

The Controversial Role of Mercenary Groups in Contemporary Warfare: A Critical Analysis

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Introduction:



Figure: Wagner Group has hardened mercenaries pictured in eastern Ukraine (Source: The Times)

Recent years have seen considerable evolution, like conflict, with new actors, technologies, and ideologies influencing how wars are fought. Each year, there are more and more armed conflicts in the world. While every conflict is unique, a common thread runs through them all: warlords and army commanders, in addition to their regular troops, seek to bolster their ranks with skilled

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fighters who can help them achieve their goals. The significance of mercenary groups has grown as conflicts continue to erupt worldwide. They are paid to fight in conflicts, offer security services, or even teach military personnel. These people or private military corporations are frequently driven by financial gain.² Mercenaries have been a key part of battle throughout history. The employment of mercenary groups has changed over time, starting in ancient when numerous empires employed them as auxiliary troops and ending in the present day when private military firms conducted operations in conflict areas. The use of mercenaries has been under scrutiny recently as worldwide attention has been focused on crises in places like Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine. Mercenary organizations continue to exist worldwide despite the controversies surrounding their use.³ While some argue that mercenaries can provide economically viable solutions to armed conflicts, others see their actions as a danger to the stability and security of the world.

A short glimpse of the mercenary groups:

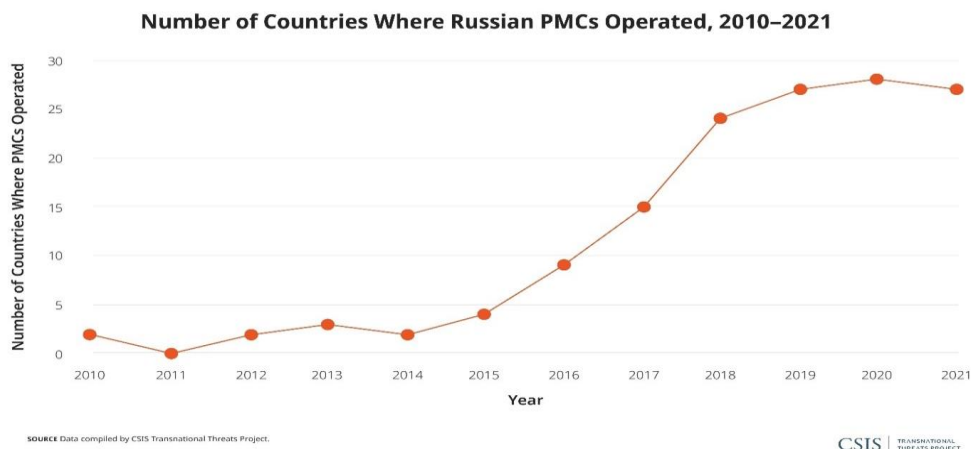


Figure: Number of Countries where Russian PMCs Operated (Source: CSIS)

The term "mercenary" describes individuals or private military enterprises contracted to fight in conflicts, offer security services, or even train military personnel, frequently motivated by financial gain. In most contemporary situations, the word "mercenary" is derogatory. Nowadays, these

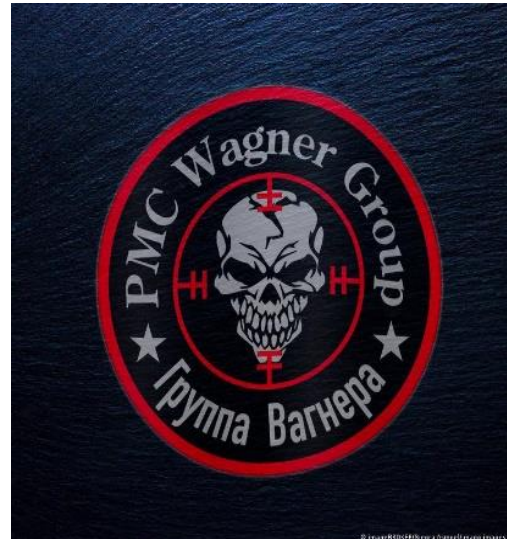
² Adams, Thomas K. "The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict." *Parameters* 29, no. 2. May 25, 1999. <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1926>.

