



**THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY
SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA
INSTITUTE OF FOR GRADUATE STUDIES IN
SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**The Impact of Private Military Companies on Hybrid Warfare:
Wagner in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya**

Master's Thesis

Assala Khettache

Master of Arts in International Relations (English)

June 2022



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STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all materials and results that are not original to this work. I declare that this thesis is written according to the writing rules of Social Sciences University of Ankara, Institute of Social Sciences.



Assala Khettache

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I would like to take the opportunity here and extend my appreciation to my tutor and advisor, Professor *Muhittin Ataman*, for his supervision throughout my research and for shaping my academic as for my personal paths, which made this project foremost possible and is properly going to influence my further career in a particular amount.

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Assala Khettache

June 21, 2022

ABSTRACT

The Impact of Private Military Companies on Hybrid Warfare: Wagner in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya

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MA in International Relations

Supervisor: Prof. Muhittin Ataman

This dissertation intends to identify the underlying dynamics of the impact of PMCs in hybrid warfare by building on focused literature on PMCs and the broad literature on the role of non-state armed actors in hybrid warfare. Relying on an in-depth examination of Russian PMC Wagner, this research adopts a qualitative research method fostered by a cross-case study design and interactive data analysis methods through a series of semi-structured interviews. The analytical framework focuses on the PMCs' instruments of power at the operational and tactical levels and the logic and motives behind the combat contract, which are translated to specific behavioral operational patterns and roles.

The application of the analytical and methodological frameworks has resulted in a set of conclusions describing typical interactions of PMCs in hybrid warfare, which helps understand hybrid conflict dynamics in practical applications. Wagner provides the premium package of battlefield services at the operational level in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine with different capacities. The degree of used capacities differs based on the rationale behind the intervention in the conflict, which ultimately defines the autonomy of the PMC and hence the degree to which PMCs operate as proxies obedient to their sponsor. The findings aim to take primary steps in filling the knowledge gap surrounding this prominent actor, which is expected to build further awareness of how PMCs activities on battlefields can be labeled in practice and theory.

Keywords: Private Military Companies, Hybrid Warfare, Wagner Group, Russia

ÖZET

Özel Askeri Şirketlerin Hibrit Savaşa Etkisi: Suriye, Ukrayna ve Libya'daki Wagner Faaliyetleri

Assala Khettsache

Uluslararası İlişkiler Yüksek Lisans Programı

Danışman: Prof. Dr. Muhittin Ataman

Bu tez, Özel Askeri Şirketler (ÖAŞ) üzerine oluşmuş spesifik literatüre ve hibrit savaşta devlet dışı silahlı aktörlerin rolüne ilişkin daha geniş literatüre dayanarak, ÖAŞ'lerin hibrit savaşta etkisinin altında yatan dinamikleri belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Rus ÖAŞ Wagner'in derinlemesine bir incelemesine dayanan bu araştırma, çapraz vaka tasarımı ve yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar üzerinden etkileşimli veri analiziyle desteklenen nitel bir araştırma yöntemi benimsemiştir. Bu analitik çerçeve, ÖAŞ'lerin operasyonel ve taktik seviyelerdeki güç enstrümanlarına ve muharebe sözleşmelerinin arkasındaki mantık ve motivasyonlara odaklanmakta, bunlar ise spesifik davranışsal operasyonel örüntü ve rollere dönüşmektedir.

Bu analitik ve metodolojik çerçeveler ÖAŞ'lerin hibrit savaşta tipik etkileşimlerini tanımlayan bir dizi sonuç ortaya çıkarmıştır ki bu, hibrit çatışmanın pratik uygulamalardaki dinamiklerinin anlaşılmasına yardımcı olmaktadır. Wagner; Suriye, Libya ve Ukrayna'da farklı kapasitelerde operasyonel düzeyde kapsamlı ve üst düzey savaş alanı hizmetleri paketi sunmaktadır. Kullanılan kapasitelerin derecesi, sonuçta ÖAŞ'nin özerkliğini ve dolayısıyla ÖAŞ'lerin sponsorlarına itaat eden vekiller olarak faaliyet gösterme derecesini tanımlamaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular, bu önemli aktör etrafındaki bilgi boşluğunu doldurmayı, bu şekilde ÖAŞ'lerin savaş meydanındaki faaliyetlerinin teori ve pratiği üzerine bir farkındalık yaratmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Özel Askeri Şirketler, Hibrit Savaş, Wagner Grubu, Rusya

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

By the turn of the 20th and 21st epochs, the world entered a qualitatively new era in the development of the international system, which seems to have a stable trend to reinforce its war potential by increasing the number of international and local, and regional conflicts. Earlier history also revealed that war never ends; it evolves gradually over time. For sure, today's wars are not yesterday's and cannot be like the ones to be seen -unfortunately- in the future times. We talk about generations of war where each generation signifies a new era reflecting upon the continuous development and evolvement of military thinking and innovation. As a result, wars have gone beyond traditional military confrontations, including modern tools and tactics with different dimensions that cannot be fully grasped today.

The concept of the warfare generations mirrors this gradual transformation. The first generation was represented by conventional wars that raged between two regular armies in a direct clash, while the second generation was embodied by guerrilla/revolutionary wars, which were usually between a traditional regular army and armed groups with specific goals and motives. The third generation of wars practically means a pre-emptive strike, or what is called the war of maneuvers. The fourth-generation was signified by the confrontation between a regular army of a country versus no country or an opponent in a different form. Fifth-generation warfare goes beyond fourth-generation warfare by broadening the realms of combat to encompass physical (land, air, and sea), information (including cyber), cognitive, and social (including political) dimensions. While the fourth generation of war symbolizes the modern warfare era, the fifth generation marks the beginning of the postmodern war (Reed, 2008). Although there are many debates on the thin lines between warfare and another or even on the categorization itself, what is significant is how the dynamics of

wars were evolving simultaneously with the nature and character of the actors involved. Over time, these actors gained a unique hybrid character that made them stand at the heart of global security concerns. While the central nature of war has not changed as people today are still fighting for the same fundamental reasons, the blurring of the boundaries between the different types of war and the usage of non-military means to undermine the foundations of the state is one of the most prominent of national security challenges faced at present.

Many concepts label modern forms of warfare as a surrogate, grey zone activity, non-linear, asymmetric, compound, ambiguous, and cyber warfare. (Giannopoulos, Smith, & Theodoridou, 2021) Hybrid warfare is just one of the many related labels and was even called ‘Sixth-generation warfare’ (Weissmann, 2018, p. 18). It is a type of war that is expected to last in the upcoming decades because of the involvement of non-state armed actors, which can be related to the weakening of the sovereignty of states that was complemented by a parallel fading of the impact of modern-day militaries (Reed, 2008) and ultimately produced a new transnational system in which relationships are complex (Ataman, 2003) non-state actors in this new system can act as independent actors and can be used as proxy tools by states to achieve their objectives and strategic pursuits. In all cases, these actors tend to use modern and traditional tactics adapting to the nature of hybrid war that merges regular and irregular fighting modes. Although “equally” state and non-state actors get involved in hybrid warfare, they differ broadly in their means and activities. They all demonstrate the capability to synchronize multiple instruments of power against vulnerabilities to generate linear and non-linear effects. (MCDC, 2017)

Private Military Companies (PMCs) as a “new”¹ type of armed non-state actors profoundly impacted the post-cold war period and how countries battle in modern wars. Some even argue that PMCs are the new signs of revolutions in military affairs today. (Moyakine, 2015) They are considered examples of how states can interfere in wars in unofficial-official, legal, or illegal ways to protect their strategic interests. Nevertheless, the guns for hire are tools used to gain advantages in conflicts and battlefields and can impact the political dynamics and strategic interests of states that sponsor/hire them, based on the role they were paid to play. PMCs have been an obstinate part of U.S. and

¹ The newness of this actor is not related to its foundation, instead on its increased activeness in the international system in general and its position as a main aggressor in conflict particularly.

UK security and foreign and internal affairs in recent decades. In Afghanistan, for instance, Blackwater PMC has worked closely with U.S. soldiers, as they have safeguarded several international politicians and diplomats and were involved in military operations. (Leander, 2010) While G4S, one of the UK's significant PMCs, provided essential operational support to Britain's military. (Norton-Taylor, 2016)

When tracing non-western PMCs' roots, we find that Russia's military interventions, mainly in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, developing because of the Anglo-American economic and dominant political culture supporting military privatization, are primarily carried out under the subcontracting of Russian PMCs. Whereas war-drowsy West "departures"² from the Middle East, Russian PMCs benefit from the Kremlin's plans in strategic zones. Using a more violent, secretive, and risk-tolerant approach, Russian PMCs play the role of the frontier agents of the Russian grand strategy that aims to extend/maintain its influence beyond Russian territory. These agents' operations are often a part of hybrid warfare campaigns. Wagner PMC, mainly, is known to be the secret weapon used to make sure that the Kremlin agendas are to be achieved outside of Russia and on the far-flung battlefields. Wagner was an unknown company in the private military contractor's world until after they fought alongside pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's armed conflict in 2014. Since then, more news³ started coming out as the indicators of the groups' engagement in different conflicts⁴ around the globe intensified. They are mostly recognized as an informal pro-Russian military force based in at least 30 countries across four continents and not necessarily in conflict zones. Wagner, therefore, is Russia's way to enjoy its power as "prestige," liberated of what visible results it may yield. This unofficial "power-projection" capabilities confirm Russia's geopolitical abilities and ambition while providing plausible deniability for its engagements. (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2021) For this reason, they are called ghost warriors (Rondeaux, 2019), as there are many ongoing

² "Departures" formally because of the reduced intensity or end of conflict, but this does not mean that they have left the territory of the conflict zone. These PMCs become military passive actors (temporarily) till they find a new conflict to engage in.

³ BBC in particular conducts field investigations on Wagner and succeeded in providing new information related to the PMC activities particularly in Libya. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvBibkFERwM>.

⁴ Their increased involvement is not necessarily related to conflict only, Wagner PMC takes part in economical deals and even allegedly humanitarian operations.

debates on the relationship between Wagner and the Kremlin and the plausible deniability this relation produces.

This research intends to identify the underlying dynamics of the impact of PMCs as non-state actors in hybrid warfare. For this purpose, the study relies on an in-depth assessment of privatization in the Russian military industry manifested in the Russian PMC Wagner. Measuring the performance and impact of Wagner in different far-flung battlefield operations and addressing the new dynamics of the involvement of this actor in conflicts are critical for the identification of the influence of PMCs in hybrid warfare. It should be noted that this research will not dig into the political ground and the Kremlin-connected sponsorship of Wagner, as these aspects require research at another microscopic level. However, by focusing solely on the military and operational dimensions, this research considers the Wagner a state-backed PMC that uses unique instruments of power and can operate with full, semi, or no autonomy at all, depending on the Russian State interest which results in different PMC roles from warfare to another.

1. RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

This dissertation sets out to answer the following question: *How do PMCs impact the dynamics of hybrid warfare?* Raising this question means that this research does not take a stand in the discussion of whether PMCs affect warfare's dynamic. Instead, it will examine the dynamics of the impact itself. Importantly, when we talk about how PMCs impact war, it is logical to assume that there are specific conditions when these companies can have a particular influence on the ground. As a result, an application of specific criteria in the analysis of the concept of PMCs is needed. Furthermore, posing sub-questions will enable answering the main one.

- a) How do PMCs fit into the notion of hybrid warfare?
- b) Does the impact of PMCs differ from one battlefield to another?
- c) Can the impact of PMCs in a hybrid conflict be effectively analyzed through a specific criterion?
- d) If yes, what are the variables/conditions controlling the impact of PMCs on hybrid warfare?

These questions will be addressed not in a specific order but ultimately within the different stages of the analyses that are explained throughout the analytical framework.

2. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

An early review of the research resources proposes that:

- PMCs impact hybrid warfare dynamics by creating *exploitable ambiguity* through employing a hybrid form of operational objectives and tactics. The degree of the created ambiguity and hence the impact of Wagner on warfare dynamics differs based on how Russia would use the PMC to project its power and achieve its strategic goals.
- PMCs' impact on warfare *internal dynamics* varies depending on the degree of the autonomy of the PMC on the battlefield/operation. This degree also is associated with the duration of the conflict, local/international support, and power equilibrium between the actors on the field, which can ultimately define the degree of the autonomy of Wagner and even the success of its operation.
- PMCs' assessment can be examined by studying its instruments of power that can be identified through the *logic* and *motive* of the intervention of the PMC in different war zones. These two parameters are outlined when investigating the contact essence of the PMC and their customer's intents⁵. These two variables control the operational behavior of the PMC that is deciphered to three types of battlefield roles: war-fighting state proxies, grey zone operators, and security experts.
- PMCs create synchronized battlefield packages that are built to perceive the vulnerabilities of the targets and then exploit them and transform them into multi-functioned operations based on the role they play on the battlefield.

3. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

Hybrid warfare is a disputed notion with no broadly accepted definition and limited empirical proof; meanwhile, PMCs' classifications and impact are still undecided. There has been very little written on PMCs' engagement logic, motives, and

⁵ Throughout this research the "customer," "sponsor," "patron" labels refer to the Russian state.

dynamics as one of ‘the main aggressors’ in conflicts. Hence, most questions are still unanswered or contested, such as those related to these actors’ broad strategic utility, even beyond the battlefield. These massive gaps can be explained by the existing weak conceptualization of armed non-state actors’ role as part of broader and more detailed-scale states’ coercive attempts to achieve their interests. Subsequently, the discourse surrounding these actors has been chiefly about their role in conflicts, aspects of understanding the market, and sorting out accountability, along with the debate on the effects PMCs have on the idea of statehood (Leander, 2010) and ethical and international regulations (Krahmann, 2005) (Kees, 2011). Regardless of the surfeit of literature that has emerged on hybrid warfare and the Private Military industry, there remains a gap as very few voices engage in understanding these units together. Hence, analysis of PMCs’ impact on hybrid warfare remains unavailable.

This research aims to take primary steps in filling the informational gap surrounding these modern actors’, which is expected to build further awareness of how PMCs activities on battlefields can be labeled in practice and theory; An awareness that seems to be more needed than ever, referring to the aggressive Russian policies against the West that target vulnerable countries and project its hybrid actions on them. Here the hybridity becomes more practical than theoretical; therefore, a strategic challenge more than an academic question. In the lack of in-depth, focused research on modern hybrid warfare, governments and international authorities face considerable challenges in fighting against hybrid aggressions. Hence, hybrid warfare and PMCs should be abstracted from the theoretical aspect and, resting on it, assessed from the perspective of practical-reciprocal actions, which is the essence of this dissertation, the motive to write it, and the goal to be reached.

3.1. Representation

Signifying the PMCs industry in the dissertation is the Wagner group. Since PMCs have been an exciting topic within political circles and an underserved area of research in academia, a thorough case like Wagner provides a frame for cross analyses of PMCs’ involvement in battlefields while also establishing a criterion for understanding the number of features of PMCs and the way they function. Examining these specific aspects is also expected to benefit other researchers in understanding

Russia's contemporary grand military strategy. Additionally, the literature on Russian PMCs, particularly those related to the Wagner group, is relatively poor due to its newness, lack of data, and high risks surrounding investigations on the group.⁶⁷ Hence, the material presented in this dissertation is estimated to be an addition to the related literature. Considering the controversy raised by the Wagner Group about its orientation, policy, and sources of support, I seek to provide a preliminary reading of the group's activity in terms of the nature of its systematic operations and the areas of deployment of its elements to reach an answer to an essential question about the extent to which it is possible to evaluate the modern hybrid warfare trends through the movements of Wagner.

3.2. Research Challenges

The shortage of scholarly literature related to PMCs lies within the difficulty of this research which requires deep-rooted knowledge of the investigated conflict territories and access to informal social channels that demand a certain level of network and social trust.⁸ The research challenges differ from one region to another; while the complexity of the local environment is the main challenge when we look at Wagner in Libya, security concerns and insufficient evidence make researching Ukraine and Syria quite tricky.

First, grasping the social dynamics of African countries is not an easy task. It can even be considered a challenge for those not acquainted with the norms, traditions, and cultural identities that can be found in one country. Here, it is worth underlining that PMCs' literature is dominated by Western thinkers who are 'often' not familiar with the complexity of the local African environments. This complexity is observed in civilians' political and social relations, either when acting as individuals or members of certain social groups. Consequently, the behavioral pathway and interactions of the PMCs with the local environment can hardly be identified. These observations can be reached by

⁶ Researchers working on Wagner- a very small group- namely Sergey Sukhankin, Marten Kimberly, and Candace Rondeaux.

⁷ There are many risks surrounding the research on Wagner, as several journalists were killed investigating the group's shadow work. Russian reporters investigating Wagner's operations have suffered mysterious deaths and some gone into hiding. (Hauer, 2018)

⁸ Based on the assumptions that: 1) locating and understanding PMCs interactions with their local environments is necessary to identify the overall impact of the PMCs and 2) PMCs particularly Wagner use their network on society level to successfully complete the missions they have been paid to do.

immersing oneself socially in the environment, which is the basis of the second challenge. The risks surrounding any military-related research in conflict zones, in general, are very high, and fieldwork cannot be conducted efficiently due to security concerns and academic ethical worries. While Ukraine is witnessing a live war, Syria is still considered a danger zone due to the active and semi-active armed groups and proxies in the region that are not necessarily related to the conflict itself but part of a more considerable regional rivalry.

At last, when it comes to the language, it is not enough to learn Russian to research in East Europe or Arabic in Arab countries but knowing the basics of the local language, or what I call language change trends, is crucial. Likewise, social barriers are a daunting obstacle; getting information from a person requires a certain level of trust that, in most cases, cannot be reached because of the widespread mentality that is founded on the ‘fear of the foreigner’s hidden intentions,’ in Africa and the Arab world; If we carefully examine the social norms, we find that supporting foreigners even when conducting academic research (surveys for example) might be considered a treasonable act and therefore not only affect the individuals but their families, and friends in the short and long term. The roots and developments of this way of thinking, which is responsible for shaping most of today’s African and Arab people’s mentality, result from the long-lasting colonialism the regions have experienced⁹ throughout the centuries.

4. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The chosen methodology and design are outlined, and the research strategy is described; subsequently, the reliability and validity of a study are presented. Due to the relevant literature research gap that will be examined from a practical aspect in Chapter 3, and to achieve the purpose behind this research, I create specific parameters to analyze the involvement of PMCs in hybrid warfare. The rationale behind the new analytical framework and its new components are explained.

⁹ “And still experiencing” Referring here to passive colonialism in post-colonial era.

4.1. Methodology

There is vibrant theoretical literature dedicated to understanding modern warfare and novel understandings of classical and mainstream theories. Even though the scope of this research might fit under theories that aim to explain how non-western powers operate in today's conflicts, such as critical security theories. The study aims not to test a theory but to deeply examine how PMCs engage in warfare to outline how they impact its dynamics by incorporating tactical, operational, and strategic dimensions. Because the topic has little empirical evidence and must be examined for its specific aspects within the general frame of war, which is a multifaceted and disputed concept in theory and practice, this dissertation will adopt a qualitative research method fostered by a cross-case study design.

This method will allow better exploration and deep understanding of the use of PMCs through digging into diverse data sources. Moreover, this analysis method eases the comparison of cohesions and variances in the activities and courses that are the units of analysis of the chosen cases. By applying this approach, internal validity increases. I consider that the results and associations resulting from the analysis would also reflect internal validity reinforced by the diversity and value of the sources used in the research. Even though the concern of external validity rests since the research analytical framework is based on a selection of inclusion criteria to examine the impact of PMCs, the external validity of the study is optimized, and its feasibility is improved. (Salkind, 2010)

The cases that are selected for the cross-sectional analyses of Wagner activities are the Ukrainian conflict (in 2014 and then in 2022 war separately) and Syrian war (the year 2018 only), and finally, the Libyan conflict (in 2020-2021). This assortment is based on the following reasons:

- A.** The cases are current/previous Russian examples of hybrid war/campaign.
- B.** The conflicts offer patterns in which the Russian state went on the offensive intentionally (officially and non-officially), using Wagner PMC as part of its hybrid campaign to acquire a political/strategic objective.

- C. The careful examination of the cases has the potency to show the capabilities of PMCs in conflict environments allowing us to detect the behavior patterns of the companies.
- D. The timeline of the cases mirrors the different phases of the development of Wagner in terms of strategy and tactics, which reflects upon the development of Russia's hybrid strategies.
- E. All the war territories selected have seen a strong PMC presence, formally or informally, at one point or another.

The timeframe is chosen based on the intensity of each conflict separately and the increase of Wagner engagements while keeping in mind Russian political action patterns and developments at the international and regional levels. Even though the cases are abstracted from diverse time phases, the analysis considers prior and recent events and should be understood as a timeline. For this purpose, I employ within-case and across-case methods of comparison to explore: How Wagner PMC in three different countries with unlike histories, cultures, political structures, and societal norms interact in conflict and if the similarities/differences between cases collate with the roles and instruments Wagner PMC use in each case.

4.2. Research Strategy

The research strategy consists of gathering and analyzing the latest primary and secondary archival data from various sources to establish qualitative cases, data from an assortment of primary and secondary sources in French, Arabic, English, Turkish and Russian languages. To enhance the study's flexibility, interactive data analysis methods are employed through a series of semi-structured interviews¹⁰ that are conducted with civilians, militants who participated in relevant operations, as well as security professionals from the PMCs industry, particularly from the UK, Libya, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Syria. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in three languages (Arabic, English, and French). This method has been chosen due to the topic's sensitivity, which cannot be framed with a set of fixed questions. Having less

¹⁰ The interviews conducted for this dissertation are approved by the ethical research committee of Social Sciences University of Ankara.

structured open-ended interviews enhances the clarity and flexibility in terms of questions and answers and makes the research patterns for investigation more visible while permitting comparisons between respondents. Whereas the total of interviews conducted is 50, only a few are used in this dissertation, representing a part of more prominent doctoral research. Due to the sensitivity and risks surrounding the topic, the names of the interviewees are anonymously stated; however, a sample of the questions asked is provided in appendix 1.¹¹ In addition, what is hoped to be found useful is the affiliations of the interviewees that are provided whereby proved to be of a remarkable quality due to the diversity in languages and cultures, high profile, experience, and education level of the people interviewed.

4.3. A Framework for Analysis and Assessment of PMC's Impact on Hybrid warfare

Establishing the basis for discussing PMCs' impact on hybrid warfare becomes inevitable to support the initial hypotheses outlined. This would build a steady groundwork for analysis as, without an assured base, it becomes challenging to assess conceptions such as hybrid warfare and PMCs consistently and rationally.

Military interventions have always been contentious despite the outcomes of the intervention. The literature review has revealed no specific criterion for separately scrutinizing the PMCs intervention in the conflict. Existing factors that appear within the literature of non-state actors and are used to measure their success are mostly related to the actor's duration, influence, and capabilities to project its powers militarily and politically. (Cambanis, et al., 2019) Others differentiate between non-state armed actors in hybrid warfare based on location and target. (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2017) Nevertheless, general parameters related to non-state armed actors are not enough to measure the degree of success or even understand the PMCs' military intervention as each non-state actor is unique in strategy and influence. While PMCs function inside two diverse spheres, military and corporate, PMCs operate militarily and ultimately answer to the state or whoever employs them in conflict zones. Accordingly, the impact and its degree differ. As Inclusion criteria respond to the study's objective and are critical to accomplishing it (Salkind, 2010) to answer the central question of how *PMCs impact*

¹¹ Refer to appendix 1

hybrid warfare? Moreover, set boundaries for the systematic examination of the phenomena, which I will use to include or exclude specific elements in the analysis. The new analytical framework has three main objectives:

1. Develop a model for understanding PMCs' impact on hybrid warfare by highlighting PMCs' contract essence, power instruments, and roles.
2. Provide a demonstration of its direct application to a specific context case.
3. Provide a novel understanding of PMCs battling beyond the traditional enemy-centric threat analysis¹² but as the multi-functioned aggressor in the war.

