# Armies for Hire: Mercenaries, Contractors, and Wagner

*Figures current as of October 2026*

*Who hires soldiers, what they pay with, and who bears the cost: five centuries of mercenaries from Renaissance Italy to the 'dogs of war'; the corporate turn of the 1990s; America's contractor wars; the Wagner Group in Syria, Africa, and Ukraine, its mutiny, and the Russian state's takeover; Turkey's and the Gulf's hired fighters; the new freelancers in Congo and Haiti; and the arguments and the dates to watch.*

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## MODULE 1 — Hired Armies, from Renaissance Italy to the 'Dogs of War'

*Goal: Learn the words, the history, and the law.*

The condottieri and Machiavelli's warning; the Hessians and the East India Company's army; how states took control of force, with the Foreign Legion and the Gurkhas as the exceptions; the Congo and Comoros mercenaries of 1960-2004; and the 1977 legal definition, six tests so strict almost no one meets them, worked.

## MODULE 2 — The Corporate Turn: Executive Outcomes

*Goal: See how mercenaries became companies.*

Apartheid's veterans sold as a firm; Angola and Sierra Leone, paid partly in diamond concessions; what happened when the contract ended; Sandline in Papua New Guinea and retired American generals in Croatia. The company's bill against the UN mission's, worked, and the peace-or-rent question argued.

## MODULE 3 — The Contractor Wars: Iraq and Afghanistan

*Goal: Understand how a superpower hired out its wars.*

One contractor per soldier in Iraq and three per soldier in Afghanistan by 2016; Blackwater at Fallujah and Nisour Square, the convictions and the pardons; the Abu Ghraib verdict against CACI; the waste the auditors found; the Montreux Document. The cost comparison, worked.

## MODULE 4 — Wagner: The Chef, the Commander, and Syria

*Goal: Trace how Russia built a deniable army.*

Prigozhin's path from prison to Kremlin catering and the troll factory; Utkin's failed Syrian mission; Donbas in 2014; Syria's oil-for-security contract; the night at Khasham and the dead no one would own. The casualty count, worked.

## MODULE 5 — Wagner in Africa: The Package

*Goal: Follow the contract in the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Libya.*

Guards, political advisers, media, and mining companies sold as a set; the Central African Republic as the model client; Sudan's gold; Libya's war, mines, and air bases; Madagascar's election. Why a gold mine can pay for an army, worked, and the saved-or-captured question argued.

## MODULE 6 — Mozambique and Mali: The Counterinsurgency Test

*Goal: Judge whether hired soldiers can beat an insurgency.*

A few months in Mozambique; Mali's turn from France to Russia, the Moura massacre, Kidal retaken, the defeat at Tinzaouaten, and 'Mission accomplished.' The Mali contract's monthly arithmetic, worked, and the safer-or-not question argued.

## MODULE 7 — Bakhmut, the Mutiny, and the Crash

*Goal: Understand the private army that marched on Moscow.*

The prison recruiting and the Bakhmut assaults; the feud with the generals; June 23-24, 2023; Putin's admission of who paid; the August plane crash. The Bakhmut arithmetic, worked, and two questions argued: was Bakhmut worth it, and was the march a coup?

## MODULE 8 — After Wagner: The Russian State Hires Directly

*Goal: Read Russia's force for hire as of October 2026.*

Africa Corps from Libya to the Sahel and Togo; the 2026 tests in Mali and Niger; Wagner's holdout in the Central African Republic; the spy service's propaganda network and the operator Anthropic caught; Russia's paid foreign recruits. Moscow's price against a poor state's budget, worked.

## MODULE 9 — Turkey's Syrians and the Gulf's Hired Armies

*Goal: See how states rent fighters from other countries.*

Turkey's Syrian militiamen in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Niger, and the firm SADAT; the Sudanese in Yemen; the United Arab Emirates' Colombians and the American assassination team in Aden; Colombian veterans with Sudan's Rapid Support Forces and the sanctions that followed.

## MODULE 10 — The New Freelancers: Congo, Haiti, and China

*Goal: Follow the contractors hired by weak states and investors.*

Congo's Romanian 'Romeos' at Goma; Haiti's drone war with Erik Prince's Vectus Global and the trial over a president's murder; Chinese guards on the Belt and Road; the drone pilot as the new hired specialty. The pay ladder, worked.

## MODULE 11 — The Arguments, and What to Watch

*Goal: Weigh the evidence and name the dates.*

Company or state tool; whether hired armies win; whether they make abuses easier to deny; whether force is being privatized or taken back. Each is argued, followed by five contradictions, a dated watch list, and a last word.

A note on the evidence. Hired force is built to be hidden: contracts are secret, deaths go uncounted, and every party has a reason to inflate or deny. The course leans on records made under oath or under scrutiny. These include court judgments, U.S. Treasury sanctions designations, UN panels of experts and human rights reports, the Congressional Budget Office, and investigative consortia working from leaked documents. When a figure comes from a party to the fight, the course says who claims it: Ukraine's counts of Russia's foreign recruits, Russia's denials, rebels' tallies of enemy dead. Where sources disagree, it gives the range. Figures are current as of October 11, 2026.

# Who's Who

*The people and organizations the course names, as of October 11, 2026*

## People

| Person | Who they are | Age; years in role | Modules |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vladimir Putin | President of Russia | 74; in power since 2000 (prime minister 2008-12) | 4, 5, 7, 8, 11 |
| Alexander Lukashenko | President of Belarus; brokered the end of the 2023 mutiny | 72; since 1994 | 7 |
| Sergei Shoigu | Russia's defense minister 2012-24, Prigozhin's target in 2023; now Security Council secretary | 71; secretary since May 2024 | 7 |
| Valery Gerasimov | Chief of Russia's General Staff | 71; since November 2012 | 7 |
| Yunus-Bek Yevkurov | Deputy defense minister overseeing Africa Corps | 63; deputy minister since 2019 | 8 |
| Andrey Averyanov | Deputy chief of military intelligence (GRU); commander of Africa Corps | 59; commander since 2023 | 8 |
| Yevgeny Prigozhin | Wagner's founder and financier; caterer to the Kremlin | Killed August 23, 2023, aged 62 | 4, 5, 7, 8, 11 |
| Dmitry Utkin | Wagner's military commander, whose call sign named the group | Killed August 23, 2023, aged 53 | 4, 7 |
| Andrei Troshev | Wagner's executive director; now leads Defense Ministry volunteer units | Birth year disputed; since September 2023 | 7, 8 |
| Pavel Prigozhin | Yevgeny's son; heads Wagner's remnant in the Central African Republic | — | 8 |
| Faustin-Archange Touadéra | President of the Central African Republic | 69; since March 2016 | 5, 8 |
| Assimi Goïta | Head of Mali's junta; his own defense minister since May 2026 | 42; in power since August 2020 | 6, 8 |
| Abdourahamane Tiani | Head of Niger's junta | Born in the 1960s; since July 2023 | 8 |
| Ibrahim Traoré | Head of Burkina Faso's junta | 38; since September 2022 | 8 |
| Khalifa Haftar | Commander of the Libyan National Army in eastern Libya | 82; commander since 2015 | 5, 9, 11 |
| Abdel Fattah al-Burhan | Sudan's army chief and head of state | 66; head of state since 2019 | 9 |
| Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) | Commander of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF); heads its rival government | About 52; RSF commander since 2013 | 5, 9 |
| Recep Tayyip Erdoğan | President of Turkey | 72; president since 2014, prime minister 2003-14 | 9 |
| Félix Tshisekedi | President of the Democratic Republic of Congo | 63; since January 2019 | 10 |
| Alix Didier Fils-Aimé | Prime minister and sole executive of Haiti | 54; since November 2024 | 10 |
| Erik Prince | Founder of Blackwater (1997) and of Vectus Global | 57 | 3, 9, 10, 11 |
| Eeben Barlow | Founder of Executive Outcomes | — | 2, 11 |
| Tim Spicer and Simon Mann | Founders of Sandline International; Mann led the 2004 Equatorial Guinea plot | Mann died in 2025 | 1, 2 |

| Person | Who they are | Age; years in role | Modules |
|---|---|---|---|
| Horațiu Potra | Romanian contractor whose firm supplied Congo's 'Romeos' | — | 10 |
| Adnan Tanrıverdi | Founder of SADAT; Erdoğan's chief military adviser after 2016 | — | 9 |

Ages are as of October 11, 2026. Officeholders' years run to the same date.

## Organizations

| Organization | What it is | Status, October 2026 | Modules |
|---|---|---|---|
| Executive Outcomes | South African military company, founded 1989 | Dissolved 1998 | 2, 11 |
| Sandline International | British military company, founded in the mid-1990s | Closed | 2 |
| Blackwater | U.S. security company, founded 1997 | Renamed, then merged into Constellis (2014) | 3, 10 |
| CACI | U.S. contractor that supplied interrogators at Abu Ghraib | Liable for $42 million; verdict upheld 2026 | 3, 11 |
| Internet Research Agency (IRA) | Prigozhin's 'troll factory' in St Petersburg, founded 2013 | Indicted in the United States, 2018 | 4 |
| Wagner Group | Russian private army, formed 2014 | Broken up after 2023; a remnant in the Central African Republic | 4-8, 11 |
| Africa Corps | Russian Defense Ministry expeditionary force, formed 2023 | In Libya, the Sahel, Equatorial Guinea, Togo, and Bangui | 6, 8, 11 |
| Africa Politology ('the Company') | Wagner's influence branch | Run by Russia's foreign intelligence service (SVR) since late 2023 | 8 |
| GRU, SVR, FSB | Russia's military intelligence, foreign intelligence, and domestic security services | — | 4, 7, 8 |
| Rosgvardia | Russia's National Guard | Absorbed some Wagner units after 2023 | 8 |
| JNIM | Al-Qaeda's Sahel branch (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) | Leading the 2026 offensive in Mali | 6, 8 |
| FLA | Azawad Liberation Front, the Tuareg separatist coalition of northern Mali | Holds Kidal since April 2026 | 8 |
| Libyan National Army (LNA) | Haftar's forces in eastern Libya | Hosts Russian forces | 5 |
| Rapid Support Forces (RSF) | Sudanese paramilitary at war with the army since April 2023 | Took El Fasher in October 2025 | 5, 9, 10 |
| M23 | Rwanda-backed rebel movement in eastern Congo | Took Goma in January 2025 | 10 |
| SADAT | Turkish defense consultancy, founded 2012 | Denies sending fighters abroad | 9 |
| Spear Operations Group | U.S.-based firm that, by a lawsuit's account, the United Arab Emirates hired in 2015 | Its founder is being sued in a U.S. court | 9, 11 |
| Vectus Global | Erik Prince's security company | Supports Haiti's drone task force since March 2025 | 10, 11 |
| MINUSCA | UN peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic | Deployed since 2014 | 5, 11 |
| Gang Suppression Force | UN-authorized force in Haiti | Authorized in 2025 | 10, 11 |

# Module 1 — Hired Armies, from Renaissance Italy to the 'Dogs of War'

*The Words, the History, and the Law*

### Recommended Reading / Reference

**Book:** Sarah Percy, *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2007) — how the stigma against fighting for money formed, and why it outlived most attempts to write it into law

**Reference:** The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Casebook entry 'Mercenaries,' with the text of Article 47 of Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Geneva Conventions and its commentary

## 1a. Who Fights for Pay

Every army pays its soldiers, so pay alone does not make a mercenary. What sets the hired soldier apart is that he fights for a cause that is not his own country's, for money rather than loyalty, and often outside the chain of command of the state he serves. Those three marks are a matter of degree, which is why the same man can be a volunteer to one side and a mercenary to the other. The course uses six terms, and keeps the everyday meaning of 'mercenary' apart from the legal one.

| Term | Meaning | Examples in the course |
|---|---|---|
| Mercenary (everyday sense) | A soldier who fights for a foreign side mainly for pay | Renaissance captains, the Hessians, Wagner's fighters abroad |
| Mercenary (legal sense) | A person who meets all six tests of Article 47 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions | Almost no one (section 1e) |
| Private military company (PMC) | A firm that sells combat, training, or military planning | Executive Outcomes, Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), Wagner |
| Private security company (PSC) | A firm that sells the guarding of people, sites, and convoys | Blackwater in Iraq, Chinese firms abroad |
| Foreign recruit or auxiliary | A foreigner enlisted in a state's own armed forces | The Foreign Legion, the Gurkhas, Ukraine's International Legion, Russia's foreign recruits |
| Proxy | An armed group that fights for a state's aims while the state denies control | Turkey's Syrian fighters |

One question runs through every module: follow the contract. Who hired the soldiers, what did they pay with, what did they get, and who bore the cost? The payment has taken many forms: cash, land, a share of a mine, a pardon, a passport. The answers explain more about hired war than the uniforms do.

## 1b. The Renaissance Market

Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy was rich in cities and poor in soldiers. Florence, Venice, and Milan bought their wars from captains who sold companies of armed men by contract, the *condotta*, which gave the captains their name: *condottieri*. The trade was open and respectable. Sir John Hawkwood, an English captain who led the White Company, served Florence for years before his death in 1394, and the city honored him with an equestrian portrait painted on the wall of its cathedral.

The danger was built into the trade. When Milan's duke, Filippo Maria Visconti, died in 1447, the Milanese hired Francesco Sforza to fight Venice for them. Sforza made peace with the Venetians, turned on the city that paid him, and in 1450 made himself Duke of Milan. A captain good enough to win your war was good enough to take your state.

Niccolò Machiavelli, writing *The Prince* in 1513, drew the lesson in one of its most quoted passages. Mercenaries, he wrote, are "disunited, ambitious, and without discipline, unfaithful, valiant before friends, cowardly before enemies," and with them "destruction is deferred only so long as the attack is." His warning had two halves. Hired soldiers will not die for you, because pay is a poor reason to die. And the ones who do fight well may take over. His remedy was an army of the prince's own citizens. Both halves of the warning return in this course, the first in Mozambique (Module 6) and the second near Moscow (Module 7).

Not all hired soldiers were Italian freelancers. Swiss cantons sold regiments of pikemen to the kings of France and to the popes, and one of those contracts survives: the Swiss Guard, hired in 1506, still guards the pope.

## 1c. How States Took Control

Through the eighteenth century, kings rented whole regiments from other rulers. The best-known case is the Hessians. About 30,000 German soldiers served Britain against the American colonies under subsidy treaties with six German princes. Each prince supplied a fixed number of men for a fixed sum, and some contracts paid extra for every soldier killed or wounded, which critics called blood money. The Declaration of Independence listed "large Armies of foreign Mercenaries" among its grievances against the king. On December 26, 1776, close to 900 of them surrendered at Trenton after Washington crossed the Delaware. About 5,000 deserted over the war, and 5,000 to 6,000 stayed in North America.

