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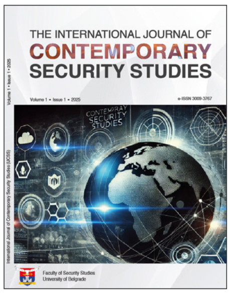

Article

Strategic Roles of Private Military Companies: The Evolution and Privatization of Warfare in the Context of Contemporary Global Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the evolution and strategic roles of private military companies (PMCs) in contemporary conflicts, with a particular focus on their growth and the increasing privatisation of warfare. Private military companies (PMCs), especially in countries with weak central authorities, have assumed critical security functions, often providing military support in situations where state institutions are unable to provide adequate protection. Private military companies originating from the United States have emerged as key actors in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where they have been engaged in a wide range of services, from logistical support to direct participation in combat operations. Moreover, an increasing number of PMCs are emerging from countries that have not traditionally been associated with such firms, including various European nations, China, and Russia, which has become a key player in the private military sector. This development further complicates the regulation of their operations on an international level. Africa is becoming a new theatre for the engagement of private military companies, where they not only pursue business interests but often act as instruments for expanding the political and economic influence of their countries of origin. Although these entities provide essential security services, their presence raises serious ethical and legal concerns, as many countries lack harmonised legislation to regulate their activities, particularly in the context of international norms and human rights. The future of private military companies will depend on the harmonisation of international regulations and the development of effective oversight mechanisms that ensure the protection of human rights and the rule of law in the context of global conflict.

KEYWORDS

Private military companies, global conflicts, privatisation of warfare, legal framework, political influence.

1. Introduction

The world's first modern private military company, *WatchGuard International Ltd*, was established in 1965 by Scottish officer and war veteran Colonel Sir David Stirling—the renowned founder of the elite British military unit SAS (Special Air Service)—together with fellow former SAS veteran John Woodhouse (McFate, 2014, p. 120) While headquartered in London, the company was legally registered as an offshore entity on the island of Jersey, enabling greater discretion in its operations.

At a time when the term "mercenary" was still shrouded in mystery—often associated with former members of elite military units, war veterans, and adventurers with unique life experiences—Stirling envisioned something different: the creation of the first professional, legally registered private organisation that would offer military and security services worldwide, primarily serving the interests of British foreign policy and its allies (Vračević & Cvetković, 2014;2019ab).

The company's operations were most active on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. There, former SAS operatives provided expert guidance to local governments in the fields of military training, counter-insurgency, and direct confrontation with armed threats. Their presence was not merely tactical but also carried strategic weight, aligning with broader British interests in the region. (Kinsey, 2006, p. 246)

One of the company's most ambitious—and controversial—ventures occurred during the 1970s when *WatchGuard* devised a plan for a covert operation in Libya. The objective was to overthrow Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and restore the deposed King Idris to power—an audacious attempt at regime change in North Africa. Although the operation had all the elements of an espionage thriller, the plan was ultimately abandoned. Fearing a diplomatic fallout with the Arab world, the British government instructed Stirling's company to withdraw from the mission. (McFate, 2014, p. 135)

In 1972, David Stirling stepped down from his active role within the company but remained deeply involved in clandestine efforts. In the latter half of the decade, he turned his attention to forming a parallel organisation aimed at undermining the labour movement in the United Kingdom, demonstrating that his ambitions extended far beyond conventional security engagements.

With the founding of *WatchGuard International*, Stirling laid the groundwork for what would become the modern private military industry, establishing a model that, in the decades to come, would evolve into a powerful and frequently controversial sector within global security (Cvetkovic & Janković, 2020; Janković et al., 2019; Cvetković et al., 2021).

2. Private Military Companies – Definition, Scope, and Legal Framework

Private military companies (PMCs) today represent international firms legally established to provide a broad range of services in the domains of security, military consulting, and operational support. Their activities encompass everything from the protection of personnel and infrastructure to the training of armed forces, logistical support, participation in combat missions, management of complex military systems, and even intelligence operations. These companies operate on a contractual basis with governments, international organisations, and even private corporations active in crisis and conflict zones. (Vračević, 2024, p.21)

In modern practice, PMCs may function as independent entities specialising exclusively in military services, or they may be integrated into broader corporate structures that encompass security and military engagement, among other business activities. In both cases, their role in contemporary conflicts is becoming increasingly prominent, particularly in situations where states choose to outsource parts of their military and security responsibilities to external commercial actors.