To this end, on the one hand, the analytical framework focuses on the PMCs' instruments of power (capabilities and tactics) and the contract of the PMCs' (intent/logic/motives), which is translated to specific behavioral operational patterns/roles. On the other hand, the repercussions are created because of the success/failure of the PMC multi-functioned strategy that combines all the elements mentioned above.

4.3.1. Contract Essence: Logic and Motives of Intervention

PMCs often operate within the framework of state institutions carrying out outsourcing operations, including establishing a short business relationship. The term is based on obtaining security or military services from private companies in return for a specified period, with controls to be agreed upon in the framework of commitment to the laws and legislation regulating these companies' work. (Omar, 2015) The time, service, price, and regulations are identified in a contract like any other business deal. The essence or core of the contract then reflects the interests and desired profits of both sides of the pact, the contractor and the client. This research considers the contract essence a vital element as it can help answer why PMCs engage in hybrid wars in the first place. In addition, by examining the contract of this engagement, one can see/foresee the possible consequences.

¹² The "enemy-centric" approach has limitations at the non-state level. A basic examination of the traditional method reveals that somehow a threat entity's intents and capacities could only be judged in connection to a threatened entity, emphasizing that threat is a complex, inter-related phenomena; a sole emphasis on the threat actor undermines this micro. (Vandepeer, 2011)

This examination is based on the logic and the motive of intervention. *While the logic is the rationale behind any motive of the PMC intervention, the motives are their incentive to act.* The logic of intervention is directly related to who hires PMCs. Here I talk about the interest of the client. Even though I consider the state as the only client in this research, it should not be forgotten that PMCs are financial entities by nature. Even when backed by states, they may be hired by other actors, state or non-state, or, in other words, by who pays more. The mentioned drives can be considered overly broad, so showing the main logic of intervention is crucial. I question not the typical but main drivers that make the state willing to use PMCs on battlefields.¹³ Most scholars are careful to note that no state actors have objectives and capacities that can differ markedly from that of states. (Pearlman & Cunningham, 2012) However, it is not always the case. With a careful examination of the operations of PMCs, I find that the armed entities can have different objectives than the states, even when working for or backed by the state. As a result, I find that the motives of PMCs¹⁴ can have a severe impact on power dynamics between the PMC itself and whoever hires them.

I examine PMCs' autonomy¹⁵ as the controlling variable that helps detect military interventions' motives and logic. The level of autonomy of a PMC reflects the degree of their actorness and sovereignty; it displays what capabilities and capacities PMCs are willing to practice in a conflict zone. The central claim here is that if we are to understand the overall warfare dynamics, we must observe the degree of PMCs' authority and how it is operationalized to evaluate the varying abilities of PMCs to deviate from their sponsor's orders. I argue that there are three different situations:

¹³ Described in detail in chapter 3.

¹⁴ We should differentiate between the motives of PMCs as entities and personal motives which are the soldiers' motives. While the motives of PMCs as an entity can be visible and clear, the motives of the individual fighters are harder to examine as it can be psychological, ideological, economical, or for other reasons. This will be explained further when digging into the motives of Wagner Soldiers.

¹⁵ Autonomy here is the degree to which PMCs operate as proxies obedient to their sponsor.

PMCs Autonomy	Logic of Intervention	Motive of Intervention	PMCs Role
Full Autonomy	economic	economic	The PMC plays the security advisor's role and offers military training and consultancy.
Semi Autonomy	economic/ political/strategic	economic	The PMC is hired as grey zone operators or medium to low importance military combats.
Non- Autonomous	Strategic pursuits	PMC used as proxies cannot have aims different than the states	The PMC offers a premium package of services to the state and engages in direct combat with its total capacity.

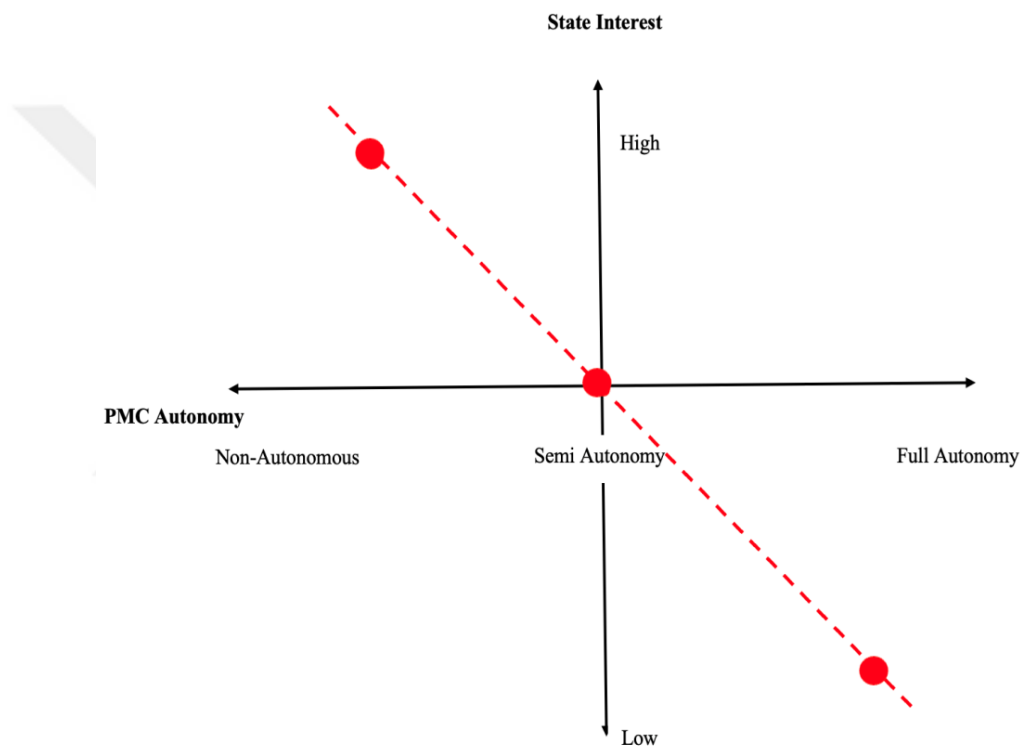
In the first situation, the PMC has full control over its actions and operations where the sponsor does not interfere with its operations and has no sovereignty over them. The motives of PMCs are purely economic, and even though the sponsor has no autonomy in the field, it still can back up the PMC politically and share profits. (If the PMC is legalized) In the second, the state uses the companies to achieve an objective that usually can be considered with medium/high importance to the state in the close geography. However, in this case, the PMC enjoys the flexibility to pursue its welfare as long as it prioritizes the sponsors' interests.

In the third situation, the PMC cannot pursue private interests as it must dedicate all its time and capabilities to serving the state. Here, PMCs are armed proxies used by the state to achieve a strategic objective that is highly important on the state's agenda.

The outlined framework is based on the argument that PMCs and hybrid warfare as two different concepts can only function together if the PMC is state-sponsored/backed. Hence, the state and non-state actors here are expressive of one entity but not related officially for plausible deniability based on legal or political reasons. None of this counters that other situations where PMCs can have quasi to full

autonomy and have no linkage to the state are possible. The matrix below illustrates the interplay between state interest and PMC autonomy based on the highlighted scenarios. When analyzing the autonomy of Wagner grounded on the Kremlin's interests, the matrix will be operationalized by placing Wagner based on the conditions of each case (Ukraine, Syria, and Libya).

Figure 1: PMC Autonomy and State Interest Matrix



4.3.2. PMCs Instruments of Power: Multi Operational Functions

PMCs went far beyond the traditional military operations by using coercive and escalators and compensatory and de-escalatory power instruments. These instruments are often tightly linked to their capabilities and the vulnerabilities of target countries, all orchestrated in escalation/de-escalation patterns according to their roles on the battlefield. In addition, they are used vaguely or conducted with unclear patterns, making it difficult for the opponents to understand and respond until the instruments have already taken effect and the defense capacity of the targets is thoroughly

weakened, and vulnerabilities are exploited. I argue that in all cases, PMCs' most efficient instrument is exploiting the vulnerabilities of targets. Clausewitz's war narrative as "*an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will*" (Münkler, 2007) provides us an effective way to understand contemporary military interventions. Any aggressor in war tends to exploit the existing vulnerabilities of its target, from economic weaknesses, systematic social gaps, and tribal rivalries, etc. What is remarkable is that PMCs in the modern world carefully detect and exploit existing vulnerabilities and create ones whenever necessary across societies beyond traditional paradigms. I differentiate between two types of vulnerabilities then, inherited and created by PMCs. The already existing or inherited vulnerabilities are the weaknesses visible to most aggressors in a conflict, while the created ones are strategic use of the PMC's capabilities to degrade the target's defense capability even before the war starts. After detecting the vulnerabilities, the PMC then translates them into operations, resulting in multi-operational functions/roles: war-fighting state proxies, grey zone operators, and security experts. Again, I would like to highlight that PMC has many other roles either on the battlefield or beyond it; however, the selected ones are the seemingly roles for PMCs-backed states in hybrid warfare since they composite with the motives and logic of PMCs' use.

4.3.3. Projected Impact: Ambiguous and Lasting Warfare

Power instruments of PMCs can be ratcheted up and down in parallel through various tools directed to the opponents (possibly more than one at the same time) during the conflict. This way, the PMCs contribute to the expansion of hybrid warfare. The latter becomes very hard to examine due to the intense and "fluid" element of ambiguity that complicates and adds a new level of coercion, aggression, conflict, and war. (MCDC, 2017) To clarify, PMCs as hybrid actors tend to change the pattern of their behaviors and interactions to adapt to the ground dynamics to achieve their strategic interests. Hence, they vaguely interact with civil society, government, and other actors at the local level. What makes the circumstances even more complex is that the ultimate goals of PMCs, like most non-state actors, are often purposefully mysterious "to prevent the deployment of deterrence measures by opponents." (Carment & Belo, 2020) One can argue here that the mystery around their warfare identity and vagueness is produced

not only because of the environment but also partially due to PMCs' strategic calculations, what we can call exploitable ambiguity.¹⁶ Produced ambiguity or intended foggy warfighting also serves to protect and keep the state/sponsors' involvement behind the curtains of the war while prioritizing and achieving its strategic goals.

4.3.4. Operationalization According to the Framework

The operationalization of the analytical framework is based on two sections. First, after clearing out the conceptual confusion related to hybrid warfare and PMCs separately and creating a common ground of vocabulary to understand the interplay of both variables in theory and practice. The next step would be to identify the gap in understanding PMCs' engagements and effect on hybrid warfare to draw out standard components that can be developed into generic analytical parts. While these parts are separated from the purpose of the research, they must be understood as a complete pattern.

5. DISSERTATION DIRECTION AND OUTLINE

To achieve the aim of the dissertation, the text is divided into five chapters. After the introduction, the second chapter covers a conceptual framework of the main variables of the research. The first half discusses the background and development of hybrid warfare in theory and on the ground, while the second concentrates on PMCs' definitions, classifications, and legal status. This part of the dissertation highlights the gap in the related literature on both concepts. Next, the third chapter connects the dots between hybrid warfare, PMCs, and Russia by first observing the phenomena status between theory and practice through presenting the PMC issue in hybrid warfare literature and then plowing into the drivers of PMCs' use in a real war situation. Afterward, the same variables are put into a Russian context by first taking a stand in the theoretical debates and then presenting Russia's hybrid warfare policies. The fourth chapter is dedicated to the Wagner Group, representing contemporary and historical examples of Russia's hybrid applications through the PMC. It analyses the group's activities in three different exploratory cases that have enough evidence to underpin the

¹⁶ The concept of exploitable ambiguity has been used before, but not applied directly to PMCs.

analytical framework and means to validate the framework through empirical examples in the case studies: Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. The last chapter of the dissertation is built on discussing the findings and finishes with a conclusion.



CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF HYBRID WARFARE AND PMCS

Without defining the existing stands in warfare development, it becomes challenging to accomplish collective understanding among the military, the public, and policymakers. Subsequently, understanding employed hybrid warfare tactics is vital to international security. This chapter contains both background information about the underlying concepts of the research topic and an overview of the state of its research. In the first part, the development and different perceptions of the concept of hybrid warfare are outlined. After presenting a study of the evolution of warfare and inspecting the origins and definitions, the concept will be operationalized by illustrating its characteristics, critics, and how hybrid warfare actors developed through time. The second part of the first chapter deliberates PMCs' definitions, classifications, characteristics, legal status, and ethical considerations.

1. HYBRID WARFARE: EVOLUTION AND FEATURES

War itself is a problem, and the hybridity makes it even more complicated and impenetrable

Before we examine the impact of PMCs in hybrid warfare, what makes a war “hybrid” must be explained and understood, as this hybridity can also be related to the PMCs and modern non-state actors in a broad spectrum. Is it the transformation of war that made a non-state actor, like PMCs, develop a hybrid character, or is it the non-state

actor's growth and maturation¹⁷ that made the war hybrid? Even though it can go both ways, in the end, there is one process that is impacted by the same conflict variables. That is why understanding the notion of hybridity alone is necessary, not to trace the source of it but to understand better the complexity of modern warfare dynamics and what is the PMC setting in the midst of it. Because there is no settled-upon explanation of hybrid warfare, as it is a very nebulous term, this part of the dissertation will have to look at how the notion of hybrid warfare has emerged and been classified in academic literature and labeled on the ground.

1.1. Origins and Definitions

Late in the 20th century, various tools were used in conflicts replacing direct military confrontations while facilitating the emergence of new forms of lasting wars.¹⁸ To take advantage of this novel kind of conflict, states, as the 'central' actors in the international system, take an offensive position to uphold their sphere of influence by deliberately choosing hybrid tactics to obtain an advantage in conflicts. Christian Nünlist and Martin Zapfe define hybrid war as "a long-known, politicized form of warfare below the threshold of full-blown conventional war that combines subversion and low-key political violence with external military pressure." (Nünlist & Zapfe, 2014) As simple as it can be, when taking an offensive position, it is rational to assume that a state can and will do anything under its capabilities to win, even if this means not playing by the rules and using tools that can be considered violent and deceptive. After all, in this very competitive process, behind the state's actions are human beings evolving their warfare capacities and military thinking; thus, anything and everything

¹⁷ I argue that PMCs (and non-state actors) also have a certain life and development cycle that is impacted by a variety of factors. However, this life cycle is not like the states as it is shorter and influenced by short-term variables. The interesting part is that this cycle is somehow also related to what stage (phase) the state is currently in, (even for non-state armed actors that act independently; they are affected by the internal/external dynamics of the state(s) they operate in. Because this life cycle is short, one actor can have many cycles, and in each new one the incompatibilities of the actor and conflict change. What I mean by the change of incompatibilities: it might be a change in territory, goals, logic, and motives of intervention...etc.; (This is my way of explaining the lifetime of ISIS, for example. The defeat of a state in a battle doesn't always mean its fall, similarly, the fall of a non-state armed actor doesn't mean it's not going to rise again).

¹⁸ "The concept of hybrid warfare is used interchangeably in the literature with hybrid threats. The exact differences between these terms are not defined in academic papers." (Glenn, 2009). Therefore, we assume that a "hybrid threat is a threat that hybrid warfare will be waged by an adversary to another entity."

can be expected. As J. Mattis and F. Hoffman state, “Recent conflicts highlight the need to always remember that the enemy is a human being [...] and does not have to play by our rules.” (Hoffman & Mattis, 2005) Keeping this in mind, hybrid wars are considered the essence of today’s complex security environments and signify a perennial aspect in the history of warfare that led to new approaches in military thought.

When examining the reports, articles, and papers discussing the hybridity of the conflict (Bekkers, et al., 2018) we find that they all somehow share the belief that hybrid warfare has been evolving in parallel with the different empirical situations, and due to this diversity or hybridity in tools and features, many definitions can be found. NATO, for instance, defines hybrid conflict as a type of conflict that “combines military and non-military as well as covert and overt means” to serve its strategic goals. (NATO, 2021) However, this definition can be considered very general as it cannot be easily understood what means are used. Williamson Murray gives more insight into the means employed by describing hybrid warfare as “a combination of economic, social, cyber, military, media, and political means.” (Murray, 2012) Captain Robert A. Newson has elaborated on Murray’s definition and gave further examples by defining hybrid warfare as: “a combination of conventional, irregular, and asymmetric means, including the persistent manipulation of political and ideological conflict, and can include the combination of special operations and conventional military forces; intelligence agents; political provocateurs; media representatives; economic intimidation; cyber-attacks; and proxies and surrogates, para-militaries, terrorist, and criminal elements” (Newson, 2014).

1.2. Who is War?

However, this concept is not limited to the state as the primary aggressor but also includes non-state actors. Early in the 20th century, “hybrid warfare” first appeared in military discourse. (Hoffman, 2007) The term became well known after the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 and then became intensively used once Russia annexed Crimea. This concept was not purely new at that time, as several previous fundamental works explicitly highlighted the theory of hybrid warfare (or not). The concept’s origins can be traced to an article, *the rise of the Hybrid war* written by James N. Mattis and Colonel Frank G. Hoffman. (Hoffman & Mattis, 2005) When foreseeing the modern battlefield,

Mattis and Hoffman assert that “the traditional regular ‘superiority’ creates a compelling logic for states and non-state actors to move out of the traditional mode of war and seek alternative capabilities to gain an advantage.”¹⁹ In other words, states and non-state actors seek new irregular methods as part of strategic calculations where the end is an advantage to be obtained for any actor, state or non-state, weak or strong.

In further literature, Hoffman emphasizes that this view is a proper systematic paradigm to understand the victory of what is considered the “weak opponent,” for example, Taliban, ISIS, or Hezbollah, against usually a well-developed -particularly technologically- superior military in Afghanistan, and also Iraq wars. (Renz, 2016) The idea of “*How the Inferior Can Defeat the Superior*” is also explained by Reed as he argues that: “The weak can defeat the strong through ruthless unconventional methods, and the first rule of unrestricted warfare is that there are no rules, with nothing forbidden” (Reed, 2008). Therefore, hybrid warfare aggressors are not limited to great powers. A small country can adopt a hybrid warfare method and mobilize all human, natural, and economic resources to protect and strengthen its capabilities and strongly resist any aggression by great powers. (Hughes, n.d.)

As can be observed, in a hybrid conflict, importance was given to the type of new methods used and exceptional attention to the environment. McCuen tries to examine a conflict from all perspectives, and by focusing mainly on the environment, he highlights the importance of the element of winning over control of the people on the battlefield. The battle, as he defines it, is “a wider struggle for control and support of the combat zone’s indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community.” (McCuen, 2008)

Prior (and most) definitions and explanations of hybrid warfare seem to focus on the blend of modes of war, but very much with a smaller scope in terms of the modes available to conventional and unconventional state military forces. Even though there is a diversity in the concept, it represents a new approach adopted by the various actors of the international system, the most convenient definition appropriate for the scope of this research is by Cormac and Aldrich, who add a thought-provoking touch to the definition of the concept, as they argue that it is “a combination of battlespaces, types of operations and a blurring of actors with the scope of achieving strategic objectives by

¹⁹ This is one way to look at it (the source of hybridity debate).

creating exploitable ambiguity.” (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018) The concept of exploitable ambiguity alone is enough to mirror the conflict because merging different forces, tactics, and strategies expanded the scope of frequent wars and resulted in this new concept of this Foggy warfighting.²⁰ Furthermore, this definition has emphasized two main components of warfare that kept developing from one generation of warfare to another: **actors** and **methods**, which will be clarified more in the next section that elaborates on the characteristics of this type of modern warfare.

1.3. Between the Old and the New

Perhaps one of the main reasons that made the concept hard to define is its multi-dimensional characteristics. When the post-Cold War era revealed the changes in conventional warfare, some argued that the concept was not new (Cox, et al., 2012) as it has the same features as conventional warfare. (Rojansky & Kofman, 2015) Others argued that it is a new concept due to the new irregular methods and tactics used by actors such as terrorism, insurgency, unrestricted warfare, guerrilla war, and criminal elements which can, through this hybridity challenge a conventionally superior force along with conventional weapons. (Hoffman & Mattis, 2005) McCuen, like Hoffman, recognizes that hybrid wars involve a combination of conventional and irregular capabilities. (McCuen, 2008)

The early characteristics of hybrid warfare started appearing in military operations in Iraq in the 1990s and early 2000s, in Afghanistan as well, in the Balkans in the late 1990s, in Libya, and Syria in parallel with the Arab Uprisings in Russia, for example, fully and openly proven the means and high tech used in the hybrid warfare at several strategical locations: during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the occupation of Chechnya, Moldova Transnistria conflict, aggression against Georgia, in the course of the Russo-Georgian war. (Solmaz, 2022) And lastly, the aggressions ended in a war in Ukraine in 2022.

Without the aim to investigate further positions for disputes and in-depth analysis of the “old” and “new” warfare, a short comparison of those two away from the theoretical assumptions is necessary to understand hybrid warfare features further. The

²⁰ This is the other way to look at the source of hybridity of war.

most helpful assumption is that war indeed demonstrates both conventional and irregular features. This research outlines the characteristics which represent the common themes of the various opinions on the elements that compose and reflect upon the hybridity of war; at the same time, we later find that the same characteristics are also applicable in describing the hybridity of non-state armed actors represented by PMCs in this study.

1.3.1. A Variety of Tools and Strategies

In modern wars, the fundamental idea of hybrid strategies is the exploitation of all tools accessible, often due to the fact that the aggressor does not obtain a considerable strong traditional military force to reach the objective alone or prefers not to use it for political or legal reasons. Multi hybrid tactics can be considered instruments of power on battlefields, and how they are utilized hang on the actor's assets (state or non-state) and the setting in which they get involved in. As both state and non-state actors can use the application of hybrid tactics, it is logical to find out a variety of tools and strategies. However, the hybridity of war lies in exploiting all available tools simultaneously and how they are combined at the many levels of warfare. (Marcuzzi, 2018) Therefore, it is not only about the variety of tools and strategies but how to strategically use them. What is particularly interesting is the numerous new features credited to hybrid warfare conducted by non-state actors. First, they display amplified levels of military operations as they level up the capabilities ranks, efficaciously adopting modern weaponry systems, technologies, and tactics that are usually believed to be beyond the reach of non-state actors. Merging the newly attained conventional techniques and capabilities with a progressive ability set and doing so instantaneously and within the same territory of conflict is considered a possibly modern and defining characteristic. (Hoffman, 2009) This stresses superior military sophistication and capabilities as critical characteristics of non-state actors using hybrid warfare, again like the growing sophistication and complexity of non-state actors perceived in the Chechnya, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq conflicts.

1.3.2. Technological Sophistication

High technology has affected the form of wars and made its use through great powers more complicated than before in their try to acquire their political objectives. Many debates referring to the use of technologically innovative strategies, primarily from when Russia annexed Crimea, have concentrated on the usage of cyber and strategic communications. (Hughes, n.d.) However, even before visible hybrid campaigns started, the importance of technological and particularly information warfare has been asserted as Carr has convincingly argued, “A good information warfare capability such as this would be a great combat multiplier for any foe.” (Carr, 1996) Some scholars even argued that technological advancements have furthered weapons and platform development and added to the domains of warfare itself. (Brown, 2018) As highlighted in the introduction, there are thin lines between each warfare, and the technological sophistication does not necessarily reflect upon a new type of war but might be only a sign of the developments of the methods of war. Hybrid warfare, conducted by state or non-state actors, relies on digital technology’s speed, volume, and ubiquity, reflecting the modern age. (MCDC, 2017) It can be logically argued that the militarization of space and cyberspace has provided combatants with new opportunities and vulnerabilities that further complicate modern conflicts.