Companies had armies too. The East India Company's three presidency armies, mostly Indian soldiers under British officers, numbered about 250,000 men around 1800, larger than the armies of many states. The Company used them to conquer much of India. After the rebellion of 1857, the British Crown took the armies over in 1858 and ended the Company's rule.

The nineteenth century closed the open market. Revolutionary France raised mass armies of citizens, and every major power followed. Laws such as America's Neutrality Act of 1794 and Britain's Foreign Enlistment Act of 1819 made private war-making by citizens a crime. In 1919 the German sociologist Max Weber defined the state as the community that claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within its territory. The definition described what the nineteenth century had achieved.

Two forms of hired service survived by changing their legal shape. France founded the Foreign Legion in 1831. In 2026 it numbers about 9,000 men from 156 nationalities, and it turns away most of the men who apply. Britain has recruited Gurkhas from Nepal since 1815. The Brigade of Gurkhas has more than 4,000 soldiers, and in 2025 some 16,000 young Nepalis competed for 274 places. Legionnaires and Gurkhas are foreign, paid, and fight. But they are enlisted members of their employer's armed forces, which places them outside the legal definition of a mercenary (section 1e).

## 1d. The 'Dogs of War,' 1960-2004

Decolonization reopened the market in Africa. When Congo became independent in 1960, the province of Katanga seceded with Belgian, French, and South African mercenaries on its side. In 1964 Moïse Tshombe, by then Congo's prime minister, hired Mike Hoare, a former British Army officer, to fight the Simba rebellion.

Hoare's mercenaries campaigned for 18 months. Alongside them, the Frenchman Bob Denard led a unit the press called *les affreux*, the frightful ones.

Denard went further than anyone. In the Comoros, an island state in the Indian Ocean, he helped topple its first president, Ahmed Abdallah, in 1975. In May 1978 he landed with 43 men, overthrew the government that had replaced Abdallah, and restored him to power. For the next eleven years he commanded Abdallah's presidential guard of about 500 men, which made a mercenary the most powerful figure in the country. In 1989 Abdallah was shot dead, and French paratroopers removed Denard. He tried once more in 1995 with about 33 men and surrendered to French forces on October 4. A French court convicted him in 2006, and he died in 2007 without serving the sentence.

The failures were as instructive. In Angola in 1976, more than a dozen Western mercenaries hired for one of the factions were captured and tried in Luanda. Four were shot by firing squad on July 10, 1976, including the Cypriot-born Briton who called himself Colonel Callan. In 1981 Hoare led 46 men to the Seychelles disguised as a beer-drinking club of former rugby players, with rifles in their luggage. A customs officer found one, a firefight followed, and the men escaped by hijacking an Air India jet to South Africa. Hoare was sentenced to 20 years, half of them suspended, and served 33 months.

The last of the old-style plots came in 2004. On March 7, Zimbabwean security forces seized a Boeing 727 carrying more than 60 men at Harare airport, where it had landed to collect weapons, and arrested the British former officer Simon Mann, who was waiting for it. They were accused of planning to overthrow Teodoro Obiang, president of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea. Mark Thatcher, son of the former British prime minister, later admitted in a South African plea bargain to having unwittingly helped the plot, and was fined. Equatorial Guinea sentenced Mann to more than 34 years in 2008 and pardoned him in 2009.

## 1e. The Law: Six Tests

The African experience wrote the law. In 1977 the Organization of African Unity adopted a convention to eliminate mercenarism in Africa. The same year, Article 47 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions declared that a mercenary has no right to be a combatant or a prisoner of war. It defined a mercenary as a person who meets all six of the following conditions at once:

- (a) He is specially recruited, locally or abroad, to fight in an armed conflict.
- (b) He takes a direct part in the hostilities.
- (c) He is motivated essentially by private gain, and is promised pay substantially above that of soldiers of similar rank in the armed forces of the side he fights for.
- (d) He is neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory a party controls.
- (e) He is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict.
- (f) He has not been sent on official duty by a state that is not a party, as a member of its armed forces.

Because the tests are cumulative, failing any one removes a person from the definition. Enlisting in the employer's army, holding its passport, or keeping pay records that look ordinary is enough. The military historian Geoffrey Best judged that anyone "who cannot exclude himself from this definition deserves to be shot – and his lawyer with him." The 1989 UN convention against mercenaries, in force since 2001, made recruiting, financing, training, and using mercenaries a crime, and added people hired to overthrow a government. Only 38 states had ratified it by 2021, and none of the five permanent members of the Security Council has joined.

The law also missed the shape the trade would take. A company that trains an army or guards a mine does not 'take a direct part in hostilities.' A state that enlists foreigners in its own forces escapes test (e). And the word itself became a weapon. In June 2022 a court in Russian-occupied Donetsk sentenced two Britons and a Moroccan to death for 'mercenary activities.' All three had been captured as members of Ukraine's armed forces, so under test (e) they could not be mercenaries. They were freed in a prisoner exchange that September brokered by Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

### Worked example — Who is a mercenary under Article 47?

Run three soldiers through the six tests. First, a Nepali rifleman in Britain's Gurkhas, deployed to Afghanistan: he was recruited abroad, he fights, he is foreign to the conflict, but he is a member of a party's armed forces, so test (e) fails and he is not a mercenary. Second, a Briton who joins Ukraine's International Legion: he enlists in Ukraine's armed forces, so test (e) fails again, whatever Russian courts say. Third, a retired Colombian soldier hired by a Gulf company to fight in another country's civil war, for several times the pay of the local fighters beside him: he is specially recruited, fights directly, is paid far above them, is foreign to the conflict, belongs to no party's army, and was not sent by his government. All six tests are met, and he is a mercenary in law. The definition catches the freelancer and misses every state that enlists foreigners or hires a company. Modules 8 and 9 meet both kinds.

# Module 1 Key Points

*Hired Armies, from Renaissance Italy to the 'Dogs of War'*

• Machiavelli's warning had two halves: hired soldiers may not fight hard, and those who fight well may seize the state.

• Britain hired about 30,000 German soldiers against the American colonies; the Declaration of Independence denounced them as foreign mercenaries.

• States won a monopoly on force in the 1800s; the Foreign Legion and the Gurkhas survive by enlisting foreigners into national armies.

• From Congo to the Comoros, mercenaries backed or ran governments; Denard commanded the Comoros presidential guard for eleven years.

• Article 47's six cumulative tests are so narrow that almost no paid foreign fighter is a mercenary in law.

# Module 1 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. Which captain, hired by Milan, turned on his employers and made himself duke in 1450?**

A) Sir John Hawkwood
B) Filippo Maria Visconti
C) Francesco Sforza
D) Niccolò Machiavelli

**2. Why do the French Foreign Legion and Britain's Gurkhas fall outside the legal definition of a mercenary?**

A) They are enlisted in the employer's armed forces
B) Their home countries sign treaties that classify them as neutral observers rather than combatants in any war
C) They serve only as guards and trainers
D) Their pay is set below that of national troops of similar rank

**3. Which instrument set out the six cumulative tests for a mercenary in the law of war?**

A) The 1907 Hague Convention
B) The 1989 UN Convention
C) The Montreux Document
D) Article 47 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I

**4. What did Bob Denard do in the Comoros from 1978 to 1989?**

A) Trained the army for France
B) Commanded the president's guard of about 500 men
C) Led a UN observer mission
D) Served as the islands' elected prime minister after winning a referendum on independence

**5. About how many German soldiers served Britain in the American Revolution?**

A) About 3,000 officers and engineers
B) Nearly 100,000 under one treaty with Hesse
C) About 30,000
D) About 250,000, matching the East India Company's army

# Module 2 — The Corporate Turn: Executive Outcomes

*When Mercenaries Became Companies*

**Recommended Reading / Reference**

**Book:** P. W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Cornell University Press, 2003; updated 2008) — the standard account of the industry's birth in the 1990s, with Executive Outcomes at its center

**Reference:** UN Peacekeeping, 'UNAMSIL: Facts and Figures' — the strength, deaths, and cost of the UN mission that followed in Sierra Leone

## 2a. Why the 1990s

The end of the Cold War created a market for force on both sides at once. On the supply side, armies shrank across Europe, the former Soviet Union, and southern Africa, leaving trained soldiers without work and helicopters and rifles without owners. The end of apartheid disbanded South Africa's most experienced counterinsurgency units; 32 Battalion, which had fought for years in Angola, was dissolved in 1993. On the demand side, weak governments faced rebels who financed themselves with diamonds and oil, and the Western powers, after the failure in Somalia in 1993, were unwilling to send their own soldiers.

What was new was the form. The freelancers of Module 1 had been recruited in bars and paid in cash. The firms of the 1990s were registered companies with offices, brochures, staff lists, and contracts signed by ministers. They described themselves as private military companies, and they were paid not only in cash but through affiliated mining and energy companies that took concessions in the countries they defended.

## 2b. Executive Outcomes

Executive Outcomes was founded in 1989 by Eeben Barlow, a former lieutenant colonel in the South African Defence Force, and at its peak employed about 2,000 former soldiers, most of them veterans of South Africa's wars in Angola and Namibia. Its first known operation in Angola, in 1993, recovered oil installations at Soyo from the rebels of UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, for the oil companies that ran them. Later that year the Angolan government itself hired the firm. Its men trained 4,000 to 5,000 government soldiers and 30 pilots and fielded frontline units of about 500 men against UNITA, the movement many of them had fought alongside in the 1980s.

The government's position improved enough that UNITA signed the Lusaka Protocol in November 1994, a ceasefire that held for a few years. American and UN pressure on Angola ended the contract in early 1996, and a UN mission replaced the company. The pattern of payment was already visible. Much of what Executive Outcomes earned flowed through shares in affiliated companies that held oil and diamond interests in the same country.

## 2c. Sierra Leone, 1995-1997

Sierra Leone's civil war began in 1991, when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded from Liberia. The rebels financed themselves by digging diamonds and became notorious for cutting off the hands of civilians. By early 1995 they were approaching Freetown, the capital, and controlled the diamond fields. The military government that had seized power in 1992 hired Executive Outcomes.

The terms, as later reported, were about $2 million a month for 150 to 200 fully equipped soldiers, helicopter support including a Mi-24 gunship, and training for the national army. Branch Energy, a company linked to Executive Outcomes, received a 25-year concession over the Koidu diamond mine, with the government keeping 60%. The concession was granted, in the words of one account, as payment for helping to suppress the rebels. By the end of 1995, the government had regained most of the mining areas, the siege of Freetown had lifted, and the country's titanium-ore mine had reopened.

The company's success made elections possible in 1996, which brought the civilian Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to power. It also made the company an obstacle to peace talks. The Abidjan Peace Accord of November 30, 1996 required its departure, and its men left in January 1997. On May 25, 1997, soldiers overthrew Kabbah and invited the RUF into the capital. On January 6, 1999, the rebels stormed Freetown in an offensive that killed several thousand civilians and maimed hundreds more. The war ended only after the UN deployed one of its largest missions and British troops intervened in 2000; the government declared it over in January 2002.

### Worked example — Executive Outcomes' bill against the UN's

Take the company's monthly rate from section 2c and divide it among about 175 men: roughly $11,000 per man per month, aircraft included. The UN mission that followed, UNAMSIL, ran from October 1999 to December 2005, about 74 months, at a total cost of about $2.8 billion. That is about $38 million a month, some 19 times the company's bill. At its full strength of about 17,400 troops, the UN paid roughly $2,200 per soldier per month. Each side of the debate finds its argument here. The company was cheap in total because it was small and it fought. The UN was dear because it was large and it held ground.

## 2d. Sandline and MPRI

Sandline International, founded in the mid-1990s by two former British Army officers, Tim Spicer and Simon Mann, belonged to the same circle of companies. In January 1997 the prime minister of Papua New Guinea, Julius Chan, agreed to pay it $36 million, half in advance, to help retake the island of Bougainville from separatist rebels. The deal was approved by a small security council rather than the full cabinet. Forty-four men were assembled, most of them subcontracted from Executive Outcomes. On March 16, 1997, the commander of the country's own army, Jerry Singirok, had them disarmed and arrested and demanded the prime minister's resignation. Protests followed, Australia threatened to cut aid, the contract was cancelled, and Chan stood down.

Sandline went on to supply weapons in 1998 to the forces trying to restore Kabbah in Sierra Leone, in breach of a UN arms embargo. A British inquiry into what officials had known followed. The company closed in 2004, the same year Mann was arrested in Harare (Module 1).

The American version looked different. Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), a firm of retired U.S. generals, signed a contract with Croatia in September 1994 with the explicit consent of the State and Defense departments, and retrained Croatia's command. In August 1995 the Croatian army's Operation Storm retook the Krajina region from Serb forces within days, and about 150,000 Croatian Serbs fled.

French and British officials accused MPRI of helping plan the offensive; the company said it had taught only classroom courses on civil-military relations. The case set the American model: the contractor as a licensed instrument of foreign policy, staffed by the government's own retirees (Module 3).

## 2e. The End of Executive Outcomes

South Africa's new government regarded the company as an embarrassment. Its Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act of 1998 required state approval for any military service sold abroad and banned direct participation in conflict for private gain. Executive Outcomes dissolved itself on December 31, 1998. Its veterans scattered into security work across Africa and, after 2003, into Iraq (Module 3).

## 2f. The Argument: Did Executive Outcomes Bring Peace or Rent It?

**The case that it brought peace.** Its defenders, including Barlow and many Sierra Leoneans who lived through 1995, argue that a few hundred professionals achieved in months what the national army and regional forces had failed to achieve in years. They made an election possible and cost a fraction of the UN mission that followed. On this view, the collapse after 1997 proves the company's worth, since it began when outsiders forced it to leave.

**The case that it rented peace.** Its critics, including the UN's special rapporteur on mercenaries, argue that a company paid in the resource it fought over had an interest in a secured mine, not in a settled country. It built no lasting capacity in the state that hired it, answered to no court, and left a government as vulnerable as before. A peace that ends when the invoice stops, on this view, is a rental.

**The evidence.** The battlefield results of 1995 and the election they made possible are not disputed. Neither is the sequel (section 2c). What remains in dispute is the counterfactual: whether a longer contract would have bought a settlement, or only a longer rental.

**The course's reading.** Executive Outcomes bought time, not peace. It won battles quickly and cheaply, but a contract that can end cannot guarantee a settlement, and when the payer stops paying, the protection stops too. The same dependence recurs in Mali and Haiti (Modules 6 and 10); the Central African Republic shows the reverse risk, a hired force that would not leave (Modules 5 and 8).

# Module 2 Key Points

*The Corporate Turn: Executive Outcomes*

• Executive Outcomes turned apartheid-era veterans into a company that sold combat to governments, paid partly through mining concessions.

• In Sierra Leone, 150 to 200 men retook the diamond fields in months, for roughly $2 million a month.

