



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES AND ARMS CONTROL CHALLENGES

## THE WAGNER GROUP IN MALI

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Please direct inquiries to:  
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime  
Avenue de France 23  
Geneva, CH-1202  
Switzerland  
[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

|                |                                                                          |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ACLED</b>   | Armed Conflict and Location Event Data Project                           |
| <b>APC</b>     | Armoured personnel carrier                                               |
| <b>ATT</b>     | Arms Trade Treaty                                                        |
| <b>AU</b>      | African Union                                                            |
| <b>CAR</b>     | Central African Republic                                                 |
| <b>CSP</b>     | Cadre Stratégique Permanent (Permanent Strategic Framework)              |
| <b>DRC</b>     | Democratic Republic of Congo                                             |
| <b>ECOWAS</b>  | Economic Community of West African States                                |
| <b>FAMa</b>    | Forces Armées Maliennes (Malian Armed Forces)                            |
| <b>FLA</b>     | Front de libération de l'Azawad (Azawad Liberation Front)                |
| <b>IAG</b>     | International Armoured Group                                             |
| <b>JNIM</b>    | Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin                                     |
| <b>MRAP</b>    | Mine-resistant ambush protected (vehicles)                               |
| <b>MINUSMA</b> | United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali |
| <b>NGO</b>     | Non-governmental organizations                                           |
| <b>OHCHR</b>   | Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights                         |
| <b>PMC</b>     | Private military companies                                               |
| <b>PSC</b>     | Peace and Security Council                                               |
| <b>SIPRI</b>   | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute                         |
| <b>UAE</b>     | United Arab Emirates                                                     |
| <b>UNTOC</b>   | UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime                      |
| <b>UNWG</b>    | UN Working Group                                                         |



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he UN and the African Union (AU) have repeatedly warned about the growing use of mercenaries and private military companies (PMCs) in conflict situations. Concerns include the involvement of mercenary groups in transnational organized crime and human rights violations, and the ‘re-routing’ of weapons intended for a state’s military to mercenary groups and PMCs. This re-routing of weapons undermines international and domestic arms control regimes, which are intended to ensure that arms are not used to undermine peace and security, or breach human rights.

Since 2021, Mali’s security and political landscape has transformed. After coming to power, the military junta invited the Wagner Group into the country, cut ties with Mali’s former security partners, requested the departure of international forces (from France and the UN peacekeeping mission) and (in 2024) left the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In this new landscape, the Wagner Group emerged as the junta’s new ally and was soon actively involved in combat operations against insurgents.

The Wagner Group’s tenure in Mali, as widely documented by UN bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media, was characterized by serious human rights abuses and war crimes, including massacres, torture and rapes of civilians, and criminal activity, from looting communities to illicit taxation of gold mining sites. For observers of the conflict, such atrocities were not unexpected, as Wagner troops were operating alongside the Malian Armed Forces (Forces Armées Maliennes, FAMA), which have been accused of human rights violations and mismanagement of weapons. However, with the deployment of Wagner troops, violence against civilians increased drastically, beyond the norms set previously by FAMA – civilian casualties per incident doubled between 2021 and 2024.

The Wagner Group did not arrive in Mali fully equipped, and troops were expected to source weapons locally, which they did through seizing arms during combat and stealing official stock. This was one of the reasons for communications between Wagner and FAMA troops breaking down. From 2023, joint Wagner/FAMA missions declined, meaning that the Wagner troops operated independently using FAMA-owned equipment.

Drawing from an extensive review of open-source material related to Wagner Group operations in Mali and interviews with military sources in Mali and other experts, this paper identifies instances of weapons and equipment intended for use by FAMA being re-routed to Wagner, enabling war crimes and human rights violations. They include FAMA armoured vehicles, vehicle-mounted heavy machine guns (widely known as ‘technical’) and possibly attack drones – all of which are covered under the

Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Some instances of re-routing weapons from FAMa to the Wagner Group appear to be in breach of commitments under the ATT, which has been signed by Mali, as well as some of the domestic arms control commitments of several weapons-supplying countries.

The Wagner Group's operations in Mali came to an end in June 2025, and the group has been replaced with the Africa Corps, which is more closely controlled by the Russian state but continues to employ a majority of former-Wagner personnel. Therefore, the Wagner Group may have left Mali in name but has not left in practice. Furthermore, Wagner's operations in Mali are just one example of re-routing state-to-state transfers of weapons to private military actors, which undermines the international legal frameworks that regulate the arms trade. The international community will need to deal with the phenomenon of the growing use of mercenaries and PMCs in global conflicts and their impact on arms control regimes. The paper makes recommendations for improving governance of the sector, which are summarized below:

- Arms-exporting countries should undertake additional due diligence when considering an export to any country that has engaged with, hired or collaborated with a PMC.
- Arms manufacturers should also undertake additional due diligence when looking to supply countries that have engaged with PMCs.
- International forums on arms control and counter-proliferation should address the emerging role of PMCs in global conflicts, and the impact on arms control mechanisms and on reshaping illicit arms markets.
- The AU should revise the 1977 Convention for the Elimination of Mercenaries in Africa to include better provisions for monitoring human rights abuses by mercenaries, including those that are backed by a third-party state.
- International peacekeeping forces should continue to ensure that any equipment left following drawdown is withdrawn or destroyed in line with UN guidelines.

After providing a background on the Wagner Group's tenure in Mali, this paper documents evidence of weapons and equipment intended for use by FAMa being re-routed to Wagner Group operations, enabling war crimes and human rights violations. It then examines the legal implications for exporting countries, arms suppliers and Mali of arms transferred to FAMa being re-routed to Wagner. In so doing, the paper provides a case study that highlights the need for global arms control regimes to grapple with the growing reality of rogue PMCs being embedded within national militaries and the hybridization of PMCs in conflict and organized criminal activity. As the UN Working Group (UNWG) 2024 report indicates, this is a broader issue than just the Wagner Group and their recent tenure in Mali.

## Methodology

First, a literature review was undertaken, and initial interviews were conducted from December 2024 to July 2025 with experts monitoring the conflict in Mali and Russian mercenary activity, to assess the available evidence on the Wagner Group, specifically its arms supplies in Mali, its working relationship with FAMa and use of FAMa arms supplies.

Digital evidence has become a mainstay of research and analysis of conflict, including mercenary activity. Images, videos and information shared on social media can provide researchers with insights into specific events and developments, including in hard-to-access conflict zones. Visual evidence is key for research projects such as this one where there is a need to identify specific models and brands of weaponry and vehicles. To this end, the GI-TOC assembled a database of open-source photographs

and videos from pro-Wagner Telegram channels, FAMa soldiers' social media accounts (mainly TikTok, and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin [JNIM]'s az-Zallaqa media outlet). The search criteria were images posted between January 2022 and June 2025 showing:

- Wagner troops using identifiable arms in Mali;
- arms seized by JNIM that were claimed to have been taken from Wagner troops; and
- military transport that would be classified as arms and subject to restrictions on arms sales, such as armoured vehicles and military aircraft.

Over 160 photographs and videos of Wagner troops and 170 photographs of JNIM arms seizures were analyzed. The initial selection was then narrowed down to images in which the arms, equipment and vehicles pictured were identifiable and taken in Mali. For example, images showing Wagner troops with identifiable FAMa troops and vehicles, bearing FAMa insignia, or where geographical or other features made it possible to geolocate the image. An arms expert also assessed the make, model and origin (where possible) of each of the arms featured in the database.

Finally, interviews were conducted with FAMa sources who were operating either alongside Wagner or in areas with a high number of Wagner operations (including both senior and mid-level officers, as well as some sources within FAMa's infantry battalions); with subject matter experts and practitioners; and with arms buyers and sellers, market sellers, as well as residents of the affected areas in Mali. This combination of sources allowed the findings from the interviews and the visual evidence to be cross-referenced and confirmed.



## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the world has witnessed a worrying rise in the use of mercenaries and PMCs. Several of the most recent examples have been observed in Africa. Nearly 300 Romanian mercenaries were forced out of the city of Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in January 2025. They were recruited to fight alongside the DRC military but were forced out after a rebel assault. Just a few months later, in August, a plane was shot down in Sudan while reportedly carrying Colombian mercenaries sent by the UAE to support the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.<sup>1</sup> These Colombian recruits would have joined a conflict already beset by a range of foreign fighters – including mercenaries from Chad, Mali, Niger, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Libya.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the Turkish private military company SADAT has expanded its role in Niger, reportedly to protect Turkish business assets such as mine sites in the country.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this is also a global issue. The boundaries between ‘private military companies’, ‘security contractors’ and ‘mercenaries’ are often blurred. The UN and many individual countries have condemned the role of US private military contractors around aid distribution centres in Gaza,<sup>4</sup> for example, with some observers and media outlets describing the group as ‘US mercenaries’.<sup>5</sup> Whistleblowers allege that these contractors have used live ammunition against civilians seeking life-saving aid, contributing to the high death toll at distribution sites (the contractors deny these allegations).<sup>6</sup>

The dangers of this proliferation of private companies in waging war have been called out at the highest level of the international humanitarian system. In 2019, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that mercenaries were increasingly ‘exploiting and feeding off other ills such as transnational organized crime, terrorism and violent extremism’ in Africa.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Guterres reiterated this warning in an April 2025 report on 20 years of protecting civilian populations from war crimes, noting that the use of mercenaries and PMCs is ‘exacerbating human rights violations in certain conflict situations’ and enabling warring parties ‘to evade their responsibilities under international humanitarian law and human rights law’.<sup>8</sup>

Debates at the AU’s Peace and Security Council (PSC) have repeatedly stressed the urgency of combating mercenary activity.<sup>9</sup> The growing trend of African rulers turning to mercenaries to consolidate their own security and power ‘essentially outsources security sovereignty to foreign fighters, lacking accountability and offering plausible deniability’.<sup>10</sup> In response, the AU PSC and the Pan-African Parliament have been working on updating the 1977 Organization of African Unity Convention for the Elimination of Mercenaries in Africa, with the aim of strengthening the current security landscape.<sup>11</sup> Observers, such as the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies, have argued that the updated



convention needs to consider the monitoring of human rights abuses by mercenaries and to broaden its scope to include mercenaries operating under the direct/indirect control of third-party states (e.g. Russian-backed mercenaries in Africa, such as the Wagner Group).<sup>12</sup>

Concerns range from the involvement of mercenary groups in transnational organized crime (as extensively documented by the GI-TOC)<sup>13</sup> to the role of PMCs in human rights violations (as seen across conflicts, from Sudan to Libya to Gaza).<sup>14</sup> The UNWG, in its 2024 report on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the rights of peoples to self-determination raised a specific concern about ‘the “re-rerouting” of legal State-to-State sales to mercenaries’ and PMCs. While all the stages of ‘such transactions are not necessarily illegal [...] the onwards rerouting or diversion of arms to non-State armed actors [...] is illegal’.<sup>15</sup> These weapons are then used by non-state actors, such as PMCs, to commit human rights abuses or engage in criminal activity.

The risk that weapons intended for one user (a state’s military) are being re-routed to an entirely different user (a PMC) undermines a central tenet of arms control regimes, from international frameworks, such as the ATT, to domestic arms licensing laws. This tenet is codified in the ATT that arms transfers shall only be made when states have determined that there is no overriding risk that the arms will not be used to undermine peace and security, or breach humanitarian or human rights law.<sup>16</sup> To ensure this, the exporting authorities issue an end-user certificate, which documents that arms are being transferred to a designated, responsible ‘end user’ who is the sole intended recipient of the arms. However, as noted in the UNWG 2024 report, where states do not consistently ‘apply, observe or uphold the end-user certificate process [...] they facilitate the illicit proliferation of arms to mercenaries, mercenary-related actors and private military and security companies operating in or from their territory’.<sup>17</sup> The UNWG does not name specific instances of weapons being ‘re-routed’ from state sources to mercenaries. This research paper aims to provide a detailed example of this trend and assess its humanitarian implications.

This paper is part of a short series of studies that the GI-TOC is undertaking into the impact of mercenaries on arms supplies, arms management and illicit arms markets in the wider Sahel region. It focuses on the conflict in Mali, where the Wagner Group has been operating since 2021 at the invitation of the military junta. Anecdotes of Wagner troops using military vehicles belonging to FAMa have been shared by researchers, human rights groups and open-source investigators monitoring online channels linked to Wagner and extremist organizations. For the first time, this paper systematically documents the re-routing of arms through matching video and image evidence with information obtained through interviews with military sources in Mali.



## THE WAGNER GROUP IN MALI (2021–2025)

**T**o understand Wagner's re-routing of FAMA weapons – and the legal and ethical implications of re-routing arms transfers to Mali – requires understanding Wagner's intervention in Mali and the timeline of key events. In December 2021, the first Wagner personnel reportedly arrived in the capital, Bamako,<sup>18</sup> a few months after the second military coup in two years that brought to power the transitional government, which has since transformed Mali's security and political landscape.

Despite Mali continuing to face a complex insurgency, which had begun in 2012 as a rebellion in the north of the country but now involved various violent extremist groups and local militias across all its regions, the military junta cut ties with Mali's former security partners and requested the departure of international forces. In August 2022, France, Mali's primary security ally for much of the past decade, withdrew the last of its forces, as part of the termination of Operation Barkhane, the French military's long-standing counterinsurgency operation in the Sahel.<sup>19</sup> And at the end of 2023, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) withdrew completely, just six months after being formally requested to leave by the Malian authorities.<sup>20</sup> In January 2024, Mali announced its decision to leave ECOWAS, further isolating the country from regional partners,<sup>21</sup> and declared the end of the 2015 peace agreement with armed separatist groups.<sup>22</sup>

In this new political and security environment, Wagner emerged as the junta's new ally. Despite the Malian authorities consistently framing Wagner's presence as a 'training mission', evidence quickly mounted of their active role in combat operations.<sup>23</sup> By early 2022, Wagner forces were actively deployed in central Mali, fighting primarily against violent extremist organizations, such as JNIM, which operates across swathes of Mali, Burkina Faso and, to a lesser extent, Niger. Over time, Wagner's focus shifted northward. Between August and November 2023, a major northward offensive, led by FAMA and Wagner, recaptured key towns controlled by what was then called the Permanent Strategic Framework (Cadre Stratégique Permanent, CSP), an alliance of mostly ethnic Tuareg armed groups, such as Kidal, Ber and Anéfis.<sup>24</sup>

During its time in Mali, Wagner had between 1 000 and 2 000 troops dispersed in various military bases in the central and northern areas, including their headquarters at Bamako airport.<sup>25</sup> While the question of how (or how much) Wagner was paid was never clear, US authorities claimed that the Malian state paid as much as US\$10 million per month for its services.<sup>26</sup>

In May 2025, the Wagner Group announced that it was withdrawing from Mali, having 'completed' its mission.<sup>27</sup> The Africa Corps – a successor organization to the Wagner Group set up as part of the Russian Ministry of Defence – has since replaced Wagner and assured their Malian partners that 'there will be no changes with the departure of the PMC [Wagner]'.<sup>28</sup>

## Wagner's human rights record in Mali

Wagner's time in Mali was characterized by brutality against civilians, in particular the Fulani and Tuareg communities,<sup>29</sup> who were accused of collaborating with terrorist groups. The litany of incidents in which Wagner has been identified as committing atrocities include massacres, torture and rapes of civilians.<sup>30</sup> The most recent of many examples was in July 2025, when Human Rights Watch called for accountability after documenting that Wagner (alongside FAMa) had committed dozens of summary executions and enforced disappearances of ethnic Fulani men since January 2025.<sup>31</sup> One of the most notorious incidents was in March 2022, when over 500 people were killed in the Moura massacre by FAMa and 'foreign troops' (the Wagner Group, which was not explicitly identified at the time) during an alleged counterterrorist operation.<sup>32</sup>

Some of these abuses have subsequently been exploited for entertainment and profit online. The news outlet *Jeune Afrique* recently gained access to a subscription-only Telegram channel where, for a fee, members could access graphic images and videos submitted by former Wagner fighters in Mali, showing torture and extrajudicial killings.<sup>33</sup> In some instances, this brutality has been in pursuit of illicit gain, for example to wrestle control over gold mining sites and allegedly 'tax' artisanal gold mining operations.<sup>34</sup> The looting of civilians' possessions has also been part of Wagner's modus operandi in Mali. As a consequence of these and similar actions in Wagner's African deployments, in January 2023, the group was designated a transnational criminal organization by the US.<sup>35</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Timeline of military coups and mercenary deployment in Mali, 2020–2025.



