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Understanding the use of Private Military and Security Companies in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger

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Master in International Studies

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SOCIOLOGIA
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Department of History

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Resumo

Esta dissertação analisa a forma como as empresas militares e de segurança privadas (PMSCs, na sigla inglesa) russas, turcas e chinesas operam na *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES). Examina-se o que o recurso a PMSCs revela sobre a intersecção entre geopolítica, privatização da segurança e fragilidade estatal. A investigação baseia-se nas teorias da geopolítica, do neoliberalismo e da securitização, utilizando o pós-colonialismo para contextualizar o estudo. Recorre-se a uma metodologia qualitativa, de estudo de caso sustentado em literatura, combinando fontes académicas, relatórios e material jornalístico para analisar o papel das PMSCs como instrumentos tanto de política externa como de sobrevivência dos regimes. Em conjunto, estes quadros teóricos permitem compreender de que modo os atores privados são crescentemente utilizados para promover agendas estatais e manter o controlo político em Estados frágeis. Os resultados demonstram que as PMSCs na AES raramente são verdadeiramente privadas. Pelo contrário, funcionam como procuradoras (*proxies*) dos seus Estados de origem, sendo empregues como meios de projeção de influência, salvaguarda de interesses económicos e competição geopolítica. Para os países da AES, a contratação de PMSCs proporciona capacidade militar de curto prazo e proteção do regime. Embora tais parcerias possam contribuir para a estabilização dos regimes, correm o risco de comprometer a soberania a longo prazo.

***Palavras-chave*:** Empresas Militares e de Segurança Privadas, Sahel, Geopolítica, Rússia, Turquia, China

Abstract

This thesis explores how Russian, Turkish, and Chinese private military and security companies (PMSCs) operate in the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES). It examines what the use of PMSCs reveals about the intersection of geopolitics, the privatisation of security, and state fragility. The research is grounded in theories of geopolitics, neoliberalism, and securitisation, and draws on postcolonialism to contextualise the study. Utilising a qualitative, literature-based case study approach, the thesis analyses the role of PMSCs as tools of both foreign policy and regime survival, drawing on academic literature, reports, and journalistic material. Together, these frameworks help explain how private actors are increasingly used to advance state agendas and maintain political control in fragile states. The findings show that PMSCs in the AES are rarely private. Instead, they act as proxies for their states of origin, serving to project influence, secure economic interests, and engage in geopolitical competition. For the AES countries, contracting PMSCs provides short-term military capacity and regime protection. While such partnerships may stabilise regimes, they risk undermining sovereignty in the long term.

Keywords: Private Military and Security Companies, Sahel, Geopolitics, Russia, Turkey, China

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Glossary

AES	Alliance des États du Sahel
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
FAMA	Malian Armed Forces
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	International Relations
ISGS	Islamic State of the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
MINUSMA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PMC	Private Military Company
PMSC	Private Military and Security Company
PSC	Private Security Company
SAP	Structural Adjustment Plans
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WG/AC	Wagner Group/Africa Corps

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Introduction

The Sahel region is both a biogeographical space and a political and cultural zone. Stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Red Sea in the east, nestled between the dry Sahara in the north and the humid savannas in the south (Villalón, 2021, pp. 1-2; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025; UNISS, n.d). It is a space where Islam meets Christianity as well as African traditional religions, and where, depending on the definition, ten countries share borders. Within this vast region, this thesis is focused on three landlocked states, namely Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – collectively known as the *Alliance des États du Sahel* (hereafter the AES). The AES countries have long ranked near the bottom of the Human Development Index (Villalón, 2021, p. 2; Bøås & Strazzari, 2020, p. 3; Laessing, 2025, p. 2), and the Sahel region is regularly described as a region in crisis. This crisis is multifaceted, rooted in fragile institutions and political corruption, human rights abuses (Faulkner, Parens & Plichta, 2024, p. 24; Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, pp. 70, 77; Onapajo & Babalola, 2024, p. 30); poverty, food insecurity, internal displacement, transnational crime (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020, p. 1; Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, p. 66); ethnic marginalisation and problematic security sector reforms (Seiyefa, 2023, p. 642); the growth of transnational Salafi-Islam ideology, and disputes over natural resource extraction (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 48). The effects of climate change, such as desertification, irregular rainfall, and resource scarcity, further exacerbate existing tensions and vulnerabilities (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 48; Laessing, 2025, p. 2; Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, p. 66). In the middle of these overlapping crises, security has become the dominant narrative surrounding the Sahel, specifically given the country's history of foreign intervention. Terrorism and violent extremism are often presented as the region's defining challenges, shaping both domestic and international policy responses, with counterterrorism and development being a dual lens through which the AES is viewed (Seiyefa, 2023, p. 642; Institute of Economics and Peace, 2025, p. 47).

As the AES countries, under military rule, seek to forge their own paths, the region has increasingly become a stage for global power competition. Following an end to previous cooperation with traditional Western military partners, new military and security actors have emerged to fill the vacuum. Among them are private military and security companies (PMSCs), whose growing involvement could mark a transformation in how force is outsourced. While PMSCs have operated in Africa for decades, as seen in the mercenaries of the 1970s and Executive Outcome in the 1990s, the current deployment of Russian, Turkish, and Chinese-

linked companies marks a new phase in the global privatisation of security. In this phase, private actors blur the line between commercial interest and state-driven geopolitical strategy.

Research question and methodology

This thesis explores the growing involvement of private military and security companies in the AES countries, focusing on Russia, Türkiye, and China. The aim is to understand and contextualise the use of PMSCs by these global powers and by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. By examining these cases, the study seeks to contribute to a broader debate on the privatisation of security, geopolitical competition, state fragility, and terrorism.

Alongside a theoretical framework of neoliberalism, securitisation, and geopolitics, the thesis is guided by the following research question:

How does Russia, Türkiye, and China's use of PMSCs in the AES countries reflect the intersection of geopolitics, the privatisation of security, and state fragility?

This question allows an examination of both the motivations driving foreign actors to deploy PMSCs in the AES countries and the motivations behind the AES countries' decision to host them.

The thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how authoritarian states instrumentalise private force to achieve strategic goals, and how fragile states use it to pursue their own agenda.

Case study

The goal of the thesis is to explore how Russia, Türkiye, and China's use of PMSCs in the AES countries reflects the intersection of geopolitics, the privatisation of security, and state fragility. To reach this objective, the thesis uses case studies as a methodology. There are many definitions, views, and even confusion about what a case study is (Gerring, 2007, p. 65; Vennesson, 2008, p. 226). According to Vennesson, a case is a phenomenon, or an event, chosen, conceptualised and analysed empirically as a manifestation of a broader class of phenomena or events (2008, p. 226) and a case study, as described by Gerring, is "[...] an intensive study of a single case (or a small set of cases) to generalize across a larger set of cases of the same general type" (Gerring, 2007, p. 65). This thesis uses case studies to explain a particular phenomenon, namely PMSCs in the AES countries, and this is a common use of case

studies among researchers. By doing so, the thesis's knowledge could reveal potential links to other cases of the same type (Vennesson, 2008, pp. 226-227; Gerring, 2007, p. 65).). The cases in this thesis are composed of nation-states (studied in a contemporary temporal frame), archetypal for students of political science (Gerring, 2007, p. 19). The choice to pursue a case study methodology comes from the fact that case studies are highly flexible, often using both qualitative and quantitative techniques and modes of data collection (Gerring, 2007, p. 19, p. 33; Vennesson, 2008, p. 227). According to Vennesson, case studies have made a central contribution to international relations studies (2008, p. 225).

Case selection and delimitations

The cases chosen for this study are Russian, Turkish, and Chinese PMSCs in the *Alliance des États du Sahel,* meaning Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The reasoning behind this selection is based on three critical facts. Firstly, the AES countries are studied as a part of one unit due to the overarching threat of jihadi violence, impacting the three states. Secondly, the three states have, to varying degrees, decided to engage with PMSCs. These companies are predominantly Russian, Turkish, and Chinese, forming the basis for the decision to engage with these states. Thirdly, all states in this research can be considered authoritarian, which further contributes to a new understanding of the use of PMSCs.

To conduct a precise case study, some delimitations must be established. For this thesis, the limitations mainly concern the timeframe, geographic location, theory, and material collected. When it comes to the timeframe, the thesis, while providing some historical context, focuses on the period beginning with the respective coups in the AES countries and the arrival of the first Russian PMSC, the Wagner Group, which means the study period runs from 2021 to 2025. Geographically, the thesis is limited to analysing *AES* and PMSC activity within these three countries. Theoretically, the thesis is delimited by its primary use of neoliberalism, securitisation, and geopolitics as a theoretical framework, with postcolonialism used to further contextualize the thesis. Therefore, the study is limited to understanding and interpreting the situation at hand through these theoretical lenses. By limiting the theoretical framework, continuity and connection with existing theories are ensured. Lastly, the material chosen for the thesis is official and publicly accessible, whilst showcasing the use of diverse resources. This will be further developed in the next section.

Material and data collection

The material on which this thesis is based mainly consists of articles from academic journals, journalistic material, media interviews, official communication, resolutions, and reports. To find material relevant to the study, different keywords were used, including “Private Military and Security Companies”, “PMSC”, “The Wagner Group”, “Africa Crops”, “SADAT”, “Mercenaries”, “Mali”, “Burkina Faso”, “Niger”, “Russian Private Military Contractors”, “Turkish Private Military Actors”, “Chinese Private Security Companies” and combinations of these. Thereafter, a selection was made to be able to obtain the material that best captured the area of interest, considering that all the material generated by these searches would not be possible within the scope of the thesis. Using a large variety of sources creates a comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand, forming the basis for a more credible work. It also helps diminish research bias and provide a deeper understanding of the topic.

The data has been collected mainly through secondary sources, primarily due to the challenge of obtaining primary sources on the topic. As the topic encompasses both private and governmental sectors and touches on military operations and cooperation, companies and states can decide how much they are willing to share. Add in the fact that most PMSC operations are denied by governments, and primary source data is almost unattainable. However, while the topic at hand is sensitive and empirical data is complex to produce, this does not imply that the topic should not be further researched.

Study limitations

The data on which this thesis is based have been collected from secondary sources. As governments are strongly discouraging travel to the AES countries at present, a decision was made to follow that advice. In research, gaining hands-on insight into the topic is beneficial for a study. However, with the AES countries experiencing constant turmoil, the possibilities of field research are minimal. Further, as the thesis focuses on PMSCs, information is scarce and hard to obtain, even from distinguished academics, journalists, or diplomats. Many efforts have been made to schedule interviews with relevant interviewees; unfortunately, these efforts have gained little success. Many late cancellations and unresponsive parties have contributed to the situation. Whilst interviews might have offered fascinating insights, the fact remains that most interviewees have not visited the AES countries recently, and even less have been in direct

contact with any PMSC representatives. The limitations in empirical evidence do not hinder the thesis from reaching its research objective.

Organisation of the dissertation

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the theoretical framework, focusing on the concepts of neoliberalism, securitisation, and geopolitics. Together with postcolonialism, these theories provide the foundation for the thesis. The second chapter consists of a literature review that provides an overview of existing research on PMSCs, the Sahel, and private security in Africa. This chapter establishes the context of the thesis, highlighting the existing knowledge of the topic at hand. The third chapter presents the case studies, which are then analysed and discussed in the fourth chapter, where the study's findings are presented. Finally, the fifth chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the research and a closing reflection.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

To understand the current PMSC deployment in the Sahel, this thesis draws on theories of geopolitics, neoliberalism, and securitisation to provide a theoretical framework. These theories, while different, complement each other and creates an understanding of the topic at hand. The section later discusses echoes of the AES countries' colonial pasts and their effects on modern-day developments, using postcolonialism as a context in which the thesis is situated in.

1.1 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, broadly understood, emphasizes deregulation, market-based solutions (O'Brien & Williams, 2016, p. 13; Harvey, 2005, p. 21), a limited role of the state, and economic growth over stability (Balaam & Dillman, 2014, p. 40; Brooks, Koch & Schaub, 2016, p. 204). This increased reliance on market forces, accompanied by a desire to reduce the state's ability to intervene in the economy, is known as the Washington Consensus. The Washington Consensus became the logic for policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (O'Brien & Williams, 2016, p. 88, 150; Balaam & Dillman, 2014, p. 93; Fine, 2001, p. 3). This consensus has been applied in the West and exported to so-called developing countries (O'Brien & Williams, 2016, p. 88). Through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), these institutions-imposed conditions on state loans that reflected the consensus (O'Brien & Williams, 2016, p. 150; Balaam & Dillman, 2014, p. 142). In practice, this meant that indebted states, many of them in Africa, were required to cut government spending, privatise public assets, and reorient their economies toward export production to be able to lend money to their economy (Balaam & Dillman, 2014, p. 142; O'Brien & Williams, 2016, p. 183; Harvey, 2005, p. 29). SAPs have long been criticised for reducing governments' investment in health, education, and other social services, thereby disproportionately harming different parts of the local population (Balaam & Dillman, 2014, p. 116). There is still a large consensus that the benefits of a liberal, open international trade system outweigh its adverse effects. However, many authors describe a post-Washington Consensus emerging in the 90s, a new liberalism that allows for state interventions that don't regard the state and the market as opposing forces (Fine, 2001, p. 3; Balaam & Dillman, 2014, p. 130). Still, authors argue that many African state institutions still have not recovered from this 'thinning of the state' that occurred due to the SAPs of the 70s and 80s across the continent

(Gerőcs, 2024, p. 307). A thinned-out state might suffer from weakened institutions that struggle to provide security guarantees, which is highly relevant to this thesis and will be developed in the literature review.

Moving on to PMSCs more specifically, prominent authors such as Deborah Avant, Anna Leander, Peter Lock, and Rita Abrahamsen, among others, use neoliberalism as part of their theoretical framework to understand the creation, expansion, and use of PMSCs. According to Abrahamsen & Williams (2010, p. 60), the expansion of PMSCs can be understood as part of a shift in governance, driven by the dominance of neoliberalism within the state apparatus, which led to increased privatisation, outsourcing, and the growth of public–private partnerships. While evident in the education and health care sectors, these transformations also extended to the security and military sectors, which have been claimed to be commodified[1] (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010, p. 60; Abrahamsen & Leander, 2010, p. 4 p. 4). The privatisation, commercialisation, or commodification of security is understood differently by various authors. Yet all agree that it produces significant impacts upon the nature of armed conflict (Berndtsson & Kinsey, 2016, p. 1). The result is, arguably, a blurred line between public and private authority, with PMSCs operating at the intersection of market logic and state interests, as registered in various states across the globe (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010, pp. 62, 64-65; Leander, 2003, p. 1). Thus, neoliberalism provides an essential theoretical lens for understanding why the use of PMSCs has become more prevalent.

1.2 Securitisation & militarisation

Another theoretical piece of the puzzle for the framework of this thesis is securitisation (and/or militarisation). The theory of securitisation is part of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2014, p. 92). Security studies, originating in the wake of World War II, have traditionally been concerned with relations among great powers in the international system (Barkawi & Laffey, 2006, p. 329). Securitisation is grounded in critical IR theory, specifically constructivism, which sees security as a social construction. In opposition to the traditional IR-theories of liberalism and realism, constructivism critiques the static assumptions of a "state" across time and place, and instead emphasises social construction, context, change, and social dimensions (Fierke, 2012, p. 188-189; McDonald, 2018, p. 49). In the Sahel, where a multitude of threats emerge within the country's borders, a broader understanding of security is needed to describe the situation. As Barkawi & Laffey

[1] See also: Lock, 1998, p. 1415; Avant, 2005, pp. 4, 24.

(2006, p. 329) argue, the traditional, and sometimes Eurocentric, take on security studies is outdated and has shifted with changes in the overall security landscape (2006, p. 329).

According to Abrahamsen & Williams (2010, p. 59), security has become the "dominant discourse of modern life" and since the attacks on 9/11, the urgent need for security has become a persuasive rhetoric, meaning that the growth of private security must be understood against this backdrop. Securitisation refers to the process of presenting something as an existential threat, thereby justifying exceptional measures, including the use of force (Buzan, Waever & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 21-24). The securitisation process works by shifting an issue out of regular political debate "[...] into the realm of emergency politics by presenting it as an existential threat" (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2014, p. 94). Within the concept of national security, it is assumed that the state 'has to survive' and therefore it is assumed that if a state is under - real or imagined - attack, governments can legitimately use extraordinary measures that suspend the usual routine of politics (Fierke, 2012, p. 200; Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2014, p. 93). Securitisation can create urgency and motivate positive action in response to matters deemed to require exceptional measures, such as environmental degradation. Securitisation can also give rise to emergency politics, in which deliberation, participation, and bargaining are necessarily constricted, giving way to a militarised mode of thinking (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2014, pp. 98, 101). Securitisation applied to migration policy serves as an example of a process that can have dire consequences, sponsoring the perception that migrants are a threat[2] (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2014, p. 102).

