WAGNER GROUP IN THE WEST AFRICAN SAHEL: A HUMAN SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

Kester C. Onor
The Nigeria Institute of International Affairs (NIIA)
Onorkester.c@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6839-8463

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64633/wissj.v10i8.21

Keywords

Private Military Companies. Wagner Group. Sahel. Insecurity. Human Security

Abstract

Research Problem: *Limited state capacity within context of intensifying insecurity and political instability triggered by terrorism and jihadist insurgencies has compelled many countries in Africa's Sahel region to rely increasingly on Private Military Contractors (PMCs) like the Wagner Group. While Wagner has brought a measure of security to these regimes and concerns for civilian protection have mounted, the study of the impact of Wagner's operations on civilian populations is inadequately explored.*
Methods/Theory: *Applying a case study design of Mali and Central Africa Republic (CAR), drawing on secondary data, this study uses the human security paradigm of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to examine how Wagner's operations impact civilian populations in the Sahel. .*
Results: *The study finds that Wagner's operations has bolstered the regimes in Mali and CAR but has also undermined human security through extrajudicial killings of civilians, resource exploitation, environmental degradation, forced displacement and entrenchment of authoritarian governments.*
Conclusion: Wagner in the Sahel embodies a contradiction where its operations sustains the state but undermines human security. As such, Wagner's operations underscore the urgent need for regional regulation of PMCs and reframing of African security strategies to prioritise civilian protection.
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The study deepens African security governance by moving the discourse on PMC's away from regime survival to their impact on civilian populations using the human security lens.*
Recommendation: *Africa's regional organisations like ECOWAS and AU should develop a regional regulatory framework for PMCs and build transparent partnerships for effective mechanisms for robust civilian oversight.*

Introduction

Africa's Sahel region is one of the most mineral-endowed but also one of the world's most unstable regions due to widespread insecurity occasioned by terrorism, insurgencies, separatist and irredentist violence, civil wars, and military coups. The efforts of many Sahel states to effectively contain these forces that challenge their sovereignty are constrained by factors including under-resourced and poorly trained

armies. Increasingly, many of these embattled states are relying on Private Military Contractors (PMCs), such as Wagner Group to secure their governments (Shoer, 2024). Though Wagner has achieved some success in regime security its operations have thrown up questions regarding human right violations. Yet, scholarly efforts at examining the growing role of Wagner in the Sahel, have given inadequate attention to its impact on civilian populations. This study examines this problem from a human security perspective.

Across the Sahel multiple countries struggle to check the destabilising activities of violent non-state actors. In Mali, insurgent groups and rebel alliances in Central African Republic (CAR), exercise sovereign control over swathes of the country. Limited state capacity and governance deficits hinder efforts to effectively tackle these violent non-state actors (Ologe & Erameh, 2025). These capacity constraints have traditionally led to reliance on international intervention particularly by France and the United Nations (UN) to contain these violent non-state actors. However, increasing dissatisfaction with the perceived failure of UN peacekeeping and French security initiatives like Operation Barkhane to translate into long-term peace and stability has forced their exit particularly in the wake of new military regimes as in Mali, with anti-western ideologies (Charbonneau, 2021; Charbonneau et al., 2024).

This breakdown of traditional security structures has widened security gaps that governments in Mali and CAR have attempted to fill by contracting PMCs like Wagner as a national security imperative. While the Sahel on account of its widespread insecurities has been the site of historic humanitarian crisis (Meredith, 2013), the growing presence of Wagner especially with its Russian Government affiliations and business model has further complicates security terrain of the Sahel. Unlike traditional mercenaries that provided services for a negotiated sum, Wagner Group provides security services including consultancy, training, and actual fighting in exchange for concessions to extract mineral resources (Dokubo, 2000; Shoer, 2024). Wagner's contracts and actions justified by host governments as critical for checking encroaching violent non-state actors due to the ineffectiveness of existing international partners has thrown up concerns of gross human rights violations. This problem is brought into sharp focus when it is considered that traditional security conceptualisations prioritises the safety of the state. Nonetheless, the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) human security paradigm shifts the priority towards the needs and safety of the people (UNDP, 1994).

