

Private Military Contractors in Africa: The Case of Erik Prince

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Introduction

The private military industry has been very lucrative during the last two decades. The business flourished after the US and its allies' invasion of Afghanistan and witnessed a boom after the Iraq war in 2003. Private military contractors undertook every single task that was related to state armies when the mastery of violence was exclusively a governmental issue. Plenty of US, Russian, French, British and South African private contractors have been reported to be major actors in different hot spots around the world such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, South Sudan and other countries in central and west Africa. Companies like the American Blackwater, DynCorp, CACI, the Russian Wagner Group, and the South African Executive Outcomes made the news almost on a daily basis. Although the African Union (AU), successor of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), passed the Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa in 1977 (entered into force in 1985) (OAU Convention), Africa is still the Eldorado of soldiers of fortune and warlords.

Profit driven soldiers are not a new phenomenon for Africa. Bob Denard in Congo (RDC) and his long mercenary career tightly linked to Jacques Foccart's *Françafrique* and Simon Mann who attempted a coup against President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo in Zimbabwe are two figures that have marked the African history. During the 1980s, Libyan leader Moamar Kaddafi hired Touaregs from Mali and Niger for his military interventions in Lebanon, Tchad and Sudan. One decade later Moboto recruited Africans and Europeans for his war against the rebels of Laurent-Désiré Kabila. The involvement of the South African company Executive Outcomes in Angola during the 1990s and the Liberian mercenaries used in the time of the imbroglio that followed the 2010 election in Ivory Coast are other examples (Boutellis, 2019). Africa has always been mercenaries' favorite territory; history recounts the use of both African and European mercenaries but always at the expense of other Africans. This paper examines the role played by Erik Prince and his PMCs (Private Military Companies) in several African countries. It delves to provide an understanding for the reasons which led him to shift to this part of the world and the way he has conducted business there.

1. Major Actors in the Private Military Business in Africa

When the Department of Defense released an unclassified video depicting the events of the 4 October 2017 ambush in the village of Tongo Tongo in Niger, no one expected

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the presence of private contractors within the task force in charge. The team that was ambushed consisted of eight US Special Forces soldiers, two US special operations support soldiers, one intelligence contractor, one Nigerian interpreter, a three-men Nigerian reconnaissance team and a thirty-one men Nigerian partner force. The team was assembled by AOB-Niger which is the Advanced Operations Based in Niger that exercises the tactical command and control over multiple Special Forces, it is located in Niamey, Niger (*DOD Briefing on Ambush*, 2017). Through different levels of command, the AOB-Niger is under the strategic responsibility of AFRICOM, this same team had a private contractor in charge of the most sensitive task in the mission, intelligence. AFRICOM, the US Africa Command headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, has a strategic responsibility for all US military operations in Africa. However, it depends on private contractors to do major sensitive functions.

The Americans are not the only private contractors in Africa, media reports have been dealing with a Russian firm called Wagner Group. The company is linked to the Russian oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin, who has been indicted by special counsel Mueller (Taylor, 2018). The company was reported moving to Central Africa Republic (CAR), Libya and Sudan. Russians have been repeatedly seen fighting in south Darfur, a claim that was confirmed later on by the ousted president Omar Bachir. In a meeting between minister Sergey Lavrov and General Khalifa Haftar, Prigozhin was present to discuss sending more contractors to Libya (Gricius, 2019). Wagner Group is believed to be working with both belligerents in Central Africa Republic. A unit was filmed by three assassinated journalists operating in the territory held by the rebels to the contrary of Russia's official stance that backs the authorities (Hauer, 2018). Press reports recount the involvement of French and British private contractors as well, mainly in central and west Africa.

The United Nations has adopted and opened for signature the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries on 4 December 1989. It has entered into force only on 20 October 2001 (UN OHCHR). According to the convention, states whose armies are considered to be the largest in the world (the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom) did not ratify the document. Although the UN has passed this convention on the use of mercenaries, the organization is found to be an important client of PMCs. This is not a new trend for the United Nations. During the 1990s the UN mission in RDC was under the protection of Defense Systems Ltd, Lifeguard provided protection for World Vision in Sierra Leon, Hart Security did so for the World Food Program, and DynCorp, KwaZulu Natal Security and Empower Loss Control Services undertook a wide range of tasks in East Timor (Isenberg, 2009). Fundamental human rights have been breached by a large number of PMCs, mostly perpetrated in Africa and the Middle East. The UN report on Mercenarism and Private Military and Security Companies titled "overview of the work carried out by the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination" mentions as key achievements two major elements; first, regulating the UN use of private military and security companies, and second, bringing a human rights perspective to the issue of foreign fighters.

