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ROLE OF PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES IN COMBATING ISLAMIC TERRORISM

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Private Military Companies: A Brief History

A private military company (PMC) is an organization that provides military services with the motive of economic gain. Unlike the armed forces, PMCs are hired by governments and have autonomy in their functioning. Private military companies are usually confused with mercenaries. While these terms are often used synonymously, mercenaries are individuals who work for personal financial gain. PMCs are recruited as an organisation and not as individual entities. Unlike PMCs, mercenaries are not allied with a specific group, making them more unreliable during a conflict.

Since the second millennium BC, warfare was seen as an activity between empires (state actors). The mercenary trade started to emerge in the 12th century in Europe and Africa.¹ The concept of PMCs can be traced back to the janissaries under the Ottoman empire. However, they were not popularized until the fall of the Soviet Union, in the 1990s. The origin of PMCs can be traced back to the 1960s, at the peak of the Cold War. The first modern PMC – Watchguard International Ltd.² was established by Sir David Stirling, a former Special Air Service officer. Watchguard began selling British equipment to nations in the middle east in exchange to conduct operations in the region. Most of Watchguard’s operations were focused in the Middle East and North Africa

¹ Sarah Percy. "Mercenaries". In *obo* in Military History, Oxford Bibliographies. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791279/obo-9780199791279-0105.xml> (accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

² MSW, "The Black Market for Force," *Weapons and Warfare*, August 3, 2015, <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2015/08/03/the-black-market-for-force/>.

(MENA) region. It played a role in the 1970 coup against Ghaddafi in Libya and the North Yemen civil war throughout the 1960s.

A radical growth in the role of PMCs began as the Cold War ended.³ As the United States saw a decline in troops, PMCs were the most ideal way for it to regain military strength. Moreover, the cost of recruiting and training troops for the US's armed forces proved to be more financially detrimental than hiring pre-trained private soldiers to fight on their behalf. It also proved to be a win for the party in power as PMC death tolls were not officially counted under those of the US armed forces, making it seem like the US lost fewer soldiers than they truly did.

However, this issue brief will focus on the role of PMCs in combating Islamic terrorism in the MENA region. The brief will highlight the case studies of the US Blackwater (now Academi) involvement in Iraq, the Wagner Group in Mali, and the Specialised Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection International (STTEP) in Nigeria to show the successes and failures of PMCs in combating terrorism. However, there are also PMCs which contribute directly to terrorism, like the Turkish group SADAT International, which will also appear later in this brief.

The Growth of PMCs

For the most of 20th century, attempts at fighting against fundamentalism were primarily carried out by state actors. It was after the September 2001 attacks, that the role of PMCs became more

³ Alexander Casendino, "Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise of Private Military Companies and Their Consequences on America's Wars," Berkeley.edu (UC Berkeley, October 25, 2017), <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2017/10/25/soldiers-of-fortune-the-rise-of-private-military-companies-and-their-consequences-on-americas-wars/>.

prominent. PMCs continue to be a subject of academic interest because of the because of their diversity in motivation and operations. The world of military contractors is mostly seen through the eyes of western companies like Academi, Aegis, Wagner, Constellis etc. Not all PMCs are autonomous. Some are directly loyal to the ruling party of a nation. For example, Sadat International has been at the helm of many controversies. It has been accused by multiple global security agencies of funding fundamentalist groups like Hamas⁴ and training Islamists in Syria and Libya.⁵ Sadat is seen as an anti-west, anticolonial group loyal to President Erdogan that carries out his military goals. While this paper is primarily on the role of PMCs in combating Islamic terrorism, it is also important to look at the other side of PMCs which further contribute to fundamentalist causes.

The increasing use of private contractors may well be the beginning of a new age of counterterrorism. The global private military industry stood at \$241.7 billion in 2021. It is expected to have an annual growth rate of over 7%, reaching \$366.8 billion in 2028.⁶ Constellis, a popular

⁴ Jonathan Spyer, “Erdogan’s Shadow Army: The Influence of ‘Sadat,’ Turkey’s Private Defense Group,” JISS (The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, April 24, 2018), <https://jiss.org.il/en/spyer-erdogans-shadow-army-influence-sadat-turkeys-private-defense-group/>.

