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## Private Security and Military Companies in the African Continent: "A Study on the Justifications for Presence and Areas of Concentration"

Remli Fahim <sup>1</sup>, Boubchiche Rafik <sup>2</sup>1University of Blida 2 (Algeria) \*, [f.remli@univ-blida2.dz](mailto:f.remli@univ-blida2.dz) <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3271-8862>2University of Batna 1 (Algeria), [rafik.boubchiche@univ-batna.dz](mailto:rafik.boubchiche@univ-batna.dz) <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3510-3767>

### Abstract:

The complex security conditions experienced by African countries during the colonial period and after independence, have led to an urgent need for new mechanisms to address gaps that local armies and security institutions have failed to manage. Most African countries have become unable to achieve their primary goal of survival and security, which has led them to rely on private security and military companies. These companies have taken on the task of providing military, logistical, and operational support to national armies, as well as other functions primarily related to protecting geo-strategically important areas in state policies.

As a result, these companies have begun to operate in conflict zones in Africa specifically. This situation necessitates research into the roles of these companies and their key areas of concentration in order to identify both the negative and positive impacts they have on the security of states in the medium and long term.

**\* Remli Fahim**

**Introduction:**

The State's retreat in Africa from performing its vital functions has led to to disruptions in all essential sectors such as health, infrastructure, and security. The latter, which has been under constant threat since the periods of traditional and modern colonialism, has today, due to the globalization of asymmetric threats that emerged notably after the end of the Cold War and the events of 9/11, become a commodity subject to negotiation regarding its value and implementation mechanisms. In the context of African countries' inability to develop highly efficient regular armies, private security and military companies have emerged as a less costly and more capable alternative for addressing new threats with high camouflage characteristics.

Private security and military companies have existed since ancient times, though in less organized and coordinated forms than they are today. Ancient empires relied on mercenaries from outside their territories to engage in foreign wars. These companies also emerged during the waves of liberation in Africa and Asia during World War II, when colonial powers used them to suppress African peoples and tribes seeking freedom and independence. Their role has grown increasingly significant and institutionalized, particularly during and after the Cold War, which saw the adoption of new forms of warfare characterized by hybrid conflicts where warring powers rely on non-state actors to conduct their battles. Additionally, due to the negative impacts of military spending on economic development, states and governments have been reducing their military forces and cutting general spending on the military sector. This has led them to rely on private security and military companies to protect their interests both domestically and internationally. These companies provide advanced security and military services to various clients capable of covering the costs associated with their involvement in conflict zones.

**Research Problem:**

The policies of military spending rationalization and army downsizing after the Cold War have led to the emergence of private security and military companies as new actors in managing wars and international crises. These companies are increasingly used to intervene in place of regular armies to protect geo-strategically important sites, in addition to other roles related to safeguarding the economic interests of major powers outside their own territories, particularly in Africa, which is experiencing widespread military coups, civil wars, and asymmetric threats, raises a fundamental question:

How do private security and military companies enable external military presence and the commercialization of security in Africa?

**Research Hypothesis:**

The research is based on main hypothesis that as the presence of private security and military companies in Africa increases, it leads to the empowerment of

external military presence and turns security into a commodity that is negotiated and traded regarding its value.

### **Study Methodology:**

The study of private security and military companies in Africa is a complex topic intertwined with many political and economic issues related both to the African states themselves and to external powers involved in the continent's conflicts. Therefore, the historical method is considered the most suitable scientific approach for the study, in addition to the realist approach in international relations, which provides conceptual keys to the policies of various powers.

### **Spatial and Temporal Scope of the Study:**

The research focuses on the African continent as the spatial scope for studying and examining the newly emerging roles of private security and military companies, which have increased their presence in Africa since the end of the Cold War. As for the temporal scope, the study does not adhere to a rigid time frame but emphasizes the role of these companies following the end of colonialism in Africa and the beginning of the era of independent states that have failed to provide security within their countries.