Accordingly, existing scholarship on PMCs in Africa focus largely on legal regulatory dimensions (Avant 2005; Singer, 2002), state sovereignty implications (Gwatiwa, 2017), and geostrategic competition (Pokalova, 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights, their state-centric approach does not prioritise the civilian populations caught in-between state government and violent non-state actors struggling for sovereign control coupled with the profit motivations of Wagner eager to protect their economic stake in the Sahel. Thus, studies that examine Wagner's operations in the Sahel through a human security lens are limited with most analysis treating impact on civilians as secondary considerations rather than central analytical concerns (McDonald, 2002). This exposes a gap which is particularly pronounced in the African Sahel where resource exploitation in fragile states intersects with Wagner operations to create a security situation that will benefit from the kind of people-centred analysis enabled by the UNDP Human security paradigm.

Arising out of the above gap and problem this study focuses on the objectives outlined below;

i. To examine the effects of Wagner's actions on Human security in Mali and CAR

ii. To examine the implications of Wagner's activities on regional stability and international security governance

iii. To propose policy recommendations for regulating PMCs and strengthening people-centred security approaches

iv. To address these objectives, the study adopts the UNDP Human Security paradigm which is supported by the theories of neorealism and neopatrimonialism.

The article is organised into six sections. The first one is the introduction above followed by a section that reviewed the literature on human security and PMCs in Africa to establish the state of discourse as it pertains to the Sahel and establishes the gap the study aims to fill. This next section is theoretical framework which discusses the theories adopted by the study and how they are applied to address its objectives. Research methodology follows detailing how the study was carried out. This is followed by discussion and analysis. The study closes with the conclusion which summarises the study and offers recommendations based on findings.

Literature Review

2.1 Sovereignty and Private Military Contractors in Africa

Sovereignty, traditionally defined in the Westphalian sense, refers to the supreme authority of the state within its own territory (Appadorai, 1975). However, in many developing countries, sovereignty is far from settled but contested as they contend with violent non-state actors for effective control of their legally recognised territories (Jackson, 1990). Faced with severe constrains and increasing unwillingness of traditional security partners like the United States (U.S) and France to commit to foreign military engagements offering marginal strategic advantages, many of these states rely increasingly on PMCs to fill the security gap created by dwindling in international support (Chesterman & Lehnardt, 2007). This has contributed to the growing relevance of PMCs in theatres of war. In the Balkans for example, Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI) was crucial to the Dayton negotiations between Croatia and Serbia. Also, PMC personnel worked alongside local and United States forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While there is no settled definition of PMCs they are generally conceived as corporate entities that provide military and security services encompassing consulting, fighting, training, intelligence gathering, and logistical support for profit (Avant, 2005; Chesterman & Lehnardt, 2007; Singer, 2002). While their commercial orientation blurs the line between PMCs and mercenaries, the corporate and professionalised aspects of PMCs creates a theoretical distinction between them and traditional mercenaries proscribed and described by the Geneva Convention's Additional Protocols as persons who are non-nationals but recruited specifically to fight in armed conflict and indeed participate in the fighting for the main purpose of private gain (Dokubo, 2000). In Africa, the end of the Cold War triggered diminishing military interest of the U.S and Soviet Union creating a security gap as the mode of local of wars shifted from inter- to intra-state resulting in insurgencies and civil wars (Collier & Sambanis, 2005; Collier & Venables, 2010; Dokubo, 2000; Elbadawi, 2000).

PMCs emerged to fill this security gap with the most prominent of this era being Executive Outcomes and Sandline International. While

Sandline was a British organisation (Temple & Newbery, 2026), Executive Outcome was formed in 1989 from demobilised special units of the South African Defence Force created to fight the Africa National Congress and its supporters (Chesterman & Lehnardt, 2007). Executive Outcomes is largely credited for setting the corporate template and controversial dichotomy between the traditional mercenarism and PMCs in their interpretation (Dokubo, 2000).

Executive Outcomes spearheaded operations in Angola helping to drive out UNITA rebels from key oil fields and played a key role in the Sierra Leone civil war. Challenges relating to the lack or difficulty in implementing regulations arising from increasing international scrutiny of PMCs regarding accountability and transparency, forced Executive Outcomes to shutdown in 1998 and tainted the general image of PMCs. Nonehteless, as many fragile African countries continue to contend with destabilising internal conflicts PMCs continue to offer short-term remedies to the pressing need of sovereign control and ensuring territorial integrity. This suggests they are increasingly permanent features of Africa's contemporary security landscape (Chesterman & Lehnardt, 2007; Gwatiwa, 2017). This sets the stage for the entrance of Wagner into Africa's Sahel security governance observable from Libya to Mozambique and Burkina Faso with CAR and Mali offering their most visible presence.

