

Is Burkina Faso edging closer to the Wagner mercenaries?

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A rising jihadist threat may force Burkina Faso into accepting outside help - and its partnership options are limited

Nearly a year after Burkina Faso's latest coup, the west African country's problems with jihadist militants seem to be intensifying.

On 4 September, 17 soldiers and 36 volunteer fighters [were killed](#) in clashes with militants, in Burkina Faso's worst attack in months.

But the government, led by 34-year-old army captain Ibrahim Traoré, who seized power in September last year - the second of two coups in the country in 2022 - is in an increasingly tight position.

Having exhausted domestic options for stemming the militant threat, Traoré has also narrowed his choice of international partners. Now he is left with only one alternative: Russia and the Wagner Group, [a private military company](#)

One of Burkina Faso's problems is that the Burkinabè army has played an auxiliary role to French military contingents since 1987, when a coup led to the assassination of Thomas Sankara, an army officer who had seized the presidency for four years. This is true of the armies of most other Francophone countries; the structure of the relationships between France and its former colonies does not allow for stand-alone militaries, which has affected the size, equipment and training of domestic armies.

Opposing the Burkinabè military is an insurgency [trained](#) not only in the practical use of weapons, technical communication devices, surveillance, and reconnaissance but also in guerrilla warfare. Insurgents attack Burkinabè government forces not to control territory or capture weapons and vehicles, but to weaken them and create fear.

In conversation, Burkina Faso army officers frequently raise two issues: some improvement in weapons, technical equipment and supplies, starting from a low base, and a worsening situation in terms of specialists, experienced sergeants and battalion commanders.

One officer noted: "[Previously] we only had enough equipment for half the contingent to undertake an operation. The other half stayed on base." Now, although the whole contingent can take part, an effective counterinsurgency would require better equipment and greater professionalism. At this point, such improvements would require the Burkinabè army to partner with outside forces.

But Traoré, who took power citing the country's deteriorating security situation, [is riding](#) a tidal wave of anti-French, pro-sovereignty movements among the Sahel's urban youth. These sentiments help legitimatise his rule, but they also limit room for manoeuvre when it comes to international

partnerships. France is no longer an option, with French forces ordered to leave Burkina Faso in January. United Nations peacekeeping forces have also [discredited themselves](#) in the eyes of Traoré's administration.

Burkina Faso is now increasingly likely to deploy Russia's Wagner group, or some version of it. Traoré has some regional templates from which to draw inspiration; Mali's interim president, Colonel Assimi Goïta – with whom the Burkinabè captain has [a warm relationship](#) – hired Wagner in 2021.

Traoré has also worked to cultivate ties with Moscow. He was the star of the Russia-Africa Summit in St Petersburg in late July, giving [a speech](#) that cast him as the embodiment of Africa's new anti-imperialist generation.

Yet, so far, Traoré has eschewed Wagner's services for several reasons.

Firstly, Thomas Sankara, the famous revolutionary leader who was nicknamed 'Africa's Che Guevara', blasted neo-colonialism and hypocrisy – and this pro-sovereignty ideology put down deep roots in his country. It is held to apply to all international partners, not just the West.

Then there is the fact that Traoré's government has witnessed five years of Wagner operations in the Central African Republic, in which the mercenaries' counterinsurgency measures successfully weakened armed groups but also [penetrated the country's local economy](#). Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, is wary. "In solving one problem, we don't want to take on another," one Burkinabè military official said.

In Mali, Wagner found a [tougher business environment](#), given the capacity and power of the country's elite, and has also had much less success countering insurgent groups in the country. This track record could be seen to bode ill for a Wagner counter-insurgency initiative in neighbouring Burkina Faso.

Therefore, the Burkinabè military has worked to shore up its position and avoid the Wagner option. Last year, the Traoré government [announced](#) it would recruit 50,000 fighters for the Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherland (VDP). "We have our Wagners," Traoré [told](#) journalists. "The VDP we recruit, they are our Wagner." But the recruitment drive did not quell the insurgency and, earlier this year, the junta announced a ["general mobilisation"](#) to give the state "all necessary means" to combat the jihadist fighters.

On 16 September, the leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger [signed a](#) collective defence pact, forming the Alliance of Sahel States, known as AES by the letters of its French abbreviation.

Though Traoré has consistently denied any plans to partner with Wagner, Wagner's own prospects and remit are changing. The death of the group's boss, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in August [has spurred](#) an effort by Russia's defence ministry to bring Wagner's Africa operations under its control.

Partnering with an outfit that is controlled by the Russian government would imply a state-to-state relationship, important for the Sahel's pro-sovereignty movement. Authorities in Bamako, for instance, always refer to Wagner personnel in Mali as "Russian soldiers". On 31 August, a delegation led by Russia's deputy defence minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov [visited](#) Ouagadougou to discuss state-to-state military cooperation and training.

There is also the belief in some Ouagadougou circles that the Russian military lacks the private mercenary Wagner's interest in financial deal-making. Wagner sources say that in the event of a deployment to Burkina Faso, security and business operations would be kept separate.

The AES security agreement between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger creates an opportunity for Ouagadougou to partner with Moscow under the aegis of a regional agreement. Traoré has been doing everything he can to avoid an outside intervention, but Burkina Faso's deteriorating security situation may force his hand. Perhaps he will now get Wagner in all but name.

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