



# Russia's African Profile Is Receding... At Least For Now

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When it comes to regional position, a few short months can make a big difference. It's a lesson that Russia is learning the hard way.

Earlier this year, the Kremlin was giving every sign of being a permanent player in the unfolding geopolitics of Africa, with a growing paramilitary presence throughout the continent and an increasingly prominent diplomatic profile in assorted regional capitals. Today, however, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and its catastrophic stumbles there, the Kremlin's footprint in Africa is being revised downward.

The shift is noteworthy. When I visited North Africa earlier this year, the dominant view among regional officials was of Russia as an emerging – and increasingly formidable – strategic player. (I wrote about that for *Al Hurra* here.) "Make no mistake," one observer told me at the time. "Moscow may be preoccupied with Ukraine now, but it will be back in Africa soon."

Back then, there was ample reason to believe just that. Recent years have witnessed a massive expansion of Russian influence in the neighborhood, as the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin deftly parlayed its military presence in nearby Syria into new engagement throughout the Middle East and Africa. The results include a slew of new military basing arrangements, stepped-up arms sales to regional regimes, and even the deployment of paramilitary forces to conflicts in places like Mozambique, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Libya.

But the Ukraine war appears to have fundamentally altered this trajectory. For months, Moscow has been forced to redeploy its paramilitary forces – most notably those of the Wagner Group, its most infamous mercenary contingent – to reinforce the Ukrainian front. The majority of observers saw this as, at best, a temporary shift in resources. But it may turn out not to be. Wagner's mercenaries have assumed a prominent role as front-line forces in the war, and their ranks have sustained significant casualties as a result. Western intelligence sources have assessed that the group's future operational effectiveness is likely to be significantly diminished as a result. In other words, Wagner may not be headed back to Africa any time soon.

Even so, there's good reason to conclude the Kremlin remains deeply invested in Africa. And in recent months, that interest has begun to manifest itself in new ways.

The first is propaganda. Russia has emerged as one of the main disinformation actors on the continent, promoting political narratives aimed at advancing its own geopolitical objectives and propping up friendly local regimes. A summer 2022 study by South Africa's Institute for Security Studies noted that "[a]s digital access deepens across Africa, there's growing evidence of external players weaponising social media platforms to achieve geopolitical ends." Russia is a key player in this regard, having successfully used disinformation in the past to cause concrete strategic outcomes, such as generating popular discontent that ultimately forced France to withdraw from its long-standing counterterrorism presence in Mali.

Moreover, the study explains, Africa remains an inviting disinformation target for the Kremlin. "In settings where institutions of governance are weak – including the courts and the checks on power offered by traditional media – disinformation campaigns can severely undermine democracies," it points out. As a result, Moscow can be counted on to continue manipulating regional politics in order to advance its own position, and diminish that of the West.

The continent has also risen in importance as a source of funding for Vladimir Putin's war of choice. As the costs of the conflict in Ukraine have risen, Moscow has been actively seeking new and untapped financing for its military campaign there – and Africa has emerged as an area of significant interest. U.S. officials have accused Russia's Wagner Group of orchestrating the "illicit trafficking of natural resources through Africa" as a way of generating much-needed funds for the Russian war machine.

Nor is Russia's current retrenchment necessarily a permanent condition. African leaders are undoubtedly correct in their assessment that Moscow remains keenly interested in the continent. That interest isn't likely to change, notwithstanding the issues now preoccupying Kremlin officials closer to home. As a result, Russia can be expected to return to Africa in force just as soon as it is able. When precisely that might be, though, is likely to be determined by the course of its war in Ukraine.