It is important to note, however, that the involvement of PMCs in armed conflicts raises serious concerns regarding the application of international humanitarian law. Depending on the nature of their engagement, PMC personnel are generally considered civilians, except in cases where they directly participate in hostilities, thereby forfeiting the protections afforded to civilians under international law. For this reason, an international document known as the *Montreux Document* was adopted in 2008. (O'Brien, 2017, p.320) It reaffirms the existing obligations of states concerning the conduct and operations of private military companies (PMCs) during armed conflicts and also provides recommendations for improving the regulation and oversight of their activities.

The role and operations of PMCs remain the subject of ongoing debate, particularly regarding their accountability, influence on the course and nature of modern global conflicts, and the limits of their legitimacy within the framework of international law.

3. The Rise of Private Military Structures – U.S. and U.K. Practices in the 1970s

As private military companies (PMCs) became increasingly present on the global stage, a pivotal moment occurred in 1974 when the American firm *Vinnell Corporation* signed a contract with the U.S. Department of Defense to train the Saudi Arabian National Guard. Valued at $77 million, the agreement involved the deployment of several hundred American veterans from the Vietnam and Second World Wars, tasked with training 26,000 members of the Saudi National Guard, particularly in protecting vital oil infrastructure. (Singer, 2003, p.186) This was the first officially sanctioned engagement of a U.S.-based private military company to train a foreign military force, marking a significant precedent in international military relations.

At the same time, former members of the British Special Air Service (SAS) were actively involved in establishing private military companies that offer security, military training, and consulting services worldwide. Some of these organisations advertised their services openly, while others operated under the guise of consulting or insurance firms. In 1975, *Control Risks Group* was founded. Initially created as an advisory firm for insurance companies, Control Risks specialised in kidnap and ransom response and crisis management. Over time, the company expanded its portfolio to include political and security risk analysis, eventually becoming a globally recognised risk management consultancy. (Speer, 2019, p.381)

A notable chapter in the history of PMCs is linked to the operations of *Security Advisory Services* (SAS)—a private firm founded by arms dealer Leslie Aspin, former paratrooper Frank Perrin, and retired marine John Banks. Despite sharing the same acronym, this company had no official affiliation with the British elite Special Air Service unit, a fact that often led to confusion in media reporting at the time.

Security Advisory Services played a central role in recruiting mercenaries for the Angolan Civil War in the mid-1970s. In November 1975, Norman Hall, a former paratrooper and aide to Holden Roberto, leader of the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA), arrived in the United Kingdom with $25,000, seeking the help of SAS (*Security Advisory Services*) to recruit fighters to oppose the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). Later, Terence Haig, another of Roberto's aides, secured an additional $84,000 for the same purpose. Banks conducted recruitment in London pubs, such as Dirty Dick's, where prospective mercenaries would gather before travelling via Belgium to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), a neighbouring country of Angola. According to various reports, between 90 and 200 fighters were sent to Angola under SAS's coordination. Some of them were as young as 17, with no prior military experience or adequate equipment. Reports indicate that 59 mercenaries lost their lives in Angola. (Speer, 2019, p.385)

In June 1976, a trial was held in Luanda, Angola's capital, for thirteen Western mercenaries who had fought alongside the FNLA. Four of them—three British nationals and one American—were sentenced to death and executed by firing squad on July 10, 1976. The remaining nine received prison sentences ranging from 16 to 30 years in prison. The British government expressed shock and disapproval over the verdicts, arguing that the trial did not meet the standards of a fair judicial process. Nonetheless, the British Parliament concluded that the actions of the *Security Advisory Services* had violated the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1870, which prohibits the recruitment of mercenaries for foreign wars. However, no legal sanctions were imposed on those involved. (Time Magazine, 2023, p.34)

4. DSL and the Invisible Hand of London – Consolidating Power Through the Private Security Sector

During the 1980s, private military companies emerged as key players on the international stage, expanding their operations and roles across various regions, with significant long-term implications for global security. In this context, the year 1981 marked the founding of *Defence Systems Limited* (DSL), a company established with substantial financial backing from British banks. DSL's mission was clear: to provide security services primarily to multinational oil and gas corporations operating in conflict and post-conflict zones.

The company conducted operations across the African continent, the Middle East, and numerous other crisis regions worldwide. Its services encompassed a broad range of activities, including the protection of critical infrastructure—such as oil platforms and energy facilities—personnel training and the execution of intelligence and security operations. (Forsyth, 1974, p.201)

Through contracts with the World Bank, the United Nations, and numerous non-governmental organisations, DSL provided protection and training to workers on energy sector projects, thereby expanding its influence in multiple regions. Although its primary focus was the oil and gas industry, the company's work also extended into other domains where military and security assistance was required—such as counter-terrorism efforts and training for military and civilian personnel in high-risk areas.