Militarisation, on the other hand, is defined as the increasing influence and use of military logic and/or institutions in political and civilian domains, often leading to a glorification of war, force, and violence as instruments to solve political conflict (Eriksson Baaz & Verweijen, 2018, p. 59). While the process of securitisation is evident in and around the Sahel region (Osland & Erstad, 2020, p. 22, Barrios, 2021, p. 439), militarisation can be seen in the fact that the current governments are all military juntas, coming into power after military coups on the rhetoric of counterterrorism and currently eroding political life and democracy (Barrios, 2021, p. 439). As the most significant portrayed threat in the region is that of terrorism, it is evident that the war on terror discourse, produced and reproduced after 9/11, still has effects on securitisation in the Sahel, especially when it comes to foreign intervention. Using securitisation as a theoretical framework helps explain how threats are framed and may include historical context.

[2] See also: von Rosen, 2019; Bello, 2020; Walters, 2010.

1.3 Geopolitics

According to Topalidis, Kartalis, Velentzas, & Sidiropoulou (2024, p.1), geopolitics emerged as a science to determine the critical role of geography in shaping world politics. As Deudney (2000, p. 78) claims, geopolitical theorising is one of the oldest and most central lines of argument in political science, as old as the study of politics itself (Wu, 2017, p. 789). Historically, geopolitics has both served as a foundation of political realism (Topalidis et al. 2024, p. 2) and as an integral branch of realist theories in International Relations (Wu, 2017, p. 787). Traditional, or classical, geopolitics focuses on the relationship between states and is primarily concerned with natural environments, territories, and spaces defined by geography and technology (Topalidis et al, 2024, p. 9; Wu, 2017, p. 790). This earlier form of geopolitical theory views the world as composed of states in constant competition, seeking to create an "[…] understanding of the basis of their power and the nature of their interactions with each other" (Wu, 2017, p. 791). However, as new modes of communication, transportation technologies, and the increased importance of non-state actors have reshaped international relations, the study of geopolitics has also evolved. Traditional geopolitical frameworks have limitations when explaining contemporary global dynamics, specifically in failing to account for issues that shape the international political structure (Topalidis et al., 2024, p. 9). Contemporary geopolitics, on the other hand, takes a more multidisciplinary approach, incorporating geographical factors, as well as social, global economic, historical, cultural, and technological factors in its analysis (Topalidis et al. 2024, p. 2). Alongside the rise of global economisation, the importance of economic interests has increased. While geopolitics maintain an importance of political and military means in the competition among countries, the logic of conflict is increasingly being replaced by the logic of competition, according to Topalidis et al. (2024, p. 5).

Thanks to the dynamic nature of geopolitics, as claimed by Wu (2017, p. 793) and Cohen (2015, p. 5), it can explain both change and continuity in world politics. As argued by Cohen (2015, p.16), the "[…] true value of modern geopolitics is a scholarly analysis of the geographical factors underlying international relations and guiding political interactions," suggesting that geopolitics is more useful, not defined as a school of thought, but as a mode of analysis. However, Deudney (2000, p. 78) claims that the term 'geopolitics' itself has largely been drained of substance and overused, often serving as a casual synonym for realist views of international strategic rivalry and interaction (2000, p. 78). Karaganov (2013) calls geopolitics a catchword, and argues for its comeback, as it has been regaining legitimacy. Geopolitical

realities retain political significance and permeate strategic approaches, underscoring the relevance of geopolitical analysis.

1.4 Postcolonialism

This thesis will discuss the deteriorating relationship between the AES countries, France (and the West in general), a relationship heavy with echoes of the countries' colonial past, in which France's longstanding engagement in the area has been criticised as neocolonial and imperialist (Watling & Wilén, 2024, p.70, Brown, 2024, p. 24; Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 6). In that sense, although this dissertation does not explicitly explore PMSCs through a postcolonial lens, postcolonialism must be outlined in the theoretical framework, as it contributes to a broader understanding of the situation at hand.

As argued by Abrahamsen (2003, p. 191) and Grovogui (2012, p. 284), postcolonialism is not merely a theory but a set of diverse ideas, perspectives, and problematisations. The problematisations can occur across significant areas of contemporary social and political theory relevant to Africa, Asia, Australia, and Latin America (Grovogui, 2012, p. 284; Abrahamsen, 2003, p. 191). Regardless of the critique of postcolonialism (partly claimed to rely on the colonial encounter as a starting point) "the colonial experience is nevertheless regarded as crucial to an understanding of contemporary politics" (Abrahamsen, 2003, pp. 193, 195). Elischer (2021) asks if perhaps all of the conflicts in the Sahel, jihadi or other, can be interpreted as long-term outcomes of European colonialism, sponsored by "artificially drawn state borders, the imposition of pro-Western authoritarian rulers, and the creation of agricultural export economies (that) collectively impeded the creation of central state authorities that citizens perceive as legitimate" (Elischer, 2021, p. 384).

Besides the importance of placing current events in a broader context, the colonial history of the AEs countries is essential, as anti-imperialist, and especially anti-French sentiment, is currently being exploited by both the countries' junta leaders and foreign actors. This is showcased throughout both the literature review and the case studies. Tying the theory to the objective of this thesis, postcolonialism, particularly used to understand the militarisation of relations and the rise of anti-Western sentiments, sets the stage for an analysis of neoliberalism and securitisation theory.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 The Monopoly of violence

Before discussing private military companies, it is necessary to provide a background on the evolution of the use of force throughout history. Historically, the monopolisation of warfare has been principal to the centralisation of power in the state (de Carvalho, 2016, p. 17; Abrahamsen & Leander, 2016, p. 2). In the Middle Ages, private force went from being an integral part of any medieval army to being seen as a widespread threat to public peace by obstructing attempts at centralisation of power. This led to efforts to change the norms of war and to introduce the idea of waging war on behalf of the public good, thereby laying the groundwork for the creation of national standing armies (de Carvalho 2016, p. 15; Singer 2003, p. 22-24; Leira 2016, p. 35). With the new standing armies increasing war-related expenses to an extent where only states could afford them, as well as an increased monopolisation of the authority to deploy forces, the business of war became the *de facto* and *de jure* monopoly of the state (de Carvalho, 2017, p. 17; Singer, 2003, p. 31). The use of violence shifted from being legitimate for non-state actors (the previous private forces) to being fully managed by the state through political systems and institutions within national borders. In this way, violence was no longer controlled by the public or the market but became tied to the state and territory (Thomson, 1994, p. 4). Following Max Weber, the state is the only legitimate actor that can resort to violence, since its very essence lies in claiming the monopoly of legitimate violence within a defined territory (de Carvalho 2016, p. 12; Howe 1998, p. 308). This definition recurs in discussions of the concept of state. Anthony Giddens defines the nation-state, in part, as having "direct control of the means of internal and external violence within a territory demarcated by boundaries" (Giddens, 1985, p. 121). McFate, recalling Thomas Hobbes, emphasises that "security is the most fundamental service a state can/has to provide its citizens" (McFate, 2016, p. 119). To guarantee this security provision, it is said to be essential for a state to have the monopoly of force within its territorial boundaries to repel external threats and domestically enforce its rule of law (McFate, 2016, p. 119). Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso (2024, p. 1064) argue that this discussion does not work in sub-Saharan Africa. Given the regular occurrence of state fragility in the area, the starting point is that states do not have a monopoly over the use of force within their territory to begin with. This is frequently used by non-state entities, such as rebels and terrorists, who challenge states' status in the area (Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1064). Locke offers a similar line of thought,

going so far as stating that “the notion that Africa was ever composed of sovereign states classically defined as having a monopoly on force in the territory within their boundaries is false” (Locke, 1998, p. 1409).

Other scholars argue that the Weberian definition of the state as linked to the monopoly of legitimate use of force was exaggerated from the start, and that, in modern times, it is out of touch with reality (Abrahamsson & Leander, 2016, p. 1). With private security actors having entered all levels of society, various authors argue that the state does not only appear to be outsourcing security provision (Higate, 2017, p. 2; Gumedze, 2007b, p. 1; Leander, 2005, p. 610), which states might continue to insist that they do not, but also that private security has gained a momentum and is increasingly dispersed (Abrahamsen & Leander, 2016, p.1; Leander, 2005, p. 610; Avant, 2005, p. 1; Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010, p. 82; Higate, 2017, p. 2; Gumedze, 2007b, p. 1). Gumedze tries to give a vast number of factors as to why this has happened“[...] including general human insecurity, the end of the Cold War, the globalisation phenomenon, the marketisation of the public sphere, the downsizing of armed forces, the professionalisation of armed and police forces, the drive for profit maximisation, the liberalisation of the arms trade, the general unending African conflicts and the events of 9/11”[3] (Gumedze, 2007b, p. 1). Private security companies can be found in shopping malls, prisons, the training of armed forces, the development of weapons systems, and the protection of businesses, CEOs, and NGO workers (Abrahamsson & Leander, 2016, p. 1). Private actors have also entered the military sector, and besides private security companies, private *military* and security companies are also present and growing.

2.2 Private military and security companies: definition, impact, and growth

First and foremost, the challenge of defining these types of actors must be addressed, as a variety of terms are frequently used interchangeably (for example, private military company, private security company, private military and security company, international security firm, and private security force). I opt for the term private military and security company (PMSC), given the actors' ever-changing nature, as it offers an encompassing definition. The same company might take on a multitude of shapes and roles depending on where it operates, blurring the distinction between private military companies (PMCs) and private security companies

[3] See also: Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, pp. 1050, 1053; Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 5-6, Singer, 2003, pp. 49, 53, 83).

(PSCs), particularly since the same firm may well operate across both military and commercial domains (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011, p. 217; Gumedze, 2007b, p.3; Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 2-3).

PMSCs are generally defined as corporate entities that specialise in providing military skills and expertise (Singer, 2003, pp. 41, 45; Howe, 1998, p. 317; Leander, 2005, p. 608; Baker & Gumedze, 2007, p. 2; Brooks, 2000, p. 4). The companies also tend to cross into services that are traditionally monopolised by the state, such as core military capabilities, including combat operations, military planning, intelligence gathering, risk assessments, training and logistical support (Singer, 2003, p. 8; Avant, 2005, p. 3; Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2012, p. 801; Owens, 2011, p. 217; Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 2; Schaub & Kelty, 2016, pp. 8, 19). While the scale and scope of military activities performed by private actors today are increasing, the phenomenon is nothing new, as the use of private forces can be traced back to medieval times. As argued by Leander & Abrahamsen, security has in some ways become "a commodity to be bought and sold in a competitive marketplace rather than a public good provided by the state" (2016, p.4). This commodification on the neoliberal market reflects the underlying business logic of most PMSCs involved in non-combat operations, such as security for NGOs, logistical support for UN missions, and protection of oil pipelines or other extraction sites for natural resources. In line with Singers' requirements, most PMSCs do not count as mercenaries, and he emphasises the difference between mercenaries and the *selling of military services* (2003, pp. 3, 41, 45). While the first group still exists, the modern PMSC has evolved from its earlier form as mercenary groups in the 1960s and 70s, transforming into an increasingly professional and commercialised entity. Nevertheless, as highlighted by some authors, PMSCs are also increasing operations in conflict-ridden areas, which might change the nature of their services and impair their legitimacy (Percy, 2007, p. 229; Owens, 2011, p. 217; Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 6; Brooks, 2000, p. 3). This leads to another discussion surrounding the phenomenon. In academia, there is a broad debate over whether private military and security companies and the individuals in them should be understood as mercenaries rather than PMSC employees. To understand and address this question, the term 'mercenary' must be defined. Referring to the Geneva Conventions, Singer describes a mercenary as "a foreign person who, despite not being a member of the armed forces in the conflict, is specifically recruited to fight and is motivated essentially by private gain." (Singer, 2003, p. 41). The term mercenary traditionally refers to an individual who fights for their own financial gain rather than national loyalty, often employed by a foreign entity (Thomson, 1994, p. 26). But, as the security landscape has changed, so has the view on mercenaries and their

definition. Some will argue that mercenaries and PMSCs are different entities both in form and in substance. As previously defined, PMSCs are corporate entities that specialise in providing military skills and expertise, including the services described earlier in this chapter, and the classification of PMSC personnel as mercenaries under international law is uncommon (Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, pp. 75-76). While international Humanitarian Law does not prohibit the use of PMSCs or mercenaries during armed conflicts, two separate conventions do: The 1977 Organisation of African Unity Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa and the 1989 International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries. These treaties prohibit states from using mercenaries, but the definition of mercenaries excludes most PMSC staff (Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, pp. 75-76; Cameron & Chetail, 2013, pp. xiii, xiv). Many states have also not ratified the conventions, weakening their potential impact.

There is also the Montreux Document. The initiative, launched in 2006 and initially signed in 2008 by 17 states, aims to reaffirm states' existing obligations under international law and to ensure respect for humanitarian and human rights law. It applies where states are home to, host to, or contracting PMSCs active in zones of armed conflict (Van der Lugt, 2024, p. 8; Pokalova, 2023, p. 4; Liu, 2016, p. 142; Macleod, 2016, p. 164). However, the document should not be seen "[...] as endorsing the use of PMSCs in any circumstance but seeks to recall legal obligations and to recommend good practices if the decision has been made to contract PMCs" (Swiss Initiative & The International Committee of the Red Cross, 2009, p.3). There are still concerns that PMSCs operate in a legal vacuum, especially given that states that are heavily engaged in the PMSC business might not be signatories to the document. However, the Montreux Document is an effort to provide direction on how states should engage with PMSCs.

Many scholars argue that the nature of the entity's activities is more important than the definition of it, and that it is impossible to try and lump together all PMSCs under the label of mercenaries as they are so diverse in terms of both operation and function (Baker & Gumedze, 2007, p. 2-3; Diouf, 2016, p. 19-20; Brooks, 2000, p. 3). As previously mentioned, the PMSCs of today operate across both military and civilian sectors, offering a broad range of services to states, international organisations and private corporations (Baker & Gumedze, 2007, p. 1, Percy, 2007, p. 206, Owens, 2011, p. 217, Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 6, Brooks, 2000, p. 7; Howe, 2001, p. 190; Singer, 2003, p. 45). However, authors such as Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso (2024, p. 1052) argue that private military and security companies are merely euphemisms for mercenary companies. Also, referencing the Geneva Conventions, Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso claim that anyone willing to sell their military skills in foreign

conflict zones, regardless of the cause, is a mercenary. Other authors who see PMSCs as mercenaries are Musah & Kayode Fayemi (2000b). The authors claim that private security is a qualitatively new form, but still a form of mercenary activity. With a colonial perspective in mind, Musah & Kayode Fayemi argue that, like when mercenary forces were used by colonising powers in the 1870s for invading the African continent, they are being used again now as these "new" mercenary businesses' goals are to access natural and mineral resources (Musah & Kayode Fayemi, 2000b, p. 1). This will be further discussed in the section *"The extractive economics of security"* and the subsequent case studies. A third group of authors argues that the entities deployed by regimes such as those of Russia, Türkiye, and China defy traditional categorisation. Van der Lugt instead uses the term *proxy military companies*. Unlike private actors, "[...] these organisations operate under contractual arrangements with sponsoring states, which shape their objectives, constraints, and chains of authority" (2024, p.11). In the AES countries, this type of PMSC seems to be most prevalent, as the current deployments in the countries consist specifically of Russian, Turkish, and Chinese entities. However, to maintain a continuous line of thought in this work, the term PMSC will be used to describe these actors as well, who are all part of a universe of (seemingly) non-state security and military service providers.

