



Putin's New Frontier: The Prospects and Limitations of Africa Corps

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CNS

OCCASIONAL PAPER

#66 · AUGUST 2025



**Middlebury Institute of
International Studies at Monterey**
James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies



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This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or the United States government.

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Executive Summary

Key takeaways

(1) The emergence of Africa Corps. Over the past two years, Africa Corps has taken over most of the Wagner Group's former Africa operations, elevating them to the level of official state-to-state relations. The new entity emerged after Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed mutiny in late June 2023, with the Russia-Africa summit a month later a key catalyst.

(2) Focus on the Sahel. Unlike in Libya, Africa Corps' takeover from the Wagner Group in Mali was marked by hiccups, and the two entities coexisted there somewhat uneasily until recently. Africa Corps embraced new openings in the Sahel, deploying to Burkina Faso and Niger, as well as more recently to Equatorial Guinea. In consolidating its presence in the Sahel, Russia both benefited from and actively encouraged the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States and a deepening and widening of joint activities among the three Sahelian juntas.

(3) Wagner in the Central African Republic. In the Central African Republic (CAR), Wagner Group fighters did not sign new contracts with the Russian defense ministry, and the group has continued to operate as Wagner. It remains to be seen whether, and for how long, Wagner can resist the defense ministry's usurpation of its CAR operations, especially after the formal end to Wagner operations in Mali in early June 2025.

(4) Wagner, rebranded. Africa Corps' emergence appears to have been largely a bureaucratic restructuring and rebranding exercise. The new entity gobbled up many former Wagner fighters and usurped much of the group's recruitment infrastructure. The Russian military tethered the new entity closer to the military's chain of command, but seems to not have created any new units for the corps. While the entity's recruitment campaigns are highly visible, replete with detail on deployment requirements, salary, and benefits, little is known from open sources about its command and manpower.

(5) Less nimble and less risk-prone. Africa Corps has thus far prioritized training and routine security assistance for its host countries, compared to the high-risk missions the Wagner Group used to undertake. For its funding, Africa Corps currently appears to rely on Russia's state budget. In the future, it will likely seek more diverse sources of funding and may even allow new "mini-Prigozhins" to spring up, to engage in profitable business activities to generate funding.

(6) A sustainable model? Though worst-case expectations about the fate of Russia's Syrian bases—namely, that Russia would be ousted from them—did not come to pass after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Russia appears to be engaged in efforts to diversify its military logistics to ensure the sustainability of its Africa operations. Should Africa Corps continue to eschew the types of higher-risk missions that Wagner used to undertake, it might face growing competition from other players, such as China, Iran, and Turkey. It also remains to be seen to what extent Africa Corps will make inroads into Togo, Benin, and a number of other potential target countries.

Introduction

As Russia's military settled into a grinding war of attrition against Ukraine in 2023, it relied heavily on the Wagner Group Private Military Company (PMC) for battlefield support. Notwithstanding Wagner's evolving and expanding role in the Ukraine campaign, its preexisting activities in Africa were not materially affected. In the period between the attempted mutiny of Wagner Group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin in late June 2023 and his death two months later, the Kremlin took measures to prepare Russia's sprawling mercenary business for a post-Prigozhin future and morph it into something different: an enterprise more tightly controlled by the Russian state.

Africa generally, and the Sahel in particular, had become an important focus for Russia in the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Its framing of the war as an anti-neocolonial struggle was meant to resonate among African audiences, in particular, which Russian propagandists targeted with a versatile information campaign. Russia has courted African states aggressively, hosting its second Russia-Africa summit in July 2023, while also engaging in countless other African initiatives under the auspices of the State Duma, the Russian Foreign Ministry and various Russian academic institutions and think tanks. Moscow has promised to (re)open—or already reopened—consulates and embassies across the continent and delivered free grain to several countries in need. Ousting what Russia calls the “collective West” from Africa became almost an obsession in the context of Russia's aggressive anti-Western stance since the invasion of Ukraine.

Against this broader backdrop, Russia considered it a priority to preserve its mercenary activities in Africa following Prigozhin's attempted mutiny. To that end, it created Africa Corps.

