

Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group: The Roots of the Phenomenon and its Effects on Russia following the June 23, 2023 Mutiny

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Yevgeny Prigozhin's Russian mercenaries, known as the Wagner Group, while comprising a relatively small part of the Russian forces in general, played an important role in Russia's war against Ukraine, not only thanks to their military skills, but also due to Prigozhin's political and media capabilities. Indeed, they have influenced the battlefield and the situation within Russia. On June 23, 2023, increasing friction between Prigozhin, who emerged during the war as an independent anti-establishment political player (he has no formal position in the establishment), and the Russian military establishment, led to an armed uprising against the military-security leadership, unprecedented in modern Russian history. The rebels took control of a provincial capital as an armed column advanced on Moscow. Although one day later the sides reached agreement and Prigozhin left Russia, the cries of support he received from soldiers and civilians are evidence of a deep change in the structure and balance of forces within Russian society, and between it and the various elites. The Russian establishment no longer looks as stable as was generally thought – and perhaps Israel should take these changes into account in its relations with the Putin regime.

The Wagner Private Military Company, also known as the Wagner Group, has been active for many years, unofficially promoting Russia's political interests as well as the economic interests of its owner – businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, a former underworld figure. The Group is well known to anyone who follows the war in Syria, where it has worked in coordination with the Russian forces and the Assad regime forces since 2015. In 2022 the Group returned to the headlines due to its prominent involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war, particularly in the battles for the city of Bakhmut – part of the frontline where the most intense battles took place until the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Bakhmut was finally captured in late May 2023 by Wagner troops after almost a year of fighting. Subsequently, most of the Group moved to camps away from the front, and the Ministry of Defense asked it to regulate its status and sign an official contract. On

June 23, 2023, the Group, led by Prigozhin, tried to stage a mutiny against the Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staff, while many (but not all) Russian forces refrained from opposing Group forces as they sped toward Moscow. Now, after Prigozhin's agreement to stop the advance and disband the revolt, the Group's future as an independent entity seems unclear.

At the start of the Russia-Ukraine War, the Wagner Group was not part of the military effort, since the General Staff of the Russian military planned and executed the invasion program and did not want to include private military elements, which officially were illegal in Russia. The Group was busy with military-economic-political projects in Africa – in the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Sudan, and perhaps other countries. However, following the failures of the Russian army in the first months of the war, the political-military elite reached the conclusion that regular forces were not enough. The devised solution, i.e., making use of the Wagner Group, was apparently partly inspired by Prigozhin himself, who identified an opportunity to promote himself and his services.

At first it seemed that Wagner was deployed in Ukraine in fairly dispersed fashion along the front, rather than used as an organic concentrated unit. As with the Group's activity in the Middle East, particularly in Libya, there was evidence of the employment of heavy equipment, including tanks, air defenses, and fighter planes (with retired army personnel who are apparently outsourced for military missions).

In July 2022, after a fairly short time, Prigozhin received special permission to visit prisons all over Russia and recruit inmates to his Group in return for pay and a future pardon. Apparently Putin himself approved this move, which constitutes a blatant breach of Russian law. Thus a force that formerly consisted of about 10,000 fighters doubled and redoubled its numbers, reaching 50,000 and perhaps more at some stage.

Bakhmut, a city in the Donetsk region with a population of about 70,000 before the war, was chosen as the focus of Wagner operations for a number of reasons. First, there are locally available natural resources (some of the largest salt mines in Europe). Prigozhin's modus operandi in Syria and Africa demonstrated that Wagner's military activity is also designed to bring economic profits through taking control of natural resources. In addition, the battle for Bakhmut served the Russian effort to attack the center of Ukrainian defense in Donbas – the agglomeration of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. Indeed, the capture ("liberation," according to the Russians) of the whole of Donbas, that is, the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, was one of Russia's central objectives in the war. However, after the

Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region (September 2022), when the Russians were pushed back from Izyum and Lyman north of Slovyansk, the original Russian plan became irrelevant.

