

# An Iron Curtain in the Sahel

by [Kyle Robertson \(/experts/kyle-robertson\)](/experts/kyle-robertson)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Kyle Robertson \(/experts/kyle-robertson\)](/experts/kyle-robertson)

Kyle Robertson is a research assistant with The Washington Institute's Rubin Family Arab Politics Program.



Brief Analysis

**Russia is taking advantage of recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to embed itself in the Sahel. However, its indiscriminate counterterrorism tactics come with a cost for their forces and the regimes it protects.**

**W**eak, corrupt governments with limited resources and active insurgencies set the conditions for military Juntas to seize power in Burkina Faso, Mali, and, most recently, Niger. The region's militaries **blamed** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60112043>) persistent violence on civilian leaders and foreign forces—particularly France—that they viewed as inept. Additionally, the perceived interference of the United States and the failure of its **counterterrorism policy** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/07/us/politics/us-terrorism-west-africa.html>) to address local grievances drove recruitment for insurgent groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel. Russian disinformation—which, according to the **Africa Center for Strategic Studies** (<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>), accounts for roughly half of disinformation campaigns in West Africa—compounded these failures by **targeting** (<https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/russian-intelligence-is-pushing-false-claims-of-u-s-biological-testing-in-africa-u-s-says-ea817592>) the United States and using themes of **anti-imperialism and neocolonialism** (<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1335015/politique/russie-afrique-de-kemi-seba-a-nathalie-yamb-les-influenceurs-pro-poutine-du-continent/>) to inflame anti-western sentiment. Once the coups occurred, the United States was required by law to **cut** ([https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/u-s-says-niger-uprising-was-a-coup-limiting-aid-to-counterterrorism-ally-ca44bf6b?mod=article\\_inline](https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/u-s-says-niger-uprising-was-a-coup-limiting-aid-to-counterterrorism-ally-ca44bf6b?mod=article_inline)) off (<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN25H18Z/>) security assistance, ending more than a decade of investment in the Sahel's security infrastructure and giving Russia an opening in the region.

## Seizing an Opening

Russia provides protection for the Sahel's military regimes **in exchange** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68322230>) for access to strategically important **natural resources**

[\(https://www.africanews.com/2022/12/08/burkina-faso-grants-permit-for-new-gold-mine/\)](https://www.africanews.com/2022/12/08/burkina-faso-grants-permit-for-new-gold-mine/) such as [\(https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/mali-signs-agreement-with-russia-build-gold-refinery-2023-11-22/\)](https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/mali-signs-agreement-with-russia-build-gold-refinery-2023-11-22/), which helps to [circumvent \(https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/the-unfreezable-asset-gold-sanctions-and-russia/\)](https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/the-unfreezable-asset-gold-sanctions-and-russia/) Western sanctions and fund the war in Ukraine. Sending private military contractors to the Sahel did not incur a heavy cost on the Kremlin, allowing Russia to reap large rewards from small investments. Moscow was able to take advantage of the existing infrastructure built by the Wagner Group in Libya to facilitate this presence, using air bases in areas controlled by east Libyan-based warlord Khalifa Haftar as [technical stops \(https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/panel-experts/reports\)](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/panel-experts/reports) for military flights carrying equipment and personnel traveling from Russian bases in Syria to Mali and the Central African Republic, among others. More recently, Russia used the port of Tobruk to supply its operations in Africa, such as in April 2024 when a Russian cargo vessel reportedly [unloaded up to 6,000 tons \(https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-backs-warlord-tighten-grip-africa-libya-mm93wc6nq\)](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-backs-warlord-tighten-grip-africa-libya-mm93wc6nq) of military equipment likely [destined \(https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/04/19/russia-funneling-weapons-through-libyan-port-eying-gateway-to-africa/\)](https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/04/19/russia-funneling-weapons-through-libyan-port-eying-gateway-to-africa/) for Russian personnel in Libya and the Sahel. This was reportedly the [fifth \(https://twitter.com/fawaselmedia/status/1779532119053586496\)](https://twitter.com/fawaselmedia/status/1779532119053586496) such shipment in the previous 45 days.

