

Presence of Russian mercenaries in Mali risks bloody backlash, say experts

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Analysis: Wagner Group 'like a bull in a china shop' in unstable parts of Africa, say experts

Western officials told the Guardian earlier this year that the Wagner mercenary group was the “thin end of the wedge” and a “Trojan horse” for a Russian effort to extend its influence covertly in resource-rich and unstable parts of Africa.

In Mali, the group is filling a vacuum left by departing French troops who led international efforts to counter a decade-long insurgency. That effort, which included one of the largest UN peacekeeping missions in the world, failed, and the violence has spilled across [the volatile Sahel region](#), displacing tens of millions and destabilising fragile countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso.

“Wagner is one of the means Russia is using to spread influence and advance economic and other interests in [Africa](#),” said Jared Thompson, a research associate with the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC. “Wagner arrived in Mali at the same time as Malian officials went to Russia and as Moscow was selling arms to Bamako [the capital of Mali]. This certainly suggests Wagner’s deployment is part of a broader effort.”

Last weekend, Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, told Italian TV that Wagner was present in [Mali](#) and Libya “on a commercial basis” and reiterated Moscow’s official position that Wagner “has nothing to do with the Russian state”.

Though the group helped government forces fight off a rebel offensive in Central African Republic, its intervention in Mozambique against Islamic militants was a bloody and expensive debacle.

And analysts say Wagner’s [tactics in Mali](#) risk a backlash among local communities, which would make Islamist extremist violence in Mali much worse.

“The Russians are like a bull in the china shop and appear not to be aware of or care about the crucial ethnic dynamics,” said Corinne Dufka, a Sahel-based researcher with Human Rights Watch. “Their behaviour – with the clear complicity of the Malians – is deepening ethnic tensions and creating lots of new jihadists by way of these exactions.”

The Wagner intervention has been part of a broader offensive launched by Malian forces across central Mali after gains made by insurgents in areas closer to Bamako. Analysts are sceptical that will succeed.

“It’s fundamentally a governance problem so a military response alone is unlikely to be successful, and particularly not if it risks exacerbating existing problems relating to impunity in Mali,” said Catherine Evans, a director at Independent Diplomat, a not-for-profit diplomatic advisory group, and a former British ambassador to Mali.

P.S.

* The Guardian. Wed 4 May 2022 12.30 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/04/russian-mercenaries-wagner-group-mali-analysis>

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