³ Leiper, Nicholas. "What Mercenaries Look Like in 2022." *Spheres of Influence*, March 22, 2022. <https://spheresofinfluence.ca/mercenaries-wagner-group-imperialism/>.

mercenaries are referred to as private military contractors (PMCs). The International Convention against the Recruiting, Use, Funding and Training of Mercenaries (also known as the Mercenary Convention) was established in 1989 and made it illegal to hire mercenaries. According to the treaty, mercenaries must be specially recruited, directly involved in hostilities, motivated by personal gain, a national of a party to the conflict, a member of that party's armed forces, and not be dispatched on official business by a non-party state.⁴ They are viewed as potential threats to nation-state domination. Here is a brief description of a few of the mercenary groups:

Wagner Group:

The Wagner Group, a Russian private military corporation (PMC), has participated in numerous international conflicts and security activities. In 2014, it started taking part in Russian activities in Ukraine. Dmitry Utkin, who formed this organization, worked until 2013 with the GRU, Russia's military intelligence department. Yevgeny Prigozhin, a supporter of President Vladimir Putin, serves as its leader. In the Russian city of St. Petersburg, it is headquartered.⁵ Due to its close ties to and support from the Russian government, it is widely thought that the group is fighting for Russia. The Wagner Group was incorporated as a business in 2022 despite mercenary troops being forbidden in Russia.⁶



⁴Leiper, Nicholas. "What Mercenaries Look Like in 2022." Spheres of Influence, March 22, 2022. <https://spheresofinfluence.ca/mercenaries-wagner-group-imperialism/>.

⁵ Vorobyov, Niko. "Shrouded in Secrecy for Years, Russia's Wagner Group Opens up." Russia-Ukraine War News | Al Jazeera, November 22, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/10/wagner-private-group-now-an-extension-of-russias-military>.

⁶ BBC News. "What Is Russia's Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?," January 23, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>.

**Percentage of Organized Political Violence Events in the Central African Republic Involving Wagner Group by Presence or Absence of State Forces
(1 December 2020 - 31 July 2022)**