The battle for Bakhmut began in the summer of 2022 and in effect has not ended, in spite of reports that the Wagner fighters completed the capture of the city at the end of May 2023 (Ukrainian forces are currently mounting counterattacks around the city). Over time, the military-strategic importance of Bakhmut has declined, but at the same time it has become a symbol for both sides, in view of the large numbers of personnel and weapons deployed in the battles. For Ukraine, it was a relatively convenient focus of defense efforts and a way to block the advance of large numbers of Russian forces in one place. For Russia, the capture of the city was a way to advance in Donbas, and from a certain point it became an objective in itself, particularly for Prigozhin, who apparently promised Putin that he would succeed in the mission (unlike the regular army, which had trouble scoring any success). In return for this assurance, it appears that Prigozhin received broad powers, including permission to swell the ranks of his fighters with prisoners, a regular supply of ammunition, and perhaps even a future concession for the natural resources in the region, first and foremost the salt mines.

Prigozhin presented Wagner as a successful alternative to the Russian military (“the Ministry of Defense” as he prefers to say, in order to focus any criticism on the command level and not on the soldiers). In fact, along the entire front, only the section in Bakhmut under the control of the Wagner Group showed any real Russian gains since autumn 2022, in spite of talk about a “Russian offensive” in early 2023 (the Ukrainians even claimed that Putin demanded that his forces take full control of the Donetsk region by March 1), and attempts to advance at several points along the front line. Sometime in January 2023, Russian paratroopers (VDV) were assigned to Wagner on the north and south sides of the city, and it was they who apparently contributed significantly to the increased speed of the Wagner advance. Prigozhin for his part did everything he could to downplay the importance of the help from the regular military units. The battle for the Wagner image and public appreciation of its role in Bakhmut could be seen in Prigozhin’s statements to the media. A number of times he even managed to make the Ministry of Defense publicly acknowledge the Group’s importance in the battle for Bakhmut (although they tried very hard not to mention the mercenaries).

The troops’ advance and capture of the city was achieved at the price of heavy losses and unrestrained use of artillery fire. It appears that the Wagner Group demanded from the Ministry of Defense far larger amounts of ammunition than the average for other frontline units. At a certain stage, the flow of supplies began

to ebb, and Prigozhin embarked on a campaign – at first in private, then using videos of his fighters, and finally starring himself – against the senior ranks in the Ministry of Defense, headed by Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov and Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, with personal insults and humiliations.

The tension between Wagner and its commanders and the Ministry of Defense and the high command of the Russian military was not necessarily institutional (for many years Prigozhin's companies have been leading suppliers of the Russian army in many fields, above all, food), but personal, and aimed at specific people in the top rank of the army and the Ministry of Defense. Shoigu and Gerasimov were Prigozhin's main targets – he announced their dismissal as one of the aims of his revolt.

Before the clash with Gerasimov and Shoigu deteriorated, one of Prigozhin's first "victims" was General Alexander Lapin, who commanded the northeastern front (Kharkiv district-northern Luhansk district) during the period of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, in which inter alia the Russians lost Izyum and Lyman. Then in October 2022, Prigozhin issued a public demand for the removal of the general. In contrast, Prigozhin had much better relations with General Sergei Surovikin, commander of the Russian Air Force and commander of the "special military operation" in Ukraine between October and January – although on June 23, during Prigozhin's journey toward the forces HQ in Rostov-on-Don, Surovikin recorded a video calling on the Wagner fighters to change their ways and lay down their arms (and still, his fate after the mutiny is unclear). The two knew each other from Syria (2017-2019): Surovikin at that time was commander of the Russian forces in Syria, and it appears that Prigozhin shared with him the profits from his control of Middle East areas rich in natural resources, including oil and gas. Since the start of the invasion in 2022, Prigozhin frequently stressed that Surovikin is a skilled general, and when the latter managed the retreat from the Kherson region during November, two months after the retreat from Izyum and Lyman, Prigozhin complimented him on his wise decision. He managed to create coalitions with various senior commanders and thus promoted the interests of his private army. Such cooperation constituted interference in the chain of command and control, and challenged the supreme command. Although there is no direct proof, it appears that even during the uprising Prigozhin enjoyed a certain degree of support within the army, which enabled him to advance quickly through Russia.