• The company's peace collapsed within months of its 1997 exit; a large UN mission and British troops ended the war.

• Sandline's Papua New Guinea contract ended when the national army arrested the mercenaries and the prime minister stood down.

• MPRI set the American model: retired officers, licensed by Washington, training a client's army.

# Module 2 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. How was Executive Outcomes paid in Sierra Leone?**

A) Entirely by the United Nations
B) In cash of about $2 million a month, plus a diamond concession for a linked company
C) In shares of the national oil company
D) Through British aid grants

**2. What happened in Sierra Leone within months of Executive Outcomes' departure in 1997?**

A) An army coup in Freetown
B) The RUF disarmed
C) A UN ceasefire
D) Diamond output doubled under Branch Energy

**3. Who stopped Sandline's 1997 operation in Papua New Guinea?**

A) Australia's navy
B) A UN Security Council resolution adopted after the contract became public
C) The Bougainville rebels, who defeated the contractors in their very first battle
D) The country's own army commander

**4. What did MPRI do for Croatia from 1994?**

A) Flew air strikes in the Krajina
B) Its retired U.S. officers retrained Croatia's command, with Washington's approval
C) Guarded Croatia's oil terminals
D) Ran inspections for the UN arms embargo on the coast

**5. Roughly how did the UN mission's monthly cost in Sierra Leone compare with Executive Outcomes' bill?**

A) About the same per month
B) Half as much, because UN troops were paid less
C) About 19 times as much
D) Less than a tenth as much, since the UN's soldiers were lent by member states that covered their own costs

# Module 3 — The Contractor Wars: Iraq and Afghanistan

*When a Superpower Hired Out Its Wars*

### Recommended Reading / Reference

**Book:** Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2014) — a former contractor's account of the industry the Iraq war built and where it was heading

**Reference:** Congressional Budget Office (CBO), *Contractors' Support of U.S. Operations in Iraq* (August 2008) — the source for the head counts, spending, and cost comparison

## 3a. How the Contractor Army Grew

The United States did not set out to hire its wars. After the Cold War it cut its active forces by about a third and moved support work to companies: the Army's main logistics contract, LOGCAP, dates from 1985 and grew in the Balkans in the 1990s. When the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq came, the military had fewer soldiers for cooking, building, driving, translating, and guarding, and it bought those services instead. The result was a war fought by two workforces, one in uniform and one under contract.

| Theater and date | Contractor personnel | U.S. troops | What stands out |
|---|---|---|---|
| Iraq, early 2008 | At least 190,000 | About the same | At least 2.5 times the contractor ratio of any earlier major U.S. war; about 20% of the contractors were Americans |
| Afghanistan, early 2012 | More than 117,000 | About 88,000 | More than 70% of contractors were foreign nationals; about 23% were security personnel |
| Afghanistan, 2016 | Nearly 29,000 | Fewer than 9,000 | About three contractors per soldier as the troops left |

Sources: Congressional Budget Office (2008); Congressional Research Service figures reported by Military Times (2016).

Most contractors were not fighters. The armed share in Iraq was 25,000 to 30,000 private security employees, about 10,000 of them working directly for the U.S. government. They guarded diplomats, convoys, bases, and reconstruction sites, and the government spent $6 billion to $10 billion on them between 2003 and 2007. U.S. agencies awarded about $85 billion of contracts for work in Iraq over the same years, nearly a fifth of the war's operating cost. Many of the guards were not American: Ugandans, Fijians, Chileans, and others worked the lower-paid posts, while American and British veterans held the senior ones.

## 3b. Blackwater

Blackwater, founded in 1997 by Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL, became the best-known of the firms through a contract to protect American diplomats in Iraq. Two events defined it. On March 31, 2004, insurgents in Fallujah ambushed four of its contractors escorting a convoy, killed them, and hung their burned bodies from a bridge over the Euphrates. The Marines' first assault on the city followed in April. A private security job had set the course of a military campaign.

On September 16, 2007, a Blackwater convoy guarding State Department officials opened fire in Nisour Square, a Baghdad traffic circle, killing 14 Iraqi civilians by the U.S. prosecutors' count; Iraq's government

counted 17. The guards said they had come under fire; prosecutors argued the shooting was unprovoked. Contractors had been immune from Iraqi law since 2004 under an order of the American occupation authority. The 2008 agreement on U.S. forces in Iraq ended that immunity from January 2009, and Iraq refused to renew Blackwater's license.

The prosecution took seven years. In October 2014 a federal jury convicted one guard of murder and three of manslaughter; the murderer got life and the others 30 years, later reduced on appeal. In December 2020, President Trump pardoned all four. The company renamed itself Xe in 2009, Prince sold it in 2010, and its new owners renamed it Academi in 2011 and merged it into Constellis in 2014. Prince went on to found new ventures, one of which returns in Haiti (Module 10).

## 3c. Abu Ghraib's Contractors

The most serious abuses of the Iraq war also involved contractors. CACI, a Virginia company, supplied interrogators to the Abu Ghraib prison in 2003. Military investigators concluded that its employees conspired with soldiers to 'soften up' detainees for questioning; soldiers were court-martialed, but no contractor was prosecuted. Three former detainees sued under the Alien Tort Statute of 1789, which lets foreigners sue in American courts for violations of international law. In November 2024, after 16 years of litigation, a jury found CACI liable for conspiring to torture them and awarded $42 million, $3 million in compensation and $11 million in punitive damages to each. The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the verdict on March 12, 2026.

## 3d. What It Cost

The Commission on Wartime Contracting, created by Congress, reported on August 31, 2011 that at least $31 billion, and possibly $60 billion, of the roughly $206 billion spent on contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan had been lost to waste and fraud. At their peak, more than 260,000 contractor employees were working in the two wars at once, at times outnumbering the troops they supported. The commission recommended phasing out some private security work altogether.

The deaths were counted differently. Contractors killed in the two wars did not appear in the Pentagon's casualty totals, and by 2010 more contractors than soldiers were dying in some periods. A government that hires part of its army also hires part of its casualty list out of public view. The same advantage drew Russia to Wagner (Module 4), and at far greater scale in Ukraine (Module 7).

### Worked example — Was contracting cheaper?

The Congressional Budget Office compared a private security contract with a U.S. military unit doing similar work in Iraq and found that, in wartime, they cost about the same. The difference comes after the war. Take an illustrative security mission costing $100 million a year either way for five years of war: $500 million whether contractors or soldiers do it. When the war ends, the contract stops, while a military unit stays in the force structure, and suppose it costs $40 million a year in peacetime. Over the next ten years, the standing unit costs another $400 million, and the contract nothing. The saving is real, and so is its price: when the next war comes, the capacity has to be bought again, from whoever is selling.

## 3e. The Rules That Followed

The scandals produced rules, mostly for contractors working for the United States. Congress extended federal criminal law to contractors supporting Defense Department missions abroad in 2004 and military law to contractors in contingency operations in 2006. In September 2008, after an initiative by Switzerland and the International Committee of the Red Cross, 17 states adopted the Montreux Document. It restates the duties that states which hire, host, or license private military and security companies already have under international law. It is not a treaty and binds no one, and by 2026, 61 states had joined, including the United States and China but not Russia. An industry code of conduct followed in 2010, with an association to oversee it in 2013.

The rules followed the American model of the trade: companies hired by governments with courts, mostly to guard rather than to fight. They had little to say about the model that was about to grow in Russia, where the state built a combat army it could deny.

# Module 3 Key Points

*The Contractor Wars: Iraq and Afghanistan*

• At the 2008 peak, Iraq had about one contractor per U.S. soldier; Afghanistan reached three per soldier by 2016.

• Blackwater guards killed at least 14 civilians at Nisour Square in 2007; four were convicted, then pardoned in 2020.

• A U.S. jury held CACI liable for torture at Abu Ghraib; the $42 million verdict was upheld in 2026.

• Congress's wartime contracting commission found $31 billion to $60 billion lost to waste and fraud.

• Contracting cost about as much as soldiers in wartime; its savings came when the contracts ended.

# Module 3 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. About how many contractor personnel worked on U.S.-funded contracts in the Iraq theater in early 2008, by the CBO's estimate?**

A) At least 190,000
B) About 9,000
C) Roughly 30,000, mostly armed guards
D) Over a million, counting every Iraqi day laborer hired

**2. What happened at Nisour Square on September 16, 2007?**

A) Four Blackwater guards were killed in an ambush
B) A suicide bomber struck a convoy
C) Iraqi police fired on a U.S. embassy convoy, starting a firefight that killed several contractors and soldiers
D) Blackwater guards opened fire and killed at least 14 Iraqi civilians

**3. What did a U.S. jury decide about CACI in 2024?**

A) It was acquitted
B) It was liable, owing three Iraqis $42 million
C) It was fined $5 million
D) Case dismissed

**4. What did the Congressional Budget Office conclude about the cost of private security in Iraq?**

A) Contractors cost about a third as much as soldiers in every role they filled.
B) Contractors cost three times as much as troops.
C) Contractors cost more in wartime, but the government recovered the difference through taxes on their wages.
D) A contract cost about the same as a military unit doing similar work.

**5. What did the Montreux Document of 2008 do?**

A) Restated states' existing legal duties toward private military firms
B) Banned private military companies
C) Created an international court for contractors
D) Required every contractor in a war zone to register with the International Committee of the Red Cross and carry its card

# Module 4 — Wagner: The Chef, the Commander, and Syria

*How Russia Built a Deniable Army, 2013-2018*

**Recommended Reading / Reference**

**Book:** Jack Margolin, *The Wagner Group: Inside Russia's Mercenary Army* (Reaktion Books, 2024) — the group's origins, its Syrian and African campaigns, and its place in the Russian state

**Reference:** U.S. Department of Justice, the indictment of the Internet Research Agency, Concord Management and Consulting, and 13 Russians (February 16, 2018)

## 4a. The Chef

Yevgeny Prigozhin was born in Leningrad in 1961. In 1981 he was sentenced to 12 years for robbery, fraud, and drawing minors into crime, and he was released in 1990 after about nine years. He began again selling hot dogs at a city market with his mother and stepfather. Within a few years he owned restaurants, among them a floating restaurant, New Island, where Vladimir Putin took visiting leaders to dine. From the restaurants grew a catering group, Concord, which won contracts to feed schoolchildren and then the army; in 2012 it received a contract worth $1.2 billion to supply the military's meals for a year. The press called him 'Putin's chef.'

In 2013 Prigozhin founded the Internet Research Agency (IRA) in St Petersburg, an office of young employees paid to write posts under false identities. From 2014 a department aimed at Americans: more than 80 staff worked on it by July 2016, running hundreds of social media accounts posing as American activists, buying political ads, and paying real Americans to stage rallies. On February 16, 2018, a U.S. grand jury indicted the agency, two Concord companies, and 13 Russians for conspiring to defraud the United States in the 2016 election. In November 2022 Prigozhin said openly that his people had interfered in American elections, were interfering, and would continue, and in February 2023 he confirmed that he had founded the agency. The troll factory and the army were two lines of one business: services the Kremlin wanted done and wanted to deny.

## 4b. The Commander

Dmitry Utkin, born in 1970, was a lieutenant colonel in the special forces of Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU, and commanded a detachment of its 2nd Special Brigade until 2013. He then joined a private security firm whose managers set up a venture called the Slavonic Corps to send Russian veterans to Syria. About 250 men went in 2013 on a mission that ended in near-disaster. Back in Russia, two of the organizers were jailed for three years in October 2014, the country's first conviction for mercenarism. The lesson was clear: a private army without Kremlin cover would be prosecuted under the law against mercenaries, Article 359 of the criminal code. Wagner would have the cover first.

Utkin's call sign, 'Wagner,' after the composer, gave the new group its name. Several news outlets reported that he admired Nazi Germany and bore its insignia as tattoos. On December 9, 2016, he attended the Kremlin's Heroes of the Fatherland reception as the holder of four Orders of Courage and was photographed with Putin. The Kremlin confirmed he had been invited.

## 4c. Donbas and the Legal Void

Wagner first appeared in Crimea in February 2014 and then in Ukraine's Donbas, where Prigozhin later said its first battalion was formed on May 1, 2014. It fought at Debaltseve in early 2015 and was withdrawn that autumn. Recruits trained at Molkino, a Defense Ministry facility in Russia's Krasnodar region, where they handed in their phones and passports and signed ten-year confidentiality agreements. The group grew from about 250 men in 2014 to about 1,000 in early 2016 and some 5,000 to 6,000 by the end of 2017.

Legally, Wagner did not exist. Putin had endorsed the idea of private military companies in 2012, but no law created them, and the criminal code still banned mercenarism. The gap was the point. The Kremlin could send Wagner where it would not send its army, deny that it had done so, and keep the dead off official casualty lists. It could pay through Prigozhin's catering contracts rather than through any budget line marked for Wagner. And it had a force outside the Defense Ministry's bureaucracy, answerable through one man. As late as July 2023 Putin would say that Wagner did not legally exist.

## 4d. Syria: Palmyra and the Oil Deal

Wagner deployed to Syria in the autumn of 2015, alongside Russia's air campaign for President Bashar al-Assad. Its men served as assault infantry in the government's hardest ground fights, above all for Palmyra, which was retaken from the Islamic State in March 2016, lost again in December, and retaken in March 2017. Their losses were not reported; the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights later counted at least 266 Wagner dead in Syria.

The payment was new. In December 2017 the Associated Press reported a 48-page contract between Syria's state oil company and Evro Polis, a Moscow-registered firm that the opposition politician Alexei Navalny's team had linked to Prigozhin. It gave Evro Polis a quarter of the proceeds from oil and gas fields its men took from the Islamic State. A client too poor to pay cash would pay in a share of what the soldiers recovered. The same formula, in gold, diamonds, and timber, would carry Wagner across Africa (Module 5).

So did a habit of brutality. A video posted on June 30, 2017 showed men torturing and killing a Syrian near the al-Shaer gas facility, finishing with a sledgehammer. When fuller footage spread in November 2019, the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* identified one of the men as a Wagner fighter. The victim's brother asked Russian investigators to open a case in 2021; they refused, the courts upheld the refusal, and the family turned to the European Court of Human Rights.

## 4e. Khasham, February 7-8, 2018

On the night of February 7, 2018, about 500 pro-government fighters with tanks and artillery advanced on a gas plant near Khasham, in eastern Syria, held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces with about 40 American troops. The plant had belonged to the American company Conoco. The column included Syrian army units, Iranian-backed militias, and Wagner contractors. American commanders had watched the build-up for a week and warned Russian officers over the deconfliction line, the hotline the two militaries used to keep their forces apart in Syria. They were told no Russians were in the column. U.S. aircraft and artillery destroyed the assault over several hours. No Americans were killed.