To observers of this conflict, it may not be unexpected news that the Wagner Group committed these atrocities using Malian military assets, as Wagner was in Mali on the invitation of the military junta, operating alongside FAMa, whose own record on arms control has historically been poor.<sup>36</sup> Many of the allegations against Wagner have also been levelled against FAMa, as the incidents took place during joint operations between the military and the mercenaries. FAMa have faced persistent allegations of serious human rights violations and mismanagement of weapons, particularly in the context of counterterrorism operations in central Mali, where they mostly operated before Wagner. Reports by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and MINUSMA have repeatedly implicated FAMa in extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions.<sup>37</sup> A 2022 Human Rights Watch report documented over 200 civilian deaths linked to FAMa operations during the preceding year.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the evidence also suggests that Wagner's deployment led to a drastic increase in violence against civilians, beyond the norms set previously by FAMa. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), between January 2024 and June 2025, Wagner and FAMa troops in Mali were responsible for over four times more civilian casualties than JNIM (1 443 compared to 331 civilian casualties).<sup>39</sup> Wagner also used violent tactics, including beheadings and booby-trapping of corpses, that had not been observed previously.<sup>40</sup> The ACLED data also shows that lethal violence against civilians by FAMa increased sharply following Wagner's arrival. In 2021, before Wagner's deployment, FAMa were involved in 78 civilian deaths from 39 events (an average of two casualties per event). By 2024, after Wagner began operating alongside FAMa, 866 civilian deaths occurred from 215 events (an average of about four casualties per event). This doubling of the casualty rate per incident suggests a significant escalation in the brutality of FAMa operations against civilians.<sup>41</sup>

## **Wagner's weapons supply chain and relationship with FAMa**

Unlike normal international military or PMC operations, the Wagner Group did not arrive in Mali with a full complement of equipment, which explains in part the need to re-route or use military equipment belonging to FAMa. Supply chains of small arms and even some larger equipment (e.g. armoured vehicles) from Russia were in place, but Wagner troops were also expected to source weapons locally, in an ad-hoc way.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, they equipped themselves with either FAMa assets or weapons seized directly from the battlefield.<sup>43</sup> Observers and journalists familiar with Wagner's presence in Mali and elsewhere, including the CAR, confirmed that Wagner consistently repurposed arms captured during combat, including from extremist organizations, such as JNIM or Islamic State Sahel Province, and rebel groups, such as the Azawad Liberation Front (Front de libération de l'Azawad, FLA). The research found no evidence of Wagner buying weapons from the illicit market or systematically selling off weapons that had been seized.

These seizures became a hallmark of Wagner operations and were even flaunted in online propaganda. For example, a Telegram post from October 2024 featured a photo of a PKM machine gun with the caption: 'A cleaned-up PKM of Azawad shepherds [...] You gotta hand it to them, they know how to clean guns. Our uncles [Wagner troops] used to trophy clean, oiled barrels.'<sup>44</sup> This practice contributed to friction between Wagner and FAMa units. In multiple cases, Wagner troops raced FAMa units to claim captured material, creating competition and undermining coordination. By the time official tallies took place, weapons listed as seized in field reports had often disappeared, with Wagner believed to be responsible for stealing the official stock.<sup>45</sup> In other instances, Wagner reportedly targeted high-value

opponents that were not on FAMa's operational agenda, raising suspicion that these operations were motivated by material gains, including the prospect of seizing valuable weapons or equipment.<sup>46</sup>

Over time, tensions between Wagner and FAMa worsened, with Wagner operatives reportedly disrespecting Malian soldiers both publicly and privately, questioning their courage and loyalty. FAMa sources described how Wagner frequently insulted them on social media and in person, describing them as cowardly.<sup>47</sup> In turn, some social media posts on Wagner-linked channels suggested the mercenaries suspected that FAMa were supplying arms to rebel groups.<sup>48</sup> FAMa interviewees complained that Wagner would often disappear mid-operation, leaving their forces unsupported and uninformed. Incidents of violence between Wagner and FAMa occurred, most notably in Ansongo in January 2025, when a FAMa soldier was killed by a Wagner operative over a dispute involving a seized motorbike.<sup>49</sup> This and several other altercations point to a broader breakdown in trust and cooperation.

From 2023, this collapse in communication led to a decline in joint missions between Wagner and FAMa. In many cases, Wagner would operate autonomously, with FAMa's presence limited to a few translators or select special units. This seems to have varied by region, but multiple sources reported that Wagner effectively operated alone, or with the minimal FAMa presence possible throughout the theatre of operations in northern Mali.<sup>50</sup> This means that, throughout its deployment, the Wagner Group was in many instances acting independently, despite relying on FAMa-owned equipment, including armoured vehicles and technicals.

## Disruption of illicit arms trade in northern Mali

The interviews and fieldwork conducted for this study also gathered information on the Wagner Group's impact on illicit arms trading and its own arms supplies. The research found that, from mid-2023, Wagner and FAMa's offensive in northern Mali disrupted a range of licit and illicit flows of commodities, including weapons.

Increased air surveillance and drone strikes, and military presence on the ground along key roads and towns, elevated the risks for traffickers. In addition, the retaking of towns in the north, from where traffickers operated, in particular towns known to be hubs for regional arms trafficking, completely dismantled the local arms market.<sup>51</sup> For instance, Ber had been a crucial hub for arms trafficking in northern Mali when under the control of armed rebel and extremist groups that were active in this illicit economy – the lack of state or international presence allowed these actors to store and trade weapons alongside other illicit goods. In August 2023, the town's role as a hub for arms trafficking ended when FAMa seized the town, forcing

armed groups and their associated traffickers to withdraw. The change in territorial control reshaped regional weapons flows and disrupted long-standing weapon-trafficking routes between Mali and Libya that were a major source of weapons especially for the northern regions of Mali and between Mali and Mauritania.

In February 2025, the price of an AK-47 in Gao rose to FCFA600 000 (around €920), compared to FCFA200 000 to FCFA300 000 (around €300–€450) before Wagner and FAMa's northern offensive. Near the Mauritanian border, prices reached FCFA900 000 (just under €1 400).<sup>52</sup> These significant price increases indicated a tightening supply in a context of sustained high demand, which has had hard-to-predict consequences. Several sources reported that some JNIM members had opportunistically sold weapons looted during clashes or seized from government stockpiles. While not sanctioned by the JNIM and limited in scale, this new behaviour, linked to the high market price of weapons (including at gold mining sites) remains noteworthy and warrants close monitoring.<sup>53</sup> ■



## EVIDENCE OF WAGNER'S USE OF FAMA WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT

**T**he research was able to identify with confidence examples of the Wagner Group using FAMA military equipment, indicating that Wagner was routinely using equipment that had been exported to Mali for the sole use of FAMA. Broadly, such re-routing would probably constitute a breach of the end-user certificates and principles of arms control frameworks (most prominently the ATT) aimed at mitigating the risks of arms proliferation. Some re-routing may also have implications for exporting states, and their compliance with due diligence obligations under the ATT and other arms control frameworks.

