

Wagner | Russia's Transnational Terrorist Group in Ukraine and Beyond

1 | Background

The Wagner Group is an illegal Russian state-affiliated military group that has been tracked in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Venezuela, the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, and elsewhere. It is known as a **deadly fighting force furthering Russia's military interests around the world.**

Wagner's management and operations are **deeply intertwined with the Russian military and intelligence community** and, since its inception in 2014, the Group has fought alongside the Russian Army -and against U.S. Armed Forces- in Syria, violently secured Russian political and economic interests in Africa and elsewhere, and led a brutal and genocidal campaign of atrocities against Ukrainian civilians spanning from the 2014 invasion of Crimea to the 2022 full-scale invasion.

2 | Foreign Terrorist Organization Designation

Wagner has yet to be designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization in the U.S. and continues to effectively evade sanctions in their terrorist engagements. The U.S. has taken incremental steps to sanction the Group by designating it an Entity of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act and announcing its designation as a Transnational Criminal Organization, but these steps are insufficient and should be seen as stepping stones in **holding to account and limiting the material capacity of a group that conducts mass executions and terrorism globally.**

Wagner's brutal advancement of Russian strategic and political interests -through massacres, sledgehammer executions, beheadings, brutal protest crushings, and other atrocities -is well documented, but also **explicitly fulfills the criteria to be designated as an FTO:** (1) Wagner retains, and is expanding, its capability and intent to carry out terrorist attacks; (2) the transcontinental reach and violent activity of the Group threatens U.S. national security and nationals; and (3) the Group perpetrates atrocities defined as terrorist activity under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, FY 1988 and 1989 and the Immigration and Nationality Act, **particularly against civilians and around high-risk infrastructure, such as nuclear power plants.**

3 | The Founders

Wagner was founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin and GRU lieutenant colonel Dmitry Utkin. Utkin, who named the organization after his callsign, has several Waffen SS tattoos and is an **admirer of the Nazis.** Prigozhin, a close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has also been repeatedly sanctioned by the United States for funding the Internet Research Agency, the troll factory that **meddled in the 2016 U.S. elections.** Prigozhin, in a January 2023 statement, identifies Wagner as a **"part of Russian power"** and the United States as a **"sworn enemy."**

4 | Engagements in Ukraine

According to radio calls intercepted by the German foreign intelligence agency BND, Wagner played a leading role in **perpetrating atrocities, including massacres, rape, and torture, against civilians during the occupation of Bucha.** The calls suggest that civilian murders are a Russian government tactic intended to spread fear among the Ukrainian populace. Wagner systematically tortured and killed civilians and village officials in **Motyzhyn**, the perpetrators being veterans who were previously stationed in Syria.

Wagner has orchestrated multiple failed **assassination attempts** on President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, relocating hundreds of fighters from Africa and elsewhere as early as January 2022 in pursuit of violent regime change in Ukraine.

5 | Engagements Globally

Wagner's engagements span at least four continents and include, but are not limited to, direct military involvements, pro-regime and pro-warlord suppressions, mineral exploitation and oil blockades, and civilian massacres, torture, rape, and executions in countries such as **Syria, Mali, Venezuela, Sudan, CAR, Libya, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, South Africa, Mozambique, DRC, Angola, and Guinea.** Their illicit financing schemes extend to **Hong Kong and Thailand.** Wagner's violent engagements are often followed by regime-granted exclusive rights to mineral deposits and military base infrastructure for either the Group or Russia in those countries.

6 | Expanding Threats

In September 2022, a new headquarters of the Wagner Group was opened in St. Petersburg, and the Group is actively spreading information about its activities in Ukraine. The Group largely serves as a **contracting mechanism** for the Russian Defense Ministry and the GRU and has **ramped up its recruitment beyond Russian penal colonies, targeting Serbians, U.S.-trained Afghan special forces, prisoners in the Central African Republic, and others globally.**