Russia's Defense Ministry said the attackers were Syrian militias acting without its knowledge and that no Russian servicemen were present. Over the following two weeks the Foreign Ministry conceded first that five Russian citizens might have died and then that Russian and other former Soviet citizens had been killed or

wounded, but never that any served Russia. The men had fought beside Russia's ally in Russia's war, and Russia would not own them.

| Source | Russians killed | Basis |
|---|---|---|
| Wagner commanders | 14 to 15 | Statements to Russian media |
| Conflict Intelligence Team, a Russian investigative group | 10 confirmed; 20-30 estimated | Names verified from open sources |
| Ukraine's security service (SBU) | 65 named | Open-source identification |
| BBC Russian service | About 80 | Interviews and records |
| A Danish university study (2019) | 65 to 200 | Review of the reporting |
| Russian nationalist activists | 80-100, with about 200 wounded; one later claim of 334 | Contacts among veterans |
| Mike Pompeo, then CIA director | 'A couple hundred' | U.S. intelligence |

Compiled from contemporary reporting. Russia's government never gave a full count.

### Worked example — Counting the dead at Khasham

The estimates in the table run from ten confirmed deaths to more than 300, and the spread is itself the lesson. Begin with the counts anchored to names: the independent Conflict Intelligence Team verified ten, and Ukraine's security service, which had reason to maximize Russian losses, named 65. Together they set a floor of at least ten and probably dozens. Then weigh the other sources' interests. Wagner's commanders had reason to say little; nationalist activists wanted to shame the Defense Ministry; American officials had reason to stress the size of the defeat. The BBC's count and the Danish study sit between them. A careful reader would say that dozens were killed, possibly more than 100, and that no one who knows the exact number has published it. A deniable army hides its losses from its own country as well as from its enemy.

## 4f. What Syria Taught

By 2018 the model was complete. The Russian state supplied cover: a base, transport, weapons, diplomatic denial, and freedom from prosecution. A private network supplied the men, ran the business, and took payment in the client's resources. The arrangement saved the Kremlin money and accountability. It also meant that when the men were killed in Russia's name, Russia could not admit they were its own, which is how Khasham happened and why its toll is still unknown.

# Module 4 Key Points

*Wagner: The Chef, the Commander, and Syria*

• Prigozhin turned Kremlin catering contracts into a troll factory and a private army, both kept off the state's official books.

• Russia jailed the Slavonic Corps' organizers in 2014 as mercenaries; Wagner, with Kremlin cover, was never prosecuted.

• In Syria, Wagner's partner company was promised a quarter of the proceeds from oil and gas fields it captured.

• At Khasham in 2018, U.S. strikes broke an assault that included Wagner men; Moscow denied they were its soldiers.

• Estimates of Russian dead at Khasham run from ten confirmed to over 300; deniability hid the losses even from Russians.

# Module 4 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. What gave the Wagner Group its name?**

A) A Soviet special forces unit
B) The St Petersburg street where its first office stood, renamed for the composer's centenary
C) Utkin's call sign
D) Prigozhin's first restaurant

**2. What did Wagner's Syrian partner company, Evro Polis, reportedly stand to receive?**

A) A fixed monthly fee from Damascus
B) A quarter of the proceeds from oil and gas fields its men took from the Islamic State
C) Free use of the port of Tartus
D) Defense Ministry contracts for the Syrian army's food

**3. Whom did the February 2018 U.S. indictment charge over the Internet Research Agency's operation?**

A) 13 Russians and three companies
B) Prigozhin alone, as the only funder named
C) Twenty-six Russian intelligence officers
D) Thirteen American activists paid by the agency to organize rallies

**4. What happened to the organizers of the Slavonic Corps' 2013 Syrian mission?**

A) They were decorated
B) They were exchanged for Syrian prisoners in a deal brokered by Turkey and the United Arab Emirates
C) Two were jailed for three years
D) They founded Wagner with Prigozhin

**5. What did Russia's Foreign Ministry eventually say about the Russians killed at Khasham?**

A) No Russians were there
B) Two hundred soldiers died
C) That the strike was a war crime and Russia would seek damages at the International Court of Justice
D) Russian and other ex-Soviet citizens died, without conceding that any served Russia

# Module 5 — Wagner in Africa: The Package

*Guards, Advisers, Media, and Mines, 2017-2023*

### Recommended Reading / Reference

**Book:** John Lechner, *Death Is Our Business: Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare* (Bloomsbury, 2025) — Wagner in the Central African Republic and beyond, from years of reporting on the ground

**Reference:** U.S. Treasury, sanctions designations of Wagner's African companies (July 15, 2020 and June 27, 2023), which set out the network's businesses in Sudan and the Central African Republic

## 5a. The Offer

Wagner's African business began with a request. In November 2017, Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir, met Putin in Sochi and asked Russia for protection from what he called aggressive acts by the United States. Within months, Prigozhin's companies were at work in Sudan, the Central African Republic, Libya, and Madagascar, and by 2019 in Mozambique, with political consultants at work in several more. What they sold was not a battalion but a package.

| Part of the package | What it did | Where |
|---|---|---|
| Guards and fighters | Protected presidents and fought their rebels | Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, Mozambique, Mali |
| Political advisers | Ran campaigns, wrote speeches, planned how to handle protests | Madagascar, Sudan, the Central African Republic, and others |
| Media | Funded radio stations, newspapers, social media pages, films, and cultural centers | Across the client states |
| Companies | Took payment in gold, diamonds, timber, and oil, and traded them | Sudan, the Central African Republic, Syria |

The clients paid in cash where they had it and in concessions where they had minerals or forests but not money. In return they also got political goods only Moscow could supply, such as its vote at the UN Security Council or an exemption from an arms embargo. The fighters' wages were modest by the standards of the trade. In 2024 Wagner advertised a starting salary for its African posts of 240,000 rubles a month, about $2,600 at the time.

## 5b. The Central African Republic: The Model Client

The Central African Republic is one of the poorest countries on earth, a landlocked state of forests, diamonds, and gold whose government has rarely controlled much beyond the capital, Bangui. A rebellion in 2013 brought a UN arms embargo, a French intervention, and, from 2014, a UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSCA. Faustin-Archange Touadéra was elected president in 2016, the year French troops left. In December 2017, Russia asked the UN committee overseeing the embargo to let it deliver weapons, and the committee agreed. In March 2018, Russia's Foreign Ministry announced that five soldiers and 170 'civilian instructors' had arrived. The instructors were Wagner's.

They moved quickly to the center of the state. A Russian, Valery Zakharov, reported to be a Wagner member, became Touadéra's national security adviser, and Russian guards took over his protection. In December 2020, a new rebel coalition backed by the former president François Bozizé took the town of

Bambari days before the elections and on January 13, 2021 attacked the outskirts of Bangui. Russia sent 300 more instructors. Wagner and Rwandan troops drove the rebels back and, by the spring, had retaken towns across the west and center, some of them by Wagner alone.

Payment came through a set of companies. Lobaye Invest held mining rights. Midas Ressources held the Ndassima gold mine, whose deposit is valued at more than $1 billion, according to the U.S. Treasury. Diamville bought gold and diamonds and shipped them to buyers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Europe. A timber firm logged forests in the southwest, and other companies made beer and vodka for the local market. The Treasury sanctioned Midas Ressources and Diamville on June 27, 2023.

The costs fell on civilians. UN experts reported in 2021 on mass executions, torture, and looting by Russian 'instructors' and the troops they led, and Human Rights Watch documented killings near Bossangoa. ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data), a conflict-event database, found that from December 2020 to July 2022, 52% of the violent events involving Wagner in the country targeted civilians. The figure was 26% for the national army and 42% for the rebel coalition. When Wagner operated on its own, the share rose to 70%. Three Russian journalists who came to investigate Wagner were killed near the town of Sibut on July 30, 2018, three days after arriving; the case remains unsolved.

Wagner also ran the country's conversation with itself. A Russian House cultural center opened in Bangui. Radio Lengo Songo, which the investigative group All Eyes on Wagner says Wagner created and funded, broadcast pro-Russian and anti-French programs. When a July 2023 referendum removed the president's term limits, Wagner provided security and logistics for the vote.

### Worked example — Why a gold mine can pay for an army

Take an illustrative force of 1,500 fighters at Wagner's 2024 starting salary (section 5a). The payroll is 360 million rubles a month, about $3.9 million, or roughly $47 million a year. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime estimates that Wagner's illicit gold exports from the country earn about $180 million a year. That is almost four times the payroll, before diamonds and timber, and it leaves room for aircraft, fuel, and profit. A client that cannot pay $47 million a year in cash can still pay with land it cannot police. The arrangement also explains why such a force is hard to dismiss. The mines are worth more to the contractor than the contract is.

## 5c. Sudan: Gold and Two Generals

In Sudan the business came first. In 2017 M Invest, a Prigozhin company, received gold mining concessions, which its subsidiary Meroe Gold worked. When protests against Bashir began in December 2018, M Invest drew up plans for his government to suppress them, according to the U.S. Treasury. They included social media disinformation and staged public executions to distract the protesters. The army removed Bashir on April 11, 2019 regardless. The network moved its bets to the generals who replaced him, above all Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The RSF was a paramilitary built from the Darfur militias, and through a family company it had become Sudan's largest gold trader.

The gold left quietly. CNN documented at least 16 Russian flights carrying gold out of Sudan over about 18 months; one, manifested as cookies, carried about a ton of gold beneath them. As American scrutiny grew, Meroe Gold's assets were moved to a Sudanese front company. The Treasury sanctioned M Invest and Meroe Gold on July 15, 2020.

When the army and the RSF went to war on April 15, 2023, Wagner's ties ran to the RSF. CNN reported, citing Sudanese and regional sources, that surface-to-air missiles were flown to the RSF two days earlier from Haftar's bases in Libya, where Wagner operated. Moscow's state interest pointed the other way. The army held Port Sudan, where Russia had long planned a naval base, and Russian diplomats courted it. In November 2025 Russia's ambassador said the base project was suspended because of the war (Module 9 follows the war).

## 5d. Libya: The Proxy War and the Hub

Wagner arrived in eastern Libya in October 2018 to support Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army, against the UN-recognized government in Tripoli. Haftar attacked Tripoli in April 2019, and by that autumn Wagner's contractors were on the front line. A UN panel of experts counted 800 to 1,200 of them, mostly Russians, working as artillery spotters, air controllers, electronic-warfare teams, and snipers. It called them an "effective force multiplier." Turkey's intervention for Tripoli in January 2020 turned the war (Module 9), and by June 2020 Haftar's forces and Wagner had withdrawn from Tripoli's southern suburbs.

They left the suburbs mined. A tablet computer left behind by a Wagner operative and obtained by the BBC held maps of 35 mined locations and some 130 diagrams of mines and booby traps, some hidden in homes and furniture. Human Rights Watch confirmed in 2022 that all 35 locations had been mined. Mines and other explosives killed 130 people and wounded 196 in Libya between May 2020 and March 2022, most of them civilians in those suburbs.

Russia raised the stakes in May 2020. The U.S. Africa Command reported that at least 14 MiG-29 and Su-24 jets had flown from Russia to Libya's al-Jufra air base, stopping in Syria to be repainted without Russian markings, to support Wagner. "Russia is clearly trying to tip the scales in its favor in Libya," said its commander, Gen. Stephen Townsend. After the front froze, Libya became Wagner's hub. Its bases served flights to Sudan and to the Sahel, the dry belt south of the Sahara, and they passed to Russia's Defense Ministry when Wagner was dismantled (Module 8).

## 5e. Madagascar and the Media Machine

The political advisers worked best where there was no war. Before Madagascar's 2018 presidential election, Russian strategists linked to Prigozhin funded or advised at least six candidates, according to the BBC's Russian service, and eight according to the Russian outlet Proekt. When Andry Rajoelina pulled ahead, they shifted their support to him. The BBC found no evidence that Rajoelina took Russian money, and he denied being Russia's candidate. The lesson for the advisers was to back several horses and claim the winner.

The media operation was larger than any one country. On October 30, 2019, Facebook removed networks tied to Prigozhin's companies that were targeting eight African countries: Madagascar, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Sudan, and Libya. They used almost 200 fake and compromised accounts with more than a million followers, and some pages were run by local people who knew whom they worked for. The network outlived its founder (Module 8).

## 5f. The Argument: Did Wagner Save the Central African Republic or Capture It?

**The case that it saved the state.** Touadéra's government and Moscow argue that in January 2021 the capital was under attack, the UN mission could not stop the rebels, and France had left. Russian fighters turned the war, restored government authority in towns that had not seen it for years, and allowed elections to be held. The alternative, on this view, was not a better government but a rebel one.

**The case that it captured the state.** UN experts, human rights groups, and the opposition argue that the country paid with its gold, diamonds, and forests. Foreigners took over the president's security, and a larger share of their violence targeted civilians than the rebels' did. The president then used that protection to remove his own term limits. A government that cannot survive without a private army, on this view, is no longer sovereign.

**The evidence.** The battlefield turn of 2021 is not disputed. Neither are the sanctioned companies, the ACLED figures on civilian targeting, or the 2023 referendum held under Wagner's protection. What happened when Moscow tried to replace Wagner in 2025-26 belongs to Module 8.

**The course's reading.** Both claims are true, and the payment in concessions made them inseparable. Wagner saved the government by capturing parts of the state, and the parts it took, the mines and the president's guard, were the ones that would make it hard to remove.

# Module 5 Key Points

*Wagner in Africa: The Package*

• Wagner sold African governments a package: guards, political advisers, media operations, and companies paid in mines and timber.

• In the Central African Republic, Russian 'instructors' arrived in 2018 and, with Rwandan troops, beat back the 2020-21 rebel offensive.

• ACLED found 52% of Wagner's violent events in the Central African Republic targeted civilians, double the national army's share.

• In Sudan, Wagner's companies mined gold, advised Bashir on crushing protests, then sided with the RSF.

• In Libya, Wagner backed Haftar's assault on Tripoli and left mines that killed civilians after it withdrew.

# Module 5 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. Why did the UN arms embargo matter to Wagner's arrival in the Central African Republic?**

A) The embargo barred Western trainers, leaving Russia the only country allowed to arm the government.
B) The embargo applied only to rebels, so the government could buy from anyone.
C) Russia won an exemption to deliver weapons.
D) France had lifted the embargo for itself and used it to block Russian deliveries.

**2. In ACLED's data, what share of Wagner's violent events in the Central African Republic targeted civilians?**

A) A tenth
B) 26%, the same as the army's share
C) Nearly all of them, about nine in ten
D) About half (52%)

**3. What did M Invest, Wagner's company in Sudan, receive in 2017?**

A) Oil fields
B) Gold mining concessions
C) A port lease
D) The contract to feed Sudan's army and police

**4. How did Wagner leave its mark on Tripoli's southern suburbs?**

A) It left mines and booby traps that killed and wounded civilians after it withdrew in 2020.
B) It built a base that Turkey later took over.
C) It ran the city's oil terminal.
D) It installed air defenses that shot down a NATO drone.

