



SPECIAL ANALYTICAL SERIES - RUSSIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN LIBYA

SPECIAL ANALYSIS 3/4

From Wagner to Africa Corps

From Wagner to Africa Corps:

The Evolution of Russia's Military Footprint in Libya

Executive Summary

The death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023 did not dismantle the Russian military system established in Libya. It accelerated its transformation.

By the time Wagner's leadership collapsed, Russia already possessed the essential elements required to maintain a durable military presence: access to airfields, logistical corridors, protected compounds, local political relationships, technical personnel and an established pattern of air and ground sustainment. The immediate problem confronting Moscow was therefore not how to rebuild the Libyan network, but how to bring an existing semi-autonomous structure under tighter state control.

The resulting transition produced Africa Corps, a new framework operating under substantially stronger Russian Ministry of Defence and military-intelligence supervision. Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov emerged as one of the principal political and military coordinators of this transition, while General Andrei Averyanov was associated with the supervision of the wider post-Wagner African security network. Yevkurov's repeated visits to Khalifa Haftar after the June 2023 Wagner mutiny and Prigozhin's death demonstrated the importance Moscow placed on ensuring continuity in Libya.

The transition did not erase the Wagner model. Personnel, local relationships, operational practices and some commercial or deniable mechanisms were retained where useful. What changed most significantly was the chain of authority. Russian personnel were increasingly required to operate under structures directly connected to the Ministry of Defence, while the logistical architecture supporting Libya and other African theatres received more explicit state backing.

Libya became particularly important during this process because it combined three advantages: an established Russian military footprint, permissive access to Haftar-controlled territory and a geographic position linking the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Sahel. By 2024, Russian personnel and equipment were reported across multiple military locations in eastern, central and southern Libya, while Russian shipping and airlift activity increased.

Assessment: Africa Corps should not be interpreted simply as a renamed Wagner Group. It represents the institutionalisation of the most strategically useful components of the Wagner system under stronger state control. In Libya, this transition converted an already embedded proxy network into a more explicitly state-enabled expeditionary architecture.

Scope of the Analysis

This report examines the transformation of the Russian military presence in Libya from the Wagner leadership crisis of 2023 through the consolidation of the Africa Corps structure during 2024-2025.

The analysis focuses on organisational transformation, command relationships, personnel, basing, logistics, state enabling and the evolution of Russia's relationship with Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army.

It does not examine in detail the broader strategic consequences of Libya's role as a Mediterranean and African logistics platform. That dimension is reserved for Special Analysis 4/4 - Libya as a Russian Strategic Foothold.

Key Analytical Judgments

High confidence	The death of Yevgeny Prigozhin did not produce a Russian military withdrawal from Libya. Moscow moved rapidly to preserve the personnel, infrastructure and relationships established during the Wagner period.
High confidence	Yunus-Bek Yevkurov became a central figure in the transition. His repeated visits to Libya from August 2023 onward formed part of a broader Russian effort to reassure African partners and transfer Wagner-linked operations under stronger state supervision.
Moderate-high confidence	General Andrei Averyanov became associated with oversight of post-Wagner Russian security operations in Africa, reinforcing the assessment that the transition involved direct Russian state and military-intelligence management.
High confidence	Africa Corps inherited much of Wagner's physical infrastructure and operational geography in Libya rather than constructing a new network from the beginning.
High confidence	Personnel associated with the new structure were required increasingly to operate under contracts or command arrangements connected to the Russian Ministry of Defence.
Moderate-high confidence	The transition increased Russian state control while preserving selected Wagner characteristics, including deniability, use of former Wagner personnel, flexible command arrangements and reliance on local political patrons.
High confidence	Libya became one of the principal staging and logistics hubs supporting Russia's expanding military activity across the Sahel.
Moderate confidence	By 2024 the Russian military footprint in Libya had grown substantially in both personnel and equipment, though precise force-strength estimates remain uncertain and vary significantly across sources.

1. The Wagner Leadership Crisis

The transition from Wagner to Africa Corps began before the formal disappearance of the Wagner leadership.

The June 2023 Wagner mutiny exposed the political risks associated with allowing a nominally private military organisation to accumulate an independent command structure, financial network and armed force capable of challenging the Russian state.

For Moscow, the implications extended far beyond Ukraine. Wagner operated military, political and commercial networks across Africa, including Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic and Sudan. Allowing these structures to fragment after the mutiny would have endangered years of Russian investment.

