



# Russian mercenaries fight shadowy battle in gas-rich Mozambique

By Tim Lister and Sebastian Shukla, CNN

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*This image, shared widely on social media and verified by a CNN source, appear to show a Russian Antonov 124 transport plane arriving in September at Nacala on Mozambique's eastern coast delivering military hardware.*

**(CNN)** A deployment of Russian guns-for-hire, with links to the Kremlin, has sustained casualties in its fight against **Islamist militants in Mozambique**, multiple sources have told CNN.

In another example of Russia's growing reach into Africa, dozens of private military contractors are aiding the Mozambique army which is battling an insurgency in its northernmost province.

The mercenaries in this resource-rich southern African country appear associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, a St. Petersburg oligarch so close to the Kremlin that he is known as President Vladimir Putin's "chef."

Prigozhin, whose reach in the region stretches into Sudan, Libya and the Central African Republic, is thought to be the financier of the Wagner group, hundreds of whose fighters have also been deployed into Syria. His companies have been previously sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for their actions in Syria and his financing of the Internet Research Agency, which was responsible for Russian attempts to interfere in the 2016 US elections.

Prigozhin has routinely denied any connection to Wagner.

The fast-expanding insurgency in Mozambique threatens to disrupt crucial foreign investment in the country's natural gas reserves, believed to be worth billions of dollars.

Multiple sources have told CNN that the Russian intervention has not begun well. Two contractors, ages 28 and 31, have been killed during clashes with the insurgents, the sources say. And there are unconfirmed reports of additional casualties.

Yevgeny Shabayev, who acts as an unofficial spokesman for Wagner fighters, told CNN that the bodies of the two men had already been returned from Mozambique to their home region of Vladimir, east of Moscow.

The role the mercenaries are playing in the country -- combat or advisory -- is still unclear. CNN has obtained photographs showing Russian fighters and equipment in the port city of Pemba. Mozambican sources told CNN the mercenaries are also based further north in the coastal town of Mocimboa da Praia and have been involved in several operations along the northern border with Tanzania, where the Islamist insurgency is growing in strength.

Sources in the country also told CNN that the Russians are poorly equipped for combat in the dense bush and that the relationship between the mercenaries and Mozambique army is strained.



*Putin just took a victory lap in the Middle East. Now he's turning to Africa*

One Mozambican soldier told a producer working with CNN that the Russians "are doing nothing in terms of reducing the impact of the attacks" and that Mozambican troops had refused to take part in some operations.

Dmitry Peskov, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, told reporters in early October that "as far as Mozambique is concerned, there are no Russian soldiers there."

The deployment of Russian contractors in September followed a visit by President Filipe Nyusi in Moscow a month earlier, the first visit by a Mozambican head of state in two decades.

During the visit, Presidents Putin and Nyusi signed agreements on mineral resources, energy, defense and security.



*Russian President Vladimir Putin and Mozambique's President Filipe Nyusi meet at the Kremlin in August.*

Shortly after the trip, 160 guns-for-hire arrived in Mozambique, according to an eyewitness. They arrived on September 13 in a giant Russian Antonov An-124 plane, according to flight data.

Twelve days later, a second Antonov An-124 touched down at Nacala Airport carrying military equipment, including an Mi-17 attack helicopter.



*This image, shared widely on social media and verified by a CNN source, appears to show a truck being unloaded in Nacala in September.*

At least one of the An-124s that flew into Mozambique belonged to the 224th Flight Unit of the Russian air force. The Russian Defense Ministry previously signed a contract, details of which were seen by CNN, with a Prigozhin company for the use of transport aircraft of a similar air force unit, the 223rd Flight.

Russia sees big opportunities across Africa as the US military presence there is scaled back and as cash-strapped governments seek security assistance. Moscow has signed more than 20 defense agreements with African governments, and last month Putin welcomed 43 heads of state or government from Africa to a summit in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

In return, the Kremlin gains strategic influence and preferential access to the continent's vast natural wealth, from gas to gold.





*This image, shared widely on social media and verified by a CNN source, appears to show an Mi-17 transport helicopter, part of the military hardware delivery at Nacala in September.*

There is now plentiful evidence, if no public confirmation, that Mozambique has become the latest African theater for Prigozhin.

