

SPS Global Insights

Private Military Contracting in MENA



This report explores private military contracting in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), looking at past and current examples, issues, and the future of contracting.

Introduction



Private military contractors (PMCs), also known as private security companies (PSCs), private military firms (PMFs), or mercenary groups, are entities that offer armed security and military-related services to governments and private organisations. The private military contracting industry is very broad, encompassing services including training, logistics, intelligence, and combat operations. Companies are mostly comprised of professional ex-military personnel, who range in skill depending on their country of origin and experience.

Operating as for-profit enterprises, PMCs are not always under direct government authority, but remain subject to regulation by laws depending on the jurisdiction. Although there are numerous PMCs that clearly focus on military and security-related services, there are also many companies that blur the lines of PMC definitions. These firms often position themselves as general government contractors and are frequently employed to provide a range of services in stabilisation missions. This may include infrastructure engineering and construction, project monitoring, and facilities support. This report looks specifically at the 'hard end' of the contracting world, encompassing mainly combat arms capable companies that deal with military-esque tasks.

The previous three decades have seen an enormous increase in the outsourcing of security and military functions to private actors, especially seen during the US invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Governments and organisations use PMCs for numerous reasons, including for cost effectiveness, flexibility, and specialised knowledge. However, PMCs can also be used to carry out activities that are politically or ethically contentious, as they are difficult to hold to account for their actions.

Due to regional volatility and the presence of numerous conflict zones, there are several PMCs operating across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The oil, gas, and mining industries in MENA have spurred a high demand for various security providers. PMCs play a crucial role in mitigating threats such as attacks on installations by individuals and drones, cyber threats, and piracy. Additionally, government policymakers often utilise them as instruments to advance their own agendas.

Turkish Proxies In Syria and Iraq

Türkiye's use of mercenaries has grown exponentially since the start of the Syrian Civil War. Initially, Ankara nurtured strong relationships with numerous Syrian militias to serve its own geo-strategic aspirations. Syrian rebel groups would be contracted to fight Kurdish factions that had been labelled as terrorist organisations, such as the People's Defence Units, more commonly referred to as the YPG. Ankara would also pay these groups to fight against radical Islamist groups, including ISIS, al-Qaeda, al-Nusra, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Since then, Türkiye has recycled these veteran Syrian fighters in conflicts across the region, such as in Azerbaijan and Libya, employing them indirectly as mercenaries.

SADAT International Defence Consultancy is the largest and most enigmatic of the PMCs operating out of Türkiye. The company formally functions as a defence contractor; however, it allegedly operates informally as a secretive extension of the armed forces. The company does not openly have any direct action or combat arms capability, claiming on its website that it offers "consultancy, training, and logistics". However, SADAT has been described as the conduit between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Syrian proxy militias, keeping the mostly volatile and poorly disciplined groups at an arms length. The founder of SADAT, retired brigadier general Annan Taniverdi, was appointed as chief military councillor to Erdoğan in 2016, reaffirming SADAT as an extension of Ankara's regime's security

and influence. The close personal relationship between the two men also gives the company an air of legitimacy and limits legal scrutiny, whilst its opacity makes it difficult to understand the company's true strength and capabilities. Outside of Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that Turkish intelligence allegedly offered contracts to Syrian militias, suggesting their deployment to Afghanistan with the task of assuming security responsibilities at Kabul airport prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021. It would be fair to surmise that SADAT would likely have had a supporting role in this.

Türkiye's growing regional involvement and its use of PMCs has created tensions with the Russian Federation. Turkish involvement in Libya has significantly shifted the power dynamic of the country by backing the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord in the west. Ankara's deployment of Syrian mercenaries to Libya preceded Russia sending several thousand Sudanese fighters to Benghazi to support Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar and the House of Representatives in the east. The deployment of Syrians means that Türkiye's avoids any direct confrontation with Russian PMCs, including the Wagner Group, or the Kremlin. It is believed that some 16,000 Syrian fighters, most of whom are or have been in rebel militias as part of the Syrian National Army, have been rotated through Libya. Many are still stationed in Tripoli and Witiyah.