DSL's connection to British interests was evident despite the company being formally classified as a private entity. Through its operations, DSL helped create secure environments for British commercial interests and played a role in projecting British political and economic influence in strategically important regions. In many cases, DSL was seen as an informal extension of London's foreign policy—especially when it came to safeguarding British interests in unstable and conflict-ridden territories.

In 1997, DSL was acquired by *Armor Holdings, Inc.*, a move that significantly expanded its capabilities and operational reach. (Arutunyan & Galeotti, 2018, p.189) This acquisition enabled DSL to shift its focus towards larger international military contracts and facilitated stronger integration with the U.S. defence industry. The takeover marked a turning point, opening new business horizons for the private military industry, in which DSL remained a prominent actor until its eventual merger with other companies.

5. From the Middle East to Latin America: The Israeli Model of Private Military Expertise and the Export of Security Services

In the early 1980s, Israel emerged as a significant provider of private military and security services across Latin America. Several Israeli companies and individuals—mostly former members of the military and special forces—were directly involved in training and advising paramilitary groups in the region.

One of the most well-known among them was *Hod Hahanit* (Spearhead), a company founded in 1984 by retired Israeli Army Lieutenant Colonel Yair Klein. This firm provided instructors and military advisors in Colombia, where it trained paramilitary forces that would later become infamous for their controversial and violent activities. (Chase & Pezzullo, 2016, p.254)

Another prominent entity was the *Golan Group*, established earlier in the decade by former officers of Israeli special forces. This group offered similar services in several Latin American countries, providing military training and security support to regimes and armed formations. (Chase & Pezzullo, 2016, p.284)

Also mentioned is the *Beni Tal company*, which, at the time, was involved in military operations against the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) but also operated in Latin America, participating in several security-related engagements. (Chase & Pezzullo, 2016, p.295)

Through these companies, Israel not only extended its influence beyond the Middle East but also became one of the key global actors in the development and deployment of private military capabilities in the late 20th century. These activities formed part of a broader trend of Israeli military engagement in Latin America, where Israeli military firms and advisors were involved in training and equipping various military and paramilitary forces—often amid controversy and criticism due to their roles in local conflicts and support for repressive regimes.

6. Private Power in the Shadow of War: The Rise of Private Military Companies from the Cold War to Contemporary Conflicts

The significant ascent of private military companies (PMCs) began in the aftermath of the Cold War. The dissolution of the bipolar global structure left behind vast military infrastructures and millions of trained soldiers without roles, as NATO members and former Warsaw Pact countries significantly reduced their armed forces. Simultaneously, the market was inundated with large quantities of inexpensive weaponry, predominantly of Soviet origin, which easily found its way into new centres of power and conflict.

In this new world order, neither the United States nor the newly formed states emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union were inclined to directly involve themselves in numerous complex conflicts, particularly on the African continent. Governments of some European and African nations, facing internal unrest, rebellions, and civil wars, were compelled to seek assistance and the assurance of their power outside traditional allied structures—in the private military sector.

Instability and bloody conflicts across Africa—from Liberia and Sierra Leone, through Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo to Sudan—provided fertile ground for the operations of PMCs. (Vračević, 2024, p.134) Some of these conflicts gave rise to entirely new actors on the military-security scene. At the same time, other companies, already established and led by former military professionals, found new purposes and markets amid the prevailing chaos.

Similar trends were evident in Europe. During the wars in the former Yugoslavia, private military contractors (PMCs) from the United States and the United Kingdom found a role in military training and advisory missions. A notable example is the American company Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI), which, with the approval of the State Department, played a key role in transforming and training the Croatian Army in the mid-1990s. Although MPRI's role in subsequent military operations remains the subject of much speculation, their engagement marked a turning point in how states prepared for armed conflicts—by hiring professional forces outside official military structures. (Arutunyan & Galeotti, 2018, p. 230)

On the other side of the world, in the deserts of the Middle East, a new crisis was brewing in the early 1990s. During the First Gulf War, albeit still within limited frameworks, private military contractors (PMCs) began providing logistical, technical, and advisory support to the U.S. military, signalling their increasing role in future armed conflicts worldwide.