This study chronicles the emergence of Africa Corps and assesses its activities since summer 2023 in relevant African states. It shows how Africa Corps consolidated its position in Libya and Mali, where the Wagner Group had a legacy presence on the ground; how it embraced new opportunities in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Equatorial Guinea; in which countries there are indications that the Africa Corps might attempt to make inroads in the future; and where the Wagner Group continues to operate as Wagner—in the Central African Republic.

After reviewing the geography of the Africa Corps' activities and its evolution over the past two years, the study assesses what is known from open sources about its structure: its command, recruitment, manpower, logistics, and funding.

The research for this report was predominantly grounded in Russian-language sources (for example, the Africa Corps' official website, media interviews given by its commanders, statements by the Russian Defense and Foreign Ministries, and relevant social media and Telegram posts of the various channels affiliated with Wagner or Africa Corps). These were augmented by Western media reports, as well as insights from open-source investigative accounts that focus on the Wagner Group and Russian PMCs. In February 2025, the author convened an RSI-sponsored virtual workshop with 15 experts on Russian PMCs, the Russian military, Russia-Africa relations, and the Sahel, to discuss Africa Corps and its future trajectory. Subject matter experts Jack Margolin and John Lechner gave brief presentations,

which were followed by a general discussion. Findings from that discussion are also heavily reflected in this report.

The study assesses that, by June 2025, the transition from the Wagner Group to Africa Corps was largely concluded, with the exception of the CAR—where Wagner seems intent on preserving itself as independent actor for an indefinite period. Much of what had previously been the Wagner Group had surfaced from the shadows of Prigozhin’s private initiative and stepped into the spotlight of official state-to-state relations as the rebranded Africa Corps. Africa Corps incorporates many former Wagner fighters but is tethered much more closely to the military’s chain of command, with Yunus Bek-Yevkurov and Andrei Averyanov publicly in charge. To date, Africa Corps has prioritized training and routine security assistance, which has made its operations less risky and potentially sustainable with less manpower, compared to the Wagner Group. It remains an open question whether Africa Corps will continue to eschew participation in counterinsurgency and counterterrorist missions, and if so, to what extent it will face competition from other security providers, especially in the Sahel.

The Emergence of Africa Corps

Amid the Wagner Group’s combat employment in Ukraine after February 2022, Russia’s PMC business in Africa countries was not materially affected. One year into the war, the Wagner Group retained an estimated 3,500-4,500 mercenaries in Africa.¹ Whereas Wagner expanded rapidly in Ukraine with the employment of tens of thousands of untrained convicts, Wagner’s Africa operations continued to rely on able and experienced field commanders overseeing a manageable number of highly trained fighters. Prigozhin’s mutiny in late June 2023, followed by his death in a plane crash in Russia two months later, set the scene for the emergence of Africa Corps. The decision to create the outfit was reportedly taken after the Russia-Africa summit in late July, according to Africa Corps representatives, though it is conceivable that preparations for it were underway for some time before.²

Through summer 2023, there were indications that a transition away from Wagner was in the works. Meeting Wagner fighters on June 29, a few days after the attempted mutiny, President Putin offered them the chance to continue serving under a new structure headed by Wagner’s chief of staff, Andrei Troshev (“Sedoy”),³ who, however, failed to encourage men to switch allegiance. Another sign of the government’s drive to bring Wagner operations under tighter control by the state was the appearance of the deputy head of the Main Directorate of Russia’s General Staff, Andrei Averyanov, at the Russia-Africa summit. Meanwhile, several other PMCs with close links to the Russian Defense Ministry stepped up their recruitment for African operations, among them “Redut” and “Konvoy.”⁴ There is evidence that Prigozhin was aware of the government’s drive to usurp his business and engaged in a competing effort—which entailed trips to his various African clients—to prevent the seizure of his networks.

The nature of Wagner’s rebranding into Africa Corps then differed from country to country. In Syria, Wagner forces were initially given a choice between signing new contracts with the Defense Ministry or leaving the country. Shortly after Prigozhin’s death, Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov met with President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, where the

Russian government asked the Syrian government to oust renegade Wagnerites by the end of September. In Libya, where the Libyan National Army (LNA) had become increasingly wary of Wagner's overconfidence prior to the attempted mutiny, a Russian military delegation led by Yevkurov and Averyanov informed General Khalifa Haftar on August 22 that the defense ministry would henceforth oversee Russia's engagement in Libya.