1.3.3. Warfare on the Cheap

The technological revolutions have escalated cooperation between security and military institutions and arms companies that produce modern armament systems. The high cost of training on this technology, and the need to teach and train traditional military forces how to operate for a long time, have led the governments of some countries to seek to enhance their defense capabilities by contracting with PMCs, for instance, that provide support to its militaries, such as the technology provided by the company Aerospatiale in France, and Royce Rolls in the United Kingdom. (Omar, 2015) Military costs are essential as they can cause high political risks, so states tend to make smart investments that create a military open bargaining market. First, this market represents the state’s level of military privatization. Second, it is considered a market since there is generally a trading front and a purchasing end. Third, it is open since the

market fluctuates depending on the product requested, and fourth, the negotiating component reflects the core of combat on the cheap notion because traditional military expenditures are excessive; therefore, the state seeks the alternative. Nevertheless, it should be noted that warfare on the cheap does not necessarily mean that the new type of hybrid war is less expensive than the previous ones but strategically and financially managed in order to multiply the desired results at the cheapest costs.

1.3.4. Plausible Deniability

In hybrid warfare, the state can employ vague instruments like nonstate actors such as private military contractors, proxies, and cyber-driven misinformation operations that are difficult to trace and sometimes reinforced by public denials, allowing plausible deniability blurring the line between violent and nonviolent activities. Plausible deniability can then be identified and located at different levels at the international level, and it can be identified as the behavior where a state is permitted to rebuff its involvement and connections to a particular event. (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018) Therefore, plausible deniability permits a state to get involved in another state's interests so that its ability to respond decisively is hindered. Demonstrating the importance of deniability in hybrid warfare, as validated by Russian military activities in Ukraine, but also by the usage of proxies, particularly PMCs, can help in addressing how deniability operates mainly in the political, social sphere, but also the military social realm has a more critical perspective of Russian military behavior.

At last, in any warfare, methods used in each military operation are chosen based on the careful analysis of the conflict and actors involved (capabilities on the ground). On this basis, modern features of hybrid characteristics are a generalization and should be applied to single situations separately to help comprehend the conflict dynamics and respond either politically or militarily. Therefore, hybrid warfare calculations involving nonstate actors might differ from warfare that does not, even between using the same actor in different war zones. It is critical to note that no two wars and no two actors are identical. For instance, Russia's hybrid methods against a Baltic state are distinctive from those used in Ukraine and much more distinctive than those employed by China in the South China Sea or by Hezbollah against Israel. Similarly, the new operational

calculation does not necessarily create a new type of war. This argument can be read between the lines of the debates surrounding hybrid warfare critics.

1.4. Hybrid Warfare Critics

Hoffman once argued that “as should be expected in any attempt to describe something as complex as war, there is much debate over characterizations and definitions.” (Hoffman, 2018) This argument is accurate when we look at the criticism of hybrid warfare. Even though the concept is used widely today, it is still a topic of sharp debate. Some still reject the notion entirely (Renz & Smith , 2016) (Glenn, 2009). Specific criticism ideas are related to the range and the degree and type of the military means used, newness, ambiguity, and utility associated with other novel notions explaining modern warfare. Even though the critics of hybrid warfare make sense in conceptual clarity, they are not limited to hybrid warfare but applicable to the border context of war itself. As there are still ongoing debates on what war is, the evolvement of its nature, and what this means for “differences between peace, conflict, and war.” (Weissmann, 2018, p. 18)

As I do not wish to drift apart from the scope of this research, I believe that highlighting only the foremost critic related to the clarity of the notion of hybrid warfare and the thin lines between labels of warfare that have been mentioned in the introduction, serve the purpose of this research. However, what is most important to draw from this is that the long critical debates around the nature and even the existence of hybrid warfare might have an influence on the research from a theoretical perspective, but it does not impact this research from practical and operational aspects which are the levels to be examined. There is nothing new about the discussions of hybrid war as they are only relevant to the means and methods of evolving war. Again, nature and methods of war changes do not necessarily produce a new category of warfare. One of the highly debated, relatively new actors of hybrid warfare who use a range of unfamiliar tactics is PMCs, which the second part of this chapter will delve into.

2. PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES: DEFINITION, CLASSIFICATION, AND STATUS

The security function of the state is a public function performed typically by a public sector institution that has also been affected by globalization to privatize security issues, including sovereign areas such as defense and security, so states have become dependent on strategies of military interventions and proxy wars implemented by PMCs especially. As for any other non-state actor, every PMC is unique, and its impact is context-specific. To fully grasp this and to be able to differentiate between their motives of intervention, it is imperative to understand the history, characteristics, legal debates, and ethical concerns surrounding the PMCs' involvement in conflicts.

2.1. Privatization of War and the Rise of PMCs

The term privatization of wars refers to the abandonment by states of financing the war, reducing the number of soldiers and their reliance on irregular armed organizations, minimizing the role of the state and its public institutions, and increasing the private sector's contribution. (Kritsiotis, 1998) The private sector's expectation of security is based on a long-standing tradition slowly replaced between the onset of the Westphalian era in 1684 and the emergence of modern nation-states in Europe following the French Revolution in 1780. Afterward, private security and private force continued to exist in the shape of private enterprises such as the Dutch VOC and British EIC but dissolved in the early 19th century. (Singer, 2008) However, the private security sector did not significantly grow until the end of the Cold War, when the presence of Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) in Africa significantly grew. (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011) In the late 2000s, prominent and controversial PMCs such as Blackwater finally put significant academic focus on private security. The repercussions of the era of globalization had the most significant impact on the growing functions of PMCs. Hence, these vast and integrated companies had a significant role in formulating conflict policies at the expense of the prevailing rules in the nation-state, as the latter no longer is at the front of battlefields. Among these

companies, some took a leading role in directing the interests of nation-states outside of their territories, related to providing security and protection, which is an expression of the merge of the public and private sectors, where the first entrusts to the second some of the tasks that fall into the core work to do. All said, from 1990 to 2000, PMCs had a role in almost 80 conflicts, compared to 15 conflicts from 1950 to 1989. (Isenberg, 2009) The professional corporate structure and remarkable advancement since the 1990s separate the present security business from its previous forms, as the private military and security sector continues to show evidence of considerable development and outstanding growth to this day.

2.1.1. Definitions

The list of academics that have spent their focus and effort on the subject is comprised of a small and dedicated group of scholars. Peter W. Singer dominates the subject and is referred to by nearly every academician. Singer's book "Corporate Warriors, the Rise of the Privatized Military Industry" explores the PMSC industry and questions the conventional moral debate about their presence. In his book "Corporate Warriors and International Security: The Rise of Private Military Companies," Christopher Kinsey significantly shies away from the moral debate when investigating the industry's history, use, and challenges. Peter argues that Private Military Firms (PMFs) are "profit-driven organizations that trade in professional services intricately linked to warfare." (Singer, 2003, p. 186) This brings us to an essential explanation by Kinsey; PMCs are to be distinguished by "the object to be secured and the means by which the object is secured." (Kinsey, 2006) I consider this description the most suitable for identifying PMCs as it provides terminology flexibility without necessarily delving into the component and structure of the company itself. Many scholars have confused defining PMCs as an entity and fell into the trap of limiting the PMC-based definition to the services provided and sometimes a temporary status; examples will be provided when highlighting PMCs' characteristics. By adopting Kinsey's explanation, PMCs become multi-functional entities that employ different means to achieve a particular objective(s). Both means and ends are flexible in this sense and change based on the market, military evolution trends, and customers' needs.

2.1.2. Classifications

Today's modern private combatants are a unique evolution of the post-cold war era and vary from classical mercenaries who fought during the Italian Renaissance or in Africa during the post-World War II period of decolonization. Some readings are based on a historical perspective and distinguish PMCs from mercenaries; still, others use the notion of "contractor" –a term primarily recognized in the media. This research does not concern mercenaries and is not about Private Security Companies (PSCs). The absence of a clear understanding of what a mercenary is and how they function is not only a definition clarity problem; the noun "mercenary" naturally, in modern dialect, is pejorative. It is often used carelessly but significantly to propagandize PMCs operations. More importantly, PMCs and mercenaries' misperception reflects a "shift" in how security is understood and judged, a "shift" that international law has not yet fully grasped. (Isenberg, 2009) Conversely, the request for a definition is more than semantic. There is a lack of transparency and misperception over the PMCs' identity. I do not intend to overstate the idea, but time spent on interpretation will not be wasted. So, before I deliberate on scrutinizing the essence of PMC today, let me look concisely at the PSCs, inaccurately disorganized with PMCs, to dismiss their actions and operations from this dissertation.

In the academic literature, there are many classifications of combat and non-combat companies (Fulloon, 2020) but it is more usual to distinguish between PMCs and PSCs. (Schreier & Caparini, 2005) Accordingly, both forms of companies offer their services to the public and private actors. However, PMCs can provide offensive and defensive services in conflict zones, but PSCs only provide defensive services. In this context, the taxonomies of Singer and Kinsey have been vastly persuasive. Kinsey differentiates between Private Combat Companies, PMCs, Proxy Military Companies, PSCs, Commercial Security Companies, and Freelance Operators. (Kinsey, 2006) According to him, PMCs and PSCs are, for example, to be distinguished by "the object to be secured and how the object is secured." While PMCs use lethal force "to secure a peace" in a war zone or "undertake certain military activities, notably to do with peacekeeping operations." PSCs have assumed traditional public services such as "managing prisons [and] prison transportation" and hardly use lethal force. (Schreier & Caparini, 2005, pp. 21-28) Singer argues that the main difference between mercenaries

and PMFs is the corporate character of the latter. (Singer, 2003, p. 191) He also lists the openness of PMFs to the market and their “much wider array of services” as their distinguishing features compared to mercenaries. (Singer, 2003, p. 192)

When we observe the PMCs operating in conflict zones, we find that not only do they have both combat defensive, support, and combat offensive type functions, but they have expanded the scope and, therefore, their tools to become multi-operational. I focus on companies that utilize violence in a combat-related capacity, either directly or indirectly, or provide direct security in a war zone. These combat-related PMCs tend toward security and are aimed against opponent threats.

2.1.3. Characteristics

Based on the definitions outlined above and further literature on PMCs, in this following section, I tackle the typical characteristics of PMCs that I believe are necessary to understand the logic behind hiring PMCs. More than any other, this characteristic makes PMCs operations effective and distinguishes them from other armed non-state actors.

a. All about Business

Scholars and experts tend to agree that PMCs are financial companies like the rest of the companies related to the economic and service field.²¹ This gives it a commercial character. These companies vary in size from small companies with a few elements that provide consulting services only to large companies with thousands of elements, providing and participating in wars and armed conflicts, and their activities extend beyond the state’s borders that established them. Even though they are sometimes associated with professional armies, PMCs cannot be compared to them as they operate in a very different way from that of the conventional armies. Professional armies work for governments, and PMCs, on the other hand, sell their services for combat, logistics, security surveillance, etc. (Leander, 2005) Since PMCs are businesses by nature, their only aim is to gain profits, and that is why they adjust to fulfill the requests of their patrons. (Isenberg, 2009) Hence, it is almost ‘natural’ for PMCs to

²¹ Some interviewees totally ignore the use of PMCs in war and purely focus on the economical dimension of it. Interviewer R2, recruiter of foreign fighters, Libya, said “PMCs are like any other company out there that seeks its own profits, what’s wrong with that?”

engage in conflicts at different levels and develop their core tactics and capabilities to satisfy the customer and make sure that they are fully equipped for the needs of the overall global market.

b. Professionalism, Brutality, and High Discipline

It is well known that PMCs are informal networks of fighters and technicians, who move very quickly to carry out specific missions (Banégas, 1998), these networks are run mainly by old tires in elite units and regular armies, and therefore they are often well experienced, disciplined and professionals, which can be observed in the high speed and quality in performing the tasks assigned to them, in peace and war. Also, the elements of these companies carry out the orders issued to them by their superiors, no matter how harsh, and often strip them of humanity. Examples of Blackwater (Singer, 2007) and Wagner (Mackinnon, 2020) knowing that this type of company feeds on the killing trade (Bussard, 2004) destruction, and wars, for without wars and armed conflicts, they would not have existed.

c. No Borders Capacity

PMCs are registered or integrated as private firms on the territory of their home countries, and legal regulations governing the establishment of private contractors allow them to work and provide specific services. (Moyakine, 2015, pp. 105-156) They intervene in conflicts worldwide, meaning that they usually work outside the country of origin in which they were established. (الخير, 2011) Through direct or indirect participation in the country's military operations established according to its laws or intervention through the conclusion of service supply contracts with other countries.

d. Misrecognition and Absence of Legal Restrictions

Theoretically, for a PMC to offer services that involve the likelihood of using force systematically and by military or paramilitary means, it typically should be legally established. (J .C. Ortiz, 2010) There are no specific guidelines for ownership as they can be owned by individuals or states (الخير, 2011) However, in reality, there is a massive absence of legal restrictions and standards surrounding PMCs. For example, the British Sandline Company announced that it works only with legitimate governments

which enjoy friendly relations; however, this company has a lot of suspicious deals. (الوهاب, 2014).

Anna Leander has dedicated much of her contributions to understanding PMCs' legal framework and regulations. Leander argues that PMCs lack transparency and work in a legal vacuum. (Leander, 2005) According to this argument, PMCs' strength originates from a "misrecognition" of these companies as autonomous actors rather than governmental proxies. Taking away PMCs' source/sponsor allows them to "share" a monopoly of violence. Finally, misrecognition permits PMCs to share the legitimacy and authority that this monopoly confers. (Leander, 2010) The violence monopoly is not a new idea, as today's views toward PMCs are shaped by history. According to Max Weber, a nation's ability to monopoly the means of violence is a critical indicator of its sovereignty, in other words, raising, maintaining, and utilizing military force. (Isenberg, 2009) In this sense, the private military force also manifested in PMCs as a new way for states to monopolize violence.

At this point, the "War Contracting" concept, in direct comparison with the upsurge of non-state actor-intensive conflicts, is an actual situation to be emphasized; with the changing nature of warfare, where states are not direct aggressors in the war, numerous ambiguities with the appreciation and privatization of security have surfaced. Contracts in combat areas became one of the determinants of war directions. As a result, one of the most complex debates about the status of PMCs stems from their use on battlefields and whether it is legitimate or not. For this reason, the examination of the legitimacy of PMCs according to international norms will be encompassed in the next heading of the research.

2.1.4. International Legitimacy and Legality of PMCs Use in Conflict

Notwithstanding the widely differing economic and socio-political backgrounds, legitimacy is an important determinant factor in the rise and emergence of violent armed actors worldwide, laying the foundation for non-state armed actors to strengthen their grip and capabilities while establishing a parallel state structure of authority and violence. (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2017) In this sense, the employment of PMCs in wars produces various anxieties about the legality and legitimacy of the transfer of state roles to private actors. (Kees, 2011) Researchers in the field of regional and global threat

management underscore the risk associated with the lack of legal and regulatory frameworks for these companies' exercises and presume it is necessary to incorporate a legitimate structure governing the functions of private military companies in order to prevent a situation under which these companies impose their mandates on nations, pressuring them to surrender their sovereign role in protecting the national defense function, and also the political interests. (أحمد, 2016) As nothing more than a result, as non-state actors, PMCs are continuously challenging the core concepts of the international order that are founded on the State monopoly of violence and require regulation. The idea of a legal vacuum, which characterizes the operation of PMCs in war zones, is frequently mentioned in legislative and other sources. (Moyakine, 2015, pp. 105-156)

International law establishes a regulatory framework for using private military contractors during and after wars and conflicts. This framework covers only fundamental concepts and broad characteristics in compliance with the nature of the international legal system. (Kees, 2011) Moreover, significant efforts have been made on the self-regulation of PMCs, notably with the “International Code of Conduct for Private Security Firms” in 2010, developed and drafted by governments, security experts, business leaders, and lawyers outlining a standard set of principles for PSCs, as well as the foundations for translating these ethics into Standards and an ascendancy and inaccuracy mechanism.²² Nevertheless, existing international efforts do not guide the scope and context of state liability for any malfeasance of these corporations’ workforce that constitutes law violations. (Moyakine, 2015, pp. 105-156)

To recap, the globe is facing several issues because of these businesses’ “re-birth” and expansion. There are legal hurdles with the PMC industry, considerations about transparency and legitimacy raised by its representatives, concerns of personal responsibility and accountability, and state responsibility for the acts of private soldiers who carry weapons, wage battles, and safeguard the individuals and assets of sovereign nations as well as other actors (Moyakine, 2015) for a specific price.

²² The Montreux Document on PMSCs was adopted in 2008 by seventeen countries to “reaffirm and clarify the existing obligations “of actors under international humanitarian and human rights law.

2.1.5. PMCs Battlefield Services: The Premium Package?

With the increase in international conflicts at the international, regional, and national levels, the phenomenon of PMCs has spread to carry out new functions that were previously included within the tasks of national armies, such as securing the supply of fighting forces with supplies and weapons and fighting as well as in civil wars in some African countries, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. These companies are currently guarding heads of state coming through coups in Africa, which are usually orchestrated from abroad, or protecting their governments, protecting oil wells and diamond mines, and even carrying out coups against regimes that refuse to dominate, as happened in the Comoros Islands led by the French mercenary Bob JD, and in other countries such as Guinea, Seychelles, and other countries.²³ I recall Kinsey's identification of PMCs and argue that what services do PMCs offer and to whom varies based on the company's capabilities and what package can it offer as PMCs can perform in distinctive competencies and capabilities. (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2021) Battlefield services offered by the PMCs are, in other words, their way of intervention on the field, from war-fighting state proxies and grey zone operators to security experts. As all these roles fall within different types of services, I outline what and how PMCs operate their battlefield packages based on their type.

Above all, military companies carry out combat operations like regular armies regarding the PMCs' combat services. Singer argues that all PMCs offer services that have traditionally fallen "within the domain of national militaries." (Singer, 2003, p. 73) He carries on by outlining the services that can be provided along, such as combat operations, security, training, transportation, communications, and other activities. (Singer, 2003) We can find the same kind of services under different labels, for example, logistical, operational assistance and support, military advice and training, and policing and security. (Percy 2006, p. 11)

New services have been added after the growth of the work of private security companies on a large scale in the era of globalization, including the provision of troop training services and the provision of military advice to the army and police forces in the countries in which they work, in addition to some of the functions accomplished by

²³ Interview AA1, private military security company consultant, UK. Conducted in 12/12/2021.

their security services, including providing logistical support for military deployment the maintenance of weaponry systems, the safeguard of buildings and facilities and persons, the education of military forces, the collection and analysis of military intelligence, the detention and interrogation of prisoners, and the participation in combat. The tasks assigned to PMCs developed in an unprecedented way in their history or the history of the regular armies in general and the American and British armies in particular, as they were entrusted with the tasks of guarding the projects of the so-called reconstruction and reconstruction of Iraq, protecting essential personalities such as the civil governor Paul Bremer and other American officials and protecting convoys of supplies which pass in areas under the control of the Iraqi resistance and the protection of many sensitive Iraqi government institutions and the headquarters of the government and the occupation forces are known as the Green Zone.²⁴

Again, battlefield services are not limited to the military aspect; careful observation of PMCs operations in recent conflicts shows that the purpose of their missions goes beyond weaponry to exploiting natural resources and gaining territorial control, at least partially. (Sukhankin, 2018) Many PMCs also offer very unlike services designed to prevent battlefield operations, such as negotiations, advisory, and intelligence services. (Singer, 2003) frame the services listed above based on the role PMCs play on the ground and argue that if the PMC provides all the services, the sponsor has purchased a premium package.

Role #1- Combat-Fighting State Proxies

A state actor can also use a proxy army to produce hybrid threats. A proxy backed by a central power may quickly develop hybrid threats by utilizing the sponsor's superior military capabilities. (Hoffman, 2018) Non-state proxy armed forces are sometimes characterized as irregular military entities that engage in an internal armed conflict entirely or partially on behalf of a foreign authority. Among them are militias, rebels, and terrorists. Consequently, PMCs might be regarded as a distinct category. In this context, they are seemingly private military service providers that act as state proxy troops. (Wither, 2020) These proxies can conduct offensive and defensive operations as any regular army.

²⁴ Interview C3, senior military officer, war of Iraq. Conducted in 20/02/2021.

Role #2- Gray Zone Operators

The gray zone is a collection of activities between peace and conflict. Many operations, from unethical economic activities, influence operations, and cyberattacks to mercenary operations, massacres, and misinformation campaigns, fall into this blurry in-between. Gray-zone actions are often defined as gradualist campaigns by state and non-state actors that mix non-military and quasi-military instruments and fall short of the threshold of armed confrontation. They are designed to obstruct, destabilize, weaken, or attack an opponent, and they are frequently customized to the target state's weaknesses. (AtlanticCouncil, 2022) PMCs as grey zone operators employ gradual steps to secure strategic leverage. In this regard, Hoffman provides a proper definition of gray zone tactics,

“Those covert or illegal activities of non-traditional statecraft that are below the threshold of armed, organized violence; including disruption of order, political subversion of government or non-governmental organizations, psychological operations, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption as part of an integrated design to achieve strategic advantage.” (Hoffman, 2018)

Role #3- Security Experts

One of the primary services expected from a private military entity is to provide expertise through training and logistics. Because these companies' main fields of activity are strategic security training-consultancy and assistance, as well as technical assistance to war zones, strategic and operational strike procedures, proactive, strategic plans, intelligence analyses, high-level protection services, search-and-rescue missions in areas of conflict, military hardware guidance, and training, it is the supply, upkeep, and repair services of weapons and ammo used in combat.

The variety in roles reflects the multi-tasks and functions of a PMC at different times or even at once, depending on the motives of its intervention and the logic behind its use. The literature review contains several views on hybrid warfare and PMCs that are practical for this research. The chapter following this one will present a synthesis of PMCs' engagements in hybrid warfare and how PMCs apt to the concept of hybrid warfare by considering Russia as a master of hybridity in terms of campaigns and actors.

CHAPTER THREE

CONNECTING THE DOTS BETWEEN PMCS AND HYBRID WARFARE: THE RUSSIAN MODEL

Hybrid actors, in general, are apparent but challenging to define; as a result, experts and decision-makers habitually overlook them or misguidedly believe them to be something they are not, usually a state body or a typical proxy. (Cambanis, et al., 2019) State and non-state actors have used hybrid warfare to achieve objectives insidiously or without the full-scale conventional use of force to challenge the military capabilities of a superior state. While Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014 is the most widely publicized incident of hybrid warfare arguably because of the implications surrounding stability in Europe, instances that fit the most widely recognized definitions have occurred throughout history. Contrary to many perceptions, it is not a new occurrence or is limited to the ambiguous battlefields of Ukraine. This chapter will focus on the role PMCs play as non-state actors in hybrid warfare literature, considering Russia as the primary aggressor in warfare and using PMCs services as one of its main tactics, if not the most efficient.

1. PMCS IN HYBRID WARFARE: BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The first section aims to help in creating an idea of what this actor traditionally looks like to frame the research on the ground better and understand where we are today, and we must look at the dynamics of PMCs' engagements in hybrid warfare in literature and how it is labeled in practice.

1.1. The PMC Issue in Hybrid Warfare Literature

When reflecting upon non-Westphalian features of contemporary conflict patterns, Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş assert that the newly emerged non-State Actors are better in operational settings understood as “part and parcel” of wars. (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2017) Under this logic, if we consider PMCs part of the non-Westphalian conflict trend, this actor must be analyzed as an integrative dyad in today’s hybrid warfare. Looking at the role private companies played in past wars will help us conceptualize what PMCs look and act like in modern warfare. It will also determine what factors play into the effectiveness and expansion of these companies. In this regard, many scholars have examined the role of PMCs in armed conflicts. Namely, P.W. Singer (Singer, 2008); Deborah Avant (Avant, 2005); A. Alexandra, D.P.Baker and M. Caparini, (eds.) (Baker & Pattison, 2012); K. Galai (Galai, 2019). Despite the considerable literature drafted on the subject, the discourse surrounding these companies has mainly been about the aspects of understanding the market and sorting out accountability, along with the debate on the effects these companies have on the idea of statehood (Leander, 2010) and their role in conflicts, but analysis of PMC’s impact remains missing. On the one hand, the available research does not consider the micro-dynamics level of conflict, which stresses PMCs as the unit of analysis. Hence, relevant research faces a fundamental empirical paleness in the preoccupation with the impact of non-state armed groups in the active conflicts.