During the Gulf War of 1990–1991, private military contractors (PMCs) played a significant role in supporting coalition forces by providing logistical support, training, and technical maintenance. Military contractors constituted approximately 2% of the U.S. military contingent, with most working for conventional private firms rather than directly for private military contractors (PMCs). (Chase & Pezzullo, 2016, p. 78)

One of the most prominent examples was the American company *Vinnell*, specialising in military training and logistics. Since 1975, *Vinnell* has been engaged in training members of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, with a focus on protecting key infrastructure, including oil facilities. During the Gulf War, instructors from this company provided operational support and accompanied Saudi units in the field.

Additionally, the private military company *DynCorp* played a crucial role in maintaining and servicing military equipment, including helicopters used in coalition operations. Their technical expertise was vital for maintaining the combat readiness of aerial assets on the front lines.

The Gulf War marked a turning point in the conduct of military operations, as it demonstrated an increasing reliance on private military contractors (PMCs) to perform functions traditionally under the purview of regular military forces. This trend continued in subsequent conflicts, where PMCs provided a wide range of services—from logistics and training to direct operational support.

During this period, there was also a shift in terminology. The traditional term "mercenaries," often carrying negative connotations, was replaced by "private military contractors." This change was not merely semantic but substantive—it represented an effort to present these actors as legitimate, professional components of modern military operations with contractual responsibilities and clearly defined roles. From that moment, a new era began in the role and significance of PMCs and their contractors in high-risk security zones, where they became key elements in contemporary security infrastructure.

The role of PMCs in the Middle Eastern wars during the 1990s laid the foundation for their broader and more pervasive engagement in global military operations, simultaneously raising important questions about accountability, oversight, and efficiency in the process of privatising military functions. This consequently led to the need to regulate their status and role in armed conflicts, both within international humanitarian law and within the domestic legal systems of individual states. (Lalić & Lipovac, 2023, p. 142)

7. From the Shadows of Apartheid to the Battlefields of Africa: The Story of Executive Outcomes

In 1989, Eeben Barlow, a former lieutenant colonel of the South African Defence Force (SADF) and former operative of the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB), founded the private military company *Executive Outcomes* (EO). He had previously headed the Western European section of the CCB—South Africa's intelligence agency known for its involvement in covert operations and the elimination of political opponents. (Carney, 1977, p. 210) As the apartheid regime began to collapse in the early 1990s, African National Congress (ANC) leader Nelson Mandela demanded that President Frederik Willem de Klerk dismantle special units implicated in political assassinations. Many former members of these units, left without employment, found new roles within the emerging private military company. (Speer, 2019, p. 232)

In Angola, where civil war erupted again in the fall of 1992 after UNITA refused to recognise election results, the Angolan government signed a contract with *Executive Outcomes* worth $40 million annually. As a result of a series of operations carried out by the company, UNITA suffered substantial losses and was compelled to enter into negotiations. In November 1994, the Lusaka Protocol was signed between the Angolan government and UNITA, temporarily ending the conflict; however, war would erupt again a few years later.

In January 1995, *Executive Outcomes* was contracted by the government of Sierra Leone to counter rebels from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), known for using thousands of child soldiers, mostly aged between 7 and 12. By that point, the rebels had already entered the capital, Freetown, and taken control of critical titanium and bauxite mining sites. According to the terms of the agreement, the government of Sierra Leone committed to paying *Executive Outcomes* $1.8 million per month, with a portion of the funds secured through the International Monetary Fund. The company's military force consisted of around 500 military advisors and over 3,000 well-trained and equipped soldiers, supported by helicopters and armoured vehicles acquired across Africa and Eastern Europe.

One unit, composed of former members of the infamous 32 Battalion of the South African Army—which had been disbanded at the request of the ANC before the parliamentary elections—was at the time described as a group of spies and assassins who had served in South African counterinsurgency operations for 15 to 20 years. This private military company proved exceptionally effective on the battlefield; in just ten days of combat, it managed to push RUF forces 100 kilometres (62 miles) inland. Seven months later, with the support of the Sierra Leonean army, *Executive Outcomes* succeeded in driving the RUF out of diamond mining regions. During a second offensive, they destroyed the rebels' main base, forcing them to sign the Abidjan Peace Accord on November 30, 1996. (Chase & Pezzullo, 2016, p. 421)

Notably, the effectiveness of *Executive Outcomes* in these operations drew international attention and set a precedent for the future deployment of private military companies in conflicts worldwide. However, its actions also sparked controversy and raised important questions about the role and regulation of such entities in modern warfare. Under pressure from the international community and following the enactment of the Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act in South Africa in 1998, *Executive Outcomes* officially ceased operations on December 31, 1998.

