

How Russia's Wagner Group is fuelling Sudan's armed conflict

Tuesday 2 May 2023, by [RAMANI Samuel](#) (Date first published: 25 April 2023).

Analysis: In Sudan's power struggle, the Russian mercenary group Wagner sees clear advantages in prolonging the conflict and strengthening the bargaining power of the Rapid Support Forces.

On 23 April, US officials revealed that the Wagner Group [offered powerful weapons](#), such as surface-to-air missiles, to Rapid Support Forces (RSF) chief Mohammed Hamdan 'Hemedti' Dagalo.

These weapons would be [transferred](#) from the Wagner Group's munitions stocks in the [Central African Republic \(CAR\)](#) to Sudan.

Although Hemedti had not accepted the Wagner Group's offer as of 20 April, the US has accused the mercenary group of trying to escalate Hemedti's conflict with Sudanese Armed Forces Chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

The [Wagner Group](#) has vehemently denied these allegations and instead framed itself as a constructive actor in Sudan. In a 20 April Telegram statement, the Wagner Group blasted "provocative" foreign media inquiries about its activities and [stated](#) that its staff have not operated in Sudan for more than two years.

"While the scale of the Wagner Group's involvement in the Burhan-Hemedti conflict is still being deciphered, the private military company has been active in Sudan since late 2017"

The Wagner Group's financier Yevgeny Prigozhin subsequently [offered himself](#) as a mediator between Burhan and Hemedti, as he "communicated with all people making decisions in the Republic of Sudan".

To burnish his image as a mediator, Prigozhin highlighted two awards that he received from the Sudanese authorities (the Order of the Republic of Sudan in 2018 and Order of Two Niles in 2020) and offered to dispatch jets with medical assistance to Sudanese soldiers.

While the scale of the Wagner Group's involvement in the [Burhan-Hemedti conflict](#) is still being deciphered, the private military company has been active in Sudan since late 2017.

By supporting Hemedti in a deniable fashion, Prigozhin seeks to present himself as a foreign policy entrepreneur that advances Russia's strategic interests and bolsters his prestige against his rivals in the Russian Foreign and Defence Ministries.

The Wagner Group's shifting alignments in Sudan

In November 2017, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir travelled to Sochi to meet with his Russian

counterpart Vladimir Putin. After their meeting, Bashir implored Russia to provide Sudan with protection from the aggressive actions of the United States.

The Kremlin [swiftly complied](#) with this request, as Wagner Group mercenaries who served in Ukraine and Syria were relocated to Sudan.

But the Wagner Group's entry into the country [was shrouded](#) with disinformation. Oleg Krinitsyn, chief of private Russian firm RSB, [claimed](#) that some of these mercenaries returned to Russia with a severe form of malaria, while former Federal Security Service (FSB) Colonel Igor Girkin asserted that the Wagner Group had actually deployed forces to neighbouring South Sudan.

Nevertheless, a military training video in Sudan featuring obscene language from Russian mercenaries was released on 12 December 2017.

Wagner Group PMCs were initially tasked with guarding Prigozhin's gold mining interests in Sudan. After the Bashir-Putin meeting, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev [oversaw](#) a mining concession agreement between Sudan's Ministry of Minerals and Prigozhin-aligned mining company M-Invest.

During the first half of 2018, M-Invest subsidiary Meroe Gold dispatched a team of 50 geologists to explore five gold mining plots in Sudan. Wagner Group PMCs were dispatched to guard Meroe Gold's new assets.

Prigozhin's activities received Kremlin support, as the Russian Air Force's 223rd Flight Unit provided M-Invest with two planes and nine flights from April 2018 to February 2019.

When protests erupted against Bashir's regime in late 2018, the Wagner Group sought to quell unrest. Despite strenuous denials from the Russian Foreign Ministry, Wagner Group PMCs [were spotted](#) patrolling anti-government rallies in Khartoum in early 2019.

As the Wagner Group had already dispatched 500 PMCs for military training in Darfur, Bashir welcomed Prigozhin's offers of assistance. The Wagner Group [devised plans](#) to repress protests that would entail a "minimal but acceptable loss of life," urging Bashir to buy time through food aid deliveries and choreographed dialogue with the Sudanese opposition, and advocated a smear campaign that linked protests to Israel and LGBT rights.