This problem is not only related to the PMCs alone. However, there is a greater misunderstanding of the role of violent non-state actors as a component of larger and more comprehensive (industrial, geopolitical, and digital) coercive tactics captured by hybrid campaigns. So *how do PMCs fit into the concept of hybrid warfare?* I address this question by examining the use of PMCs in hybrid warfare. The information provided in answering the question is based on interviews with PMC professionals who worked/are working in the private security industry.

1.2. Drivers of PMCs Use in Hybrid Warfare: An Alternative or a Necessity?

The common perception is that states have withdrawn from their monopoly of war through the employment of PMCs as they engage with asymmetric methods out of

choice. (Münkler, 2007) Nevertheless, drivers to use PMCs are not narrowed to this; these modern proxies are multi-functional, expanding the scope of their usage, range of clients, and objectives of use. Several factors have contributed to the growing role of PMCs in hybrid conflict environments during the recent period, most notably the followings.

The Structural Weakness of the Local Armies and Security Services

Many “weak” governments could not form solid security agencies, and some of them turned into crossings for smuggling, organized crime, and terrorist outposts. For example, the proliferation of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabab in Somalia, and ISIS in the Sahel and Central Africa and the chronic pervasiveness of racial and ethnic tensions have forced a new era of violence. The governments of these countries find themselves in need of an alternative, where PMCs present themselves as a temporary solution for a specific price. In these cases, military officials have identified PMCs not necessarily as an alternative but more as a booster or complementary tool that needs to be controlled by the local government/army.²⁵ In this regard, Kinsey writes that the increased hiring of PMCs has been part of the “enthusiasm for outsourcing government services” (Kinsey, 2006) He also supports the argument of Schreier and Caparini. They say that PMCs are used for specific tasks to save military strength for more critical tasks (Schreier & Caparini, 2005) based on the assumption that PMCs’ fundamental aim is to augment the competence of a sponsor/customer’s military force to have successful operations in war or for effective prevention of conflict. (Shearer, 1998) Furthermore, they have better weaponry systems and capacity and are much more flexible and efficient than traditional armies. (McFate, 2015)

Massive Profits for “All”

The private military industry is characterized by a rapidly growing market internationally, and there are great opportunities to make profits from it. Most significant multinational corporations, in this sense, are the most prominent new customers, especially extractive industries that are tired of relying on the incompetent

²⁵ Interviewer A, senior military official, Libya. Conducted in 3/1/2022.

security forces of host governments. PMCs are also working to secure their economic interests. Wagner's "Lobby Invest" and "MInvest"²⁶ companies obtained a license to extract gold, diamonds, and uranium in Central Africa in 2017 and contributed to implementing the Russian company Miro Gold mining activities in Sudan in the same year.²⁷ Many PMCs legally put their shares for trading on global stock exchanges. One of the retired contractors has informed me that he is still enjoying his retirement bonuses and shares from investment deals made by his previous employee while fighting with them in Syria.²⁸

The Increase in Local Partnerships in Zones of Conflict

The internal dynamics of wars have constantly been changing, and one of the main manifestations of this change is at the local level. Civilians are mainly highly motivated to do business with contractors in the lack of opportunities, political hope, and social-economic struggles, even though sometimes it is against the social and behavioral guidelines and norms. The local support provides PMCs with a logistical strength and a new range of regional economic and long-term opportunities. (Khattache & Kinsey, 2022) Many of the interviewed Libyan civilians have demonstrated the willingness to cooperate with the armed actors, not for political reasons but for economic needs; one of them has told me: "I want to feed my kids; the government and the world do not care about us, why should we?"²⁹

A Reflection on International and Regional Competition

Military companies have become one of the favorite hybrid power tools that many significant countries exploit to intrude in the domestic affairs of other states, and their presence represents an extension of competition over areas of influence. In this context, Wagner, for instance, represents a tool for achieving the strategy of promoting Russian growth in Africa. (Siegle, 2021) Due to the consistent international competition in the domain of the private security industry, one can argue that there is a vivid simulation of Western countries through the deployment of troops to track PMCs in

²⁶ The Wagner PMC relation with these companies will be explained in Chapter 3.

²⁷ Interview 2C, senior military official, UK. Conducted in 20/12/2021.

²⁸ Interview 10 E, previous PMC element, Syria. Conducted in 11/01/2022

²⁹ Interview C3, Civilian working with PMCs, Libya, Conducted in 12/1/2022. quotes are originally stated in Arabic, translated by myself as I'm fully acquainted with the language.

areas of scarcity, as in Western special forces to Libya, in 2011, to support armed opposition forces, despite the resistance of Gadhafi forces from not authorizing the Security Council, and in recent years, to support Khalifa Haftar.

Filling Job Shortage in High-Risk Environments

Some military companies provide exceptional services in a highly professional manner, making them attractive to even the most professional armies. For example, the US occupation in Afghanistan expanded the use of former Soviet pilots participating in the Russian war in Afghanistan (1979-1989),³⁰ Due to their experience in flight paths and their knowledge of the complex geographical structure of the country. The assassination of former Haitian President Jovenel Moise in July 2021 also revealed the role those Colombian private forces have become in political conflicts in many Latin American and other countries. These Colombian contractors have the comparative advantages of low contracting costs and extensive experience with long-running conflicts with rebel groups, drug cartels, and organized crime. The interest in engaging in a similar high-risk environment does not necessarily come from the state. In 2017, the creator of the PMC Academi, previously recognized as Blackwater, even suggested that the White House hires the company to lead the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. (Wither, 2020)

Low Political Risks

This is a significant reason for the expansion in demand for the services of PMCs; Countries and governments can quickly disavow the actions of these companies or avoid the political fallout from them. For example, Russia was able to employ the services of Wagner and other proxies in the conflict in Crimea against Ukraine and Libya and succeeded in denying any military presence on the ground. Likewise, the United States tried to mitigate the impact of the crimes committed by its army against civilians in Iraq by focusing the media on the crimes committed by the contractors led by the Blackwater Company.³¹

³⁰ Interview D1, Intelligence expert, Turkey. Conducted in 12/10/2021.

³¹ Interview S1, S2, military seniors, Conducted in 12/10/2021.

Humanitarian Losses

PMC represented a solution for bloody war losses, as they could fight on behalf and for the state and, at the same time, exempts the state from the pressure of domestic public opinion in the event of human casualties. This argument sometimes explains the Kremlin's use of PMCs based on the assumption that Russia fears repeating the Afghanistan scenario when the Soviet Union militarily intervened. Afghanistan supported the pro-Soviet government, for a whole decade, from 1979 until 1989, without succeeding in achieving its goals and after incurring heavy losses. Because of this negative memory, the fears that the Afghan scenario might be repeated, the Russian intervention is through its PMCs. (ترویتسکیا، 2017) This is not the main reason for Russia's use of PMCs; however, a good reason to understand the endurance of PMC usage between the soviet and Russian periods, reflecting traditional Russian models of using proxies. (Sukhankin, 2018)

It could be supposed that the employment of PMCs in hybrid war is, for some major countries, an alternative to conventional wars that are fought by self-military means because its costs and results would be disastrous for them and their interests if they were fought openly and directly. In short, it is a “strategic investment in war and security at a lower cost” by fighting for the lives of others.

2. RUSSIAN HYBRID-PMC DEPLOYMENT MODEL

This section connects the dots between hybrid warfare, PMCs, and Russia first by outlining the existing theoretical discussions and Russian hybrid policies from a practical perspective. It is not novel to relate the Russian state with the notion of hybrid warfare. However, instead of getting into the debate that considers all hybrid wars Russian, I examine if Russian warfare is hybrid warfare based on the characteristics of the modern war that were explained in Chapter I. Furthermore, relying on the historical background provided in the same chapter on the evolution of the concept itself, we know that hybrid warfare existed before and beyond Russia. It should then be cleared out why Russia and not another actor. First, the drive of the research is to investigate the impact of PMCs on hybrid warfare through a Russian PMC case: the Wagner Group, so it is logical to include Russia behind the curtains of war. Second, the essence of the analytical framework explained in the introduction is considering the PMC state-

backed/sponsored. Hence, the PMC and the state actorness and hybridity should be understood separately and then as one.

2.1. Taking a Stand in the Theoretical Debates: A Russian Warfare?

A substantial body of research connects hybrid warfare to Russia's operations in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Solid and extensive studies also explain Russia's whole strategic toolkit in Ukraine. (Lanozska, 2016; Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014). Aside from sabotage, cyber-attacks, media propaganda, the presence of "little green men," staged military maneuvers, criminal disorder, and agitations are all possibilities. Some researchers believe that cyber warfare or information warfare are critical advancements in Russia's military strategy. (Bachmann, Gunneriusson, 2015; Giles, 2016). At the same time, others, on the other hand, are focused on Russia's asymmetric tactics (Thornton, 2016). Other perspectives emphasize the challenge of conceptualizing Russia's tactics as a hybrid war, characterizing them as "gray-zone wars" (Echevarria, 2016) or the practice of a "compound indirect" tactic (Scheipers, 2016). In most cases, in the literature, it is hard to separate hybrid warfare from Russian warfare based on the belief that Russia has efficaciously used a hybrid blend of military, economic, political, and social tactics in warfare. Mikael Weissman even attributes all talks about hybrid warfare to Russia. (Weissmann, 2018, p. 17) The "blurring" of conventional warfare concepts, its newness, the use of non-military tools, and the asymmetric relationship to conventional Western warfighting have all backed labeling these actions Russian. (Vandiver, 2014) Making sense of this assumption will be through applying the characteristics of hybrid warfare outlined in the first chapter in alliance with Russia as an aggressor in warfare.

First, Russia seeks to attain politically key outcomes by employing all existing means, both frequent and asymmetric, on the premise that conventional structures are primarily oriented toward symmetrical adversaries, or, in the less severe case, asymmetrical adversaries, rather than a convenient concurrent combination of the two. (Marcuzzi, 2018) The hybrid nature of Russian warfare lies behind its new ratio of non-military to military measures. (Fainberg, 2017) Second, when discussing Russia, it should be borne in mind that we are talking about a country with vast military

experience. Russia needs to create an army whose mission is to minimize political risk when going to war. In this regard, Russian PMCs provide an adequate military at a lower cost because it has lower start-up and operating costs than traditional armies. (Worcester, 2014) This is warfare on the cheap; Russia's intervention in Syria was shaped by two things: ambitious goals and a limited budget (Hall & Todman, 2022)

Third, the character of warfare has altered because of the new information environment. Events in Ukraine in 2014 demonstrated that combat might be won without a single gunshot and that big battles can be fought in cyberspace rather than on the ground, air, and seas. (Ionatamishvili & Svetoka, 2018) Fourth, internal and external plausible deniability, Wagner is considered Russia's hidden hand because it is affiliated with the latter and at the same time does not recognize its subordination, which means that it adopts an opposite policy about military interventions in conflict areas, where Western countries intervene with regular forces and then assign combat actions to private companies, Russia pushes private security companies into conflicts. It then studies the possibility of direct military and economic intervention. Keeping the PMCs illegal in Russia augments plausible deniability for Putin by allowing him to stay in the shadow, away from any unpleasant or risky acts the company makes. (Marten, 2020) Once the Russian PMCs become legal, in other words, they become inefficient as legitimizing Wagner means legitimizing violence. Importantly, great powers may want to play along with the claim that they do not belong to Russia, even if their intelligence apparatus presents reliable information to the contrary. First, it spares them from explaining to their polity why they may not be responding to the situation by starting a war with Russia. Second, if they choose to respond, they can fight the auxiliaries and use them against Russia because they will not want to be seen covering support publicly. (Rendboe, 2019, pp. 41-42)

The Russian PMCs' deniability is another problem, and it is much more crucially an issue with the deniability they give to Russia. Because of the risk of escalation, the West is hesitant to take military action against Russia. With the employment of these proxies by Russia, the West has the option of not escalating politically in a scenario where Russia is acting. There is enough scientific evidence to reveal Russia and respond if the desire is there. This supports the Russian PMCs such as Wagner in providing deniability.

2.2. Russia's Policies of Hybrid Warfare

I have argued before that hybrid warfare can be conducted by weak and strong actors. However, although non-state actors and states can similarly conduct hybrid campaigns, engaging in hybrid warfare is different. I assume that the state calculates its external moves as it does from within. So *how does Russia do so?* The Russian policies of hybrid warfare reflect the importance of comprehensive government changes to adapt to the war or simply hybrid campaigns.

a. Centralization and the Integration of Institutions

Centralized decision-making is the main factor that can lead to the success of hybrid wars. Hybrid warfare requires the focus of all potential Russian decision-making bodies to coordinate the efforts of the entire government. The long-ruled Russian president Vladimir Putin's image and influence can make one believe that there is no Russia without Putin. Perhaps there will be no "influential" Russia without him, but integrating the different state institutions is supposed to keep the Russian federation solid. Russia had already established the National Defense Control Center (NDCC) in December 2013 as the central body for managing Russia's security policy and used it to manage Moscow's involvement in the Syrian war and the Crimean dispute, and other conflicts. Russia is also working on expanding the group of parties involved in maintaining national security to include the entire Russian society, including state, commercial, cultural, and media institutions.³² The Kremlin also seeks to reduce the economy's erosion to prepare for the hybrid war. By improving social and economic conditions, reducing corruption, and centralizing the economy.

b. Media and Societal Campaigns

The Russian military stresses the need to improve the power of media campaigns to instill a unified ideology to mitigate the effects of the informational and ideological erosion of Russians through media platforms run by the Kremlin, such as RT and Sputnik, as well as through the Military-Political Directorate established by the Ministry

³² Interview R3, Russia.

of Defense in July 2018.³³ To inculcate the unifying ideology needed to wage hybrid wars and create an abiding conviction in both the military and society about why they should serve Russia. Russian military planners in 2017 recommended orthodoxy, state interests, national military traditions, psychology, and national culture, among others; it can form a national creed of the state in a new system. The directorate works with residents and youth from outside the army, considering that “the student of today is the soldier of the future.”

c. Military Diplomatic Coverage

Russian analysts³⁴ argue that countries often deploy conventional forces as the closing step of a hybrid war and that these forces are often used under the cover of legal frameworks such as peacekeeping. Russian officers assert that the approval of the UN Security Council for peacekeeping operations or multinational NATO operations is a way to enable countries to deploy military forces, regardless of the nature and the stated reasons for deployment.³⁵ Therefore, the Kremlin is working to integrate the Russian army into many international security organizations to obtain the diplomatic cover that Moscow believes is important in using conventional forces in hybrid wars.

d. Proxies

Russian experts³⁶ consider armed and rebel groups and PMCs the main actors in hybrid wars, which are almost always run by states. Russia is increasing its priority on employing these proxy forces and preparing to combat them. As mentioned in previous chapters, PMCs are beneficial because of their low cost and perceived deniability for conventional armed forces. Researchers of the Russian General Staff also openly discussed in 2015 the idea of PMCs immunizing the state’s foreign policy from criticism and international law, whereby states can respond to any criticism by saying that “the state does not interfere in the internal affairs of private companies,”³⁷ and

³³ Interview R1, Russian intelligence expert, conducted in 27/11/2021. (British, American Backgrounds)

³⁴ Interview R1, Russian Intelligence expert, Conducted in 27/11/2021. (British, American Backgrounds)

³⁵ Interview R2, Russian Intelligence expert, Conducted in 27/11/2021. (British, American Backgrounds)

³⁶ Interview R1, R2, R3, Russian Intelligence experts, Conducted in 27/11/2021. (British, American Backgrounds)

³⁷ Interview R2, Russian Intelligence expert, Conducted in 27/11/2021. (British, American Backgrounds)

denying the state's connection to private companies. The fall and disintegration of the Soviet Union were followed by the dismissal of a notable figure of military and security personnel, who tended to establish security and military companies, as there are about 20,000 private protection companies in Russia, about 4,000 PMCs, and between 10 to 20 private military companies. (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2021, p. 2) The most well-known companies are “RSB-Group, MAR, Antiterror, Moran Security Group, E.N.O.T. Corp., Tigr Top-Rent Security, and Slavonic Corps Limited.” (Sukhankin, 2018) That is why it is necessary to note that Wagner is not the only active PMC in hybrid warfare.

Figure 2: Private Military Companies in Russia



Source: (InformNapalm, 2015)

It is not Russian warfare by itself that is revolutionary. Instead, uniqueness may be found in how Russia strategically and carefully uses PMC to achieve its pursuits. In recent years, Wagner has been the show star for many reasons highlighted in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DECIPHERING THE WAGNER GROUP

ACTORNESS IN HYBRID WARFARE: THE CASES OF UKRAINE, SYRIA, AND LIBYA

This chapter provides the historical background of the study case and explains the broader context of the cases, the Wagner activities in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. The description, history, and structure of initial facts about Wagner PMC are presented in the section. It is wrong to relate Wagner PMC only to wars. The young PMC has other modes that will be referred to when outlining the main tasks/functions performed in the first section. Within the analysis framework, the second part will focus on the war mode of Wagner in the Libyan, Syrian, and Ukrainian conflicts, three significant cases from the broad spectrum of the geographic presence of Wagner that is continuously expanding and increasingly concerning the international community.

1. BACKGROUND OF WAGNER PMC

From 1997 to 2013, Russian PMCs (or organizations approximately fitting this criterion) saw a remarkable transition in both frequency and magnitude: Their total number expanded considerably, resulting in some vital structural alterations. (Sukhankin, 2018) Compared to other Russian private military companies, Wagner Group is relatively very young, which will be confirmed when presenting the phases of its maturity and the geographic landscape of its operations. However, the group represents one of the utmost noticeable examples in the strategic deliberations regarding the conflicts, the chaos caused, and their aims and tactics.

1.1. Foundation: Putin-Prigogine-Utkin Connection Plot

Группа Вагнера or Wagner's³⁸ roots go back to Orel Counterterrorism, which was officially established in Orel in 2003 as a “non-governmental education and training center.” It is a company founded by retired members of the Special Forces. That company signed contracts with various Russian civilian companies to protect its business operations in Iraq. Several companies emerged from Orel, most notably Moran Security Group, officially registered in 2011. Its website says that it provides protection services in the maritime field, including armed guarding of ships, and has activities in Central Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, and several of its naval vessels are registered in the Cook Islands. In October 2012, Moran made headlines in Russia when the Nigerian government arrested nine of her Russian guards during an attack on their ship in Lagos Port for illegal possession of weapons. They were released on bail from the Russian Embassy in Nigeria and were allowed to leave and return home in October 2013. (Marten, 2019) In the same year, the Syrian government asked the Moran Security Group to help regain control of the oil and gas infrastructure seized by ISIS two years before Russia officially entered the Syrian conflict. The Moran Security Group established a subsidiary in Hong Kong called the Slavonic-Corpus, owned by Vadim Gusev, deputy director of Moran Group. The Slavic Legion Company sent 267 fighters to Syria, but they failed in their mission. Upon their return to Russia, the owner of the company, Joseph, and one of his assistants was arrested, and they were found responsible for running mercenary groups under “Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code,” they were condemned to years in prison they went victim to the conflicts of the Russian security services.³⁹

Then the name of the military intelligence officer Dmitry Utkin appeared. Utkin, a Russian Military Intelligence Agency (GRU) lieutenant colonel, ended his official military career in 2013. (Korotkov, 2015) Utkin participated in the first and second Chechen wars and then moved in 2000 to Picori town near the Estonian border, where

³⁸ It should be highlighted that the Wagner Group does not have formal capabilities for military intervention, and the entity technically does not exist. The concept of the “Wagner Group” was established after several reports of people linked together and sent to participate in various conflict hotspots as part of an organization bearing that name.

³⁹ Interview R1, Russian Intelligence expert, Conducted in 27/11/2021. (British, American Backgrounds)

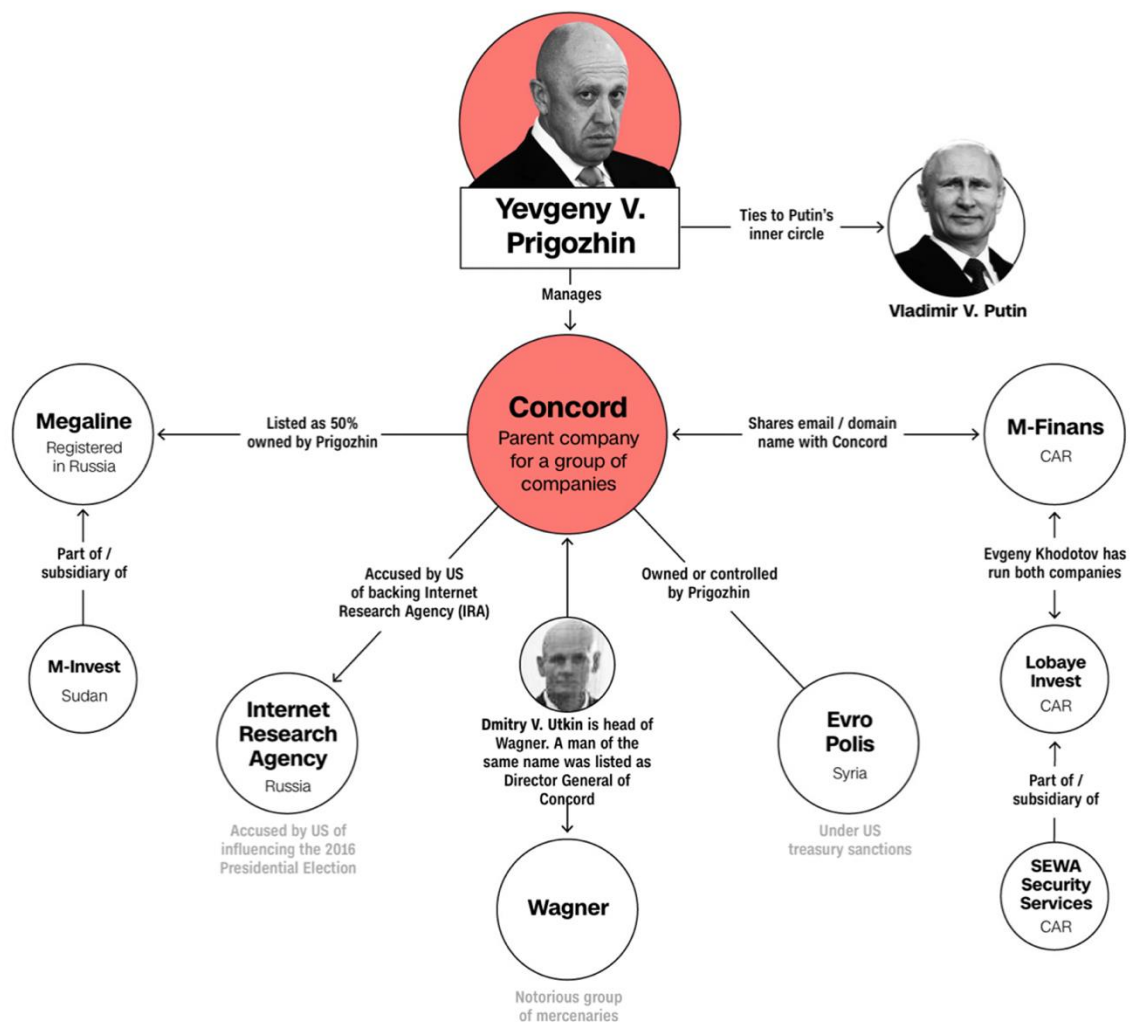
he acted as commander of the Special Operations Division (Sebastinaz) in the 2nd Brigade belonging to the Russian Military Intelligence (Bellingcat, 2020) Utkin left the service in 2013, worked for the Moran Security Group, and participated in the Slavic Corps Mission to Syria but was not arrested upon his return to Russia. Utkin founded Wagner in 2014 after the German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883), who loved his music. Utkin appeared in a filmed broadcast of a reception held in the Kremlin in 2016. After the Kremlin initially denied any information of his existence, Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov eventually admitted that Utkin attended a ceremony honoring the former military in the Kremlin. (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2021)

At that time, the role of businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin emerged as a financier and head of Wagner, while Utkin's role did not exceed the technical and field leadership side. Interestingly, Prigozhin has no military or security background. The Wagner PMC's formation and continuous expansion are commonly linked to alleged financial backing from Kremlin-connected Russian multi-millionaire Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose fortune is 7.14 billion rubles (\$120 million); however, the actual value might be significantly higher. Prigozhin is the head of Concord-M, a catering firm that services the St. Petersburg and Moscow school systems and nearly 90 percent of the Russian military, earning him approximately \$1 billion in contractual arrangements. (Sukhankin, 2018) The information about him states that after spending a period in prison for theft and fraud in the late Soviet era, he became a restaurateur running high-end restaurants in St. Petersburg, where Putin worked. By the mid-2000s, after hosting Putin in his restaurants, Prigozhin began making his way into the president's circle, eventually becoming a Kremlin catering operator and known as "Putin's Chef" (Reynolds, 2019, p. 4) Then, his activity expanded to include supplying food to the army, police, and patients in hospitals in exchange for huge payments estimated at no less than 3 billion dollars. (Bellingcat, 2020) His name is also associated with the infamous Internet Research Agency, which has been accused of conducting infamous political influence operations. From here, and under circumstances that leave no room for doubt, came the accusations about the Russians' involvement in influencing the US elections, as the US Treasury imposed sanctions on Prigozhin by targeting several of his financial assets and businesses.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Interview R3, Russian Intelligence expert, Conducted in 27/11/2021.(British, American Backgrounds)

To recap, the only tangible entity linked to Wagner is LLC Concord Management and Consulting Services, a registered company that falls under the Prigogine umbrella and provides various services. The executive director of Concorde is alleged to be Dmitriy, who has extensive combat experience and close ties to the private security sector, namely through the Moran Military Group and the Slavic Guard. The Putin-Prigogine-Atkin connection plot and the allegations about Wagner are based on this plot. (Jazeera, 2020)

Figure 3: Putin-Prigogine-Atkin Connection Plot



Source: (CNN, 2019)

1.2. Quasi-PMC or Mercenary?

Wagner is not a typical group of being labeled as a mercenary or a semi-state force. It is a distinct entity with an organizational chart. (Marten, 2020) Many typically referred to the Wagner Group as mercenaries; however, its personnel are not actual mercenaries. The group is intensely patriotic even as they struggle for money on the deal. It only operates with total capacity when it believes it is acting on behalf of the Russian government, although some of its members are just Russian buddies from Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, and Serbia. (Anon., 2020) Wagner operates under the umbrella of the Russian state, specifically under the supervision of the Military Intelligence Service, but it has a unique, independent space (flexible autonomy) within which it operates. There are many assumptions because it is asserted that Wagner is a state-backed PMC or even a state proxy. I highlight the followings:

Wagner training is near the GRU special operations Spetsnaz training center in Molokino, Krasnodar. (Marten, 2020).⁴¹ Wagner personnel use Russian state facilities – bases, aircraft, and hospitals as a natural result. (Hauer, 2018) In 2015 and 2016, some of its members killed in action were buried with military honors, something usually reserved for uniformed soldiers. (Marten, 2020) Moreover, others were awarded Russian state medals.