As the United States and others distanced themselves from Junta leaders, Russia embraced them. The Russian Ambassador to Mali became the [first \(https://www.dw.com/fr/des-questions-sur-la-pr%C3%A9sence-russe-aux-c%C3%B4t%C3%A9s-de-la-junte/a-54687932\)](https://www.dw.com/fr/des-questions-sur-la-pr%C3%A9sence-russe-aux-c%C3%B4t%C3%A9s-de-la-junte/a-54687932) foreign diplomat to [meet \(https://ria.ru/20200821/mali-1576107993.html\)](https://ria.ru/20200821/mali-1576107993.html) with representatives of the military leaders that seized power in August 2020. Mali later requested help from Russian [private military companies \(https://www.rferl.org/a/lavrov-mali-vagner-russia/31478097.html\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/lavrov-mali-vagner-russia/31478097.html) to combat Islamist insurgents for about 6 billion CFA francs (\$10.8 million) [\(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-deal-allowing-russian-mercenaries-into-mali-is-close-sources-2021-09-13/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-deal-allowing-russian-mercenaries-into-mali-is-close-sources-2021-09-13/) a month in exchange for military training and providing protection for senior officials. By January 2022, Malian authorities [confirmed the presence \(https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-troops-deploy-to-timbuktu-in-mali-after-french-withdrawal/6385948.html\)](https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-troops-deploy-to-timbuktu-in-mali-after-french-withdrawal/6385948.html) of about 400 Russian military personnel  [\(https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220107-russian-military-advisors-arrive-in-mali-after-french-troop-reduction\)](https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220107-russian-military-advisors-arrive-in-mali-after-french-troop-reduction), including the Wagner Group. This presence peaked at [over 2,000 military personnel \(https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mixed-picture-how-mali-views-wagner-group\)](https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mixed-picture-how-mali-views-wagner-group) in early 2023, with current estimates at about 1,000 Russian soldiers [\(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/25/west-africa-sahel-military-junta/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/25/west-africa-sahel-military-junta/).

After Ibrahim Traore [took power \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/heavy-gunfire-heard-burkina-faso-capital-reuters-witnesses-2022-09-30/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/heavy-gunfire-heard-burkina-faso-capital-reuters-witnesses-2022-09-30/) in Burkina Faso, Yevgeny Prigozhin [congratulated \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63171771\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63171771) him as a “truly worthy and courageous son of his motherland.” A source close to Traore’s government announced in 2023 that Burkina Faso was [expecting the arrival of Russian instructors \(https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546\)](https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546) to train soldiers on how to use equipment purchased from Russia. Although Traore denied the presence of Russian forces or the Wagner Group, he referred to Russia as a [strategic ally \(https://www.reuters.com/world/burkina-faso-interim-leader-hails-russia-strategic-ally-2023-05-05/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/burkina-faso-interim-leader-hails-russia-strategic-ally-2023-05-05/) and a major supplier of military equipment. By November 2023, about 20 Russian military personnel  [\(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/11/18/burkina-faso-is-strengthening-its-alliance-with-russia\\_6266977\\_124.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/11/18/burkina-faso-is-strengthening-its-alliance-with-russia_6266977_124.html) arrived in Burkina Faso, followed by roughly 100  [\(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russian-troops-deploy-burkina-faso-2024-01-25/#:~:text=Jan%2025%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20A,security%20sources%20said%20on%20Thursday.\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russian-troops-deploy-burkina-faso-2024-01-25/#:~:text=Jan%2025%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20A,security%20sources%20said%20on%20Thursday.) Russian military personnel in January 2024. Recent estimates put the total number of Russian military personnel at [between](#)

200 and 300 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/07/14/the-bear-brigade-the-kremlin-s-new-paramilitary-outfit-in-africa\\_6684180\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/07/14/the-bear-brigade-the-kremlin-s-new-paramilitary-outfit-in-africa_6684180_124.html)), including members of the GRU, Africa Corps, former Wagner soldiers, and the [Bear Brigade \(https://x.com/Jack\\_Mrgln/status/1801231635792171397\)](https://x.com/Jack_Mrgln/status/1801231635792171397).