According to arms trade experts consulted, the standard procedure for arms transfers would be for the end-user certificates for the equipment (which included armoured vehicles and heavy machine guns) to specify that it was for the sole use of the Malian government.<sup>54</sup> Allowing for a third party, such as a PMC, to make use of these vehicles would be highly irregular. Therefore, it is highly probable that the instances documented in this paper of Wagner Group using FAMA equipment are examples of the 're-routing' phenomenon identified by the UNWG.

For each example of equipment identified, the research team contacted the manufacturer and authorities of the countries from where they were exported,<sup>55</sup> to confirm that the designated end user was FAMA. As the end-user certificates for arms transfers are not public documents, this was a necessary step to confirm, as far as possible, whether these arms and armoured vehicles were being used in violation of the export conditions.

This re-routing of equipment may be a broader phenomenon than the examples given here, as it was not possible to confirm independently several further instances that were captured in the image and video database or described in interviews. For example, only a handful of the many images of Wagner troops shared on Telegram channels could be confidently geolocated as taken in Mali, while the quality of other images did not allow expert reviewers to identify definitively the make and model of the weapons or vehicles involved. The image and video evidence was cross-confirmed with interviews given by FAMA sources, who (by necessity) remain anonymous.



The examples, covering armoured vehicles, technicals and drones, are all heavy military equipment, rather than small arms and light weapons. Excluding weapons seized on the battlefield, Wagner's small arms and light weapons were found to be mostly Russian-made and customized with their own (varied) accessories. In contrast, FAMa's weapons were typically Chinese copies of Kalashnikov designs, suggesting different suppliers. This was confirmed by the majority of FAMa sources interviewed, who reported that the Wagner Group largely used their own small arms and ammunition. Those who reported that Wagner troops at times used FAMa small arms said that this became increasingly rare.<sup>56</sup> This implies that Wagner Group troops travelled to Mali with supplies of small arms and ammunition, but their logistics did not often stretch to heavier equipment such as vehicles.

Armoured vehicles and heavy machine guns, which are part of the technical, are governed under the ATT. Drones are not explicitly referenced within the ATT, although some legal analysts have argued that they are 'implicitly' covered under the treaty under the category of 'combat aircraft', as drones are defined as such under the UN Register on Conventional Weapons.<sup>57</sup>

## Armoured vehicles

Armoured combat vehicles are one of eight categories of conventional arms regulated by the ATT<sup>58</sup> and include mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles and armoured personnel carriers (APCs). From the image and video database, researchers identified five different types of armoured vehicles (both MRAPs and APCs) used by the Wagner Group in Mali that appeared to have been re-routed from their original end users to the mercenaries. The five vehicle types are produced by manufacturers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE – two cases), China, Nigeria and France. Four vehicle types appear to have been direct arms transfers to Mali, while the remaining one appears to have been transferred to another country (Chad) and then used in Mali as part of MINUSMA operations. Given the consistency between FAMa sources in interviews and the image analysis, the research team is confident that the Wagner Group made use of FAMa-owned armoured vehicles. Figure 2 describes the model of vehicles identified, the country of origin and the circumstances around their presence in Mali.

| Vehicle model           | Producing company            | Country of origin | Date/means of arrival in Mali                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Streit Typhoon          | Streit Group                 | UAE               | In 2020, 30 vehicles were delivered to Mali from the UAE, according to information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) arms transfers database and media reports. <sup>59</sup>                                                 |
| VP11                    | NORINCO                      | China             | In 2023, 80 vehicles were delivered to Mali from China, according to information from the SIPRI arms transfers database and media reports. <sup>60</sup>                                                                                                      |
| IAG Guardian Xtreme 4x4 | International Armoured Group | UAE               | In 2023, 20 vehicles were delivered to Mali from the UAE, according to the SIPRI arms transfers database. Images shared by FAMa with regional media in early 2023 show these vehicles in action. <sup>61</sup>                                                |
| Proforce Ara II MRAP    | Proforce                     | Nigeria           | Correspondence with Proforce confirmed that the MRAP in question was transferred to Chad in 2022. <sup>62</sup> The vehicle seems to have been used by Chadian troops in Mali as part of MINUSMA, as suggested in media reports from late 2024. <sup>63</sup> |
| ACMAT Bastion           | Arquus (formerly ACMAT)      | France            | In 2015, five vehicles and, in 2019, 13 vehicles were delivered to Mali, according to the SIPRI arms transfers database and media reporting. <sup>64</sup> The 2019 transfer is also reflected in France's reporting to the ATT secretariat. <sup>65</sup>    |

**FIGURE 2** Armoured vehicles re-routed to the Wagner Group.

## Example 1: Streit Typhoon armoured vehicle

Both images below were shared in the same Telegram channel. The channel's author claims to be the former Wagner fighter pictured who uses this channel to share anecdotes, images and videos, and generally reminisce about his time with the 'orchestra' (a common online nickname for the Wagner Group, alluding to the classical composer Richard Wagner). His tour in Mali with the Wagner Group spanned 2022 and 2023.<sup>66</sup> The channel has shared several images and videos showing Wagner

troops in Mali that do not appear on other online channels, which suggests that the author is sharing original and genuine images. The mountain in the background of the left-hand image below appears to show Mount Hombori, in the Mopti region of Mali.<sup>67</sup> The town of Hombori was the location of a notorious massacre carried out by Wagner mercenaries and FAMA in April 2022, when they opened fire on a market, killing around 50 civilians.<sup>68</sup>



Wagner troops using a Streit Typhoon armoured vehicle in central Mali. Photos: Telegram

Messages on the same channel refer to the Typhoon vehicle in other contexts, suggesting it was routinely used. For example, alongside a video that appears to be taken from inside the turret of the Typhoon, the author claims that this 'was the first time I climbed into the turret and stood behind the Typhoon machine gun on a real mission'.<sup>69</sup> Images shared on other channels also appear to show Streit Typhoon vehicles.<sup>70</sup> Below is a wrecked Typhoon that was fitted with a

demining device at the front and originally shared on a locked Wagner-linked Telegram channel (and then circulated more widely online). Again, the mountains in the background of the image allow the research team to be confident that this is in central Mali.<sup>71</sup>

Another Wagner-linked channel describes how the Typhoon was a mainstay for Wagner troops:<sup>72</sup>

The Typhoon. Produced by the UAE Streit Group [...] The first and, for a long time, the main working machine [of Wagner in Mali] [...] Thick armour, good design in terms of resistance to explosions and air conditioning became the main advantages of this machine, which saved many lives. Honestly, I don't even know what we would have done without them. They always went first [in convoys].



Typhoon damaged by a mine in central Mali. Photo: Telegram

## Example 2: NORINCO VP11 armoured vehicle

In November 2023, the recapture of the northern town of Kidal was one of the Wagner Group's major strategic victories during their Mali operations. Wagner troops reportedly took the lead role in this operation, while FAMA's involvement was comparatively minimal.<sup>73</sup> Some of the first images and videos from Kidal after its recapture

show Wagner troops driving into the town aboard VP11 armoured vehicles. These were widely shared on a number of social media channels. The vehicles used by Wagner troops who led the offensive appear to be Chinese-made NORINCO VP11s.