2. Erik Prince

Erik Prince is one of the richest soldiers who have ever served in the US Navy. Along with his fellow Navy Seal colleague Al Clark, Prince started his notorious company called Blackwater in 1997 (Scahill, 2007; Simons, 2009). The first tasks Blackwater has been contracted to do were in Afghanistan in 2001 then in Iraq in 2003. The US declared War

on Terror has been vital to the prosperity of PMCs. The business boomed during that period and enabled them to make profit of the situation. The existence of Blackwater and some other PMCs in the Iraqi scene went unnoticed till the world woke up on the images of the four Blackwater contractors being killed, burned, mutilated and then two of them being hanged from a Euphrates Bridge on 31 March 2004 (Chan, 2004).

Three years later media reports issued from the most known press agencies were talking about a massacre that took place in Nisour Square, Baghdad. On 16 September 2007, Blackwater contractors on board of four armored vehicles opened fire on Iraqi civilians, the attack left 17 dead and 24 wounded (Glanz and Robin, 2007). Prior to this event only little was known about Prince. He appeared publically for the first time during a Hearing before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on 1 October 2007. After that Prince immediately engaged in a campaign to clear the name of his company on several media corporations.

The company became notorious. Consequently, it kept changing its name and has adopted the following: Blackwater USA, Blackwater Worldwide, Xe Services LLC and finally Academi. “Juggernaut” Blackwater as Labeled by Adam Ciralsky from Vanity Fair, who also called Prince “Mr. Fix-It” in the war the US waged on terror. Ciralsky confirms that Prince led a kind of a double life. Publicly he acts as Blackwater’s chairman and secretly he has been doing the “CIA’s bidding, helping to craft, fund, and execute operations ranging from inserting personnel into “denied areas”—places U.S. intelligence has trouble penetrating—to assembling hit teams targeting al-Qaeda members and their allies” (Ciralsky, 2009).

On 20 August 2009, Jeremy Scahill, author of the book *Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army* wrote in *The Nation* revealing information about Blackwater being paid \$5 million dollars in April 2002 to deploy a team in Afghanistan. Scahill says that one month later Prince went to Afghanistan as part of the team. Scahill confirms that Blackwater worked for the CIA’s stations both in Kabul and Shkin and operated from a fortress called the Alamo.

In 2010, Prince sold the business as he told Mehdi Hassan in an interview on Al Jazeera English (*Blackwater’s Erik Prince*, 2019 7: 23). Prince moved to the UAE where his name was linked to a new PMC called R2 Reflex Responses which was headquartered there (Cole, 2019). Erik Prince, the brother of the US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, was making the news again. He was in a hearing testifying before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) on 30 November 2017 on the Trump Transition Team and Russia connections. Recently his name appeared in the Mueller Report; he held several meetings with the Trump Campaign Team as well as with Russian and Russian-related individuals. He was deeply involved in this issue.

Prince clearly lied under oath in his testimony before the HPSCI on 30 November 2017. On April 30 2019, Adam Schiff, Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, sent a criminal referral to the Department of Justice for a potential criminal prosecution for “false testimony that Prince provided the committee in 2017 as a part of its investigation into Russian interference in the US political process”. According to the Mueller Report, one of the most important things Prince lied about was the reasons of meeting the Russian Oligarch Kirill Dmitriev in the Seychelles, a meeting that was arranged by the Emiratis.

Recently, Erik Prince’s name has been associated with the region of Xinjiang where plenty of atrocities and human rights breaches are taking place (the Uyghur Muslim minority). In the region that is considered as an integral part of the Belt and Road network of infrastructures, Prince and FSG (Frontier Services Group) are building a training base in a deal that was signed with Kashgar Caohu for 40 million Yuan (over \$6 million) (*Erik Prince Company*, 2019).

Prince's interest in Africa started after selling Blackwater. He was the fund manager for his private equity firm Frontier Resource Group (FRG). The company was dealing in early stage oil and mineral exploration in South Sudan (Eisenhammer, 2014). Later, the interest became related to his business with the Emiratis and most importantly the business he has initiated with FSG and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative where Africa is considered to be essential.