Russia and Niger had been increasing their security cooperation long before the [2023 coup \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/niger-president-says-democracy-will-be-saved-following-coup-2023-07-27/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/niger-president-says-democracy-will-be-saved-following-coup-2023-07-27/). Russia previously signed a draft [military cooperation agreement \(https://tass.com/defense/959862\)](https://tass.com/defense/959862) with Niger and agreed to supply it with [12 Mi-35 attack helicopters \(https://newsaf.cgtn.com/news/2019-10-24/Russia-signs-deal-to-supply-Niger-with-12-military-helicopters-L2afxL89W/index.html\)](https://newsaf.cgtn.com/news/2019-10-24/Russia-signs-deal-to-supply-Niger-with-12-military-helicopters-L2afxL89W/index.html), but security ties expanded after Niger [revoked \(https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/17/world/africa/niger-orders-american-troops-out.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/17/world/africa/niger-orders-american-troops-out.html) its military cooperation deal with the United States in March following a [meeting \(https://www.state.gov/u-s-officials-travel-to-niger/\)](https://www.state.gov/u-s-officials-travel-to-niger/) in which U.S. officials [accused \(https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/niger-once-key-u-s-counterterrorism-ally-ends-military-ties-7db66dbe\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/niger-once-key-u-s-counterterrorism-ally-ends-military-ties-7db66dbe) Niger of exploring a deal to sell uranium to Iran. (Russia has also sought [uranium assets \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-06-03/russia-said-to-look-for-uranium-assets-in-niger?sref=FVpgSLg0\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-06-03/russia-said-to-look-for-uranium-assets-in-niger?sref=FVpgSLg0) in Niger held by Orano SA, a French company who recently had their permit for a major uranium mine [withdrawn \(https://www.rfi.fr/fr/en-bref/20240620-le-niger-retire-le-permis-d-exploitation-d-une-grande-mine-d-uranium-%C3%A0-orano-confirme-l-entreprise-fran%C3%A7aise\)](https://www.rfi.fr/fr/en-bref/20240620-le-niger-retire-le-permis-d-exploitation-d-une-grande-mine-d-uranium-%C3%A0-orano-confirme-l-entreprise-fran%C3%A7aise) by the Junta.) After extensive negotiations, the U.S. military was ordered to remove its personnel from the country and cease its drone operations at [Air Base 201 \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3861097/joint-statement-from-the-us-department-of-defense-and-the-department-of-nationa/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3861097/joint-statement-from-the-us-department-of-defense-and-the-department-of-nationa/) in Agadez, which cost [\\$110 million \(https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/u-s-seeks-drone-bases-in-coastal-west-africa-to-stem-islamist-advance-21282861?mod=article\\_inline\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/u-s-seeks-drone-bases-in-coastal-west-africa-to-stem-islamist-advance-21282861?mod=article_inline) to build and once hosted over 1,100 U.S. military personnel. The next month Niger announced the arrival of Russian [military instructors and personnel \(https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-has-sent-military-instructors-niger-says-niger-state-tv-2024-04-11/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-has-sent-military-instructors-niger-says-niger-state-tv-2024-04-11/) –some of whom reportedly [transited \(https://verstka.media/rossiya-naraschivaet-voennoe-prisutstvie-v-livii\)](https://verstka.media/rossiya-naraschivaet-voennoe-prisutstvie-v-livii) Libya. The incoming Russian troops were stationed [in close proximity \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russian-troops-enter-base-housing-us-military-niger-us-official-says-2024-05-02/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russian-troops-enter-base-housing-us-military-niger-us-official-says-2024-05-02/) to U.S. forces at a base in Niamey, signaling a changing of the guard in the Sahel's great power competition.