Now let us look at the incidents that confirm the connections of Russia to Wagner on the battlefield, which can be abstracted from the different external actions/reactions of the official state representatives at the international system level. When Wagner fighters and their Syrian allies conducted a joint attack in 2018, US military officials warned their Russian counterparts to withdraw the attacking forces through direct communication. The Russian army responded by denying any knowledge of the advanced force. The American army attacked it by air fiercely, killing up to 200 Wagner fighters' Russian officials officially commented on the incident by saying (We only deal with data related to the soldiers of the Russian forces... We do not have data about other Russians who could be in Syria) (Borger & Bennetts, 2018) Defense

⁴¹ See, <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>; for illustrations of Wagner and official Russian state training sites.

Minister Jim Mattis confirmed to Congress the denial of the Russian high command in Syria that the targets are affiliated with the incident revealed that Prigozhin's commercial interests might cause significant risks, as the unilateral movement of his company's elements threatened Russian-American relations, and angered the Russian army and the Kremlin, prompting Prigozhin to pledge that this would not happen again (Reynolds, 2019, p. 6) The incident deepened tensions between Wagner and the Russian army, which distanced itself from the attack. In a newspaper interview, members of Wagner questioned the army's claim that it was unaware of their attack and expressed their doubts that Russian officers had allowed US forces to attack Wagner's operatives to embarrass Prigozhin. One of them even claimed that an officer in the Russian army had pledged air cover for the operation, but he had not fulfilled his pledge. (Хазов-Кассиа, 2019)

Russian officials insist on their denial of the relationship between the Wagner Group and the country's official institutions, especially the intelligence service and the military, including President Vladimir Putin. In April 2012, some deputies in the State Duma asked Putin (then Prime Minister) whether he favored forming a network of Russian PMCs, and he replied that these companies could be kits to allow the fulfillment of national interests without official state interference.⁴² However, he did not mention any relationship with Wagner and limiting the tasks of these companies to protecting essential facilities and training foreign military personnel abroad.

This position contradicts various data and reports and actual evidence that confirms a close relationship between the Russian military and Wagner. Reports confirmed that there is not a single registered company called Wagner and that the name describes a network of companies that includes mercenary groups, which are engaged in a broad scope of actions, including work to suppress pro-democracy protests, dissemination of disinformation, prospecting for minerals such as gold and diamonds, and engaging in military activity. *But why Wagner?* As it can be argued that many other Russian PMCs perhaps have broader experience and capabilities. Many considerations explain the reasons for Russia's interest in using Wagner Group, the most prominent of which are:

⁴² Interview D1, Intelligence expert, Turkey. Conducted in 12/10/2021.

- This type of company is cheaper and less accountable, and at the same time, more capable than regular armies in dealing with different environments, which is evident in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq.
- Wagner helped to expand the Kremlin's influence abroad without the intervention of military forces that could expose it to human losses.
- Supporting the group's activity represents a mechanism to bypass the prohibitions in Russian laws regarding the establishment and deployment of special military forces in wars. These laws emphasized the usage of PMCs to protect facilities and public figures only.
- The activity of this group helps reduce the possibility of exposure to international sanctions, which result in economic losses that do not seem insignificant.
- The use of Wagner helps get rid of the security risks posed by the presence of mercenaries in Russia. They pose a security and political threat to the state with their high training and combat capabilities.
- The Kremlin uses Wagner to accomplish its objectives without bearing the aftermaths of its acts, as it portrays them as volunteers who have nothing to do with the state.
- Wagner allows for the likely incorporation of outsiders (from underprivileged parts of the post-Soviet arena or even from other conflicts/non-conflict zones in the world), which gives Russia a powerful overseas influence tool.

1.3. Why Not Legal?

“A mercenary without a legal framework cannot be decreased in combat. They vanish without a name, a body, or a trace of existence.”

(Pereira, 2022)

PMCs are not legalized in Russia under “Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code” of 1996, which defines a “mercenary” as “a person who works to obtain material reward without being a national of the state whose armed conflict or hostilities are taking place on its territory, He does not reside permanently within its territory, or perform his official duties in it.” Kimberly Marten describes the Group's relationship

with the Kremlin as “hard to define” and places additional emphasis on its illegality. (Marten, 2019, p. 4)

The lack of legalization of the activity of these companies is due to bureaucratic obstacles on the part of influential parties, led by the Russian army, which see the need for the state to sustain the monopoly on the use of violence, as well as the existence of a serious disagreement between the Federal Security Agency (FSB) and the Military Intelligence Service (GRU) regarding who has the right to supervise. On the activities of these companies. Russia has declined to support a bill to permit PMCs’ existence. (Uawire, 2018) Beginning in 2009, several members of the Russian House of Representatives tried to pass legislation to legalize the work of Russian military companies, but it was not approved. In March 2018, the Russian Cabinet (including the Ministries of Defense, Justice, and Finance, the National Guard, the Federal Security Service, Foreign Intelligence Service, and Prosecutor General) refused to consider legalizing Wagner or other PMCs, arguing that mercenary comportment violated the law. Moscow considers PMCs to be more useful if they are not regulated. In this way, it is easy for the Russian authorities to shirk responsibility for their activities. (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2021, p. 7) This is what Putin did regarding Wagner’s presence in Libya, where he said at a joint press conference with then German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Moscow in January 2020, in response to a question about the presence of Russian military contractors in Libya: “Even if there are Russian citizens, they do not represent the interests of the Russian state, and they do not receive any money from it,” (RT-Arabic, 2020) So, from the legal point of view, there are PMCs in Russia, and most of the entities active in the sector are registered as regular commercial companies, generally with the status of private limited companies (Dreyfus, 2018, p. 5)

Since PMCs are illegal in Russia, Wagner is thought to be registered in Argentina, and the group’s funding source is due to profits from Russian contracts in natural resources in the countries in which they operate, such as mining rights. This illegality serves two primary purposes. For starters, it upholds these groups loyal to the Kremlin’s “power vertical” and Putin by forcing them to share any profit derived from their actions. They can be arrested and detained for mercenary activity whenever they exhibit betrayal to their patron. Second, it restricts the market and ensures that only Putin’s

favorites benefit from these activities, as any outsider seeking to establish such a corporation would face the same fate. (Marten, 2020)

In international law, the Russian military's degree of organizational oversight and control implies that Russia has selective and overall control of Wagner. This means that alone by the activities of Wagner, we should legally consider the Ukraine conflict to be an interstate war. Furthermore, if people like Utkin got their position directly through the FSB and took orders from GRU, then the relationship is arguably one of strict control for which Russia is entirely responsible. Whilst lack of intelligence may have made the group plausibly deniable at the time, it is by no means deniable in hindsight.

1.4. Wagner Operations Timeline

Armed non-state actors and PMCs predominantly have a certain life and development cycle that is impacted by various factors. This life cycle is not like states, as it is shorter and influenced by short-term variables. The exciting part is that this sequence is somehow also related to what stage (phase) the state is currently in (even for non-state armed actors that act independently; they are affected by the internal/external dynamics of the state(s) they operate in. Because this life cycle is short, one actor can have many cycles, and in each new one, the incompatibilities of the actor and conflict change. I mean by the change of incompatibilities: it might be a change in territory, goals, logic, motives of intervention...etc.; this is my way of explaining the rise and fall of ISIS, for example. The defeat of a state in a battle does not always mean its fall. Similarly, the fall of a non-state armed actor does not mean it will not rise again. If we believe that Wagner also has a life cycle, then its operations and activities can be put into phases that reflect upon the development of the PMC itself. Hence, it reflects upon the gradual growth of its capacities, capabilities, and even the scope of the group's pursuits.

1.4.1. Phase 1: The Official Launching⁴³

The geopolitical objectives of Wagner started in 2014 (Sukhankin, 2018) when it was first spotted. Wagner supported pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine and joined the

⁴³ Not the beginning as a group but as an effective proxy.

ranks of rebel groups fighting the pro-Western Ukrainian authorities when it actively participated in hostilities in the Donbas region. Wagner first appeared at a time when the Kremlin needed to go to war there clandestinely to ease international pressure against it. Wagner was active in Crimea, Donbas, and Luhansk and fought fierce battles against the Ukrainian forces. (Reynolds, 2019, p. 2) In February 2015, the Ukrainian intelligence service (SBU) monitored phone calls between Utkin and Oleg Ivannikov, a senior Russian military intelligence officer, regarding the advancement of military acts in Eastern Ukraine. (Bellingcat, 2020) As the fighting in Ukraine subsided in 2015, Wagner operatives were transferred to a secret training base in Molenko, Krasnodar region, next to a training facility for special forces operating within the 10th Brigade of Military Intelligence in southern Russia. While Prigozhin's financing of Wagner provided several advantages for the Kremlin, it came under its control as a mercenary force without the need to pay the costs of its work. (Marten, 2019, p. 14) Utkin continued to lead Wagner militarily, while its role began to expand over time in Syria, where its elements benefited from Russian military bases and logistical networks.⁴⁴

1.4.2. Phase 2: The Transformation

Wagner's efficacy reached a peak, culminating in the group backing in capturing the city of Palmyra from ISIS. (Sukhankin, 2018). The group became more prominent in the Syrian conflict after Moscow announced its direct military intervention in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in September 2015. In this intervention, along with the regular army, Wagner's support included training the regime forces and being on the first front lines to spare the regular Russian forces' human losses. The group then expanded its activities in areas where Russia could not officially intervene or preferred not to be at the forefront. (Bell, 2019) Wagner has gone through some significant changes in the second phase, which are reflected in both the nature of the tasks/operations undertaken (Specifically, the protection of the Shaer natural gas/oil field and related facilities) as well as the diminishing quality of available armament and troops in general. Accordingly, the primary recruitment sources at that time have been Cossacks and foreigners (mainly from Donbas). This transition is primarily based on

⁴⁴ S2, retired military officer. Conducted 24/10/2021.

changes in *budgetary constraints*: previously, financial assistance came from Russian government oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, but until 2017 (following an alleged disagreement between both the multi-millionaire and the defense ministry), the Syrian government has covered Wagner's significant expenditures, resulting in a drop in operational capabilities. They paid for the military services provided by the Wagner Company by giving it a quarter of the profits from the oil and gas fields that the company guards or recovers from the regime's opponents. (Marten, 2019, p. 14)

This new formation was utilized as the spearhead of Russian ground operations in Syria when US-led troops heavily attacked it, killing at least several hundred people in Deir el-Zour. Igor Strelkov, former defense minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine, broke the news of the devastating rout. It was then echoed by Michael Pompeo, then-director of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), who stated that "a couple hundred" Russians were killed in Syria. (Sukhankin, 2018)

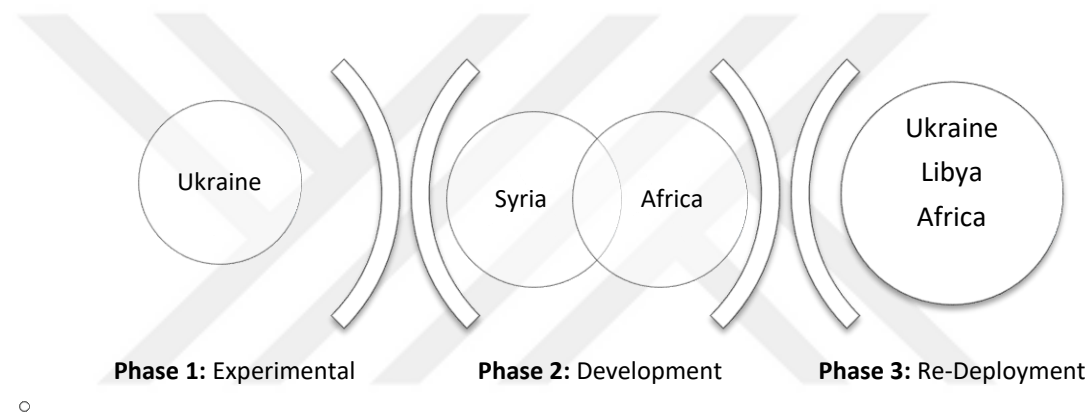
Wagner's involvement in the Venezuela crisis is part of the second trend, as this intervention came to support President Nicolas Maduro, an ally of Russia, and keep him in power after the protests escalated at the end of 2019. Wagner was also present in Sudan in support of the rule of former President Omar al-Bashir. The same was true for Belarus, where 32 Wagner fighters were arrested and accused of attempting to prepare for terrorist operations and support the opposition during the presidential elections. On a similar level, Wagner intervened in Libya and began sending weapons, military equipment, and mercenaries to support the Libyan army, and the United Nations specified their number at no less than 1,200.⁴⁵ In this context, the great activity of Wagner is noted in African conflicts. In 2018, the group made a foray into the Central African Republic; to secure the mining and mining activities of gold and diamonds for the Russian company "Lobaye Invest," secure the institutions, and train the Presidential Guard the army there. Wagner has spread since 2019 in northern Mozambique, where the gas-rich areas to counter ISIS also operate in Congo, Somalia, and Mali. After the Prime Minister of Mali, Kokala Maiga, accused, on September 25, 2021, France of abandoning his country by withdrawing the "Barkhane" force, and in the context of the increasing jihadist threat in this region, the Russian Foreign Minister, Lavrov,

⁴⁵ Interview L2, Military Officer, Libya. Conducted in 20/10/2021.

confirmed that the Republic of Mali requested the services of private Russian companies. The Malian government is close to contracting 1,000 Wagner armed elements, a move that drew criticism from European countries, particularly France.⁴⁶

Wagner's operations are not limited to the abovementioned incidents; Appendix 2 illustrates other locations where the PMC is active today. As these locations fall out of the scope of this research, only a brief description of the service provided by Wagner and in which phase of the company's evolution we can relate the intervention is mentioned.

Figure 4: Wagner PMC Hybrid Model



1.4.3. Phase 3: Predictions

One might question when the lifeline of the group and maybe a possible collapse; it is very early to talk about this if Putin and Prigozhin are in power. Does the Kremlin have an extended plan for Wagner? It is too difficult to tell as the company has a brief history. What I observed is that the far the Wagner PMC moves from its motherland, the more autonomy and control it enjoys. (A reflection on Russia's Grand Strategy and Priorities). The real question is whether the Wagner PMC enjoys such a degree of autonomy per choice, meaning that Russia fails to control its proxies in far regions, or is the PMC getting independent of its creator. The rumors of the PMC's desire to cut ties with Russia started after Russia launched a full-scale war on Ukraine in 2022. Russia asked Wagner to transfer its troops back to Ukraine from Africa, which was the case.

⁴⁶ Interview L2, Military Officer, Libya. Conducted in 20/10/2021.

However, for example, Wagner in Central Africa was not happy. The Wagnerites, involved in massive mining and diamonds and oil deals, believe that if they lose their territorial control, it will affect the floods of money they gain from securing the mines ...etc. Is Level 2 and 3 of Wagner having internal problems? or is it Level 2 that, despite their lasting loyalty, detected a structural weakness in the kremlin that can harm them in the short or long term. The answers to these questions will define phase 3 of the lifeline of Wagner PMC. The Wagner Group faces two possible scenarios: First, having complete autonomy and sovereignty over its actions if the group wants to survive as a PMC. The second option is to carry on operating under the umbrella of the Russian State unofficially (the thing that will not change anytime soon). The result of the war will provide us with a clearer image of the group's future.

Based on the interviews I have conducted with people close to Wagner, particularly in Africa, they were reachable through informal social channels. I can confidently say that there is mistrust and dissatisfaction among Wagner soldiers. They were not satisfied with the payments in Syria and hardly accepted that they were not yet paid the promised money in Libya. For this reason, it is hard to believe that they will give away other sources of money and power in the region. This argument helps in understanding the double-faced strategy of the military company in many oil-rich African countries, with offices in 23 African countries.⁴⁷ (Carafano & Grazios, 2022) This strategy has two visible patterns, the first aims at enhancing the role of Wagner in the African continent to serve the Russian influence in strategic areas such as the Sahel and West Africa, and the second is to exploit what these zones possess of wealth and natural resources that all international powers are scrambling for.

1.5. Wagner Capacities: Human and Material Resources

Wagner has an organizational structure like that adopted by the rest of the companies, i.e., a chief general manager, a board of directors, and employees, and the profits of these companies pour into their owners' bank accounts. When gathering information on Wagner, the careful examination of an interview BBC conducted with a previous Wagner Soldier 2021 (BBC, 2021) provided me with an initial base on Wagner soldiers' internal structure that I have worked on enriching through interviews

⁴⁷ See more: RUSI, (Pereira, 2022)

with people who had a close network with Wagner or have witnessed a piece of relevant information concerning the soldiers. I then can divide operational Wagner into three levels.

Level 01: Central Command

Here we must recall the Putin-Prigogine-Utkin Connection Plot. While Prigogine represents the corporate side of Wagner and Utkin the military, Putin remains the master of all decisions. The Russian president is the solid of the central command structure of this triangle. He makes decisions on how to bring the desired state, particularly in terms of political-strategic interests in far operational zones. These decisions are turned into a set of activities, which are then transferred to the other levels of Wagner forces. We assume the close ties of Putin-Prigogine explain the flexible autonomy the PMC enjoys in the zones they operate in, which allows them to seek their pursuits while working on preserving the Russian interests.

Level 02: Elite Soldiers

Security agencies recruit elite soldiers, or “*siloviki*,” semi-amateurs (through war veterans and Cossack organizations), and “cannon fodder” (former criminals, amateurs, and people with a shady history). (Sukhankin, 2018) These elites are the crucial base of Wagner; we call them elites as they do not fight the bloody conflict and are rarely put on the frontlines. Their military experiences are very vast, and they acquired high-tech knowledge (drones. etc.),⁴⁸ and they probably are the ones who trained the new joint forces of the Wagner Group. An interviewer who has witnessed an alleged Wagner training mentioned that it was in pure Russian, and in some cases, they use translators.⁴⁹ Various explorations, like the one carried out by the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) in 2016 about the fatalities of Russian recruits in Ukraine and Syria, have shown that most of those killed were not members of Russia’s special troops. Some sources are considerably more upfront in their evaluations, saying that “top-notch professionals do not join Wagner” (Sukhankin, 2018) However, it is almost certain that the elites of Wagner are the masterminds of the success of its operations. Hence it is fair to say that the PMCs’ capabilities are not about the quantity but the quality of the operations.

⁴⁸ Interview R2.

⁴⁹ Interview L2.

Level 03: Frontlines Soldiers

In terms of employment, Wagner is a multifaceted mixture of personnel, whether citizens of the home/host country, mercenaries, contractors of cross-border PMCs, or even some organizations classified globally as a terrorist such as ISIS. Any military entity that is backed by political power fears treason from within. Consequently, trust is a rational reason not to include foreign people at the elite level. This does not mean that Wagner PMC soldiers are purely Russian. They hired, for instance, Syrians in Libya not at the higher ranks but the lowest levels. For sure, Wagner's training of soldiers is different from one force to another. (Soldiers from Libya and Syria)

Moreover, as mentioned above, they can never participate in high-tech weapons-related operations.⁵⁰ The number of Wagner fighters is estimated at a few thousand, and retirees and veterans in Afghanistan and Chechnya represent the group's main strength, which expanded by contracting with recruits who have limited military experience in general and are sent to the war zone after military training. It does not exceed several weeks, and they receive a high salary compared to the income level of the average Russian citizen, amounting to about 4 thousand U.S. dollars.⁵¹ Recruiting foreign fighters and employing an odd personage such as Utkin as their military master may be a further attempt to boost the deniability of the group by suggesting that they are part of an organic insurrection. Frontline soldiers are hired on a short-term contract, their motives for joining the PMC are different, and they also differ from Wagner's motives of intervention in the war.

Romantic Soldiers: Most of them are Russian or from neighboring countries loyal to Putin and fight in the name of Russian honor and pride.

