

GRB

GLOBAL RISK BULLETIN

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WORLD NEWS IN BRIEF

1 Syria Terrorism

On 7 July, the United States Central Command chief announced that US military forces had killed an Islamic State (IS) leader, Osama Al Muhajer, during a drone strike in eastern Syria. Details of the incident are limited. However, Al Muhajer is the fourth IS leader to be killed in counter-terrorist operations since February 2022, following the deaths of Abu Ibrahim Al Hashimi Al Qurashi, Abu Al Hassan Al Hashemi Al Qurashi and Abu Hussein Al Qurashi. The death of four leaders in close succession could disrupt IS's short term ambitions, although it remains unclear if this will deteriorate the group's longer term capabilities.

2 Israel Civil unrest

Over the course of July, tens of thousands of people staged countrywide demonstrations to denounce government reforms aimed at limiting the capabilities of the country's Supreme Court. The largest demonstrations occurred in Tel Aviv, causing traffic disruptions at prominent locations in the city, including outside the airport, the stock exchange building and military headquarters. Protests opposing the reforms first began in January 2023, and will likely continue in the coming weeks to dissuade the government from implementing prescribed institutional changes following a 24 July parliamentary vote which passed the initial phase of the planned reforms. Demonstrations are expected to intensify with labour unions and businesses signalling intent to join the resistance. While demonstrations have been largely peaceful, clashes with police are possible, particularly during attempts to clear blockades on major roads and around airports. The protests are expected to prompt business, commercial and travel disruptions countrywide.

3 North Korea War

Over the past month, tensions around the Korean Peninsula have heightened. Between 1 and 10 July, North Korean authorities threatened military action against US spy planes and drones conducting intelligence gathering operations in close proximity to its borders. Both the US and South Korean military dismissed North Korea's threats. However, on 12 July, North Korea fired an intercontinental ballistic missile into waters 155 miles west of Japan's Okushiri Island, marking North Korea's longest missile flight time and displaying its enhanced missile capabilities. North Korea has increased the frequency of its military

operations around the Korean Peninsula as the US military has indicated plans to mobilise a submarine with missile capabilities to South Korea for an unspecified duration for the first time in four decades. Regional stakeholders, including Japan and South Korea, are likely to advance security cooperation and military presence along the Korean Peninsula to counterbalance North Korea's military activity, raising the potential for miscalculations and disproportionate responses.

4 Bangladesh Civil unrest

In July, supporters of the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), staged multiple protests countrywide demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ahead of general elections scheduled for January 2024. Notably, on 12 and 18 July, around 50,000 opposition supporters gathered in Dhaka and at least 16 other locations to stage anti-government protests. Protests were initially peaceful, but on 18 July, clashes between the protesters and police in Dhaka resulted in one civilian death and multiple civilian injuries. In response to anti-government protests, government supporters have held counter-demonstrations in several parts of Dhaka. Further pro- and anti-government demonstrations are likely in the coming months ahead of general elections in January 2024.

5 Colombia Political violence

The Colombian government has persisted with efforts to improve the domestic security environment. On 5 July, Colombian Defence Minister Iván Velásquez Gómez and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army, ELN) – a local militant group – signed a truce to bring fighting between Colombia's armed forces and the ELN to an immediate stop on 6 July. The truce follows a ceasefire agreement forged between the Colombian government and the ELN on 9 June, which will come into effect on 3 August. If the truce and ceasefire hold, it would mark the longest halt in the conflict between the local armed forces and the ELN since 1964. Decades of entrenched violence and distrust between militant groups and successive governments in Colombia preserves the risk of clashes between the ELN and local armed forces during the ceasefire period. As such, Colombia's security environment remains vulnerable to renewed conflict and prospects for lasting peace remains uncertain.