### **Research Structure:**

To address the research problem posed at the beginning and verify the validity of the hypothesis, a plan is adopted consisting of an introduction and two main sections. These sections aim to explore the traditional roles of private security and military companies in Africa and the new functions they have assumed following the rise of hybrid wars and asymmetric threats. This will involve examining several case studies such as Angola, Sierra Leone, and Libya, concluding with a summary that includes the findings and conclusions reached through the research process.

### **THE FIRST TOPIC- Private Military and Security Companies in Africa: Traditional Functions vs. Emerging Roles**

The security sector in most African countries suffers from fundamental imbalances, which have led to the growing role of private security and military companies. African governments, unable to perform their vital functions, have turned to the military, logistical, and operational services provided by these companies to address various security challenges at local and regional levels. The emergence of new forms of international and national conflicts of an asymmetric nature has also led to the creation of new roles for private security and military companies in Africa. This raises the question of the nature of the functions and roles these companies have played in the African continent, both historically and in the present.

### **First requirement: The Reality of Private Security and Military Companies on the African Continent**

Beginning in the 16th century, mercenaries began to be employed based on contracts and agreements between states. An example of this type of mercenary employment is Britain recruiting German mercenaries to fight on its behalf throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly during the American Revolution, where Britain used about thirty thousand German mercenaries in an attempt to suppress the American Revolution in 1776.

In modern times, the period of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s saw the peak of mercenary activities, particularly in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. During the Congo Crisis in the 1960s, both France and Belgium recruited foreign mercenaries, either under their direct supervision or through mining companies, to support the secession of the Katanga region. This group led the Katangan Gendarmerie rebels against United Nations peacekeeping forces that supported the unity and territorial integrity of the country following the chaos that ensued after independence from Belgian colonial rule (khalif, 2018, p.419).

With the departure of Western colonial forces from Africa and Asia, these countries began to establish private security companies managed by former military personnel to perform tasks in countries where colonial powers wished to maintain control. Over time, demand for these companies increased, especially in Africa and Latin America, to protect dictatorial presidents, manage coups on behalf of certain political entities, or safeguard oil wells, diamond production areas, and other assets, all in exchange for substantial financial sums.

By the end of the Cold War, the activities of private security companies expanded widely to include providing training for armed forces, offering military consulting to army and police forces in the countries where they operate, providing logistical support for military deployments, maintaining weapon systems, protecting facilities and buildings, collecting and analyzing military intelligence, detaining and interrogating prisoners, and, in some cases, participating in combat operations (Akroum, 2014, pp.113-114).

An example of the involvement of private security and military companies in internal conflicts in Africa is the case of Angola. In the 1990s, the private military company Executive Outcomes (OE) participated in the Angolan conflict alongside the government. With prior knowledge of the region's terrain and the specifics of the conflicting parties—since South Africa had previously employed them to target opponents of the apartheid state in Angola—OE was deployed alongside UNITA rebels fighting the Angolan government. They were also hired to recover assets of Heritage Oil from the city of Soyo, which had been seized by the UNITA movement during the Second Angolan Civil War. Starting in 1993, OE provided 550 fighters who led combat operations with the government army, trained over 5,000 soldiers and 30 pilots in combat techniques, weapon maintenance, and engineering, which helped shift the balance of power in favor of the government. This forced UNITA to sit at the negotiation table and sign the

Lusaka Peace Agreement in Zambia in June 1994. However, the conflict continued until 2002, when UNITA's armed forces were disbanded and a political party was established. Even after that, OE continued its presence in Angola to protect its interests in oil fields and diamond mines by transferring its operations to a subsidiary company, Diamond Works (Hamoum & Tahrawi, 2020, pp.606-607).

In Sierra Leone, whose economy relies on mining activities such as diamond extraction—contributing to a 70% increase in foreign exchange in 1968—the instability and unrest led to a decrease in diamond contribution to \$100,000 annually by the mid-1980s. With the outbreak of the civil war between the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Sierra Leonean government, the government closed bauxite, diamond, and titanium mines, reducing national production to 10% in 1995. This impacted the interests of major mining companies, which turned to private military and security companies for the protection and extraction of mineral resources in Sierra Leone, particularly diamonds. This need was addressed in 1995 when the National Provisional Ruling Council of Sierra Leone contracted the British company GSG GURKHA SECURITY GUARDS through a British arms company. Under this agreement, GSG was primarily tasked with providing security and protecting the American and Australian mining interests in Sierra Leone, as well as training Sierra Leone's special forces and armed forces. However, the company's role later expanded to include direct participation in military operations against the rebels, especially after the rebels took control of two important mining centers (Al-Shahwani, 2012, p.84).