In the CAR, post-mutiny rumors of Wagner forces leaving the country quickly gave way to reports confirming that there had merely been a rotation. In mid-July 2023, new Wagner fighters arrived in Bangui to oversee a referendum scheduled for July 20. Still, the Kremlin signaled a desire for the CAR leadership to create some distance between itself and Prigozhin. When President Touadéra came to the Russia-Africa summit that month, he declined to take a photograph with the Wagner chief. Yet, when Prigozhin died in late August, Touadéra's government still declared a day of national mourning.

In Mali—of which Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had said immediately after the mutiny that Russian “instructors” would continue to work there⁵—the foreign minister vowed in early July that his government was communicating exclusively with the Russian state and would continue the cooperation.⁶ Later that month, a coup in Niger raised the specter of Russia making a play for an additional African stronghold. Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels immediately cheered the coup as an opportunity to extend the group's influence in the Sahel, and there were rumors that a Wagner team had entered Niamey, Niger's capital, coming from Mali.⁷ Such information was never confirmed, however.

Africa Corps: Activities, Characteristics, Ambitions

The geography of Africa Corps' deployments

As Africa Corps found its footing, the Sahel became a particular area of interest for Russia.

Mali

In Mali, the Wagner Group had appeared on the scene in 2021, with the defense ministry initially negotiating the terms of Russia's deployment.⁸ At the time, the U.S. State Department said that Mali was paying the group \$10 million per month.⁹ After Prigozhin's death, it seemed that the Wagner Group and the new Africa Corps would for a while coexist in some messy symbiosis, both complementing and competing with each other. In September, Wagner Group social media released images of operations involving Mi-8 helicopters¹⁰ and Putin spoke with Mali's interim president several times.¹¹ In November 2023, Wagner assisted the Malian army in retaking the strategically important town of Kidal from Tuareg separatists.

Wagnerites continued to serve in high-risk missions in 2024, frequently posting pictures on social media that showed their continued presence in Mali.¹² In July 2024, they made a disastrous push into separatist territory at Tinzaouaten, their forces ambushed in what would mark one of the deadliest attacks against Russian forces in Africa in years. Top Wagner

Group commander Sergey Shevchenko and Nikita Fedyanin, owner of the popular Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel Grey Zone, were killed. John Lechner commented that Mali's handover from Wagner to Africa Corps "was a mess": Africa Corps ran command and control while Wagner leaders were in the field, creating a situation which led to the ambush. At the same time, Wagner's legacy presence gave Moscow cover to suggest that the disaster at Tinzaouaten was not caused by Africa Corps' shortcomings. Lechner contends that the ambush also gave ammunition to Russian military officers arguing for Russia to scale back its participation in such high-risk operations and to focus instead on training the local army and law enforcement forces.

After the Tinzaouaten ambush, there were growing signs in late 2024 and early 2025 that Russia's operations in Mali were transitioning from Wagner to Africa Corps. In January 2025, a Telegram channel close to Wagner shared claims by commanders in Mali that they were being replaced by Africa Corps.¹³ Construction work on the expansion of a base at the Modibo Keita International Airport in Bamako continued apace, presaging the arrival of Africa Corps.¹⁴ Yevkurov visited Mali a few weeks later.¹⁵ The open-source research project All Eyes on Wagner project later claimed that, after August 2024, all Russian forces operating in Mali had done so effectively under the auspices of Africa Corps.¹⁶

On June 6, 2025, Wagner officially announced the end of its operations in Mali, confirming that Africa Corps' takeover was complete.¹⁷ Observers commented that, with the full pivot to Africa Corps, it would be interesting to see to what extent the character of Russia's military activity in Mali would change, given Africa Corps' focus on training and the protection of assets.¹⁸ Later in June, interim president Assimi Goïta flew to Russia, where he met with Putin, Yevkurov, Defense Minister Andrey Belousov, visited the "Kazan Helicopters" plant in Tatarstan, and oversaw the establishment of a Russian-Malian trade commission.¹⁹

Niger

In Niger, a military coup one month before Prigozhin's death had opened a window for Russia to make a play for an additional African theatre. After the coup, Niger's military junta tilted closer to Russia; its partnership with the United States—which operated a drone base and deployed more than 1,000 troops in the country—became increasingly precarious. Through fall 2023, Russian military delegations met with Nigerien counterparts on several occasions. In September, for instance, Yevkurov visited, reportedly alongside the head of clandestine operations of Russia's military intelligence, the GRU.²⁰ On December 4, Niger announced it was ending two EU security and defense missions in the country.