Images after the recapture of Kidal in northern Mali. Photos: Telegram

Rebel groups with VP11 vehicles in the background. Photo: Telegram

In July 2024, Wagner suffered its most significant defeat in Mali, when dozens of its troops were killed in an ambush by CSP rebels in Tinzaouaten. Above are images circulated in the aftermath of the Tinzaouaten attack by rebel groups,

who claimed that they had ambushed several Wagner troops who were using NORINCO VP11 vehicles. Several other images of VP11 vehicles used by Wagner, probably in Mali, have also circulated on other social media channels.<sup>74</sup>

## Example 3: IAG Guardian Xtreme 4x4

The image below is taken from a video from the JNIM az-Zallaqa media outlet showing an armoured vehicle that JNIM fighters claimed to have destroyed with



Image from a video shared by JNIM of a wrecked IAG Guardian vehicle, which they claimed was driven by Wagner troops. Photo: az-Zallaqa

an improvised explosive device (IED) near Mourdiah, south-western Mali.<sup>75</sup>

JNIM's report claimed the vehicle was carrying Wagner troops, although this could not be independently verified. This type of MRAP appears not to be commonly used by Wagner troops, as it does not appear elsewhere in our dataset. The International Armoured Group (IAG) confirmed that this MRAP was exported for the sole use of the Malian military:

The IAG Guardian Xtreme is available to Government, Military and Law Enforcement only, rather than any private companies. IAG possesses all official documents and approvals required by the UAE Ministry of Defence for exporting the vehicles, thereby proving the end-user was a military entity.<sup>76</sup>

The IAG later clarified that the military entity referred to was the Malian military.



## Example 4: ACMAT Bastion

This image of a destroyed ACMAT Bastion APC vehicle (right) was shared on the same Telegram channel that released images of the Streit Typhoon vehicles (see above) and is controlled by a former Wagner fighter who was in Mali in 2022 and 2023. In the post, the author described how the vehicle was blown up 'while we were travelling in a convoy. And my senior comrade was inside it [...] He survived but was seriously injured. Another warrior, who was riding with him in the passenger seat, unfortunately, died.'<sup>77</sup> It was the only image of this vehicle type captured in the database.



Ambushed ACMAT Bastion. Photo: Telegram

## Example 5: Proforce Ara II

This example, of a Nigerian-made model of MRAP, differs from the four other examples, as the vehicle was not directly transferred to Mali. It was transferred to Chadian forces in 2022 and then appears to have been used in Mali as part of MINUSMA operations, in which Chadian forces participated.<sup>78</sup>



A Proforce MRAP apparently rebranded by Wagner troops. Photo: Telegram

This image (and others shared in the same channel seeming to show the same vehicle) are difficult to geolocate to a precise place in Mali. However, it appears that these vehicles have not been used in other African countries where Wagner operated, for example in the CAR or Sudan. Therefore, by process of elimination, the images are highly likely to be from Mali.

Proforce, the Nigerian company that produced this vehicle, confirmed that the MRAP had been delivered to Chad, and that their company has not exported any equipment, whether indirectly or directly, to Mali.

We have no knowledge of any transfer or resale of the equipment to Mali or any other third party, as no application for consent to such a transfer was submitted. The End User certification for the use and operation of the MRAPs supplied was issued by the Chadian government solely for the use of the Chadian Army with an undertaking not to sell, deliver or otherwise transfer to any third Party. The exportation of the MRAPs was also approved by the office of the National Security Adviser of Nigeria.<sup>79</sup>

MINUSMA faced a complex withdrawal operation over a truncated period of six months. The drawdown has been described as 'a logistical nightmare', as 'the UN's departure entailed closing 9 bases in six months in addition to repatriating equipment, material and personnel in a rapidly deteriorating security context'.<sup>80</sup> MINUSMA's statements at the time reported that all equipment, such as armoured



vehicles, arms and ammunition, would be withdrawn as a matter of priority.<sup>81</sup> These goods could not be gifted or sold to Malian authorities, or any others, and would either be returned to MINUSMA contingents' home countries or disposed of in accordance with UN policies.<sup>82</sup> Media reports and MINUSMA statements note that some armoured vehicles were withdrawn<sup>83</sup> and others were destroyed as UN guidelines suggested.<sup>84</sup> When approached for comment, a UN spokesperson reported that all vehicles used by the mission had been accounted for.<sup>85</sup> However, it appears, in

this individual case, that the vehicle was still in serviceable enough condition to be used by the mercenary group.<sup>86</sup> This perhaps reflects the exceptionally challenging security environment (as captured by MINUSMA's own reporting at the time),<sup>87</sup> in which armoured vehicles were an essential asset to keep MINUSMA personnel safe until their final withdrawal. This is the only instance of a former MINUSMA vehicle – or any other equipment from the mission – captured in our research. ■

These five examples from the image analysis are consistent with interviews with FAMa sources. All seven FAMa soldiers and officers interviewed reported that Wagner relied almost (if not) entirely on FAMa-owned military transport for their operations, including goods subject to arms control restrictions such as APCs, MRAPs, military aircraft and so on. Subject matter experts interviewed for the project also agreed that the logistics, heavy weaponry and military transport used by Wagner belonged to FAMa.<sup>88</sup>

Sources confirmed that Wagner used FAMa's infantry fighting vehicles (including APCs and MRAPs) for both joint and independent operations. A FAMa soldier in central Mali interviewed in May 2025 said:

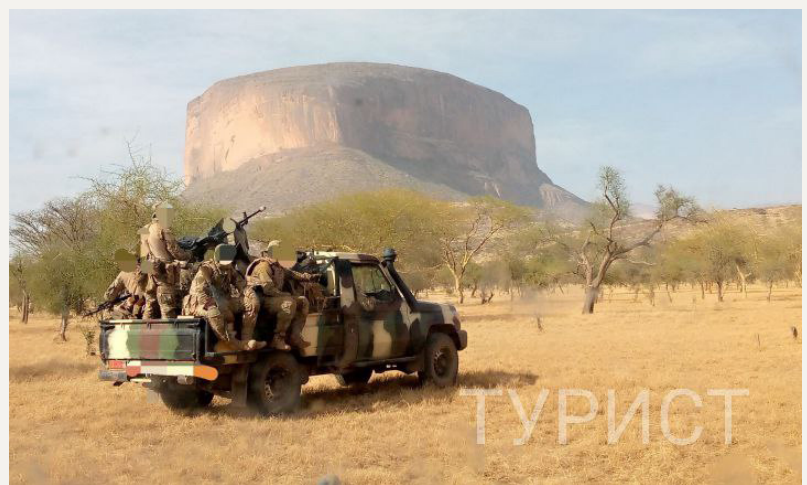
Yes, the Toyota with the 14.5 [calibre heavy machine gun], the Kia and the MRAP tanks that they drive belong to the FAMa. They drive the FAMa vehicles themselves; they don't trust us. It seems that when they obtained FAMa vehicles, they changed the oil and serviced the filters and other parts themselves before starting to use them. Ever since they arrived, they've been using the armoured transport vehicles for every move. Even when they go shopping at the city market, they use these MRAP armoured vehicles.

Similarly, a FAMa officer in northern Mali reported:

They have always used our means of transport since their arrival. When they came, they were in our FAMa registered vehicles. From the moment they arrived in Mali until now, they have used the armoured transport vehicles for all their missions. These were Toyota, Kia and armoured vehicles [...] when they first arrived, it was some of the FAMa who drove the vehicles, but a few weeks later, the Wagner started driving for themselves. They've been driving them for themselves ever since they've been in the field.<sup>89</sup>

## Technicals

The image and video dataset also included a wealth of images showing Wagner troops operating vehicle-mounted weapons in Mali.<sup>90</sup> The vehicles pictured below match the types of vehicles, camouflage patterns and weapons widely used by FAMa, and interviews with FAMa sources confirmed Wagner's widespread use of FAMa technicals, strongly indicating that Wagner troops were using FAMa equipment.