### **Partnership or Dependence?**

Despite the influx of military equipment and personnel, Russia has proven to be an unreliable security partner, especially due to their extreme but ineffective counterterrorism tactics. The Wagner Group was implicated in the [massacre of hundreds of civilians \(https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/world/africa/mali-massacre-investigation.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/world/africa/mali-massacre-investigation.html) in Mali in March 2022 and a recent Human Rights Watch report [accused \(https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/mali-army-wagner-group-atrocities-against-civilians\)](https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/mali-army-wagner-group-atrocities-against-civilians) the Wagner Group of conducting indiscriminate drone strikes and summary killings. Yet, in 2023, there were an estimated [11,643 fatalities \(https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2024-deaths-militant-islamist-violence-africa-rise/\)](https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2024-deaths-militant-islamist-violence-africa-rise/) linked to militant Islamist violence in the Sahel, a nearly threefold increase from 2020 when the first military coup in the region occurred. Additionally, last month [dozens of Wagner fighters \(https://apnews.com/article/mali-wagner-russia-sahel-tuareg-extremism-conflict-949c217b99f4f2cbf07805345f399273\)](https://apnews.com/article/mali-wagner-russia-sahel-tuareg-extremism-conflict-949c217b99f4f2cbf07805345f399273) were killed in an ambush by JNIM and Tuareg separatists near Tinzaouaten in northern Mali in the [worst-ever known loss \(https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/29/africa/russian-mercenaries-wagner-killed-mali-intl-latam/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/29/africa/russian-mercenaries-wagner-killed-mali-intl-latam/index.html) for Russian mercenaries in Africa. In sum, a 2022 CTC Sentinel [report assessed \(https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel\)](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel) that Wagner presided over a deterioration in Mali's

security situation and was aggravating the Jihadi threat in the Sahel.

Paradoxically, Russia's inability to improve the counterterrorism threat only deepens the dependence of Sahel militaries on its assistance. The worsening situation questions the long-term viability of regimes that have based their credibility on curtailing Islamist violence. Juntas therefore become more reliant on Russia to ensure the survival of their own regime. For example, in June Russia sent between 80 to 120 Russian (<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20240618-burkina-faso-des-soldats-maliens-et-des-mercenaires-russes-de-wagner-sont-arriv%C3%A9s-%C3%A0-ouagadougou>) Africa Corps operatives and Malian troops to Burkina Faso to ensure ([https://x.com/Wamaps\\_news/status/1802627292339884134](https://x.com/Wamaps_news/status/1802627292339884134)) Traore's safety and help suppress a reported mutiny in the army following an attack by insurgents that killed over 100 soldiers (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-junta-leader-denies-reports-army-mutiny-2024-06-20/>). This new focus on regime survival instead of counterinsurgency will only make the security situation worse.

### **Future Outlook**

Russia is content with the status quo as long as it maintains its influence with Juntas that grant it access to the Sahel's lucrative resources. However, the instability in the region that is aggravated by Russia's presence is beginning to spread (<https://apnews.com/article/un-sahel-west-africa-alqaida-islamic-state-88873047ebd7aeda418e95f30c0c1693>), making the status quo less tenable for neighboring states. The possible disintegration (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-african-bloc-says-it-risks-disintegration-if-junta-led-states-leave-2024-07-07/>) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) after the decision by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to withdraw (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/28/niger-mali-burkina-faso-announce-withdrawal-from-ecowas>) and form a confederation ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/07/06/niger-s-military-leader-states-niger-mali-burkina-irrevocably-turned-backs-on-ecowas\\_6676875\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/07/06/niger-s-military-leader-states-niger-mali-burkina-irrevocably-turned-backs-on-ecowas_6676875_4.html)) designed to compete with the bloc only complicates the situation further. The ability of the so-called Alliance of Sahel States (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-burkina-faso-sign-sahel-security-pact-2023-09-16/>) (AES) to curb (<https://x.com/DirpaFa/status/1818400669059235934>) Islamist violence in the Kidal region of Mali, where the deadly ambush on Russian mercenaries occurred last month, will be a litmus test for the new confederation's future.

Russia's growing influence in the Sahel should not be ignored by the United States and its partners. Its presence adds to the chaos afflicting the region and contributes to the influx of migrants toward Europe and the stresses weighing on governments in coastal and North Africa. The conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East rightfully captivate Washington, but it is important that the United States does not turn a blind eye to West Africa as Russia's military (<https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2024/02/19/army-overseeing-construction-of-new-secret-northern-base,110160770-art>), diplomatic (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/lavrov-says-russia-plans-to-open-embassy-in-sierra-leone-by-end-of-year/3212844>), and economic (<https://rosatom.ru/en/press-centre/news/rosatom-together-with-partners-from-the-republic-of-guinea-study-the-possibility-of-deploying-floati/>) presence, as well as its popularity (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigeria-arrests-seven-polish-nationals-raising-russian-flags-protests-2024-08-07/>), continue to grow. ❖

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