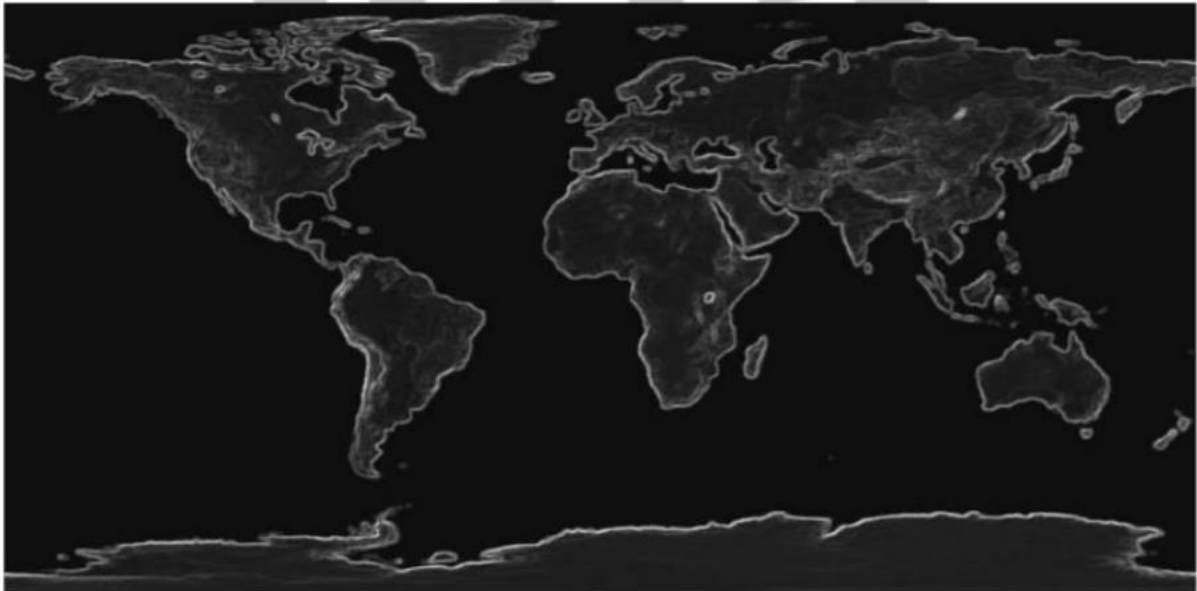


THE WAGNER GROUP INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

Unraveling the Russian presence and actions in Syria

Veritas et Aequitas



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What are the Private Military Companies, PMCs/PSCs?

Private Military Companies are independent corporations that offer military services (Private Military Contractors) to national governments, international organizations and sub-state actors. The utilization of private military forces is not a new technique. It has been at its disposal since the 18th and 19th century. However, during the 20th century its use remained underestimated and military power was restricted to state accountability. During the Cold War this scenario started to change and several military specialists in Africa and Asia emerged. Besides, the use of PMCs increased quantitatively during the last two decades operating in wars, conflicts, strategic spots, etc. such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and also Western countries for domestic purposes. Private Military Contractors, also known as defense contractors, can carry out different kinds of military service. They are specialized in providing combat and protection forces such as fighting in armed conflicts or gathering intelligence. Moreover, military contractors are trained to use powerful weapons such as tanks, helicopters, bazookas, etc. (BELL, 2016). Some of these private forces are long-established companies with highly qualified experienced and transparent business structures. However, others seem to be operating in the shadows behind the governments' veil (VOILLAT, 2004).

Besides, the concept of war has been evolving during the years and has become the so-called Modern War in which several factors play a relevant role (new weapons, nuclear bombs, fighter planes, drones, etc.) and, PMCs stand out as a key actor to provide private security to citizens and wage war in the name of states to avoid international political issues. Hence, in countries where PMCs operate, security is becoming a private sector rather than a public good. This issue is damaging the conceived notion of protecting society as a whole and PMCs presence/action can even destabilize the economy, society, and politics of states. This phenomenon is increasingly affecting failed states or states in war such as Syria, Somalia or Afghanistan.

The main statement for the use of private military services is that they are “cheaper”, more efficient and reliable than armies. These assumptions are settled down in the thoughts that the public sector is corrupted, slower and inefficient compared with the free market. In fact, there is no evidence supporting these arguments. PMCs are often more expensive than conventional armies because they receive high-priced contracts to provide the same services. In addition, military contractors act without impunity and pressure from the governments or international coalition because its operations are done in the shadows, and therefore are considered highly controversial (VOILLAT, 2004).