Libya represented a particularly sensitive case. Unlike some Wagner deployments elsewhere in Africa, the Russian presence in Libya was embedded in a mature network of bases and depended on relationships with Khalifa Haftar and his command structure. The loss of Wagner leadership therefore created an organisational crisis, but not an operational vacuum.

The infrastructure remained. The personnel remained. The local relationships remained. The problem was control.

2. Prigozhin's Death and the Succession Problem

Yevgeny Prigozhin died in an aircraft crash on 23 August 2023, approximately two months after Wagner's mutiny.

His death removed the central political entrepreneur who had connected Wagner's military, commercial and diplomatic activities.

The immediate challenge for Moscow was to separate useful operational structures from the political autonomy associated with Prigozhin.

The Kremlin had strong incentives to preserve Wagner's African network. Many of its operations supported Russian geopolitical objectives at relatively low political cost. The network provided access, local leverage, security partnerships, resource relationships and military influence without requiring large conventional deployments.

Libya was therefore not treated as a failed Wagner project to be abandoned. It was treated as an asset to be inherited.

The succession process focused on transferring command authority, renegotiating relationships with local partners and ensuring that existing Russian personnel accepted the new framework.



Memorial for Yevgeny Prigozhin following his death, Russia, August 2023. Source: Olga Maltseva / AFP.

3. Moscow's Decision to Preserve the African Network

The Russian response after the Wagner mutiny demonstrated continuity rather than retrenchment.

Moscow sought to reassure African governments and armed partners that Russian security assistance would continue.

The objective was not simply to replace Wagner personnel with Russian regular forces. It was to preserve functioning networks while reducing the possibility that another private military organisation could develop Prigozhin-level autonomy.

This produced a hybrid outcome. Former Wagner personnel remained useful because they possessed local experience, language familiarity, operational knowledge and established relationships. At the same time, the Russian state increased its direct involvement in recruitment, contracting, logistics, command and political coordination.

Africa Corps emerged from this requirement.

4. Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and the Defence Ministry Takeover

Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov became one of the most visible figures in the Russian restructuring of African military operations.

His travel pattern after the Wagner mutiny is analytically significant. Yevkurov visited Libya repeatedly between August 2023 and early 2024 and met Khalifa Haftar on multiple occasions. Libya was reportedly his most frequently visited African partner during the initial transition period.

His first major visit occurred on 22 August 2023, one day before Prigozhin's death. The timing does not prove prior knowledge of Prigozhin's fate. It does, however, demonstrate that Moscow was already actively managing the future of its Libyan presence.

The Russian delegation communicated a broader shift in authority. Engagement that had previously relied heavily on Prigozhin-linked structures was increasingly conducted through formal representatives of the Russian state.

The relationship with Haftar therefore became more institutionalised.



Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov during the official Russian military delegation visit to eastern Libya, August 2023. Source: Russian Ministry of Defence.



Yunus-Bek Yevkurov meets Khalifa Haftar and LAAF officials in Benghazi, August 2023. Source: General Command of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF).

5. Andrei Averyanov and the Security-Intelligence Dimension

The transition also involved Russian military intelligence.

General Andrei Averyanov became associated with oversight of post-Wagner Russian security operations in Africa. His involvement is important because it suggests that the restructuring was not simply an administrative transfer from one military contractor to another.

The network was being integrated into a wider state-controlled security architecture.

Averyanov's background in Russian military intelligence reinforced the importance of deniable influence, political access and expeditionary operations within the new model.

The precise division of responsibilities between Yevkurov, Averyanov, Russian military intelligence and individual Africa Corps commanders remains incompletely documented. However, the emerging structure was clearly more closely connected to Russian state institutions than the Prigozhin-era Wagner organisation.

6. From Wagner Branding to Africa Corps

Africa Corps became the principal organisational framework for the Russian military restructuring in Africa.

The new structure retained several features associated with Wagner. It employed personnel with Wagner experience. It operated in politically permissive but institutionally weak environments. It maintained relationships with local military elites. It used relatively small deployments to generate strategic effects disproportionate to their size.

The key difference was institutional control. Personnel were increasingly required to sign contracts linked to the Russian Ministry of Defence or operate within structures recognised by the Russian state.

This reduced organisational independence while increasing access to state logistics, transport, equipment and political support.

The transition was therefore evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Wagner's operational model survived. Prigozhin's autonomous command system did not.