6 Niger Political violence

On 26 July, members of the Garde Présidentielle (Presidential Guard, GP) staged a coup and ousted the democratically elected government and detained President Mohamed Bazoum. The coup instigators, led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani, subsequently dissolved Niger's constitution, suspended the country's institutions and closed all international borders. Pro-coup demonstrators also set fire to the ruling Parti nigérien pour la démocratie et le socialisme (PNDS-Tarayya) headquarters in Niamey and staged violent demonstrations outside the French embassy. While the military has announced its support for the coup, the armed forces remain highly factionalised, indicating the potential for a countercoup by personnel loyal to Bazoum. On 30 July, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed sanctions on the coup leaders and threatened military intervention against the junta if they did not release and reinstate Bazoum. Additionally, the EU has suspended economic and security cooperation with Niger, which has been a strategically important partner for French and US counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel in recent years, highlighting the potential destabilising impacts of the coup on the region.

7 Canada Civil unrest

From 1 to 19 July, operations across 30 ports in British Columbia faced significant disruption due to strike action by more than 7,000 port workers represented by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The Board of Trade in Vancouver estimated that around USD 8 billion worth of trade was disrupted by the strikes. On 19 July, the ILWU was unable to renew its strike notice with the Canada Industrial Relations Board due to insufficient notice, and port operations resumed across British Columbia the following day. Amid calls to resume strike action on 22 July, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau held a crisis meeting with stakeholders, including relevant ministers and the ILWU, to restore port operations. It is unclear if a settlement to address port worker grievances around low salaries, poor working conditions and inadequate benefits was reached. However, following the meeting, the ILWU withdrew its 22 July strike notice.

8 Kenya Civil unrest

In July, opposition activists staged multiple anti-government protests countrywide, despite a government ban on public demonstrations. On 12 July, opposition activists staged protests in Nairobi and other cities over various grievances including recent tax hikes. 300 protesters were

arrested, including an opposition lawmaker. Additionally, six protesters were killed in clashes with police; five of them died in the towns of Mlolongo and Kitengela on the outskirts of Nairobi. On 19 July, opposition activists staged another countrywide protest denouncing recent tax hikes, the rising cost of living and other grievances. Police opened fire during the protests, killing two people in Kisumu – an opposition stronghold – and injuring more than a dozen people. More than 300 people, including nine senior opposition members, were arrested. Further protests are likely amid growing anti-government sentiment. However, security forces will likely crack down on protests, increasing the likelihood of violence.

9 DRC Political violence

On 13 July, Chérubin Okende, a prominent opposition politician and former transport minister, was shot and killed by unidentified perpetrators in Kinshasa. Okende was a member of Ensemble pour la République (Together for the Republic), a political party led by Moïse Katumbi, who will be contesting the presidential election in December 2023. Katumbi described the killing as political assassination and called for an independent investigation into the incident. Due to weak law enforcement in the country, future acts of violence against prominent politicians cannot be ruled out amid heightened political tensions in the lead up to the presidential elections.

10 Portugal Civil unrest

On 5 July, unionised dock workers went on strike at ports in Lisbon and Setúbal to denounce violations of their right to strike by port companies and to demand improved working conditions. The industrial action, scheduled to last until 5 November, is expected to prompt disruptions to cargo loading and unloading operations at the two ports. To alleviate cargo backlogs and minimise disruptions to trade and commercial operations, port operators and companies reliant on import-export activity are likely to employ replacement dock workers from third-party providers.

11 Russia War

Throughout July, Russia continued to carry out missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian cities including Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson and Odesa, as well as on critical infrastructure. Amid these attacks, on 10 July, Ukrainian authorities announced that the military had reclaimed 169 square kilometres of territory from Russian troops in southern Ukraine as part of its counter-offensive. Ukraine's military further reclaimed 24 square kilometres around the strategic city of Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast, eastern Ukraine. GRB

FRANCE'S FLASHPOINTS AND THE INGRAINED DRIVERS OF UNREST

Despite government efforts, deep inequality and social marginalisation continue to characterise France's low-income neighbourhoods, creating a tinder box of tensions waiting for the right catalyst to erupt, **writes Tamsin Hunt**