Turkish Proxies In Syria and Iraq

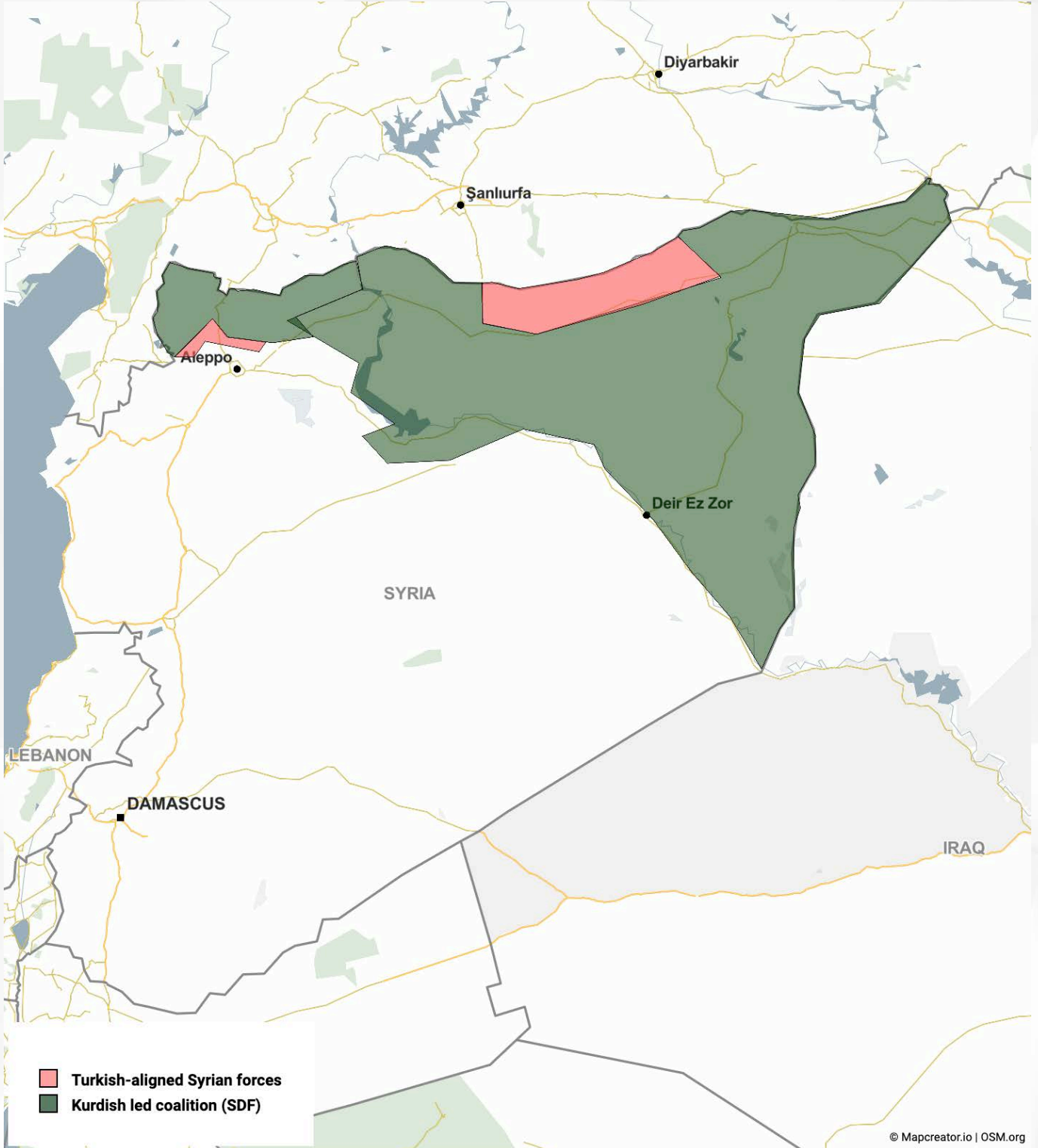


Figure 1: Map showing territory controlled by Kurdish and pro-Turkish forces in Syria. Türkiye labels all Kurdish factions in Syria as terrorist organisations. The rest of the country is controlled by forces loyal to the Assad regime (including Russians), or by extremist groups or pro-Iranian militias.