**5. What did Facebook's takedown of October 2019 reveal?**

A) Prigozhin-linked networks were running pages in eight African countries.
B) Russian diplomats were buying ads in Kenya.
C) A Chinese firm was running Wagner's pages in Mali, paid through accounts in Dubai and Hong Kong.
D) Prigozhin's companies had stopped all their online work in Africa after the 2018 U.S. indictment.

# Module 6 — Mozambique and Mali: The Counterinsurgency Test

*Can Hired Soldiers Beat an Insurgency?*

**Recommended Reading / Reference**

**Book:** Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) — the insurgencies Wagner was hired to defeat, explained from the ground up

**Reference:** UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, report on the events in Moura, Mali (May 2023)

## 6a. Mozambique, 2019

A protection job and a counterinsurgency are different trades. Guarding a president requires loyalty and firepower around a palace. Defeating an insurgency requires knowing the villages, the language, and the people who might inform on the rebels, and it takes years. Wagner's first attempt at the second trade came in Mozambique.

In October 2017 an insurgency linked to the Islamic State began in Cabo Delgado, the northern province where France's Total was building Africa's largest gas project. In August 2019 Mozambique's government hired Wagner, and at least 200 of its men arrived with helicopters in September. Within weeks they were ambushed in the bush. At least seven Russians were killed in October 2019, some of them beheaded. By late November the survivors had pulled back to the coast, and by early 2020 they were gone. The reasons given by people who studied the mission were simple. The force was small, it did not know the terrain or the languages, its partner army gave it little intelligence, and the two forces did not trust each other.

Mozambique tried another contractor, a South African helicopter firm, the Dyck Advisory Group. In 2021 Amnesty International accused it of firing indiscriminately from the air, and the company said it would investigate. The towns were retaken only after Rwanda sent its army in July 2021, followed by troops from southern African states. A state army, with its own interests and its own discipline, did what two contractors could not.

## 6b. Mali Turns to Moscow

Mali's crisis began in 2012, when jihadist groups and a rebellion of the Tuareg, a Berber people of the Sahara, took the north and soldiers overthrew the government in Bamako. France intervened in January 2013 and stayed nine years, with UN peacekeepers alongside. The jihadists spread into the center of the country anyway. Colonel Assimi Goïta led coups in August 2020 and May 2021, and his junta turned against France. In September 2021, Reuters reported that it was close to hiring Wagner for about 6 billion CFA francs a month, about $10.8 million. The CFA franc is the currency Mali shares with seven other West African states. The first Russians arrived in December. France announced its withdrawal in February 2022, and its last soldiers left in August. In June 2023 the junta asked the UN mission to leave, and it closed at the end of that year.

The turn was popular. In a December 2024 survey of 1,200 Malians by Afrobarometer, a pan-African polling network, 88% said Russia's influence on Mali was positive and 9% said the same of France's. To many

Malians, a decade of French operations had failed to stop the jihadists while France lectured the junta about elections, and Russia offered help without conditions.

### Worked example — The Mali contract's monthly arithmetic

Six billion CFA francs a month is 72 billion a year. Mali spent about 641 billion CFA francs on defense in 2024, so the fee alone would equal about 11% of the defense budget. Now set the payroll against the fee. At Wagner's 2024 starting salary for Africa (Module 5), the roughly 2,000 men American officials counted (section 6e) would cost about $5.2 million a month. That leaves roughly $5.6 million of the $10.8 million for helicopters, fuel, flights, insurance, equipment, and profit. The figures come from different years and serve only to show proportions. They show a fee about twice the payroll, a margin that explains why the contract mattered to Moscow as well as to Bamako.

## 6c. Moura

From March 27 to 31, 2022, Malian troops and foreign fighters, whom witnesses and human rights groups identified as Russians, occupied the market town of Moura in central Mali, an area where jihadists recruited. The UN human rights office reported in May 2023 that Malian soldiers and "foreign military personnel" had killed at least 500 people there, most of them executed. It also found that at least 58 women and girls had been raped. The junta presented the operation as a victory over terrorists and rejected the findings. It was the worst single atrocity of Mali's long war.

Moura was not an exception. ACLED found that in Wagner's first months in Mali, 71% of the violent events it took part in targeted civilians, against less than 20% for the state's forces overall. The pattern had a logic. Fighters without the language or local knowledge to tell rebels from villagers treated villages that jihadists had passed through as enemy ground.

## 6d. Kidal and Tinzaouaten

The junta's great prize came on November 14, 2023, when the Malian army and Wagner took Kidal, the Tuareg separatists' stronghold in the far north, which no Malian government had controlled for a decade. For the junta, the flag over Kidal proved that the Russian partnership worked where the French one had not.

Eight months later the north struck back. From July 25 to 27, 2024, near Tinzaouaten on the Algerian border, the Tuareg separatist coalition routed a column of Malian soldiers and Wagner fighters. Jihadists of JNIM, al-Qaeda's Sahel branch, ambushed the retreating survivors. The separatists claimed 84 Wagner dead; a former Wagner fighter told the BBC's Russian service that at least 82 had died. Wagner itself admitted heavy losses, including its commander there, Sergei Shevchenko. It was the group's worst defeat in Africa. When Ukraine's military intelligence claimed it had helped the rebels, Mali cut diplomatic relations with Ukraine.

## 6e. 'Mission Accomplished'

On June 6, 2025, Wagner announced on Telegram: "Mission accomplished. PMC Wagner returns home." It claimed to have brought every regional capital under Malian army control. American officials put the Russian presence at about 2,000 men, and the Defense Ministry's Africa Corps said nothing would change, since it was staying. Analysts read the announcement differently. Wagner had taken heavy losses, the jihadists had

been gaining in recent weeks, and Moscow was folding its contractors into a force under state command (Module 8).

## 6f. The Argument: Did the Russians Make Mali Safer?

**The case that they did.** The junta, Moscow, and many Malians point to Kidal, retaken after a decade, and to an army that fights with helicopters and drones instead of waiting for French permission. They point to the end of what they saw as a neocolonial presence that had failed for nine years, and to a partner that respects Mali's choices. The survey numbers, on this view, are a verdict from the people who live there.

**The case that they did not.** ACLED, the UN, and human rights groups point to the rising killing of civilians, Moura above all. They note that the jihadists kept expanding into the south and west, and that the defeat at Tinzaouaten showed the limits of a few thousand fighters. A force that kills villagers, on this view, recruits for the insurgency it was hired to defeat.

**The evidence.** The territorial record is mixed: Kidal won in 2023, Tinzaouaten lost in 2024. The civilian record is not mixed: a far larger share of Wagner's violence targeted civilians than the state forces' did (section 6c). Popularity in surveys and safety on the ground are different measures, and both are real.

**The course's reading.** The Russians protected the junta and won symbolic battles, but Mali became more dangerous for the people who live outside its cities. Hired soldiers can hold a capital, but they cannot win a war that depends on the trust of villages. Module 8 follows the test into 2026.

# Module 6 Key Points

*Mozambique and Mali: The Counterinsurgency Test*

• In Mozambique, about 200 Wagner men lasted only months against jihadists; Rwanda's army later retook the towns.

• Mali's junta replaced France with Wagner for a reported $10.8 million a month.

• The UN found that Malian troops and foreign personnel killed at least 500 people at Moura in March 2022.

• Wagner helped take Kidal in 2023, then suffered its worst African defeat at Tinzaouaten in 2024.

• Wagner left Mali in June 2025 declaring 'mission accomplished'; the state's Africa Corps stayed.

# Module 6 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. Why did Wagner's 2019 mission in Mozambique fail, according to the people who studied it?**

A) Rwanda's army expelled it
B) It ran out of money within a month
C) The Islamic State paid it to switch sides
D) Its small force lacked local knowledge, language, and intelligence from its partner army

**2. What did the UN human rights office conclude about Moura?**

A) Jihadists killed 50 soldiers
B) At least 500 people were killed by Malian troops and foreign personnel
C) Most of the dead were jihadists
D) The deaths were caused by a French airstrike called in by mistake during a joint operation with Mali's army

**3. What did Wagner announce when it left Mali in June 2025?**

A) That the junta had expelled it after the defeat at Tinzaouaten
B) That it would hand its mines to Mali's army
C) 'Mission accomplished'
D) That Africa Corps would leave too, along with all Russian advisers, by the end of 2025

**4. About what share of Mali's 2024 defense spending would the reported Wagner fee equal over a year?**

A) About 11%
B) Roughly half of it
C) About 2%, a small fraction
D) More than the whole defense budget

**5. What happened at Tinzaouaten in July 2024?**

A) Wagner retook Kidal
B) France returned to Mali
C) Tuareg separatists routed a Malian and Wagner column, killing dozens of Wagner fighters
D) JNIM signed a ceasefire with the junta

# Module 7 — Bakhmut, the Mutiny, and the Crash

*The Private Army That Marched on Moscow, 2022-2023*

**Recommended Reading / Reference**

**Book:** Candace Rondeaux, *Putin's Sledgehammer: The Wagner Group and Russia's Collapse into Mercenary Chaos* (PublicAffairs, 2025) — Prigozhin's rise, Bakhmut, the mutiny, and what followed

**Reference:** The count of Russian military deaths confirmed by name, kept by Mediazona, an independent Russian news outlet, with the BBC Russian service; it includes Wagner's convict recruits

## 7a. Back to Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, its army expected a short war and had little use for Wagner. Within months it needed infantry badly, and Wagner returned to the front, fighting at Popasna, Sievierodonetsk, and Lysychansk in the spring and summer. The secrecy ended with it. In September 2022 Prigozhin admitted for the first time that he had founded the group, and in November Wagner opened a glass headquarters in St Petersburg.

The new manpower came from prisons. From the summer of 2022 Prigozhin toured penal colonies himself, offering convicts six months at the front in return for a pardon. Pay was 100,000 to 200,000 rubles a month, with 5 million rubles promised to the family of anyone killed. In a recorded speech he set the rules: no alcohol, no drugs, no looting, and death for deserters. Mediazona, working from official data, found that the number of men in Russia's prisons fell by a record 23,000 within months. In December 2022 American officials estimated that Wagner had 50,000 fighters in Ukraine, 40,000 of them convicts.

The rules were enforced on camera. Yevgeny Nuzhin, a convict recruit, surrendered to Ukrainian forces, said in an interview that he wanted to fight for Ukraine, and was later returned to Russian hands, apparently in an exchange. On November 12, 2022, a Wagner-linked channel posted a video of him being killed with a sledgehammer. Prigozhin called it "excellent directorial work." The sledgehammer of Syria (Module 4) had become a brand.

## 7b. Bakhmut

From August 2022 Wagner led the assault on Bakhmut, an industrial town in Donetsk, in what was then the war's longest battle. Its method was waves of convicts sent against Ukrainian positions, with experienced fighters following once the defenders revealed themselves. It took the nearby town of Soledar in January 2023, and on May 20, 2023 Prigozhin declared Bakhmut captured.

The cost was enormous. On May 1, 2023, the White House said Russia had suffered 100,000 casualties since December, more than 20,000 of them killed, and that nearly half the dead were Wagner's. On May 24, Prigozhin gave his own figures. About 50,000 convicts had been recruited, about a fifth of them were killed, and the same share were wounded. Some 20,000 Wagner fighters had died in all, about half of them convicts.

The battle also broke Wagner's relationship with the army. In February 2023 Wagner stopped recruiting in prisons, and the Defense Ministry took the recruiting over for its own units. Prigozhin accused Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, of starving his men of artillery

shells. In May he filmed himself among rows of his fighters' bodies, shouting for the ammunition. A private army had become the loudest critic of the state's conduct of the war.

### Worked example — The Bakhmut arithmetic

Set Prigozhin's figures (section 7b) against the American ones. A fifth of 50,000 convicts is 10,000 dead, so the other 10,000 of his 20,000 dead were contract fighters. The White House's figure covered only December to April, Bakhmut's last and bloodiest months: nearly half of more than 20,000 Russian dead, or roughly 9,000 to 10,000 Wagner fighters. The two accounts, from sources with opposite interests, agree on the order of magnitude. Wagner lost about 10,000 men in Bakhmut's final five months and about 20,000 over its whole war. Add Prigozhin's 20% wounded and some 40% of the convicts who went to the front were killed or wounded.

## 7c. The Argument: Was Bakhmut Worth It?

**Russia's case.** Prigozhin called Bakhmut a meat grinder that would bleed Ukraine's best brigades while the regular army rebuilt after its 2022 defeats. Taking it was the only significant Russian gain of the winter, and it was achieved largely with men the state had locked up.

**Ukraine's case.** Kyiv argued that holding the town cost the attackers far more than the defenders and pinned Russian forces through the winter. It also bought time to train the brigades for its 2023 counteroffensive.

**The skeptics' case.** Many analysts on both sides concluded that each army spent its best units on a ruined town of little operational value. They note that Ukraine's counteroffensive that summer failed anyway.

**The evidence.** The casualty ratios are contested and cannot be settled from public data. Wagner's own losses can be estimated from two sources with opposite interests (the worked example above).

**The course's reading.** Whatever Bakhmut did to the two armies, the outcome for the private army is clear: it won the town and lost itself. Bakhmut consumed tens of thousands of its fighters and turned its owner against the generals, and the feud led directly to June 2023.

## 7d. The Mutiny, June 23-24, 2023

On June 10, 2023, the Defense Ministry ordered every volunteer formation to sign contracts with it by July 1. For Wagner that meant the end of Prigozhin's command, and with it his control of the African business. On June 23 he released a video saying the war's official justifications were false, and he claimed that the army had struck a Wagner camp; the ministry denied it, and no one has verified the claim. The FSB, Russia's security service, opened a case for armed rebellion.

Early on June 24, Wagner crossed from occupied Ukraine into Russia and took Rostov-on-Don and the headquarters of the Southern Military District without a shot. Columns moved north up the M4 highway toward Moscow, and when army aircraft engaged them, Wagner shot down several aircraft, among them an Il-22 airborne command post with ten crew aboard; at least a dozen airmen died. In a televised address, Putin called the revolt treason. That evening, by Prigozhin's account about 200 kilometers from Moscow, the columns stopped. Alexander Lukashenko, the president of Belarus, had brokered a deal: the charges would be dropped, and Wagner's men could sign with the ministry, go home, or follow Prigozhin to Belarus.

Three days later Putin ended the pretense that had made Wagner useful. The state, he said, had paid the group about 86 billion rubles, roughly $1 billion, from May 2022 to May 2023 for its upkeep, plus about 110 billion rubles in insurance payments. Prigozhin's catering company had earned about 80 billion rubles feeding the army over the same period. The deniable army had been on the state's payroll all along.