### **second requirement: Private Security and Military Companies in Africa "Reasons for Involvement and Vital Functions"**

Recently, the reasons for the proliferation of private security and military companies in Africa have diversified and become interrelated, leading to an expansion of their roles and an increase in their political, economic, and military influence in the countries where they operate. The factors contributing to the creation of a favorable environment for the growth of these companies include the following:

- **Structural Weakness of Local Armies and Security Agencies:** Many developing countries have been unable to establish solid security apparatuses, and some have turned into transit points for smuggling, organized crime, and terrorist hotspots. For example, the spread of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabab in Somalia, and ISIS in the Sahel and Central Africa, along with chronic ethnic and racial tensions, has forced these governments to rely on private military companies. A notable example is the significant activity of the Russian group Wagner in African conflicts. In 2018, Wagner entered the Central African Republic to secure mining and extraction



activities for the Russian company Lobaye Invest, protect institutions, and train the presidential guard and military. Since 2019, Wagner has also been active in northern Mozambique, rich in gas, to combat ISIS, and operates in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Mali (Bashandari, 2024).

- The spread of armed conflicts, civil wars, and coups in most African countries, especially since the end of the Cold War, has led to the emergence of many internal problems, increased arms trafficking, and the militarization of societies.
- The emergence of armed groups, warlords, rebels, and militias trained to engage in military operations against government forces.
- The presence of international companies in African countries and their conviction of the necessity to rely on private security and military companies capable of protecting their activities from the security threats posed by the spread of terrorist groups.
- The superiority of resources of private actors such as private security companies or development organizations over state resources (Rashad, 2021, p.134).
- The proliferation of private military and security companies as a manifestation of new international intervention and as a mechanism of rough globalization. In this context, there has also been a complementary phenomenon to the growth of private security and military companies, namely the globalization of prisons and the emergence of mechanisms and arms for these companies (new intelligence networks, military logistical support channels, coordination with various diplomatic circles and institutions of major powers, ownership of prisons within African countries, and secret arms caches).
- The shift from the state's monopoly on military power to the privatization of security, aligning with the global liberal-capitalist trend. An example of this is the American company DynCorp, which employs 17,000 people and has operations exceeding \$200 billion. It is also part of the International Stability Operations Association (Qawi, 2015, p.4).
- The security obsession and apprehension about terrorist operations, as the private security and military industry is one of the sectors that benefited from the prevailing security climate after the events of September 11, 2001. Private security companies were able to invest in the growing security concerns of countries regarding terrorist operations to establish their presence in many countries worldwide, particularly in African countries, which are among the world's hotspots for terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram, and ISIS.
- The rise of proxy wars and hybrid wars among major powers, which signal their involvement in chaotic regions while simultaneously seeking to maintain their interests and their ability to intervene in the political and economic

affairs of conflict-affected countries. Additionally, major powers use private military and security companies to evade societal accountability, which often rejects their countries' interventions in conflict zones (Ghzli, 2020, p.609).

With the variety of reasons, the modern functions of private military and security companies in Africa have become diverse. The concept of the private military and security industry generally refers to commercial companies that enter into legal contracts aimed primarily at making a profit from the security services they provide. Their activities include offering military services related to strategic planning, intelligence, investigation, land, sea, or air reconnaissance, as well as any type of aviation operations, and providing material and technical support to armed forces. These services may also extend to direct involvement in conflicts and operational participation in wars. Specifically, security services involve providing armed guarding and protection for people and property, such as convoys and facilities, maintaining and operating weapon systems, detaining and interrogating prisoners, and offering advice or training to local forces and security personnel.