3. Somalia

By early 2011, Erik Prince and his Xe Services (Blackwater renamed) were involved in a multimillion-dollar program to train and recruit around 2,000 Somali contractors to stop the Somali piracy in the region. This trained task force was supposed to take over and end piracy in the region as well as to fight against Islamist insurgents (*AP Enterprise Blackwater*, 2011). In an article on 20 January 2011, *The New York Times* said that Prince had secretly backed a South African PMC to be part of the scene by safeguarding Somali officials, recruiting and training militias and fighting Islamist groups. According to its sources, Erik Prince funded Saracen International, the South African PMC (Executive Outcomes was reflagged Saracen International) to be granted contracts by the Somali government. The operation was financed from a Middle Eastern country, which several sources confirmed to be the UAE (Mazzetti and Schmitt, 2011). *Forbes* reported that Prince had a future plan for Somalia; it was the patrolling of its coasts to prevent illegal fishermen (Kirsch, 2018).

On January 2014, in an interview to *The Wall Street Journal*, Erik Prince revealed that he was the CEO of Frontier Services Group (FSG), the security and logistics firm with a focus on Africa. The firm is linked to the state owned CITIC Group (China International Trust Investment Corporation). Knowing that China has a \$1 trillion planned spending for infrastructures, Erik Prince headed toward Africa for potential profit (Feith, 2014). The company was listed on Hong Kong's stock market and headquartered in Nairobi. It has employed 340 staff in the head office and regional affiliates in Hong Kong, Beijing, Dubai, and Malta. The priority was to provide facilities management and workforce accommodations. It was also to build and maintain "infrastructures, installations and platforms" all what was necessary for the clients in the continent (Lee and De Clara, 2016). The company was granted a contract by South West State of Somalia to organize its new Free Zone Investment Authority (FZIA). The deal was negotiated with President Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden, and covered a wide range of areas, including an integrated solution for the air-land-sea logistics capabilities and security management. The contract consisted of building "seaport, airport, as well as residential areas and agricultural zones". Prince said about this: "FSG has a proven track record of being able to manage complex projects across challenging terrains and is therefore perfectly placed to provide support for this important new project in Somalia". He added: "With the team's experience and expertise, FSG will provide the best possible logistics and security services to ensure that the project can operate safely and on time" (*Contract Win FSG*, 2017). Along with private security, Erik Prince's interest shifted to logistics, infrastructures and complex projects.

4. South Sudan

Airborne Technologies is a company which is headquartered in Vienna, and is working in the field of design and equipment of small airplanes with wireless surveillance tools. The company has worked for four months on the American-made crop duster Thrussh 510G

to add the characteristics required by a client known for *Echo Papa* who turned out to be Erik Prince, the owner of around a quarter of the company. Workers on that plane were instructed to refer to him as *Echo Papa* while discussing specific modifications to that plane. On April 2016, *The Intercept* revealed all these details adding that the modifications were not only surveillance and laser-targeting equipment, the aircraft was outfitted with “bulletproof cockpit windows, an armored engine block, anti-explosive mesh for the fuel tank, and specialized wiring that could control rockets and bombs”. They also “installed pods for mounting two high-powered 23 mm machine guns”. By doing so, Airborne Technologies broke plenty of Austrian laws. When the business became very lucrative, the Bulgarian-based company LASA Technologies was established (Scahill and Cole, 2016). The modification brought to this aircraft fit well to fight small armed groups and militias. It was directed initially to fulfill the contract FSG had with South Sudan. Amidst an ongoing civil war, Erik Prince was sent by CITIC Group to South Sudan in 2014 to meet with Salva Kiir Mayardit who was fighting against Riek Machar, his former vice-president. The aim of this mission was the reestablishment of the oil flow from the Chinese owned oil reserves which were shut down because of the war in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan. Prince put on the table an offer that consists of surveillance flights, providing infrastructure and securing the reserves. The \$150 Million contract was halted for it violated several international laws (Gannon, 2017). This came during the period of the release of the 2015 AU Commission report. The commission was under the chairmanship of Olusegun Obasanjo, and it confirmed that rape and cannibalism among other forms of violence were perpetuated by both sides of the conflict. The US has also issued the Executive Order 13664 of April 3, 2014 on “Blocking Property of Certain Persons with Respect to South Sudan”.

According to the report made by *The Intercept*, the aviation authorities of San Marino cancelled the plane registration because it turned out to be an aircraft that is not for civilian endeavors contrary to the certificate that was issued. In February 2014, as the company chairman, Prince ordered the purchase of two Thrush 510G. The purpose was Project Mike, a proposal from the Mali government for its war against al-Qaeda affiliate. Later that year, the aircraft was transported to an eastern African country and remained there. By late 2014, the government of South Sudan stopped the contract. The company officials could not understand the reason behind this move (Scahill and Cole, 2016). *The Intercept* said that: “...one South Sudanese official told an FSG employee in the country that Prince had promised to provide the government with attack aircraft. The South Sudanese, according to a person with knowledge of the encounter, were initially confused, and then angry, when the militarized planes never arrived”.