On June 29 Putin met Prigozhin and 35 Wagner commanders in the Kremlin. By his own later account, he offered to keep Wagner as a unit under one of its veteran commanders, Andrei Troshev. Prigozhin refused. Gen. Sergei Surovikin, a senior commander reported to have known of the plan in advance, disappeared from view and was removed from his post that August.

## 7e. The Crash, August 23, 2023

Two months to the day after the mutiny began, Prigozhin's Embraer business jet crashed in the Tver region on a flight from Moscow to St Petersburg. All ten people aboard were killed, among them Prigozhin, Utkin, and Wagner's logistics chief, Valery Chekalov. Russia confirmed the deaths by DNA four days later. American officials said an explosion aboard had most likely brought the plane down, and the Kremlin denied involvement. In October Putin said investigators had found fragments of hand grenades in the bodies and no sign of an external strike. By October 2026 no official finding on the cause had been published. Within days of the crash, Putin decreed that fighters in volunteer formations must swear an oath of loyalty to the Russian state.

## 7f. The Argument: Coup or Bargaining Move?

**The Kremlin's case.** An armed force seized a military headquarters, shot down state aircraft, killed airmen, and advanced on the capital. That is an armed rebellion, whatever its leader called it, and Putin named it treason.

**Prigozhin's case.** He called it a 'march of justice' against Shoigu and Gerasimov, not against Putin or the state. He said he turned back to avoid bloodshed, which, he argued, no one planning a coup would do.

**The evidence.** U.S. intelligence concluded that the revolt had been planned in advance, and Western reporting suggested the FSB learned of it days early. Its demands, the removal of the two commanders, were not met before the halt. No army units joined it. And its leader accepted exile terms within a day.

**The course's reading.** It was a bargaining move made with armed force, which could have become a coup only if the army joined. It was Machiavelli's second warning (Module 1) with a modern ending: the captain who turned on his employer did not take the state, and did not survive the year.

# Module 7 Key Points

*Bakhmut, the Mutiny, and the Crash*

• Wagner recruited about 50,000 Russian convicts in 2022-23, promising pardons after six months at the front.

• By Prigozhin's own count, about 20,000 Wagner fighters died in Ukraine, half of them convicts.

• On June 24, 2023, Wagner seized Rostov and marched toward Moscow before a deal brokered by Lukashenko.

• Days later Putin admitted the state had paid Wagner about 86 billion rubles in a year.

• Prigozhin and Utkin died in a plane crash two months after the mutiny; no official cause has been published.

# Module 7 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. What did Wagner promise convicts who survived six months at the front?**

A) A lump sum of 5 million rubles
B) Commissions as officers in the regular army
C) Parole
D) A pardon for their crimes

**2. How did Prigozhin's own figures for Wagner's dead compare with the U.S. estimate?**

A) They were far lower than U.S. figures.
B) They were broadly consistent with the U.S. estimate of Wagner's dead.
C) Prigozhin never gave a figure.
D) The U.S. figure was ten times higher, since it counted the wounded and the regular army as well as Wagner.

**3. What triggered the June 2023 mutiny?**

A) Prigozhin's arrest
B) A Defense Ministry order requiring all volunteer formations to sign contracts with the ministry by July 1
C) A U.S. sanctions package
D) The loss of Bakhmut to Ukraine

**4. What did Putin say about Wagner's funding on June 27, 2023?**

A) It was self-funded
B) Africa paid for it
C) The state had paid it about 86 billion rubles in a year
D) That its pay came from Concord's catering profits, without a ruble of state money, as the Kremlin had always said

**5. What did Putin claim investigators found after the August 2023 crash?**

A) Hand-grenade fragments in the bodies
B) A missile strike
C) A bird strike that disabled both engines on the climb out of Moscow
D) Proof that Ukraine's intelligence service had hidden a bomb in the plane's landing gear before takeoff

# Module 8 — After Wagner: The Russian State Hires Directly

*Africa Corps, the Holdouts, and the Foreign Recruits, 2023-2026*

### Recommended Reading / Reference

**Book:** Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?* (Hurst, 2023) — the state strategy behind Wagner, and what survived it

**Reference:** All Eyes on Wagner, an open-source investigative project, and its reports on the Wagner network, including the February 2026 documents on the foreign intelligence service's control of its propaganda branch

## 8a. The Breakup

After the crash, Wagner's fighters had three choices: sign a Defense Ministry contract, go home, or stay with what was left of the group. Troshev, the veteran commander Putin had proposed in June (Module 7), chose the state. Putin received him in September 2023 and asked him to form volunteer units for Ukraine. Other Wagner units moved into the National Guard, Rosgvardia. The camps in Belarus emptied within months, leaving a few hundred men as instructors. Pavel Prigozhin, Yevgeny's son, inherited the remnant and its African ties.

The state's decision was clear. The Kremlin had learned in June 2023 that a private army big enough to matter was big enough to threaten it. What it wanted to keep was the reach Wagner had built abroad, without the independence.

## 8b. Africa Corps

The Defense Ministry created Africa Corps in late 2023 to take over Wagner's foreign work. Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov oversees it. Its commander is Lt. Gen. Andrey Averyanov, a deputy chief of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence service. He previously led GRU Unit 29155, which Western governments blame for the 2014 explosions at Czech ammunition depots and the 2018 poisoning of Sergei Skripal in England. The name echoes the German Afrika Korps of the Second World War. Many of its commanders and fighters came from Wagner; Human Rights Watch says that in Mali it has roughly Wagner's strength, including many former Wagner men. Britain sanctioned Africa Corps in November 2024, and the European Union sanctioned Averyanov that December.

| Country | Arrived | Reported size | Role |
|---|---|---|---|
| Libya | Took over Wagner's positions from spring 2024 | 800 to 1,800 | Air bases and the supply route to the Sahel and Sudan |
| Burkina Faso | January 2024 | 100, planned to rise to 300 | Protection and training for Capt. Ibrahim Traoré's junta |
| Niger | April 2024 | 200 to 300 | Intelligence, training, surveillance |
| Mali | December 2024; the only Russian force since June 2025 | About 2,000 (Module 6) | Combat, protection, and training |
| Equatorial Guinea | Autumn 2024 | Up to 200 | Protecting the president, training elite units |

| Country | Arrived | Reported size | Role |
|---|---|---|---|
| Togo | Officers January 2026; troops by July 2026 | 300 to 350 | Training, intelligence, and the port of Lomé |
| Central African Republic | 2026; cut back under a September 2026 compromise | A reduced presence in Bangui | Alongside Wagner, which stays (section 8d) |

Sources: the Critical Threats Project, Human Rights Watch, and news reporting through September 2026. Size estimates vary widely.

The business model changed with the owner. Wagner had often paid itself through concessions (Module 5), though Mali paid it cash (Module 6). Africa Corps has asked governments for fees in cash (section 8d), and it trains and protects more than it fights, which suits a ministry with a war in Ukraine to supply. The supply lines changed too. After Bashar al-Assad fell in December 2024, Russia's two Syrian bases, the Hmeimim air base and the Tartus naval base, lost much of their role as the bridge to Africa. On August 9, 2026, Syria announced an agreement, to be carried out within three months, to turn them into joint training centers and hand their civilian facilities back. Libya took Syria's place. American government imagery analysis shows Russia building at six Libyan air bases, with fighters, air defenses, and drones, and personnel at one of them, Brak al-Shati, rising from 300 to 450. In July 2026 a Russian ship unloaded about 50 military vehicles at Lomé, Togo's port, and Africa Corps escorted them overland to Bamako. It was a new Atlantic route around the jihadists' blockade of Mali's roads.

## 8c. The 2026 Tests

**Mali.** Since September 2025, JNIM had imposed a fuel blockade on Bamako. On April 25, 2026, it and the Tuareg separatists, now called the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA), launched coordinated attacks across the country. A car bomb killed Defense Minister Sadio Camara at his home in Kati, outside the capital. The separatists took Kidal within about two days, and Africa Corps withdrew from Kidal, Tessalit, Aguelhok, and other northern posts, some under negotiated terms with Algerian mediation. On April 28 JNIM declared a blockade of every road into Bamako. Goïta, who had been moved to a military camp, reappeared to visit the Russian ambassador, and on May 4 he named himself defense minister. Moscow called the offensive a foiled coup backed by Ukraine and the West, and Mali kept the partnership. The attacks resumed in July, and on September 10 an assault on the Dioura camp reportedly killed more than 100 soldiers. At least two Russian helicopters were shot down during the year.

The killing of civilians continued too. Human Rights Watch reported that on July 10, 2026, more than 100 Africa Corps fighters with a few Malian soldiers raided the village of Bombori in central Mali. They killed nine civilians, four of them children, and burned homes in its quarter of Fulani, a mostly herding people spread across West Africa. The group said the junta appeared to have given the Russians a green light to kill civilians.

**Niger.** In January 2026 Africa Corps fought Islamic State attackers at Niamey's airport. Before dawn on August 29, 2026, officers and special forces turned on the junta of Gen. Abdourahamane Tiani. They seized the air base at the airport and fought loyalists near the presidential palace and the state television station. The Presidential Guard and Africa Corps defeated them by the end of the day. One analyst told Radio France Internationale that the Russians had "saved the day."

Read together, the two tests showed what Russia's force now sells. It protects the rulers in Niamey and Bamako, though in Mali even that came under strain. It does not hold territory against an insurgency, which is what Mozambique and Tinzaouaten had already shown (Module 6).

## 8d. The Holdout: The Central African Republic

The one place where Wagner did not fold was the country it had made its model. In 2025 Moscow pressed Touadéra to replace Wagner with Africa Corps and to pay for it in cash: up to $15 million a month, according to the newsletter Africa Intelligence, or $4 million to $15 million by Le Monde's estimate. A deadline of December 31, 2025 passed unmet. Touadéra had his own priorities: on December 28, 2025 he won a third term, with 77.9% of the vote by the Constitutional Court's count and turnout of 52.4%. In March 2026 he went to Moscow, and reports that spring said he had accepted the transition. Wagner stayed anyway.

In July 2026 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that up to 500 Wagner fighters remained, led by Pavel Prigozhin. They were financed partly by gold and partly by the opioid tramadol, made in India and shipped through Congo up the Ubangi River, which they sell to miners and fighters. In early September, Africa Intelligence reported a compromise reached at the Russian embassy in Bangui. Wagner's networks would keep their security contracts and mines, and Africa Corps would keep a reduced presence in the capital. The state that had ended Wagner everywhere else could not dislodge it from the country where it was paid in land.

### Worked example — Moscow's price against a poor state's budget

At the top of the reported range, Africa Corps would cost the Central African Republic $15 million a month, or $180 million a year. Deutsche Welle, reporting a rumored $1.6 billion exit payment that the government denied, noted that the sum was about three times the national budget, which puts the budget near $530 million. The fee alone would take about a third of it. Even the bottom of Le Monde's range, $4 million a month, would take about 9%. Now set the price beside Module 5's estimate of what Wagner earns from the country's gold: also about $180 million a year. Moscow was asking to be paid in cash what the network already takes in gold, which helps explain why the network stayed.

## 8e. The Propaganda Network Under the Spies

Wagner's media and political operation outlived it too, under a new master. In February 2026 a consortium of newsrooms, including The Continent, Forbidden Stories, and All Eyes on Wagner, published 76 leaked internal documents of 1,431 pages. They describe Wagner's influence branch, Africa Politology, which called itself 'the Company,' and show that the SVR, Russia's foreign intelligence service, took control of it around the end of 2023. By May 2024 it had 98 operatives in St Petersburg, Africa, and Latin America, working in 34 target countries, with the Central African Republic, Mali, and South Africa at the top of the budget. It spent about $750,000 a month from January to October 2024. In August 2024 alone, it paid $340,000 for 516 articles, posts, and videos, about $660 apiece. At that rate a year of propaganda, about $9 million, cost less than one month of Africa Corps at the top of the price Moscow asked of Bangui (section 8d).

The network has used new tools. In September 2026 Anthropic, the company that makes the AI model Claude, reported that it had disrupted an operation run from Bangui. A Russian-speaking operator, whom Anthropic assessed as the local media coordinator for Africa Politology, had used Claude to produce daily content for Radio Lengo Songo with pro-Russian, anti-French talking points. The network also used it to draft staff contracts requiring loyalty to Touadéra and to organize recurring tracking of opposition politicians. According to Anthropic, Claude refused the most aggressive request, to name real people as militants. Anthropic removed the accounts after a tip from the organization behind All Eyes on Wagner. In Bangui, opposition figures said the findings showed that the government and its Russian allies wanted to be rid of their opponents.

## 8f. Russia's Paid Foreign Recruits

At home the state now does its own hiring of foreigners. Since 2023 Russia has signed foreigners to army contracts with pay, bonuses, and, from a January 2024 decree, a fast track to Russian citizenship. Ukraine's prisoner-of-war coordination headquarters said in May 2026 that it had identified more than 28,000 foreigners who had signed contracts with Russia's armed forces, at least 5,149 of whom had been killed. Ukraine's foreign minister said in November 2025 that 1,436 Africans from 36 countries had been identified, and Ukraine's intelligence identified more than 1,000 Cubans. Many were recruited with offers of jobs that turned out to be at the front. Nepal said in January 2024 that more than 200 of its citizens had been recruited and at least 14 killed, and it banned its citizens from traveling to Russia or Ukraine for work.

Ukraine calls them mercenaries. Under the law's six tests they are not, because they are enlisted in Russia's armed forces (Module 1). The state that once hired a company to deny its soldiers now enlists foreigners openly, and the law treats them as Russian soldiers.

# Module 8 Key Points

*After Wagner: The Russian State Hires Directly*

• Africa Corps took over Wagner's foreign work under the Defense Ministry and asks governments for fees in cash.

• The April 2026 rebel and jihadist offensive in Mali cost the junta Kidal and its defense minister; Africa Corps withdrew from the north.

• Russian troops helped Niger's junta defeat an August 2026 coup attempt: Russia's force now protects rulers rather than territory.

• Wagner survives only in the Central African Republic, where Moscow's price for Africa Corps went unpaid.

• Russia's foreign intelligence service now runs Wagner's old propaganda network, which spent about $750,000 a month in 2024.

• Ukraine counts more than 28,000 foreigners signed to Russia's army, enlisted soldiers whom the law does not call mercenaries.

# Module 8 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. Who commands Africa Corps?**

A) Pavel Prigozhin, Yevgeny's son
B) Andrei Troshev, Wagner's old executive director
C) A council of former Wagner commanders elected by the fighters, with a chair approved by the Kremlin
D) Andrey Averyanov

**2. What did Africa Intelligence report about the Central African Republic in September 2026?**

A) Wagner's complete withdrawal and its replacement by Africa Corps under a new treaty
B) That Touadéra had agreed to pay $15 million a month
C) A Wagner-Africa Corps compromise
D) That the UN mission would take over the president's protection from all Russian forces, with Rwandan troops in support

**3. What happened to Africa Corps in the April 2026 offensive in Mali?**

A) It withdrew from Kidal and other northern posts, some under negotiated terms, as the rebels advanced.
B) It retook Kidal within a week.
C) It surrendered Bamako's airport.
D) It defeated JNIM near the capital and ended the blockade.

