In some cases, U.S. security cooperation could serve as an alternative to Russian support, although the extent to which the two are interchangeable may be debated. Managing potentially sensitive activities with a partner force that is working closely with a U.S. adversary may also prove challenging, and policy risks can arise from U.S. support to authoritarian or abusive regimes. Congress has authorized and appropriated funds for a "Countering Russian Influence Fund" for use in, and to strengthen U.S. and NATO security cooperation with, countries in Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia, not in Africa (see §7047 of Div. F, P.L. 119-75).

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