2.2 Wagner Group's Evolution and Presence in Africa

Wagner Group was created around 2014 by Yevgeny Prigozhin a businessman closely associated with the Russina government and Dmitry Utkin a former Russian military officer for whose call sign the organisation is supposedly named (Mauceri, 2023). Wagner at the onset was framed as an independent private entity. However, its earliest operations in locations perceived as holding geostrategic value for Russia like Ukraine's Donbas region where it provided support for Russian-backed separatists and Syria where it helped secure crucial military and energy infrastructure to prop up the repressive and widely unpopular regime of Al Assad seen as Russia's last ally in the Middle East has popularised perceptions it is a proxy of the Russian government in its struggle to reassert itself as a superpower status in an increasingly fragmenting global world order (Sukhankin, 2020). Initially, Russia's government maintained distance between itself and Wagner's operations by upholdng its signatory status to international accords that prohibit mercenaries as well as through state laws that denounce such groups. However, the increasingly negative reputation of the Group and the alleged coup attempt by Prigozhin one of its founders against the Russian government, forced its rebranding as the Africa Corp under the direct control of the Russian government. This effectively stripped away any reservations of Wagner being a geostrategic tool of the Russian state.

Wagner's operational model differentiates it from its African predecessos in two respects. Executive Outcome for instance was initially contracted by the Sierra Leonean government for a monthly cash fee which the government increasingly struggled to pay leading it grant the PMC a 25-year mining concession at the Koidu diamond mine (Maciąg, 2019). In contrast, Wagner in Africa offered its services in exchange for economic concessions to mine strategic minerals including oil, gas, gold, diamonds, and rare earth minerals. Also predecessors like Sandline and Executive Outcomes are framed as private entities. In contrast Wagner's initial closeness and later co-optation by the Russian government establishes it as an official medium for advancing Russian foreign policy (Sukhankin, 2020). Russia achieves this by using Wagner to project military power and consolidate foreign policy ties with some of the Sahel's

most fragile and authoritarian regimes as a means to secure access to critical mineral resources and manoeuvre geostrategically in its struggle for global relevance and dominance agains the West and the U.S in particular (Pokalova, 2023).

Wagner's operations in Central African Republic (CAR), date to around 2017 and represented its first major deployment in Africa. Wagner entered CAR out of expedience of regime survival. The country's government, confronted by violent non-state actors including rebels, warlords, and organised criminal syndicates struggling for territorial control (USCIRF, 2023), had relied heavily on international UN peacekeeping missions and French military support to contain these forces (Auerbach, 2022; Carayannis & Fowlis, 2017; Welz, 2014). However, their limited success coupled with UN arm embargoes constrained the countries access to crucial weapons forced its President, Faustin-Archange Touadera to pivot towards Wagner (United Nations, 2023). Wagner's contract included mining concessions in exchange for securing the President, training the country's soldiers, securing in-flow of arms from Sudan, and safeguarding gold and diamond mines (Stronski, 2023). Overtime, Wagner's contract expanded to include fighting non-state forces (llorca, 2025).

Arguably, Wagner's operations in CAR has helped to regain occupied territory and strengthened the government's position against anti-government (Amani Africa, 2025). Nonetheless, this outcome has thrown up controversies pertaining to widespread human right abuse including torture, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence and forced displacement human security with available evidence pointing to widespread (Human Rights Watch, 2022; llorca, 2025). Additionally, arrangement between Wagner and the CAR regime has deepened elite predation through the forcible displacement of civilian populations to access mining sites. This has worsened an existing displacement problem with over 460,000 CAR citizens internally displaced and around another 700,000 are refugees in Cameroon, Congo DRC, Chad, Sudan, and South Sudan (UNHCR, 2024).

Similar to CAR, Wagner's debut in Mali was a desperate reaction to deepening insecurity following the withdrawal of French forces from the country in 2021 (Charbonneau et al., 2024). France's exit was triggered by growing local resentment at the ineffectiveness of existing international security partnerships against jihadist insurgency in the country (Ologe & Erameh, 2025). In reaction, the military regime of Captain Tchiani, established by a 2021 military coup contracted Wagner to help tackle the degrading security situation (Giustozzi, 2024).