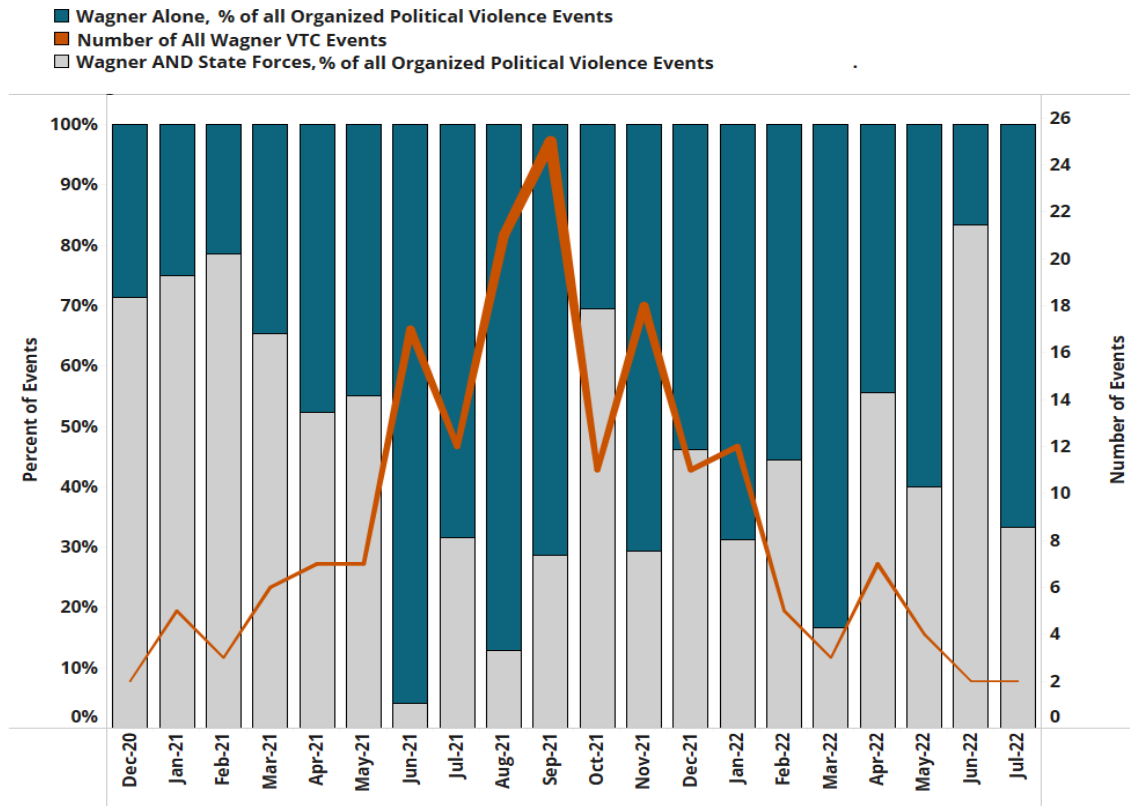


Figure: Involvement of Wagner Group in Central African Republic (Source: ACLED)

This group engaged in combat in Mozambique, Libya, Mali, Sudan, Syria, and the Central African Republic. This organization supports the Russian army with tens of thousands of mercenaries.⁷ According to British intelligence, 50,000 Wagner soldiers are currently deployed in Ukraine, making up almost a fourth of Russia's total force.⁸ According to the US National Security Council, prisons provided almost 80% of its forces in Ukraine.⁹ It is estimated that the Wagner Group had only 5,000 fighters, most of whom were seasoned ex-soldiers before Russia invaded Ukraine.¹⁰

⁷ James, Liam. "Who Are the Wagner Mercenaries and Why Are They so Involved in Ukraine?" The Independent, March 7, 2023. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/wagner-group-russia-ukraine-war-b2295482.html>.

⁸ James, "Who Are the Wagner Mercenaries and Why Are They so Involved in Ukraine?"

⁹ BBC News. "What Is Russia's Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?," January 23, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>.

¹⁰ BBC News, "What Is Russia's Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?"



Figure: Wagner mercenaries pose in the captured village of Krasna Hora (Source: The Moscow Times)

The Wagner Group has played a significant role in Russian efforts to annex the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut. The opposition Labour Party in the UK requests that the Wagner Group be labelled as a terrorist group.¹¹ Recently, there has been a conflict between this group and the Russian government. Yevgeny Prigozhin asserts that the lack of ammunition for his army may result from "usual bureaucracy or a treachery."¹² He also warned the Russian authorities that this might lead to the Wagner groups departing Ukraine, and if that happened, the entire Russian frontier in Ukraine would be in danger.¹³ Governments and human rights organizations are concerned about the Wagner Group's actions because they claim it violates human rights and destabilizes war zones. The United States and the European Union have imposed sanctions on the group, and intelligence services and international organizations continue to monitor its operations closely.

¹¹ James, Liam. "Who Are the Wagner Mercenaries and Why Are They so Involved in Ukraine?" The Independent, March 7, 2023. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/wagner-group-russia-ukraine-war-b2295482.html>.

¹² Walsh, By Aoife. "Ukraine War: Russia's Wagner Boss Suggests 'betrayal' in Bakhmut Battle." BBC News, March 6, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64859780>.

¹³ Walsh, "Ukraine War: Russia's Wagner Boss Suggests 'betrayal' in Bakhmut Battle."

Academi:

Academi, formerly known as Blackwater, is a private military company (PMC) established in 1997 by Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL, and Al Clark. The corporation, which has its corporate office in Moyock, North Carolina, offers various services to businesses, governments, and other organizations, such as security, training, and support.¹⁴ Blackwater was one of the numerous private security firms used to watch over government employees, security personnel, and military locations during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.¹⁵ The firm also helped to educate the Iraqi army and police forces and gave other assistance to the armed forces. In 2007, a shooting incident in Baghdad's Nisour Square involving workers of Academi led to the deaths of 17 people, drawing the company's worldwide attention.¹⁶ The incident caused controversy, leading to Academi being criticized and the corporation is prohibited from doing business in Iraq. The corporation has experienced numerous rebrandings and ownership changes since that time. It changed its name to Xe Services LLC in 2010 after being sold to private investors. The firm was sold in 2011 and changed its name to Academi.¹⁷ Recent claims are that it is preparing mercenaries for a mission in the Donbas area.¹⁸ The company has been charged with committing war crimes and violating human rights. Due to its methods, it has drawn criticism and controversy.