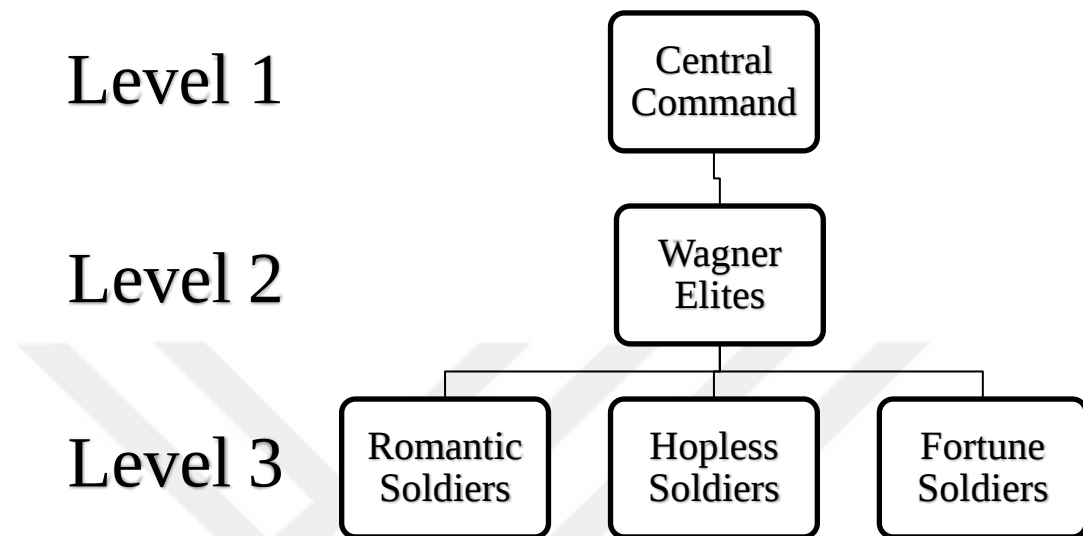
Hopeless/Obligated Soldiers: Wagner employees militia veterans who want to pay off debts. "They come from rural areas where there are few other opportunities for them to make money." (BBC, 2022) These soldiers also fight because they fear consequences that might not be directly related to them but their families and close ones. I consider the way Wagner exploits the vulnerabilities of its soldiers one of its success factors; I elaborate further on how Wagner does so in the next section.

⁵⁰ Interview R1.

⁵¹ Interview 12 A.

Soldiers of Fortune: They represent most of the Wagnerites; they get paid to fight and are usually promised high salaries and better treatment.⁵²

Figure 5: Wagner's Structure



Level 1 and Level 3 have no direct communication channels, as Level 3 can be considered temporary, meaning that some of the fighters are hired for short-term contracts and let go after they achieve the purpose of their recruitment, which are, in most times, related to the duration of the conflict. Some interviewees have confirmed this by explaining further what kind of missions they have been assigned, such as confronting terrorists in Syria. Furthermore, due to the shady nature of Wagner, it is logical to assume that this communication gap is essential to protect the identity and relations dynamics of the commanding level. Level 2 and Level 1 relations are less tight due to the commanding level's familiarity, experience, and long-term loyalty. Level 2 might be aware of the decision board dynamics but have limited access to them,⁵³ at least political access that has been remarkably replaced with economic and corporate coverage.

⁵² Interviewees who participated in PMC-military operations have emphasized the importance of a “good treatment” because usually this situation becomes unbearable.

⁵³ Interview R1M

1.5.1. Wagner's Success Factors: Strategic and Flexible Control

Constituency in nurturing stable links with their hosting country and steady foreign funding are critical factors that have made certain hybrid actors practical and durable. Numerous actors originated because of government failures to provide security or services. Presently, the same old players constitute a significant impediment to state determinations to reconstruct power. In this regard, hybrid actors are a consequence and a cause of state fragility, government incompetence, and instability. (Cambanis, et al., 2019) I believe that recurrent experience with PMCs as hybrid actors in several wars reveals the factors that correspond with PMC success that I identify as consistent loyalty and backed state sponsorship. A combination of the many factors obtained Wagner's operational success, observed in the following indicators.

1. The quality of core personnel (elites of Wagner)
2. The availability and flexible recruitment methods of the fortune soldiers
3. A solid structure of the central command system and strategic management of soldiers
4. Effective collaborations with other armed groups in the conflict zones.

To begin with, growing numbers are insufficient; an expanding workforce necessitates improved training (Isenberg, 2009) and one of the most critical parameters of the success of Russian Wagner is the military experience. Wagner cannot be described as significant, but they are very active and have the high potential possessed by their fighters. Several sources mentioned that preferably those who previously served in the army and participated in previous wars such as the Chechen war (1994-1996, 1999-2009), the South Ossetian war (2008), or the Donbas war (2014) could join the forces of Wagner, which means excellent military advantages capable of carrying out special and qualitative combat missions. Wagner soldiers are highly trained; there are even some 'tales' that Wagner's military training is within the Russian national army's same ways and locations. One of their main features is using high-tech weaponry systems and drones, which is the off-limit operations for civilians and African and other forces, in other words, frontline soldiers. Those operations are limited to Wagner from Russians, Kazaks, Yugoslavians, etc.⁵⁴ When observing the differences in Libya's wars,

⁵⁴ Interview S1

for instance, the Tripoli war, we find that elite Russian Wagner soldiers do not get involved in confrontations per choice. Usually, they choose a zone, get control over it, put bombs, and direct their drones. However, when it comes to face-to-face confrontations, they use forces they train. Based on these outlined facts, I argue that Wagner is not a mercenary but employs mercenaries.

Military experience without effective communication on the battlefield is indeed insignificant. Speaking of communication, the first that comes to mind is language, and it is hard to find people speaking Russian in Libya or Africa generally. However, Wagner does not use civilians directly but through Russian officers who had previous experiences in Libya (some of them use translators). In all cases, non-Russian Wagner soldiers are used in confrontation and demanding manual work operations/tasks that usually do not require understanding the Russian language as they have direct, simple orders:⁵⁵ mainly to protect or attack. In other terms, *ordering violence does not require transparency or effective communication*.

The PMC managed to develop a recruitment and operational system that is flexible and very efficient. From a tactical military perspective, we find that Wagner is indeed learning from each conflict they get involved in. Today, the rising group is exploiting all possible vulnerabilities in Ukraine. Wagner managed to transfer their power instruments from one conflict to another. The trained Syrian civilians who later became Wagnerites fought in Libya. During the summer of 2020, many Wagner fighters were transferred to Libya with converted Ilyushin Il-76 of the Russian Air Force. Wagner operators have reportedly been stationed at al-Gardabiya, al-Jufra, and Brak al-Shati bases in Libya. Russian personnel were also a part of this coordinated effort, mostly in managing and administrative roles, with most of the recruits being of Syrian origin. (Africom, 2020) Furthermore, the ones trained in the desert of Libya and Mali are now in Ukraine fighting along with Russia.⁵⁶

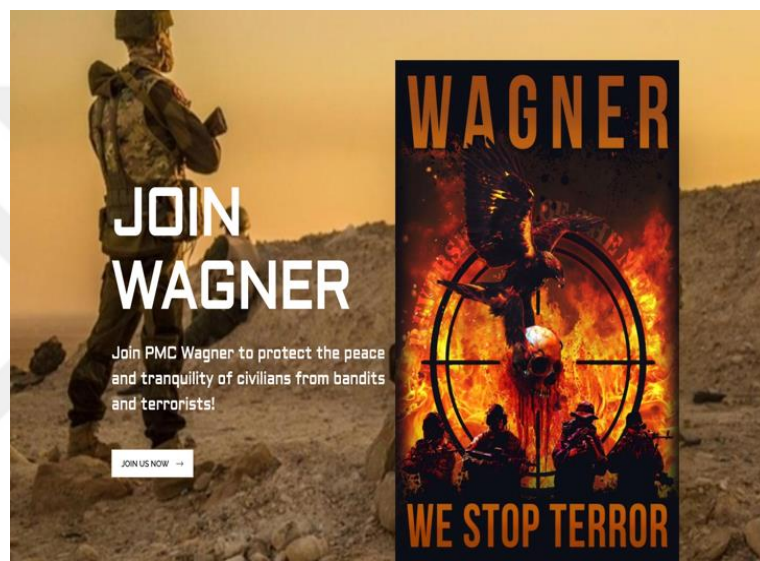
Wagner uses a flexible, social networked-based system for recruitment methods. There is much news on possible online recruitments of Wagnerites through a website (<https://join-wagner.com/>), but if there is an online way of recruitment, it is hard to believe that Wagner is doing so through a website as any other legal PMC. The secretively of the group makes the only possible virtual method is through Facebook

⁵⁵ Interview R2

⁵⁶ Interview L3.

and other social channels; more importantly, not directly by Wagner elements but through their local representatives.⁵⁷ In Syria and Ukraine, Wagner members were ordered to use Facebook, for instance, in a limited way, or they would be punished, as Level 1 was paranoid about Western authorities tracking the group's moves (mainly the U.S.). Nevertheless, this is not the case in Libya and Africa generally, where the PMC network regularly uses social media. What opens new doors for debate on Wagner's commanding and control system in Asia, Europe, and Africa.

Images were taken from the alleged Wagner website



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Fill out this form and we will contact you shortly

Name *

Email *

Phone *

Briefly describe yourself *

[Send Message](#)

Source: (<https://join-wagner.com/>)

⁵⁷ Interview L4, Civilian, previously worked with PMCs in Libya. Conducted in 20/10/2021.

Wagner's exploitation of the vulnerabilities of its soldiers is another success factor. Here we talk about the price for their blood to be paid to their families if they die or are injured and; the negative repercussions on the families of Wagner soldiers, who were told that they would be taken care of if spouses or sons were killed or injured in the battles. In this context, a Russian citizen named Olga Markelova called on the Kremlin to take responsibility for the killing of mercenaries sent on secret foreign missions. Her ex-husband, Dmitry, was a Wagner soldier killed in Syria in January 2017. In 2019, the family of a Russian soldier killed on the battlefield received 3 million Russian rubles (\$38,860) from the government and a monthly sum of 14,000 Russian rubles (\$181). However, the authorities considered that Markelova was not entitled to receive social and financial aid because Dmitriy was on an unofficial special mission in Syria. Some Wagnerite families were warned frequently. One of them mentioned that Wagner told her, "If you want to keep a good relationship with us, do not ask any questions." She was warned that if she continued to ask questions, she would never be able to visit her son's grave. (Al-mashareq, 2022)

The flexibility of the Wagner soldier's management is also apparent in Russia's desire to bring in new groups of Syrian mercenaries and send them to the Central African Republic. After their five-month contracts expired in mid-June 2021, Russia signed with them to send them to Libya. According to Syrian media, a Russian officer in charge of the Syrian mercenaries offered them a new contract to fight this time in Central Africa. Some agreed and were transferred through the Al-Jufra airbase there, and the majorities are afraid and are waiting to return to Syria. According to the Syrian government, fighters must obtain security approvals from the Military Intelligence of the Ministry of Interior to travel outside Syria through a recruitment policy followed by security companies with regional offices to attract young people. The website confirmed that it had obtained a document containing the names of about 20,000 Syrians registered with security companies that attract mercenaries to Libya. After obtaining security approvals, numbers are increasing and indicate the presence of an army of mercenaries for Russia in Syria. In July 2021, the network reported that the returnees refused to renew the contract with Moscow for another five months. Because the new contract

stipulates that they will fight alongside Russian security companies in the Central African Republic (CAR). (الحمصي, 2022)

This research considers Wagner's effective collaborations with other armed groups in the conflict zones a successful strategy that helped the PMC achieve its operational pursuits. The spinoff of circles close to Wagner mirrors the exploitable ambiguity the company produces. The "Hunters"⁵⁸ (a derivative of Wagner-related organizations), for instance, were exploited domestically and overseas in Russian propaganda operations. The unit first came to public attention in March 2017, when Russian media reported on a specific unit bolstering Syrian regime forces and focused on operations versus ISIS. It was rapidly replicated by media outlets closely affiliated with Russian propaganda overseas, which are known to copy and propagate "managed leaks" in "target nations" such as Bulgaria, earmarked for misinformation offensive operations. Perhaps one of their key responsibilities is the protection of the Syrian army's important facilities, like gas and oil reserves, which overlap with Euro Polis, a corporation linked to a close Putin ally. While the specifics of Euro Polis' Syrian contracts remain a corporate mystery, it is apparent that the ISIS Hunters are a significant component of the firm's operations, as the corporation is related to corporate moguls close to Wagner. (Avramov & Trad, 2018)

1.5.2. Wagner as an Instrument of Realpolitik

Wagner acted in interstate warfare in Ukraine; Wagner is supporting Haftar in Libya, who is undertaking a coup d'état; they are/were supposedly preventing a coup d'état in Sudan and Venezuela; they were seemingly looking for a client to indebt in Madagascar; they found one such client in CAR. This is not precisely a revision of the international order but looks more like Marten's (2015) idea of judoka foreign policy. Nevertheless, whilst they do not serve to revise the current international order, they may still serve strategic goals within the current order. (Rendboe, 2019, p. 67) It is clear that Wagner's movements in conflict areas are concentrated in two directions that can be illustrated as follows: achieving Russia's strategic pursuits and achieving economic gains.

⁵⁸ @ISIS_Hunters active official twitter account.

First, the role played by the Wagner Group in the world is not new to the tools of implementing Russian foreign policy, as Moscow sought during previous decades to rely on invisible forces to support its allies and achieve its interests in the world. In 1937, throughout the II Sino-Japanese War, Soviet forces were deployed in China, and the (former) Soviet Union was formally deprived of any association with them. Its operatives belonged to the Soviet Air Force. Continuing the same approach, the Soviet Union directed many military specialists as consultants to analyze conflicts worldwide. In the 1990s, forces from Russia participated in the separationist conflicts in Georgia, while the former again denied connection to these wars and described them as civil wars.⁵⁹

Secondly, Russia seeks to benefit economically from the group's activity, as is evident in the African continent, where the continent has abundant natural resources and minerals, and Moscow needs raw materials from minerals, such as manganese and chromium. Russia already has energy competence that it may provide to Africa's oil-rich states. According to Western media, the Russian energy corporation "Lukoil" has operations in Cameroon, Ghana, and Nigeria and is attempting to acquire a foothold in the Congo, ambitions, and interests that Wagner can help achieve and safeguard.⁶⁰ Wagner has sought to exploit the need of African countries for security support against the escalation of internal conflicts and the weakness of the security forces in the face of terrorist organizations and armed factions, in addition to the high crime rates, to strengthen its presence and open the door to Russian companies working in the field of diamonds, gold, and uranium.

Although Wagner uses other unusual tactics like fighting against terrorism, refereeing to the evidence in Mozambique and Syria, where the intervention of Wagner groups came within the framework of the trend linked to confronting terrorism, we should differentiate between the instruments of power Wagner uses and the real intention behind their intervention in a particular territory. This purpose can only be achieved by carefully examining Wagner's engagement in different conflict zones.

⁵⁹ IR3

⁶⁰ Interview L2, Military Officer, Libya. Conducted in 20/10/2021.

2. WAGNER IN BATTLEFIELD: MULTI-MODUS OPERANDI

The cases selected for the cross-examination are Wagner's activities in Ukraine and Syria, at last in Libya. These instances were chosen because several sources have classified them as hybrid warfare scenarios. Nonetheless, it is unclear what is defined as hybrid warfare in Russia's operations, making it intriguing to compare these situations utilizing comparable conflict paradigms and hybrid warfare aspects. After a brief background of the actor Wagner is described in each conflict, I outline the instruments of power Wagner used, from exploiting and creating vulnerabilities to further operational opportunities and limitations that the PMC encountered and influenced the overall war dynamics.

2.1. The Ukrainian Conflict

Because Wagner's intervention in each conflict cannot be related to the start, duration, or same dynamics, instead of providing a general background on the conflict, I have focused the case's background focus on Wagner in the conflict zone only. However, I provide Wagner's operation in the broader historical context of the conflict, which allows the detection of general warfare dynamics from the PMC interaction with the local setting, existing armed proxies, and political and international patterns. The following cases are also examined in the same manner.

2.1.1. Background

As the intervention of Wagner in the Ukrainian conflict was in two different times, I highlight both separately when describing Wagner's intervention. However, when analyzing Wagner's instruments of power, I investigate both phases together and try to detect the change in instruments, if there are any. In the first phase, three events that included Wagner interventions (confirmed and alleged) are outlined: The Battle of Luhansk Airport, the shootdown of Ukrainian Il-76, and finally, the Annexation of Crimea. In the second, the immersion process of Wagner in the current Russia-Ukraine War is examined. Although it is pretty difficult to analyze a new war due to the unclear and underdeveloped dynamics and behaviors of actors, I attempt only to draw the

possible operational pattern of Wagner in the war, which I assert is a milestone in the lifeline of the lifeline the Russian PMC.

a. First Phase

Wagner first appeared in Ukraine following Russia's takeover of Crimea in March 2014 before playing a crucial part in Moscow's prolonged proxy war in Eastern Ukraine's Donbas region in the weeks preceding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the height of the fighting in 2015, PMC forces in Ukraine, including the Wagner Group, numbered between 2,500 and 5,000, whether acting independently or reinforcing regular Russian troops. Approximately 1,000 Wagner fighters then aided pro-Russian militias battling to control the Luhansk and Donetsk territories. (BBC, 2022) Wagner helped train, organize, and arm Russian-backed militias fighting for control of Ukraine's eastern Donbas region when it comes to the provided services. According to CSIS, Wagner operatives also participated in the fighting and intelligence gathering and were reportedly part of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. (Berger, 2022) Wagner played an important auxiliary role to Russian special operations forces, blocking Ukrainian military reinforcements from crossing into the Crimean Peninsula.

Battle of Luhansk Airport: In this critical early battle for control of Luhansk, the Wagner Group deployed artillery, rockets, and Special Forces. The struggle for Donetsk Airport, waged in two independent conflicts between May 2014 and January 2015, demonstrates that violent fights of attrition continue to loom big in modern warfare of the Digital World. Furthermore, the competition demonstrates the Russian Federation's willingness to go to great lengths to protect its strategic and tactical interests in Ukraine. The battles form a link between Russia's summer and winter offensives, which were launched to protect Russia's proxy forces and eliminate Ukrainian offensive capabilities. As a result, these clashes fueled the winter offensive's assertiveness in the war. The battle for Donetsk Airport demonstrates Russia's skill in mobilizing soldiers from throughout the country and fast deploying them. The fight for Donetsk Airport exemplifies Russia's efficiency in sending soldiers from around the Federation, quickly training those forces, and sending them into the fight. The fight also served as a good training ground for Russian tank, infantry, and artillery units and, as part of a more extensive operation, gave 47 percent of the Russian land forces the chance to earn

invaluable combat experience, a point that should not be overlooked. These engagements resulted in a pulverized airport, a blunted and beaten Ukrainian army, and Russia's ability to sustain access and control in eastern Ukraine. (Fox, 2019)

The shootdown of Ukrainian Il-76: In Luhansk, rebels shot down an Il-76 transport jet, killing all 40 army troops, including nine crewmembers. Surveillance footage from the city showed a mid-air explosion after an item –maybe a rocket– shot into the sky, followed by an enormous explosion and fire on the ground. Later, a Kyiv military expert said that the empty tubes of two Igla portable surface-to-air missiles had been discovered near Luhansk Airport, the only substantial piece of infrastructure that Ukrainian troops could keep in the rebel-held city. (BBC, 2014) (Luhn, 2014)

Wagner provided Moscow with an ideal tool for pursuing its geostrategic, security apparatus, and ideological goals in Ukraine, such as trying to destabilize and realigning control over Crimea and Donbas, subverting, and forcing Kyiv and its Western backers for diplomatic concessions, and all while rejecting any official Russian involvement. Even though PMCs enabled Moscow and its Donbas proxies to gain and hold control over new “independent” republics in Donetsk and Luhansk, combat achievements have mostly stalled since 2015, leaving Eastern Ukraine's frontlines embroiled in yet another Russian-backed frozen war. Furthermore, Russian efforts to maintain plausible deniability for their actions deceived a few Western countries, leading to penalties against Kremlin and PMC officers and entities. Nonetheless, Russia's involvement in Ukraine was one of the first battlefield executions of its hybrid warfare doctrine, with Moscow incorporating PMCs into its military operations. Based on what has been asserted, Wagner provided Russia with the premium package in military standards: it acted as security experts in training and mentoring the rebels, acted as grey zone operators, and finally fought in direct combat to annex Crimea.

b. Second Phase

Wagner has begun comprehensive recruitment⁶¹ of mercenaries to participate in the operation of Russia in Ukraine, and the BBC Russian Service reported public recruitment of “soldiers of fortune.” Accordingly, PMCs have lifted most of the

⁶¹ For more information about Recruitment methods in Ukraine (Барабанов, 2022)

previous restrictions: for example, residents of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR, immigrants from Crimea, and foreigners are invited to go to Ukraine. Prior to this, only Russians born within the country's borders before 2014 were admitted to the Wagnerites. The presence of a criminal record or the lack of a passport for potential candidates did not become a limitation either. (Wagner recruitment policies developed). Wagner Group is suspected of having carried out “false flag” or “pseudo-science” assaults in eastern Ukraine to provide Russia a justification for striking. Messages on Russian media platforms are already recruiting mercenaries by calling them to a *picnic* in Ukraine. However, the group operates under various names, such as The Hawks, which might be an effort to avoid using the Wagner name since “the brand is tainted.” (BBC, 2022)

Wagner PMC is not yet fully involved in the Russian Ukrainian war. The advertisements for hiring potential fighters say that work on the previous contracts continues, and there are no plans to transfer Wagner soldiers from Africa back to Russia. (ПОЛИТ.РУ, 2022) In this regard, many reports indicated that Moscow had withdrawn dozens of Wagner forces from Africa to join the military operation in Ukraine. Some even started the evacuation process last January (2022). For example, Russian air traffic has been monitored between Mopti Airport and Bamako Airport in Mali. The Times, a British newspaper, also indicated that elements of Wagner have withdrawn from the Central African countries and Mali to Ukraine. (Obaji, 2022)

2.1.2. Wagner Instruments of Power in Ukraine

In the annexation of Crimea, Wagner focused more on exploiting the available vulnerabilities than creating new ones as it was an early stage of its development, and the tactics used at an operational level did not have military maturation. However, we can see that the pattern of its operational behavior has changed when getting involved in the Ukraine Russian war in 2022. The PMC is trying to figure out new vulnerabilities as the previous tools are not practical with the dynamics of the new warfare; speaking mainly of the involvement of many foreign fighters from the Ukrainian side, the solid local armies, and the international support Ukrainians are receiving, which are dynamic that are new to Wagner. Hence, the company faces a delicate situation that requires acting within total capacity, something Wagner has not done before. Acting with total

capacity is not related to the roles PMC plays on the battlefield or the services provided, but it concerns the overall command system that has sub affiliations worldwide.

a. Created Vulnerabilities

Created vulnerabilities are not necessarily related to conflict territory. In the absence of possible power instruments, Wagner seeks alternatives beyond the conflict they are operating in. Today in Ukraine, Wagner uses its close ties and economic and military leverage in Africa to expand its human and material resources in the war on Ukraine. As the world has witnessed, African attitudes towards the Russian-Ukrainian crisis at the United Nations varied between condemnation and cautious silence. Others voted in favor of the exact resolution, such as Sudan, South Sudan, Mozambique, Tanzania, Madagascar, Namibia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (Olivier, 2022) which reveals the extent to which economic and security interests are intertwined between Moscow and many African countries.

Wagner enjoys a great deal of African welcome at the official and popular levels in some African countries such as Mali, Central Africa, and Burkina Faso, especially in light of the European disappointment, especially the French, in the face of terrorist organizations in the Sahel and West Africa, which resulted in the demand for the expulsion of French forces and the use of the Russian role in confronting terrorism, and the popular demonstrations that took place in some Sahel countries over the past three years, such as Burkina Faso and Mali, as well as Central Africa against Western forces, and the apparent rapprochement between Moscow and some of the military elites that managed to gain power in the Sahel region during the past two years. Although non-military techniques constitute an essential element of Russia's arsenal against Ukraine, conventional forces have been critical in several operations, notably the one in Crimea. Russia initiated a covert ground offensive to capture Ukrainian soldiers stationed at the peninsula's strategic government and military sites, working alongside the 16,000 uniformed forces already stationed there (under a basing agreement with Kyiv that allowed up to 25,000 soldiers to be stationed there). Furthermore, Russia supported the LNR and DNR rebel groups in their fight against the Ukrainian army in Eastern Ukraine. (Carment & Belo, 2018)

Russia adopted numerous lessons from its first involvement in Ukraine in 2014, including using PMCs' military-like skills and government deniability, for its next big international operation: Syria to use it again with semi-full capacity in launching a war against Ukraine in 2022.