Wagner troops using what appear to be FAMa technicals. Photos: Telegram

The dataset included several examples of Wagner troops using vehicles mounted with W85 machine guns, which are produced by NORINCO in China. After checking arms transfer databases, it was not possible to identify when any W85 weapons were imported to Mali. However, this is not unusual and may reflect the lack of transparency surrounding China's arms industry, as noted by research organizations that monitor the arms trade.<sup>91</sup>

Several of the images above contained visual identifiers that enabled them to be geolocated to Mali. For example, the image in the top left shows a FAMa ration pack, while the Wagner soldier in the bottom left image is wearing a Mali flag insignia. The bottom right image shows distinctive Malian geographic features, in this case indicating Hombori. Interviews with FAMa sources also confirmed that the Toyota pick-ups used by FAMa and equipped with heavy machine guns were widely used by Wagner troops. In addition to the images above, several videos posted online appear to show Wagner troops driving through landscapes that are distinctly Malian, with no FAMa soldiers leading the missions or accompanying them.<sup>92</sup> Access to the equipment seems relatively unfettered.

## Attack drones

Since at least January 2023, Bayraktar TB2 attack drones have been deployed to Mali,<sup>93</sup> with subsequent deliveries of more drones made in 2023 and 2024.<sup>94</sup> These drones are produced by major Turkish arms producer Baykar, widely used by the Turkish military and a major export and diplomatic tool for Türkiye.<sup>95</sup> The TB2 has even been described as ‘changing the nature of warfare’, as it is powerful and relatively cheap compared to its competitors, meaning it has rapidly become the weapon of choice for many militaries.<sup>96</sup> Ukrainian forces have used these drones to fight against Russia’s invasion.

Five independent FAMA sources interviewed in April and May 2025 claimed that Wagner troops had operated FAMA drones:

1. ‘Wagner uses FAMA drones for reconnaissance, observation of armed group movements and strikes [...] Malian drones have always been piloted by Wagner.’<sup>97</sup>
2. ‘The drone command centre is managed by Wagner.’<sup>98</sup>
3. ‘Wagner uses the FAMA’s drones to carry out strikes; they pilot these drones themselves. The FAMA don’t know how to fly this type of drone yet. I know that the Russians will train them to do so in the near future.’<sup>99</sup>
4. ‘Yes, it’s Wagner’s technicians who pilot the FAMA drones. This was Wagner’s first mission before being deployed in the field. The FAMA don’t know how to drive these drones, so until now, it’s been Wagner who’s been flying the FAMA drones.’<sup>100</sup>
5. ‘Wagner are the only ones using the drones, because they’re deployed in areas where only they operate, and sometimes in the company of our special forces.’<sup>101</sup>

Only one FAMA source did not agree with this assessment, stating, ‘No, they don’t use the drones directly, but they sometimes ask their superiors to deploy them in their areas of operation. The drones are flown by FAMA and Turkish pilots.’<sup>102</sup> ■

Reports that Wagner is involved in operating the Bayraktar drones would be consistent with a previous report that these drones have been observed at Wagner Group bases. In September 2023, Russian investigative outlet The Insider reported that some of these drones were parked at the Wagner base in Sevaré,<sup>103</sup> as evidenced by aerial photography showing the drone’s distinctive shape at the base. However, this could not be confirmed by the research team’s image analysis, partly due to drones being remotely operated. A geolocated image can be obtained to identify Wagner troops using armoured vehicles or technical equipment but not to identify who is controlling a remotely operated drone. Nothing shared on Wagner-linked Telegram channels was found claiming that Wagner troops were piloting these drones, which is at odds with their usual tendency to boast about any action they are involved in.

In response to a request for comment, the Turkish Ministry of National Defence said that ‘any claims regarding the use of the Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicle by third parties, which are not based on any official statement or concrete evidence, should not be considered credible’, and that ‘bilateral military relations between Türkiye and Mali continue to develop based on a model of trusted partnership’.<sup>104</sup> The research team reached out to Baykar for comment but received no response.



## Similar re-routing of arms from state forces to the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic

Mali was not the only African conflict in which the Wagner played a prominent role. Their operations in the CAR provide another example of the re-routing of official arms transfers to the PMC. In their 2021 report, the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR noted that Russian ‘military instructors’ were using weapons that had been provided to the CAR Ministry of Defence, in breach of the end-user agreements governing these weapons,<sup>105</sup> including arms and ammunition, as well as armoured vehicles. (At the time, the UN Panel of Experts used the term ‘military instructors’ rather than Wagner mercenaries – Russia maintained that these personnel were hired as instructors and to provide close protection for CAR politicians through an entity called the Officers Union for International Security. It later transpired that this entity was a front for the Wagner Group and that the troops took a prominent combat role rather than merely training.)

Russian authorities stated that the weapons came from stocks that it provided to the CAR. However, the Panel noted that this was in breach of the end-user commitments, which specified that the CAR military would be the sole user of these arms and ammunition, and armoured vehicles. This breach was more than a mere technicality but had a real-world impact, as it meant these weapons could be exempted from the UN arms embargo in place on the CAR at the time. The UN Panel of Experts had access to the end-user certificates for these weapons and were able to point out the discrepancy irrefutably because the CAR government had provided the documents, as part of the UN’s monitoring and enforcing of the arms embargo.

A source familiar with the situation in the CAR reported that Wagner mercenaries were also allowed to use armoured vehicles that had been donated to the CAR government by the US. The fall-out of this reportedly contributed to the US scaling down its military support to the CAR government.<sup>106</sup> ■



## IMPLICATIONS OF WAGNER'S RE-ROUTING OF FAMA WEAPONS

**T**his paper has established an evidence base, from open-source information and interviews, that Wagner troops routinely made use of FAMA weapons, including armoured vehicles and vehicle-mounted heavy machine guns. Interviews suggested that Wagner also made use of FAMA attack drones, although this was not possible to verify independently.

While perhaps not surprising, Wagner's sharing of arms with FAMA is more than just a technical issue; it is a legal and ethical concern for the international community and arms producers supplying the Malian state. The specific implications for each case of re-routing depend on the legal frameworks governing the exporting countries' arms exports and when these exports took place. The ATT is, of course, the most prominent international legal framework governing arms transfers. China, Nigeria and France, which were involved in the arms transfers analyzed, are parties to the ATT (Figure 3), as is Mali itself. Both the UAE and Türkiye are signatories to the ATT, meaning they have joined but have not yet ratified, accepted or approved the treaty.

| Country of origin | Producing company                         | Model                                  | Relevant legal framework                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UAE               | Streit Group International Armoured Group | Streit Typhoon IAG Guardian Xtreme 4x4 | UAE is a signatory but not state party to the ATT. It has its own domestic framework for firearms exports that requires an end-user certificate. <sup>107</sup> |
| China             | NORINCO                                   | VP11, W85 heavy machine gun            | China is a state party to the ATT.                                                                                                                              |
| Nigeria           | Proforce                                  | Proforce Ara II MRAP                   | Nigeria is a state party to the ATT.                                                                                                                            |
| France            | Arquus (formerly ACMAT)                   | ACMAT Bastion                          | France is a state party to the ATT.                                                                                                                             |
| Türkiye           | Baykar                                    | Bayraktar TB2                          | Türkiye is a signatory but not a state party to the ATT.                                                                                                        |

**FIGURE 3** Suppliers of re-routed armoured vehicles to Mali.

## Relevant legal frameworks

According to the ATT, exports are prohibited if:

The State Party has knowledge, at the time of authorization, that the arms or items would be used in the commission of [...] crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, attacks directed against civilian objects or civilians protected as such, or other war crimes as defined by international agreements to which it is a Party.<sup>108</sup>

The ATT places obligations on exporting countries to ‘conduct an objective and non-discriminatory assessment’ of the potential ‘that the arms could be used to undermine peace and security, violate international humanitarian or human rights law or commit war crimes or violate any other international conventions the state is party to relating to organized crime or terrorism’.<sup>109</sup> This would include, for example, the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) Firearms Protocol, to which the above-mentioned countries are all party and which obliges countries to establish an arms export control regime that minimizes the risk of diversion to the illicit market.<sup>110</sup>

The ATT also places obligations on importing countries (in this case, Mali) to enact measures to prevent the diversion of weapons. End-user certificates contribute to the assessment that the ATT calls for, as they form part of the basis of guaranteeing that the weapons will be transferred to a responsible actor, rather than shared with other users or diverted elsewhere.