8. Private Military Companies in Afghanistan and Iraq: Roles, Engagement, and Controversies

Following the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S. government engaged several private military companies (PMCs) to assist in training local police and military forces, overseeing the movement of goods, and conducting intelligence activities. PMCs were also tasked with providing security for foreign companies, embassies, and civilian facilities across Afghanistan, largely because their personnel lacked trust in the local police forces. This reliance on PMCs triggered dissatisfaction among local authorities, who frequently accused these companies of criminal conduct.

A similar scenario unfolded during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, where private military contractors (PMCs) from the United States and the United Kingdom—including *Blackwater*, *Custer Battles*, *ArmorGroup*, *Aegis Defence Services*, and *Erinys International*—played a pivotal role in securing diplomatic personnel, critical infrastructure, and military convoys. (Shearer, 2021, p.98) Beyond their military-adjacent duties, these companies were also contracted to protect private, non-military personnel, such as executives of multinational corporations, mid- and lower-level managers, as well as engineers and workers operating across various sites throughout the country. Their presence was deemed essential due to the shortage of military personnel and the urgent need to stabilise the region quickly.

However, the operations of these PMCs frequently became a source of controversy. One of the most notorious incidents occurred in September 2007, when operatives from *Blackwater* opened fire on civilians in Nisour Square, Baghdad, killing 14 and injuring 17 others. (Vračević, 2024, p.120) The incident drew widespread international condemnation and sparked intense debate over the accountability and regulation of private military actors in conflict zones. Investigations later determined that the use of force had been both unjustified and disproportionate. In December 2008, several *Blackwater* employees were charged with manslaughter and excessive use of force, but the charges were subsequently dismissed due to procedural errors.

The case was later reopened, leading to the conviction of Nicholas Slatten, one of the involved contractors, for first-degree murder. In April 2015, he was sentenced to life in prison. Three of his colleagues received 30-year prison sentences each. In August 2017, a U.S. appeals court overturned Slatten's conviction and ordered a new trial. After a retrial, Slatten was once again found guilty in December 2018 and received the same sentence. (Scahill, 2007, p.111) These events reignited the global debate on the role, ethics, and oversight of PMCs in modern armed conflicts, raising critical questions about their legal status, operational boundaries, and the implications of their increasing prominence in war zones.

9. Millions of Dollars Without Oversight: The Global Expansion of Blackwater in the Private Military Industry

Founded in 1997 by Erik Prince, a former U.S. Navy SEAL and heir to a family fortune, *Blackwater* emerged onto the global stage during operations in Afghanistan, where it provided security services for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Its operations soon expanded to Iraq, where *Blackwater* was tasked with protecting U.S. diplomats and other high-ranking officials. Prince established *Blackwater* with the vision of providing top-tier security services to the U.S. government, ushering in a new era in the privatisation of military functions.

In September 2005, the U.S. government contracted *Blackwater* to assist with relief efforts following Hurricane Katrina. Approximately 200 of its operatives were deployed to the disaster-stricken area, costing the government around $240,000 per day. This marked the first time a private military company was contracted for operations on U.S. soil, sparking widespread debate about the role and legal authority of such companies within the country's borders. Their presence in New Orleans raised critical questions regarding the privatisation of security and the accountability of PMCs in domestic crisis management.

In more recent history, the war in Iraq represented a period of intense PMC engagement. By December 2006, the U.S. Department of Defense had contracted at least 100,000 private contractors—ten times the number of civilians employed during the Gulf War. The range of services provided by these companies was vast and diverse, encompassing everything from logistical support—including food preparation and distribution for military units—to armed protection of U.S. military bases, demining operations, disposal of unexploded ordnance, and close protection for senior U.S. government officials. In addition, a significant portion of their responsibilities involved safeguarding executives of multinational corporations and civilian personnel working on key infrastructure projects across Iraq. (Speer, 2019, p.69)

Blackwater, notably, was granted authorisation to deploy 1,020 personnel in Iraq, with the primary task of protecting the U.S. Embassy. According to Andy Bearpark, Director General of the British Association of Private Security Companies, during 2003 and 2004 in Iraq, money was "almost unlimited," leading to the awarding of multimillion-dollar security contracts with little oversight or regulatory control. British firms such as *Aegis Defence Services* and *ArmorGroup* received hundreds of millions of pounds for deploying their operatives in Iraq. (Prince, 2009, p. 287) These companies later assumed security responsibilities that had previously been under the jurisdiction of regular U.S. military forces.

It is crucial to note that PMCs operating in Iraq were not subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Before departing Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority from 2003 to 2004, signed Order No. 17, which granted immunity from Iraqi legal prosecution to all American citizens working for the occupying administration. This order shielded PMC personnel from criminal accountability under local law, further intensifying concerns about their role, reach, and regulation within a volatile conflict zone.