For three months Surovikin commanded the whole campaign, and was then demoted to deputy commander, while Chief of Staff Gerasimov was appointed overall commander of the campaign in January 2023. The reasons for this move apparently included an effort by senior elements in the General Staff and the

Ministry of Defense to persuade Putin to restore control of the campaign to the classic military establishment at the expense of Prigozhin and his supporters in the military. After the exchange of personnel, Prigozhin also lost the ability to continue recruiting prisoners – this source of manpower moved to the Ministry of Defense.

It seems that the Wagner Group's combat doctrine has changed a great deal since the start of the invasion, and certainly since its activity in Africa and Syria. Until the recruitment of prisoners, it was based on relatively skilled fighters, even if the threshold for acceptance in the first months of the invasion was lowered as their losses mounted. But with the mass recruitment of prisoners, the system changed. Since the summer of 2022 Wagner has used cheap, unskilled personnel (mainly prisoners) for "cannon fodder" missions (storming a target without fire cover in order to expose Ukrainian positions), while the commanders and professional mercenaries (the original nucleus of the Wagner Group) kept for better uses. The charge by "cannon fodder" enables them to identify and aim at Ukrainian positions and thus advance on the ground.

The use of prisoners is cynical and cruel. Apart from sending them on foot and without protection toward Ukrainian positions (leading to very high rates of casualties), many cases are known of prisoner recruits being executed for refusing to obey commands, leaving their posts, or trying to surrender to Ukrainians. The responsibility for all this usually lies with Wagner's so-called Internal Security Department. Some of the cases have been documented by the Wagner Group itself and publicized as a means of creating fear – brutal executions with a heavy hammer have become one of the Group's symbols.

In spite of their logistical dependence on the General Staff and political dependence on Putin himself, the Group had considerable operational independence on the ground. It is known that the Group had its own bank of prisoners, and Ukraine had made several prisoner exchange deals directly with Wagner. Although legally a Wagner fighter has no recognized combatant status (he is a member of an illegal armed organization), in practice Ukraine recognizes the balance of forces in the field and conducted talks (at least on prisoner exchanges) directly with Prigozhin.

In recent months, the owner of the Wagner Group became more of a political figure in Russia. Prigozhin has enjoyed ad hoc collaboration with other political figures in the Russian establishment: the ruler of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov, Putin spokesman Dimitri Peskov, Sergey Mironov, chairman of one of the Duma factions (although during the mutiny all these figures declared their loyalty to Putin and

rejected support for Prigozhin); he made excellent use of media resources at his disposal (as well as Wagner, he owns a chain of news agencies, news sites, and Telegram channels, cultivating extensive activity among young people – it now appears that all these are being dismantled), and made populist declarations to the general public. Although avoiding criticism of Putin, a large part of his message consisted of challenges to senior figures in the establishment, headed by Shoigu.

Once Bakhmut was captured, the dispute grew steadily worse: there were several reports of friction between Wagner forces and Russian army units, including a case in which Wagner fighters captured a Russian officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel, beat him, and forced him to record an apology (a widespread violent practice in Russia) – they allege this was due to an attempt by his soldiers to attack the Wagner forces. In early June the Minister of Defense issued an instruction that all militias (volunteer forces fighting alongside the Russian army – Wagner is not the only one) had to sign a contract with the Ministry of Defense in order to regulate their legal and organizational status. Prigozhin was the only one of the leaders of these unofficial forces to oppose this order and announce that his men would not sign a contract, since they were more effective fighters than the military.