To conclude with this section, it is relevant to consider that PMCs, mercenaries or freelance soldiers that fight for money can be mixed up. Nevertheless, PMCs are the only ones that, in terms of international policies, are considered legal (TEKINGUNDUZ, 2018).

What is the Wagner Group?

The so-called Wagner Group, Vagner Group or Wagner PMC is a Russian private military company, supposedly, founded by the former specialist in military intelligence of the GRU (Department of Intelligence of Russian Federation) and army officer Dmitry Utkin. Their modus operandi consists of recruiting and employing former soldiers of the Russian army or freelance soldiers to send them on operations.



It was settled during the Russian proxy war in Ukraine in 2014 (Ukraine's Crimea Conflict) when Kremlin engaged in its tactic to support pro-Russian separatists in the eastern part of Ukraine. During this conflict between both the eastern nations, a huge number of Russian or pro-Russian individuals went to work for Wagner (GLOBAL SECURITY, B). Hence, Wagner PMC is strongly related to the Russian politic administration and its international objectives, despite the fact it was born as a private military company. It can be mirrored since military contractors of the Wagner Group work hand-in-hand and train with the Russian military (COALSON & KHAZOV-CASSIA, 2018). Moreover, Yevgeny Prigozhin a Russian oligarch and close associate of President Vladimir Putin is strongly related and associated with the military corporation. He has also been involved during the Russian interference in the 2016 United States Presidential elections (PETER, 2018). Both Wagner and Prigozhin are part of a long list of Russian individuals and entities subject to sanctions because of their involvement during the Ukraine conflict and US Presidential elections.

On the other hand, it is relevant to consider that Moscow, officially, has not recognized the Wagner Group as a Private Military Company. Hence, it is acknowledged as a civilian corporation working in oil and gas fields. However, it is known that they have been in action since 2014 in several conflicts in the name of Russia and have been involved in some controversial scenarios such as the death of the three Russian journalist in Central Africa. According to analyst's reports, Moscow uses the Wagner PMC so it can deploy military activity in active conflicts and discount casualties. In addition, its general headquarter is managed by Russian military commanders who coordinate different military groups contracted and based in strategic international spots. The military company has been actively acting in conflicts such as in Syria and Ukraine and has also sent military contractors to Central Africa and Sudan (AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, 2018).

Syria

Before the creation of the Wagner Group (2014), private military contractors were sent to Syria by an organization called "Slavic Corps" in 2013. At least 267 men had the official mission to guard oil facilities and pipelines, but they were caught participating in the Syrian civil war to prevent the fall of the Syrian regime (COALSON & KHAZOV-CASSIA, 2018).

The Wagner PMC began its intervention in Syria in 2015 when the military company was contracted by the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad to capture and secure oil and gas fields ISIS had seized. Their main objective is to fulfil operations that Russia cannot conduct because international organizations and laws prevent it from being involved in direct intervention outside its borders (ABU AL-KHAIR, 2019). Wagner signed an agreement (2016) which gave the company a 25% stake of gas and oil produced over the next five years (BROWN, 2018). Hence, it indicates that Russia is not only obtaining political influences over other states but also guaranteeing the exploitation of resources.

Nowadays, there are several Russian private military contracting companies working in the country. Nevertheless, only the Wagner Group has the authority to engage in combat operations. According to stingers settle down in Syria, the major concentration of the Wagner Group members in Syria is located in the principal port city in the Latakia province (West of Syria), one of the main Russian areas of influence in the Middle-East country. There are about 2,000 Wagner fighters in Syria, despite the fact that the media reports inform of the presence



of about 4,000. Together with the Russian military soldiers, there are 8,000 Russians supporting the authoritarian regime in Syria (COALSON & KHAZOV-CASSIA, 2018).

Moreover, the Private Military Company drew international attention in February 2018 when at least 200 military contractors of the Wagner Group in Syria died. Therefore, the Wagner Group's intervention and actions in Syria came to light (ABU AL-KHAIR, 2019).

To sum it up, the Wagner PMC or Wagner Group is known to be a key actor for the Kremlin's interests which have acted in several relevant conflicts such as Ukraine's Crimea, Syria or Uganda. Moreover, as we have analyzed during the present work, Syria represents a relevant international conflict in which Russia is making a profit by getting influence over Syria and achieving natural resources such as oil and gas.

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