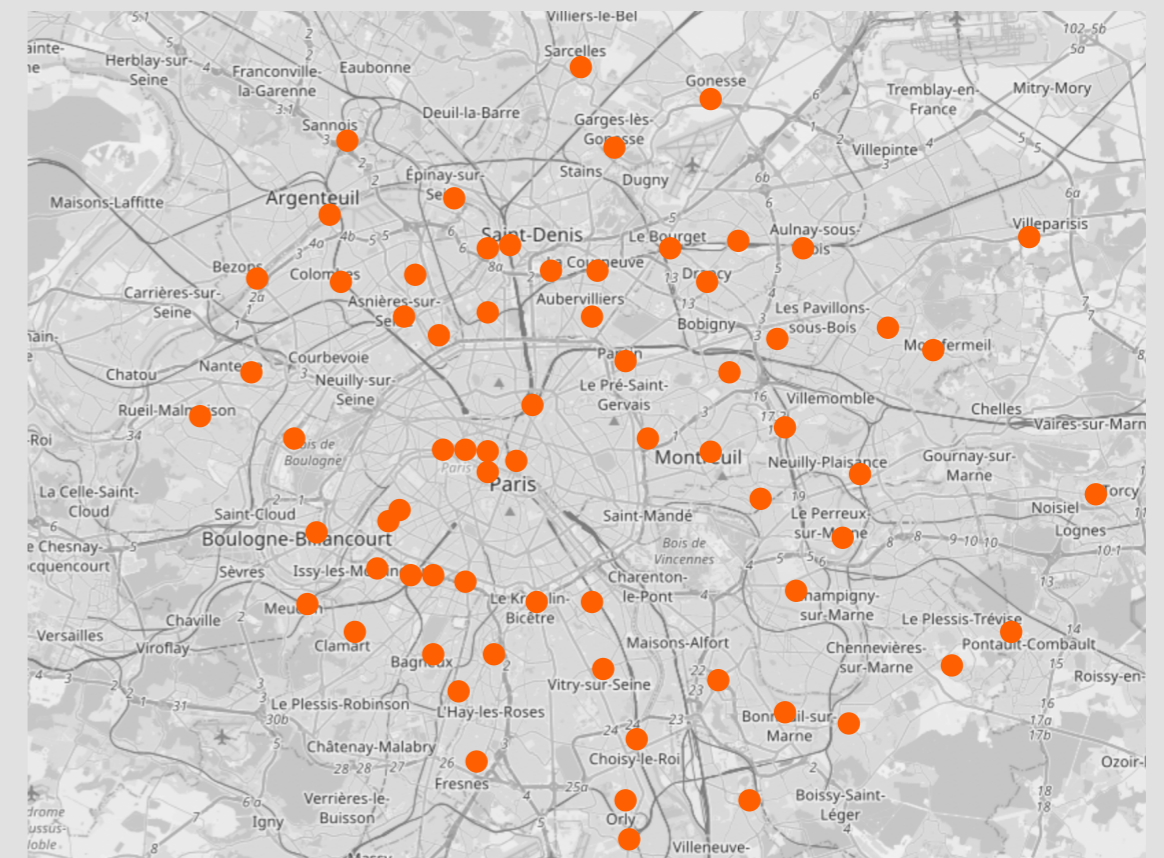
On the morning of 27 June, a police officer shot and killed 17-year-old Nahel Merzouk for refusing to stop at a traffic check in Nanterre, just west of Paris. Little was the officer to know that his actions would set in motion countrywide riots rooted in deep-seated grievances and inequalities that have simmered for decades. The protests lasted for six days; causing more than USD 1.1 billion worth of damage to shops, schools, banks, town halls, police stations and government buildings across the country. While some demonstrations occurred in city centres, including in Paris, the worst of the violence took place in banlieues – a term that directly translates to 'suburb', but has come to refer specifically to low-income housing projects, home to more than 5 million people and dominated by African and Arab immigrants and their descendants. While some banlieues are prosperous, many are characterised by high rates of poverty and social exclusion, which – if not meaningfully addressed – will continue to create the ideal conditions for further civil unrest.