In later June the rhetoric grew fiercer. Prigozhin claimed that the reasons for starting the war were not justified and served the corrupt security elites – a direct allegation against Putin’s policy. On the eve of June 23, after declaring that the Ministry of Defense forces had attacked Wagner camps, Prigozhin led his forces to capture the city of Rostov-on-Don (capital of the southern region bordering Donbas) in order and punish Gerasimov and Shoigu. A force that was claimed to comprise up to 25,000 fighters entered the town without meeting any resistance, and surrounded and blocked administrative buildings, led by the headquarters of Southern Russian Command, which had directed most of the war effort. Another force, which split off from the main one, moved along the route linking Rostov and Moscow (about 1000 kilometers) and over the course of June 24 covered most of the distance, while engaging in a number of clashes with Russian army forces along the way, bringing down some aircraft and destroying vehicles (it appears that some of the Russian forces refrained from confronting the Wagner soldiers and perhaps some even joined them). Toward evening, when the Wagner column was approaching Moscow, it was announced that with the mediation of the President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko, Prigozhin and Putin had reached agreement, whereby Prigozhin would disband his troops and leave for Belarus, and in return the political-legal pursuit of Prigozhin (announced by the FSB and Putin before then) would be dropped. He left Rostov-on-Don, to the cheers of passersby greeting the Wagner Group as heroes.

The power of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group in its pre-munity format is the result of the war and the overall crisis affecting Russia in general and its Ministry of Defense in particular: throughout Putin's tenure there has never been such an important independent force, and certainly no armed uprising against the establishment. Thanks to the use of methods and standards that differ from those of the regular army (flexibility, use of greater resources – manpower, weapons, media), the Wagner Group has been prominent for its output, particularly in the media and perhaps even in the eyes of its biggest admirer – Putin. Thus in spite of its relatively limited size (tens of thousands of fighters, compared to hundreds of thousands in all the forces at Russia's disposal), the Wagner Group played an important role, with sufficient organizational-logistical independence to launch the mutiny.

But more important than the military aspect is the sociopolitical dimension: Prigozhin became an anti-establishment political figure, not controlled by the ruling hierarchy. He led an independent force of armed fighters, sending messages directly to the greater public that blatantly undermined the unity and reputation of the establishment – first in words, and then with direct military action. Putin's system is rooted in full control of all actors with public-political strength, and anyone who becomes too independent is in danger: he is either swallowed by the system or neutralized.

But since the military lacked the capability to achieve a decisive victory, Prigozhin built up the image of Wagner, a group of fighters loyal to him personally, as an effective force and thus made himself necessary to the Russian establishment. This "insurance policy" enabled him to take risks and establish an independent position in the public arena through smart use of the media networks at his disposal. Nobody could have imagined such conduct before the war, but Putin's military weakness made it possible for Prigozhin to grow, amass power, and become a force challenging the whole system.

It is not clear what Prigozhin received in return for stopping the mutiny, and how he will act from now on. Even if his story and the story of the Wagner Group as an organic and independent organization is nearing the end, their huge influence remains in the deep cracks they have created in the structure of the Russian establishment, exposing its inability to deal with an internal threat of its own making. In any event, Prigozhin and his mercenaries brought to the surface a sociopolitical phenomenon not seen in Russia throughout Putin's rule – an independent force, indifferent to the law, and not controlled or even restrained by

the establishment. This is about former prisoners with weapons returning to their hometowns and terrorizing the local population, executions for failure to obey commands, public debasement of the heads of the military establishment, and of course the daring and confidence to announce a military mutiny. The common element in all – taking the law into one’s own hands.

Illegal mercenary units used by the state through well connected businesspeople have created a precedent in modern Russia. The cause of the revolt was the Kremlin policy that allowed these entities to spring up. At this stage the incident appears to have ended fairly comfortably for Putin, but it is possible to identify a deep change in the Russian establishment and society that will find other opportunities to express itself. It is too early to determine whether Prigozhin and Wagner will play any further part in the political and social development of Russia, or whether they will contribute to a regime change, but it is already clear they are a symbol of the end of the age of stable government under Putin, and of a new trend that the military venture in Ukraine has brought to Russia.

These changes raise questions as to line taken by Israel in its policy toward Russia and Ukraine. The new signs of weakness in the Russian establishment require a reexamination of Jerusalem’s conduct. Israel must be ready for sudden changes in Russia, particularly in view of the deep-rooted belief until now of the stability of Russia’s status in the international and Middle East arena. The options for a change in this situation are increasing constantly.