Given that the monopoly of legitimate violence is considered essential to the establishment of state authority, states that fail to maintain it are often labelled weak, fragile, or failed (McFate, 2016, p. 119). There are arguments that states that hire PMSCs are desperate and no longer able to provide security for their citizens or enforce public order through their own institutions (Percy, 2007, p. 218; Leander, 2003, pp. 10, 12; Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 88; Schaub & Kelty, 2016, p. 11). Different authors discuss the concern of whether or not PMSCs undermine state authority and, without generalising, the main arguments are that PMSCs seem to have an eroding effect on state authority, control, as well as on democratic governance (Leander, 2003, pp. 10, 12; Leander, 2005, pp. 606, 615; Avant, 2005, p. 60; Gumedze, 2007b, p. 3, McFate, 2015, p. 14-17). State contracts with PMSCs might change the process by which security policy is made, and power and influence are distributed, leading to a change in the political control of force (Leander, 2003, pp. 10, 12; Leander, 2005, p. 615; Avant, 2005, p. 60; Gumedze, 2007b, p. 3, McFate, 2015, p. 14-17). The belief that non-state forces can threaten state security and legitimacy has long been established (Howe, 1998, p. 308). But as Abrahamsen & Williams (2011, pp. 214-215) claim, authority does not have to be a zero-sum game, and the use of PMSCs might be a sign of state weakness but should not be taken for granted. This can be shown in the fact that not all states prefer a monopoly over the

use of legitimate violence. Several states (for example, the US, the UK, and France) are seen as so strong that they can allow military and security firms to operate outside of the state monopoly of violence, sometimes mobilising them to pursue their own goals, influenced by the corporatisation of the PMSCs. Authorising non-state violence in the international system has served state interests well, as it can contribute to the fulfilment of territorial, economic, and political ambitions at little economic or controversy cost to states themselves. The result: states can project their influence more broadly, without having to consider political sensitivities to the same extent.

The cost of using PMSCs can be relatively low, efficient and outside state responsibility or accountability[4] (Barkawi, 2011, p. 50; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 24; Fredland, 2004, p. 212; Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010, p. 65). Hiring PMSCs can also relieve the state of the need to build its own capable security and military institutions, which are always costly and sometimes pose a risk to the government. For example, in a context of multiple military coups (Leander, 2003, pp. 10, 12; Owens, 2011, p. 27; Schreier & Caparini, 2005, pp. 9, 63; Howe, 2001, p. 11, 224; Fredland, 2004, p. 212). Foreign personnel, on the contrary, may not care or be aware of local politics. Meaning that, while fragile states may resort to PMSCs out of desperation and a lack of control over the legitimate use of violence, they might also, as strong states, do so strategically, albeit for different reasons. In these cases, the capacity to govern need not be undermined when legitimate force is delegated to an entity other than the state. However, although PMSCs may perform a range of law enforcement-related activities, private military and security personnel might still lack training, be unsupervised, have criminal records, as well as commit crimes and human rights offences, or not have the proper understanding on how to assert human rights during their deployment (Gumedze, 2007, p. 200; Zedeck, 2007, p. 99-100). This may, in the end, reflect on both the host-state and the PMSCs' state of origin, as seen in the Nisour Square massacre in 2007, where around 15 civilians were killed, creating international outcry over the use of private military contractors (Singer, 2007; International Code of Conduct Association, 2024; Safi, 2020).

The increasing reliance on PMSCs represents a shift in how states maintain control over their territories, as McFate (2016, p. 119) argues. But why is the (perceived) reliance increasing? Abrahamsen & Williams (2010, p. 59), say that the increasing role of PMSCs today must be understood against a backdrop of expanding securitisation across society. According

[4] See also: Thomson, 1994, p. 43; Lock, 1998, p. 1418, Howe, 1998, pp. 308-309, Leander, 2005, p. 610; Howe, 2001, p. 192-193.

to the authors, this can be seen in the securitisation of previously political issues such as migration, health, environmental degradation, and development aid, themes that have been seen moving from the political to the security sphere. Besides being explained by the so-called expanding security agenda, some authors resort to private market dynamics, which also fit into the theoretical framework of this thesis. According to Abrahamsen & Williams (2010, p. 59), supply-and-demand trends affect PMSCs' popularity, either increasing or decreasing. Showcased in the military downsizing seen after the end of the Cold War, which led to a surplus of skilled personnel being available for private contracting (Abrahamsen & Leander, 2016, p. 2; Singer, 2003, p. 53; Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 3-4). Simultaneously, the demand for these personnel in the private sector increased as Western states downsized their militaries and other countries sought to upgrade theirs. Add into the mix an increased demand from fragile states no longer supported by superpowers and without a national defence (Avant, 2005, p. 31; Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 3-4), and from non-state actors such as private firms and NGOs wanting to protect their sites and personnel (Lock, 1998, p. 1393; Howe, 2001, p. 217; Singer, 2003, pp. 81-83, Leander, 2003, pp. 2-3), and the increase of PMSC can be described by the push and pull of market forces. But the supply and demand alone cannot describe the growth of PMSCs.

Lock (1998, pp. 1416, 1416) argues that another factor in the development of PMSC is the perceived insecurity of a community. PMSCs are argued to be self-promoting as their visibility nourishes perceived insecurity, independent of the statistics. This feeds back into the sector's growth, making PMSCs a partly active agent in it[5]. Leander argues that rather than being self-promoting, PMSCs actively shape understandings of and decisions about security, contributing to the securitisation (and possible militarisation) of issues, eventually leading to an increase in their demand (Leander, 2005, pp. 612-613).

2.3 Private security in Africa, and a changing security landscape

The trend of military downsizing after the Cold War led to a multitude of changes, not least on the African continent. Downsizing and weakening both national armies and police forces can undermine the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force and erode the state's role as guarantor of security. This is particularly seen in fragile or conflict-ridden countries, where public security cannot be guaranteed (Lock, 1998, p. 1395, p. 1419; Bryden, 2016, pp. 1-2; Gumedze, 2007b, pp. 1, 7; Singer, 2003, pp. 56, 58; Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010, p. 64).

[5] See also Singer, 2003, p. 78.

Where state security provision has been lacking, private and community-based non-state security providers have increasingly filled the gaps, a development tied to a growing sense of generalised insecurity. The reduction of France's military footprint in sub-Saharan Africa during the 90s, contributed to this broader trend, with the transformation being described by scholars as having created a security vacuum/military gap (Bryden, 2016, p.1-2; Gumedze, 2007b, p. 4, Leander, 3005, p. 610; Singer, 2003, p. 49-50; Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010, p. 64).

In this so-called vacuum, the private security industry in Africa grew rapidly. In mid-1999, private soldiers were present in all of Africa's major conflicts, with the more well-known examples being Executive Outcomes' presence in Angola and Sierra Leone (Howe, 2000, p. 217). According to Bryden (2016, p. 1-2), private security also became an appealing occupation due to high unemployment levels and the increased demand from transnational companies, particularly amid rising levels of terrorist attacks. The presence of local staff is also familiar in private military companies, and this is nothing new in the military universe. Barkawi argues that it is assumed that only 'nationals' of a country serve in the armed forces, with the military regularly seen as an essentially national institution. However, many national armies allow foreign citizens to serve, even making it a pathway to citizenship. By viewing national armies as composed solely of nationals, the many colonial armies and other indigenous forces are forgotten (Barkawi, 2001, pp. 47, 53). This applies to PMSCs as well who, to keep costs down, hire personnel from wherever military labour is cheap. Meaning that even if a PMSC operating in Africa may be American, Russian, British, or Turkish, other nationals, particularly African soldiers looking for a higher-paid job than their own national forces, might become embedded in the PMSC during their stay on the continent [6](Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1063). According to Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, the employment of nationals of the contracting state in a foreign PMSC activity might create African mercenaries who "[...]will artificially generate insecurities during peacetime when they have no employment"." (2024, p. 1061). As of now, there are few signs of this happening in the AES, but as seen in the case of SADAT, it is important to note.

There are also warnings that external interventions in conflicts, especially by those that Musah & Fayemi call "corporate mercenaries" (Musah & Fayemi, 2000, p. 8), often fail to address root causes, and instead worsen existing tensions, or at least only provide short and fragile military victory (Musah & Fayemi, 2000, p. 8; Gumedze, 2007b, p. 4; Leander, 2005,

[6] See also Leander, 2005, p. 616.

p. 615; Howe, 2001, p. 273, Olech, 2024, p. 294). Singer argues that, in some respects, the presence of the private security sector increases African states' fragility, whereas private military actors thrive in areas of weak governance (2003, p. 9, 39). Moreover, the capacity of fragile states to deal with the consequences of military and security privatisation is limited. While PMSCs may not be directly responsible for exacerbating the tensions, their presence has been linked to long-term instability in fragile states in the region (Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, 1068; Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2012, p. 799). In unregulated environments without effective regulatory mechanisms, PMSCs may exploit weak monitoring systems, pose a threat and contribute to long-term instability (Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski, 2012, pp. 799–800; Gumedze, 2007b, p. 4). Further, Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso (2024, p. 1064) argue that selling security to African authoritarian leaders may increase the risk of dictatorship, poor governance, and human insecurity. Nevertheless, Gumedze (2007b, p. 15-16) and Singer (2003, p. 240) are slightly optimistic about the use of PMSCs in Africa, arguing that governments could control the impact of privatised security, using it as a complementary tool for democracy. Under the conditions that proper, stronger, and clearer regulatory mechanisms are put in place. Other optimists argue that private options offer solutions that can operate within national interests, and that PMSCs operating in Africa are willing to take intervention tasks that others do not, possibly helping end civil conflicts that would otherwise be intractable (Avant, 2005, p. 5). Creating/restoring public security in the more fragile African states might be helped by encouraging private military companies to play a more active role in the process (Leander, 2005, p. 606). Brooks argues that “it is a horrendous tragedy that we are NOT using this willing resource to bring peace, stability, and political freedom to the African continent” (2000, p. 8).

2.4 Outlining the Alliance des États du Sahel

As mentioned in the introduction, the Sahel region is commonly described as a region in crisis. The Sahel is also the region in the world with the highest number of successful coups, contributing to weak governance. Six of the coups between 2020 and 2023 were successful in overthrowing the existing governments of the countries. Most of these coups occurred in Mali and Burkina Faso, with Mali experiencing three between 2020 and 2022 and Burkina Faso experiencing two in 2022 alone (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024, p. 23; Piombo et al., 2024, p. 234; Thurston, 2024, p. 9). Currently, the AES countries are led by military juntas, with Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso, Assimi Goïta in Mali, and Abdourahamane Tchiani in Niger. This is

worrying, according to Seiyefa (2023, p. 649), as it showcases a trend of democratic recession and the coming to power of authoritarian heads of state. The military juntas of all three AES countries have been accused of human rights violations, political persecutions, and corruption, and have all postponed civilian elections (Sippy & Boswall, 2025; Eizenga, 2025; Security Council Report, 2025).

The AES countries have also been facing a steady growth in armed radicalised extremist groups, with notable groups in the area including the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the IS-Sahel alongside an assortment of smaller armed groups. Armed groups have expanded their operations from northern Mali to central Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, with the Sahel region being the new epicentre for terrorism (Osland & Erstad, 2020, p. 25; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 47; United Nations Security Council, 2025, p. 6; Sippy & Boswall, 2025; Karr, & Carter, 2024). The roots of the jihadi movements in the AES countries date back to the 1990s. After the civil war in Algeria, jihadi groups expanded southwards into the Sahel, creating the base for AQIM. Add in the Libyan crisis of 2011, which reinforced the spread of jihadist ideology in West Africa, and the creation of JNIM and ISGS was underway (Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 1-2; Whitehouse, 2021, p. 137; Faulkner, Parens & Plichta, 2024, p. 24; Benjaminsen, 2021, p. 278). Further exacerbating the situation is the significant Tuareg independence movement that often coordinates or overlaps with jihadi organisations. The Tuareg rebellion of 2012, which is not the first the country has seen, led Mali to lose control over nearly half its territory when heavily armed Tuareg soldiers returned from Libya. The aftermath resulted in a military coup and the so-called collapse of the Malian state (Faulkner et al., 2024, p. 24; Benjaminsen, 2021, p. 278; Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 2). These, mostly Salafi-jihadist or separatist movements, cooperate and compete in the region, sometimes forming coalitions - JNIM being the primary example (Thompson, 2021; Karr & Carter, 2024). Besides being active in the AES countries, these groups are currently also active in Nigeria and Chad, with activities seeming to spread to Togo, Benin, and potentially Ghana (Seiyefa, 2023, p. 651; Whitehouse, 2021, p. 131; Pokalova, 2023, p. 14, Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 5; United Nations Security Council, 2025, p.7).

The groups are said to have become increasingly aggressive, using more advanced weaponry (including drones), and their attacks lead to internal displacement, the killing of both civilians and military personnel, and the destruction of infrastructure (Security Council Report, 2025; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 5; UNOWAS, 2025; Ajala, 2025; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

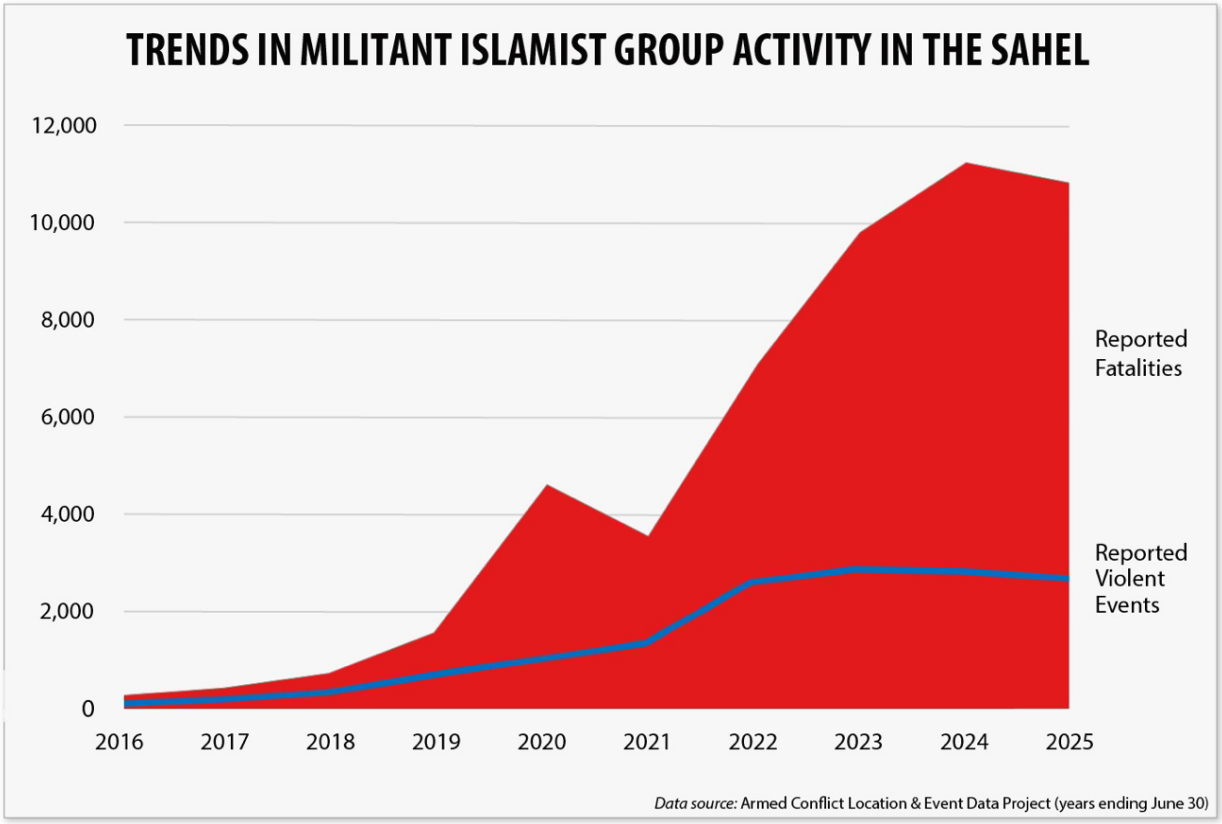

Figure 1. Trends in militant Islamist group activity in the Sahel since 2016. (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025).