⁵ Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Jonathan Spyer, “Turkish Militias and Proxies,” Trendsresearch.org (Trends Research and Advisory, January 25, 2021), <https://trendsresearch.org/research/turkish-militias-and-proxies/>.

⁶ Vantage Market Research, “Private Military Security Services Market Size Worth USD 366.8 Billion by 2028 | with Stunning 7.2% CAGR, Says Vantage Market Research,” GlobeNewswire News Room, June 22, 2022, <https://www.globenewswire.com/en/news-release/2022/06/22/2466892/0/en/Private-Military-Security-Services-Market-Size-worth-USD-366-8-Billion-by-2028-With-stunning-7-2-CAGR-Says-Vantage-Market-Research.html>.

PMC in the US, had a revenue of over \$1 billion in 2021⁷. at the start of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, there was only one private contractor for every ten US army personnel. But in less than 5 years, the number of private soldiers outnumbered those of the US army. In 2019, the number of private military troops in the middle east outnumbered official army troops by 53,000 to 35,000.⁸ PMCs mainly comprise soldiers purely motivated by financial gain, a sense of adventure, or in many cases, veterans who prefer fieldwork over a daily job. The next section will look at case studies of PMCs in the MENA region and analyse the strategic and ethical consequences of hiring them.

PMCs in Action: Blackwater, Wagner, and the STTEP

Examining the role of PMCs in combating Islamic terrorism is a vast topic with multiple examples worth studying. The rationale behind choosing Iraq and Nigeria is to take two noteworthy examples that can be used as stepping stones to evaluate the general functioning of PMCs and their successes and failures in fighting terrorism. Through the lens of Blackwater and the STTEP, one will be able to connect similar instances of private contractors being hired to fight fundamentalist groups across the world.

⁷ Zippia, “Constellis Revenue - Zippia,” [www.zippia.com](https://www.zippia.com/constellis-careers-20062/revenue/), December 14, 2021, <https://www.zippia.com/constellis-careers-20062/revenue/>.

⁸ Alex Horton and Aaron Gregg, “Use of Military Contractors Shrouds True Costs of War. Washington Wants It That Way, Study Says.,” *Washington Post*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/06/30/military-contractor-study/>.

Blackwater in Iraq: The Unruly Power of PMCs

Blackwater (now Academi) was started in 1996 with a vision to help aid the US government to fulfil its military needs. It was almost instantly successful and began to secure government contracts in the early 2000s. It started with providing security to American intelligence bases on the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, bringing it to the heart of the US invasion of Afghanistan. But its presence deepened when the government called for its training and protection services in Iraq in 2003. Its operations in Iraq began simply with protecting diplomats (Paul Bremer, in particular). Over time, more than 20,000 professionals from all over the world were hired by Blackwater to serve in Iraq. PMCs served as a helpful tool in aiding government operations. But things took a turn with the Nisour Square massacre and the Fallujah battle (Operation Vigilant Resolve).

The Nisour Square massacre of 2007 was one of the most defining moments in the Iraq War. On September 16, when Blackwater guards were tasked with protecting a US envoy, they shot and killed seventeen Iraqi civilians, while injuring over twenty. The US embassy envoys were sent to investigate a bomb explosion that happened on the same day.⁹ To date, Blackwater claims that it was an act of self-defence as Iraqi dissidents opened fire on them first, which Baghdad refused to acknowledge. The power abuse by private contractors was not only restricted to the Nisour massacre. Although a team was sent to investigate its activities, Blackwater used its power and influence to retaliate. After the massacre, the Iraqi government revoked the company's licence to function. The guards were then tried and imprisoned for life, till then-president Donald Trump pardoned them in a controversial series of events.

⁹ Rahel Philipose, "Explained: Why Trump's Pardon to Blackwater Contractors Is Controversial," The Indian Express, December 24, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/donald-trump-blackwater-contractors-pardon-controversy-nisour-square-massacre-iraq-7118285/>.

