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Russia's African coup strategy

Sep 1, 2023 | Clint Watts - General Manager, Microsoft Threat Analysis Center

Microsoft Threat Analysis Center

Legend:
- Wagner deployments
- Other Wagner/Prigozhin activity
- Military agreements with Russia
- French troop presence
- French troop withdrawal

- Russia has signed at least 38 military cooperation agreements since 2015
- Wagner's military, commercial, and logistical activities crisscross at least 14 countries
- There are at least 4 countries where Wagner is deployed: Sudan (2017), Libya (2018), CAR (2018), and Mali (2021)

ALGERIA   LIBYA
SENEGAL 350   MALI 1,500   NIGER   CHAD 1,000   SUDAN   DJIBOUTI 1,500
BURKINA FASO
NIGERIA
CÔTE D'IVOIRE 950   CAR
CAMEROON
GABON 350

Microsoft Threat Intelligence   MTAC | September 2023

Today we are sharing a [report](#) from the Microsoft Threat Analysis Center (MTAC) on Russian influence operations in Africa, principally focused on the Niger coup. We believe it is vital there is wider understanding of the ways in which the internet is being used to stoke political instability around the world.

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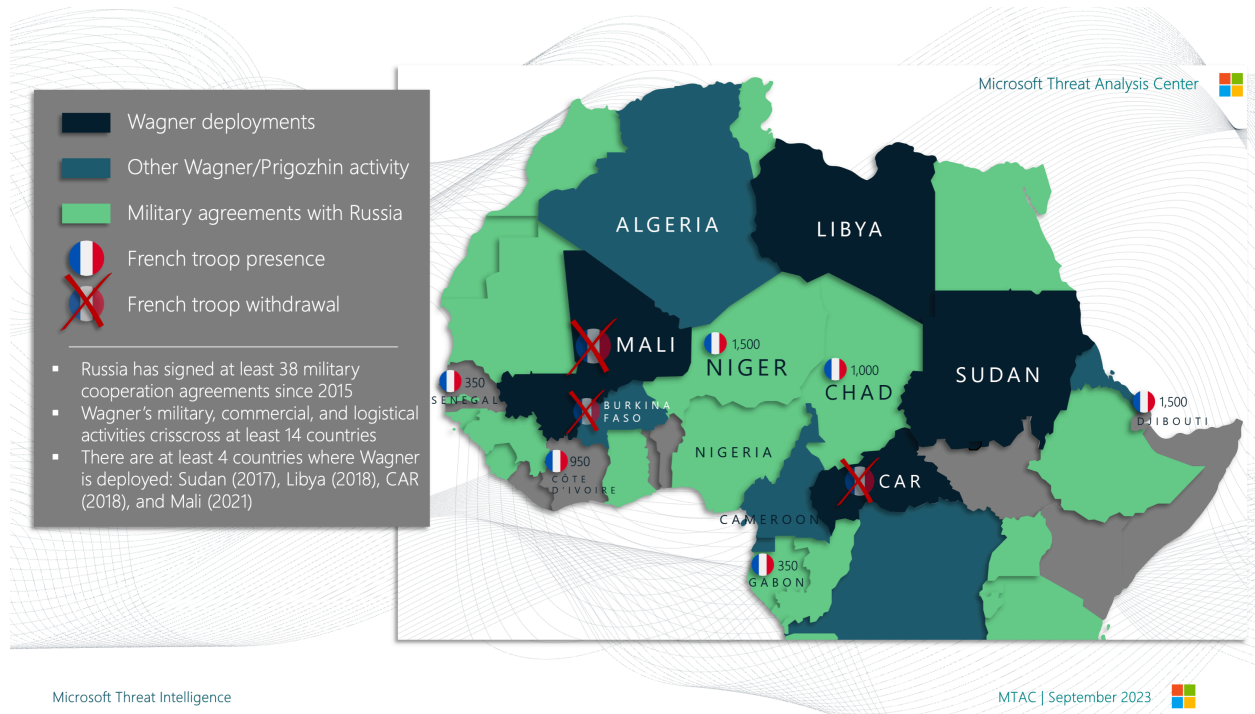Jul 11, 2023 | [Charlie Bell](#)

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Recent weeks have seen a spate of military coups in French-speaking African countries – including Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon – which have led to global concerns about a spiraling crisis of governance in the region.

The report observes:

- The Niger coup leaders violently suppressed initial protests in the capital Niamey, imposed a curfew, and closed the borders. Counter-protests, supporting the coup and brandishing Russian flags, quickly followed using claims that France was seeking to restore the previous government to power and demands that France depart from the Sahel region of Africa.

- MTAC has identified several Nigerien civil society groups involved in these events. Two stand out for their unusually pro-Russian stance – PARADE Niger and the Union of Pan-African Patriots. The first appears to be a construct of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with little genuine local support while the second is a political vehicle for a single politician. These groups have defended the coup, called for greater cooperation with Russia and helped coordinate and amplify offline protest. They have also engaged in multiple examples of inauthentic online behavior to artificially promote content.

- More widely in Africa, MTAC has identified six basic elements to Russia's African coup playbook:

  1. **Establishing long-term influence campaigns –** Russia and its messengers in Africa produce a constant drip of content that is both anti-French and pro-Russian, concentrating on polarizing issues. and driven by colonial-era grievances.

  2. **Aligning with the putschists** – When a coup occurs, Russia's messengers quickly declare support for the putschists, often through proxies, including previous instances where the voice was the now-deceased [Yevgeny Prigozhin](.).

  3. **Seizing control of the narrative** – In the days after a coup, Russian messengers align on prepositioned narratives, capitalizing on the information void. Post-coup

messaging typically glorifies military and coup leaders and championing national sovereignty while denigrating France.

4. **Amplifying affiliates** – Given their long-term investments in Africa-based, pro-Russian propagandists and IO networks, Russia can call upon a range of figures, both overt and covert, to loudly amplify their messaging, thereby crowding out competing narratives and creating the impression of popular agreement.

5. **Mobilizing supporters** – Pro-coup demonstrations featuring Russian flags give the impression of widespread support for both the putsch and partnership with Russia while opposition to the coup is violently repressed, chilling dissent.

6. **Banning dissenting media** – In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, coup leaders have quickly identified Radio France International and France 24 as critical press and then suspended them, silencing the largest French-language sources of credible news from the West.

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