The growth of militant and jihadi groups in the area is both a cause of and a driver of the current societal and economic crisis the region is facing, as radicalisation is often rooted in and fed by social problems (Barrios, 2021, p. 443; Faulkner et al., 2024, p. 24). For example, JNIM is said to be composed mostly of young men and boys who lack other economic opportunities. The group (amongst other Islamist groups in the area) embeds itself in local communities, explore local grievances, conflicts and ethnic divisions as means of recruiting or winning sympathy towards their cause (Sippy & Boswall, 2025; Thompson, 2021; Ajala, 2025; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; United Nations Security Council, 2025, p.6; Lenshie, et al. 2025, p. 2). Nevertheless, the groups are causing immense suffering among both the local and foreign populations. According to the Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel accounted for 51% of global terrorism-related deaths in 2024, with five of the ten countries most affected by terrorism located in the area. Burkina Faso has been the most affected, accounting for 55% of the overall terrorism-related fatalities over the last four years (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025;

Security Council Report, 2025; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 5). Using JNIM as an example again, as the group was the most lethal in the region in 2024, the group's attacks amounted to 1,454 deaths in 2024, with 67% of attacks occurring in Burkina Faso, 22% in Mali, and 11% in Niger. From two attacks in Niger in 2023 to 13 attacks in 2024, it seems like JNIM is spreading to the country (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 17). As previously mentioned, the region is often described as in crisis. The region is also frequently described as insecure and risky. Following the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and subsequent military coup in Mali, along with the continued rise of armed extremist groups in the region, scholars have emphasised that the prevailing (in)security narrative surrounding the area stems from the Malian state's inability to contain the growing jihadi-separatist movement at the time (Whitehouse, 2021, p. 127; Barrios, 2021, p. 439).

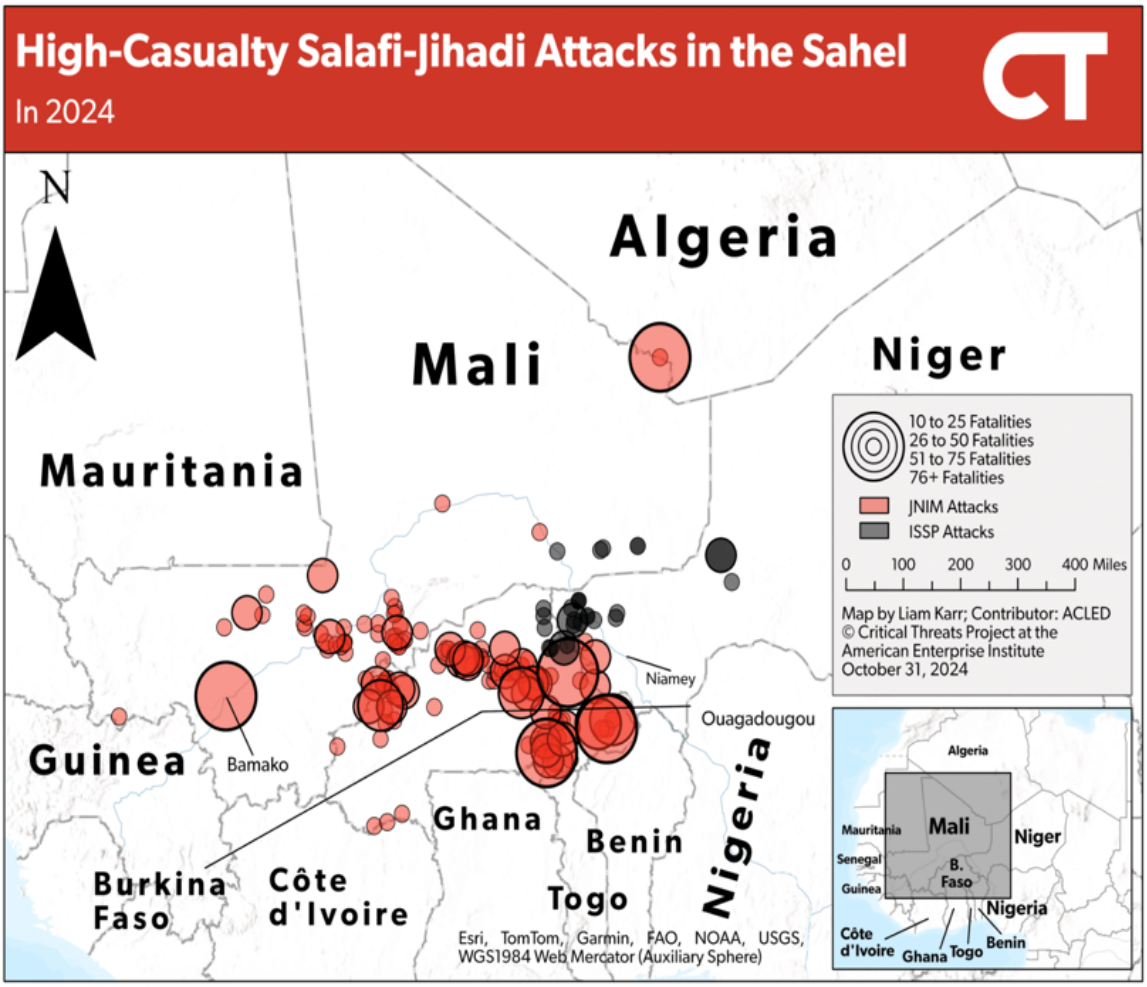

Figure 2. High-Casualty Salafi-Jihadi Attacks in the Sahel, year 2024 (Karr & Carter, 2024).

Paired with the AES states' current inability to respond to societal challenges, insecurity caused by terrorism continues to be put in the very centre of the political agenda (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020, p.1; Onapajo & Babalola, 2024, p. 30; Seiyefa, 2023, p. 642; Thurston, 2024, p. 11).

The current military leadership of the AES countries has all used widespread insecurity as a pretext to overthrow civilian governments and promised to use their power to restore security and defeat jihadi insurgencies. However, authors argue that insecurity has instead increased[7] after the respective coups (Thurston, 2024, p. 9; Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025; Gerőcs, 2024, p. 295). Beyond military leadership, the securitisation of the Sahel has also been reinforced by high levels of external intervention. Islamist terrorism remains the most internationalised security challenge in the region, with incidents such as attacks and kidnappings of tourists, journalists, aid workers, and industrial employees frequently making international headlines (Barrios, 2021, p. 443; Benjaminsen, 2021, p. 278). Since the 2010s, and more visibly between 2012 and 2022, the US, France, the UN, and the EU have launched a patchwork of security initiatives to address insecurity in the region. France launched Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane; the United States established drone bases in Niger; the EU launched the EU Training Mission (EUTM); and the UN installed the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1061; Elischer, 2021, p. 384; Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 2, 17; Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 6). These external assistance programs for the economic and human development of the area, peace and security manoeuvres, as well as military interventions and a militarisation of international relations following the global "war on terror" have all contributed to the ongoing securitisation (Osland & Erstad, 2020. p 24; Villalon, 2021, p. 5-6; Venturi & Toure, 2020, p. 54; Barrios, 2021, p. 439).

On the topic of militarisation, Mann (2021, p. 45) argues that the contemporary armies of the AES countries have long played a central role in the political life of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, even if each army has generally been too small to control its respective national territory. These countries are argued to have long been shaped by their military institutions, both under previous French rule and during subsequent independence, with French involvement in the region being highly militarised [8](Mann, 2021, p. 45). In contemporary times, the United States, China, Russia, and Türkiye's search for influence in the region follows the same pattern, according to Villalón (2021, pp. 5-6). Authors claim that countries currently engaging in the AES might pursue a militarised neocolonial agenda, whether by sending counterterrorism troops or striking new mineral deals (Africa Defense Forum, 2024). This has

[7] The causation is difficult to prove as this increase in violence may have started before the coups, making it inevitable, according to Thurston (2024, p. 9).

[8] see also Elischer, 2021, p. 423.

continued to fuel the perception that militarised solutions are the only viable means of governing and addressing security problems in the region.

Security has also long been a pillar of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in West Africa. Regional organisations, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), and the G5 Sahel, have all, at least partly, had security as their objective (Seiyefa, 2023, p. 641; Brooks, 2000, p. 4). The recently created *Alliance des États du Sahel* is no exception (Security Council Report, 2025b; Institute for Peace and Economics, 2025, p.22; Gerőcs, 2024, p. 308; Stanyard, 2025, p.10; UNOWAS, 2025). On the 16th of September 2023, the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, a mutual defence pact that established the Alliance of the Sahel states, subsequently creating the AES confederation in 2024 (Charter of Liptako-Gourma, September 16th 2023; Digithèque MJP, 2023; Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 2024, p. 4; Balima, 2024). In the charter, the AES countries undertake to combat all forms of terrorism and organised crime to prevent, manage, and solve any armed rebellion and/or other threats to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the states. The signatories also commit to interpret any aggression against one or more of the AES countries as an aggression against all, to be responded to through relief and assistance, including the use of armed force (Charter of Liptako-Gourma, September 16th, 2023, Article 6; Digithèque MJP, 2023). This was emphasised by the Malian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Abdoulaye Diop, on the 4th edition of the high-level panel *Salon des Médias au Mali* (Mali-Online TV, 2025, 04:45-06:58). The minister also emphasises that the countries are increasingly speaking with one voice and that there has been a paradigm shift in how the countries engage with the international community, challenging the status quo, and the *neocolonial models of domination and subjugation* (Mali-Online TV, 2025, 20:17-22:28). While one pillar of the alliance is heavily based on common security challenges, with plans to deploy a joint force of 5000 troops, the alliance agenda also consists of increasing intra-regional trade, enhancing political ties as well as autonomy, controlling mineral extraction, and economic development (Ozkan, 2025; Gerőcs, 2024, p. 308; Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 2024, p. 9).

Brown (2024, p. 12) argues that the AES confederation could be a more effective military measure than the previous G5 Sahel Joint Force (a regional security initiative with Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania), which never reached its objective. However, the creation of the AES coincided with the drawback of French, American, and United Nations troops from the countries, leaving them with substantially fewer troops in the region. The

creation also coincided with the withdrawal of the AES countries from some of their previous multilateral corporations, ECOWAS being an example. This withdrawal is considered partly to be a response to the heavy sanctions the states were facing after their respective military coups, as well a protest from the three junta leaders claiming that the bloc was under Western influence, influence that the AES countries themselves are trying to get rid of (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024, p. 34, Piombo et al., 2024, p. 246-247; Gerőcs, 2024, p. 307-308; Stanyard, 2025, p.10; Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 6; Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 2024, p. 4). Although the AES countries have left ECOWAS, the organisation wants a continued constructive dialogue, especially regarding further cooperation in the fight against the threat of terrorism, which they call a threat to the entire West African region (ECOWAS: Final Communique of sixty-seventh ordinary session of the ECOWAS authority of heads of state and government, 2025, June 22). The fact that these events have all coincided leaves Brown (2024, p. 12) apprehensive about the alliance's ability to reach its security objective.

To summarise, the AES faces numerous challenges. With radicalised extremist armed groups, rebels, and other violent actors executing coordinated attacks, the countries struggle to establish a legitimate monopoly of violence within their respective states' territorial borders (Osland & Erstad, 2020, p. 18; Leander, 2005, p. 605-606; Barrios, 2021, p. 451). For example, it is estimated that Burkinabe forces now control only 40% of the national territory (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). To combat the security challenges posed by terrorist groups, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have not only created the Alliance of the Sahel States but have also adopted militarised counterinsurgency strategies. Nationally, they use their respective armies or recruit civilians into a volunteer force to reach this objective, but the countries are also using international partners. This can be seen in the contracting of private military companies by the AES states, which the next section explores.

2.5 PMSCs in the AES

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger all face difficulties fulfilling the aim of their national armed forces, namely, protecting their territories from external threats through a legitimate monopoly on the use of violence. With changing security dynamics and an inability to face the region's many challenges, the AES governments have partly turned to PMSCs for support to maintain control over and counter insurgent jihadi groups (Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, p. 66). As the expansion of private security and the extension of PMSCs have intensified in recent years, the Sahel region has seen its share increase as well. The use of PMSC in warfare or counter

terrorism operations is not a new phenomenon, as shown in earlier sections, but its growth is complicating the understanding of modern warfare. Especially when it comes to the rise of highly organised PMSCs claiming defensive functions, as seen in the AES (Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 2; Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, p. 75-76; Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2012, p. 798). Despite the argument for African solutions to Africa's problems (Howe, 2001, p. 2), Seiyefa notes that West Africa's approach to regional security seems highly militarised, regime-centric, and dependent on external solutions (2023, p. 642). Given their continued dependence on foreign troops and logistical support, Lenshie et al. (2025, p. 9) argue that the current and previous military partnerships of the countries erode the AES countries' sovereignty, weaken their capacity to develop self-sufficient security systems, and limit their control over security decisions (Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 9). Brooks argues that it is unrealistic to expect PMSCs to provide a solution to African political issues because: "[…] ultimately, only Africans can provide enduring political solutions to Africa's seemingly endless wars." (2000, p. 2). Nevertheless, PMSCs have been deployed in the region as a means of counterterrorism efforts. But, as it seems, the reality of PMSC deployments might have less to do with counterterrorism, as explored in the case studies, and more with the AES regimes' survival.

Many authors claim that authoritarian rule uses types of PMSC to stay in power, suppress rebellions and armed groups, and maintain the status quo, rather than using them as a tool to help increase public security (Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1064; Watling & Wilén, 2024, Security Council Report, 2025; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 23). Theories regarding the relationship between authoritarian (military) regimes and PMSCs view the relationship as mutually constitutive. Military regimes typically establish and promote norms that prioritise security and stability over other considerations, not uncommonly through securitisation processes. The presence of terrorist groups or violent insurgents is used as justification for bringing PMSCs into the country, with military regimes depicting PMSCs as crucial partners in maintaining order and defending the state against internal and external threats. Simultaneously, civil liberties, human rights, and democratic governance are deprioritised (Braun, 2025; Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, p. 68). This narrative helps legitimise the use of PMSCs in the eyes of the public and other state actors, with Arshad & Qayyum arguing that: "[…] military regimes rely on PMSCs to expand their control and security capabilities, while PMSCs gain opportunities and legitimacy through their association with the military." (Arshad & Qayyum, 2024, p. 68). On one hand, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali have all moved away from their previous military cooperation with the West, and according to

Faulkner et al., have the intent to seek new, authoritarian-style PMSC assistance to accompany their military junta regimes[9] (Faulkner et al, 2024, pp. 23-24). Perhaps prioritising this over actual counterterrorism measures. Van der Lugt argues that this new type of assistance reflects a broader trend of authoritarian states privatising security while maintaining control (Van der Lugt, 2024, p.10). The PMSCs, on the other hand, seem to provide authoritarian regimes with protection that Western partners could (and should) not, according to Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso (2024, p. 1067) and Faulkner et al. (2024, p. 26). For example, what has been labelled as "regime survival packages" (Stanyard, 2025, p. 10; Ehl, 2024; Africa Defense Forum, 2024b; Lenshie et al., 2024, p. 16). Using security forces as a means of regime protection is, according to Abrahamsen & Williams (2010, p. 64-65), a characteristic that can be seen in the African context both throughout history and in modern times. Police, military, and other forces who *should* be focused on, for example, crime prevention and public safety, have instead been used to ensure the survival of a government that lacks strong popular support. This will be further discussed in the case study. However, before advancing, an essential disclaimer is required which will be presented in the next section.

2.5.1 The extractive economics of security

To conclude the literature review, this short section will focus on how states pay for PMSC services and the rationale for the business activities that are also part of PMSC activities.

Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski (2012, p. 800[10]), Fayemi (2000b, p. 18), Van der Lugt (2024, p.9) & Singer (2003, p. 45), among others, argue that the motivations of PMSCs are primarily rooted in profit rather than resolving the conflicts to which they are deployed. Even suggesting that if prolonging a conflict proves more profitable, for example, in the name of resource extraction, this should be expected from these actors. This is evident in the extractive sectors of conflict-ridden countries, where PMSCs have long been involved. Where an employing state has limited capacity to pay for PMSCs' services directly, compensation is usually given or demanded in the form of mining, gas, and oil concessions. Van der Lugt (2024, p. 9) argues that this reduces the prospect of PMSCs contributing to a sustainable peace. Besides PMSCs being paid in concessions, mining, gas, and oil companies may contract a combination of public, private, and in-house security to protect their sites, resources, and personnel. This further complicates the division between the corporate and the military (Musah & Fayemi, 2000b, p. 23; Bryden, 2016, p. 3; Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski, 2012, p. 796;

[9] See also: Olech, 2024, p. 275, p. 281, Watling & Wilén, 2024, p. 70.
[10] See also: Singer, 2003, p. 158.

Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 76; Howe, 2001, p. 221; Watling & Wilén, 2024, p. 65; Van der Lugt, 2024, p. 9). As noted by Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski (2012, p. 796), this tends to undermine national control over key natural resources, which may become crucial to post-conflict reconstruction. In this context, Musah & Fayemi (2000b, p. 25) as well as Avant (2005, p. 4-5) argue that the current state of African security, therefore, must be understood as part of a larger political/economic/resource network, where PMSCs are in liaison with not only mineral exploiters, but also authoritarian governments.