Bias in the banlieues

Residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are three times less likely to be employed compared to the national average, and an estimated 57 percent of banlieue children live in poverty, more than double the countrywide average of 21 percent. And yet, these areas are characterised by substantially lower rates of state funding for basic social services such as security, healthcare and education. Approximately 40 percent of families in low-income neighbourhoods do not have access to pre-schools; there are, on average, 37 percent fewer healthcare professionals in these areas; and residents have access to 50 percent fewer sport and recreation services. In Paris, banlieues are physically separated from the city centre by the Boulevard Périphérique that encircles the city, further entrenching this social exclusion; and residents joke they need a passport to cross that divide.

Poverty and marginalisation have created hostilities in banlieues that only require a spark to ignite. In 1979, the first banlieue riots occurred when a teenager died by suicide

Locations of riots in and around Paris between 27 June and 1 July



Note that riots were far more frequent outside of the city centre. Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

following his arrest for stealing a car; and in 2005, two teenagers died while hiding from police in an electrical substation near Paris, prompting more than three weeks of countrywide riots and a state of emergency. Police brutality and alleged racism – long a significant grievance among low-income communities in France – provided the catalyst in June 2023.

In recent years, French police have repeatedly been accused of excessive use of force, and official statistics show that traffic police shot and killed a record 13 people in 2022. Although the ethnic identities of those 13 are unknown (France largely prohibits ethnic profiling in its statistics), a 2017 government report showed that young men of African or Arab descent are five times more likely to be stopped by police than their white counterparts.


Government (in)action

By 2 July, protests had eased, and relative calm had returned to the streets of France; however, banlieues will remain a tinder box for unrest in the years to come. Entrenched issues of inequality, discrimination and police racism are difficult and time-consuming problems to address, requiring substantial political will and investment – both of which are lacking. The government has so far ignored calls to reform the police and appears to deny that there is even a problem, going so far as to tell the United Nations in a statement on 30 June that ‘any accusation of systemic racism or discrimination by law enforcement in France is totally unfounded’. Meanwhile, the increasing polarisation of French politics will continue to exacerbate the situation. While the hard left refused to criticise the actions of rioters and looters, the far right blamed the crisis on immigration and sinister ‘foreign enclaves’ – despite the fact that only one in 10 of those arrested for violence during the June/July protests were foreign nationals – whilst calling for a harsher crackdown. Such extreme political positioning will likely only entrench perceptions of inequality and discrimination, rather than make any progress

towards resolution and integration.

That is not to say that the authorities have done nothing. Over the past 20 years, government has spent more than USD 65 billion on renovating housing blocks, improving facilities, and extending metro and tramway networks out of city centres to suburban areas. However, the provision of aid and benefits remains distinctly lower in disadvantaged areas than in France as a whole. Indicatively, the Seine-Saint-Denis Department to the northeast of Paris is the poorest department in France, and yet it is also the eighth largest contributor to income support programs. As a result, much of the department’s council budget flows towards national welfare programmes, rather than to local employment or inclusion policies. Nevertheless, government data shows that there are high levels of upward social mobility amongst immigrants and their descendants in these areas, with 10 to 12 percent of residents relocating out of disadvantaged banlieues every year. The number of university graduates in suburban areas is also proportionally close to that of wider France, and 72 percent of children from low-income households earn more than their parents.

A stagnant state of affairs

Political scientist Ted Gurr’s seminal work in the 1970s pointed to the increased propensity for violence that arises when a population experiences continued perceptions of deprivation. But recognising these conditions – and in the case of the French banlieues they are eminently present – does not in isolation lend itself to readily pinpointing the unique triggers or catalysts that result in specific incidents of violence. The banlieue residents of tomorrow will not be the same as today. But the grievances will remain, and short of a comprehensive programme of social reform, a repeat of the July rioting remains a distinct possibility. In the longer term, it will in large part be the French government’s actions that will ease (or not) the underlying drivers of social discontent. 