Arguably, Mali's pivot away from traditional western security partnerships represented by France and the UN towards alternatives like Wagner was an expedient strategy to legitimise the military regimes and consolidate power in the face of insurgent threats (Ologe & Erameh, 2025). Access to the full package of these traditional security arrangements tended to be constrained by conditions linked to respect for human right, which Wagner could circumvent offering a morally flexible option for these regimes (Amani Africa, 2025). Wagner's operations in Mali from the onset encompassed regime protection and fighting in hot zones like Central Mali. Evidence from these operations suggest incidence of large-scale human rights violations like the March 2022 massacre of civilians in Moura village (Amnesty International, 2023). Evidence implicate Malian security forces alongside Wagner forces under perpetrating these violations under guise of counterinsurgency operations including forced detention and torture of young people in Central Mali under suspicion

of terrorism using electrocution (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The above suggests an exposure of civilian populations to threats that undermine their safety and wellbeing in the deepening Wagner regime. This points to a deeper human security problem thrown up by Wagner operations in Africa. Wagner's modus operandi challenges existing regional security governance mechanisms. For emphasis, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) protocol on Democracy and Good Governance explicitly criminalises military coups yet Wagner's support for the military junta in Mali has enabled them to resist pressures for a quick transition to civilian rule while also emboldening the country in league with neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso to create an alternative security organisation and breakaway from ECOWAS further threatening long term security governance and stability in West Africa (Ologe & Erameh, 2025). This creation of alternative security frameworks impairs the African Union (AU) initiatives like 'Agenda 2063' and 'Silencing the Guns', to protect civilians because they rely heavily on the resilience and effectiveness of regional actors like ECOWAS.

The above points to a burgeoning literature on PMCs and particularly on Wagner in Africa but focusing overwhelmingly on state-centric perspectives and the geostrategic implications of Wagner in Africa. There is a clear disparity on the human security dimensions of Wagner's operations in Africa. In deed only few studies like Bosch & Kimble (2026), have examined how the outsourcing of state military functions to PMCs like Wagner contravene international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Nonetheless studies that are built around the experiences of civilian populations and assess Wagner operations through a human security lens remain scarce. This is a gap which this study aims to address using the UNDP human security paradigm to examine Wagner's impact on civilian populations in Mali and the Central African Republic.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Human security paradigm as the primary theoretical framework with neorealism and neopatrimonialism as supporting theories.

3.1 Human Security Paradigm

The Human Security paradigm put forward by the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) represented a fundamental shift of security focus from traditional views that prioritised the safety of the state from military threats over that of ordinary people within the state. The shift was necessitated by convictions in the post-Cold War era that the main threats to human safety where not external but internal particularly intra-state violence like civil wars, communal clashes, political repression, and socio-economic deprivations like poverty, disease, hunger, unemployment, lack of access to healthcare and education, crime, environmental degradation and human rights violations (UNDP, 1994). The paradigm defined human security as encompassing seven dimensions namely economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. These dimensions where subsumed under and used to operationalise three broad categories of freedoms essentially to the safety of civilian populations. They are freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity.

Freedom from fear which encapsulated protection from physical threats and violence, is guaranteed through personal, community, and political security. Freedom from want embodies protection from socioeconomic threats like hunger, disease and poverty; is ensured through economic, food, and health security. Environmental security is essential to both. Freedom to live in dignity emphasised

that beyond freedom from fear and want, for people to develop fully, they require a conducive environment that enables them to decide and construct their own reality. The seven dimensions link directly into attaining human dignity (Commission on Human Security, 2003).

While the human security paradigm underscores the tension between state survival and human survival (McDonald, 2002). it has been criticised as being too broad to the point of losing usefulness for analysis and policy prioritisation (Paris, 2001). Supporters on the other hand contend that this broadness allows for a holistic approach to the challenge of development that narrower approaches focused on the military defence may be too narrow to capture (Martin & Owen, 2013). Regardless, examining Wagner's operations through the lens of these three freedoms that subsume the seven dimensions of human security enables the study to highlight how narrow focus on regime security through military action can support regime security on the short term by addressing immediate threats to regime security but imperils long-term safety of ordinary citizens.