10. Private Armies of Global Powers: The Invisible Frontlines of the Battle for Africa

Over the past decade, private military companies (PMCs) have become pivotal actors in shaping the security dynamics of the African continent. Their presence is particularly prominent in conflict zones, where they assume roles traditionally held by national armies and peacekeeping forces.

The United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) currently employs as many as 21 American private military contractors (PMCs) across North Africa and the Sahel region. These companies provide logistical support, engage in demining operations, train local military and security forces, and support United Nations peacekeeping missions. (Vračević, 2024, p. 128) Their role frequently extends to more discreet operations aligned with American strategic interests in the region.

China, an increasingly assertive global player, utilises its private military contractors (PMCs) to safeguard its investments and expand influence in Africa. In Sudan, for example, companies such as *DeWei Security* and *HuaXin ZhongAn* have been deployed to protect Chinese oil fields and industrial facilities. Their responsibilities include physical security, emergency evacuation of personnel in crises, and training local security forces to ensure the protection of China's state-owned enterprises. (Martin, 2021, p. 245)

On another front, the Russian PMC *Wagner Group* has significantly expanded its footprint in Africa by exploiting power vacuums in states weakened by conflict and fragile institutions. In Mali, authorities turned to *Wagner* in 2021, offering approximately $11 million per month for the protection of high-ranking officials and the training of the Malian army. This collaboration was part of a broader strategy by Mali's junta to seek alternative sources of security support outside its traditional Western alliances.

Beyond Mali, *Wagner Group* has also been frequently linked to events in Burkina Faso. Following the September 2022 coup, which brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power, numerous speculations emerged regarding *Wagner's* potential involvement in orchestrating and supporting the coup. Although Traoré publicly denied the presence of Russian mercenaries, claiming that "our Wagners" were local volunteers recruited to defend the homeland, the extent and nature of Russian influence in the country remain open to question. (Zaitsev, 2022, p. 224)

The growing presence of PMCs in Africa has become increasingly strategic—not only as instruments of force but also as tools of political and economic leverage wielded by global powers. Operating often beyond the boundaries of international law and without proper oversight, their actions have a profound impact on the sovereignty of host nations and the security of local populations.

11. Wagner Group: The Unofficial Fist of Russian Foreign Policy

The idea of establishing the *Wagner Group* as a private military company (PMC) emerged in the early 2010s within Russia's Ministry of Defense. A pivotal moment occurred during a presentation by Eeben Barlow, the founder of the renowned South African private military company Executive Outcomes, to senior Russian military officials in 2010. Barlow highlighted the operational flexibility and effectiveness of PMCs in complex conflict zones—demonstrating to Russian decision-makers how strategic objectives could be achieved without formally deploying regular armed forces or incurring direct political risk.

This idea was quickly embraced by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman closely linked to Vladimir Putin since the 1990s when he managed high-end restaurants in St. Petersburg frequented by the then-deputy mayor. Leveraging his political and business ties, Prigozhin secured the support and resources necessary to establish such a formation. (Prigozhin, 2023, p. 180)

A key figure in the formation and command structure of *the Wagner Group was Dmitry Utkin, a former officer of the Russian military intelligence agency GRU (Prigozhin, 2023, p. 78). Utkin became the company's chief* *military commander, and the organisation* took its name from his wartime call sign, "Wagner." His military background, ideological leanings, and connections to intelligence circles further solidified the operational bond between the PMC and Russia's security apparatus.

Wagner Group quickly evolved into an unofficial instrument of Russian foreign policy, operating across the globe—from Donbas and Syria to Libya, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan. Its operatives have conducted combat missions, provided training, engaged in intelligence activities, secured critical infrastructure, and executed politically sensitive missions such as supporting coups and overseeing the exploitation of natural resources. (Scott-Clark, 2011, p. 56)

The group also played a prominent role in the war in Ukraine, once again underscoring its intimate ties with the Russian state. Although officially independent, *Wagner*'s dependence on Moscow for logistics and intelligence, as well as its on-the-ground behaviour, reflects deep-rooted institutional support.

When compared to the American PMC *Blackwater* (now *Constellis*), *Wagner* reveals notable similarities in operational models and objectives—both entities have carried out tasks that conventional militaries have avoided due to legal or political constraints. However, while *Blackwater* operated within the legal and institutional framework of the United States, *Wagner* functioned in a far murkier space, with no clear accountability and with a much higher degree of brutality and political instrumentalisation. (Margolin, 2020, p. 279)

Its flexibility, combat efficiency, and ability to operate in unstable regions have made *Wagner* a potent tool of Russian foreign policy. Nevertheless, the group's involvement in certain missions has drawn international attention, particularly when regime change, or politically sensitive military operations were involved, raising serious concerns over regional destabilisation.