Young men of African or Arab descent are five times more likely to be stopped by police than their white counterparts”



PERSISTENT INSTABILITY

UNREST CONTINUES UNDER BOLUARTE

As Peru experiences yet another cycle of demonstrations over its most recent leadership change, political infighting continues to hamper efforts to address the protesters' grievances. **Erin Drake examines** the recent unrest in Peru, and its impact on the commercial environment.

Amid an ongoing political crisis that has spanned seven presidencies since 2016, recurring and often violent anti-government unrest continues to characterise Peru's political and security environment. In 2023, unrest has centred on the perceived illegitimacy of incumbent President Dina Boluarte, who assumed office following former leftist President Pedro Castillo's impeachment in December 2022. Castillo supporters, who make up a large portion of anti-government demonstrators and include indigenous communities and farmers in the country's south, have accused Boluarte and Peru's right leaning Congress of staging a legislative coup, driving widespread disillusionment with both the president and

the government. Frustrations have been exacerbated by subsequent states of emergency, and police and military crackdowns on protests in which an estimated 70 people have been killed since December. Castillo's supporters, joined by other civic groups and unions, are not only calling for Boluarte's resignation, but also for Castillo's release from prison, Congress's dissolution, early general elections, and a new constitution.

A constant deadlock

Longstanding power struggles between Peru's successive presidents and Congress have resulted in frequent leadership changes in recent years, sustaining a political deadlock that has often prevented the passage of crucial



AFFECTED SECTORS

Tourism

The general director of Peru's largest hotel chain described the first quarter of 2023 as "catastrophic," while the Cusco Chamber of Commerce reported that 95 and 50 percent of tourism reservations were cancelled in the first and second quarters of 2023, respectively. Although tourism arrivals have since increased and authorities have reopened Machu Picchu, the country's main tourist attraction, chambers of commerce have expressed concern that the announcements of further protests have resulted in cancellations for hotels.

Agriculture

In the agricultural industry (Peru's largest source of employment), trade organisations like the Asociación de Gremios Productores Agrarios del Perú (AGAP) have indicated that logistics and exports have been severely impacted due to highway and port blockades, and related curfews and government-imposed restrictions on movement. Between December and January, AGAP reported agricultural export losses of over USD 200 million.

Mining

The mining sector remains vulnerable to unrest amid historic feuds with indigenous communities, who also make up a large portion of the current anti-government movement. From January to March, production decreased in 17 departments, concentrated in the mineral-rich southern region. Although some mining companies have sided with protesters, ongoing states of emergency in mining regions have slowed production and delayed new projects.

Merchants

Meanwhile, ahead of renewed unrest, merchants in Lima are seeking enhanced protection from the government, as previous demonstrations prompted civil disorder that saw vandalism, looting and violent clashes with security forces, causing many businesses to suspend operations for days at a time.

reforms. This impasse has underpinned anti-government sentiment and driven unrest, including during Castillo's tenure, as right-wing factions in Congress frustrated most of his efforts to govern in order to maintain the political and economic status quo. While Boluarte has aligned herself with Congress's dominant political factions – a perceived betrayal for Castillo's supporters – this coalition has not necessarily led to alignment in decision-making on critical issues. Amid dismally low public approval for Congress – around 6 percent – conservative factions looking to secure their political futures have rejected Boluarte's attempts to bring forward elections as she sought to meet at least one of the protesters' major demands.