And as elsewhere in Africa, companies linked to Prigozhin have carried out well-disguised social media campaigns in Mozambique.

Last month, Facebook closed a network of accounts that were actively targeting a total of eight African countries. It said that: "Although the people behind these networks attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation connected these campaigns to entities associated with Russian financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin."

In Mozambique, one was called Onda da Frelimo and was set up to support President Nyusi ahead of his victory in elections in Mozambique last month.

It highlighted a "poll" (the publication of which is illegal in Mozambique during campaigning) purportedly carried out by another entity affiliated with Prigozhin -- the International Anticrisis Center -- which predicted a sweeping win for Nyusi.

According to the Stanford Internet Observatory which examined Russian social media activity in Africa, Onda da Frelimo was one of four Facebook accounts set up on the same day -- September 23. Another promoted government successes against the insurgents; a third criticized an opposition presidential candidate.

Also active in Mozambique is a group called AFRIC, which is linked to Prigozhin according to the Dossier Center, an investigative group in London run by exiled Russian businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky. AFRIC is led by a Mozambican, Jose Matemulane, who lived in St. Petersburg for several years. It denies any connection to Prigozhin. Matemulane told the New York Times last month that AFRIC was launched last year with support from a St. Petersburg businessman he declined to name.

AFRIC, a self-described NGO, conducts a number of activities including election monitoring; it only receives donations in crypto-currency and was involved in the pre-election poll.

AFRIC's Facebook page was suspended at the end of October. Facebook said AFRIC was associated with Prigozhin and had attempted to interfere in the domestic politics of African countries.

### **A growing threat**

Mozambique's huge unexploited resources, especially liquified natural gas (LNG) and precious minerals, such as gold, diamonds and rubies, have made it an attractive target for outside investment.

Russian energy giant Rosneft is competing with other international companies for a slice of what could become one of the world's largest sources of LNG. In August, it signed an agreement with Mozambique's state-owned energy company to help develop gas fields in the region.

Additionally, Russian diamond giant Alrosa is carrying out geological surveys in Mozambique.

But pacifying northern Mozambique may be beyond a few dozen Russian mercenaries and a poorly trained and equipped Mozambican army that's largely relying on artillery. The insurgents are already threatening energy infrastructure being built near the border with Tanzania. There have been at least two attacks on vehicles carrying oil workers in recent months.

The insurgency has intensified over the last two years as hundreds of young Muslim men have become radicalized and joined a group called Ahlu Sunna wa Jama.

Counterterrorism analysts are concerned that ISIS may be grafting itself onto the insurgency in northern Mozambique. It has claimed several attacks since June, claims that have not been verified by CNN. Last month, ISIS's online magazine Naba claimed that "multiple soldiers from the Mozambican and Russian armies mounted a joint attack on positions of the mujahideen in Cabo Delgado, where the mujahideen clashed with them with a variety of weapons."

In early November, ISIS claimed its "Central African Province" had killed eight Mozambican soldiers. That was followed by reports of a clash on the border with Tanzania, close to international infrastructure being developed for exporting LNG supplies.

Just how far ISIS is really connected to the insurgency is unclear. Emilia Columbo, a senior associate for the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, is skeptical about links between local militants and ISIS. "This conflict still seems to be very local in nature, stemming from a dispute between radicalized youth and their religious elders over what is true Islam," she told CNN.

"They set up their own mosques and schools, prompting the established religious leaders to call on the government to take action against these upstarts," Columbo said. While established religious leaders benefited from government largesse, local youth are not.

### **Competing with Prigozhin**

The Russians were not without competition in offering security assistance to Mozambique. Sources in the military contractor business told CNN that at least three firms made a bid for a role in combating the insurgency.

One was a little-known South African company called Umbra Aviation, which recommended the use of attack aircraft and helicopters as well as a range of armored vehicles, in what it described as "a proposal for the effective defeat/destruction of the hostile/anti-government components."

Umbra's proposal, obtained by CNN, concluded: "We will need to ensure that the operation is conducted as covertly as possible, with all successes and recognition going to the Mozambican Military."