Mineral extraction has long been part of the trade relations between the AES countries and other countries. Mining provides 10-15% of the region's gross domestic product and is each country's largest export industry. Gold is the largest export for Burkina Faso and Mali; uranium for Niger (Africa Defense Forum, 2025; Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 14). The mining sector in the AES has recently attracted greater international attention for several reasons. Firstly, the AES countries seem to be on a mission to re-nationalise mines and excavation sites from mainly western partners and increase government stakes in mine operations (Africa Defense Forum, 2025; Schwikowski, 2025; Moody, 2025). Simultaneously, the mining sector is making headlines as a sector where an influx of PMSC actors is evident, especially from Russia, China, and Türkiye. Besides counterterrorism efforts, Russia's, China's and Türkiye's PMCS engagement in Mali and Burkina Faso is also linked to the control and extraction of mineral resources. While ideological or political motives might drive private military actors, PMSCs have previously been seen as primarily profit-driven, raising questions about their motivations for ending a conflict. As demonstrated in the case studies, Russia's Wagner Group/Africa Corps, Türkiye's SADAT, and Chinese PMSCs might prove otherwise, further complicating the understanding of the topic. However, it is not only other nations and PMSCs who are using the mines as a source of revenue.

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining takes place in every region in northern Mali and is not uncommonly under the control of individuals with ties to armed or terrorist groups. These illicit economies help fund and sustain armed rebel, jihadi, and terrorist groups in the region. In some instances, these foster coexistence between the groups, but with increased interest from PMSCs, competition, and violent struggle may grow. For example, the Gao region in northern Mali has long seen the control of its mines by JNIM, Tuareg separatists, and ISGS. However, in 2024, the Wagner Group/Africa Corps (hereafter referred to as WG/AC) arrived in the area, seized Mali's largest artisanal gold mine, after initially taking over three mines in the south of the country in 2023 (Stanyard, 2025, p. 20; United Nations Security Council, 2023, p. 24-25;

Africa Defense Forum, 2024; Moody, 2025). This might further exacerbate already existing tension in the scramble for resources.

To finish this section, Lenshie et al. (2025, p. 8) make a strong argument for the significance of resource politics in the AES countries' counterterrorism operations. The authors claim that foreign counterterrorism involvement in the region, particularly by France, Russia, and the US, has always been linked to the strategic pursuit of resource security. Niger, for instance, is rich in uranium resources, which remains a critical component of nuclear energy activities, and fighting armed groups in resource-rich areas might have a double agenda (Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 8). In the Sahel, counterterrorism initiatives frequently overlap with the strategic priorities of global powers, raising questions about their underlying motivations (Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 14).

2.6 Why am I not speaking more about France?

France has historically maintained deep political, military, and economic ties with the Sahel region (Amoah, 2023). In modern times, French involvement has often been justified in the language of regional security and counterterrorism, as seen in the many military interventions in the area and in France's role as the region's primary security partner until the mid-2010s (Issaev et al., 2022, p. 439; Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 6). France's military presence has also been seen as an extension of postcolonial presence, contributing to perceptions of neocolonialism, paternalism and the undermining of local sovereignty (Brown, 2024, p. 24; Pokalova, 2023, p. 14; Amoah, 2023; Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 6; Watling & Wilén, 2024, p. 70). Sovereignty is a topic that continues to arise in this context. Both when speaking about the so-called characteristics of a state and PMSCs possibly infringing on these. But, when it comes to the AES countries, it is also a topic that comes up when speaking about their relations with other countries, where for example Niger has made a strong statement on the country's sovereign right to choose their partners and partnerships, whether they be with the US, France or Russia (Tricontinental, 2024, p. 9; The Guardian, 2024). According to the Tricontinental, the creation of the AES itself represents an attempt to uphold the demands of sovereignty and the right to self-determination (Tricontinental, 2024, p. 9).

Anti-French sentiment can be seen throughout the societies of the AES countries. Onapajo & Babalola go so far as to say that the 2022 coup in Burkina Faso qualifies as a coup against the French influence in the state[11] (2024, pp. 31-32). These sentiments are part of the

[11] See also: Pokalova, 2023, p. 14; Laessing, 2025, p. 3.

reason behind the expulsion and withdrawal of French troops in the AES countries between 2022 and 2024. Alongside the US withdrawal in 2024, Onapajo & Babalola (2024, pp. 31-32), argue that this has opened a security vacuum and a military gap. On one hand, according to the Institute for Economics & Peace (2025, p. 26), the security vacuum has enabled groups such as JNIM and IS to escalate their activities in the region. Thurston (2024, p. 10) agrees that the rise in violence coincides with the so-called security vacuum but notes that the increase can also be attributed to the junta's policy choices. The military gap, on the other hand, as will be illustrated in the case studies, has increasingly been filled by Russian influence, especially by Russian PMSCs. The country has been positioning itself as an alternative partner, both as a security provider and as a symbolic rejection of Western imperialism, paternalism, and the neo-colonial agenda[12] (Issaev et al., 2022, pp. 437–439; Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1061; Olech, 2024, p. 298; Gogny & de Castro, 2025, p. 258; Laessing, 2025, p. 2). The growing political divide between the AES countries and Western powers, coupled with increasing reliance on non-traditional military partnerships, is, according to the Security Council Report (2025), currently shaping the security landscape in the area. However, Brown argues that while the relationship with the AES and the rest of Europe is tainted by anti-French sentiment, it could survive without France's domination in the relationship, and improving relations between the EU and the AES should be pursued (2024, p. 24).

Considering this, why decide to not further engage with France? Although France has undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping the security structure of the Sahel, it is mainly in the post-French era that new actors have entered the field. A focus on France could leave the thesis hostage to a broader (and well-grounded) critique of neocolonialism, foreign intervention, and paternalism, while this thesis must focus elsewhere. Lastly, the literature on France's role in the Sahel is already extensive, so this work aims to contribute to a less-explored subject in academia.

[12] See also: Pokalova, 2023, p. 14 & Amoah, 2023.

Chapter 3: Case Studies

This section will examine three case studies: Russia's, Türkiye's, and China's PMSC engagement in the AES countries. The focus on these cases is to provide a broad understanding of the use of PMSCs in the area. While the companies are often discussed as PMSCs, they all have strong connections to their deploying states, which contribute to their ambiguous nature and obscure goals, and call for a re-evaluation of their agendas.

3.1 Russian PMSC activity in the Sahel

Over the past decade, Russia has significantly expanded its role and influence in parts of Africa. Following extensive relations between the Soviet Union and many African states, during which the Soviet Union supported the liberation movements of the 1950s and 1980s, relations declined after the fall of the USSR in the 1990s. Even though some authors claim that Putin renewed the relations after coming into office, the early 2010s only saw Russian state visits in 10-12 African countries (Issaev, Shishkina & Liokumovich, 2022, p. 426-428; Stanyard, 2025, p. 5; Ajala, 2024; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 18). Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea (and subsequent international sanctions), this has changed. Russian policies have now diversified, seemingly making African allies more critical to the Kremlin than before (Issaev et al., 2022, p. 428; Pokalova, 2023, p.2; Vorobyov, 2025; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 18; Watling et al., 2024, p. 14, 19; Ajala, 2024; Freire, 2025, p. 9). As further evidence of Russia's deepening relations with the continent, the first-ever Russia-Africa Summit was held in Sochi in 2019 (Pokalova, 2023, p. 2; Stanyard, 2025, p. 5), and with that, Pokalova (2023, p. 2) argues that Putin made his "African Agenda" well known.

Russia's approach promises to differ from that of its previous Western partners. In an article leading up to the second Russia-Africa Summit in 2023, the emphasis was on Russia's never-weaning support for the right of self-determination and liberation from colonialism for African countries, as well as a non-discriminatory agenda for cooperation (Putin, 2023). Given that Russia has not been a colonial power in Africa, the government has been able to position itself as an equal, anti-colonial partner (Freire, 2025, p. 9; Dobos, 2025, p. 6). According to Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso (2024, p. 1058), Russia is now focusing on access to African elites, engaging in anti-piracy efforts, military cooperation, trade in arms, debt relief, nuclear energy cooperation, oil exploration, and grain supply. While there are many political and economic links as well, it is primarily the military presence of the Kremlin that is growing

in the Sahel[13] (Issaev et al., 2022, p. 428). Faulkner et al. argue that Russia has become the de facto security partner of the Sahel region (particularly the AES countries) and that it aims to extend Moscow's influence primarily through security assistance. In April 2025, Russia publicly pledged support for the acquisition of arms and the provision of training for the new AES joint force of 5,000 troops. Leading the Malian Foreign Minister to describe Russia as a "sincere ally" of the AES (Wilén, 2025, p. 2).

Some authors describe Russia's engagement and cooperation with African states to be within the framework of “shadow” military diplomacy, which includes “political agreements, arms supplied in exchange for deals with Russian companies for raw materials, and armed protection of Russian interests by the forces of PMCs” [14] (Issaev et al., 2022, p. 430). Wilén (2025, p. 2) and Nsaibia (2025) argue that while Russia's engagement in the AES countries predates the arrival of modern PMSC forces, Wagner's deployment marked the start of military changes. However, as the authors argue, the arrival of Wagner coincided with political changes as well. Namely, contributing to the AES states' strategic realignment from previous Western partners, and solidifying Russia's broader involvement in the region. The Institute for Economics & Peace (2025, p. 50) claims that the area is becoming a theatre for Russia's competition with the West. Gogny & de Castro (2025, p. 258) argue that the arrival of Russian PMSCs challenges the predominance of the Western liberal mode of intervention. Consequently, Russia can position itself as the most suitable option in the face of Western interventionism (Gogny & de Castro, 2025, p. 258; Freire, 2025, p. 9d), which the AES countries appear to have grown tired of. However, Russia is far from the only partner with which the AES countries cooperate, particularly in the sphere of PMCS. Türkiye and China are other notable examples. But, so far, the most prominent examples of PMSCs activities in the AES countries are still Russian, with the Wagner Group and/or Afrika Corps in the forefront. Although the two PMSCs are used interchangeably in this thesis, as in most literature on the subject, they are two different entities. This will be further developed in the following section.

3.1.1 The Wagner Group/Africa Corps

Different authors define the Wagner Group/Africa Corps as a private, or proxy military company, a mercenary group, a semi-state/para-private PMC, Russia's most influential foreign policy tool, or something in between. The Wagner Group was founded (with the approval of

[13] See also Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 50; Stanyard, 2025, p. 10; Security Council Report, 2025b.
[14] See also Olech, 2024, p. 274.

the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation) around 2010 by Dmitry Utkin and was, until his death, funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin (Pokalova, 2023, p. 4; Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, pp. 1052, 1059; Olech, 2024, pp. 274-275; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 18, 22; Larsen, 2025). The Wagner group's first mission was deployed in 2014 to Crimea and the Donbass, with Syria being the following country to host the Wagner group in 2015 (Olech, 2024, p. 27 Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1058). Since then, the group's operations have spread and are now mainly focused on Africa. So far, Wagner seem to have been - although not always militarily - active in the Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Libya, South Sudan, Sudan, Mozambique, Botswana, Burundi, Chad, The Comoros, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, and Nigeria (Amoah, 2023; Larsen, 2025; Ehl, 2024).

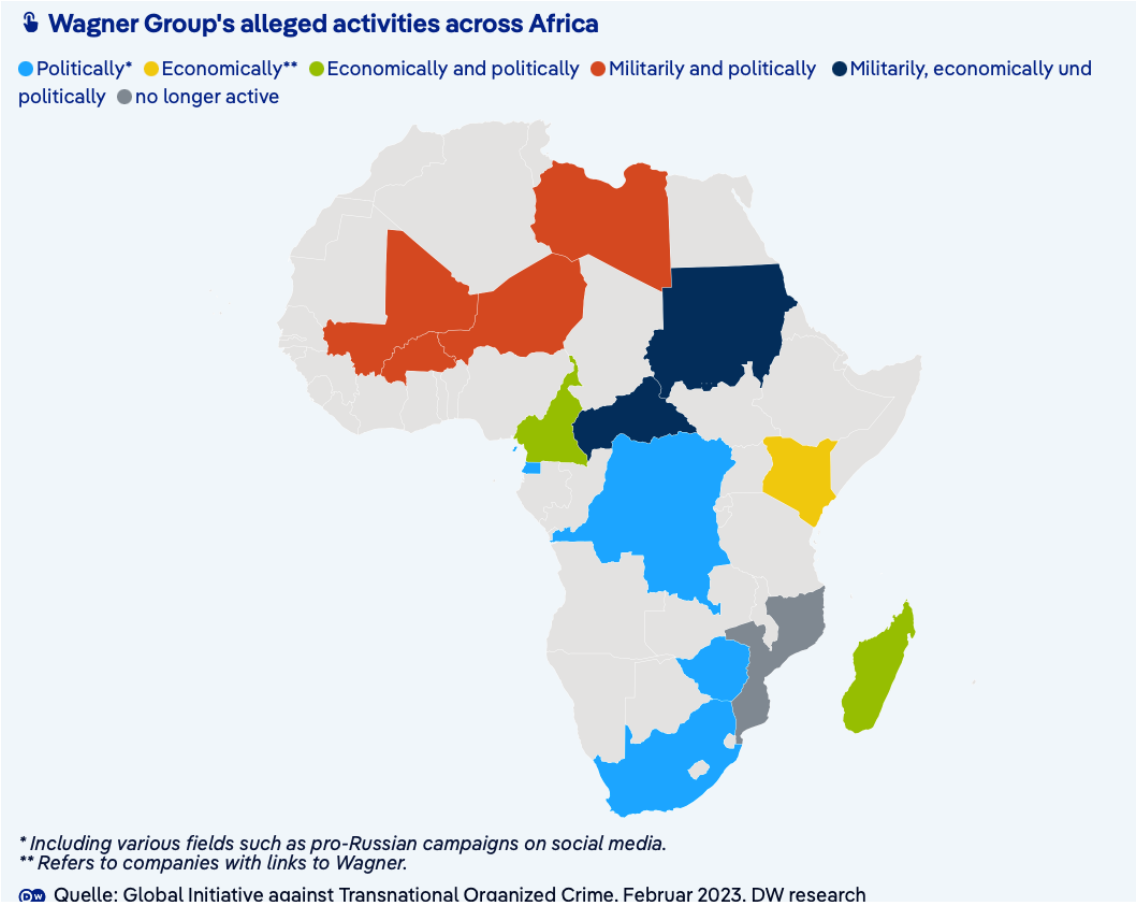

Figure 3. Wagner Group's alleged activities across Africa (Ehl, 2024).

Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso (2024, p. 1058) describe the Wagner Group as being more than a single entity. Instead, the authors describe the group more as a 'network of businesses' including security actors as well as firms in oil, gas, and precious metals, all in cooperation with operations under the influence of President Putin and the Russian military-intelligence

structure[15]. Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso argue that these types of PMSCs will be part of politics and international relations for the foreseeable future, making them different from other, and earlier, PMSCs in the African context[16] (2024, p. 1061-62). Given Wagner's close ties to Russia's geopolitical interests, the group's actions have benefited them. Simultaneously, Russia has routinely denied any connection to the activities of the PMSC, which is further developed in a later section. These activities include military and security services, combat operations, training military forces, securing infrastructure, supporting both rebels and governments, conducting influence campaigns, and exploiting mines and engaging in arms sales. In exchange, Wagner has received both direct payments, resource concessions, and/or diplomatic support, expanding Moscow's influence across the continent. As explained in the section *"The extractive economies of security",* a common theme with current PMSC deployments in the AES countries is their involvement in the extraction sector.

By controlling natural resources, such as gold, Brown (2024, p. 7) argues that Russia has secured a substantial financial asset, helping it evade international sanctions[17]. The acquisition of resources and mining concessions forms part of Russia's approach to Africa (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 53; Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1059; Lenshie et al., 2025, p. 16). Considering this, Wagner appears to function as both a profit-driven entity and a strategic tool of the Russian government (Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1059; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 22; Pokalova, 2023, p. 2; Van der Lugt, 2024, p. 10). As Van der Lugt puts it: "At first glance, Wagner appears market-driven, negotiating contracts with governments or corporations in exchange for economic or political favours. However, operations consistently align with Russian state objectives, particularly in regions like Africa. This alignment ensures Wagner serves Moscow's foreign policy goals without explicit state oversight." (Van der Lugt, 2024, p. 10). Laessing (2025, p. 3) argues along the same lines, claiming that while gaining access to natural resources is essential for Wagner and Russia, the main reason behind the country's engagement is to gain allies in the international domain. While the WG/AC are the most notable Russian PMSCs in the area Cisse et al. (2025, p. 19-21) note that there are up to 10 active Russian PMSCs in African countries, all of which appear to have ties to the Wagner Group. Whether through shared founders, overlapping personnel, and common training sites, or through direct competition.[18]. These include Redut

[15] See also Stanyard, 2025, p. 12; Watling et al., 2024, p 17.
[16] See also Watling et al., 2024, p. 15.
[17] See also: Dobos, 2025, p. 6; Laessing, 2025, p. 3.
[18] See also: Wall Street Journal, 2023.

and Convoy, to name two (Cisse., et al, 2025, p. 19-21). However, the Wagner Group is currently being dismantled and its soldiers being subsumed into Russian state institutions and other PMSCs after Prigozhin's mutiny in 2023 (and later death).