**4. Roughly how much did Wagner's old propaganda network spend per month in 2024, according to the leaked documents?**

A) $75,000
B) About $750,000
C) $7,500
D) About $15 million, the same as the Africa Corps fee

**5. How many foreigners does Ukraine say have signed contracts with Russia's armed forces?**

A) About 900
B) About 2,000, nearly all from Cuba and Nepal
C) Over 250,000, more than Russia's own volunteers in the same period
D) More than 28,000

# Module 9 — Turkey's Syrians and the Gulf's Hired Armies

*When States Rent Fighters From Other Countries*

**Recommended Reading / Reference**

**Book:** Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century* (Georgetown University Press, 2019) — why states fight through proxies, contractors, and hired foreigners

**Reference:** Human Rights Watch, *From Bogotá to El Fasher: The UAE's Role in the Deployment of Colombian Fighters* (May 25, 2026)

## 9a. Turkey's Syrian Fighters

Russia was not the only state to run a market in fighters. Turkey's came out of Syria's civil war. In northern Syria, Turkey backed a coalition of rebel factions known as the Syrian National Army, whose men were poorly paid at home and depended on Ankara. From late 2019 Turkey began sending them abroad on contracts.

The first destination was Libya. When Turkey intervened for the Tripoli government in January 2020 with drones, air defenses, and officers, it also sent Syrian fighters. By November 2020 the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights counted 18,000 sent, 350 of them minors; 496 had been killed and 10,750 had returned home after their contracts. They faced Wagner's contractors across the front (Module 5), Syrians fighting Russians in a North African war that was neither's own. In the autumn of 2020 the Observatory counted 2,580 more sent to Azerbaijan for its war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. From August 2023 at least 1,000 went to Niger to guard Turkish projects and mines, on six-month contracts arranged through one of the factions. About 50 were reported killed there, and nine deaths were verified.

The firm most often named is SADAT, a defense consultancy founded in 2012 by Adnan Tanrıverdi, a retired brigadier general, and 22 other former officers. After the failed coup of July 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made Tanrıverdi his chief military adviser. The U.S. Africa Command reported in 2020 that SADAT trainers paid and supervised the Syrians in Libya, and a UN panel of experts found in 2021 that it had violated the Libya arms embargo. SADAT and the Turkish government deny that it recruits or deploys fighters, and Erdoğan has said he has nothing to do with its leadership.

## 9b. The Gulf: Buying Soldiers

The Gulf monarchies have money, modern weapons, and small citizen populations; the United Arab Emirates has about 1.1 to 1.3 million citizens among some 11 million residents. They have long hired foreigners to fill their forces, and in the 2010s they began hiring them to fight. In 2011 the UAE gave Erik Prince's company, Reflex Responses, a budget of $529 million to build a battalion of foreign troops, mostly former Colombian soldiers. In 2015, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia went to war in Yemen, the New York Times reported that more than 400 Latin American fighters, most of them Colombian, had been sent there from that force.

The UAE is also accused of hiring assassins. According to a lawsuit and earlier reporting by BuzzFeed News, it paid the Spear Operations Group, a U.S.-based firm founded by Abraham Golan, $1.5 million a

month, plus bonuses for successful killings, to kill its political opponents in Yemen. On December 29, 2015, the team set off a bomb at the door of the Aden offices of Islah, Yemen's main Islamist party, aiming at a member of parliament, Anssaf Ali Mayo. He survived and went into exile, and in 2026 he sued Golan and two American veterans of the team in federal court in California. The UAE has denied the allegations.

Saudi Arabia hired by the brigade. As many as 14,000 Sudanese were fighting for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen at any one time, the New York Times reported in 2018, most of them from Darfur; returning fighters said children made up 20 to 40% of their units. Many came through Hemedti's Rapid Support Forces, which turned the war into a business and the business into political power at home (Module 5).

The line between guard and fighter was sometimes crossed by deception. From September to November 2019, an Emirati firm, Black Shield Security Services, recruited more than 390 Sudanese men for jobs as security guards in Abu Dhabi. It confiscated their phones and passports, trained them at a military compound, and in January 2020 sent about 270 of them, on the promise of double pay, to guard oil facilities at Ras Lanuf in Libya, held by Haftar's forces. Their families protested in Khartoum, Sudan's government demanded their return, and the men came home. The company denied deceiving them.

## 9c. The Colombian Pipeline to Sudan

Sudan's war between the army of Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Hemedti's RSF (Module 5) has displaced millions and produced famine. On October 26-27, 2025, the RSF took El Fasher, the last army stronghold in Darfur, with mass killings and rape that a UN fact-finding mission said bore the hallmarks of genocide.

Colombian veterans were there. Human Rights Watch traced the pipeline in a May 2026 report. A Bogotá recruitment agency, A4SI, and later a successor called Fénix, signed former soldiers from August 2024 for what were described as security jobs. An Abu Dhabi firm, Global Security Services Group, appears to have hired and paid them, with salaries moving through a Panama company. The men passed through Emirati military sites, where one said he was trained by Emiratis for about 20 days, and on through eastern Libya, Somalia's Puntland region, or Chad into Darfur. The U.S. Treasury found they trained RSF fighters, including children, operated drones and artillery, and fought at El Fasher, Khartoum, and Kordofan. Sudan's government told the UN in September 2025 that 350 to 380 had arrived. At El Fasher, witnesses described white, helmeted fighters, whom Human Rights Watch judged most likely to be Colombian contractors, standing by the RSF's trench as civilians were killed. The UAE denies supporting the RSF.

The responses came from three directions. The U.S. Treasury sanctioned four Colombians and four companies in the recruiting network on December 9, 2025, and five more, including Fénix, on April 17, 2026. Colombia's Congress voted in December 2025 to join the 1989 UN convention against mercenaries, which President Gustavo Petro then ratified, and passed an anti-mercenary law that UN experts welcomed in March 2026. The UN's working group on mercenaries estimated that more than 10,000 Colombians may have been recruited to fight in wars abroad.

## 9d. Why States Rent Fighters

Each buyer had its reasons. Turkey got manpower that cost little and whose deaths did not appear in Turkish casualty lists, from factions that could not refuse it. The UAE has too few citizens for the wars it chose and enough money to hire others, and companies let it keep its name off the contract. Saudi Arabia needed infantry for a war its own army fought poorly. On the supply side were states and movements with

men to rent, such as Sudan's RSF and Syria's factions, and countries with many trained veterans and few jobs for them, Colombia above all.

The law reaches this trade unevenly. A Syrian sent by his faction to Libya, or a Colombian hired by a company to fight in Darfur, may meet all six of Article 47's tests (Module 1), unless he has been enlisted in the forces he fights for. The buyers have rarely been named in any court. The sanctions so far have fallen on recruiters, the cheapest link in the chain.

# Module 9 Key Points

*Turkey's Syrians and the Gulf's Hired Armies*

• Turkey sent about 18,000 Syrian militiamen to Libya in 2020, then more to Nagorno-Karabakh and Niger.

• As many as 14,000 Sudanese at a time fought for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, some of them children.

• A U.S. firm reportedly ran an assassination campaign for the UAE in Aden in 2015; a target who survived is now suing.

• Hundreds of Colombian veterans fought with Sudan's RSF, including at El Fasher; the United States sanctioned their recruiters.

• States rent foreign fighters to spare their own citizens and to deny responsibility.

# Module 9 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. By the Syrian Observatory's count, how many Syrian fighters had Turkey sent to Libya by November 2020?**

A) About 18,000, including some 350 minors
B) About 1,800
C) Fewer than 500
D) About 5,000, all adults

**2. Who paid the Spear Operations Group, according to the lawsuit and earlier reporting?**

A) Saudi Arabia's interior ministry
B) The U.S. Defense Department, under a classified program
C) The UAE
D) Yemen's Islah party, which hired the team to protect its offices from rival militias in Aden

**3. What did the Black Shield affair reveal?**

A) A Turkish arms deal
B) UAE oil theft
C) Colombian pilots flying for Haftar from Egyptian bases
D) Sudanese 'guards' sent to Libya

**4. What did the U.S. Treasury do in December 2025?**

A) Fined the UAE
B) Sanctioned the recruiters
C) Indicted Hemedti for genocide
D) Sanctioned the RSF commanders who led the El Fasher killings of October 2025

**5. Why does the UAE hire foreign fighters through companies, by the module's account?**

A) A treaty with the United States bars Emirati troops from combat abroad
B) The UN bars the UAE from deploying its own troops in Sudan
C) Contractors cost less than Emirati soldiers in every role
D) It has few citizens to send and much money, and companies keep its name off the contract

# Module 10 — The New Freelancers: Congo, Haiti, and China

*Weak States, Private Contractors, and the Drone Pilots*

**Recommended Reading / Reference**

**Book:** Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (William Morrow, 2019) — an argument that private force will shape the wars to come

**Reference:** Human Rights Watch, 'Haiti: Drone Strikes Put Residents at Risk' (March 10, 2026), with its data on the task force's operations

## 10a. Congo's 'Romeos'

In late 2022, as the Rwanda-backed M23 rebels closed in on Goma, the largest city of eastern Congo, the government of President Félix Tshisekedi hired two private firms. The smaller, Agemira, employed about 40 former French security personnel for intelligence and logistics. The larger was run by Horațiu Potra, a Romanian former French legionnaire, and at its peak supplied about 1,000 men, most of them Romanian, known in the trade as 'the Romeos.' They worked three months on and one month off, without medical insurance, buying much of their own equipment. Contractors later described a disorganized force that included untrained recruits, among them former supermarket guards, and they fought alongside government troops and local militias.

On January 28, 2025, M23 and Rwandan forces took Goma. The Romeos fled to the UN peacekeepers' base and abandoned their equipment, and the rebels gave them two hours to surrender. Nearly 300 were paraded before cameras, and more than 280 were taken by bus to the Rwandan border and flown home. At least four had died during the deployment. Tshisekedi said they had been 'coaching,' not fighting. Romanian investigators later found that serving soldiers, gendarmes, and police officers had moonlighted among them. In April 2025, Reuters reported that Congo had reached a deal with Erik Prince, Blackwater's founder (Module 3), to help it secure and tax its mineral wealth.

## 10b. Haiti's Drone War

Haiti's current crisis deepened with a killing by hired guns. On July 7, 2021, about two dozen gunmen, most of them former Colombian soldiers, killed President Jovenel Moïse in his home. The plot was organized and financed largely from South Florida, through a security firm called CTU. On May 8, 2026, a Miami jury convicted four men, including CTU's two principals, of conspiring to kill or kidnap Haiti's president and of violating the U.S. Neutrality Act, the 1794 law against private war-making (Module 1). At least five others had already pleaded guilty and received life sentences. In September 2026, eighteen more suspects, seventeen of them Colombians, were flown from Haiti to Florida for trial.

Since the murder, gangs have taken most of Port-au-Prince. Haiti has had no elected president since 2021, and Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils-Aimé has been its sole executive since February 2026. The first general election in a decade, set for December 13, 2026, was postponed in October with no new date, amid gang violence and blockades. A Kenyan-led international police mission deployed in 2024 never reached even half its planned 2,500 officers. In September 2025 the UN Security Council authorized a larger Gang Suppression Force with a ceiling of 5,550 personnel. About 1,500 were in Haiti by September 2026, when the Council extended its mandate by six months.

Into that gap came Prince, with a new company, Vectus Global. Its first operation in Haiti was on March 1, 2025. It supports a special task force set up by the prime minister, flying armed quadcopter drones, providing helicopter support, and watching gang areas from the air, with about 200 staff reported from the United States, Europe, and El Salvador. Prince described a one-year contract, and the State Department licensed the company to export defense services to Haiti. Reports of a longer agreement that would give the company a share of customs revenue have not been confirmed by Haiti's government.

The drones have been lethal. Human Rights Watch counted at least 1,243 people killed and 738 injured in 141 drone operations between March 1, 2025 and January 21, 2026. Among the dead were at least 43 adults and 17 children with no link to gangs. On September 20, 2025, a drone exploded near a gift distribution in the Simon-Pelé district, killing ten people who were not gang members, nine of them children aged 3 to 12. The UN's office in Haiti counted 69 members of the public killed or injured by drone strikes from January to March 2026, five of them children. The Secretary-General warned that the task force should be listed for violations against children if the pattern continued. The government, the company, and the police did not answer the human rights group's questions.

## 10c. China's Guards

China has followed its investments with private guards. Estimates put the number of Chinese private security companies working abroad at 20 to 40, many staffed by former soldiers of the People's Liberation Army and most of them guarding Chinese workers and Belt and Road projects, the ports, railways, roads, and power plants China has financed abroad since 2013. Beijing's rules forbid them to use force abroad, so they guard and advise rather than fight. In February 2025, Myanmar's junta enacted a private security law that analysts say was designed to let Chinese firms protect Chinese projects and personnel.

The risk they manage is real. On March 19, 2023, gunmen killed nine Chinese workers at a gold mine near Chimbolo in the Central African Republic. The government blamed the rebel coalition; the rebels blamed Wagner; the killers have never been identified. China's investors had walked into a country where a Russian private army and its rivals were fighting over the same gold (Module 5).

## 10d. The Drone Pilot

The most sought-after hired skill of the 2020s is not marksmanship but flying drones. Recruiters for the Colombians bound for Sudan advertised specifically for drone pilots. Vectus Global flies drones for Haiti's task force (section 10b), and the war in Ukraine has made drone operation the defining skill of modern combat. A small team with cheap drones can now deliver what once took an air force or a company of infantry. That puts lethal force within reach of a few contractors, and of any government that can pay them.

### Worked example — The pay ladder

| Who | Reported pay | Year | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Syrian militiaman at home, northern Syria | About 1,500 Turkish lira a month, about $46 | 2024 | Al-Monitor |
| Same man on a Turkish contract in Niger | $1,500 a month, less $350 kept by his faction | 2024 | Al-Monitor |
| Syrian fighter in Libya | Over $2,000 a month (one fighter's account) | 2020 | Al-Monitor |
| Congolese soldier | About $100 a month | 2025 | The Guardian |
| Romanian contractor in Congo | $5,000 to $6,000 a month | 2025 | The Guardian |
| Colombian veteran bound for Sudan | $3,400 in one recruit's one-year contract; $2,500 to $3,000 in drone-pilot ads; neither states the period | 2024 | Human Rights Watch |

Rates are as reported by recruits and contractors and are not verified payrolls.