3.2 Neorealism

Without rehashing its fundamental assumptions, realism as theory for understanding state behaviour argues that states are focused primarily on power consolidation for the purpose of survival and pursuit of national interests in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1993). Neorealism provides a powerful supportive analysis frame by exposing how the governments of fragile states like Mali and CAR in the Sahel approach PMCs like Wagner as a tool for the survival of their regimes when traditional western security alliances increasingly struggle, are unable, or unwilling to guarantee this outcome at all cost. With Wagner's recognition as a vehicle for Russia's geostrategic objectives of power projection, influence extension, resource access, and countering Western influence in Africa, prioritising human safety and welfare is not essentially prioritised. The alignment and prioritisation of Russia's desire for global relevance and regime survival by governments in Mali and CAR over the safety of their citizens makes sense from the realist perspective making it immensely useful for this study.

3.3 Neo-Patrimonialism

This theory in application to post-colonial Africa describes the phenomena where governments appropriate public resources which they distribute to key elements within the state in exchange for regime support (Bach, 2011; Bach & Gazibo, 2013; Meredith, 2013). This transactionary relationship often establishes a predatory patronage system which supports the enrichment of government elites but relegates citizen welfare and normalises violation of their rights. Applied to this study, PMCs like Wagner are not moral agents or neutral providers of security but are employed by the governments of Mali and CAR as tools of power consolidation and regime stabilisation to guarantee elite privileges by securing access to regime sustaining mineral resources.

4.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative methodology using Mali and Central African Republic (CAR) as case studies. The study is reliant entirely on secondary data drawn from multiple sources including academic journal articles, textbooks, and grey literature containing information relevant to the study. The study adopted the secondary source of data because the necessary data required to engage its objectives are available in the public domain. The study purposively selected Mali and CAR as its case studies for multiple reasons. First the CAR has played host to

Wagner since 2017 and therefore not only covers a significant time period that holds rich data for analysis, it also presents the clearest Wagner footprint in the Central Sahel region. Mali on the other hand presents documented cases of human rights violations in the West African axis of the Sahel. Both therefore, make compelling cases from critical sub-regions from which inferences can be made regarding Wagner's operations within the broader Sahel region.

Data for the study was collected and analysed using desk research which was adequate considering its qualitative methodology. The desk research operated by collecting data based on the study's defined objectives. Collected data was then screened to isolate useful information. This was followed by a cross-checking process to gain insights which were then synthesised to answer the study's objectives.

5.0 Impact of Wagner's Regime Securing Operations on Human Security in CAR and Mali

In CAR and Mali, Wagner's writ have expanded from protecting ruling elites to participation in actual fighting against rebels and insurgent groups as necessary component of regime protection (Bauer, 2025; llorca, 2025). As mentioned above, Wagner provided a moral flexibility and significant latitude regarding human rights that encumbered traditional Western partners. This allowed it to push back advancing rebel groups in Mali as well as creating protecting critical buffers around the capital city of CAR, there has been fallout that has negatively impacted civilian poplations as the Mourra and . The human security paradigm demonstrates that while Wagner's activities help to secure regimes it generates outcomes that imperil civilian populations.

In the Central African Republic humanitarian reports have documented evidence of extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced displacement carried out by state security forces aided by Wagner personnel (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In the case of Mali, villages like Moura have suffered massacres by security operatives during supposed counterinsurgency operations. A major takeway from this is the clear disregard for drawing a distinctive line between combatants and non-combatants (Human Rights Watch, 2023).. This between violating international humanitarian law undermines freedom from fear imperatives throught he exposure of ordinary citizens to insecurities that threaten their safety and dignity.

Wagner's focus on securing the state and its elites at the expense of civilian safety is logical from a neopatrimonial perspective. The organisation's military service for mining concessions effectively integrates it into the patron-client relationship of neopatrimonialism which as precedent as shown in Africa tdoes not necessarily the welfare of the citizens but those of the political elite. Accordngly, Wagner's success beyond perpetuating predatory politicians, it has also helped to preserve dictatorial regimes in Mali and CAR that directly threatens the agency of vulnerable local populations already confronting adverse poverty and other socio-economic deprivations as well as environmental degradation arising from unregulated mining that threaten community safety.