Niger's pivot into Russia's orbit continued in 2024. Its new prime minister and defense minister visited Russia in January, announcing cooperation with Russia aimed at increasing the capabilities of Niger's armed forces. The United States scrambled to turn the tide, but a visit by an American delegation in March went awry, and the junta declared the military relationship over. Closed-door talks ensued as Washington wanted to probe whether the fallout could be contained and some US presence in the country preserved.

Commenting on the developments, John Lechner wrote that the Russians—who, unlike in Mali, had no legacy ties in Niger—were probably just as wary of the new junta as the Americans. “It’s the junta trying to draw in Moscow, not the other way around... If Niger does flip, it’ll be a US fumble, not a stroke of genius from Moscow,” he wrote. Be that as it may, by mid-April, the first one hundred Africa Corps troops arrived in Niger, and two weeks later, Averyanov visited again. Africa Corps released social media images that appeared to show Nigerien troops receiving FPV drone training from a Russian instructor.²¹ Footage also showed the newly arrived Russian troops operating out of the same military base that still housed the soon-to-depart American forces.²²

As of summer 2025, the number of Africa Corps personnel in Niger remained low, but a Russian defense delegation visited in July to discuss an expansion.²³

Burkina Faso

Before his death, Prigozhin had also set his sights on Burkina Faso, where a coup had brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power as interim leader in September 2022. Traoré, wary of the Wagner Group, ramped up militia recruitment instead of turning to Prigozhin for help once he ordered French troops out of the country in January 2023. With the emergence of Africa Corps, Burkina Faso warmed to the idea of inviting Russian instructors into the country. A week after Prigozhin’s death, a Russian delegation led by Yevkurov touched down in Ouagadougou, where the two sides discussed “areas of cooperation [that] primarily concern the military domain, including the training of Burkinabe officer cadets and officers at all levels.”²⁴

In November, a Russian air force plane arrived with some estimated fifty Russian soldiers.²⁵ By January 2024, Africa Corps had deployed to the country with an initial one hundred instructors, eventually to be increased to 300. After a hiatus of nearly thirty-two years, Russia also reopened its embassy in Burkina Faso. When Lavrov visited in June 2024 as part of a tour of African countries, he announced Moscow’s intention to further increase the number of Africa Corps personnel in the country.²⁶ In October, Belousov received Burkina Faso’s prime minister in Moscow for further talks.²⁷ Interestingly, Moscow also dispatched an Interior Ministry delegation to Ouagadougou to discuss Russian training and instruction.²⁸

In consolidating Africa Corps’ presence in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, Russia both benefited from and actively encouraged the formation of the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES), which was formally announced in September 2023. This defense pact likely nudged a skeptical Burkina Faso toward partnership with Russia under the aegis of a regional agreement.²⁹ Over time, the three countries increasingly engaged their Russian security patron in concert. In September 2024, all three signed a deal with Russian aerospace agency Roscosmos to acquire surveillance satellites and secure communications technology from Russia.³⁰ All three discussed cooperation on nuclear energy with Russia. In April 2025, their foreign ministers jointly visited Moscow, where Lavrov announced Russia’s readiness to provide arms and military training to the Alliance of the Sahel States’ joint force, newly announced in January.³¹ In late July 2025, a large Russian government delegation visited first

Niger, then Burkina Faso, then Mali, further underscoring that Moscow pursues a coordinated and strategic effort vis-à-vis the AES.³²

Libya

Meanwhile, in Libya, the Russian Defense Ministry, having taken over from Wagner, continued to consolidate its ties, likely also with a view to beefing up its military logistics in the country in support of Africa Corps operations elsewhere. Libya expert Jalel Harchaoui estimated in December 2023 that Russia maintained roughly 800 Africa Corps troops and 100 regular forces in the country.³³ Deputy Defense Minister Yevkurov made several visits to Libya through 2024.³⁴ In May, All Eyes on Wagner published a joint investigation with *Verstka*, an independent online publication, showing that Africa Corps had deployed at least 1,800 troops during the first quarter of 2024, mostly to LNA-affiliated bases in eastern Libya. The investigation also chronicled the delivery of military equipment, including armored vehicles, to the port of Tobruk.³⁵