2.2. The Syrian Conflict

There are also different phases in the activeness of Wagner in Syria. Opposite to Ukraine, the phases are related to time but more about the instruments used by Wagner. Due to the dynamics of the conflict that cannot be divided based on time-phased, I describe Wagner's background in Syria based on the visibility and intensity of the group's operations.

2.2.1. Background

When Russia intervened directly in the war in September 2015, officials in Moscow spoke of a short air operation, ruling out sending soldiers and long-term involvement in the Syrian quagmire, especially since the costly Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had not yet been erased from the Russians minds. Nevertheless, military analysts acknowledged at the time that sending ostensibly independent military fighters as ground forces would provide the Syrian army with a means to achieve its goals and avoid losses when necessary. Officially, the Russian forces counted the loss of approximately 41 soldiers until the end of 2017, including a general killed in the bombing of Deir ez-Zor in September. (النهار, 2018) However, through many online platforms, it was reported that many Wagner elements were lost during the battles.

Wagner fought a series of confrontations in northwestern Syria between October 2017 and February 2018, aimed at controlling the intersection of the governorates of Hama, Aleppo, and Idlib, before being subjected in February of 2018 to the major blow that is said to have destabilized its existence. In Syria, after the Wagner Group lost hundreds of fighters at once in the American attack on its units, it tried to approach the Kurdish forces backed by Washington near the Khasham oil field, which resulted in its fall under concentrated bombardment by the American forces. (بوشنتشيفسكايا, 2021) Wagner troops made the surprise attack in February 2018 with roughly 500 pro-Syrian

militants against natural gas reserves secured by U.S. special operations personnel in Syria's Kurdish province of Deir ez-Zor. (Gibbons-Neff, 2018) The facilities were positioned across a deconfliction line agreed upon by Washington and Moscow in 2015, separating the U.S. and Russian-controlled zones in Syria.

Following combat in which dozens of Wagner Group members were likely killed by a U.S. aircraft, the injured survivors were ultimately transported home aboard Russian military jets. However, the Russian military refused to send helicopters to rescue the injured from the fighting. (Shabayev, 2018) This most likely exacerbated Wagner's casualties. It is unknown why the Russian military would allow so many Russian civilians to die without acting to stop them once it became evident that the U.S. would strike back –this might be since uniformed Russian leaders were antagonistic against Prigozhin and his corruption. (Marten, 2018) However, whether Moscow organized the Wagner Group attack or not, it is virtually likely that the GRU used it as an experiment to test the mettle of the U.S. soldiers in the field. The strike came after a series of smaller probing of the deconfliction line by uniformed Russian forces. (Katz & Harrington, 2020)

The Wagnerites are still present in Syria, where they participate in the offensive in the provinces of Hama and Idlib. The group Malhama Tactical, a pro-rebel PMC consisting of former Soviet citizens trained by the Russian military, has reported that one of its primary reasons for coming to Syria was to fight back the Russian contractors on this front. (Reynolds, 2019) Several research and political studies centers indicated that the Wagner Group entered many countries experiencing conflicts, indicating the inevitability of its participation in the wars against the ISIS terrorist organization. However, this participation remains surrounded by secrets until the present time as ISIS terrorist organization. It has caused the killing, displacement, and displacement of thousands of Syrians, and it is still frequent in the news bulletins to announce the crimes they have committed and are still committing so far. The Syrian Badia carried out repeated attacks on separate areas, whether through ambushes, explosives, or explosive devices, the last of which was in al-Shula area, in which about 40 soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army were killed.⁶²

⁶² Interview S1.

Deir ez-Zor governorate is witnessing a lack of security stability, and the Syrian government is facing difficulty in controlling the situation there. ISIS terrorists carried out a series of attacks against⁶³ members of the Syrian Arab Army on the Palmyra-Sukhna Road between September 18 and 21. Also, one of the military convoys was ambushed by the terrorist organization ISIS, which led to the death and wounding of 19 soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army. About the attack in Deir ez-Zor, Yury Barmin, an expert on Russian Middle East policy, told al-Nahar that the Russian response to the attack indicated that the security company's fighters were involved in the attack without Moscow's knowledge, pointing to Russian officials' comment on the incident that the forces launched the attack on the facilities of the Syrian Democratic Forces without coordinating with the center in Hmeimim, so they were attacked by the Americans. (النهار, 2018)⁶⁴

He sees two sides to the absence of any Russian response despite many casualties. The first is that Moscow seeks to keep Assad politically consistent with its strategy in Syria. With the end of the military threat to him from the opposition, the degree of his dependence on Russia has decreased, so it is looking for ways to re-impose its influence on the Syrian president. (النهار, 2018) From this point of view, the American attack on the fighters of the private security company raises a feeling of danger for the Syrian government and puts Russia in the position of the only protector of the Syrian regime. Therefore, Russia may have benefited from the attack if it provided additional ways to pressure Assad, especially concerning the political process.

2.2.2. Wagner Instruments of Power in Syria

a. Inherited Vulnerabilities

The inherited vulnerabilities in Syria are mostly a result of a series of events the country witnessed through decades. Some have high impacts, such as terrorism, existing Russian infrastructure, and sectarian and ethnic divisions. There are, of course, other vulnerabilities, such as the ones related to the economy and regional actors' rivalry. However, not all the loopholes are exploited by Wagner. Wagner strategically used the

⁶³ <https://southfront.org/isis-terrorists-targeted-egyptian-military-in-several-recent-attacks-on-north-sinai>

⁶⁴ Interview S2

provided ones at an operational and sometimes political level. That is why I consider exploiting the inherited vulnerabilities of Wagner's instruments of power in Syria.

Confronting Terrorism was never Russia's aim in Syria but a vulnerability that Wagner exploited to achieve the Kremlin's broader strategic aims in the region: a territorial cleansing. I am close to believing that Wagner is learning to exploit the sentiments of the people as a new strategy. It should not be forgotten that Wagner is conducting business and not a humanitarian operation. Moreover, even if they conduct the latter, they must be paid to do so. The emergence of ISIS in Syria brought mastery in the "horror industry" and killing in the form of dread and prompted shivering from the idea of confronting the organization by its "regular-irregular" network of opponents. The rising terrorist organization insulted the Syrian, Turkish, and Iranian militaries in the battles it clashed with them. But the decisive battle in the "horror industry" was in the organization's control over the strategically important Syrian city of Palmyra in mid-2015. There, the terrorist organization was executed in the Palmyra theater, which is on the UNESCO Human Heritage List, the execution of 20 Syrian officers and soldiers, in a dramatic scene that recorded the first participation of ISIS. They carried out executions consistently and in cold blood. A few months passed until Russia decided to secure the Syrian geography complex in the city of "Palmyra." Since the Russian campaign was consistent in "that the Russian regular forces do not engage directly with ISIS on the ground in order to avoid any possibility of insulting the honor of the Russian military," the Wagner Group was chosen to confront ISIS, expelling it from the vital city, and preparing for the entry of Russian and Syrian forces later.

In this battle, the Wagner Group resorted to the same methods as ISIS, as it was involved in beheadings and torture like ISIS's illustrated versions. Instead, the Wagner Group's leadership recruited many ISIS elements after their capture in the battles to provide information that directed preemptive strikes on the organization and deprived it of access. The presence of approximately 1,000 to 3,000 members of the Wagner Forces during different stages of the Russian military operation in Syria to combat the terrorist organization ISIS, as no one can yet be certain about the number of fundamental forces that participated on the ground.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Interview S2.

In conjunction with the battle of Palmyra, the Wagner Group was entrusted with the task of “cleaning” the Syrian poet field in Homs from ISIS control after it was impossible to liberate the field by fighters and bombers. The battle conditions necessitated the formation of infantry lines that would fight ISIS with the same brutality. In exchange for “cleaning” the field, the company “Evropolis,” the official sponsor of the Wagner Group, earned 25% of the resulted profits in 2017. When the company was run by “Evgeny Prigozhin,” who is close to Putin, overall obtained \$162 million for its services. Moreover, in the battles to clean the field, the Wagner Group carried horrific killings against Syrian citizens. (حسن, 2021).

As for Syria, the aim was to turn it into a frozen conflict, where Russia would have the decision to manage this conflict rather than resolve it, as happened with other conflicts that occurred within its domain after the fall of the Soviet Union. Although the official justification given by Russia for the intervention in Syria was to fight terrorism, Moscow never targeted ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra, but instead supported them indirectly because of the sheer brutality demonstrated by the indiscriminate Russian air raids seeking to preserve the Assad regime prompted moderates to extremism. Instead of a real counter-terrorism campaign, Russia conducted a counter-rebel campaign to save Assad. And since Assad has become responsible for most of the civilian deaths in Syria (and this happened mainly with the support of Russia), the main reason for joining the ranks of terrorism will remain the same, especially in Idlib, if Assad remains in power. (بوشتشيفسكايا, 2021)

Another exploited inherited vulnerability is *Russian history and existing infrastructure*. Wagner Group was moving smoothly from one place to another. Wagner’s familiarity with the Syrian territory should not come as a surprise; it is even one factor helping the PMC achieve its strategic pursuits. Syria is one of the most important military bases in the Middle East for the former Soviet Union and today for the Russian Federation. The geostrategic importance of Syria is located on the Mediterranean Sea and close to the Gulf States, where Russia aspires to enter their markets and promote its products there.

Moreover, militarily, and all of this is not equal to its importance to the large arms market on which Russia relies, through the Syrian army, which ultimately relies only on the Russian weaponry market. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979 forced

it to strengthen relations with its last stronghold in the Middle East: the father Assad regime, to the point of concluding a “common defense” treaty between the two regimes under the slogan of the strategic alliance that It was translated by re-supplying the Syrian army with qualitative weapons, especially air defense equipment, before 2011. (المطلق, 2020)

b. Created Vulnerabilities

The substantial Russian involvement in Syria achieved the long-term loyalty and respect of the Assad administration, consolidating Moscow’s influence. The similar tactic of recruiting Syrians for private security duties captured the hearts and minds of the suffering Syrian people, who were looking for a reliable source of income, and built an active reserve list for future Russian operations throughout the area. At the same time, Russia’s push into all levels of Syrian society strongly undermined the country’s longtime benefactor, Iran. As a result, Tehran has recently taken a similar tactic, attempting to develop Iran-backed private security firms as a last option to offset Russia’s influence. (Kassidiaris, 2021) There is a growing feeling among observers of the Syrian issue that Moscow is losing some influence over Assad. Therefore, the Kremlin will take advantage of opportunities to pressure Damascus without publicly revealing this. In the Deir ez-Zor incident, Moscow minimizes or disavows the losses incurred by Wagner while benefiting from what happened to put pressure on the Syrian regime. (النهار, 2018)

2.3.The Libyan Conflict

The presence of Wagner in Libya in recent years can be noticed easily, as the group has not only made its presence visible, but it was like Wagner wanted to be seen as an active military company not only in Libya but in the region. This behavior might be considered unusual for a shady and secretive company like Wagner. Nevertheless, when digging into the logic and motives behind its intervention in Libya, it becomes clear that this strategy serves Wagner as a commercial entity more than a Russian Proxy. Although Wagner’s presence in Libya is argued to be very old (at least for some of the officers) since Ghaddafi times, I investigate only the recent years when the military

operation of Wagner, along with its territorial control, has massively grown. Nevertheless, the historical facts that concern and influence Wagner in Libya today will be incorporated when necessary.

2.3.1. Background

Wagner extended its technical aid and maintenance cooperation with the Libyan National Army (LNA) beginning in August 2019, particularly in tactical assistance and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) for artillery and aircraft operations. (Anon., 2020) Nevertheless, hundreds of reportedly flown-in Russian precision shooters functioned as a force multiplier for Haftar's offensive thrust against the city in the fall of 2019. (Times, 2019) It was estimated that between 800 and 1,200 Wagner soldiers would be on the ground by May 2020. (RFE/RL, 2020). According to a September 2020 UN assessment, Russia violated a UN arms embargo by sending 338 military transport flights from Syria to Libya between November 2019 and July 2020 to give logistical assistance to the Wagner Group and the LNA. (Nichols, 2020) Haftar's assault was thwarted in late May 2020, when Turkish troops intervened in support of the Government of National Accord (GNA), launching devastating drone attacks against LNA soldiers and Wagner Group allies. The GNA caused the most humiliation when it acquired a sophisticated Russian Pantsir-S1 air defense system from the LNA and displayed it around Tripoli. (Sutton, 2020) Many Wagner Group soldiers were evacuated with heavy equipment along the road, first to an airport southeast of the capital and subsequently to the distant Jufra airbase in the Libyan desert. (Reuters, 2020) According to Libyan sources, Haftar was so upset by Russia's failure that he threatened to withhold \$150 million from the Wagner Group contract. His wrath was likely heightened because at least 300 Wagner Group members fighting beside him were uninspired former Syrian Free Army rebels. These new troops were recruited from the Russian-controlled region of southern Syria and trained in Homs by Wagner Group personnel who promised them and their families a better treatment in Syria if they served in Libya.

At the same time, 14 modern MiG-29 fighter fighters and three Su-24 attack aircraft were flown from Russia to the Jufra facility via Syria and Iran, with their Russian insignia painted over. Their stated goal was to protect the last LNA bastion in the country's east from GNA and Turkish advances, potentially allowing Russia to

construct a permanent military post there. The Wagner Group followed in the footsteps of a previous LNA strategy by seizing Libya's largest Sahara oilfield to hinder exports and decrease GNA earnings. By July 2020, Russia was thought to have increased its military transport flights to 75 per month, and 5,000 Russian-supplied soldiers (including Syrians and other Wagner Group forces) were scheduled to be stationed in Libya, including all critical oil resources. Despite the continuous talk of an LNA/GNA and Russian/Turkish peace, Libya remains unpredictable as this document goes to press. (MARTEN, 2020)

There is a difference in estimating the number of Wagner elements who participated on the side of Haftar's National Army. The Russian investigative press is talking about hundreds of fighters, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in December 2019, denounced the presence of 2,000 Russian mercenaries. The truth seems to be closer to the first estimate. Whatever it was, the presence of Russian fighters in Libya –was implicitly recognized by Vladimir Putin when he declared that “if there are Russian citizens present, they do not represent the interests of the Russian state, and do not receive money from the Russian state.” (دريغوس، 2020) According to the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), the Wagner Group was boosted in May with the delivery of 14 “fourth-generation” MiG-29 fighter jets and five Su24 attack aircrafts transferred from Russia via Iran, Syria, and repainted to conceal their Russian identity. AFRICOM received information by June that such planes were being flown by “inexperienced” pilots honing “basic flying skills” and “pilot competency.” Nasser Ammar, Commander of the Support Force–Tripoli (SFT) Special Military Operations Room, reported that Russian mercenaries began to evacuate toward a Jufra airfield. He reported that approximately 500 Russian mercenaries (more than 1,000 Janjaweed militants) were positioned in/near the battlefield of Salah al-Deen, Yarmouk, Khallatat, and Abu Salim. (Observer, 2020)

Wagner soldiers were seen running from front lines, allegedly “1,500 to 1,600 mercenaries” escaping to Bani Walid and further East. (Jazeera, 2020) Wagner's forces did not participate in ground conflicts, with the noteworthy exception of certain snipers and targeting experts, where there were only just a few Russian losses during the war. Notwithstanding (deliberately) inflated media accounts, there were never more than

350-400 Russians involved directly in the war for Tripoli, most of whom were not on the battle lines. Their major contribution was aircraft maintenance, particularly on front helicopters. Wagner's actions were just incapable of changing the course of the fight.

The arrival of Prigozhin and his structures in Libya followed a meeting organized in Moscow in November 2018 between Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and a delegation of senior Libyan military officials led by retired Major General Khalifa Haftar. (Kharief, 2022) Prigogine participated in this meeting. To understand the latter's arrival in the Libyan theater, it must be remembered first that Moscow's role in this file is minimal compared to the Syrian front. If Moscow officially supports both the government in Tripoli and Haftar, the Kremlin favors the latter. However, among others, he supported the strongman of Tobruk, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Map 1: Wagner Active Locations in Libya



Source: This map was made by me and a group of Libyan experts (2021)

2.3.2. Wagner Instruments of Power in Libya

a. Inherited Vulnerabilities

By examining the history of the territory PMCs are occupying, we can detect the local actors' level of tolerance/acceptance of Russian presence. To begin with, we assume that if the country is familiar with Russia, the involvement of its PMCs becomes relatively more straightforward as there is already a Russian infrastructure to help establish the PMC presence in the country and provide it with support on the ground. The infrastructure does not necessarily mean that the country must have a shared history with Russia. However, if practical, any source of Russian influence can be considered. To clarify, countries allied to the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War are still influenced today by the Russians. It should not be overlooked that the USSR sponsored significant military and educational programs across Africa in that period, producing generations of military and political elites.⁶⁶ Then, the Soviet Union was also an influential actor as it supported postcolonial independence movements and sought to weaken Western influence by standing against the colonial legacy.

Interestingly enough, when we look at the existing Russian infrastructure in Libya, we find many Wagner officers and high-grade militants were in Libya even before Wagner as a PMC intervened in today's conflict. It is assumed⁶⁷ that they were based in the south of the country where Moammar Ghaddafi had a Russian military base (in 1982-1990 mostly). Their existence in Libya can be traced to the times when they used to sell weapons during the Libyan-Chadian War and when the conflict between France and the Soviets was intense.⁶⁸ Working for Wagner now, these officers are very familiar with Libya's geography and culture. They lived for years in Libya and worked in different military units through time.⁶⁹ This reveals that Wagner's relations with Haftar today are not brand-new. Most of Haftar's military officers today were

⁶⁶ To this day, the essence of the educational and health systems in Algeria, Libya...etc. is communism. In military terms as well, several North African militants and elites were trained in Russia at the same time were also trained to hate "Westerns." They are all loyal to Russia to the present day.

⁶⁷ This is confirmed by officers who were working with Ghaddafi and changed their position now.

⁶⁸ Interview 2B

⁶⁹ These are not rumoring anymore as one of them in Tripoli war has written on his Facebook page (Long time no see, finally I'm in Libya again) along with many other confirmations.

Ghaddafi's people in the past, so basically, these two groups might have worked with each other already under one united front. Why do we believe that most of these Russians are working in Wagner today? After the fall of the Soviet Union, many militants were left with no jobs (mercenaries), so they joined Wagner. This is also applicable to any military officer/soldier in the Russian military in present times.

From a historical and geographical aspect, Russia knows Libya very well,⁷⁰ and this can be considered one of the reasons why Wagner's operations are successful in terms of strategic planning. The existence of several military bases from the Soviet times reflects how deep-rooted this relationship is and confirms that these military bases are one of Wagner's power treasures. In the west, the *al-Watiya* airbase has always been a Russian base, and today, Wagner's. In the south, military bases in *Obari* were full of Russians, particularly in the times of the conflict between Chad and Libya. (They can also be found in Tripoli's *Metiga* military base; when Libya bought Sukhoi⁷¹ aircraft, it brought Russian experts for training and education).⁷²

The return of the Russian energy sector to the Libyan market remains the most widely speculated subject in Moscow. Kremlin-affiliated outlets declare that the Libyan side awaits Russian energy companies' return to the market. The aforementioned is primarily grounded on the statement of then Deputy Prime Minister of the GNA Ahmed Maityg following his visit to Moscow. (TASS, 2020) Among the major Russian energy companies expected to reappear in the Libyan market are "*Tatneft*," "*Gazprom*," and "*Rosneft*."

In line with Maityg's statement and the interest Tripoli expresses towards the Russian energy companies, it is interested in Russian aircraft. Thus, the possibilities of concluding contracts to purchase civilian aircrafts SSJ 100 and MS-21 and civilian helicopters. (TASS, 2020) Moreover, during his visit, Maityg declared that a possibility that Russia and Libya might re-sign the intergovernmental agreement on trade,

⁷⁰ Regarding the Russian infrastructure, while deep historical, average economic ties exist, cultural ones are absent.

⁷¹ Russian weaponry systems in Libya today, Interview 2L

⁷² In the 1980-81, there were many people in military bases, trained by Russians. I managed to reach two of them who provided me with the kind of trainings and where they received training from Russians. (Trainings in air forces institutions), Interview L3. The existence of military base is a critical element. Let's compare two cases: In Algeria for example, there is no military base, experts usually go to Russia for training and get back because there is no Russian military base but in Libya it's the opposite, Russians go to train Libyans as they already have many units there. Interview 2A

economic and financial relations concluded between the two countries in 2008 by the end of this year is being stipulated. (Акопов, 2020)

Overall, one of the Russian primary interests in Libya reflects its willingness to become an influential player in the Mediterranean energy market by securing a political atmosphere within the country suitable for the proper functioning of its crony-energy companies. (Akhiyadov, 2020) Russian companies “Rosneft,” “Tatneft,” and “Gazprom” have their interests in returning to the Libyan market. Furthermore, Moscow’s involvement in the intra-Libyan struggle for power is determined by its desire to acquire various political dividends that will consolidate its presence in the country. Additionally, Moscow is willing to expand its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean region and the African continent. Thus, energy-rich Libya, with the longest coastline in the “neighborhood,” has gained momentum as an essential part of the Russian foreign policy agenda. Despite the economic importance of an energy-rich and strategically located Libya for Russia, the settlement of the Libyan conflict is not the most vital issue for Moscow (i.e., its vitality cannot be compared to the one of Syria). However, by playing its role in the conflict, it aims to demonstrate its influence on other regional actors. (Akhiyadov, 2020)

b. Created Vulnerabilities

What is interesting is the Libyan case. Libyans shared a similar mentality with Maghreb countries and shared a united perception of foreign companies; however, Libya is becoming more like other African countries as internal divisions rise. Since 2011, the North African country has been divided gradually. These divisions broke the common social channels. Individual economic profits became more important than social norms and the common good. As these divisions contributed to the rise of poverty, social embarrassment, and what will dealing with PMCs bring to the family and society, the future does not matter when they do not have enough to feed their children. (Libya is very rich but at the same time very poor.)⁷³ Motivations of the civilians to engage with PMCs are related to PMC operation requirements. If the motivations result from opportunities offered by PMCs, what can Wagner offer that the

⁷³ Interview 2A.

locals need? At the forefront (if not the only), economic profits. Whether there is a weak economic structure, financial profits have always been substantial.

PMCs job market for countries facing poverty in African countries is seen as a survival opportunity. Ethiopia and Sudan are impoverished countries that do not have high technology. The financial companies there produce economic vitality in zones that are not protected by countries, locally or internationally. These companies are a source of money for civilians. Oil companies like General Electric in Nigeria and Angola use private military companies to protect their people and natural sources.

Some civilians living in Tripoli are not affiliated with the ongoing developments between the GNA and Haftar. Hence, they rely on the profits they could gain (They simply dedicate their loyalty to the one who pays more). When starting this research, there was an assumption that the political interest is a rational reason to engage with PMCs. However, there is no political interest driving civilians (95 percent of them) in Libya. If they engage with Wagner, it is for money. People are getting poorer by day in Libya, and they no longer believe in political promises as they need to feed their families today, not tomorrow. Even Haftar's people today can take the side with another if he pays more. (Many videos are still on the web of people (known politicians) who were with Wagner against al-Dabaiba. Now they shifted their views not surprisingly, got massive fortunes).⁷⁴ Indeed, if the basic needs are not met (food and security), political pursuits are far from being on local Libyan agendas. Furthermore, political interests reflect political principles. In Libya, the few who had political principles are dead or sent away. Let us take Haftar himself as an example. Why did he bring Wagner? Not because he has a political principle but because he wants to rule and stay rich and build his empire. Libyans believe that stability without money is meaningless.⁷⁵ This is why they seek to secure their economic status before everything else.

Indeed, the motivations to engage with Wagner cannot be limited to financial pursuits only. Personal, psychological, social, and ethnic reasons should also be considered. In the south of Libya, demography and economy push civilians to work for Wagner. People do not have another option because of poverty, marginalization, and lack of security. Tuareg and Tabu, the Amazigh of Libya, the problem is a great

⁷⁴ "It is all about the money, if Libya was not quite rich, this wouldn't be happening today" quoted from one of the civilians. Interview L3.