Table 1: Comparative Summary Table of Wagner's in CAR and Mali

	CAR	Mali
Year of Entry	2017	2021
Initial Mandate	Regime protection, training, securing mining sites	Regime protection
Economic Arrangement	Mining concession-for-security (gold, diamonds)	Mining concessions-for-security (gold)
Human Rights Concerns	Extrajudicial killings, torture, forced displacement, sexual violence	forced detention, torture of young people in Central Mali suspected of terrosim using electrocution
Impact on Human Security	Severe undermining of all dimensions	Severe undermining of all dimensions
Regional Implications	Fragmentation, resource exploitation	Creation of AES, fragmentation of ECOWAS, undermining established security frameworks

Source: Compiled by Author

5.1 Implications for Regional Stability

In the Sahel governments such as those of Mali and CAR frame Wagner's presence as lynchpin for reasserting their sovereignty against violent non-state actors and unnecessary external influence (Ologe & Erameh, 2025). Yet the outsourcing of core security functions to PMCs have corrosive effects on sovereignty (Fitzi, 2009). Accordingly, the increasing integration of Wagner into the security architecture of CAR and Mali as an autonomous military and economic actor not only challenges traditional realist notions of state monopoly on force creates security dependencies that undermine sovereignty and long term stability. This triggers the perpetual destabilisation of states in the Sahel with long-term negative implications for human security due to geopolitical ambitions of the foreign power that Wagner actually represents (Kumar, 2023).

The above exert pressures that have critical region wide implications. For decades regional organisations like ECOWAS and AU have struggled to contain violence in the region contending with financial constraints and coordination challenges. Yet the presence of Wagner (rebranded) as the African Corp, supported by Russia resulted in the creation of the AES further complicating the volatile regional security landscape. In deed the emergence of AES has had real security impact following the exit of Mali in 2022 from the G5 Sahel a critical security partnership for combating counterterrorism, followed by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023 leading to the dissolution of the organisation (Samaan, 2026). Outsourcing military security to Wagner and bypassing established regional security architectures undermine these organisations and their fragmentation erodes prospects of sustainable solutions to perennial challenge of insurgency and terrorism (Ologe & Erameh, 2025).

Arguably, Wagner's military-centric measures prioritising hard measures which has resulted in the death of at least 1,800 civilians in Mali and CAR (U.S. Department of State, 2024) (US Department. Incidents like the 2022 Moura massacre where over 300 civilians were summarily executed over a 5-day period carries within it the seeds for the radicalisation of aggrieved citizens and communities thus providing future fighters and support for insurgencies and rebel groups thus fuelling and perpetuating ongoing conflicts particularly in Mali.

Wagner's provision of military services as prerequisite for mineral extraction has resulted in economic insecurities that deepen destabilisation of local and regional economies. In CAR where concessions have granted Wagner control over lucrative gold and diamond resources bypass state treasuries and promote corruption. It also compromises the livelihood of displaced local artisanal miners deepening socio-economic deprivations like poverty and environmental grievances located at the root of the Sahel's history of violent conflicts.

Another avenue via which Wagner's operations in the Sahel negatively affects regional stability is how it intensifies the geostrategic competition for influence between Russia and powerful Western countries like France and the U.S. This has effectively transformed the region as site for proxy battles by external actors. Additionally, Wagner represents a unique regulatory challenge for regional organisations like ECOWAS and AU. This is due in part to the secrecy surrounding its contracts making it difficult to hold the PMC accountable within the sovereign borders where they operate.

6.0 Conclusion

In response to dominant approaches that treat PMCs through the state-centric approach, this study using the UNDP human security paradigm, supported by neorealism and neopatrimonialism examined why fragile African states contract PMCs like Wagner and how their presence impacts civilian populations in Africa's Sahel. Dominant state-centric approaches treat civilian protection as a dependent variable while the human security paradigm adopts civilian safety as its main variable thus creating crucial insights into how the operations of profit-oriented PMCs impact civilian safety in fragile states with long histories of violence and authoritarian rule.

Using CAR and Mali as cases, the study finds that Wagner's operations in these countries has helped to secure at least on the short term of the regime from violent non-state actors like insurgent and rebel groups competing for sovereign authority at the detriment of long term human security. The study also finds that Wagner presence is enabling the destabilisation and fragmentation of established security frameworks as evident in the creation of AES hampering regional capacity for coordinated action against violent non-state actors further destabilising the region and threatening the safety of civilian populations. The study concludes that considering Africa's significant humanitarian and security needs, tackling violence that threaten civilian populations must centralise human security emphasising freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to dignified existence.

