

Mali Possibly Weighing Use of Russian Mercenaries as French Counterterrorism Forces Draw Down



Rostov-on-Don 2014 Victory Day Parade Rehearsal, Russian Army, Soldiers, Russia.

Source: Vyacheslav Argenberg
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By Jacob Zenn
 OE Watch Commentary

On 27 September, the left-center French publication *Le Monde*, which reports on global affairs from an analytical perspective, featured the excerpted article about France's response to the possibility of Russian mercenaries operating in Mali. According to the article, Mali's Prime Minister, Choguel Maïga, alluded to Mali welcoming Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group into Mali to combat militants aligned with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This potential cooperation with the Wagner Group came as Maïga claimed France was abandoning Mali by considering a 50 percent reduction of the 5,100 French troop deployment to the Sahel by 2023.

The article notes, however, that France considers its reduction of troops in Mali not as a decrease in commitment to counterterrorism operations, but a change in strategy. France's Minister of the Armed Forces also stated that Western support to Mali was incompatible with Mali working with Russian mercenaries. Further, as the state-owned *France24* reported on 16 September, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that French troops had killed Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, the leader of the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) several weeks earlier—a message likely meant to demonstrate France's continued commitment to counterterrorism in Mali.

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The possibility that Mali would host Wagner Group mercenaries was heightened at the UN General Assembly in September when the Russian Foreign Minister stated that Mali was turning to a Russian military company for counterterrorism support, which, according to the article, implicitly meant Wagner Group. The article assesses that Mali is hinting at inviting the Wagner Group to Mali as a way to press France to increase its counterterrorism commitment to Mali by exploiting a perceived rivalry between France and Russia. At the same time, the article does not discount the possibility that, since the coup in Mali in May, the new Malian government may be strategically reorienting itself away from France and toward Russia. If this is the case, then Maïga may not be bluffing about welcoming Wagner Group into Mali after all.

Source: “L’hypothèse Wagner fait monter la tension entre la France et le Mali (The Wagner hypothesis raises the tension between France and Mali),” *lemonde.fr* (left-center French publication that reports on global affairs from an analytical perspective), 27 September 2021. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/09/27/au-mali-le-premier-ministre-ouvre-la-voie-aux-mercenaires-russes-du-groupe-wagner_6096210_3212.html

The name of this Russian private military company without formal existence is carefully avoided by the Malian Prime Minister, Choguel Maïga. His speech before the podium of the United Nations General Assembly and his latest statements to the press, however, seem like confirmation of the discussions between his government and the controversial company.

France has not ceased in recent days warning Bamako against the consequences of this possible security reorientation. The Minister of the Armed Forces, Florence Parly, went on September 20 to tell her counterpart of the ‘serious incompatibility’ between the use of these mercenaries and Western support. Paris maintains that the reduction in the number of its soldiers in the Sahel is not a redefinition of its priorities but a transformation of strategy.

Paris was very shocked by the statements of Choguel Maïga, as a few moments before his UN speech, Sergei Lavrov, the head of Russian diplomacy, offered the pleasure of confirming at a press conference that ‘the Malian authorities turned to a private Russian military company.’

The Malian leaders can take advantage of international rivalries to solicit a stronger commitment from their current partners and Moscow enjoys the anger of the West at the announcement of the arrival of these mercenaries in their area influence. A question arises, however: is Mali today on the verge of reversing its alliances and turning to Moscow?

Source: “Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, vétéran du jihad, cible no.1 de la France au Sahel (Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, jihad veteran, France’s No. 1 target in the Sahel),” *france24.com* (state owned international news outlet), 16 September 2021. <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210916-abou-walid-al-sahraoui-v%C3%A9t%C3%A9ran-du-jihad-%C3%A9tait-la-cible-n%C2%B01-de-la-france-au-sahel>

French forces killed Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a longtime jihadist figure in the Sahel. His elimination has been described as a ‘major success’ for France by President Emmanuel Macron. Florence Parly, Minister of the Armed Forces, said at a press conference that Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi died after ‘succumbing to injuries caused by a strike by the Barkhane force in August 2021.’