In June, the Boluarte-led government confirmed its intent to stay in power until 2026. But, lacking perceived legitimacy and popular support, Boluarte could face impeachment challenges from Congress as it looks to distance itself from local and international criticism over her heavy-handed response to anti-government protests. Already facing an investigation by the public prosecutor for her role in the protest crackdowns, in July, Boluarte promised that only 'legitimate force' would be employed in response to further rioting. However, this move alone is unlikely to appease protesters, and in the context of ongoing political uncertainty – and with diminishing



prospects for securing any of their demands – demonstrators' intent to sustain or escalate disruptive unrest could increase.

Disruptive impact

Protests between December and March 2022 caused countrywide disruptions as demonstrators blockaded strategic highways, airports and ports, prompting fuel and food shortages in several cities. Businesses suffered operational disruptions and many suspended commercial activities as supply chains collapsed. Demonstrations lost momentum in March, but Congress's failure in April to impeach Boluarte over protester deaths, and a May Supreme Court ruling that protests were not constitutionally supported, have led to calls for renewed resistance that will likely fuel further disruptions to business activities in the coming months.


The government has tried to reassure and incentivise investors by aggressively pursuing foreign investment in energy, transport and infrastructure sectors to stimulate economic recovery and growth, damaged by months of unrest and the impact of the El Niño weather pattern on agricultural output; 71 percent of CEOs across 136 of Peru's largest companies have indicated approval of Boluarte and her business-friendly approach. However, while Peru's investment climate has remained relatively resilient to years of unrest, it remains unclear if this strategy will be enough



Political inertia, grassroots activism, and the government's strategy of protest suppression over resolution will maintain the existing threat of periodic, disruptive unrest”

to offset potential investor fatigue as protests continue to disrupt operations in the longer term.

Status quo

Political stability will remain elusive in the coming months. The combination of political inertia, grassroots activism, and the government's strategy of protest suppression over resolution will maintain the existing threat of periodic, disruptive unrest, and could hinder efforts to secure a lasting return to political and social stability. In turn, commercial operators and prospective investors may need to brace for further disruptions. 

WAGNER AFTER PRIGOZHIN

WHAT NEXT?

Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, two months after his failed mutiny against the Russian state, poses yet another setback for the Wagner mercenary group. While likely to see significant change closer to home, the impact on the group's operations in Africa will not be immediate, **writes Saif Islam.**

As the private jet of Yevgeny Prigozhin – the head of Russian private military company Wagner Group – crashed in Russia’s Tver Region, killing him and nine members of his inner circle, the group’s decline became all the more certain. Founded in 2014 by oligarch Prigozhin and former Russian army officer Dmitry Utkin, who also died in the plane crash, the private military company has been deployed around the world as a shadow arm of the Russian government. It has been an active participant in conflict zones including Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), in addition to providing a wide range of security services in these countries. The group has also been linked to numerous lucrative business operations both at home and abroad, including the illicit exploitation of minerals and other resources, becoming a significant Russian player on the global stage.

Although private military companies are illegal under the Russian constitution and Russian authorities denied any involvement with Wagner until recently, it has long been alleged that the latter received political, military and financial support from the Russian government. It played a crucial role in pushing Russia’s foreign policy interests abroad while its opaque status gave the Kremlin a veneer of plausible deniability. And, given repeated accusations of gross human rights violations in many of the conflicts Wagner has been engaged in, it served Russia’s interests to keep the group at arm’s length publicly.

Good deal gone sour

The success of the Kremlin-Wagner arrangement, however, came undone amid Russia’s battlefield struggles in Ukraine. These losses exposed deep divisions between Prigozhin and the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and other senior commanders. Prigozhin accused the military establishment of undermining Wagner, including withholding weapon supplies to his fighters and leaving them vulnerable in Ukraine. Tensions escalated further when Shoigu ordered Wagner fighters to sign new contracts directly with his ministry, a move supported by President Vladimir Putin but one that would essentially isolate Prigozhin. Enraged by the prospects of being marginalised from the very organisation that he built, Prigozhin launched his “march of justice” from the frontlines in Ukraine to Moscow.