¹⁴ “Private Military Companies: Blackwater.” Silent Professionals, December 23, 2020. <https://silentprofessionals.org/blackwater/>.

¹⁵ “Private Military Companies: Blackwater.”

¹⁶ Lind, Dara. “Why Four Blackwater Contractors Were Just Now Convicted of Killing 17 Iraqi Civilians in 2007.” Vox, October 23, 2014. <https://www.vox.com/2014/10/23/7047519/blackwater-trial-nisour-square-massacre-2007-guilty-convicted>.

¹⁷ “Private Military Companies: Blackwater.” Silent Professionals, December 23, 2020. <https://silentprofessionals.org/blackwater/>.

¹⁸ Morning Star. “Blackwater Mercenaries Training Far-Right Militia in Ukraine, Donetsk,” January 31, 2022. <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/blackwater-mercenaries-training-far-right-militia-ukraine-donetsk-military-commander-claims>.

Aegis Defence Services:

UK's London served as the home base for Aegis Defence Services. Tim Spicer, a former British Army commander, created it in 2002.¹⁹ The business included a significant network of staff members and contractors, including ex-military and intelligence professionals, who were sent to different places to serve customers. Aegis rose to prominence in Iraq, where the US Department of Defense gave it a contract to offer security and stabilization services. An Iraqi national filed a lawsuit against the business in 2007, alleging that Aegis contractors shot and hurt him during a convoy operation. The firm's involvement in Iraq was contentious, and it received criticism for allegedly violating human rights and hiring contractors who were charged with shooting people.²⁰ Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are two of the 18 African nations where Aegis Defence Services has conducted business. One of its former directors acknowledged in 2016 that the company used ex-Sierra Leonean child soldiers as mercenaries for the US in Iraq.²¹



It is important to remember that the above list is not all of the worldwide private military and security firms. Mercenary organizations like Executive Outcomes, Triple Canopy, Unity Resources Group, and many others have operated worldwide.

Analyzing the dark side of the mercenary groups:

The tendency for mercenary groups to violate human rights and destabilize conflict zones is part of their darker side. The misuse of mercenary organizations can also contribute to the loss of national sovereignty and the collapse of democratic government. Some of the darkest sides will be highlighted here-

¹⁹ Irish Echo Newspaper. "Aegis Founder Spicer Has Not Left the Building," n.d. <https://www.irishecho.com/2010/9/aegis-founder-spicer-has-not-left-the-building>.

²⁰ Mite, Valentinas. "Iraq: Shoot-Out Draws Attention To Security Contractors." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, February 2, 2012. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1078706.html>.

²¹ Ross, Alice. "Ex-Child Soldiers to Sue UK Firm That Hired Them to Be Mercenaries in Iraq." The Guardian, October 19, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/nov/18/ex-child-soldiers-to-sue-uk-firm-that-hired-them-to-be-mercenaries-in-iraq>.

The dilemma of unaccountability:

The unaccountability of mercenary groups arises because they operate outside of national military and legal systems, with limited oversight and regulation. This is because they are often hired by private entities, meaning their actions may not be subject to the same scrutiny or accountability as those of state actors. The case of Blackwater in Iraq in 2007, where contractors were involved in a shooting incident in Baghdad's Nisour Square that resulted in the deaths of 17 Iraqi civilians, highlights this issue. Although some contractors were eventually convicted, the initial immunity granted by the US government under Iraqi law demonstrates the unaccountability of mercenary groups.²² While there are international legal frameworks, and some countries have passed laws targeting private military contractors, the issue of unaccountability remains a significant concern.

Illegality:

The International Convention against the Recruiting, Use, Funding and Training of Mercenaries, enacted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, states that using mercenaries is illegal under international law because it violates state sovereignty and the ban on the use of force. Despite this, the Wagner Group, a Russian private military firm with apparent ties to the Russian government, has been implicated in conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and other nations and has been charged with various human rights crimes. The Wagner Group has breached the UN arms embargo and conducted airstrikes on civilian targets while supporting the Libyan National Army, according to a 2020 assessment by the United Nations Panel of Experts on Libya.²³

Human rights abuse:

Mercenaries frequently act unethically and illegally because they are driven by financial gain rather than a feeling of responsibility or obligation to safeguard human rights. They might be employed to silence opposition, terrorize or hurt civilians, or engage in other actions against human rights. It is suspected that recruits from the Wagner Group took part in abuses of human rights and humanitarian law during the current conflict in Ukraine. There are various human rights violations

²² Lind, Dara. "Why Four Blackwater Contractors Were Just Now Convicted of Killing 17 Iraqi Civilians in 2007." Vox, October 23, 2014. <https://www.vox.com/2014/10/23/7047519/blackwater-trial-nisour-square-massacre-2007-guilty-convicted>.