Researchers and journalists alike are trying to examine the organisations that are the WG/AC, respectively, as there are many reports of former Wagner soldiers now being deployed by the Africa Corps (Murphy, 2024; Wall Street Journal, 2023; Vorobyov, 2025; Nsaibia, 2025; Braun, 2025; Larsen, 2025; Africa Defense Forum, 2024a). Africa Corps (created in 2023) is, unlike its predecessor Wagner, placed under the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Defence (Laessing, 2025, p. 3; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 26; Africa Defense Forum, 2025b). Deputy Minister of Defence, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, and GRU general Andrei Averyanov seem to be the leaders of the group. According to Stanyard (2025, p. 7) and Cisse et al. (2025, p. 26), the group has been put in place for continued military cooperation with the previous partners of Wagner, and to ensure control over the previous Wagner group's activities[19]. In effect, "Wagner became the Africa Corps and now serves the full purposes of military intelligence and the Ministry of Defence" (Murphy, 2024). Estimates claim that 70-80% of Africa Corps personnel are Wagner veterans, with Africa Corps officially putting the number at around 50% (Vorobyov, 2025; Nossiter, 2025; Security Council Report, 2025b; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 50; Stanyard, 2025, p. 11; Security Council Report, 2025b). The lack of regulation of PMSCs (the Wagner group in this case) allows states to advance their strategic goals at relatively low cost, without risking open confrontation and other state-level repercussions (Cisse et al., 2025, p. 24), as discussed in the literature review. This is particularly striking in Russia's case. Despite not being a signatory to the Montreux Document or a supporter of the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (Pokalova, 2023, p. 4), Russian legislation formally prohibits the very type of private military companies it is currently relying upon. While private security companies are recognised under Russian law, private military companies engaging in combat activities remain legally ambiguous (Cisse et al., 2025, p. 19; Larsen, 2025; Van der Lugt, 2024, p. 10). As explored by Pokalova:

> Article 13 of the Russian Constitution bans organisations that aim at creating non-state armed groups. Article 208 of the FZ-63 Russian Criminal Code criminalises non-state armed formations. It makes it illegal to participate in such entities if their activities are

[19] See also: Nsaibia, 2025; Nossiter, 2025; Larsen, 2025; Security Council Report, 2025.

> contrary to the interests of the Russian Federation. Additionally, the Code's Article 359 bans the use of mercenaries. (2023, p. 4).

Whereas the previous Wagner groups' obscure organisation gave Moscow plausible deniability, often reciting PMSCs illegality in the country, Africa Corps (being under the direct control of the Russian Ministry of Defense) makes Russia directly and publicly responsible for the Africa Corps' actions (Bauer, 2025; Nsaibia, 2025; Larsen, 2025; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 35; Laessing. 2025, p. 5). This means that the advantage of plausible deniability will no longer hold, as the Wagner Group is being continuously submerged and replaced by the Africa Corps. And while there was previously the possibility to question the 'private' nature of the Wagner Group, that possibility seems to have disappeared with Wagner's submersion. As Cisse et al. put it,"[...] can we still speak of private security when the link with the authorities is so direct and publicly acknowledged?" (2025, p. 35).

The transition of the Wagner Group into the Africa Corps appears to be underway in Mali, as Wagner officially completed its mission in Mali in June 2025. Albeit the process is slow, and information is hard to verify (Wilén, 2025, p. 2; Security Council Report, 2025c). With the Africa Corps fully taking over Wagner's missions, Vorobyov (2025) considers whether this will have a significant impact on Russia's engagement in the region. Stanyard (2025, p. 7) argues that the Africa Corps' direct subordination to the Ministry of Defence gives the impression of the group being "more legitimate" to African governments. However, while the Wagner units have been described as aggressive and operationally independent, often engaging in direct combat without accompaniment, Vorobyov (2025) and Laessing (2025, p. 5) claim that the Africa Corps has been designed as a more training-oriented mission, with greater bureaucracy and risk aversion. Perhaps this is already evident in Russia's small deployments in Burkina Faso and Niger.

Before continuing to explore Wagner Group/Africa Corps activities in the AES countries in more detail, these so-called Russian *regime-survival packages* will be briefly discussed. There appear to be questions about the Wagner Groups' activities on the continent. With the number of soldiers currently present in the AES countries, can they really provide any actual support in the fight against jihadism? Or have the regimes stopped seeing Russian PMSCs as an active part of the solution to the situation at hand, instead using their services to stay in power? Multiple authors discuss and debate whether the primary purpose of Russian PMSCs in the AES countries currently is to protect the regimes and their junta leaders. The PMSCs are not believed to be able to contribute to combat terrorist groups, improving the

security situation of the countries; instead, the small units seem to be focused around the leaders, with reports of Russians in the guarding forces of Goïta, Traoré, and Tchiani (Faulkner, et al., 2024, p. 26; Stanyard, 2025, p. 10; Ehl, 2025, Africa Defense Forum, 2024b; Cisse, et al., 2025, p. 23; Dobos, 2025, p. 6). According to Cisse et al. (2025, p. 23), African authorities appear to seek the services of Wagner-like PMSCs to remain in power, suppress armed groups, and diversify their partnerships, especially as Western alliances have come under increasing scrutiny. According to Gogny & de Castro, who have studied Russia's relations with Mali, Russia provides this exact service related to the primary interest of the Malian government, namely regime preservation (2025, p. 258). The following section will further analyse the relations between the two countries.

3.1.2 Mali's partnership with Russian PMSCs

Mali and Russia signed a defence cooperation agreement in 1994, with an updated agreement being signed in 2019. Built on the agreements, which outline military & political cooperation as well as joint work in counterterrorism, Mali contracted the Wagner Group in 2021 (Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1061; Pokalova, 2023, p. 14; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 50; Watling et al., 2024, p. 19; Gogny & de Castro, 2025, p. 256). With the withdrawal of French, American, and UN forces from the country, the responsibility for providing security transitioned fully from these partners to the Malian Armed Forces, supported by pro-government militias and the WG/AC (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 50; The Sentry, 2025, p. 7). The PMSC has participated in counterterrorist operations, directly engaging in frontline combat against the ISIS- and Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists and alongside Malian forces ever since arriving in the country. There are estimates of between 1000 and 2000 WG/AC personnel being deployed to Mali, although that number is difficult to verify (Olech, 2024, p. 279; Pokalova, 2023, p. 1061; Nossiter, 2025; Brown, 2024, p. 7; Ameyaw-Brobbey & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1061; Lenshie et al., 2025, p.15).

When Wagner first arrived in Mali, it seemed like the company was a classic PMSC aiding counterterrorism efforts, but as time has passed, Pokalova (2023, p. 15) argues that this was just a facade. Behind the official narrative, Wagner has "[...] acted as an agent of influence, staging anti-French information campaigns, campaigns against pro-democracy movements, and campaigns to prop up the junta regime favourable to Moscow"[20]. Nevertheless, the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) and their Russian PMSC allies have cooperated in the battle against

[20] See also: Watling & Wilén, 2024, p. 65; Ehl, 2024; Gogny & de Castro, 2025, p. 256.

terrorism in the country. The joint Wagner Group and FAMA operations have achieved some successes, most notably the recapture of the northern city of Kidal. Kidal had been under the control of primarily Tuareg armed separatist groups since 2013 (Olech, 2024, p. 279; Africa News, 2023; Oestericher, 2024). When the insurrection broke out in 2012, the Kidal region was among the first to fall into rebel hands, making the takeover of the strategic town significant (Africa News, 2023; Olech, 2024, p. 279; The Sentry, 2025, p. 8). According to the Institute for Economics & Peace, the WG/ACs counterinsurgency approach appears to be appealing to the military regime. It has gained approval from both the Malian troops and parts of the population (2025, p. 51). However, while there appears to be some approval from the Malian armed forces, reports indicate that the partnership between FAMA and the PMSC claims the opposite. In a 2025 report, Wagner is said to be creating chaos within the Malian military hierarchy, where the lack of order, communication, and following chains of command is deteriorating the FAMA ranks (The Sentry, 2025, p. 16).

The Malian forces and their allies, Wagner/Africa Corps included, have also repeatedly been accused of committing grave human rights abuses. Acts of torture, child abductions, mass executions, rape and sexual violence, pillaging, arbitrary detentions, and enforced disappearances are some of the accounts told by survivors (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Dobos, 2025, p. 8; Human Rights Watch, 2024). According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 71% of Wagner's involvement in Mali has been associated with disproportionate civilian targeting (Thoms, 2023; Pokalova, 2023, p. 15; Stanyard, 2025, p. 9). This has caused atrocities committed by the Wagner Group to become one of the reasons for internal displacement (Laessing, 2025, p. 4). The WG/AC is allegedly forcing the FAMA to remain silent in cases of civilian abuses, as well as committing abuses against the Malian armed forces themselves (The Sentry, 2025, p. 16-17).

The Malian military itself is reportedly committing the same acts of violence against civilians. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the fatal attacks on civilians from security forces and Russian PMSCs even exceed the casualties linked to militant Islamist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso over the last four years, with Malian and allied forces being responsible for 82% of civilian fatalities over the past year (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). The targeting of civilians (mainly of the Fulani ethnic group) by Malian, Burkinabé, and Russian forces is "[...] unparalleled relative to any other region in Africa." (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). The fact that this is seemingly occurring at such a large scale has been taken advantage of by JNIM, amongst other groups, who highlight the abuses of the security forces and their allies to legitimise their narrative (United Nations Security Council, 2025, p.

6; Laessing, 2025, p. 2), using it as a tool for recruitment. Many sources are arguing that instead of seeing improvements in security, attacks and deaths attributed to terrorism have remained prevalent in the region, with some even claiming that the situation in the AES countries has deteriorated since Russia's arrival. Renewed Islamist activities, terrorist groups combining their capabilities to expand their territory of operations, and a continuous number of deadly attacks all contribute to this trend (Olech, 2024, p. 280; Pokalova, 2023, p. 15; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 25; Dobos, 2025, p. 7; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

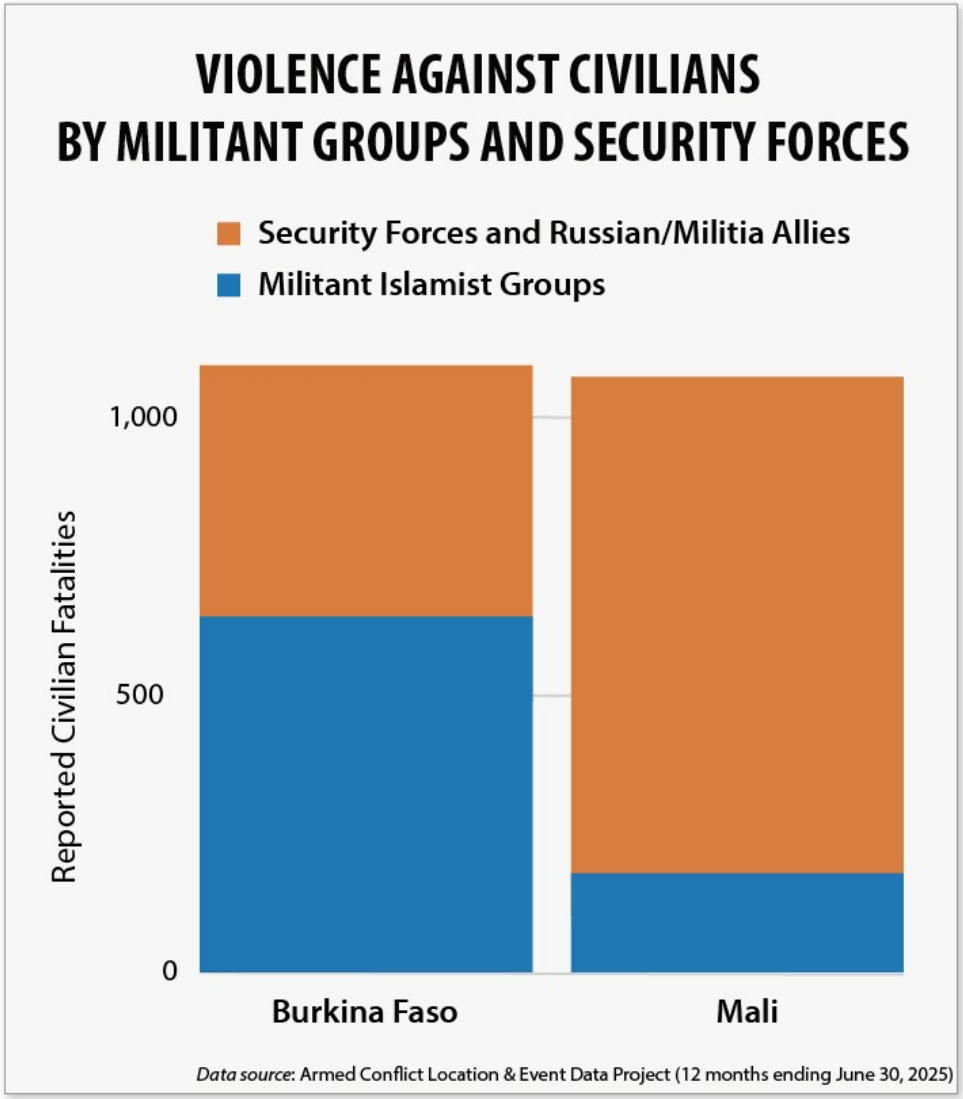

Figure 4. Violence against civilians by militant groups and security forces (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025).

One attack that has been used as an example of the failures of Moscow in Mali is the July 2024 ambush on the Mali-Algeria border. At least 84 WG/AC troops were killed after being ambushed by Tuareg and JNIM militants. An undisclosed number of Malian soldiers were also killed, with the Malian Army admitting 'significant' losses (Institute for Economics

& Peace, 2025, p. 51; Brown, 2024, p. 7; Ewokor & Fleming, 2024; Zenn, 2024; Stanyard, 2025, p. 14; Ajala, 2025; Kerr & Carter, 2024; The Sentry, 2025, p. 6). Another large-scale attack occurred in September 2024, on a military academy and air base in Bamako. Reportedly killing 60 soldiers, the attack was the most significant and deadliest attack on the capital since 2016 (Brown, 2024; p.7; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 25; Stanyard, 2025, p. 14). Although the overall level of terrorist attacks in the country has declined for two years in a row (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 25), few authors attribute this development to the WG/AC presence in the country. Not to say that any previous intervention has succeeded, as we are still in a situation of deadly violence and a multitude of extremist groups. In the Sentry's report, Wagner's performance in Mali has been described as mediocre and falling short of the junta's expectations (The Sentry, 2025, p. 6). Other reports suggest that Russian troops are becoming less willing to participate in high-risk missions and are increasingly withdrawing to the areas around their bases. The Global Terrorism Index report for 2025 states that only around 1,000 African corps troops are currently deployed in Mali, down from 2,000 previously. Either way, the number is substantially lower than the combined 13,000 UN peacekeepers and French soldiers previously deployed to the country in the name of counterterrorism (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 51). Olech describes the lack of success partly by pointing out that Wagner, as PMSCs in general, might not be motivated to end the conflicts in which they participate, as they are driven by financial motivation [21](Olech, 2024, p. 293).

The WG/AG, like other PMSCs before it, has secured mining concessions in Mali and is in the process of obtaining uranium concessions in Niger and gold concessions in Burkina Faso (Watling & Wilén, 2024, p. 74; Stanyard, 2025, p. 10). While Mali is confirmed to have vast natural resources, the full extent of WG/AC operations in the area is difficult to verify. Wagner troops are reported to have taken over artisanal mining sites in the past, and Russia has agreed to build a gold refinery in Bamako (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 53; Brown, 2024, p. 7; Watling et al., 2024, p. 23). There are also claims that the group receives $10.8 million per month from the Malian government for its operations (Olech, 2024, p. 279; The Sentry, 2025). Whether Africa Corps is continuing with the same price tag is unclear, but what is clear is that they continue to engage in the mining industry.