The Wagner Group

The Wagner Group is a Russian PMC, originally formed by former ally of President Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin suspiciously died two months after staging a rebellion in protest over apparent incompetence by the military leadership in the war in Ukraine. With his death in August 2023, the Wagner Group is closer under the Kremlin's watch than ever before. In MENA, Wagner operates in Syria and Libya, where it has been accused of numerous human rights abuses, including the use of chemical weapons and the targeting of civilians.

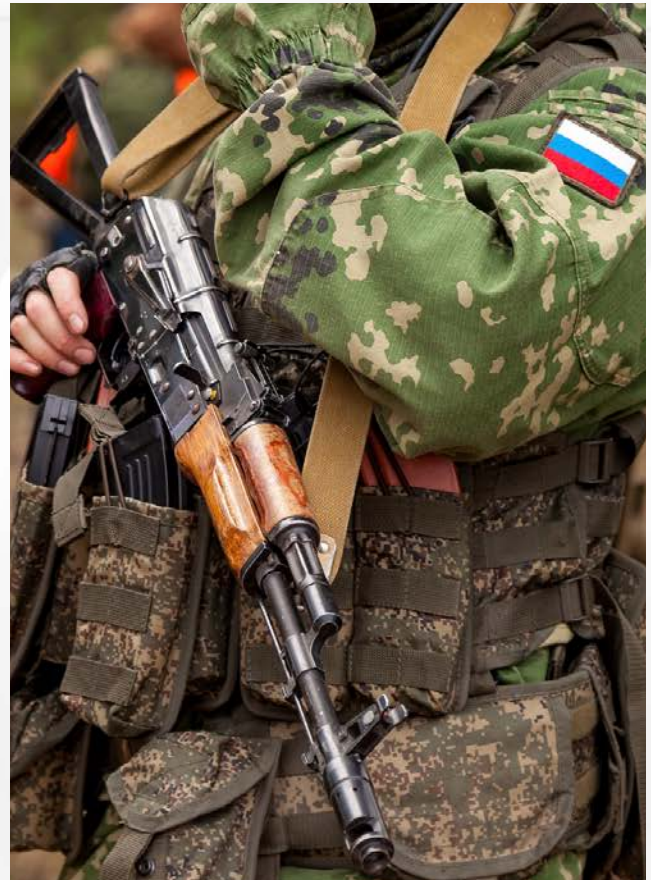
Syria

Wagner troops were deployed in Syria in 2015 to back the Russian military that was supporting the regime of President Bashar al-Asad, a long-time ally of Moscow. The Wagner Group was embedded within the Russian military at naval and air bases across the country. This has been very lucrative for the group, allowing the PMC to diversify its economic holdings. EvroPolis, a Wagner controlled energy company, was awarded significant energy concessions by the Asad regime in return for recapturing ISIS held oilfields. In 2017, it was recorded that this generated over \$162 million in revenue for the group.

There are some suggestions that the group demanded that they were granted control over 25% of all production from gas and oil fields, as well as phosphate mines, from any territory that it had liberated or defended. The rest of the revenue would be split between Moscow and Damascus. The organisation has evidently learned that it can take advantage of failing states for significant economic gain.