The downward spiral

The mutiny was short-lived. Following a flurry of likely backdoor dealings, President Putin and Prigozhin reached

a deal within hours, just as a Wagner-linked convoy was within 200 km of Moscow. In a surprise move, the terms of the deal included amnesty for Prigozhin and his fighters, provided they moved to Belarus, signed contracts with the Defence Ministry, or retired from service.

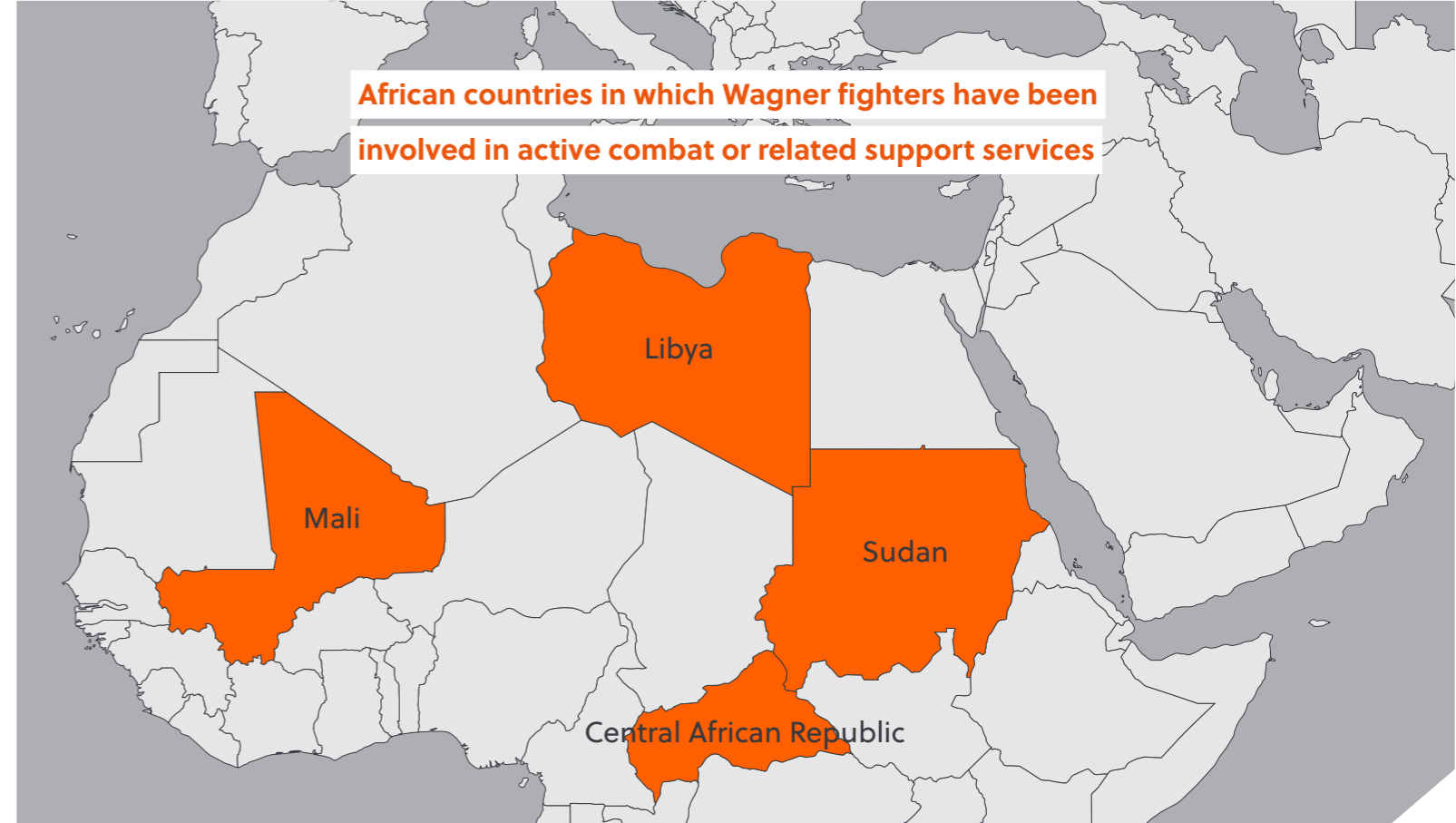
In the weeks that followed, Prigozhin sought to convey a sense of normalcy publicly, but his apparent renewed commitment to operations in Africa, as conveyed in a slew of videos he released, poorly concealed how far he had been pushed out of Putin’s cadre. Just as workers were publicly removing Wagner’s signs and logos from its former headquarters in St. Petersburg, the Defence Ministry was overseeing the transfer of heavy weapons from Wagner to the Russian military. The ministry also cancelled what was a long-term, lucrative contract for Prigozhin’s catering company, amid a government investigation into Wagner’s finances.