### **OAM International**

**Another company that bid was OAM, run by John Gartner. Gartner told CNN that his plan had emphasized "the need for a long-term engagement with Mozambique Army through a training and advisory assistance role," to be followed by embedding advisers with the local military.**

**Gartner says the deal with the Russians was no surprise. "The Russians gain another foothold in Africa, on the eastern seaboard, while the Mozambique government receives military support for a minimal cost -- though there may be longer term political costs based on the bad publicity attached to Wagner."**

The Russian contingent now in Mozambique may find themselves in for a prolonged struggle. Columbo says the insurgency is growing more capable and that "the security services' response to the insurgents seems to go from a total failure to act, to over-reacting to the point of violating human rights." President Nyusi earlier this year described the insurgents as "faceless evil-doers" who "sow terror, kill, destroy and plunder the goods of defenseless populations."

Columbo told CNN that Mozambican security forces are not trained in counter-extremist operations and lack the discipline, equipment, and military intelligence to combat the insurgency. But without a more comprehensive approach to dealing with economic and social problems in northern Mozambique, she believes the insurgency will become an entrenched and long-term security problem.

Gartner sees a similar risk. "While not a strategic threat at this stage, these insurgencies tend to gain momentum as central government cracks down, deploying poorly trained troops who do not come from the communities in which they are deployed, thereby creating an oppressive environment."

But he believes the Russians are also in it for the long haul. "Reports that they have recently withdrawn from the immediate area of operations are probably accurate, but this is not to say that Wagner will abandon their mission," he told CNN. "They will regroup and reassess their tactics and strategies before redeploying. Failure is really not an option."

*CNN's Tara John contributed to this report.*



# Bloodshed and retreat from Mozambique for Putin's private Army the Wagner Group

Jane Flanagan, Africa Correspondent

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<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bloodshed-and-retreat-from-mozambique-for-putin-s-private-army-the-wagner-group-696tnpzqh>



*Yevgeny Prigozhin shows President Putin around his factory in 2010. Mr. Prigozhin founded Wagner Group, the mercenary force that has been forced out of Mozambique*  
ALEXEI DRUZHININ/AP

Russian mercenaries have been forced to retreat by jihadist insurgents in Mozambique after losing men and territory in an intensifying battle they appear ill-prepared to win.

About 200 fighters from a private military operation with apparent links to the Kremlin have pulled back after ten of their men were killed in ambushes, beheadings and botched operations.

In the three months since the Wagner Group was deployed to the far north of Mozambique, guerrilla attacks by Islamist militants have increased in frequency and ferocity, according to local reports. Some of the Russians were killed in a “friendly fire” incident, which has led to a breakdown in trust with their host, the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces.

They are fighting in the densely forested province of Cabo Delgado, an impoverished and isolated region of southern Africa’s most fragile state, where enormous gas deposits have been found off the coast.

Eeben Barlow, 63, who founded Executive Outcomes, one of the first modern private armies, told *The Times* that foreign combatants “attempting to apply a European or Russian style of strategic approach to an African conflict was a recipe for disaster”.

Little is known about the ambitions or allegiances of the insurgency which took hold in 2017 in the densely forested province. Drawing on his own experience of preparing an elite Nigerian strike force to tackle Boko Haram in Nigeria, Mr. Barlow, 63, said that without proper intelligence any imported fighters would be doomed.

“Arrogance and overconfidence will lay the foundations for failure. Terrorism in any form can be defeated but no operation can be successful if the campaign strategy is lacking intelligence and is instead based on thumb-sucking and skewed perceptions of the threat,” he added.

Ending the bloodshed is becoming urgent for the government as it negotiates investments worth at least £30 billion for the natural gas fields found off Cabo Delgado in 2010. The lawless territory has been neglected by the government for generations and is proving a fertile ground for recruiting rebels. More than half of its 2.3 million people are Muslim compared with less than a fifth for the country as a whole.

Three-hundred attacks have been recorded over the past two years, killing at least 450 people, mostly civilians, and thousands have had their homes burnt. Since June, Islamic State has claimed involvement in about a dozen incidents.