[21] See also: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 25.

3.1.3Burkina Faso's and Niger's partnership with Russian PMSCs

Burkina Faso and Niger seem to have had their first deployments of the WG/AC in late 2023 or beginning of 2024 with around 100 "military instructors" arriving to the countries during the period (Barrios, 2021, p. 449; Larsen, 2025; Stanyard, 2025, p. 7; Security Council Report, 2025b; Lenshie et al, 2025, p. 15; Africa Defense Forum, 2024a; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 29; Nsaibia, 2025). Following is a short section describing the respective countries' relations with Russia, again focused on PMSC developments.

After an initial military cooperation agreement signed in 2018, the Burkinabé regime began to align more closely with Moscow following the country's second coup in 2022. Captain Ibrahim Traoré is said to have strengthened ties with Russia, specifically military assistance and the acquisition of weapons. In January 2023, the leader called for the withdrawal of French troops, who left the country soon after, thereby solidifying the new partnership (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 55; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 29). Burkina Faso is no stranger to unconventional security cooperation, and the government has also sought to strengthen the military by recruiting civilians into the controversial Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) militia, a paramilitary force separate from the Burkinabé military. While the name suggests voluntary fighters, reports indicate that recruitment is sometimes forced, serving as punishment for political opponents (Africa Defense Forum, 2024a). While WG/AC have been directly engaging in combat with jihadi rebels in Mali, the situation in Burkina Faso seems to be different. As of August 2025, the number of Africa Corps personnel in the country is estimated at 100-300 soldiers, as stated by Africa Corps' own Telegram Channel (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p 55; Ezinga, 2025; Africa Defense Forum, 2024a). While the forces are said to be supporting missions near the border with Mali, reports suggest that the central role of the PMSCs in the country is not as a partner in the fight against terrorism, rather as regime security for Traoré and his military junta (Eizenga, 2025; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025. p 55; Africa Defense Forum, 2024a).

For Niger, distancing from previous Western allies and the end of security cooperation with the EU, the U.S., and France, in exchange for relations with Russia, began in 2023 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 56; Laessing, 2025, p. 3). As in Burkina Faso, reports highlight Russian PMSCs' focus on supporting the Nigerien military junta rather than counterterrorism efforts, with Africa Corps troops in Niger reportedly ranging from 150 to 300 as of August 2024 (Stanyard, 2025, p. 9). In the Global Terrorism Index report for 2025, the Institute for Economics & Peace claims that “[...] Niger's shift toward partnerships with Russia,

accompanied by a decline in collaboration with Western allies, has contributed to a rise in terrorist attacks and fatalities"[22] (2025, p. 26). Whether the deployment of Africa Corps is to train and equip small forces (Laessing, 2025, p. 3), to protect the regimes, or to engage in counterterrorism actions remains to be proven.

3.2 Other emerging powers

While relations between the AES countries and Russia have been well documented, other emerging powers, such as Türkiye and China, are also expanding their presence in the region. Although less visible, their influence is growing in the area. This section will focus on the country's respective PMSC activities.

3.2.1 Türkiye

Türkiye has expanded its political, military, and commercial influence in the AES countries through multiple channels. These include education, infrastructure, religious outreach, and growing trade relations (Özlem, 2025, p. 10; Wilén, 2025, p.4; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Mali's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdoulaye Diop, confirms the countries good relationship in the Antalya Diplomacy Forum 2025, including areas as transportation, health, infrastructure development and increasing purchases of high technology military equipment as examples (TRT World, 2025a, 00:35-1:30). During the same forum, the Burkinabé counterpart, Karamoko Jean-Marie Traoré, calls Türkiye one of the country's best friends, claiming that the country is standing alongside Burkina Faso in the face of terrorism and hardships, and that the relationship is only growing stronger (TRT World, 2025b, 00:45-01:30). Like Russia, Türkiye is positioning itself as an alternative to previous Western allies. President Erdoğan's well-known motto, "The world is bigger than five" (Medet, 2023), and frequent criticism of Western colonialism resonate strongly in West Africa, where, according to Medet (2023), anti-colonial sentiment has been on the rise. As relations between the AES countries, France, and the U.S. deteriorated, Türkiye is said to have seized the opportunity to fill a part of the security vacuum and deepen bilateral defence ties. Wilén (2025, p.4) concurs and says that while Türkiye initially adopted a multifaceted approach to the Sahel, the country has more recently deepened its engagement with the AES states in a few key areas. These include strategic engagements in the region's natural resources, mainly in the extractive sector,

[22] See also: Africa Defense Forum, 2025b.

where Parens & Plichta (2025) argue Türkiye explicitly needs a uranium source, explaining the growing relations with Niger in particular[23].

Another key area includes arms provision, such as drones for combat against jihadi groups (BBC Arabic, 2024; France24, 2024; Bourcier et al., 2024; Bozkurt, 2025). By 2022, Turkish armoured vehicles had also been delivered to Burkina Faso (and Chad), while Niger had become the first export customer of a fully Turkish-manufactured aircraft (Yochai, 2025; Parens & Plichta, 2025). However, it's not only material that is being exported from Türkiye, as reports emerged in 2024 that the private military company SADAT International Defense Consultancy had deployed soldiers to the AES. SADAT was founded in 2012 by former army brigadier general Adnan Tanriverdi and consists of land, naval, air, and police forces (Zenn, 2024; SADAT, n.d.; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 37; Bourcier et al., 2024; Bozkurt, 2025). The company's mission is, as stated on their webpage, to "[...] establish a Defense Collaboration and Defense Industry Cooperation among Islamic Countries to help Islamic World take the place where it merits among Superpowers by providing Strategic Consultancy, Defense and Security Training and Supply Services to Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces of Islamic Countries." (SADAT, n.d). Like the WG/AC, authors claim that SADAT differs from a conventional PMSC. SADAT has strong ties both to the Turkish state and Turkish intelligence services and is allegedly staying true to its religious-nationalist roots, with its founder emphasising Islamic solidarity (Van der Lugt, 2024, p. 10, Parens & Plichta, 2025; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 37; Özlem, 2025, p. 11). This supposedly Islamist connection, while hard to prove, might become problematic for the PMSC, which will be further explored in a later section.

As discussed in the literature review, national armies are not always composed solely of nationals, and this is even less true of PMSCs. To reduce costs, many PMSCs recruit personnel from countries where military labour is cheaper, but also where proxy fighters are available. In the case of SADAT, most soldiers appear to be recruited from Turkish-trained Syrian fighters (Africa Defense Forum, 2024b; Al Mansour, 2025; Parens & Plichta, 2025; BBC Arabic, 2024). According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), SADAT allegedly sent over 1,000 Syrian fighters, through Türkiye, to Niger and Burkina Faso in 2024 to protect Turkish projects and commercial interests. Other reports suggest that SADAT has been active in Mali as well, providing military training to troops, as well as contributing to junta leader Goïtas private security (BBC Arabic, 2024; Parens & Plichta, 2025; Yochai, 2025; France 24, 2024; Bourcier, et al., 2024; Africa Defense Forum, 2024b; Wilén, 2025, p.4).

[23] See also: Bozkurt, 2025.

SADAT is supposedly also engaging in counterterrorism operations, with reports of casualties surfacing. As of September 2025, between 10 and 50 Syrian fighters have been killed in Niger, mostly in attacks or ambushes in the fight against jihadists (France 24, 2024; Al Mansour, 2025; BBC Arabic, 2024). There are multiple potential challenges to SADAT's ongoing involvement in the AES region that go beyond covertly engaging in another country's counterterrorism operations. Parens & Plichta (2025) focus specifically on SADAT's reputed religious roots. If the group is indeed fighting Sunni jihadist forces such as JNIM, the group's alleged ideological support for the Muslim Brotherhood and for other Muslims might prove complicated. While it is difficult to anchor the objectives and actions of a PMSC such as SADAT in ideology or religion, the fact that there are various sources, including SADAT itself, that emphasise Islamic solidarity might tell us something about the group's motivations. However, this discussion is sensitive and must be dealt with carefully, not to equate Muslims with Islamists, although sources are accusing the group of providing training to the latter (Parens & Plichta, 2025; Stapleton & Ciddi, 2024).

Like the WG/AC, SADAT also has an "informational arm" as Cisse et al. (2025, p. 37) call it, through the think tank ASSAM. SADAT's founder and previous President Tanriverdi held the same position in ASSAM until his passing, and the Turkish think tank explicitly denounces "Western imperialism" while promoting the advance and rise of Islamic countries as a global superpower, under Turkish leadership (Cisse et al., 2025, p. 37; ASSAM, 2024). In this sense, SADAT is not only a military actor but also an ideological tool, aligning Ankara's strategic goals in the Sahel with a broader narrative of postcolonial resistance and Islamic unity. For Van der Lugt, SADAT is an excellent example of the broader trend of authoritarian states' security privatisation, as discussed in the literature review. As Türkiye has neither ratified any key conventions on the use of mercenaries, nor acceded to the Montreux Document, the country gains flexibility in handling PMSCs on the global stage, according to Özlem (2025, p. 12). Nationally, PMSCs are in a legally grey area: on the one hand, they are licensed under a law on private security services, but on the other hand, they are not required to comply with it, as it applies only to conventional security services. Özlem (2025, pp. 12-13) argues that the Turkish state's use of PMSCs as SADAT showcases how PMSCs can be deliberately structured to allow state control, while at the same time preserving plausible deniability, as previously seen in the case of the Wagner group.

3.2.2 China

Through the One Belt One Road initiative, China has been expanding its economic activities on the African continent, having signed agreements with 52 of the 54 countries (Auge, 2024), including the AES. The countries' relationship has evolved over several years of cooperation through investments in fields such as construction, infrastructure, medical missions, housing construction and resource extraction (Cheick, 2022; Lenshie, et al., 2025, p. 3; Auge, 2024; Wilén, 2025, p. 3; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 53; Issaev et al, 2022, p. 438). As stated in a press release following the Burkinabé Foreign Minister's visit to China, China and Burkina Faso currently enjoy full diplomatic relations, elevating the relationship to a strategic partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). Mali's and China's relationship has also gained the status of a strategic partnership, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d). Niger and China have as well seen a growing relationship over the last few years, with China supporting the current regime and undermining sanctions imposed on the country. However, as the Nigerien junta seeks to reevaluate its cooperation, especially in natural resource areas, relations have deteriorated (Nantulya, 2025; Wilén, 2025). Still, China is Niger's second-largest foreign investor. Over time, the relationships have started to focus on security diplomacy as well, and in 2022, the first China-Africa Security and Defense Forum was organised in Beijing by the Chinese Ministry of Defence (Cheick, 2022; Cisse et al., 2025, p. 3). China is now supplying the AES countries with military support vehicles, gun-mortar and rocket launch systems, and military training (Nyabiage, 2025).

Chinese PMSCs have also been seen in the region. However, China has so far taken a different approach to the deployment of PMSCs on the African continent than Russia and Türkiye. The country appears to be focusing on security measures to protect Chinese economic interests rather than on offensive operations or regime protection (Cisse et al., 2025, p. 3). This position also reflects the attitude of the Chinese government, which is subtle and actively discourages its PMSCs from taking risks that could lead to diplomatic incidents and tarnish the regime's reputation (Cisse et al., 2025, p. 1, p. 7; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 53; Singh Gill, 2025). Still, there is a strong commitment to protect Chinese interests against security threats. China has pledged 1 billion Yuan (EUR 117 million/U.S. $136 million) in military assistance to train 6,000 military personnel and 1,000 law enforcement members across the continent. However, as the Institute for Economics & Peace notes, the actual direct implications for security dynamics, especially in the AES countries, are ambiguous (2025, p.

56). While Chinese PMSCs, unlike Russian and Turkish, do not seem to concern themselves with counterterrorism efforts or regime protection specifically, China's foreign policy of noninterference in international affairs is usually regime-centric, according to Nantulya[24] (2025). Similarly to the cases of Russia and Türkiye, one could argue that China as well is offering some sort of regime security to the AES countries.

Cisse et al. note that Chinese PMSCs, increasingly tasked with safeguarding critical infrastructure built and run by Chinese companies, are helping strengthen China's political influence in recipient countries[25] (2025, pp. 10-11). Claiming that the "[...] boundary between the protection of economic and strategic interests is becoming increasingly blurred" (Cisse et al, 2025, p. 10). Private security companies have been legalised in China since 2009, driving growth in the sector both nationally and internationally (Cisse et al, 2024, p. 4; Singh Gill, 2025). However, their private nature seems limited, and according to Singh Gill (2025), Beijing has been unwilling to allow PMSCs to reach any level of genuine autonomy, and People's Liberation Army/People's Armed Police personnel usually staff the companies (Singh Gill, 2025; Cisse et al, 2024, p. 11). Similar to both Russia and Türkiye, China has increased its mining deals in the AES, particularly for uranium in Niger (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Simultaneously, French and Canadian companies have lost access (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 57). With China currently operating two lithium mines in Mali, and mines being a focal point for different attacks from jihadi groups, the question that arises is how willing the country is to start engaging more offensively to protect its interests. As discussed by Gogny & de Castro (2025, p. 254) and Lenshie (2025, p. 8), the natural resources of the AES countries play a greater role in the competitiveness of global powers, a competition that none of China, Russia, or the USA wants to lose.

3.2.3 Ukraine

Although media reports indicate that the Ukrainian PMSC Omega Consulting Group has opened an office in Burkina Faso (Auge, 2024), this section will not specifically focus on Ukraine's PMSC activity in the AES countries. Information about Ukrainian PMSC activities is scarce and difficult to verify. Instead, this section will begin an exploration of how geopolitics and business competitiveness are playing out in the AES.

[24] See also: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025
[25] See also: Issaev et al, 2022, p. 438.

As previously described, the ambush in the north of Mali in July 2024 left around 130 casualties, amongst them Wagnerists and Malian soldiers. Besides being covered in media as a significant setback for Russia, what really caught journalists' and later the AES government's attention, was statements by Andriy Yusov, spokesman for Kyiv's military intelligence service. The spokesman claimed that the Tuareg rebels had received necessary information from Ukraine, which enabled a successful military operation against the Russian and Malian forces. Other reports also include Ukraine providing rebels in Mali with drones to use against their adversaries (Stanyard, 2025, p. 21; Security Council report, 2025b; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p. 53; Auge, 2024; Chibekushi & Mwai, 2024; Mhaka, 2024; Ajala, 2024b). This is allegedly not the first direct intervention from Ukraine against Wagner military operations on the continent; there have also been reports of Ukrainian drone attacks in Sudan against Russian fighters (Stanyard, 2025, p. 21; Melly, 2024; Roger, 2024; Ewokor & Flemming, 2024; Chibekushi & Mwai, 2024; Mhaka, 2024; Ajala, 2024b). However, Ukraine's foreign minister has denied the country's involvement, claiming there is no evidence implicating Ukraine in the fighting (Stanyard, 2025, p. 21; Mhaka, 2024). Nevertheless, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso severed diplomatic ties with Ukraine in August 2024. In a joint letter, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso also asked the UN Security Council to act against and investigate what they called Ukraine's open and assumed support for international terrorism, stating that the Ukrainian aggression and 'glorification of terrorism' is unjustifiable (Stanyard, 2025, p. 21; Chibekushi & Mwai, 2024; United Nations Security Council, 2024, p.2; Mhaka, 2024; Ozkan, 2025; Ajala, 2024b). ECOWAS followed suit, condemning any outside interference in the region which could constitute a threat to peace and security in the region, and draw it into any current geopolitical confrontations (Mhaka, 2024; Melly, 2024). Stanyard argues that “[...]Kyiv's hints of direct involvement confirm how far it is prepared to go in taking against Russia's President Vladimir Putin well beyond the home battlefield” (2025, p. 21). The Institute for Economics & Peace (2025, p. 53) claim that the conflicts in Sahel have the potential to develop into proxy war emanating from the war in Ukraine, with Melly calling the developments "[...] yet another case of outside powers exploiting the continent as a bloody playing field for their own rivalries[26]" (Melly, 2024).