Thus, entrenching the human security paradigm at the centre of national, regional, and international strategies can more pragmatic pathways ending violence and stabilising the Sahel region of Africa. Considering that Wagner in real terms is a medium for the advancement of the interests of external power that destabilise the region, reducing reliance on Wagner through the development of military capacities that prioritise human security is essential to ending violence and stabilising the region for long term civilian safety. Additionally, Africa's apex organisations like ECOWAS and AU must develop clear regulatory frameworks to control PMCs where their services are unavoidable.

References

Amani Africa. (2025, September 18). Update on the Situation in Central African Republic. Amani Africa. https://amaniafrica-et.org/update-on-the-situation-in-central-african-republic/

Amnesty International. (2023, May 17). Mali: The Perpetrators of the Moura Massacre must be Prosecuted and Tried by a Competent COurt. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/mali-les-auteurs-des-tueries-a-moura-doivent-etre-poursuivis-et-juges-devant-un-tribunal-competent/

Appadorai, A. (1975). The Substance of Politics. Oxford University Press.

Auerbach, J. (2022). Between postcolonialism and equal partnership: The legitimization strategies of French military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic. LIT Verlag.

Avant, D. D. (2005). The market for force: The consequences of privatizing security. Cambridge University Press.

Bach, D. C. (2011). Patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism: Comparative trajectories and readings. Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 49(3), 275–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2011.582731

Bach, D., & Gazibo, M. (Eds). (2013). Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond (0 edn). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203145623

Bauer, R. (2025, December 7). The Wagner Group is Leaving Mali. But Russian Mercenaries Aren't Going Anywhere. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/06/the-wagner-group-is-leaving-mali-but-russian-mercenaries.html

Carayannis, T., & Fowlis, M. (2017). Lessons from African Union–United Nations cooperation in peace operations in the Central African Republic. African Security Review, 26(2), 220–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2017.1302707

Charbonneau, B. (2021). Counter-insurgency governance in the Sahel. International Affairs, 97(6), 1805–1823. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab182

Charbonneau, B., Debos, M., Olsson, C., & Wasinski, C. (2024). OldWine in New Bottles:? France's Belated Embrace of the 'War on Terror' and the Co-Production of Violence. In The French War on Terror: A Relational Approach to (counter-)Terrorism (1st edn, pp. 71–100). Routledge.

Chesterman, S., & Lehnardt, C. (2007). From Mercenaries to Market: The Rise and Regulation of Private Military Companies. Oxford University Press.

Collier, P., & Sambanis, N. (Eds). (2005). Understanding Civil War (Volume 1: Africa): Evidence and Analysis. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-6047-7

Collier, P., & Venables, A. J. (2010). Natural Resources and State Fragility. European University Institute. https://cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/d195d15e-ebf3-5906-8e0d-20061285cbf7/content

Commission on Human Security (Ed.). (2003). Human security now: Protecting and empowering people.

Dokubo, C. (2000). 'An Army for rent', private military corporations and civil conflicts in Africa: The case of Sierra Leone. Civil Wars, 3(2), 51–64.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240008402438

Elbadawi, E. (2000). Why are there so many civil wars in Africa? Understanding and preventing violent conflict. Journal of African Economics, 9(3), 244–269. https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/9.3.244

Fitzi, G. (2009). Sovereignty, legality and democracy: Politics in the work of Max Weber. Max Weber Studies, 9(1), 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1353/max.2009.a808847

Giustozzi, A. (2024, March 27). A Mixed Picture: How Mali Views the Wagner Group. The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI). https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mixed-picture-how-mali-views-wagner-group

Gwatiwa, T. T. (2017). Private Military and Security Companies policy in Africa: Regional policy stasis as Agency in international politics. Scientia Militaria, 44(2). https://doi.org/10.5787/44-2-1176

Human RIghts Watch. (2022, May 3). Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/03/central-african-republic-abuses-russia-linked-forces

Human Rights Watch. (2023, June 24). Mali: New Atrocities by Malian Army, Apparent Wagner Fighters. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/24/mali-new-atrocities-malian-army-apparent-wagner-fighters

Jackson, R. H. (1990). Quasi-states: Sovereignty, international relations, and the Third World. Cambridge University Press.