With the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, Russia's presence in Libya required even greater importance as a refueling hub. In spring 2025, Haftar visited Belarus and Moscow.³⁶ During an RSI-sponsored virtual workshop on Africa Corps, hosted by CNS in February 2025, experts on Russian PMCs, the Russian military, and different African countries took stock of Africa Corps and how it compared to the Wagner Group. A Libyan analyst, based in Tobruk, noted at that workshop that it was "not going to be easy for Russia to get what it wants in Libya," that General Haftar remained "very transactional" vis-a-vis Russia, and that Russia's growing reliance on Libya after Assad's ouster gave him greater leverage in the bilateral relationship.

Central African Republic

In the CAR, the situation evolved differently: A few commanders were replaced, but Wagner continued to deploy as Wagner, and fighters did not sign new contracts with the Russian Defense Ministry. A few weeks after Prigozhin's death, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra confirmed in an interview that Russian fighters would stay and continue to provide security at a "difficult moment." At the time, Russian Telegram channels claimed that Wagner commander Dmitry Podolsky ("Salem") had become a security adviser to Touadéra, in a further sign that Wagner would remain in the CAR.³⁷ Whistleblower and former Wagner media operative Ephrem Yalike-Ngonzo, who stayed in Bangui until early 2024, confirmed to the author in an interview in France in spring 2025 that little had changed for Wagner in the CAR amid Africa Corps' emergence elsewhere.

Through 2024, old rumors of Russian intentions to establish a military base in the CAR resurfaced and ricocheted across social media. In January, the Russian embassy in Bangui confirmed ongoing talks to that effect.³⁸ In October, the *Economist* reported that development of the base, intended to host 10,000 troops by 2030, was already underway.³⁹ That assessment seemed premature since, as of May 2025, the two countries' defense ministries were reportedly still discussing "mutually acceptable conditions."⁴⁰

It remains to be seen what will come of plans to establish the base. During the RSI-CNS workshop, several participants shared the assessment that the Russian government's decision to rebrand Wagner into Africa Corps in Libya and across the Sahel, while allowing combat personnel to still deploy under the Wagner flag in the CAR, might be indicative of a general shift in Russian priorities and political focus away from the CAR and toward the Sahel. As of June 2025, it remained an open question whether, and for how long, Wagner could resist the Defense Ministry's usurpation of its CAR business. When Wagner announced the end of its Mali operations on June 6, Wagner's military commander in CAR told John Lechner, "We have leverage and arguments to stay here."⁴¹

Equatorial Guinea

While consolidating its hold over the Sahel, Africa Corps has also looked for new openings. Putin received the president of Equatorial Guinea in Moscow in late September 2024. A few weeks later, footage emerged on social media purportedly showing the arrival of Africa Corps troops.⁴² Yevkurov visited on December 1 to discuss "the outlook for military and military-technical cooperation,"⁴³ and the opening of a Russian House in Malabo, the capital, followed.⁴⁴ Through spring, social media channels were replete with evidence of Africa Corps troops providing protection to senior officials and training local forces.⁴⁵ At the RSI-CNS workshop, one expert drew attention to Africa Corps' collaboration with fighters from Belarus in Equatorial Guinea, raising the question whether this model might be replicated in other countries in the future. When Russian and Equatorial Guinean militaries held celebrations in Malabo on May 9, 2025 to mark Victory Day, Vladislav Zhur, chargé d'affaires of the Belarusian embassy, was in attendance.⁴⁶

