

The Wagner forces under a new flag: Russia's Africa Corps in Burkina Faso

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A 100-strong Russian contingent landed in Burkina Faso in late January, and another 200 men are expected to join it in the future. The arrivals are part of the Africa Corps, a force that was recently formed by the Russian defence ministry to replace the Wagner Group, which was disbanded last year. Meanwhile, negotiations to set up a Russian military base in the Central African Republic (CAR) are reportedly underway. The new units are likely to be deployed in a number of the Sahel states, the CAR and Libya; contracts with local governments will govern the scope of their activities. Unrestricted access to ports and airports in Libya and Algeria is a precondition for the smooth operation of Russian military forces in the Sahel countries.

Commentary

- The Africa Corps consists of mercenaries and volunteers, and does not form part of the Russian Armed Forces. It began recruiting in December 2023, and has also included job offers for former Wagner Group mercenaries; it may also recruit local residents. According to unofficial reports, the Corps will eventually number 20,000 men. These estimates are likely to be exaggerated, given that the Wagner Group's African units consisted of around 5000–7000 mercenaries at the peak of their activity. We should assume that the Russian armed forces and law enforcement agencies, which have been struggling with mobilisation at home, will not be able to recruit more than a few thousand people.
- The formation of the Africa Corps under the umbrella of the Russian defence ministry indicates that an effort is underway to put things back in order after the dismantling of the Wagner Group, as the Corps is set to take over its operations. Deputy Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov is in charge of setting up the force, a process which is expected to be completed by this summer. He has stressed that military, training and security cooperation will not only benefit the forces overseen by the military, but also those under the National Guard and the FSB as well as military companies that Russian mining companies have set up.
- The Russian contingent's arrival in Burkina Faso signals both an expansion and the formalisation of the Kremlin's military presence in the Sahel region; the installation of a military base in the CAR will also serve this purpose. The Corps' deployment was preceded by Yevkurov paying several visits to Africa, as well as the opening of the

Russian embassy in Ouagadougou after a hiatus of more than 30 years. The Russian expansion on the continent is filling the security vacuum that has opened up following the withdrawal of French contingents from most Sahel countries and the CAR. The military juntas that have seized power in many countries of the Sahel region in recent years see Russia as a protector in both the domestic and international arenas, and are keen to cooperate with it in the field of defence. While the Africa Corps' stated aim is to provide assistance in the fight against jihadism, its presence on the continent will primarily serve to expand the Kremlin's military, political and economic footprint.

- The Corps may be deployed not only in the countries where Russian mercenaries have operated before (Libya, Mali, the CAR, Sudan), but also in Niger, where a US military contingent is still stationed. The tense situation in the Sahel has facilitated the Kremlin's expansion of its activities in the region. Last September, the junta-ruled Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formed the defensive Alliance of Sahel States, and in January this year they unilaterally announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).