Countries involved in the arms transfers covered here that are not party to the ATT (Türkiye and the UAE) rely on domestic arms control regulations to govern exports of goods such as arms and armoured vehicles. These can include similar requirements for end-user certificates, as encouraged by the ATT. For example, the UAE requires for armoured vehicles an end-user certificate and a letter from the government agency that requested the vehicles (if being transferred for a government entity).<sup>111</sup> The UAE has stated its export regime aims to support UN Security Council resolutions on ‘the cessation of arms proliferation and financing’.<sup>112</sup>

Similarly, Turkish authorities state that the designated end user is one of the factors considered in governing strategic exports, in Türkiye’s efforts to support ‘non-proliferation and a safer and more stable world’.<sup>113</sup> Some international observers have argued that Türkiye has taken a no-questions-asked approach to exporting drones, including to countries where they may be used in human rights abuses.<sup>114</sup> Türkiye has pushed back on this, arguing that its export regime is in line with international norms promoting peace and security.<sup>115</sup>

## Assessing timelines of the arms transfers

The question is, therefore, whether these exporting countries should have considered the risk of the Wagner Group ‘potentially’ using the weapons, armoured vehicles and possibly drones, which their arms producers wished to export to Mali. Any export assessment would also have to consider the likelihood of FAMa using these arms to commit human rights abuses (as described above, allegations have been made by international observers and civil society). However, although this is a crucially important consideration, this paper’s remit is limited to the Wagner Group.

Some arms transfers, such as the Streit Group or ACMAT vehicles (in 2020 and 2019, respectively), were made before the military coup and the arrival of the Wagner Group in Mali. At this point, the assessment for these arms exports under the criteria in the ATT would have been different, as the exporters could not reasonably have anticipated that their goods would be used by the Wagner Group. In the case of the Nigerian Proforce Ara II vehicle transferred to Chad and used by Chadian forces on military operations,

it cannot reasonably have been part of Nigeria's assessment (as stipulated under the ATT) that this vehicle would be eventually used by a rogue third party, a PMC, in Mali.

However, the ATT also specifies that 'if, after an authorization has been granted, an exporting State Party becomes aware of new relevant information, it is encouraged to reassess the authorization after consultations, if appropriate, with the importing State'.<sup>116</sup> It could be argued that these exporting nations should have been aware through their investigations or through information supplied by Mali that Wagner was using these vehicles, and raised this issue with the Malian authorities or publicly.

Furthermore, the opposite is true for three examples: China's provision of VP11 vehicles (2023), Türkiye's Bayraktar drones (2022) and IAG Guardian vehicles produced in the UAE (2023). These transfers were made after Wagner arrived in Mali, after documented evidence of Wagner committing human rights abuses in Mali (as well as in the CAR and Sudan), after much open-source material showed that Wagner was using FAMa military assets (as noted by NGOs and researchers monitoring the conflict) and after the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR had shown that Russian mercenaries had re-routed arms transferred to the CAR military (indicating their modus operandi). Therefore, the arms exporters could reasonably have assessed that the weapons being supplied would probably be used by both the stated end users and the PMC embedded with FAMa (Wagner).



**FIGURE 4** Main allegations of human rights abuses against Wagner in Africa compared to key arms transfers to Mali.



## Legal implications of transfers made to Mali during Wagner's operations

Of the three countries mentioned above, China is the only one that is a state party to the ATT, which places obligations on states to not authorize exports if they have 'knowledge at the time of authorisation' that there is an 'overriding risk' (interpreted by many states to mean a 'clear' or 'substantial risk')<sup>117</sup> of the weapons being used to commit war crimes, against civilians or for other illegal acts set out in the ATT.

According to guidance on implementing the ATT, 'knowledge at the time' includes information that is public or which states could reasonably obtain – a list of suggested sources that states can draw on is provided.<sup>118</sup> The sources include states' own governmental bodies (such as diplomatic and intelligence services), UN bodies (such as panels of experts), non-governmental research organizations and think tanks, and the media.<sup>119</sup> The information described in the preceding section about Wagner's record in Mali would have been available from a combination of these sources at the time of the three transfers. While information around an active conflict, such as that in Mali, is always chaotic, the key pieces of information to make this assessment would have been available from the sources set out in the ATT guidance.

By 2023, these exporters could reasonably have assessed that the weapons they were exporting to Mali would potentially be used not only by the stated end users but by the Wagner Group, the PMC embedded with FAMa. Section 7 of the ATT makes it clear that, should the required due diligence assessment identify such a risk, the arms transfer should not be authorized. This information could (and arguably should) have been a reason not to authorize the transfer of VP11 vehicles from China. In the case of Türkiye and the UAE, which are not parties to the ATT (both are signatories) and so are not bound by the same legal standards of evidence, the same set of information sources would clearly have been available to them. And this information could have formed part of their export assessments under their own domestic legislation, to adhere to their stated aims of promoting peace and security.

The Chinese government has been clear in statements made at the ATT Conference of States Parties that it does not approve arms exports to PMCs. A statement from 2021 reads:

China will continue to conduct arms trade with sovereign states only [...] [It] requires the end-user and end-use certificates from the recipient governments, with commitments not to transfer the arms imported from China to any third party without prior consent of the Chinese Government. Moreover, China does not permit arms exports to non-state actors.<sup>120</sup>

However, the use of Chinese-made heavy machine guns and armoured vehicles by the Wagner Group in Mali runs counter to this position.

Further images, videos and media reports have emerged to show that Mali received dozens more NORINCO-manufactured MRAPs from China in August and early September 2025.<sup>121</sup> These are VP14 MRAPs, delivered by sea to Guinea Conakry, then overland to Mali. It remains to be seen whether these new vehicles will be used by the Africa Corps, but given the previous approach to arms-sharing with Wagner, this would not be a surprising development.

Mali is also a state party to the ATT, which obliges importing states to provide relevant information to exporters to allow them to assess whether exports should be made<sup>122</sup> – for example, if equipment destined for a national military will also be used by a PMC. The ATT also includes obligations for states to regulate arms imports, to minimize weapons diversion or proliferation.

End-user certificates, issued by the importing country, provide assurance to an exporting country that the arms are going to a legal recipient. Many end-user agreements and arms contracts contain contractual stipulations that forbid any re-transfer of the weapons without notifying the original supplier – China appears to take this approach, as evidenced by their 2021 statement. However, other than these contractual stipulations, the end-user agreements are not inherently legally binding documents.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, in practice, the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs reports that monitoring of end-use documentation is largely neglected,<sup>124</sup> and there is little recourse for enforcement.

The re-routing of armoured vehicles, heavy machine guns and other material from FAMA to Wagner violates the principles and purpose of the ATT and domestic arms control regimes. It changes the nature of what granting an end-user certificate to Mali – or, in future, any other country that has a similar relationship with a PMC – might mean. Exporters need to assess the arms management, governance and human rights record of not only the state authorities but also PMC units operating in the country. Transferring arms to a nation-state military would not normally mean that the arms would be used by a PMC embedded with that military. This highly unusual situation that defies the norms of arms trading regimes, as outlined by the ATT and harmonized regimes, will probably become an increasingly common risk. As states rely more on PMCs, such risks must become a critical element of due diligence assessments. In the context of the Wagner Group, which is arguably the best documented PMC in the world, these risks crystallized in Mali and in other conflict theatres well before these arms transfers were made in 2023, and arguably were already clear in 2022.