In their latest operation, insurgents struck from the sea and straight into a “safe zone” reserved for foreign contractors working on the coveted gas projects. The new *modus operandi* reflects “an acceleration in the brazenness and sophistication of the attacks which are also picking up pace”, according to Jasmine Opperman, a South Africa-based terrorism specialist

Twenty-five incidents have been recorded this month. Ms. Opperman said that the Russians felt “isolated and exposed”, adding: “Wagner have been sent to the eye of the storm and are in over their heads while the enemy just gets stronger by the day.”

The Wagner forces were deployed weeks after President Nyusi of Mozambique visited Moscow in August where he signed energy and security deals with President Putin. The organisation was founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman who is close to the Russian leader. Analysts say the outsourcing of fire power to a private army gives Moscow deniability as it steps up its push for influence in Africa.

Wagner’s men are on the ground in a number of countries on the continent including Sudan, the Central African Republic and Libya. The company has also been deployed to Syria, where two of its men have been identified from videos showing Russian-speaking mercenaries dismembering and setting on fire a prisoner in Homs.

Mark Galeotti, a Russian security analyst, said that the opaque firm had become a popular and affordable choice for African leaders in the bristling private security market.

Mr. Galeotti linked Wagner’s rising body count to its brisk expansion to meet Russia’s international ambitions. “This means being less picky with recruits,” he told the *Moscow Times*.

### **OAM International**

One of the security firms competing for the lucrative Mozambique contract was OAM, headed by John Gartner, who served in the special forces of what was formerly known as Rhodesia.

In his pitch for the deal, Mr. Gartner told *The Times*, he had proposed a deployment of 50 men at a cost to the client of \$15,000 to \$25,000 a month for each man. The Wagner Group’s tender was apparently far lower, but the Russians evidently underestimated the scale of the job, he said.

**Their retreat to the port city of Nacala, 360 miles south of the insurgency hotspot, would give them space to “regroup, resupply and restrategise”, Mr. Gartner said.**

**“This is not the sort of job that can be sorted in a matter of weeks or months, it requires long-term preparation, co-ordination, boots on the ground as well as building capacity among the local forces,” he added.**

**“They won’t be easily intimidated and there is no way that they will pack up and go home with their tails between their legs. They can’t anyway; this was a job agreed between two governments so they will see it through regardless of their manpower losses and initial setbacks.”**

**Since reports emerged that Wagner “was now out of its depth” in southern Africa, Mr. Gartner confirmed he has been approached by “old hands” from other more established private armies “to form a joint mission and finish the job”.**

**“I’d certainly accept the task if it was on offer,” he said.**

## In Push for Africa, Russia's Wagner Mercenaries Are 'Out of Their Depth' in Mozambique

(Quote Source: John Gartner, Director, **OAM International**)

The secretive Kremlin-linked group is growing in scope and ambition, winning contracts normally reserved for local security firms. Many believe it is not up to the job.

By [Pjotr Sauer](#)

Nov. 19, 2019



*Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. F Mira / Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)*

**When John Gartner, a former Rhodesian soldier who now heads the military security company OAM, was approached by a Mozambican official to help fight the Islamist insurgency in the country's north, he thought he was about to win a lucrative contract. "We presented them with a first-class proposal in early August. We have so much experience in operating in Mozambique and know the tough environment very well. Trust me, we would have done an excellent job," he told The Moscow Times.**

Dolf Dorfling, an ex-colonel in the South African army and founder of the Black Hawk private military contractor, likewise submitted a "strong" proposal for a country he knows "like the palm of his hand."

They both lost out to a new player in town — the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, believed to be owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman with close links to Russian President Vladimir Putin often referred to as "Putin's Chef" because of his catering business.

While the veteran mercenaries admitted they couldn't match Wagner's low costs and high-level political connections, they cast doubt on the Russian company's ability to operate in Mozambique because they say it knows neither the terrain nor the politics.

**"Look, it's money and politics, it was clear we couldn't compete with Wagner," said Gartner, "But now they are in trouble there, they are out of their depth."**





*Cabo Delgado. **Google Maps / MT***

In September, about 200 Russian Wagner mercenaries arrived in Mozambique's capital Maputo, news first reported by The Times of London and independently confirmed by The Moscow Times.

Since arriving, they have been engaged in a fierce fight with an Islamic State-linked insurgency in the country's gas-rich, Muslim-majority Cabo Delgado region, which has claimed over 200 deaths since 2017.