Such a kind of assistance would be a violation of US arms exports. In 2010, Prince’s company, Blackwater, reached a settlement for the violation of plenty of US export control regulations. According to Blackwater and US officials, the violations were mainly about illegal weapons exports to Afghanistan, unauthorized proposals made to the government of South Sudan to train troops and sniper training provided for police officers of Taiwan (Risen, 2010). In 2012, another settlement was reached; it covered unauthorized sales of satellite phones to Sudan among many other violations (*Academi/Blackwater Charged*, 2012).

5. Kenya, Congo and Guinea

When Erik Prince became the chairman of Frontier Services Group by early 2014 (owned 9 % stake by then), the company already had some planes and an airstrip in Kenya with

a will to build a pan-African aircraft network. Prince told *Reuters*: “We’re starting in the aviation space because I believe if you’re going to operate in Africa you’ve got to be able to move by air. Commercial airlines are limited, roads get washed out”. He added: “If you’re drilling in some remote area and your rig goes down and you need a new part for your rig; that’s 10s if not 100s of thousands of dollars a day. How do you get that thing quickly and with no excuses?” The aviation business was vital for Blackwater which was operating 70 aircraft (Eisenhammer, 2014).

After DNV Holdings had acquired the Kilifi-based aviation company Kijipwa Aviation (Prince bought 49 % stake), Prince wanted access to different services the company could provide, from the provision of passengers and freight to multinational companies’ transportation logistics to remote places in East Africa. Being in the business shows how important the discovery of oil in Kenya’s northern region is and beyond for multinational corporations (*Prince of Terror*, 2014). The aviation sector was very lucrative to Prince’s nascent company, primarily for getting the benefit this sector offers, but mainly for boosting his own business. The FSG owned Phoenix Aviation secured the go-ahead by the Kenyan Civil Aviation Authority (KCAA) for chartered passenger flights and freight to China. Kijipwa Aviation, however, was refused the renewal of the Air Services Licence (ASL) on 21 October 2014 by the KCAA (*State Denies American*, 2014). The reason for the revoked ASL was due to ownership-related issues and the non-compliance with Kenyan laws according to *Business Daily* and due to offering non-scheduled passenger and freight within/out flights from its Kijipwa base using Cessna (single turboprop) I72 aircraft according to *ch-aviation*, the airline intelligence provider. *Business Daily* reported that “The decision by KCAA, the aviation industry regulator, deals a heavy blow to the private security baron’s plans to offer logistics, aviation and risk management services

to multinationals operating in mining, oil and gas in eastern Africa”. It added “Mr Prince had lined up 25 aircraft delivered to Kijipwa’s airstrip located on the grounds of Bamburi Cement in Mombasa, to provide specialised aviation services and aerial survey of installations such as oil pipelines to players in the extractive industry”.

Along with his FSG Company, Prince registered an affiliated small business company in the Democratic Republic of Congo where he intended to explore minerals and many other activities. FSG has been the owner of a small Congolese firm of transportation called Cheetah Logistics since 2015, but the new firm, Frontier Service Group Congo, is bigger. Documents show that FSG Congo was registered on 20 August 2018 and finally established on 13 November 2018 (qtd. in *Carta de Moçambique*, 2019). Along with Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, Congo is present in the FSG annual report list of countries it is related to. Congo has almost 60 % of the world’s cobalt production and is Africa’s largest output of



Ilustração 01 – Plane carrying US Special Forces gets stuck on a sandy airstrip in a remote area in Kenya near the Somalia border. The US-registered aircraft belonged to Erik Prince, founder of Blackwater, Trump’s unofficial war advisor. (Note men in the bushes) #AlShabaab #USSF #Somalia #Kenya.

Twitter, 2 Apr. 2018.

copper (Ross, 2019). Prince was trying to raise up some \$ 500 million for a new investment fund to deal in cobalt, copper and lithium needed for electric car batteries (qtd. in Ross, 2019). Relying on his Chinese network and connections, Prince's mine in Guinea was granted an agreement to supply the Chinese state-owned Chalco with bauxite, the main source to produce aluminum (Sanderson, 2019). The mining field was important for Prince who did not want to miss any business opportunity in Africa.