⁷⁵ Interview 2C.

example. Tuareg considers themselves marginalized because Tabu has deep relations with Chad and Mali, resulting in many gains...etc. As everybody sought to build an empire and collect money and weapons, Tuareg started working closely with Wagner. On the other hand, Wagner trained and used Tabu and Tuareg as part of its advanced strategy.

Civilians engage with Wagner mainly for economic profits, but those do not have different perceptions and ideas about Wagner. Some of General Haftar's supporters may see them as auxiliary forces for the Libyan army. However, most Libyans at the level of Libya in the west and south are unanimous in their rejection of any foreign military force entering Libya to assist with any of the military or political parties in Libya, as they strongly believe that PMCs constitute an additional problem in the Libyan interior and make it difficult for all the local and international parties that are trying to create consensus among the Libyans to find a formula for stability in the next stage. They believe that the absence of the Libyans' ability to regain their decision by themselves and the involvement of PMCs that have direct interests in the continuation of chaos in Libya makes the conflict situation continue because they believe that real competition exists occurs between Libyans only and not others. They are the only ones who can break the circle of conflict, but only if they have the sincere will to do so. Others argue that such companies contribute to the increase in military tension and make the political parties resort to each of them to seek the assistance of other military companies, which increases the pace of violence inside Libya. In the East, despite ignoring its presence, they consider it supportive of the army in the fight against terrorism and political Islam; they cannot express their opinions clearly.⁷⁶

“A fundamental implication of gray zone campaigns is to blur the dividing line between peace and war and civilian and military endeavors. They are, in a sense, the use of civilian instruments to achieve objectives sometimes reserved for military capabilities.” (Mazarr, 2015, p. 62) To understand how Wagner involves civilians in their operations, we should first highlight the limits of their engagement. It might be hard to picture Wagner hiring civilians in combat-related operations, but Wagner has a strategy for dealing with these limits. Civilians can be engaged in other PMCs' non-combat operations. As PMCs cannot rely on intelligence provided by the state or the

⁷⁶ This final paragraph is based on politicians' views, the rest is from the different local actors. (Civilians, civil society...), Interview L1, 2, 3.

actor cooperating with them, they should have the capacity to collect information through numerous intelligence assets. Many Libyans share the idea that Tripoli is full of spies (American, British...), and many do not mind giving any information for a specific price. In the Eastern part notably, Ghaddafi used vast networks of spies.⁷⁷ They do this for money or fear (to gain a guarantee). Thus, it does not come as a surprise that many Libyan civilians today work for Wagner as spies.

So besides collecting information, what can civilians do? They are used in conducting Psychological Operations. They conduct military operations on the ground like a standard and traditional military unit, and they must inject messages to the civilians that they should ease the efforts of the PMC. For instance, they must open routes, the roads that facilitate the transportation of the units. Wagner does not want civilians along the roads because they will see whatever they have and how many people are. (It is a type of channel intelligence concern). For this, they may try first to push the local actor on the ground to urge other civilians to behave in a certain way, starting a psychological operation, a civilians-led campaign of misleading. For example, Wagner uses Unexploded Bombs Fear in Libya to empty a zone.⁷⁸ Civilians working with Wagner also use social media. They have Facebook groups⁷⁹ dedicated to these kinds of things. (Posts like in zone X, there is an open fire, closed road, bombs, do not go there). Many people check, and they do not find anything such as the incidents on the way to the Tripoli Airport. This is how Wagner spread fear through unofficial channels.

Another engagement of civilians is through logistics tasks. Wagner can protect the mines like they are doing in CAR, but when it comes to the hard physical work, they use other forces to facilitate the mobilization of the units on the ground, clearing pathways, and mining. We know for sure that Wagner soldier numbers are on the rise; however, it is hard to imagine that combat soldiers do these kinds of tasks, too, as they are highly trained for military operations, not mining -for example- that requires strenuous physical efforts and adaptation with the weather of the region (the heat in

⁷⁷ Libyans have many jokes about this (funny facts)

⁷⁸ This information was obtained from people that worked closely with Wagner, Interview L1.

⁷⁹ There are pictures, videos of civilians with Wagner (people laughing with Wagner, trying to speak in Russians, selling them stuff, eating together ...) there are **keywords** to use for this kind of research that some locals have showed me. It might seem simple, but it is very complicated. As civilians themselves had to learn from where to get the news under massive media pressure.

Libya desert is intolerable for some foreign and even locals). Someone might say that Wagner also has people that can do these tasks. The expenses of bringing people to this from Russia or other countries are hard to believe as PMCs are profit-oriented, probably with a well-organized budget. (Simple financial calculation can show that cheap African labor is much more convenient than funding other foreign labor).



CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this research, the impact of PMCs on hybrid warfare was presented, building on focused literature on hybrid warfare and PMCs and the broad literature on the role of non-state armed actors in warfare. This has resulted in a set of conclusions describing typical interactions between armed non-state actors in the hybrid war, which helps understand hybrid conflict dynamics in practical applications. At the start of this dissertation, numerous hypotheses concerning PMCs in hybrid warfare were presented; they will now be re-examined considering the assessment criteria identified in the introduction and the contents of the Ukraine, Syria, and Libya cases to evaluate their significance. Each notion will be explored with the premise that they are all intricately related to one another.

From the beginning, it has been argued that PMCs impact Hybrid warfare dynamics by creating *exploitable ambiguity* through employing a hybrid form of operational objectives and tactics. The degree of the created ambiguity and hence the impact of Wagner on warfare differs based on how Russia may use the PMC to project its power and achieve its strategic goals. Wagner PMC as a hybrid actor, tend to change the pattern of their behaviors and interactions to adapt to the political, social, and cultural dynamics being played out on the ground to achieve their strategic, operational, and tactical interests. Hence, when interacting with civil society, government, and other actors at the local level, they do so vaguely. This vagueness is produced not only because of the environment but partially due to PMCs' strategic calculations that produce ambiguity. In other words, this strategic ambiguity results from applying instruments of power: exploiting and creating vulnerabilities.

Another argument introduced is that PMCs' impact on warfare *internal dynamics* varies depending on the degree of the autonomy of the PMC on the battlefield/Operation. This degree also is related to the length of the conflict, local

support, and the power balance between the actors involved, which can contribute to the efficiency of Wagner's operations. In all cases, Wagner has received tremendous support from local actors. In Libya, Wagner positioned itself to gain partially political support from Haftar, worked on involving civilians on their fronts, and enjoyed great armed support from African armed proxies from neighboring countries. Even though the Wagner numbers are not relatively high in Libya, the degree of autonomy the PMC enjoys is considerable. Contrary to what is happening in Libya, there is a significant Russian military presence in Syria. The Wagnerites there were more visible and active as they received direct support for Assad's government and exploited many regional security loopholes to strengthen their position in the field (terrorists).

At last, I have argued that Wagner's impact assessment can be examined by studying the logic and motives of the intervention of the PMC. While there are many parallels between Wagner's activities in these three wars, some signs imply that Wagner may be part of a more significant political endeavor. It is clear from the cases that the type of intervention, even if it reverses Russian trends, is not direct, which suggests that Russia relies on Wagner as a tool to achieve its interests without being directly involved in some conflicts. The intensification of Russia's engagement in Syria and Ukraine demonstrates that Moscow still has the willingness and capability to use solid military assets to build strategic footholds beyond its local zone of influence. In this way, Russia's engagement in Libya varies significantly from Ukraine and Syria. Although Russia has apparent strategic interests in Ukraine, Russia's interests in Libya are not directly related to Russian national security. Where the Mediterranean is of great importance in the context of confirming Russia's international influence, and the presence in Libya supports the Russian policy regarding some files, especially the refugee file, which still represents a source of great concern for many European countries, which means that any other refugee crisis that emanates from Libya will reinforce the rise of the hard-right and destabilize the European Union. It will be a robust pressure tool on Europe to back down on essential files such as the Ukrainian file.

It is also distinct from Russia's military intervention. A convergence of factors - Russian anxieties about the Assad government's inevitable collapse, terrorist threats emanating from Syria, and the rising legitimacy of foreign-backed regime change-

likely increased Moscow's strategic worry about the conflict.⁸⁰ Russia is eager to expand its position in the Middle East following its intervention in Syria. The effectiveness of the Wagner PMC in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine then depends on the logic of intervention and the logic of the situation, which ultimately defines the degree of Wagner's autonomy.

Russia's vital strategic interests, which direct its foreign policy, can be articulated as three themes: defending Russia's borders and preserving the Russian regime; keeping influence in the near abroad; and fulfilling the aspiration of Russia as a great power (contest with the West), which includes keeping those other powers treat Russia as such. Other nations' actions that threaten these interests will almost certainly elicit a response from Russia, although it may be restricted in breadth and severity until specified thresholds set by the Russian government are exceeded. Wagner's patterns of behaviors, actions, and capacities differ based on the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda and the company's pursuit of its interests, creating a unique relationship between Wagner and national/local actors.

At an operational level, Wagner's interventions in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, even though they look similar from afar, they are quite divergent. In each case, Wagner's exploited and created vulnerabilities are different based on the Kremlin's interest and autonomy in the field. As a result, these hybrid wars have been prolonged and continued until the destruction of the armies of some (Ukraine 2014), the division of the societies (what Wagner is working on doing in Libya and achieved in Syria), the change of their political systems or their geographical maps, or even the achievement of geostrategic settlements and agreements at the level of the region and the world. This leads me to say that Wagner's operations in Donbas and Syria appear to have been devised to test its capacity to control the area, highlighted by Gerasimov and the Russian General Staff. Importantly, PMCs allow Moscow to deny responsibility for the fatalities of the Russian military in foreign missions. There are, however, similarities when it comes to the PMCs' tactics in the three cases. Ukraine's parallels with Syria, Wagner undertakes blatant assaults on citizens, the bombardment of institutions, siege tactics, widespread

⁸⁰ Check: Russia's Escalating Use of Private Military Companies in Africa. <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2425797/russias-escalating-use-of-private-military-companies-in-africa/>

propaganda, mass-casualty attacks, purposeful targeting of civilians, sieges, and demolished cities. Wagner's instruments of power reflect the developments of Wagner as a PMC.

The exploitation and creation of vulnerabilities in conflict zones have proven strategically successful. The success is not related to the overall intervention in the conflict but more to the operations. In its second phase, Wagner, 2018 onward, started targeting civilians as vulnerabilities. Two patterns can be seen, targeting civilians to recruit them and collaborating with local armed forces.

Wagner examines the social environment and what the civilians lack and translate it into a strategy. In Libya, Wagner offered job opportunities and a source of money. In Syria, it confronted ISIS and played on the people's heartstrings. This strategy was also used in Crimea but was not visible as the inherited vulnerabilities were almost enough, and hence there was no need to create a new vulnerability. The Russian structure and history in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine offered Wagner an infrastructure that helped operations. In Libya, military bases and officers know Libya well. In Syria, Russia does not adhere to the international PMC regulation structure and, unlike other states, deploys PMCs aggressively as a proxy force in direct conflict. PMCs are well-suited to Russia's hybrid approach to modern warfare, operating alongside the Russian army, special forces, or local militias.

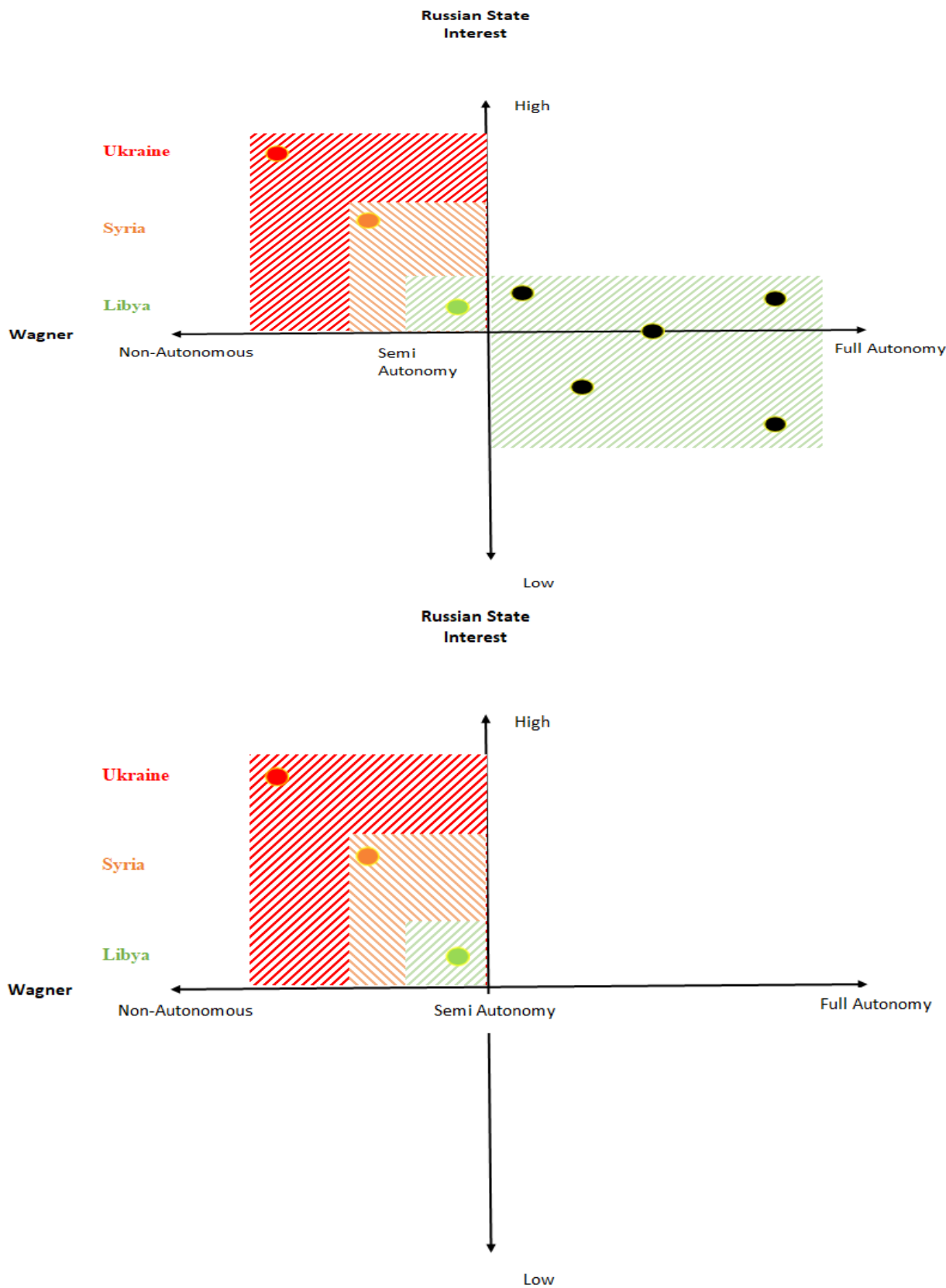
Wagner provides the premium package of battlefield services at the operational level in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine with different capacities. The degree of used capacities differs based on the rationale behind the intervention in the conflict, which ultimately defines the territorial autonomy of the PMC.

Undoubtedly, the wars that erupted during the past two decades in Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe indicate that state and non-state actors are fighting them with the concept and methods of hybrid war in which multiple types, methods, and patterns overlap mix. From the well-known traditional means of war to the use of elements of modern war, such as the systematic exploitation of the media, psychological warfare, electronic and cyber warfare, to the extent that we almost see a military balance between the warring states and non-states, which prolongs the war and increases its material and human costs and prevents it from being resolved in the interest of any party in any way. This leads us to the conclusion that some of these hybrid wars are

alternative and combined wars, fought by significant powers by smaller players after exploiting and fueling contradictions and fertilizing intellectual, religious, and sectarian differences within the various components of a society or a country, to reach to strategic goals and achieve the interests and objectives of the major countries and warlords. These hybrid wars proved that political and military interventions no longer require a massive effort or a high cost like the cost of conventional wars, which suggests the possibility of expanding the use of hybrid tactics.

Private military companies have proliferated since the 1990s, and this is closely related to the armed conflicts spreading in the world. These companies were engaging in military conflicts instead of regular armies in some instances. At a later stage, the activities of these companies went beyond the military field to play political roles. Wagner represents one of the most prominent of these companies, and although it is a profitable commercial company, it plays an important role in achieving Russia's strategic pursuits, especially considering the remarkable transformation that has affected its foreign policy.

Figure 6: Wagner Autonomy and Russia’s Interest Matrix



Russia has established a formidable and handy non-linear warfare weapon and a tool for Russian elites to achieve their geo-economic aims by fostering a rising number of PMCs like the Wagner Group. Influence on warfare, In Syria, the inclusion of Wagner in the equation of warfare shifted the balance of power in favor of the regime armies in a short period. In contrast, in Libya, Wagner's involvement in the clashes prompted Haftar troops, who made rapid progress in Libya's street wars, to lay siege to the National Reconciliation Government.

When we talk about hybrid warfare, we mirror the evolution of the PMCs model, which reflects the Kremlin's developing awareness of the flexibility and deployability of PMCs in hybrid warfare. This multi-mission function of PMCs, military, political, and economic—and incorporation with host-nation proxy forces would be used in Libya next. As these private mercenaries collaborated with local troops in Syrian and Libyan, the Russians honed the paradigm, creating an increasingly polished and adaptable operational model. This logic is more oriented toward objectively assessing military acts as such rather than prioritizing the political ramifications of this assessment. In return for the most remarkable results, in other words, we are facing a future transformation that will make wars focus on quality and not quantity, which is what hybrid wars can achieve.

There will be an expansion in the use of PMCs to carry out operations on behalf of the official armed forces, ensuring that no accusations are brought against states. Countries that are influential in conflicts, especially in the Syrian, Libyan and Ukrainian conflicts, will resort to expanding support for certain armed groups on their behalf in this complex war because of the deep knowledge these groups have of the conditions in the field of society there.

Table 1 Operationalization of the Analytical Framework

Analytical Components	Description	Ukraine		Syria	Libya
		I	II		
Wagner's Autonomy	Full Autonomy				
	Semi Autonomy				x
	Non-Autonomous	x	x	x	
Logic/Motives⁸¹ of Intervention: Russian State	Direct national interest	x	x		
	Regional influence			x	
	Russia's vision as a great power				x
	Economic Profits				x
Wagner Battlefield Package	Proxies	x	x	x	x
	Grey Zone operations	x			
	Security Expertise	x	x	x	x

⁸¹ At this stage, the PMC's motives of interventions are not to be outlined separate then the autonomy. As I argue that the PMC and the state in this research are representative of one entity.

APPENDIX 1: Interviews

All the interviews conducted were approved by the ethical research committee of the Social Sciences University of Ankara. In the first section of the Annex, a sample of semi-structured interview questions is provided in English and Arabic. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, particularly the aspect related to the Wagner group, the names of the interviewees will be mentioned anonymously for ethical concerns. However, to preserve the transparency of the research conducted, the roles of the interviews will be stated along with the dates of the interviews, and further details on the interviewees are listed in the second part of the appendix.

I. Semi-Structured interviews Questions Sample (Libya case)

Questions:

1. How do politicians see private military companies' impact on Libya in general and the Wagner group's impact at the decision-making level?
2. Do you have any idea if the Wagner try/tried to approach the non-combat civilians? If yes, how do they approach them?
3. "In the absence of competition, the prevalent structure creates opportunities for PMCs to underperform to maximize profits by staying in conflict" what can you comment on?
4. What can you tell me about Wagner's tactics and weapons in Libya?
5. What is the common perception of the Wagner group in Libya?
6. Do we find different perceptions from the locals and politicians in Libya on Wagner from the east to the west, south to the north?
7. Do you have any idea about Wagner's activities in other countries in Africa? Is Wagner's engagement in these countries similar to Libya's?

1. على مستوى صنع القرار ، كيف يرى السياسيون تأثير الشركات العسكرية الخاصة على ليبيا بشكل عام وتأثير مجموعة فاغنر بشكل خاص؟
2. هل لديك أي فكرة عما إذا كان فاغنر يحاول / يحاول الاقتراب من المدنيين غير المقاتلين؟ إذا كانت الإجابة بنعم ، فكيف يقتربون منه؟
3. في غياب المنافسة ، يخلق الهيكل السائد فرصًا للشركات العسكرية الخاصة لتقليل الأداء من أجل تعظيم الأرباح من خلال البقاء في حالة نزاع ، ما الذي يمكنك التعليق عليه؟
4. ماذا يمكنك أن تخبرني عن التكتيكات والأسلحة التي تستخدمها فاغنر في ليبيا؟
5. ما هو التصور الشائع لمجموعة فاغنر في ليبيا؟

6. هل نجد تصورات مختلفة من السكان المحليين والسياسيين في ليبيا حول فاغنر من الشرق إلى الغرب ومن الجنوب إلى الشمال؟
7. هل لديك أي فكرة عن أنشطة فاغنر في بلدان أخرى في أفريقيا؟ هل مشاركة فاغنر في هذه البلدان مماثلة لتلك الليبية؟

II. Interviewees

I conducted the interviews directly; no third party was involved as I am thoroughly acquainted with the necessary language skills. Further information on the interviewed sample is provided below:

- *Sample number:* The interviewed sample used in this research is, in sum, 23 interviews.
- *Methods:* Interviews were conducted: face-to-face and through online platforms.
- *Age range:* between 33 years old to 78 years old.
- *Gender:* 90% men and 10% female.
- *Languages:* English, Arabic, French, and Turkish
- *Professions:* PMC industry experts and workers, previous and current military officers and soldiers, civilians, politicians, Wagner-related network.

Note: Due to high-security concerns related to most of the interviews, only 10% of the interviewees were recorded. However, all the interviews were scripted and approved by the second party (interviews). The interviews then were categorized and coded based on three parameters: Interviewee profession/background, investigated conflict, and scope of the interview.

APPENDIX 2: Wagner's Operation in the Broad Geographical Context

<i>Location</i>	<i>Description</i>	PMC Autonomy
Ukraine	Wagner operatives were first spotted alongside pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, where they appeared in the ranks of rebel groups fighting the pro-Western Ukrainian authorities.	Non-autonomus
Syria	When the Russian military intervened in Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad, many reports began to reveal their presence alongside the Russian army, especially in major battles such as restoring the ancient city of Palmyra.	Non-autonomus
The Central African Republic	Wagner was assigned tasks to protect enterprises, gold mines, uranium, diamonds, and other natural resources, as a step to create conditions for strengthening the influence of Russian companies (CNN, 2019) (Ramani, 2021)	Semi-autonomy
Belarus	Belarus announced the presence of a group of Wagner forces that support the opposition against the current president's candidacy for the presidency again.	Semi-autonomy
Mali	The Malian government negotiated with Wagner to carry out security missions to protect institutions and public figures against terrorism, considering France's reduction of its forces in preparation for its withdrawal from the country. (France24, 2022) (Roger, 2022)	Semi-autonomy

Venezuela	The group supported President Nicolas Maduro (Russia's ally) and contributed to keeping him in power, especially after the wave of protests escalated in the end.	Semi-autonomy
Mozambique	About 200 Wagner fighters arrived in the Mozambican capital, Maputo. Since their arrival, they have entered a fierce battle with a rebellion linked to the terrorist organization ISIS in the oil-rich region of Cabo Delgado, inhabited by a Muslim majority in the country, and the battle has claimed the lives of more than 200 people since the year 2017. (Flangan, 2019) (AnadoluAgency, 2021)	Semi-autonomy
Sudan	The group was present in Sudan in support of the rule of former President Omar al-Bashir before his ouster in April 2019, in addition to the tasks of protecting gold mines, uranium, diamonds, and other natural resources, as a step to create conditions for Russian companies. (Russian mercenaries help put down Sudan protests, The Times)	Semi-autonomy
Libya	Wagner has been on the job since October 2018, providing technical help for military vehicle repairs and engaging in military activities. The number of Russian mercenaries in Libya at the end of 2019 reached between 800 and 1,400 fighters.	Semi-autonomy

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