

The New Riflemen: The Systemic Recruitment of Young Africans into Foreign Conflicts and the Violation of Sovereignty



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Abstract

This article analyses the system for recruiting young Africans into armed conflicts outside their countries of origin Libya, Sudan, Ukraine, and the Greater Terrorism Area as the product of a threefold structural failure: the failure of African states to provide economic prospects for their young people; the organised demand of foreign belligerents who deliberately externalise death; and the limitations of international humanitarian law in addressing the issue. It introduces the original concept of ‘juvenile substitute mercenarism’ by establishing its historical continuity with the Senegalese Tirailleurs of the colonial era. Finally, the article examines four principal theatres in which fighters are recruited and formulates an architecture of operational recommendations at four levels: normative, institutional, state, and military.

Keywords: juvenile mercenarism, Senegalese Tirailleurs, African sovereignty, Libya, Sahel, Ukraine, international humanitarian law, recruitment, African youth, necropolitics

INTRODUCTION

In March 2023, Malian and Burkinabè media documented the recruitment of young men by Wagner Group agents to fight on the Ukrainian front. In July of the same year, the United Nations published a report on Sahelian fighters recruited by Sudan's Rapid Support Forces. During the same period, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded more than fifty thousand African fighters active in the Libyan theatre alone since 2011.¹

A February 2026 investigative report, *The Business of Despair*, published by the INPACT group (All Eyes on Wagner), quantifies the scale of the phenomenon: 1,417 Africans from 35 countries signed contracts with the Russian army between January 2023 and September 2025; more than 300 died in the first few months, representing a mortality rate of 22%. The increase was as follows: 177 recruits in 2023, 592 in 2024, and 647 in 2025.²

These data confirm what the academic literature has not yet fully theorised: young Africans, recruited on African soil, deployed in armed conflicts abroad, in the service of foreign belligerents who use them to avoid exposing their own nationals, within a legal framework that leaves them without protection. This phenomenon is neither marginal nor spontaneous, nor is it new in its underlying logic.

It is the contemporary reactivation of a specific historical matrix that of the colonial Senegalese *Tirailleurs* and the product of a threefold structural failure that this article seeks to theorise, document empirically, and subject to prescriptive analysis.

This article argues that juvenile substitute mercenarism is not a new, marginal, or spontaneous phenomenon. It is the contemporary reactivation of a proven colonial logic the logic of the substitutable African body under new legal, economic, and technological forms.

The analysis developed in this article is qualitative and uses a triangulation method combining field research and document analysis. The decolonised approach adopted in the analytical framework is guided by the rigour of military fieldwork and the critical distance afforded by geopolitical analysis in this context. This *modus operandi* suggests that an analysis involving such questions requires a combination of at least two different but complementary perspectives that cannot be separated. The decolonial analytical approach developed in this article combines two perspectives: military and geopolitical.

¹ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project), *Africa Conflict Tracker: Foreign Fighter Dynamics* (Baltimore : ACLED, 2025). Les données ACLED constituent la source quantitative la plus systématique sur la présence de combattants africains dans les conflits extérieurs sur la période 2011–2026.

²INPACT (All Eyes on Wagner), « *The Business of Despair : African Recruitment in the Russian Armed Forces 2023–2025* », rapport d'investigation, février 2026. Selon ce rapport, 1 417 Africains issus de 35 pays ont signé des contrats avec l'armée russe entre janvier 2023 et septembre 2025. Plus de 300 sont morts dans les premiers mois de déploiement, soit un taux de mortalité de 22 %. La progression est alarmante : 177 recrues en 2023, 592 en 2024, 647 en 2025. Disponible sur : adf-magazine.com

The development of this article is structured around five strands: identifying the colonial matrix and its contemporary inversion; constructing the concept of ‘juvenile substitute mercenarism’; empirically mapping the four principal theatres; analysing the threefold systemic failure; and formulating an architecture of operational recommendations.

I. FROM THE COLONIAL MATRIX TO THE CONTEMPORARY INVERSION

1.1 The Plombières Decree and the Logic of the Substitutable Body

On 21 July 1857, Napoleon III signed a decree at Plombières-les-Bains establishing the corps of Senegalese Tirailleurs under Governor Faidherbe. Its first article is clinically clear: to establish African troops to ensure ‘the conquest and pacification’ of the colonial empire.³ This text founded a logic that we shall call the ‘logic of the substitutable body’: deliberately exposing Africans in theatres deemed too dangerous, too climatically hostile, or too politically costly for metropolitan soldiers.

This logic belongs to an institutional genealogy that Ndao reconstructs with precision: from 1817, when Senegal was returned following the Congress of Vienna, France restructured its colonial army by relying on Black companies. In 1822, the Gorée and Senegal battalions were created. In 1843, the corps of Senegalese Spahis was established to secure trade routes against Moorish incursions and, from 1854, it took part in the Crimean War the first international deployment of African fighters in a European war.⁴

General Mangin would theorise this logic with the greatest cynical explicitness in *La Force noire* (1910): creating an ‘inexhaustible reserve’ of Africans to compensate for France’s declining birth rate and reduce metropolitan casualties.⁵ The outcome is well known: during the First World War, France mobilised 134,000 Senegalese Tirailleurs, who served under conditions of extreme hardship cold, unsuitable equipment, and an unfamiliar environment in theatres where their deaths were statistically anticipated and politically absorbable.⁶

³Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Portsmouth : Heinemann, 1991), 7–9. Le décret fondateur du 21 juillet 1857, signé à Plombières-les-Bains, stipule en son article premier : « Il sera formé au Sénégal un corps d’infanterie indigène sous la dénomination de tirailleurs sénégalais. »

⁴Mor Ndao et Jean-Michel Rouyer, *Autour des tirailleurs sénégalais de 14-18 : mémoire locale, mémoire globale* (Dakar : [éditeur à confirmer], [date à confirmer]), chapitre « L’enrôlement et la participation des Africains ». Toutes les citations sans autre indication renvoient à ce chapitre fondateur.