Kumar, R. (2023, December). The Wagner Group in the Central Sahel: Decolonization or Destabilization? Counter Extremism Project. https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-12/Wagner_in_CS_121523.pdf

Ladd, S. (2026, June 15). Is Nigeria's Mass Kidnapping Crisis Spreading? Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). https://acleddata.com/expert-comment/nigerias-mass-kidnapping-crisis-spreading

llorca, A. (2025, June 5). The Wagner Group and UN Sanctions: Inconsistent Reporting. Armed Groups and International Law. https://www.armedgroups-internationallaw.org/2025/06/05/the-wagner-group-and-un-sanctions-inconsistent-reporting/

Maciąg, M. (2019). Engagement of Executive Outcomes in Sierra Leone – utility assessment. Security and Defence Quarterly, 27(5), 57–71. https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/112110

Martin, M., & Owen, T. (Eds). (2013). Routledge Handbook of Human Security (0 edn). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315885926

Mauceri, J. (2023, July 7). The Wagner Group Explained. Yale University Press. https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2023/07/07/the-wagner-group-explained/

McDonald, M. (2002). Human Security and the Construction of Security. Global Society, 16(3), 277–295. https://doi.org/10.1080/0953732022014807 6

Meredith, M. (2013). The state of Africa: A history of the continent since independence (Paperback edition). Simon & Schuster, A CBS Company.

Ologe, U. H., & Erameh, N. I. (2025). The Implications of the Alliance of Sahelian States for Regional INtegration, Stability and Development in Africa. The ROund

Table. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10/1080/00358533.2025.2554979

Paris, R. (2001). Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air? International Security, 26(2), 87–102. https://doi.org/10.1162/016228801753191141

Pokalova, E. (2023). The Wagner Group in Africa: Russia's Quasi-State Agent of Influence. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2231642

Samaan, J.-L. (2026). The Rise and Fall of the G5 Sahel: Extraversion Strategies and the Limits of Regional Security Cooperation. International Peacekeeping, 33(4), 599–625. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2026.2677058

Shoer, S. (2024). Proxy Power and Precious Minerals: Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa through the Wagner Group. Inter Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations, 2(1), 57–70.

Singer, P. W. (2002). Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry and Its Ramifications for International Security. International Security, 26(3), 186–220. https://doi.org/10.1162/016228801753399763

Stronski, P. (2023, February 28). Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa's Sahel Region. Carnegie Foundation for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/02/russias-growing-footprint-in-africas-sahel-region?lang=en

Sukhankin, S. (2020). Russian Private Military Contractors in Sub-Saharan Africa: Strengths, Limitations, and Implications. IFRI: Institut Francais des Relations Internationales. https://coilink.org/20.500.12592/wmjjqm

Temple, J., & Newbery, S. (2026). Assessing Sandline International's reputation as a private military company. Small Wars & Insurgencies, 37(1), 29–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2572593

UNDP. (1994). Human Development Report 1994. https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr1994encompletenostats.pdf

UNHCR. (2024). The Central African Republic is Facing a Humanitarian Crisis marked by Insecurity, Climate Shocks, and Protracted Displacement. United Nations Refugee Agency. https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/central-african-republic-emergency

United Nations. (2023, July 27). Security COuncil Extends Arms Embargo on Central African Republic, Mandate of Expert Panel, Adopting Resolution 2693 (2023) by 13 Votes in Favour, 2 Abstentions. United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15369.doc.htm

U.S. Department of State. (2024, February 4). The Wagner Group's Atrocities in Africa: Lies and Truth. U.S. Department of State. https://2021-2025.state.gov/the-wagner-groups-atrocities-in-africa-lies-and-truth/

USCIRF. (2023, February). Factsheet: Religious Freedom in Central African Republic. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023%20Factsheet%20-%20Religious%20Freedom%20Concerns%20in%20Central%20Africa.pdf

Waltz, K. N. (1993). The Emerging Structure of International Politics. International Security, 18(2), 44. https://doi.org/10.2307/2539097

Welz, M. (2014). Briefing: Crisis in the Central African Republic and the international response. African Affairs, 113(453), 601–610. https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adu048