This was an example to show that this brief is not just restricted to Islamic terrorism, but to provide an overall picture of how PMCs functioned and the authority they wielded. On the other side, the Fallujah incident of 2004 was triggered by Iraqi insurgents attacking an armoured Blackwater convoy. Four contractors were killed, leading to Operation Vigilant Resolve (First Battle of Fallujah) to capture those responsible for the killings.

The Wagner Group in Mali

One of the most noteworthy and current examples of PMC activity is that of the Wagner Group in Mali. Compared to its American counterpart, the Wagner Group was started only recently. It was founded by Dmitriy Utkin, who fought during the Chechen wars. It first rose to prominence for its activities in Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Interestingly, the Wagner Group does not exist on paper.¹⁰ It has a presence with operations in Syria and other African nations like Mozambique, the Central African Republic, Libya, and Yemen.

The Wagner Group's presence in Mali began to gain strength as French troops withdrew after almost a decade of military activities under 'Operation Barkhane.'¹¹ Mali is a nation embroiled in political and economic crises. It is now ruled by a military junta responsible for the imprisonment and killing of civilians suspected to be terrorists.¹² Wagner entered to combat Islamist insurgent

¹⁰ Amy Mackinnon, "Russia's Wagner Group Doesn't Actually Exist," foreignpolicy.com (Foreign Policy, July 6, 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/06/what-is-wagner-group-russia-mercenaries-military-contractor/>.

¹¹ José Antonio Latorre, "A Change in Mali: The French Out, Wagner In. Global Affairs. Universidad de Navarra," unav.edu (Universidad de Navarra, May 7, 2022), <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/a-change-in-mali-the-french-out-wagner-in>.

¹² HRW, "Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers," hrw.org (Human Rights Watch, April 5, 2022), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>.

groups in the country. The group's defining characteristic is that is not like other PMCs which express autonomy. It is known for being connected to the Russian government and works in the interests of the latter. Although the Wagner Group is relatively new to Mali, it has caused significant damage to the nation. In the name of a counterterrorism operation against Salafi-jihadist groups, the company killed over three hundred civilians during the siege of Moura in March 2022. Russia even vetoed a UNSC proposal to investigate the killings.¹³ A witness even mentioned that they feared Wagner guards more than they did the terrorists in the region.¹⁴

The Mali government is now in close ties with the Kremlin, paying over \$10 million¹⁵ monthly to the group's activities. Unlike any other PMC, Wagner did not just come to Mali to provide training and counterterrorism aid to the government. It was a propaganda machine. The group was

¹³ Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali," [www.csis.org](https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali) (CSIS, May 11, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Pierson, "Nous Sommes Devenus Un Jouet Entre Les Forces Armées : à Gossi, La Population Otage de La Guerre Informationnelle Entre Wagner et Barkhane," [lefigaro.fr](https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/nous-sommes-devenus-un-jouet-entre-les-forces-armees-a-gossi-la-population-otage-de-la-guerre-informationnelle-entre-wagner-et-barkhane-20220503) (Lefigaro, May 3, 2022), <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/nous-sommes-devenus-un-jouet-entre-les-forces-armees-a-gossi-la-population-otage-de-la-guerre-informationnelle-entre-wagner-et-barkhane-20220503>.

¹⁵ John Irish and David Lewis, "EXCLUSIVE Deal Allowing Russian Mercenaries into Mali Is Close - Sources," Reuters, September 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-deal-allowing-russian-mercenaries-into-mali-is-close-sources-2021-09-13/>.

responsible for publishing fake polls which showed increased support of the Malian government towards the Russian cause in the region while condemning France's operations in the region.¹⁶

The STTEP and Boko Haram

The intervention of the Specialised Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection International (STTEP) in Nigeria is a unique case. It is claimed to be among the first cases of a PMC being directly involved in combating Islamic terrorism in Africa. The company has its origins in South Africa. It was hired by the Nigerian government in 2015 to provide military support against Boko Haram.¹⁷ The majority of the terrorist group's presence is in Nigeria. The government's failure to use its counterterrorism forces led to the intervention of the STTEP. The Nigerian military's scandals and human rights abuses¹⁸ led to trust issues between the government and its people. The famous Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping case led the Nigerian government to enlist the help of a PMC to combat terrorism. The STTEP was not Nigeria's first choice. The government contacted blackwater, which offered a sum of \$1.5 billion, which was rejected.¹⁹

¹⁶ Jared Thompson, Catrina Doxsee, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali," www.csis.org (CSIS, February 2, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>.