7. Libya as the Principal Transition Hub

Libya was particularly well suited to the transformation.

The country already contained an established Russian military network. Al-Khadim provided eastern reception and sustainment. Al-Jufra provided central operational depth. Qardabiyah supported the Sirte axis. Brak al-Shati and other southern locations provided access to the Fezzan and onward movement toward the Sahel.

This infrastructure allowed Moscow to restructure its personnel without losing operational continuity. New personnel could enter through established logistics hubs. Existing personnel could be reassigned. Equipment could be stored, repaired or redistributed. Command personnel could rotate through secure locations.

Libya therefore served simultaneously as a host country, transit corridor and reorganisation platform.

8. Personnel, Command and Force Reorganisation

The Africa Corps transition altered both personnel status and command relationships.

Former Wagner personnel did not automatically disappear from the theatre. Many were absorbed into new structures. Others reportedly declined new contracts or left.

The resulting force included a mixture of former Wagner operators, newly recruited Russian personnel, regular military specialists and other Russian state-linked elements.

This mixed composition complicates attribution. An individual operating at a Libyan base after 2023 may have possessed Wagner experience while technically serving under a different contract or command system.

The most important distinction is therefore not whether all former Wagner personnel disappeared. They did not. The relevant analytical question is who exercised command authority. By 2024, that authority had shifted substantially toward the Russian state.

9. Expansion of the Russian Military Presence

The transition coincided with reports of increased Russian deployments to Libya.

Open-source estimates vary, but several assessments place the Russian presence in eastern Libya in the high hundreds to low thousands during 2024. Other reporting later suggested a broader deployment approaching approximately 2,000 personnel or more across multiple sites.

Exact figures remain uncertain. However, the directional trend is more important than the specific number. The Russian footprint was expanding rather than contracting.

Personnel were reportedly distributed across multiple bases and training locations, reinforcing the network model already established during the Wagner period.

10. The Haftar Relationship after Wagner

Khalifa Haftar remained indispensable to the Russian presence. His forces controlled the territory containing most of the bases used by Russian personnel.

The relationship, however, became increasingly state-to-state in character. During the Wagner period, Prigozhin's network provided Moscow with a layer of political distance. After 2023, senior Russian officials dealt more directly with Haftar and his family.

This strengthened Moscow's political influence but reduced deniability.

For Haftar, the transition offered potential advantages. Direct Russian state backing provided greater political weight and potentially more reliable military support than an autonomous private network.

For Moscow, Haftar continued to provide territorial access without requiring a formal Russian basing treaty. The arrangement therefore remained mutually beneficial.

11. Basing, Training and Infrastructure Consolidation

The Africa Corps transition did not require a new basing architecture. It inherited the system already built.

What changed was the intensity and purpose of use. Existing airfields increasingly supported not only local Russian operations but training, personnel reception, equipment redistribution and regional movement.

Reports from 2024 described Russian personnel operating at several bases across eastern, central and southern Libya. Training activity also increased.

Russian personnel reportedly worked with Libyan formations associated with Haftar's command structure, providing instruction while simultaneously reinforcing their own access to facilities.

This arrangement strengthened both local dependency and Russian operational freedom.



Russian-made armoured vehicles displayed at the LAAF military parade in the new Military City south of Benghazi, 26 May 2025. Source: Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), official media.



Russian-made air-defence systems displayed during the LAAF military parade, eastern Libya, 26 May 2025. Source: Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), official media.

12. Maritime Logistics and the Tobruk Connection

The transition also expanded the maritime dimension.

During 2024, Russian vessels were reported delivering military equipment to eastern Libyan ports, particularly Tobruk. Cargo reportedly included artillery, armoured vehicles and rocket systems.

The significance of these shipments extends beyond individual equipment types. Maritime delivery provided a second strategic logistics channel alongside airlift.

This reduced dependence on a single supply mechanism and allowed heavier equipment to enter the Libyan theatre.

It also strengthened Libya's role as a redistribution hub for Russian military activity elsewhere in Africa.

13. Libya-Sahel Airbridge

Libya's geographic value increased as Russian military cooperation expanded with governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Airfields in Libya allowed Russian aircraft to stage movements between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. Al-Jufra was particularly valuable because of its central location and established logistics infrastructure.

Personnel arriving in Libya could subsequently be transferred south. Equipment could be staged before onward deployment. Aircraft could use Libyan bases as intermediate stops.