It is worth noting that, primarily due to its involvement in the armed conflict in Ukraine, the private military company *Wagner Group* became the subject of sanctions packages adopted by the United States and the European Union. These sanctions included, among other measures, entry bans for Yevgeny Prigozhin, the owner of the *Wagner Group*, as well as for other commanders of this private military company, and the freezing of their assets located in bank accounts or within the territory of the U.S. and EU member states. However, it is important to point out that, according to statements from Washington and Brussels, members of the *Wagner Group* are directly engaged in hostilities on the territory of another state—that is, in combat operations in Ukraine. For this reason, the authorities in the U.S. and EU do not treat *Wagner* as a private military company but instead label it a "mercenary group" or a "transnational criminal organisation." (Lalić & Lipovac, 2023, p. 154). Similar patterns of behaviour can be observed in other private military companies worldwide, further intensifying the global debate over their role, accountability, and legal status in contemporary armed conflicts.

The death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in a plane crash in August 2023, alongside several top commanders of the organisation, remains shrouded in controversy. (Time Magazine, 2023, p.15) Still, his death did not mark the end of the concept of PMCs as instruments for pursuing political and military objectives. On the contrary, the case of *Wagner* remains paradigmatic for analysing the relationship between the state and private force contractors in modern warfare.

12. New-Generation Private Armies: The UAE and the Rise of New Players in Africa's Conflict Zones

In the evolving security landscape of the African continent, private military companies (PMCs) originating from countries not traditionally associated with this sector are gaining increased prominence. Their presence in African conflict zones reflects not only corporate ambition but increasingly serves as a tool for expanding the political and economic influence of their countries of origin, as well as that of the multinational corporations that hire them. (Mulvenon, 2001, p. 302)

French private military companies (PMCs), although often operating outside the public spotlight, are active in numerous African nations. Their involvement is deeply tied to post-colonial legacies and Paris' enduring strategic interests across the continent. These companies provide training, logistics, and military support—roles that have become increasingly prominent in regions where the French state seeks to maintain influence while simultaneously reducing its direct military presence. Through private military contracts, France maintains control over key geopolitical nodes and natural resources in countries such as Mali, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). One notable example is *Agemira RDC*, a company led by Franco-Congolese national Olivier Bazin. This firm is engaged in restoring and expanding air force capacities, maintaining and reconstructing airports, and securing strategic sites throughout the DRC—thereby directly influencing local military balance.

Simultaneously, PMCs staffed by experts from Eastern European countries, including Bulgaria and Romania, are emerging as significant actors on the African continent. Their operational presence, particularly in high-risk zones such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), underscores the growing global demand for privatised military capabilities. Bulgarian personnel are embedded within the structure of *Agemira RDC*, which employs individuals of various nationalities, including Bulgarian contractors who provide military support—ranging from training local forces and offering technical expertise to participating in field operations. (Speer, 2019, p. 278)

Romanian involvement further illustrates the regional breadth of these activities. The company *Asociatia RALF*, led by former French Foreign Legionnaire Horațiu Potra, signed a contract with *Congo Protection* to provide military instructors to the Congolese armed forces. These instructors were responsible for training local troops and offering logistical support in operations against the M23 rebel group. However, following a series of failed military operations, over 280 Romanian contractors participating in this mission were forced to surrender to Rwandan forces on January 29, 2025. This incident drew international attention and raised serious concerns regarding accountability, oversight, and the legitimacy of deploying private military contractors (PMCs) in complex and volatile security environments such as the DRC.

A particularly distinct case is that of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has increasingly positioned itself as a global hub for military-security contracting. As a financial and economic hub where Eastern and Western interests intersect, Dubai has become a key base for coordinating private military operations, particularly those targeting Africa and the Middle East. The Emirati political and business elite are increasingly leveraging private military and security companies (PMSCs) as an extension of their foreign policy. (Margolin, 2020, p. 78) In Libya, the UAE played a decisive role in supporting the Benghazi-based regime, providing training and logistics to forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar through private military contractors. This collaboration underscores the profound interconnection of military interests and political alliances in the region.