Chad

In Chad, another Sahel country, the picture remained muddier through 2024 and spring 2025. US forces were ordered out in spring, only to be invited to return a few months later. In May 2024, Wagner Group accounts claimed that Russian interlocutors had helped to broker an agreement between Chad and the CAR on a border crossing and cooperation against "banditry."⁴⁷ There were also claims around the same time that Russian forces participated in the rescue of 21 Chadian soldiers detained by Islamists in a joint Russo-Chadian operation.⁴⁸ Andrew McGregor doubted that Russian forces had entered Chad, writing that a contingent of Hungarian forces that had arrived in April may have been mistaken for Russians, and that the Chadian military resisted Russia's entry.⁴⁹ Around the same time, Lavrov arrived in N'Djamena, stating at a joint press conference with his Chadian counterpart that the two countries were actively implementing existing agreements on defense and military-technical cooperation. While he specified that Chad was receiving Russian weapons and military equipment, he did not confirm the dispatch of Russian instructors.⁵⁰ In September, Chadian authorities temporarily detained a Prigozhin affiliate, Maxim Shugalei. In early 2025, the French-language pan-African weekly *Jeune Afrique* claimed that Africa Corps had begun deploying equipment at a base in northern Chad, near

the border with Libya. But it remained unclear whether Africa Corps had actually entered the country.

Other theaters

Through 2024 and spring 2025, there were signs that Russia was eyeing additional potential theaters for Africa Corps. Of particular note are Benin and Togo. During his African tour in November, Yevkurov discussed military-technical cooperation with the Togolese government. In summer 2025, the Russian foreign ministry said it was preparing to open an embassy in Togo, and shortly thereafter, the Russian parliament ratified a military cooperation agreement with the country. The deal reportedly includes joint military exercises, training for Togolese soldiers, and intelligence exchange. Some observers suggest that Russia may want to draw Togo into the AES.⁵¹ Benin is another country to watch: In contacts with the country's leadership, Lavrov discussed terrorism in the Sahel,⁵² and the pro-Russian Kemi Seba, who has hailed the Alliance of Sahel States, will run in Benin's April 2026 presidential election. In late July 2025, Russia's ambassador to Benin told Izvestia newspaper that Russia planned to sign an intergovernmental agreement on military cooperation with Benin: "We hope the calls of Russian warships at Benin and Togo will become a good tradition and promote the expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation in the security and defense spheres," he said.⁵³

In addition, in spring 2024, Russia's ambassador to Cameroon announced that Moscow wanted to help the country fight terrorism.⁵⁴ Through 2024, Russia also worked to reopen diplomatic missions, embassies, and "Russian Houses" in a number of other countries, including Somalia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Gambia, Liberia, and Guinea.⁵⁵ Participants in the RSI-CNS workshop noted that Sierra Leone, in particular, was a country to watch, given that several ministers have ties to Russia. Other countries, mentioned as possibly susceptible to Russia's entry, were the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, and Zimbabwe.

[Africa Corps: structural characteristics](#)

The Wagner Group vs. Africa Corps

During the RSI-CNS workshop, participants assessed that the Wagner Group's present disadvantages vis-à-vis Africa Corps include its loss of the Prigozhin "brand"; its dependence on allies in the Russian security services; its loss of significant human capital to other groups; and the fact that Africa Corps is set up for formalized government-to-government relations with host nations, which many of the latter prefer to the informal ties with Wagner. The Wagner Group's advantages remain its willingness to take on high-risk missions (such as, until recently, in Mali) and its greater flexibility.

Command

The workshop discussion showed that much remains unclear about Africa Corps' structure and command. Its greater proximity to and reliance upon the Russian Defense Ministry's chain of command and its formal integration with the ministry, have resulted in less visibility for researchers. As Jack Margolin noted, besides Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov and General Andrei Averyanov, commander of the GRU's Special Action Service, Africa Corps' leadership also includes Konstantin Mirzayants from Redut's leadership. While Africa Corps' operational leadership is not documented in open sources, the organization has claimed that its command staff consists of former combat commanders of elite units in the Russian military and unspecified PMCs.⁵⁶

Recruitment

Both the Wagner Group and Africa Corps have continued to lure willing fighters through elaborate recruitment campaigns on social media, with the latter usurping some of the former's recruitment infrastructure.⁵⁷ Africa Corps' official website provides detailed information about the application process; educational, legal, and medical requirements; and salary and benefits.⁵⁸ An Africa Corps representative with the call sign "Varyag" explained in an interview with a Tatar outlet that candidates have to undergo a polygraph test and multistage interviews, be Russian citizens, be free from outstanding debts or criminal records, and be "fit for service in countries with unfavorable hot climates." Before deployment abroad, he added, a recruit is given time to study the "cultural characteristics of the local population, their way of life and traditions."⁵⁹