In contrast, some of these specialized companies undertake missions on behalf of the United Nations and the International Security Council. They participate in international peacekeeping operations, mine clearance, and the protection of UN staff, their premises, and their movements. They also safeguard humanitarian aid convoys in many conflict zones around the world, especially in Africa, including Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Mali, Sierra Leone, and others (Alou, 2016, p.68).

In general, the services provided by private security and military companies can be classified into the following categories:

- **Military and logistical functions:** The significant decline in government military spending on military institutions and the rise of privatization of security and wars have led private security and military companies to take on roles that cover the shortcomings of regular armies. They now provide numerous services and logistical functions, including:
  - Training and education: One of the key roles assigned to military and security companies is training and education. These companies are responsible for training the regular armies of countries, particularly newly independent states or those whose armies have collapsed due to occupation or the overthrow of their governments. They also work on training and retraining the regular forces of countries that request their services.
  - Taking on supply roles for regular armies in conflict zones, such as transporting food, weapons, ammunition, and all equipment needed for military operations.
- **Providing military consulting:** Private military and security companies offer military advice and war tactics to their clients, including governments and

nations, for their army and police forces in the countries where they operate (Talib, 2018, p.52).

- **Direct participation in military operations:** Private security and military companies often engage in combat operations alongside or independently from state forces in areas experiencing severe security escalations, terrorist group activity, or piracy. An example is the Russian company Wagner, which operates in several African countries, including Libya.
- **Protecting the activities of multinational companies and political and diplomatic figures:** In an unstable environment marked by the spread of terrorist groups, armed group activities, frequent coups, and thriving smuggling activities, Africa has become a "vital area" for private security and military companies. Private companies, as well as politicians, use it for protection and defense. An example of such a company is the French firm "OBS Afrique," which conducts operations in various countries on the continent, such as Equatorial Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritania, and the Central African Republic (Qawi, 2015, p.5).

Based on the above, it can be said that Africa experienced private security and military companies before their global prominence. Initially, these companies were used as auxiliary arms for European colonial powers in Africa, aimed at containing national liberation movements led by local forces in colonized African countries. After these countries gained independence, these companies were employed not as tools of colonialism but as protectors and supporters of illegitimate political regimes that relied on repressive methods to stay in power. The need for these companies increased with the rise of transnational and cross-border security threats, with Africa becoming a stronghold for prohibited international activities such as terrorism and transnational crime. The reliance on private security and military companies in Africa notably surged after 2011, a period marked by the collapse of many African states, which reports by the United Nations classified as failed or fragile states, such as Mali, Niger, and Somalia.

### **THE SECOND TOPIC- Private Security and Military Companies as a Tool for Establishing External Military Presence in Africa**

Geopolitically, the African continent is an open field for continuous competition among major powers within the international system. However, the evolution of warfare generations and forms of international conflict has led to the emergence of new actors who take on these powers' military roles and security tasks. This points to the pivotal role that private security and military companies now play in the security and militarization equation in Africa. Although these companies operate as private entities aiming to provide security and military services in exchange for financial returns, they also represent a clear manifestation of the failure of African states to maintain the independence of their decision-making and sovereignty in political, military, and economic spheres. Below are



some of the most prominent private security and military companies active in key hotspots and conflict zones in Africa.

### **First requirement: The Presence of Private Security and Military Companies in North Africa - "The Case of Libya"**

Libya is one of the most conflict-ridden and tension-filled hotspots in Africa, attracting significant foreign involvement. The conflict map in Libya reveals a multitude of parties with constantly conflicting interests. Private security companies from France, Russia, and the UAE have become key players in the power struggle among the various factions involved on the ground. In addition to the different factions and terrorist groups either returning from the Middle East or coming from the Sahel region, several companies act as proxies for parties that prefer to distance themselves from direct military and combat operations in Libya.

One of the most influential private military and security companies in the Libyan conflict is the Russian Wagner Group. Established in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin, Wagner first appeared in Eastern Ukraine in March 2014, at a time when the Kremlin needed to wage war there covertly to mitigate international pressure. Wagner was active in Crimea, Donbas, and Luhansk, where they engaged in battles against Ukrainian forces. As the fighting in Ukraine subsided, Wagner's operatives were relocated in 2015 to a secret training base in Molkin, in the Krasnodar region, adjacent to a training facility used by the Special Forces of the 10th Directorate of the Main Intelligence Agency (GRU) in southern Russia. Utkin continued to lead Wagner militarily, and the group's role expanded over time, particularly in Syria, where they benefited from Russian military bases and logistical networks established there (Mawlana, 2021, p.10).