Iraq

Russia is positioning itself to take over from the US as the primary security provider in Iraq. Currently, Washington and Baghdad are in the process of withdrawing the US military contingent in the country, which stands at approximately 2,500



troops. This contingent was originally stationed to combat radical extremist groups in the region, particularly the Islamic State. The Iraqi government had voiced concerns over US airstrikes targeting pro-Iranian factions within its borders, citing violations of its sovereignty. Consequently, the Iraqi parliament called for the departure of US Forces. Relations between Russia and Iraq are cordial, as evidenced by Iraqi Prime Minister Shia al-Sudani's visit to the Kremlin in December. The Russian Ambassador to Iraq, Elbrus Kutrashv, has also engaged in discussions with high-ranking Iraqi political and military figures since the end of January, allegedly exploring the possibility of Russia bolstering Iraq's military capability. Kutrashv met with senior officials from several Iranian-backed factions, highlighting the amicable relationship between Tehran and Moscow. With the potential for a shift in the security landscape, Russia may aim to position itself as the primary security provider of military equipment and training to the Iraqi forces.

The Wagner Group

Following the reduction of US assistance to Iraq's own counterterrorism operations, Russia could step in to provide immediate support, such as small arms and spare parts, albeit limited by its ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Russia's keen interest in Iraq's vast oil resources is also apparent.

Libya

In oil-rich Libya, Wagner forces have backed Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the east. The Wagner Group has been present in Libya since at least 2018, establishing command-and-control infrastructure and operational centres in four military air bases across Libya. Reports from local sources also indicate that the Brak al-Shati base has been used by Wagner for training exercises. Additionally, the group maintains a presence at several oil and gas facilities. These positions serve strategic purposes, enabling the group (and potentially Moscow) to manipulate Libya's assets and influence international oil markets.

Wagner's foothold in the country has also facilitated its operations in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Chad and Mali. Throughout the Cold War period, Africa emerged as a pivotal arena for the Soviet Union, both ideologically and economically, following the wave of decolonisation. As newly independent African nations sought to establish their identities free from European colonial influence, they also sought ideological support to resonate with their populations. Moscow seized the opportunity to propagate communist ideology and anti-American sentiments across the continent, aiming to expand its sphere of influence as extensively as possible. As a result, many African governments, several of which have come to power through military coups, have turned away from Western countries, such as France, for security. By utilising LNA airfields, Wagner has established airbridges between Libya and these countries. Flight data has proven that several Soviet Ilyushin Il-18 aircraft frequently fly between the states,

landing at Wagner airfields. The US has also accused the group of training the Chadian rebel group, l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT) in Libya, with some contractors allegedly accompanying the group back to Chad. Wagner has also been supplying Sudan's Rapid Support Forces, the paramilitary organisation currently fighting the Sudanese Armed Forces for control of the country.

Wagner's involvement in Libya goes beyond conventional security operations typically associated with PMCs. They have expanded their activities to include political advisory services and social media influence operations. These activities are often done through subsidiaries, deliberately designed to obscure their origins. These efforts aim to solidify Wagner's presence in Libya within the political arena and to advance Russian interests. The group operates with relative impunity as the international community is unwilling to interfere with the LNA's activities. Russian mercenaries are perceived as part of the fragile security apparatus of eastern Libya, despite Wagner's presence being in violation of the 2020 Ceasefire agreement, which called for all foreign fighters and mercenaries to leave the country.