"The Wagner Group's chief Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely backing Hemedti in the hopes of achieving a victory in Sudan that empowers him at the expense of his domestic rivals"

Bashir's [refusal](#) to fully implement these recommendations, which Prigozhin lambasted as a "lack of activity" and an "extremely cautious position," caused the Wagner Group to establish ties with his rivals in the Sudanese military.

Due to his involvement in gold smuggling and hardline opposition to a democratic transition, Wagner viewed Hemedti as an especially appealing partner. Possibly as a result of his alliance with Hemedti, Prigozhin established 'The Russian Company', a tightly guarded gold mining plant in al-Ibediyya, which is located approximately 200 miles north of Khartoum.

The [October 2021 coup](#), which banished Sudan's civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok from the political scene, further strengthened Wagner's partnership with Hemedti. After this coup, the Wagner Group [allegedly began](#) supplying military aid to help the RSF repress grassroots pro-democracy movements in Sudan.

The Wagner Group's stake in the conflict

Since mid-April, the Wagner Group has allegedly provided military assistance to Hemedti's forces via its installations in [Libya](#). These military aid shipments were likely greenlit by Libya National Army (LNA) chief Khalifa Haftar, who has used Wagner Group and RSF mercenaries for offensive operations.

In the forty-eight hours [leading up](#) to the first Burhan-Hemedti clashes on 15 April, Russian Ilyushin-76 aircraft shuttled between Khadim, Libya and Latakia, Syria and from Khadim to Jufra, Libya. These highly unusual air transit patterns potentially resulted in the distribution of surface-to-air missiles to Hemedti's forces.

The Wagner Group's clandestine support for Hemedti is at odds with Russia's more balanced official position.

The Kremlin's response to the Burhan-Hemedti conflict mirrored the reactions of the US and China, as it called for dialogue between the warring parties. While Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov welcomed Hemedti to Moscow in February 2022, he also held talks with Burhan during his February 2023 visit to Khartoum.

These frictions are unsurprising, as they coincide with Prigozhin's increasingly strident criticisms of the Russian Defence and Foreign Ministries.

As the Wagner Group's progress in the eastern [Ukrainian battleground of Bakhmut](#) stagnated in late February, Prigozhin accused Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov of "treason" and of trying to destroy Wagner by [denying him ammunition](#).

On 9 April, Prigozhin [accused](#) the Russian Foreign Ministry of "doing absolutely nothing" in Africa and proposed a list of 15 issues that Russia should be dealing with as UN Security Council chair.

Given these tensions, Prigozhin is likely backing Hemedti in the hopes of achieving a victory in Sudan that empowers him at the expense of his domestic rivals.

"Much like in Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic, Wagner's gambit will be detrimental to Sudanese civilians and Sudan's flailing democratic transition"

If Hemedti prevails in his struggle against Burhan or a settlement is reached that preserves his stature, Prigozhin could benefit in two ways.

First, it would ensconce Russia's long-term control over Sudanese gold reserves, which play an indirect role in financing [Wagner operations in Ukraine](#).

The Wagner Group has an entrenched [gold smuggling network](#) in Sudan, which is led by the convicted kidnapper and former Wagner PMC in Libya Alexander Kuznetsov, that expanded its operations since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

In addition to helping Prigozhin self-finance Wagner's operations in Ukraine, smuggled gold provides valuable hard currency that helps Russia buttress the impact of Western sanctions.

Second, it could bolster Russia's prospects of securing a Red Sea naval base in Sudan, which could be staffed by Wagner Group PMCs.

On 11 February, the Sudanese government confirmed that it finished its review of the basing

agreement with Russia in Port Sudan but was awaiting the victory of a civilian government to implement the deal.

As Russia had expanded its weapons deliveries to Sudan in the hopes of expediting the base's construction, this announcement likely disappointed the Kremlin.

Since Hemedti implored the Sudanese authorities to be open to a [naval base accord](#) with Russia in March 2022, an empowered RSF would likely be more willing than Burhan to lobby for the Port Sudan base's construction.

Although the opportunistic character of Russia's Sudan policy will likely endure, the Wagner Group sees clear advantages in prolonging the conflict and strengthening Hemedti's bargaining power.

Much like in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic, Wagner's gambit will be detrimental to Sudanese civilians and Sudan's flailing democratic transition.

Samuel Ramani is a tutor of politics and international relations at the University of Oxford, where he received a doctorate in 2021. His research focuses on Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

The New Arab

<https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-russias-wagner-group-fuelling-sudans-armed-conflict>