²³ Lederer, Edith M. "UN Experts: Libya's Security Threatened by Foreign Fighters." AP NEWS, May 28, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-africa-middle-east-13eeca3f53926040275ae406edece88f>.

that harm both soldiers and civilians. Around 5,987 civilian casualties were reported, including 1,605 fatalities and 4,382 injuries.²⁴ Although only documented instances are included, the actual number of casualties is most certainly far greater. However, not all of these are done by the Wagner group, but they have major involvement.²⁵ Ukraine is one of many conflicts worldwide where mercenary groups operate with little control and accountability and where human rights violations are frequently observed.

The factor of destabilizing the society:

Mercenary groups are frequently not affiliated with any one state or ideology, which makes them unpredictable and difficult to oversee. Due to this lack of loyalty, the mercenary group may act in ways that endanger the stability of society. The absence of accountability can result in abuses of authority, violations of human rights, and other destabilizing behaviour. The Russian government has engaged the Wagner Group, a Russian mercenary organization, to aid Syrian President Bashar al-government. The Wagner Group has been charged with violating human rights and aiding Assad in his harsh crackdown on the Syrian people, which hastened the conflict and destabilized the state.²⁶

Link with the terrorist groups:

To improve their military prowess or launch assaults against their adversaries, terrorist organizations may try to enlist mercenaries. In the present day, even terrorists employ mercenaries. Malhama Tactical is situated in Uzbekistan and only assists Islamist radicals. Malhama's hired guns are Sunnis, although not all share their patrons' ideologies.²⁷

²⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. "REPORT ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN UKRAINE," March 24, 2023.

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2023/23-03-24-Ukraine-35th-periodic-report-ENG.pdf>.

²⁵ Ball, Tom. "Wagner Group's Hardened Mercenaries Pictured in Eastern Ukraine," April 4, 2022.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/wagner-groups-hardened-mercenaries-pictured-in-eastern-ukraine-td9jnwsm>.

²⁶ Özer, Nur Özkan ErbayDilara Aslan. "Assad's Syria to Turn into Big Wagner Providing Mercenaries for Russia." Daily Sabah, March 21, 2022. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/assads-syria-to-turn-into-big-wagner-providing-mercenaries-for-russia>.

²⁷ National Defense University Press. "Mercenaries and War: Understanding Private Armies Today," n.d. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2031922/mercenaries-and-war-understanding-private-armies-today/>.

External influence:

External actors like governments or corporations can hire mercenary groups, leading to conflicts of interest with the local population. According to a 2018 UN assessment, the Russian government provided the Wagner Group with weaponry, military hardware, and media coverage as outside support.²⁸ The group has been connected to activities involving political influence in nations like the Central African Republic in 2018. It is claimed that it attempted to influence the results of an election in favour of the current president, who had close ties to Moscow.²⁹

The dark side of mercenary organizations shows the urgent need for more responsibility and control. Many human rights crimes, including indiscriminate attacks on civilians, have occurred because of these groups' use in global conflicts.

Analyzing the other side of the coin:

Mercenary organizations can be useful in a positive spectrum, despite their negative associations with crimes against humanity. Here an analysis of the other side of the coin will be drawn-

Availability and flexibility of the mercenary groups:

In contrast to conventional military forces, mercenary companies can frequently deploy swiftly to a mission site. Mercenary organizations may function in various settings and quickly adjust to shifting conditions. They can be more flexible and agile because they are not subject to the same rules and limitations as conventional military formations. Compared to developing their own military or security forces, some nations may find that contracting a mercenary company is more affordable. This is especially true for smaller nations or groups, which could lack the funding necessary to keep a regular army.

²⁸ NEWS WIRES. "US Pressures Allies to Expel Russia's Wagner Mercenaries from Libya, Sudan." France 24, February 3, 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230203-us-pressures-allies-to-expel-wagner-russian-mercenaries-from-libya-sudan>.