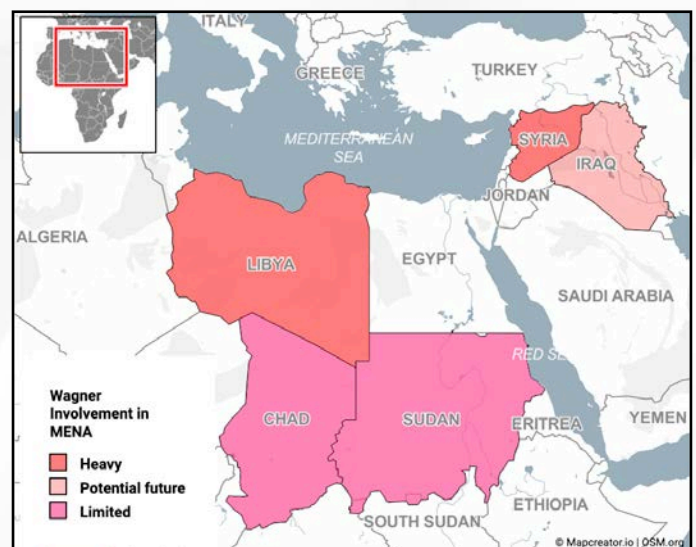


Figure 2: Map showing Wagner footprint in MENA

US PMC's

Americans in The United Arab Emirates

The UAE employs several US PMCs to provide services to its armed forces. US PMCs play a crucial role in facilitating the UAE's defence operations mainly by providing US military expertise. Many US and Western veterans are embedded within the UAE's armed forces, serving as trainers, advisors, technicians, operators, commanders, and even combatants. However, operating within the UAE's tightly controlled defence sector poses risks of corruption and regional conflict. The sector, tightly controlled by the UAE's President, lacks transparency and accountability, creating potential conflicts of interest for PMCs and their personnel. Moreover, US citizens employed by Emirati PMCs have found themselves supporting controversial foreign interventions in countries such as Yemen and Libya.

A BBC report in 2024 revealed that American contractors were being used by the Emirati regime to conduct targeted assassinations of its political enemies, although the UAE deny the allegations. The majority of those assassinated were members of the Muslim Brotherhood (more specifically, Islah, its Yemeni branch), a popular Islamist movement. Within the UAE, the Muslim Brotherhood is banned, and is seen as a direct threat to the ruling elite. A named US security company has been linked to these extra-judicial killings. Emiratis were then allegedly trained by US contractors in Aden, Yemen. Those working for the US PMC in Yemen stated that their aim was to eliminate members of al-Qaeda and Islamic State. The UAE government, the US security company in question, the US Department of Defence, and the State Department all refused to comment on the BBC investigation. Following accusations that the CIA were involved, the agency responded with "the idea that the CIA signed off on such an operation is false". This case underscores the ethical ambiguity often inherent in the kinetic operations of PMCs.



US PMC's

Academi

Academi, formally known as Constellis, Xe Services LLC, and Blackwater, is an American PMC boasting a workforce of 14,000, a revenue of \$1.3bn, and a fleet of 42 aircraft. The company, then known as Blackwater, gained notoriety in the early 2000s for its involvement in the Iraq War, where it provided security services for the US government and other private contractors. The company's actions were mired in controversy, with accusations of serious misconduct, including the killing of unarmed civilians. The most notorious incident was in 2007, where Blackwater contractors were implicated in the killing of 17 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad's Nisour Square. A year prior, a contractor was responsible for the death of an Iraqi vice-presidential guard, resulting in a diplomatic crisis between the US and Iraq.

Blackwater's actions highlighted the legal ambiguity surrounding the activities of PMCs in Iraq, who operated without the same oversight as the US military. The organisation maintained a significant presence in Iraq and Afghanistan during the respective conflicts, providing security services to various clients, including oil companies and businesses, as well as facilitating financial reward delivery for individuals who had provided information on people on the US 'wanted' list. Blackwater faced allegations that during its time in Afghanistan, the organisation engaged in activities aimed at illegally exploring and exploiting natural resources.

Allegations continued to be voiced over other illicit activities, such as weapons trafficking, illegal arms sales, and bribery.

Benghazi 2012 Attacks

Despite the controversies surrounding PMCs, the involvement of CIA contractors in Libya during the tumultuous period following the revolution underscores their effectiveness and resilience in challenging situations. On September 11th, 2012, militants from Ansar al-Sharia, an armed Salafi Islamist militia, launched an assault on a US diplomatic compound and a CIA facility in Benghazi, Libya, resulting in the deaths of four Americans, including the US Ambassador. Conflicting accounts from various sources, including the US government, complicate efforts to ascertain the exact sequence of events. Nevertheless, it is evident that six former special forces operators employed by the CIA successfully repelled a significantly larger hostile forces, estimated to number in the hundreds, for over 13 hours. Their actions prevented the seizure of the annex until reinforcements from a Libyan militia allied with the United States arrived, enabling the evacuation of American civilian personnel from the site.