This network reduced the logistical distance between Russian-controlled or Russian-accessible Mediterranean nodes and Sahelian partners.

By 2024, reporting indicated that personnel arriving in Libya had subsequently been transferred to Niger. This demonstrates that the Libyan network had moved beyond supporting the Libyan theatre itself.

14. Command and Control: What Changed

The central organisational change between Wagner and Africa Corps concerned command authority.

Wagner operated through a vertically integrated but privately controlled structure centred on Prigozhin. Africa Corps operates within a more complex but more directly state-controlled system.

Russian military leadership now plays a greater role in deployment decisions, logistics and political coordination. Military intelligence retains influence. Former Wagner networks and personnel remain operationally relevant.

The result is a layered structure combining formal military control with elements inherited from deniable expeditionary warfare.

This arrangement provides Moscow with greater strategic control while retaining some flexibility.

15. What Remained from the Wagner Model

The transformation did not eliminate Wagner's institutional legacy.

Several characteristics survived. First, Russia continued to rely on relatively small forces to generate influence through local partners. Second, political relationships remained centred on elite networks rather than broad institutional engagement. Third, Russia continued to exploit ambiguity between formal military presence, contracted personnel and security assistance. Fourth, local actors retained substantial responsibility for territorial security. Fifth, expeditionary operations remained closely connected to logistics networks extending beyond the host country.

Africa Corps therefore represents less a rejection of Wagner than a selective absorption of its most useful characteristics.

16. Information Gaps and Attribution Problems

The transition creates substantial intelligence challenges.

Personnel affiliation is difficult to establish from imagery alone. Former Wagner operators may serve under new contractual arrangements. Regular Russian military personnel may operate alongside nominally contracted forces. Command relationships may vary by location and mission.

Official Russian descriptions of Africa Corps are incomplete and often politically framed. Public reporting also differs significantly regarding personnel numbers.

For these reasons, this assessment places greater weight on persistent indicators: senior-level Russian visits, military transport activity, equipment deliveries, repeated use of bases, personnel rotations and the observable expansion of infrastructure.

17. Assessment: From Deniable Proxy to State-Controlled Expeditionary Network

The transformation from Wagner to Africa Corps represents a fundamental change in ownership rather than a complete change in operating model.

Under Prigozhin, Wagner provided Moscow with military influence while preserving substantial organisational autonomy. After the 2023 mutiny, that autonomy became unacceptable. The Russian state therefore absorbed the network rather than abandoning it.

Libya was central to this process because the operational system already existed. The bases were available. The logistics routes were functioning. The local partner was cooperative. The infrastructure was protected. The transformation could therefore occur without an operational break.

The result was a more institutionalised Russian military presence. Africa Corps inherited Wagner's geography but operated under tighter state control.

This transition reduced political distance between Moscow and the Russian personnel deployed in Libya. At the same time, it increased Moscow's ability to coordinate Libya with its wider African strategy.

The key analytical conclusion is that the collapse of Wagner did not weaken Russia's position in Libya. It removed an organisational intermediary.

By 2024-2025, the Russian military presence had become more directly connected to the state institutions responsible for defence, intelligence and foreign military policy.

Libya had therefore moved from hosting a Russian proxy force to hosting an increasingly state-controlled expeditionary network.

Analytical Focus

The Wagner-to-Africa Corps transition should be assessed as a process of institutional capture.

Russia preserved the physical infrastructure, personnel experience, local relationships and operational practices developed by Wagner while removing the degree of political autonomy that had allowed Prigozhin to challenge the Kremlin.

Libya was critical because it offered continuity during this restructuring. The network established between 2018 and 2023 meant that Moscow did not need to negotiate access from the beginning. It simply changed the authority controlling the system.

The resulting architecture combined direct state sponsorship with selected elements of the Wagner model: flexible personnel structures, local patronage relationships, deniable activity and relatively small forces capable of supporting broader geopolitical objectives.

The transition therefore strengthened the connection between Libya and Russia's wider African military posture. That strategic role is examined in the final report.

Next in the Series

Special Analysis 4/4 - Libya as a Russian Strategic Foothold

The final edition will examine Libya as a regional military and logistics platform: its role in supporting Russian operations across the Sahel and Central Africa, the strategic importance of Mediterranean access, the potential maritime dimension, the value of air and sea corridors, and the implications of a durable Russian military presence for NATO's southern flank and the wider Mediterranean security environment.