Manpower

Workshop participants agreed that precise estimates of Africa Corps' manpower are impossible to compile from open sources. According to a report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), when the corps was created in summer 2023, the initial aspiration was for 40,000 troops to join. This target was subsequently reduced to 20,000 by the end of 2023, and the GRU failed to meet it.⁶⁰ In May 2024, the UK Ministry of Defense assessed that Africa Corps consists of "more than 2,000 regular soldiers and officers."⁶¹

The Wagner Group was not formally integrated into Africa Corps, though many of its members elected to join the corps. According to Margolin, assault detachment commanders with long tenure in the Wagner Group, such as Aleksandr "Ratibor" Kuznetsov and Boris "Zombie" Nizhevenok,⁶² joined Africa Corps. These veterans were then leveraged to attract skeptical potential recruits into service in organizations controlled by the Defense Ministry. On occasion, Africa Corps appears to have relied on other semiformal structures, such as the 81st Volunteer Spetsnaz Brigade "Bears." It is not apparent that any genuinely new units were created under Africa Corps. On occasion, a number of Russian fighters in the Sahel appear to have been redeployed to Ukraine: For instance, amid Ukraine's Kursk offensive in August 2024, around 100 Bear Brigade forces were redeployed from Burkina Faso.⁶³

At the RSI-CNS workshop, John Lechner suggested that Africa Corps personnel are largely comprised of instructors, with combat units intended as an operational reserve to ensure the security of administrative centers and critical infrastructure. Other participants reflected that, should Africa Corps continue to focus on lower-risk missions, it would likely continue to need less manpower compared to the Wagner Group. Per its advertising, Africa Corps is looking to recruit servicemen for a wide variety of positions: motorized rifle troops; artillery operators; tank operators; mechanics and drivers of armored infantry fighting vehicles; UAV operators; communications specialists; operators of air defense, radars, and electronic warfare; medical workers; technical and engineering support personnel; and translators, among others.⁶⁴

Benefits

According to the ministry, servicemen of Africa Corps are treated as equal to participants in the “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine and receive the same benefits.⁶⁵ All serving in Africa Corps are eligible for a military mortgage, medical care, and social services.⁶⁶ They are promised benefits for their children, such as a kindergarten placement without having to put their names on a waiting list, free meals in kindergarten and school, free after-school programs, free summer camps, and free college education.⁶⁷ Additional benefits for families include services for the elderly and disabled, and a one-time payment of 20,000 rubles for each minor child, among others.⁶⁸

Logistics

After the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, defense analysts estimated that Russia could probably maintain its Africa operations without access to its bases in Hmeymim and Tartus but that doing so would become more costly and a logistical headache. By mid-January 2025, initial panic in Russia’s military blogger scene gave way to cautious optimism that Moscow would probably strike a deal with Syria’s new leaders. Since January, Russia has engaged diplomatically to ensure a modicum of amicable relations with Syria, dispatching foreign ministry delegations to Damascus and changing its tone on Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Still, there were voices calling for Russia to diversify its military logistics.⁶⁹ To hedge its bets, Russia continued to invest in expanding its bases in Libya, the next refueling hub for Russia after Syria. In early 2025, videos showed a large Russian convoy composed of one hundred military vehicles rolling into Mali. While some observers saw the move as indicative of a transition from Wagner to Africa Corps, others noted that the hardware deployed, including heavy tanks, was of limited utility for counterterrorism operations in the Sahel and might have been brought “for show.”⁷⁰ At the same time, construction activity continued at an airport in Bamako, likely indicative of Russia’s desire to expand military logistics in Mali.⁷¹

Reviewing options for Russian naval basing at the time, RUSI concluded that bases in Libya, while imperfect, would be Moscow’s most likely alternative to the Tartus port but that it might also seek access to Algeria’s commercial ports for maintenance.⁷² The appointment of

General Sergey Surovikin as Russia’s military point person for Algeria and a December 2024 visit by Yevkurov—just 10 days after Assad’s fall in Syria—pointed to a possible interest in assessing such options.⁷³