## TRANSITION TO THE AFRICA CORPS

In early June 2025, the Wagner Group announced that it was withdrawing from Mali, claiming in a video that it had 'completed' its mission to bring security to Mali and rescue the country from what it described as the West's nefarious and criminal interests.<sup>125</sup> These statements are at odds with Mali's worsening security crisis. In June 2025, the re-emergence of the FLA following clashes in the north underscored the state's fragile control in former rebel strongholds. Meanwhile, between May and July 2025, JNIM launched large-scale attacks in both the north, centre and the south of Mali. In a significant show of force, JNIM carried out attacks on the city of Timbuktu and military camps in Boulkessi (central Mali), causing hundreds of military casualties, and coordinated attacks in the Kayes and Sikasso regions.<sup>126</sup>

Taking Wagner's place is the Africa Corps, which announced in early June 2025 that a contingent of troops had been deployed to Mali, such that 'there will be no changes with the departure of the PMC [Wagner]'.<sup>127</sup> The Africa Corps is an entity controlled by the Russian Ministry of Defence<sup>128</sup> that was created in the aftermath of the Wagner mutiny, which threatened to topple the Putin regime in June 2023. This transition had been in progress for several months – as early as late 2024, the Russian government started to gradually replace Wagner personnel with those from the Africa Corps.<sup>129</sup>

It is not yet fully clear whether the re-routing of FAMa stocks of weapons and equipment for use by PMCs in Mali has ceased with the re-branding of Wagner as the Africa Corps. In January and May 2025, Russia delivered major shipments of military equipment to Mali, including armoured vehicles, tanks and artillery.<sup>130</sup> Although initially unclear whether all or some of this equipment was destined for FAMa or for the Africa Corps, it appears that the Africa Corps has deployed some of the armoured vehicles and aircraft provided by Russia in operations in Mali.<sup>131</sup>

In April 2025, satellite imagery from Bamako identified a Su-24M Russian bomber aircraft, and in June 2025, the Africa Corps shared a video on their Telegram channel from inside the cockpit of a similar bomber, stating that the Su-24M jets are 'carrying out bombing strikes against camps of militants of terrorist organizations in an African country', which is widely assumed to be Mali.<sup>132</sup> This aircraft later crashed into the Niger River.<sup>133</sup> In a statement about the incident, FAMa reported that the aircraft was being flown in an operation on FAMa's behalf (rather than a FAMa operation), further suggesting this was an Africa Corps aircraft.<sup>134</sup>

On 31 July 2025, the UK Ministry of Defence Intelligence shared that 'Africa Corps has deployed with over 100 pieces of major combat equipment to Mali, including main battle tanks, multiple launch rocket systems and tactical bomber aircraft, greatly increasing the firepower available to Russian forces in the country'. This indicates that, at least in the UK's assessment, the equipment was destined for the Africa Corps.<sup>135</sup> It is unclear whether, with the additional equipment provided, the estimated 2 000 Africa Corps personnel will still require arms and equipment from FAMa. However, the possibility remains that the Africa Corps will continue the Wagner precedent of freely using equipment from FAMa and other allies.

Although the Africa Corps' messaging has been keen to distinguish itself from its Wagner predecessor, many similarities remain. According to some estimates, 75%–80% of the Africa Corps is made up of former Wagner personnel, including commanders.<sup>136</sup> In the weeks since its first deployment in Mali, the Africa Corps has followed the Wagner model of taking an active role in field operations, rather than, for example, providing training to Malian forces. In June 2025, shortly after taking over from Wagner, the Africa Corps suffered casualties in the field following an ambush by the FLA in northern Mali between Anéfis and Aguelhok.<sup>137</sup>





## CONCLUSION

**W**agner's operations in Mali may have come to an end and, at the time of writing, negotiations appear to be underway to replace the Wagner Group with the Africa Corps in the CAR, which would mark the end of Wagner's notorious activities in Africa.<sup>138</sup>

Yet the way the Wagner Group have operated and armed itself in Mali – taking weapons seized from insurgents and using weapons from FAMA to supplement their own armouries – still matters.

The Africa Corps is in some (but not all) ways Wagner rebranded. While it may now be an official part of the Russian Ministry of Defence, (whereas links to Wagner were for a long time denied by the Russian state), the Africa Corps shares many of the same personnel and strategic aims. Statements from officials in the CAR show that the Africa Corps still requires payment for its services, much like its PMC predecessor.<sup>139</sup> Although it may have been provided with a wider range of equipment from Russia, it continues to follow in Wagner's footsteps in Mali.

Wagner's operations in Mali provide a case study of a broader phenomenon. As Guterres' statements on the growing role of mercenaries in global conflicts show, the international community will need to deal with how the activities of mercenaries may affect the implementation of arms control regimes and how to hold mercenaries accountable for human rights abuses. The Wagner Group, and other Russian mercenary groups, are not the only actors in this space, and other groups may follow the same model of embedding themselves within national militaries.

The ATT's main objectives are to prevent war crimes, crimes against humanity and human rights abuses. The UNWG has already identified the threat posed by mercenaries to arms proliferation, and the human rights abuses and atrocities that can emanate from unfettered access to arms. This case study, in which a PMC becomes embedded into the supply chain of a national army, provides evidence of a mercenary-linked proliferation risk, which has crystallized in the well-documented massacre of civilians by the Wagner Group in Mali.

Wagner's operations in Mali (and the CAR, as documented by the UN Panel of Experts 2021 report) will not be the only example of re-routing of state-to-state transfers of weapons to private military actors. This re-routing undermines the international legal frameworks put in place to regulate the arms trade in order to prevent arms proliferation, reduce illicit flows and increase transparency in this historically opaque sector. The recommendations below provide some suggestions, directed at key stakeholders, to make international oversight systems and arms control programmes more robust when it comes to the role of mercenaries.

## Recommendations

### **For arms-exporting countries**

Countries that authorize arms exports should undertake additional due diligence when considering an export to any country that has engaged with, hired or collaborated with a PMC. The assessment over whether the export can be made legally (whether a country is obligated to do such an assessment under the ATT or their own domestic legislation) should look at the probability that the exported equipment would be used to commit war crimes or human rights abuses by the national military bodies of the country and the PMCs with whom they work. This includes the PMCs' operations in other countries.

### **For arms manufacturers**

Arms manufacturers should also undertake additional due diligence when looking to supply countries that have engaged with PMCs. After an export is made, verification processes should be carried out to ensure that the equipment is being used by the correct end user. If the contractual obligations regarding designated end-users are not kept (e.g. if the weapons are re-routed to a PMC), manufacturers should notify the authorities of their country and decline any future requests for arms supplies.

### **For international forums on arms control and counter-proliferation**

In forums such as the ATT Conference of States Parties and the UNTOC Conference of Parties Working Group on Firearms, discussions about firearms control and implementation of these treaties should address the emerging role of PMCs in global conflicts, and the impact on arms control mechanisms and on reshaping illicit arms markets. In May 2025, the ATT Working Group on Effective Treaty Implementation suggested that the role of private military actors be a topic of discussion at the upcoming Conference of States Parties.<sup>140</sup> These discussions should take place so that states can make collective decisions on how to implement the ATT in the new context of private military activity, and clearly recognize the additional considerations required in arms trading to align with the purpose of existing regimes, which is to mitigate the risks of arms proliferation and human rights abuses.

### **For the African Union**

The revision of the 1977 Convention for the Elimination of Mercenaries in Africa should include better provisions for monitoring human rights abuses by mercenaries, which in turn should feed into considerations for arms control mechanisms. The scope of the convention should include mercenaries that operate with the backing of a third-party state such as Russia.<sup>141</sup>

### **For international peacekeeping operations**

While clearly already a consideration by international peacekeeping forces, the case study underscores the risk that any equipment left following drawdown processes could be re-used by rogue actors, such as PMCs. This should continue to contribute to decision-making processes about which equipment should be withdrawn or destroyed in line with UN guidelines.



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