Furthermore, Dubai has emerged as a haven for global figures in private security, most notably Erik Prince, founder of the former private military contractor *Blackwater*. For years, Prince has been at the centre of security-related business ventures in the United Arab Emirates. His close ties to UAE's strategic apparatus have enabled him to develop a vast network of enterprises in the security and consulting sectors, taking full advantage of Dubai's liberal business environment and high degree of discretion. (Shearer, 2021, p. 138) In addition to launching various security projects, Prince has been repeatedly involved in initiatives related to recruiting fighters and providing logistical support for regional conflicts, solidifying the UAE's role as a key mediator and patron of private military activity across North Africa and the Middle East.

These developments indicate a fundamental shift in the structure of modern conflicts, where private actors are no longer mere executors but strategic players in their own right—shaping the dynamics of warfare by the interests of powerful states, corporations, and transnational security networks that are increasingly detached from traditional national frameworks.

13. War on Demand: Private Military Companies as the Extended Arm of Capital

Private military companies (PMCs) exhibit a notable interest in maintaining armed conflicts worldwide, as wars provide an inexhaustible source of revenue. Given that one of the principal objectives of contemporary warfare is the conquest and exploitation of natural resources, these companies often align themselves with the directives of transnational corporations and affluent multinational actors seeking control over such assets. The annual revenues of some PMCs rival those of certain developing nations. There is little doubt that these companies will persist for as long as wars continue — and with them, the capitalist system that fuels and sustains their operations.

The relationship between national armed forces and private military companies (PMCs) is complex and fluid, shaped by the unique political, security, and economic conditions of each country. In certain contexts, PMCs operate as an extension of national military structures, providing supplementary capacity, specialised expertise, and operational support. In other instances, they function as autonomous actors with independent agendas, engaged primarily for their flexibility and rapid responsiveness to the ever-changing dynamics of high-risk security zones. (Vračević, 2024, p. 411)

This intricate dynamic becomes particularly evident in states with weak central authority, where private military companies (PMCs) often assume pivotal security roles, providing military assistance in the absence of effective governmental institutions. In countries such as the United States, the employment of PMCs has become a near-standard practice, especially during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where these firms offered a broad array of services — from training and logistics to direct involvement in combat operations.

Thanks to their financial strength and operational agility, PMCs possess the capacity to swiftly adapt to evolving conditions on the ground. However, their engagement has sparked significant controversy, especially regarding accountability for human rights violations and other serious crimes. This raises urgent questions about the ethical and legal frameworks governing their use in modern conflict environments.

14. Conclusion

Private military companies (PMCs) increasingly operate in a grey zone between official military intervention and informal politico-military engagement, making the task of assigning responsibility significantly more challenging. Economic considerations play a central role in the growing reliance on these actors, as many states—particularly those with limited defence budgets—view the use of PMCs as a cost-effective means to address complex security challenges. By employing private security actors, governments avoid substantial investments in military infrastructure, training, and equipment while gaining access to flexible and skilled personnel capable of rapid deployment.

This trend has become especially pronounced since the end of the Cold War, when many countries significantly reduced their defence spending, creating a vacuum that allowed the private sector to assume a portion of the state's security functions. During the Iraq War in 2007, for instance, contractors from *Blackwater* were earning several times more than regular soldiers, further fueling interest in the services of private military firms.

However, the presence of PMCs raises a host of legal and ethical dilemmas. One of the most pressing issues is the absence of a clear legal framework governing their activities—particularly at the international level. While some countries have laws that address the operations of such companies, enforcement remains problematic, especially when private military companies (PMCs) operate outside their country of origin. As a result, there have been numerous cases where these entities have been responsible for serious human rights violations yet faced no legal consequences, thereby complicating global efforts to establish international norms and effective oversight.

Despite these challenges, PMCs have occasionally played roles in humanitarian contexts. For example, during the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, private military contractors provided critical logistical support and security for aid organisations, ensuring that humanitarian assistance reached affected populations safely. Additionally, some PMCs have been involved in evacuating civilians from conflict zones, such as efforts to assist vulnerable individuals during the conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine. These instances demonstrate that, under certain circumstances, PMCs can make a positive contribution to humanitarian missions, although their involvement remains a subject of debate.

In today's conflicts, private military contractors (PMCs) have become indispensable actors, shaping the course of military, political, and economic developments worldwide. Their activities range from supporting states with limited military capabilities to advancing the interests of multinational corporations and diverse geopolitical players. Although they undoubtedly provide critical security services, their role remains a subject of controversy due to the numerous unresolved legal and ethical issues they pose. The future of their deployment will largely depend on the international community's ability to develop effective oversight and regulatory mechanisms—while preserving the fundamental principles of human rights and the rule of law.

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