The incident underscores the high level of skill and proficiency possessed by many contractors from Western countries, which typically surpasses those of counterparts from regions such as Latin America, as well as from Russia.



LATAM PMC's



Latin American Mercenaries

In recent years, the Middle East has emerged as a magnet for mercenaries hailing from Latin America, drawn by the promise of lucrative contracts and significantly higher wages compared to domestic military service. This trend has seen Latin American mercenaries actively involved in a multitude of missions and conflicts spanning Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the UAE, among other global flashpoints.

One notable instance occurred in 2015 when the UAE enlisted approximately 450 mercenaries from Latin America, predominately Colombian and Chilean nationals, to combat the Houthi movement in Yemen. Tempted by the prospect of substantial financial rewards, these mercenaries were enticed with promises of immediate Emirati citizenship for themselves and their families, alongside generous benefits like pensions, healthcare coverage, and

educational opportunities. Moreover, the 2011 Libyan Civil War witnessed the employment of Colombian mercenaries by both the regime of Muammar Qaddafi and anti-government factions, showcasing their involvement in different factions of the conflict.

Nevertheless, Latin American contractors have encountered challenges due to their comparatively lower costs when compared to their American counterparts. During the peak of the US's presence in Iraq, a Blackwater-affiliated company based in Bogotá recruited Colombian mercenaries for a security assignment in Baghdad. However, upon deployment, these individuals received only a fraction of the initially promised compensations, underscoring the risks and uncertainties associated with mercenary contracts in volatile regions.

Conclusion

Private military contracting is an enormous global industry, with total annual sales of PMCs reaching \$224bn in 2020 (estimated to reach \$457bn by 2030). However, its significance is problematic. The growing trend of states delegating military and security responsibilities to PMCs has created serious issues regarding legitimacy and accountability, as well as post-conflict resolution. In some conflict zones, PMCs, often only exacerbate instability by prolonging the conflicts to support their business model. Wagner is also seen by some analysts as an extension of the Kremlin, seeking to disrupt international attempts to stabilise places such as Libya. Additionally, in Syria, Wagner's deployment is hugely lucrative; many PMCs, especially those that fit the traditional "mercenary" model, are motivated solely by money. Their lack of interest in solving the political and economic issues of the country they operate in prevents any form of movement towards peace and stability.

Furthermore, the issues faced by many American PMCs in the Middle East, especially during the early days of the Iraq and Afghan occupation, have highlighted the precarious accountability and legitimacy of their operations. Despite this chequered past, in the last few years, large Western contractors have made huge efforts to ensure that their operations are completely legal. For example, the Iraqi Interior Ministry also now tightly controls contractors to ensure that they are operating fully

within the law, often forcing companies to be audited several times a year. This is to prevent a return to the days when PMCs, such as blackwater could operate relatively unchecked.

Looking forward, it is increasingly probable that PMCs will continue to thrive amidst a world transitioning towards multipolarity and fragmentation, diverging from the more bipolar dynamics of the 20th Century. Modern conflicts have shifted from conventional battles to intricate hybrid wars, blurring lines and complicating resolutions. Integral to this transformation is the rising influence of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies in both physical and cyber warfare. This trajectory points toward a future characterised by disorder and a dearth of cohesive international governance. With no single power dictating the rules of global politics, the world is poised for a more uncertain and disjointed geopolitical landscape.

Businesses must conscientiously consider the issues associated with employing PMCS in the MENA region. PMCs characterised by scant accountability and a track record of human rights violations run the risk of becoming focal points for protest actions by aggrieved individuals. Moreover, the legal fallout from illicit PMC operations could potentially spell significant trouble for business operations.

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