Wagner's presence in Libya became particularly evident following Khalifa Haftar's operations against the capital, Tripoli. This was highlighted when one of Haftar's pilots, Amer Al-Jagam, was shot down and confirmed that the Russians were providing technological and technical support, as well as planning and determining the course of engagements on the battlefield. In addition to this, Wagner operatives were involved in the maintenance of Sukhoi aircraft and other out-of-service planes at the Al-Watiya air base, located 170 km southwest of the Mediterranean, which is controlled by Haftar (Kultu & Arzu, 2020, p.206). Haftar's alliance with Russia, a major power seeking influence and a role in the warm waters, underscores the strategic partnership between the two.

Historically, gaining access to warm-water ports in the eastern Mediterranean has been of significant importance to Russian rulers as part of their efforts to establish the country as a major player in European politics. During the 1945 Potsdam Conference, Joseph Stalin unsuccessfully attempted to gain trusteeship over the Tripoli region in Libya. Despite that failed attempt, Libya emerged as a significant arms client for the Soviet Union after World War II. In the 1970s, Muammar Gaddafi increasingly aligned with Moscow, which provided thousands

of personnel and vast amounts of military equipment to support his activities, including the construction of advanced missile bases.

Vladimir Putin later became involved in the Libyan conflict alongside Khalifa Haftar, continuing the geopolitical gains Russia had achieved from its involvement in Syria. This involvement could, in the long term, provide Russia with significant leverage over Europe and allow it to play more influential roles in the Middle East and Africa. The deep-water ports of Tobruk and Derna in Libya would be particularly valuable to the Russian Navy from both logistical and geostrategic perspectives, especially when combined with the port of Tartus in Syria. Additionally, maximizing the exploitation of energy resources would serve as an added element of Russia's policy in the eastern Mediterranean (Borshchevskaya, 2024).

Additionally, other private military and security companies attempted to participate in Libya, such as the French company Secopex, whose president was killed on Libyan soil in 2011, and the UAE-based Black Shield company. A United Nations report confirmed the presence of Black Shield in Libya and its involvement in operations that undermine the efforts for peace that the UN seeks to establish. The involvement of this company became more evident after Human Rights Watch highlighted its activities that violated international humanitarian law, particularly concerning human trafficking and using individuals in combat operations contrary to the contracts signed.

Human Rights Watch published the following on its website: "In Libya, the UAE is one of three countries that have routinely and systematically violated the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations in 2011, according to UN experts' reports. The UAE supplies General Haftar's armed group with weapons and ammunition, has an advanced operations base in eastern Libya, and operates armed drones in support of General Haftar. Since April 2019, it has carried out more than 850 drone and warplane strikes on behalf of General Haftar, resulting in the deaths of dozens of people" (Ziyadin, 2024).

### **second requirement: Private Security and Military Companies in East and Central Africa - The Cases of "Nigeria and the Central African Republic"**

Not far from Libya, the East and Central African regions are among the most unstable areas, plagued by the spread of terrorist groups, organized crime networks, piracy, and the inability of states and their regular armies to address these threats. As a result, many private security and military companies operate in these areas, employed by either central governments or separatists who often seek external support to achieve their political goals and secure military victories. In this region, there are several hotspots where private security and military companies are active. For instance, in Mozambique, the South African private military company Dyck Advisory Group intervened, conducting aerial operations at the request of the Mozambican government in response to repeated attacks by

terrorist groups, notably the locally known "Al-Shabaab" linked to ISIS (Ruwaiha, 2024).

In Nigeria, which has been experiencing a severe rise in the number of terrorists, especially those belonging to Boko Haram, two private security and military companies were contracted in 2015 to support counterinsurgency operations. One of the prominent companies there was Steep. Although the involvement of these companies was initially meant only to provide training and trainers for the official army, it practically extended to include the provision of equipment and air support. They also worked alongside Nigerian army officers to support ground operations (Rashad, 2021, p.136).