¹⁷ Colin Freeman, "South African Mercenaries' Secret War on Boko Haram," www.telegraph.co.uk (The Telegraph, May 10, 2015),

¹⁸ Antonino Adamo, "The Terrorist and the Mercenary: Private Warriors against Nigeria's Boko Haram," *African Studies*, August 5, 2020, 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2020.1788920>.

¹⁹ Ibid. 6

Boko Haram's presence in the region led to the withdrawal of many army troops, which left their equipment behind only for it to be used by the terrorists. STTEP used the method of relentless pursuit²⁰ to combat terrorists. It involved using combat trackers and light infantry which moved at quick speeds to catch the enemy by surprise. Troops would continue to attack until the terrorists exhausted their resources. The STTEP also conducted operations via air to increase its reach. The Nigerian government tried to deny any involvement of an external company in its fight against Boko Haram. But Barlow, the chairman of STEEP was open about its involvement in Nigeria.²¹ The STTEP did not just conduct attacks. It was responsible for gathering intelligence, and providing supplies, and transportation.

While the previous cases of Iraq and Mali also highlighted the power abuses by PMCs, the case of STTEP is different. There has been no significant data to show any human rights abuse committed by the PMC. The company took significant efforts to be clandestine and hide data, even from its host state. No witness spoke against any illegal activity. On paper, nothing significant was reported. Although Boko Haram continues to widen its presence today, the efforts of the STTEP were successful in some cases. Its continued presence in the region has led to more stability in Nigeria today, than before its arrival in 2015.

²⁰ Jack Murphy, "Eeben Barlow Speaks out (Pt. 3): Tactics Used to Destroy Boko Haram," SOFREP, April 7, 2015, <https://sofrep.com/news/eeben-barlow-speaks-pt-3-tactics-used-destroy-boko-haram/>.

²¹ Antonino Adamo, "The Terrorist and the Mercenary: Private Warriors against Nigeria's Boko Haram," *African Studies*, August 5, 2020, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2020.1788920>.

PMCs That Engage in Terrorism: The Case of SADAT International

While the primary focus of this brief is to discuss the role of PMCs in combating Islamic terrorism, it is also important to discuss PMCs on the other side of the line. One of the most important examples of PMCs which directly contribute to terrorism is the Turkish SADAT International Defence Consultancy Inc (commonly called SADAT International). The group was founded by a former Turkish Army officer named Adnan Tandriverdi. Like any other PMC, its main functions lie in training, consultancy, and weapons trading. But President Erdogan's appointment of Adnan as his Chief Military Counsellor²² in 2016 has led to many controversies about SADAT's connection to the Turkish government.

SADAT has been accused of having a prominent presence in nations like Syria, Somalia, and Qatar in which they train radical Islamists. It has also been accused of diverting aid to the Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, greatly contributing to the Syrian Civil War.²³ The Shabak claims that SADAT has close ties with Hamas as well.²⁴ SADAT was also condemned by the UN for its involvement in

²² Michael Rubin, "Has SADAT Become Erdogan's Revolutionary Guards?," American Enterprise Institute - AEI, May 30, 2017, <https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/middle-east/has-sadat-become-erdogans-revolutionary-guards/>.

²³ Seth J. Frantzman, "Mob Boss: Turkey Diverted Aid for Turkmen to 'Nusra' Linked Extremists," Jpost.com (The Jerusalem Post, May 30, 2021), <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/mob-boss-turkey-diverted-aid-for-turkmen-to-nusra-linked-extremists-669604>.