The war in Ukraine may also have other significant implications for the AES countries. Zenn (2024) argues that Moscow is prioritising personnel for the war in Ukraine, highlighting the unreliability of Russian PMSC forces for African states. For example, just months after

[26] See also: Ajala, 2024b.

deploying to Burkina Faso, part of Africa Corps soldiers were recalled to Russia to help defend against Ukraine in Kursk, leaving a gap in the "Bear Brigade", allegedly tasked with shielding Traoré (Zenn, 2024; Braun, 2025; Security Council Report, 2025b; Institute of Economics and Peace, 2025, p. 55; Stanyard, 2025, p. 18). Beyond the broader geopolitical context, Ukraine also appears to have deployed a PMSC to Burkina Faso, as mentioned at the beginning of this section.

3.3 Dynamics between PMSCs in the Sahel

The PMSCs discussed in the previous section may differ in their methods and operational scope. Still, they share a common characteristic, namely their strong connection to the state, acting as proxies for foreign policy objectives. China has pursued a deliberate and stable presence on the continent, embedding its security presence within long-term economic and infrastructural cooperation. In contrast, Russia has taken a far more interventionist stance, focusing primarily on countries experiencing armed conflict, sending fighters and instructors to support counterterrorism efforts. More recently, Russia’s approach seems to be leaning heavily on regime protection, using PMSCs as a tool to support military junta regimes of the AES countries. Türkiye's approach can be seen as a hybrid of the two, combining commercial, religious, and security engagements, while also presenting itself as a partner rooted in notions of Islamic solidarity. With the three countries offering, albeit slightly different, PMSC services to the AES, a question arises regarding the dynamics between the PMSCs.

While Russia quickly filled the security vacuum left by Western withdrawals, Türkiye and China's roles appear to be expanding, with Zenn (2024) arguing that this may even raise the level of geopolitical competition between the states. Cisse et al. (2025, p. 37) note the possibility of growing rivalries between Russian and foreign PMSCs. For instance, in Mali, Türkiye has lost several mining permits, a development that Cisse et al. (2025, p. 37) find noteworthy given the timing of Russia's Africa Corps to Burkina Faso and reports of disinformation campaigns against SADAT (being Türkiye’s right arm in the extraction business) on Russian Telegram channels. Parens & Plichta (2025), explore another example of potential competition, where Burkina Faso and Niger could contract SADAT, bringing in more experienced fighters and heavy equipment in comparison to Africa Corps' small deployments. With a history of previously having fought each other in Libya in late 2019, Turkish and Russian PMCS seem to be cooperating for now, both being active in the fight against jihadists in the AES border region (Auge, 2024). However, although denied by SADAT and the Turkish Ministry of Defence, some

of SADAT's recruits appear to have ended up under Russian WG/AC command, reportedly causing friction. As previously mentioned, the Wagner Group was previously deployed to Syria, where Russia supported the Assad regime (BBC Arabic, 2024; Laessing, 2025, p. 4; Özlem, 2025, p. 11). Syrian fighters, many of whom were previously opposed to the Assad regime, now seem to find themselves in the paradoxical position of collaborating with, or reporting to, their former adversaries, having to side with them in battle against other Muslims (BBC Arabic, 2024; Parens & Plichta, 2025; Bourcier et al., 2024; France 24, 2024; Africa Defense Forum, 2024b; Wilén, 2025, p. 5). This is only one example of the intricate affairs that follow state-sponsored PMSC activity.

Another example is given by Brown (2024, p. 8), who claims that Mali's junta-leader Goïta has considered recruiting mercenaries from SADAT, arguing that the objective "[...] would probably be to counterbalance Sadio Camara, his powerful defence minister and potential rivals"[27](Brown, 2024, p. 8). Camara was the driving force behind the deployment of Wagner in the country late 2021, which, according to Bourcier et al. (2024), leaves Goïta wary of the WG/ACs' loyalties. While this has not been confirmed, it raises another question regarding the roles of PMSCs in regime security, which will be further developed in the next section.

[27] See also: Bourcier et al., 2024; The Sentry, 2025, p. 22.

Chapter 4: Findings & Discussion

The cases selected for this thesis collectively contribute to a broader understanding of how PMSCs in the AES countries reflect the intersection of geopolitics, the privatisation of security, and state fragility. This chapter discusses these connections and their implications before moving on to the conclusions drawn by the study. To do so, this part has been divided into three subchapters.

4.1. Geopolitical competition

Geopolitics, being primarily concerned with relations between states and the constant competition for influence and resources, provides an essential lens for analysing the use of PMSCs in the AES countries. In the long term, PMSCs can be used to compete with other great powers in the international arena, securing necessary resources and allies.

Russia, Türkiye, and China appear to be aiming to increase their involvement in the AES countries, both through more conventional modes of cooperation and trade, as evidenced by numerous efforts in areas such as transportation, healthcare, education, and infrastructure, as well as growing trade relations. However, the countries have also increasingly been seen deepening their military cooperation with the AES, signing bilateral defense agreements, and increasing trade in arms and weaponry. Coinciding with the withdrawal of Western powers, the security vacuum seems to have been quickly filled mainly by Russia, Türkiye, and to some extent China. Besides official military relations, the countries are offering the AES a range of PMSC services, from more public infrastructure protection to more covert counterterrorism efforts, with each adopting different approaches.

Russia has been taking a particularly offensive approach, especially as seen in the case of the former Wagner Group. By using the Wagner Group as a tool in counterterrorism, Russia has been engaging in battles against jihadists all over Mali and the tri-border region between the AES countries. While some efforts have been successful, many reports emphasize grave human rights abuses and an overall deteriorating security situation following the PMSCs' arrival. The highly militarised governments of the AES countries appear to view security through a military lens, perhaps preferring this approach. This approach, however, continues to fuel jihadi recruitment efforts, creating a vicious circle. Nevertheless, as the AES countries seem to have grown tired of Western interventionist approaches, Russia’s PMSCs initiatives keep the country militarily involved in the area. In a similar vein, Turkish PMSCs are operating, mostly in cooperation with Russian companies. The sale of Russian, Turkish, and Chinese

arms, drones, and aircraft further deepens the three states' military relations with the AES, obstructing any current possibility of a return of Western-led security initiatives. However, contemporary geopolitics does not only concern itself with military means of confrontation in the international realm.

As described in the literature review and showcased in the case studies, contemporary PMSCs tend to embed themselves in the extraction business, providing both in-house and external security to mining sites. In this instance, PMSCs help provide their respective states of origin opportunities to gain access to crucial minerals. For Russia, this access seems to help the country to both bypass international sanctions and generate revenue for its ongoing conflict with Ukraine. For China and Türkiye, resource access (for example, access to Malian lithium and Nigerien uranium) helps strengthen their positions in the global market for renewables and energy, as well as lessen their dependencies. The AES states recent move to nationalise mining operations and to reallocate concessions to new partners, showcase the positions Türkiye, China, and Russia currently hold. By leveraging their non-colonial history with the AES, policies of non-interference and nodding to Islamic solidarity, alongside their strategic use of PMSCs, the countries can advance their geopolitical interests.

The AES countries can also leverage the current situation to their advantage, striking new deals and agreements that benefit the military regimes. By severing ties with previous Western partners, whom the junta has accused of paternalistic attitudes and of infringing on the states' sovereignty, the new military and economic relations can be used to assert some agency in international affairs. With global powers seeking to secure access to uranium, gold, and lithium, the AES countries appear to be strategically utilising their resources. This highlights the possible geopolitical power that the AES can exert. However, as state institutions, and territorial control is weak, and jihadi attacks on mines are high, the AES are currently also in need of security/military support, which is explored in the next section.

4.2 The privatisation of security

The seemingly growing reliance of states on PMSCs reflects a broader trend of the privatisation of security, a process rooted in the states' (non)monopoly of violence and neoliberal reforms. However, as seen in the case studies, the "private" dimension of the actors discussed in this thesis is up for debate.

PMCS used by Russia, Türkiye, and China, deployed in the AES countries, all display the characteristics of a relatively new actor, in which the P in their acronym is better seen as

proxy rather than *private,* as Van der Lugt suggests. In all three cases, the companies deployed maintain close ties to their respective state of origin, serving as tools of foreign policy rather than independent business actors. Being well-connected to, or even part of, the state apparatus, the PMSCs' agendas are difficult to separate from the objectives of their government's strategic interests. This is reflected not only in the areas in which the PMSCs get involved, but also in what manner, and at what cost to the state itself. By using PMSCs tightly intertwined with national interests, Russia, Türkiye, and China all benefit from PMSC services while avoiding unwanted attention, claiming plausible deniability if needed.

The behaviours of China's PMSCs reflect the country's diplomatic approach, which tends to focus on low-risk, subtle deployments. To note, in the case of China, Chinese PMSCs are more security–focused than military, concentrating on protecting economic interests, such as the Belt and Road initiatives. With the One Belt and One Road initiative, Chinese PMSCs are increasingly tasked with safeguarding critical infrastructure, and recipient countries are becoming increasingly dependent on them, strengthening China's influence. This demonstrates one of the benefits of a strong state's deployment of PMSCs: the ability to gain and project influence at a low cost to the state itself. Russia's PMSCs offer a stark contrast. With the Wagner Group now absorbed into the Africa Corps, under the Russian Ministry of Defence, there are no questions about the company's earlier semi-private status. Turkish PMSC SADAT represents yet another model, taking on a multitude of different roles, from protecting Turkish strategic interests to allegedly protecting the Malian junta leader Goïta and counterterrorism efforts in the tri-border region. With its deep connections to both the Turkish state and the Turkish intelligence service, SADAT is currently the best example of a *proxy* military and security company. Its ideological and religious foundations, emphasising Islamic solidarity and anti-imperialist rhetoric, further blur the line between being a private enterprise and a tool for Ankara-aligned objectives. While religious objectives are hard to uncover, especially when the PMSC is part of a bigger Turkish agenda, it is interesting to ponder if this has any implications for the deployment of SADAT to three predominantly Muslim states.

Regardless, the presence of SADAT in the AES, where it allegedly both cooperates and competes with Russian forces, demonstrates how PMSCs can simultaneously serve strategic, ideological, and commercial goals. Together, these cases suggest that PMSCs have transformed from emerging entities shaped by the neoliberal privatisation of security into hybrid entities that blur the lines between private and state interests.

Another crucial aspect to consider is how these not-so-private PMSCs could increasingly become tools in national and international conflicts. This raises the question of

whether PMSCs are evolving into new arenas for proxy warfare. A striking example of this can be seen in reports suggesting that, with the alleged support of Ukrainian intelligence, jihadi fighters have attacked Russian PMSCs (and FAMA forces) in Mali, an incident some analysts interpret as evidence of how far Ukraine is willing to go in its confrontation with Russia.

In the case of the AES countries, the benefits of privatising security are clear. On the one hand, contracting with PMSCs from other authoritarian states helps countries get rid of any unwanted conditions tied to foreign interventions and lessen their dependency on French and Western influence. PMSCs' indifference to most local grievances contributes to these benefits but also poses a risk, as their real loyalties lie elsewhere. Nevertheless, if the goal is to preserve the military junta regimes and protect them against both external and internal threats, PMSCs have a lot to offer. The AES countries can currently pick and choose among available PMSCs on the neoliberal market, who seem to be cooperating where necessary. One the other hand, creating a dependence on PMSCs might fuel long-term instability and insecurity. If the goal is counterterrorism, the current deployments of private actors seem too small to make any real difference.

4.3 State fragility

The final part of the research question intends to shed light on state fragility. To begin with, there is a multitude of studies that aim to determine the link between the general use of PMSCs and state fragility, leaning heavily on the idea of a state's monopoly of violence. Nevertheless, this thesis has shown that both fragile and strong states can use PMSCs as part of their internal and external strategies. The AES countries have commonly suffered from weak governance, limited control over their territories, and militarised politics. A significant weakness in this context is the military institutions' incapacity to handle a jihadi terrorist threat. As a response, the countries (specifically Mali) have employed PMSCs providing their national armies with private training and weapons, as well as combatant partners. Choosing, or having to use PMSCs to try to fill the vacuum left by earlier, and much larger, military cooperation and interventions.

The AES countries have increasingly securitised and even militarised a range of political, economic, and social challenges, creating the Alliance itself on a basis of security. This framing legitimises exceptional measures, including the outsourcing of security functions to foreign actors such as PMSCs. This reliance on PMSCs, however small the deployments, underscores both the weaknesses of the AES state institutions and their adaptation to changes in global security. Paradoxically, while states claim to act in defence of sovereignty, their

reliance on external PMSCs effectively undermines it (according to most authors) by transferring core security functions to foreign actors.

Furthermore, as the case studies suggest, the AES countries are following a pattern of using PMSCs for regime security. According to the literature on the subject, the military junta's primary concern is maintaining power. Both Russian and Turkish PMSCs concern themselves with regime protection, and the WG/AC and SADAT have allegedly been spotted in the guards of the junta leaders. This further highlights the instability of the country's institutions, with reports of PMSCs being used to gain power even within the ranks of the leaders. Rather than using PMSCs to increase public security or strengthen national institutions, they are used to reinforce authoritarian rule, in this instance, supported by other authoritarian rulers. While the deployment of PMSC personnel to the AES countries is relatively small, the Wagner Group demonstrates an important lesson. Namely, the risk of an increased outsourcing of the right to use violence. As mentioned in the case studies, the most significant reason behind the end of Wagner was Prigozhin's mutiny. While the Wagner Group was never fully private, it demonstrated that even a state-linked PMSC can develop sufficient autonomy and objectives to challenge state authority appropriately. In this instance, Wagner turned against its state of origin, but who is to say that private contractors might not turn against the government of the state that employs them? Primarily, if this benefits the foreign policy objectives of the deploying state.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis explores how Russian, Turkish, and Chinese PMSCs operate in the AES countries and what their presence reveals about the intersection of geopolitics, the privatisation of security, and state fragility. To reach this objective, the thesis applied a combined theoretical framework of geopolitics, neoliberalism, and securitisation, viewed against a postcolonial backdrop. Together, these theories have contributed to the interpretation of how broader global power dynamics play out in local security contexts.

A qualitative literature-based case study approach was used to reach the aims of this study. The method was well-suited for the topic, as information about PMSCs is often fragmented and complex to access, especially in conflict zones or when linked to authoritarian states. The thesis's findings demonstrate that PMSCs have become tools for both fragile and strong states. For strong states, PMSCS offer a way to project influence, pursue strategic and economic objectives, and expand their geopolitical presence. For fragile states, PMSCs can be used to strengthen regime security and gain leverage in international relations. Geopolitically, the findings suggest that the growing presence of PMSCs reflects a potential shift in global power relations. Security and military services are often exchanged for access to natural resources and used to diversify foreign relations, giving the AES countries some agency in the international realm. The active PMSCs, closely aligned with the objectives of their respective states of origin, have contributed to China’s, Türkiye’s, and Russia’s growing access to crucial minerals and to new allies.

The analysis further showcases that the PMSCs operating in the AES cannot be understood as private entities. Their strong connections to state structures blur the line between commercial and political interests. While the operations and presence of PMSCs in general reflect neoliberal logics through the outsourcing of security, the cases studied in the thesis showcase how they serve state-driven agendas. Revealing both the processes of the privatisation of security, as well as how the privatisation has become a tool for statecraft and influence projection. In the long term, this challenges the traditional monopoly of violence and raises questions about accountability.

Finally, the findings indicate that the reliance on PMSCs reflects and reinforces state fragility. By framing instability and terrorism as an existential threat, military regimes in the AES have legitimised their rule and justified the outsourcing of security and the army functions.

However, the deployed PMSCs mainly provide regime protection rather than public security, reinforcing authoritarian control. While PMSCs may temporarily strengthen regime security, they risk undermining state sovereignty in the long term. Reliance on foreign PMSCs creates a paradox in which securitisation, intended to protect the state, exposes its fragility. Ultimately, as PMSCs continue to blur the lines between public and private, they challenge existing international norms, calling for renewed debates about privatised warfare. The use of PMSCs in the AES countries could signal a shift in how global power is exercised, not through open intervention, but through the strategic outsourcing and employment of violence.

Like any thesis, this thesis has its limitations. The study is literature-based, and whereas primary source information is valuable, reliable, first-hand information on PMSCs is challenging to access. Particularly when speaking of PMSCs in conflict zones, with a strong connection to their authoritarian states of origin. However, interviews with policymakers or other experts in the area could have benefited the work. For future research, it would be interesting to explore the long-term political consequences of PMSC involvement in authoritarian states, both for the countries that deploy them and for those that employ them. Exploring these dynamics could deepen understanding of how privatised security is reshaping power in the international system.

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