What’s next for Wagner?

Now, with the group’s leadership removed under such circumstances, the future for Wagner is uncertain. It is feasible that Putin, who will be eager to avoid another mutiny, will seek to replace Prigozhin and his associates with even closer allies that are likely to be less ambitious. But the absence of such personal ambitions among a new leadership group cannot be guaranteed by the Kremlin. Similarly, the bulk of Wagner’s personnel and assets could be incorporated into the military. This is also improbable, in spite of some Wagner fighters signing contracts with the Defence Ministry. The appearance of distance between Wagner and the Kremlin has long been advantageous and an arrangement the Kremlin would seek to preserve, at least in some form. Instead, the group could be split or absorbed into smaller entities, such as Patriot and Redut that offer a similar degree of autonomy from the Russian state and are just big enough to be effective but not a threat.

So, business as usual in Africa?

The uncertainty surrounding Wagner’s future will raise questions about Russia’s ability to continue protecting its strategic interests in Africa, but the Kremlin is eager to convey a message of business as usual. Several days after the mutiny, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stressed that private military contractors would remain in the CAR and Mali, without mentioning Wagner by name. Around the same time, a Russian envoy flew to Benghazi, Libya, to meet with Khalifa Haftar, a major militia leader who has been supported by Wagner for several years. The envoy reportedly assured Haftar that there may be “some changes at the top”



Prigozhin's alleged support for coup in Niger

On 26 July, Abdourahamane Tchiani, the commander of the presidential guard, arrested President Mohamed Bazoum and declared himself president. Following these developments, on 30 July, hundreds of supporters of the coup marched through the capital Niamey, waving Russian flags and denouncing France, former colonial power. In a voice message on Telegram app channels associated with Wagner, Prigozhin expressed support for the coup. In the message, Prigozhin described the coup as a “struggle of the people of Niger with their colonisers.” While Western countries widely denounced the coup, and Russia officially expressed concern at the development, there remains a possibility of Wagner - which has a presence in neighbouring Mali - ingratiating itself with Tchiani. Even if Wagner fighters are not on the ground in Niger, seeking close ties with Tchiani would fit the Kremlin’s playbook of expanding its influence in Africa at the expense of Western countries, including France. In fact, Western countries recently announcing that they would cut funding to Niger will likely make Russia an even more attractive partner to the military junta.



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but not much will change on the ground.

Indeed, Prigozhin and Wagner’s myriad challenges in Ukraine contrast what appears to be the group’s uninterrupted operations abroad. These commanders, who have largely escaped any reprisals from Putin since the fall-out with Prigozhin, continue to enjoy significant operational freedom and the mechanisms to generate lucrative revenue channels alongside their security operations. And, if the death of Prigozhin, who had used his vast financial resources and political contacts to build Wagner, has left a void, the Kremlin could be ready to fill it.

Loyalty may be the most precious currency in Russia, but it is hard to test on matters relating to professional mercenaries. With or without Wagner, the days of shadowy Russian operatives traversing conflict zones across Africa will persist, even if their employment contracts, colours and badges change. GRB



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