Funding

The RSI-CNS workshop saw a discussion on the political economy of Africa Corps, how its funding structures differ from those of the Wagner Group, and how Africa Corps will be able to pay for its operations. In that context, several experts cautioned against the idea that enterprises run by Prigozhin in Africa had been particularly profitable. Nonetheless, there seemed to be consensus among participants that Africa Corps presently requires funding from the Russian state budget—another reason for it to move to a smaller, leaner footprint in terms of manpower. While not yet seeing any evidence of Africa Corps moving into critical mineral or mining businesses, participants noted that there was always the possibility of “mini-Prigozhins” springing up in the future, and that there would likely be an effort to solicit additional funding for Africa Corps operations, including from “patriotic oligarchs” with spare resources to invest in projects abroad. In April 2025, it was reported that Burkina Faso had offered a mining license to Nordgold, a Russian-backed mining company with ties to Wagner during Prigozhin’s era.⁷⁴

Future trajectory

There was a debate among participants at the RSI-CNS workshop as to whether Africa Corps’ model would be competitive in the future. Some argued that a low-risk approach focused on training and security assistance may prove just as “high reward” for Russia as did the Wagner Group’s high-risk engagement in the past. Others wondered whether Russia’s unwillingness to engage in high-risk operations could undermine its competitiveness vis-à-vis other security providers (such as Turkey), especially at a time when the Sahelian juntas and other African partners are looking to diversify their defense ties. One participant, based in Bamako, said, “Mali needs people to fight for them, not just training. If Russia doesn’t offer that, the Malians will look elsewhere.” Yet others noted that while Africa Corps to date seems interested mostly in low-risk operations, the possibility of “mission creep” could not be excluded, and its mandate could evolve in the future. Indeed, since the February workshop, there have been indications of a greater appetite by Africa Corps to move into higher-risk missions. Military equipment delivered for its Mali operations included the Spartak and other armored vehicles, suggesting preparations for combat involvement.⁷⁵

Conclusion

As of the writing of this report, it appears that the pieces have more or less fallen into place. Over the past two years, Africa Corps has taken over the Wagner Group’s former Africa operations, with the exception of those in the CAR, and elevated them to the level of state-to-state relations. As it was finding its footing, the Africa Corps firmed up its position in Libya and, with time, in Mali, where Wagner officially announced the end of its operations on June

6, 2025. The new entity also embraced new openings in countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Equatorial Guinea. In consolidating its presence in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, Russia both benefited from and actively encouraged the formation of the Alliance of the Sahel States and a deepening and widening of joint activities among the three countries.

Africa Corps' takeover appears to have been largely a bureaucratic reorganization and rebranding exercise: It gobbled up former Wagner fighters. The Russian military tethered the new entity closer to the military's chain of command, with Yevkurov and Averyanov in charge, but it does not seem to have created any new military units for the corps. While the entity's recruitment campaigns are highly visible, replete with detail on requirements, salary, and benefits, little is known from open sources about its command, manpower and funding. Africa Corps has operated overtly, shedding Wagner's approach of seeking to maintain plausible deniability. Though worst-case expectations regarding Russia's ouster from its Syrian bases did not come to pass after the fall of the Assad regime in December, Russia appears to be engaged in efforts to diversify its military logistics to ensure the sustainability of its Africa operations. Africa Corps has thus far prioritized training and routine security assistance, compared to the high-risk missions the Wagner Group used to undertake. Russia's mercenary enterprise emerged from Prigozhin's death in many ways more resilient and controllable—though perhaps also less nimble, not as good at making money, and, possibly, with less appetite for risk.

Several questions remain open at the time of writing. It is unclear whether and for how long the Wagner Group can preserve itself in the CAR and what the prospective usurpation of its activities by Africa Corps might mean for long-rumored Russian plans to establish a military base in the country. It remains to be seen whether Africa Corps will enter Chad, Togo, and Benin, and whether it will attempt to make inroads into a number of other potential target countries. Finally, it is not clear how much Africa Corps' operations will contribute to the ongoing fragmentation of the security-assistance landscape in Africa. As of spring 2025, players such as China, Iran, Turkey, and even Hungary were stepping up their own involvement in and around the Sahel, spreading their soft power and, in some cases, deploying PMCs. Should Africa Corps continue to eschew the types of higher-risk missions that Wagner had engaged in, it might face growing competition from these other players.

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