6. Libya

In an interview to the Italian daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Erik Prince pushed a plan to the EU to help stop illegal immigration to the southern shores of Europe. For him, human trafficking in countries like Sudan, Chad and Niger is “an industrial process”, it needs to be encountered with special measures. According to him, “To stop it, you need to create a Libyan border police along the southern border. Gaddafi loved the landing strips, they are everywhere, just build three police bases and send 250 foreign trainers to each side of Libya, just as Blackwater did with the Afghan border police”. He added: “They will provide leadership, intelligence, communications support, surveillance aircraft, a couple of helicopters: traffickers have to drive for vast distances, so it is easy to locate their trucks full of migrants, intercept them, arrest the driver”. For the immigrants who are going to be arrested, Prince says: “We will take them to refugee camps in the bases, they will receive food and medical assistance and will be repatriated without ever arriving at the coast. I imagine that Europe wants to block the flow of migrants in the most humane and professional way possible” (Mazza, 2017). The European immigrant crisis was merely another business opportunity for Prince.

The Libyan conflict was triggered by foreign powers and the Libyans themselves. The split within the Libyans is characterized by Gen. Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya and Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and his government in Tripoli. Foreign powers ranging from UAE, KSA, Egypt, Russia, France and recently the USA are backing Haftar. Turkey and Qatar in the other camp back the internationally recognized al-Sarraj government. By early 2017, several sources reported about connections Erik Prince had with the Emirati involvement in the Libyan conflict. On 11 January 2017, *Intelligence Online* reported that, along with some other private contractors, Prince is a major player in the Emirati-led operations in Libya.

War Is Boring has relied on some sources that confirmed the involvement arguing that pilots flying the Emirati Air Force IOMAX AT-802 Air Tractors are contractors. The Emirati AT-802 was first seen at a Libyan air base (unidentified) with its national markings hidden in June 2015. In November 2016, the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) published a video showing an Emirati AT-802 in the sky conducting an air strike on the Ganfouda area of Benghazi (Delalande, 2017). Mercenaries with ties to Erik Prince travelled secretly from Kurdistan (Iraq) to Libya. The mercenary group which is affiliated to a company that is active in Iraq and the UAE, went to Libya to fight among Haftar's militias according to the London-based *العربي*. Haftar did not only receive military assistance in his struggle against al-Sarraj government, but he was also provided political and financial support by the Emiratis in a wider struggle that has been characterized by an intense polarization in the whole MENA region.

Conclusion

Erik Prince's practices are not different from the old times mercenarism. In Africa, his declared business was mainly part of China's Belt and Road global development strategy. With FSG, he dealt in security and minerals in South Sudan, Kenya, RDC and Guinea. However, his business in Somalia and Libya was mainly security-related. He has been reported to be proposing different types of services. He proposed a plan for a Libyan coastal guard police to the EU and a fishing patrol force to Somalia. Prince also claimed having other ambitious plans that have not seen the light, such as: the Mike Project in Mali and the Iron Fist in South Sudan.

Not so far from Africa, reports linked him to the conflict in Yemen along with the Emiratis. Prince has more global plans for the future; his proposal of an international network of private spies to the Trump Administration was disclosed in December 2017. He also openly expressed his willingness to go back to doing business in Afghanistan. Despite all the atrocities perpetuated under his watch and the breaches to US and International laws, there were no direct accusations for Prince. Only one referral was made, however it has no relation to Human Rights. It is related to his involvement in the Trump-Russia connections, and it is on the United States National Security. Furthermore, the 2010 and 2012 Blackwater/Academi settlements were dealt with as administrative issues, there were no criminal charges.

Acronyms

AFRICOM – United States Africa Command
 AOB-Niger – Advanced Operations Based in Niger
 ASL – Air Services Licence
 AU – African Union
 BRSC – Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council
 CACI – (originally) California Analysis Center, Inc., (then) Consolidated Analysis Center, Incorporated
 CAR – Central Africa Republic
 CITIC – China International Trust Investment Corporation
 DynCorp – Dynalectron Corporation
 FRG – Frontier Resource Group
 FSG – Frontier Service Group
 FSG Congo – Frontier Service Group Congo
 FZIA – Free Zone Investment Authority
 HPSCI – House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
 KCAA – Kenyan Civil Aviation Authority
 OAU – Organization of the African Unity
 PMC – Private Military Company
 R2 – Reflex Responses
 RDC – République Démocratique du Congo

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