Black Hawk and **OAM** are two of the many private military contractors operating in Sub-Saharan Africa. Their rise has been linked to the end of apartheid in South Africa, which released many skilled soldiers eager to be paid to help African governments struggling to curtail internal rebellions. Many are now aged between 55 and 65, but say they have the knowledge and experience to keep working in Africa.

**Gartner said he had proposed to bring around 50 highly qualified experts to Mozambique at a cost of between \$15,000 and \$25,000 per person per month.**

While no public information is available on how much Wagner pays its mercenaries, Yevgeny Shabayev, a former Russian military officer and self-appointed spokesman for the group, told The Moscow Times that on average, a lower-rank Wagner soldier receives between 120,000 and 300,000 rubles per month (\$1,800 - \$4,700).

Perhaps more important, the military contractors said, is the political backing Wagner has attracted compared to traditional mercenary groups.

Prigozhin is emerging as a key figure in Russia's increasingly expansive foreign policy in Africa, and Wagner troops have been reported operating in Sudan, the Central African Republic and Libya.

Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russian security affairs, says that Wagner's unique blend of proximity to the Kremlin and low costs make it attractive. "They are cheap and come as part of a package of regime-support services, including political technologies."

Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi flew to Russia and met Putin at the end of August — two months before the country's October presidential elections — where he signed a number of energy and security agreements.

While there is no evidence to suggest Russia sent operatives to influence the Mozambican elections, companies linked to Prigozhin have been accused of propping up Nyusi and his party.

## In over their heads

A few weeks after Wagner's arrival in September, reports started coming out of Mozambique that the group's mercenaries were being ambushed, killed and beheaded in Cabo Delgado.

Two Mozambique army sources told The Moscow Times in October that at least seven Russians had been killed by the insurgency that month. Over a dozen independent analysts, mercenaries and security experts working in the region have since told The Moscow Times that Wagner is struggling.



*Cabo Delgado is one of the poorest and least developed areas in the region. **Stig Nygaard / Flickr (CC BY 2.0)***

"You have to realize this is one of the toughest environments in the world," said Al Venter, a veteran South Africa journalist who has written extensively about mercenaries on the continent. "The consensus is that Wagner has almost no experience of the kind of

primitive bush warfare being waged in there. They are going to come very badly unstuck,” he added.

Cabo Delgado is one of the poorest and least developed areas in the region. It has limited basic infrastructure, including a lack of roads and hospitals, that makes it an environment that is “ideal” for ambushes, according to a Mozambican intelligence specialist based in the area who wished to remain anonymous.

“The undergrowth is so thick there that all the high-tech equipment Wagner brought ceases to be effective. The Russians arrived with drones, but they can’t actually use them,” the specialist said.

The environment is not the only problem Wagner faces.

Two sources in the Mozambique military, also speaking under condition of anonymity, described growing tensions between Wagner and the Mozambique Defense Armed Forces (FADM) after a number of failed military operations. “We have almost stopped patrolling together,” one of the two soldiers said.

Jasmine Opperman, a terrorism expert based in South Africa, believes “a perfect storm” has formed around Wagner in Mozambique. “The Russians don’t understand the local culture, don’t trust the soldiers and have to fight in horrible conditions against an enemy that is gaining more and more momentum. They are in over their heads.”

### **Growing pains**

Wagner’s problems in Mozambique raise bigger questions about the company’s rapid growth, according to Galeotti. “They have clearly had to expand since their early Syrian

days and also have to make a profit. This means being less picky with recruits. They are increasingly operating in theaters where they don't have much expertise."

Shabayev, who says he is in regular contact with Wagner soldiers, echoed these sentiments. He expects the death toll for Wagner soldiers to rise across the world in coming years but said it will be hard to glean concrete information given Wagner's secrecy.

He said the first bodies of Wagner soldiers who died in Mozambique have already arrived in Vladimir, a region outside Moscow, where families have been given hefty compensation in return for silence.

The Moscow Times was unable to independently confirm this. Sources told them that Wagner has started to look around for local military expertise, although they haven't heard anything yet.

"If you could let Wagner know we are available to help, that would be great. We would like to come in and do what we do best," said Gartner, before hanging up.

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<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/19/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-a68220>