In the Central African Republic, the conflict that has caused the death and displacement of thousands led the central government to enlist the Russian private security and military company, Wagner. Wagner was tasked with training the army, setting up a training camp on the ruins of the former emperor Jean-Bédél Bokassa's palace in Berengo, southwest of Bangui (Katz et al, 2020, p. 22). A key point when discussing Wagner's actual involvement in the Central African Republic is the potential impact it has on changing the balance of power on the ground. Despite France's political and military influence in the Central African Republic, the military tool and logistical support provided by Wagner have elevated Russian-Central African diplomatic relations to new levels. Recently, Russian was adopted as an official language of instruction in Central African universities, reflecting significant political and geopolitical implications. This indicates Russia's effort to expand its sphere of influence beyond its traditional areas in Central Asia and the Middle East, competing with Western dominance in Africa. This perspective is further supported by the French official reactions following the beginning of security coordination between the Malian military council and the Russian Wagner company.

From the examples mentioned above regarding the cases in which private security and military companies have intervened and their political and military connections, several conclusions can be drawn, as follows:

- Private security and military companies often operate alongside the countries of their nationality or where they are registered, thereby contributing to shifting the balance of power in favor of those countries. This occurred in the cases of Libya, the Central African Republic, and Mali, where Russia, through the involvement of the Wagner Group, emerged as a new player in these contested areas dominated by traditional powers, particularly France. Prior to this, British and South African security and military companies were present in Sierra Leone and Gabon to protect the interests of major British companies.
- Heavy reliance on private security and military companies leads to a stifling dependency on external powers in the future. This phenomenon carries many negative consequences for the regular armies of these countries, particularly

in terms of the basic and internal training of military personnel, loss of constant readiness, and ceding important aspects of state sovereignty, especially in cases of inability to pay these companies' dues.

- The constant renewal of chaos, without which private security and military companies lose their relevance and legitimacy as entities operating within the states where they are active.
- The shift from political paralysis to chronic institutional failure due to relinquishing strategic decision-making to external parties, as seen in Libya, which has not overcome the security instability since 2011 despite the absence of the initial causes of the crisis (the change in the Libyan political system).

### **Conclusion:**

The decline in the role of national states in Africa has led to the rise of asymmetrical security threats that proliferate in the gray areas of the continent. This has made the need for private security and military companies urgent, raising numerous national issues related to political corruption, the weakness and fragmentation of national armies due to sectarian and ethnic differences, reduced defense budgets, protection of the economic interests of major powers, and the global trend toward privatization of security.

In response to the study's problem, which seeks to explore how the reliance on private security and military companies facilitates the entrenchment of external military presence in the continent and commodifies security, making it a value that African states cannot achieve without external parties, the following results have been reached:

- Private security and military companies thrive and derive their legitimacy and usefulness in regions plagued by chaos and inhabited by lawless groups such as organized crime networks, terrorist organizations, and aggressive separatist movements.
- A complete resolution of conflicts in Africa by private security and military companies is unlikely, as it would negate the primary condition for their intervention in various parts of the continent. Consequently, any solution would necessarily lead to the emergence of new areas of tension where these companies would intervene.
- The reliance on private security and military companies leads to the erosion of the morale and human resources of national armies in African countries. This results in a reduction in the obligation for constant and ongoing work, thereby diminishing their readiness to face security shocks.
- The presence of private security and military companies in Africa is considered a form of security breach, especially concerning the collection of sensitive information about the country's topography and critical locations.
- The cases of the Central African Republic, Libya, and Mali highlight the close connection between private security and military companies and their home

countries. The Russian company Wagner intervened alongside Russia's allies, providing logistical and technical support, leading to political disputes between Russia and traditional influential powers in Africa.

- The growing role of private security and military companies in Africa has led to the privatization of war and turned security into a negotiable commodity. Due to the frequent inability of African countries to repay their debts to these companies, their resources are often relinquished in exchange for services provided to counter various threats, fragmenting their sovereignty and making them infiltrated countries.

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