The gap between what a man earns at home and what a buyer pays him is the business model of the trade. On the table's figures, a Syrian militiaman earns about 33 times as much on a Turkish contract in Niger as at home, before his faction takes its cut. A Romanian contractor in Congo earned 50 to 60 times a Congolese soldier's pay. Buyers pay that premium for skill, for reliability, and for the freedom to deny the men are theirs. The men accept risks their own armies would not pay them to take. The same gap is what recruiters exploit when they lie about the job, as the Sudanese guards sent to Libya and many of Russia's foreign recruits found (Modules 8 and 9).

# Module 10 Key Points

*The New Freelancers: Congo, Haiti, and China*

• Congo hired about 1,000 mostly Romanian contractors at 50 to 60 times a Congolese soldier's pay; nearly 300 surrendered when Goma fell.

• Haiti's drone task force, supported by Vectus Global, killed at least 1,243 people in under eleven months, by Human Rights Watch's count.

• A Miami jury convicted four men in May 2026 of plotting the 2021 killing of Haiti's president with hired Colombians.

• China's 20 to 40 security firms abroad mostly guard Belt and Road projects; Beijing forbids them to fight.

• Drone operators are the hired specialty of the 2020s, sought in Haiti and by the recruiters supplying Sudan's RSF.

# Module 10 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. What happened to Congo's Romanian contractors when Goma fell in January 2025?**

A) They held out
B) They surrendered
C) They joined the M23
D) They were killed in the city's defense, nearly all of them

**2. Which company supports Haiti's drone task force?**

A) Vectus Global
B) Academi, Blackwater's successor
C) Wagner's former Latin American branch
D) A Kenyan police contractor

**3. What did a Miami jury decide in May 2026?**

A) Vectus was liable
B) CTU was acquitted
C) Four men were guilty of plotting to kill or kidnap Haiti's president
D) Erik Prince was liable for civilian deaths in Haiti's drone strikes and must pay damages to the victims' families

**4. What limit do Chinese private security firms abroad operate under?**

A) They may carry arms only on Chinese-owned sites
B) They need a UN license
C) Beijing bars them from using force abroad, so they mostly guard
D) They must serve under the host country's army

**5. By the pay ladder, roughly how many times a Congolese soldier's pay did a Romanian contractor in Congo earn?**

A) About twice as much
B) Roughly the same, after expenses
C) More than 500 times, counting danger bonuses
D) 50 to 60

# Module 11 — The Arguments, and What to Watch

*Do Hired Armies Work, and Where Is Force Going?*

### Recommended Reading / Reference

**Book:** Deborah D. Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) — the classic analysis of what states gain and lose when they buy force

**Reference:** The UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries, annual reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly (UN human rights office)

## 11a. The Argument on One Page

Across five centuries the bargain has barely changed. Buyers with money but too few willing soldiers purchase force from sellers with soldiers to spare. The buyers have been Renaissance cities and eighteenth-century kings (Module 1), weak African governments (Modules 2, 5, 6, and 10), a rich Gulf state (Module 9), and a superpower that wanted fewer of its own dead (Module 3). The sellers have been Swiss cantons and German princes, apartheid's veterans, Russian convicts, Syrian militias, and Colombian veterans (Modules 1, 2, 7, and 9). The payment follows whatever the buyer has, from cash to a passport. The force serves while it is paid. When the contract ends it leaves, as Executive Outcomes left Sierra Leone in 1997 (Module 2). When the seller thinks itself stronger than the buyer it turns, as Sforza did in 1450 and Prigozhin tried to in 2023 (Modules 1 and 7).

Two things changed in the last fifteen years. States became the largest sellers as well as buyers, with Russia and Turkey renting out men they controlled. And deniability became the main product. What the Kremlin bought from Wagner was not soldiers, which it had, but the ability to send soldiers and say it had not. That is also what the UAE bought through companies (Module 9). The four arguments below follow from that.

## 11b. Argument One: Was Wagner a Company or a Tool of the State?

**The case that it was a private company.** Until the mutiny this was the Kremlin's own line: officials called Wagner a private business, when they acknowledged it at all. Analysts who stress Prigozhin's independence point to his conduct. He made money through catering contracts, oil shares, and gold and diamond concessions, fought public battles with the Defense Ministry, and saw his men abandoned by the state at Khasham (Module 4). Wagner marched on Moscow, which no state instrument does (Module 7), and its network outlived the state's order to fold in the Central African Republic (Module 8).

**The case that it was the state's tool.** Western governments and many scholars of Russia argue the reverse. The state paid for Wagner, by Putin's own admission (Module 7). It trained on a Defense Ministry base and in Libya fought under Russian air cover (Modules 4 and 5). Its commander was honored at a Kremlin reception for decorated heroes (Module 4). And once its owner was dead, the state absorbed its fighters, its bases, and its propaganda network within months (Module 8).

**The evidence.** Neither list is disputed. The state's money and cover (Modules 4 and 7) and the owner's profits and mutiny (Modules 4, 5, and 7) are both documented, so the question is which mattered more.

**The course's reading.** Wagner was a franchise. The state authorized, funded, armed, and protected it, and a private owner ran it for profit. The state could revoke the franchise, and did, but it could not take back

every asset: in the Central African Republic, where Wagner had paid itself in land, the business stayed (Module 8).

## 11c. Argument Two: Do Hired Armies Win?

**The case that they do.** Defenders of the industry, among them Executive Outcomes' founder Eeben Barlow and Erik Prince, argue that small professional forces do what large armies cannot, and they point to results. Executive Outcomes turned Sierra Leone's war in months. Wagner saved Bangui in 2021 and helped retake Kidal in 2023, and Africa Corps helped save Niger's junta in 2026 (Modules 2, 5, 6, and 8).

**The case that they do not.** Skeptics in Machiavelli's tradition point to the failures. Wagner failed in Mozambique and lost at Tinzaouaten, and its successor lost the north of Mali in 2026. The Romeos surrendered at Goma, and Haiti's gangs still hold most of the capital (Modules 6, 8, and 10).

**The evidence.** Research supports a qualified version of each case. A study of Africa's civil wars from 1990 to 2008 by Seden Akcinaroglu and Elizabeth Radziszewski found that wars ended sooner when governments hired private military firms that faced competition. The authors argued that firms without competitors have a reason to prolong the wars that pay them. A later database by Deborah Avant and Kara Kingma Neu found that the presence of private military and security firms was correlated with shorter civil wars. But research summarized in 2023 by the political scientist Ulrich Petersohn found that government-hired firms in civil wars raise battle deaths on average, and that combat services raise them far more than training does.

**The course's reading.** Hired armies win battles and protect rulers. They rarely end wars, because ending a war ends the contract; only competition, which lets the buyer replace them, changes that. The clearest successes in this course protected a capital or a palace; none settled a country.

## 11d. Argument Three: Do Hired Armies Make Abuses Easier to Deny?

**The case that they do.** Human rights groups and the UN's working group on mercenaries argue that hired force is built to escape accountability. No one has been tried for Moura, for Bombori, for the civilians in Wagner's Central African operations, or for the children killed by Haiti's drones (Modules 5, 6, 8, and 10). Deniability is what the buyers pay for, and abuse is part of what it hides.

**The case that they do not.** The sponsors of the Montreux Document, Switzerland and the International Committee of the Red Cross, hold that hired force operates in no legal vacuum (Module 3). Accountability has reached it where the courts or sanctions of a country with working institutions can reach it: the Nisour Square convictions, the CACI verdict, the convictions over President Moïse's murder, and the sanctions on the Colombian recruiters (Modules 3, 9, and 10).

**The evidence.** The research Petersohn summarized suggests that abuse is concentrated in one segment of the market. Civilian victimization was about 72% lower where the client state had joined the Montreux Document, and lower where firms came from countries with strong human rights records.

**The course's reading.** Accountability follows the buyer's legal system. Hired force from a state with working courts is held to account some of the time, and a pardon can undo even that (Module 3). Hired force bought by states that want deniability has never been tried in court; the most it has met is foreign sanctions.

## 11e. Argument Four: Is Force Being Privatized, or Taken Back?

**The case for privatization.** Writers such as Sean McFate, who argues that private force will shape the wars to come, point to the market's growth. Erik Prince's company supports Haiti's drone war, and he has a deal to secure Congo's minerals. Gulf money hires Colombian veterans, Chinese guards follow Chinese investment, and drones let a few contractors deliver an air force's firepower (Modules 9 and 10).

**The case that states are taking it back.** Governments make this case by what they do. Russia nationalized Wagner, gave its propaganda arm to an intelligence service, and now recruits foreigners into its own army (Module 8). Turkey's Syrian fighters were paid and supervised in Libya by a firm close to its president, by an American account (Module 9). Colombia criminalized the trade, and the UN authorized a force for Haiti (Modules 9 and 10).

**The evidence.** Both trends are documented, and they often run through the same case. Africa Corps is a state force built from a private one (Module 8), and Vectus Global flies for a government's task force under an American export license (Module 10).

**The course's reading.** Neither. Force is being hybridized. States keep control and the ability to deny, while companies and foreign recruits supply the bodies.

## 11f. Five Contradictions

- **The law cannot see most of the trade.** The legal definition of a mercenary excludes enlisted foreigners and companies, and catches mainly freelancers such as the Colombians in Sudan and perhaps Turkey's Syrians (Modules 1, 8, and 9).
- **The cheapest force is the hardest to remove.** A force paid in land stays with the land: Wagner kept its hold on the Central African Republic after the Russian state ended it everywhere else (Modules 5 and 8).
- **Deniability is worth most to the strongest buyers.** A superpower kept contractor deaths out of its casualty lists, and Russia disowned its dead at Khasham, though both could have fielded their own soldiers (Modules 3 and 4).
- **A private army is most dangerous to its sponsor.** Sforza made himself master of the city that hired him; Prigozhin marched on the state that paid him (Modules 1 and 7).
- **Words outlast guns.** Wagner's propaganda network survived its army, cost a fraction of it, and found new tools (Modules 5 and 8).

## 11g. What to Watch

| When | What | Why it matters |
|---|---|---|
| By about November 9, 2026 | The end of the three-month window for Syria's agreement on Russia's bases (Module 8) | If the handover goes through, Libya's air bases carry Russia's whole route to Africa, and Haftar's price for hosting them rises |
| November 15, 2026 | MINUSCA's mandate expires; Security Council vote on renewal | The UN force is the largest armed presence in the Central African Republic that answers neither to Moscow nor to Wagner |
| November 2026 to May 2027 | Mali's dry season | Insurgents move most easily; the season will test whether Africa Corps can still deliver the protection Moscow sells |

| When | What | Why it matters |
|---|---|---|
| February 2027 | Sentencing of the four men convicted in Miami over President Moïse's killing; the 18 suspects flown to Florida await trial | These cases test whether the Neutrality Act, America's oldest law against private war, deters the next plot |
| March 31, 2027 | Haiti's Gang Suppression Force mandate ends unless renewed | Whether Haiti leans on a UN-authorized force or on a contractor decides who answers for the next civilian deaths |
| Pending | A new date for Haiti's postponed election (Module 10) | Whether contracted force can make the country safe enough to vote, and who commands the task force afterward |
| Pending | Anssaf Ali Mayo's suit against the Spear Operations Group's founder and two team members in federal court in California | A rare test of whether Americans accused of killing for a foreign government can be held liable at home |
| Pending | The Wagner-Africa Corps arrangement in Bangui | If Moscow can neither collect its fee nor remove the network, the franchise outlives the state's attempt to end it |
| Pending | Russia-Ukraine negotiations | Any exchange must settle the status of the foreigners enlisted on both sides, whom each side calls the other's mercenaries |
| 2027 | Colombia's anti-mercenary law in practice | The largest exporter of veterans for hire tests whether a supplier state can stop the flow |

## 11h. The Last Word

The states that have learned Machiavelli's lesson are not giving up hired force; they are bringing it under their own command (section 11e). For any armed force in the news, the course's opening question still applies: follow the contract (section 1a). Its cases add two more. To whom does the force answer when its paymaster and its host disagree? And who will count its dead?

# Module 11 Key Points

*The Arguments, and What to Watch*

• Wagner was a franchise: authorized, funded, and protected by the state, privately run for profit, and revocable, though not completely.

• Hired armies win battles and protect rulers more often than they end wars.

• Accountability follows the buyer's legal system: convictions for Nisour Square and the CACI verdict, but no one tried for Moura or Bombori.

• Force is being hybridized: states keep control and deniability while firms and foreign recruits supply the soldiers.

• A hired force serves while it is paid: when the contract ends it leaves, and when it thinks itself stronger it turns.

# Module 11 Quiz

## Check Your Understanding

**1. How does the course read the question of whether Wagner was a company or a tool of the state?**

A) As a state franchise run privately for profit
B) As a purely private firm
C) As a secret Defense Ministry unit with no private owners, funded entirely from the budget
D) As a criminal gang that captured parts of the state

**2. What did Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski's study find about government-hired private military firms?**

A) They always lengthened wars.
B) Competition among firms shortened wars; without it, firms had reason to prolong them.
C) They had no measurable effect.
D) They ended wars fastest when one firm held a monopoly contract, because it could plan for the long term and invest in the client's army.

**3. Which case does the course cite as accountability reaching hired force through working courts?**

A) Moura
B) The CACI verdict
C) The Bombori killings in Mali
D) The Khasham strike, prosecuted in Moscow after Russia admitted its citizens were present

**4. What does the course conclude about whether force is being privatized or taken back by states?**

A) It is being fully privatized, as states lose the ability to field their own armies.
B) States are taking it back everywhere, ending private military work.
C) It is being hybridized.
D) The trade has returned to the open market of Renaissance Italy.

**5. By the course's account, what did the Kremlin mainly buy from Wagner?**

A) The ability to send soldiers and deny it
B) Soldiers it lacked
C) Access to African gold
D) Cheaper soldiers than its own conscripts, paid from catering profits

# Answer Sheet

*Answers to every module's Check Your Understanding quiz.*

| Module | Answers |
|---|---|
| **Module 1 Quiz** | 1. C 2. A 3. D 4. B 5. C |
| **Module 2 Quiz** | 1. B 2. A 3. D 4. B 5. C |
| **Module 3 Quiz** | 1. A 2. D 3. B 4. D 5. A |
| **Module 4 Quiz** | 1. C 2. B 3. A 4. C 5. D |
| **Module 5 Quiz** | 1. C 2. D 3. B 4. A 5. A |
| **Module 6 Quiz** | 1. D 2. B 3. C 4. A 5. C |
| **Module 7 Quiz** | 1. D 2. B 3. B 4. C 5. A |
| **Module 8 Quiz** | 1. D 2. C 3. A 4. B 5. D |
| **Module 9 Quiz** | 1. A 2. C 3. D 4. B 5. D |
| **Module 10 Quiz** | 1. B 2. A 3. C 4. C 5. D |
| **Module 11 Quiz** | 1. A 2. B 3. B 4. C 5. A |