²⁹ Fasanotti, Federica Saini. "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, Commercial Concessions, Rights Violations, and Counterinsurgency Failure." Brookings, March 9, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/08/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>.

Counting the specialization of the mercenary groups as an asset:

Specialized knowledge can be valuable for any military or security organization, including mercenary groups. Mercenary organizations are often composed of trained troops paid to fight for a specific cause or client. These troops can be extremely significant assets on the battlefield because they frequently have a depth of military tactics, operations expertise, and training. Certain mercenary organizations may specialize in offering security for prominent people or businesses, including politicians or oil firms working in crisis zones. In conflict zones, other mercenary organizations may instruct and assist local forces.

Consideration of the political neutrality of the mercenary groups:

Mercenary organizations' political neutrality enables them to function independently of political agendas and concentrate entirely on their client's demands. This can make it more likely that strategic and tactical considerations would direct the group's activities rather than political ones that ideologies or other causes might influence. Since it shows that they are dedicated to delivering expert services unaffected by political biases or motivations, the group's political neutrality can also increase its reputation and credibility. The benefits and drawbacks of political neutrality for mercenary groups will vary depending on the particular environment in which the group operates.

Role in filling up the security vacuum:

The use of mercenaries can be a realistic option to fill the security void in circumstances where the government cannot provide protection, such as in failed nations or regions affected by civil war. Mercenaries can positively fill the security vacuum by offering effective and efficient security services in regions where government forces are unable or unwilling to operate. This can lessen violence, safeguard citizens, and foster a more stable social and economic advancement environment. Mercenaries can provide specific resources and talents that local security forces might lack, such as cutting-edge technology, intelligence gathering, and tactical knowledge.

Humanitarian role of the mercenary groups:

In conflict zones, mercenaries have occasionally been used to provide humanitarian aid, such as food, water, and medical supplies. This can be especially crucial in conflict-torn countries or places where the government cannot offer relief. Moreover, mercenaries have often assisted in providing

protection for groups that are at risk, including refugees or internally displaced people. They can guard camps or accompany convoys delivering help to afflicted areas. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) increasingly rely on the private sector, including CARE, Save the Children, CARITAS, and World Vision.³⁰

A warning for the future:

Mercenaries were formerly referred to as "Soldiers of Fortune." A mercenary today need not be a soldier of fortune.³¹ When we refer to someone as a "mercenary," we indicate that they are driven almost solely by financial gain and will use any means necessary to get it. Everywhere, private force is appearing. Since renting force is less expensive than buying it, contract warfare has emerged as a new form of conflict. The use of Private Military Companies (PMCs) has grown dramatically over the past two decades. Private security has developed into a large, international industry. Major mercenary activity has been observed recently in Yemen, Nigeria, Ukraine, Syria, and Iraq. While conventional Western militaries have increasingly used private military companies, weak states and international political organizations have frequently contracted out military activities. The truth is that private military corporations have grown in number, broadened their offerings, gained credibility, and taken a key role in providing security in the post-9/11 era. The most privatized wars in recent American military history are considered the two most significant US military deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. The force market, which has been underground for 150 years, is about to resurface and is expanding at an alarming rate. So, it is possible to foresee that worse things would happen.

³⁰ Hellinger, Daniel. "HUMANITARIAN ACTION, NGOs AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE MILITARY." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2004): 192–220.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45054874>.

³¹ Leiper, Nicholas. "What Mercenaries Look Like in 2022." *Spheres of Influence*, March 22, 2022.
<https://spheresofinfluence.ca/mercenaries-wagner-group-imperialism/>.

Concluding Remarks:

Mercenaries have been used throughout history, but the modern world's complex security issues have raised the demand for their services. Private military corporations may be able to provide states and organizations with useful services. Still, it is important to know their possible lack of responsibility and the risk of violating human rights. Its use is criticized for undermining state sovereignty and responsibility, while supporters claim they provide more practical, affordable, and effective alternatives to state forces. The protection of human rights and obedience to international law must always come first in any decision-making process, despite the complexity and breadth of the advantages and disadvantages of their use. To protect civilians and maintain international security, it is essential to carefully evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of using private military corporations and ensure that they comply with ethical and legal requirements.