²⁴ Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Jonathan Spyer, "Turkish Militias and Proxies," Trendsresearch.org (Trends Research and Advisory, January 25, 2021), <https://trendsresearch.org/research/turkish-militias-and-proxies/>.

arms trade during the Libyan Civil War, although not directly mentioned in the Final Report on UN Security Council resolution 1973.²⁵

The Ethics of PMCs: Successes and Failures

It is also important to address the larger functioning of PMCs and the ethics of how they function. Deriving from the case studies above, this section will explore the general merits and demerits of the functioning of PMCs.

PMCs: The Advantages

Through the example of the STTEP in Nigeria, one can deduce that PMCs have played an important role in increasing the military independence of nations. It was only after countries like the US and Israel refused to help did Nigeria resort to hiring the STTEP. This meant that external government intervention was not necessary in the first place. Hiring a PMC gave the Nigerian government more autonomy in its actions.

Although one can argue that hiring a PMC may be expensive, it is more cost-effective than having to directly bear war-related expenses. PMCs are formally registered entities with extremely skilled fighters, most of whom are veterans from armies worldwide. For example, the PMC Executive Outcomes (EO) which fought against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone was

²⁵ United Nations Security Council, “S/2022/427/Corr.1,” undocs.org (United Nations Security Council, July 14, 2022), <http://undocs.org/S/2022/427/Corr.1>.

able to produce significant results for less than \$35 million, making its two-year stint less expensive than a month's worth of UN-led operations.²⁶

In many ways, PMCs offer much more than some armies can. Leaving the financial aspects, even the logistics of hiring a PMC over deploying government troops is easier. PMC soldiers have survived in the worst of conditions and have years of experience, which many officers in a nation's army may not have. But while PMCs have their successes and are ideal in theory, they have their fair share of problems.

PMCs: The Risks

An issue that remains at the core of how PMCs function is that they are autonomous in their functions. There is no specific system of checks and balances other than the code of conduct that the companies themselves have. In many ways, it is this autonomy that gave Blackwater the power to open fire during the Nisour incident. The guards were imprisoned only to be pardoned later. In the end, they do not owe any accountability to the public.²⁷

The primary purpose of PMCs is to make profits, which is what sets them apart from regular armies. PMCs have a lot to gain from operating in troubled nations. The dependence on governments and autonomy can sometimes give them the upper hand. There is no guarantee of neutrality or reliability of their actions. The loyalty of a PMC-hired soldier lies in the principle of 'company before country'. In cases like the Wagner Group and SADAT International, PMCs may

²⁶ Nikola Zadzorova, "Private Military Companies: An Efficient Way of Meeting the Demand for Security?," e-ir.info (E-International Relations, September 20, 2015), <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/09/20/private-military-companies-an-efficient-way-of-meeting-the-demand-for-security/>.

²⁷ Global Policy Forum, "PMSCs: Risks and Misconduct," archive.globalpolicy.org (Global Policy Forum, n.d.), <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/pmscs/50208-contractor-misconduct-and-abuse.html>.

directly owe their loyalty to a nation's government. In such cases, it will become easy for any government to shift the responsibility to a PMC and not be accountable for its actions.

Conclusion

This brief attempted to explore the nature of PMCs at length, ranging from their origins to current activities, with a focus on their role in combating Islamic extremism in the MENA region. While there are numerous PMCs in the business, this paper focused on discussing a few of them in detail to provide a general view of their functioning. The examples of Blackwater, the Wagner Group, STTEP, and SADAT International showed the commonalities and differences between the nature of each of them. While most of these examples here show how PMCs combat terrorism, exploring the exception of SADAT International is important to understand that there are PMCs which also serve as private armies to the leader of a nation.

Using these case studies, the brief also went beyond to look at the ethics of how PMCs work, highlighting both their successes and failures in operations across the world. While PMCs have greatly helped save costs and increased the independence of nations, their increased autonomy has raised questions about their reliability. Therefore, like any other organisation in the world, PMCs must also be accountable for their actions. If not to those who hired them, then to those who are affected by them. When such a level of responsibility is shown, one can expect to have a more positive outlook towards them.

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