⁵Charles Mangin, *La Force noire* (Paris : Hachette, 1910). Rédigé alors que Mangin est colonel, l’ouvrage théorise l’utilisation systématique des troupes africaines pour compenser la dénatalité française. Il demeure le texte-source de toute réflexion sur la « mobilisation noire » de 1914–1918.

⁶Marc Michel, *L’Appel à l’Afrique. Contributions et réactions à l’effort de guerre en AOF, 1914–1919* (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982), 18 ; Joe Harris Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth : Heinemann, 1999) ; Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2006), 22–30.

1.2 The Three Mechanisms of Colonial Recruitment

Ndao identifies three methods of recruiting Tirailleurs whose structure remains analytically useful for interpreting contemporary recruitment networks.⁷

- The first was apparent voluntarism: officially free enlistment, fuelled by the enthusiasm of residents of the Four Communes who wished to consolidate their French citizenship. From the outset, however, this voluntarism was structurally constrained: the absence of economic alternatives made consent formal rather than substantive. The distinction between free choice and structural constraint is analytically crucial and reappears unchanged in contemporary recruitment.
- The second method was recruitment through customary and religious leaders, who were responsible for supplying contingents to the colonial administration. This system of outsourcing coercion through intermediaries institutionalised the complicity of intermediary authorities and weakened bonds of trust between communities and their chiefs. Its contemporary counterpart is the tribal network of intermediaries used by Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sahelian jihadist groups.
- The third and most significant was conscription, made compulsory by an August 1912 decree for every African aged 20 to 28, on Mangin's recommendation. Its implementation was described as a 'veritable manhunt', provoking revolts and uprisings. The continuum between soft coercion (the absence of alternatives), social coercion (pressure from chiefs), and physical coercion (round-ups) revealed by this history is precisely the continuum that structures contemporary recruitment.

General Faye draws an analytically decisive parallel between these three mechanisms and their contemporary equivalents:⁸ apparent voluntarism persists in the form of the French Foreign Legion, a legal and regulated framework that remains a genuine option for some young Africans. Recruitment through customary chiefs has been replaced by fictitious travel agencies, social-media influencers, and intermediaries rewarded with benefits in kind the same method in new packaging. Conscription, meanwhile, has evolved into a radically more sophisticated form: organised deception in which victims register themselves for a service whose true nature they do not know. This includes contracts in Russian

⁷Ndao et Rouyer, *Autour des tirailleurs*, chapitre cité. Sur les opérations de rachat d'esclaves menées par Faïdherbe après 1857, voir Mann, *Native Sons*, 22–30 : ce mécanisme transformait une servitude (l'esclavage) en une autre (le service armé colonial), révélant la dimension économique du recrutement militaire.

⁸El Hadji Babacar Faye (Général, CHEDS/IDS), contributions analytiques, mars 2026 : « La Légion étrangère française maintient le volontariat encore en vigueur. Le recrutement par les chefs coutumiers a été remplacé par des agences de voyage, des influenceurs avec le même procédé, des intermédiaires contre avantages en nature. La conscription a été remplacée par une tromperie : la réalité est que les victimes s'inscrivent elles-mêmes pour un service qu'elles ignorent. » Ces apports doctrinaux du CHEDS/IDS constituent la contribution empirique de co-auteur à cet article.

signed without translation or legal counsel, passports confiscated on arrival and promised signing bonuses of \$13,000 that are never paid.⁹

1.3 Classical Literature and Its Blind Spot

The period from 1960 to 2000 saw the emergence of a form of mercenarism that appeared to reverse the colonial logic: Western fighters deployed in Africa on behalf of governments or companies. The works of Singer, Percy, and Kinsey rigorously theorised this form,¹⁰¹¹ constructing a framework centred on private military companies, their degree of direct participation in combat, and their position within the economy of organised violence.

This framework remains analytically sound for its object of study. It is, however, structurally blind to what we have observed since 2011: a reversal of the flow. It is no longer Westerners coming to fight in Africa in the service of African governments. Rather, young, economically precarious Africans, abundant in demographic terms, are recruited to fight in wars outside their own social environments and beyond the continent, in the service of powers and interests entirely alien to them.

Kaldor had correctly anticipated the decentralisation of the war economy,¹² but without theorising the racial and demographic dimension of recruitment. Mbembe and Fanon provide what the strategic literature has not revealed:¹³¹⁴ an understanding of the African body as a zone of externalised necropolitics a body whose death is politically invisible in the societies that commission it, and whose instrumentalisation is structured by centuries of denied sovereignty.¹⁵

⁹Ministère ukrainien des Affaires étrangères, déclaration du ministre Andrii Sybiha, Al Jazeera, 25 février 2026 : « Plus de 1 780 citoyens africains combattent actuellement dans les rangs de l'armée russe, recrutés via des schémas frauduleux orchestrés par Moscou. » Voir aussi : CNN, « African Recruits in Russia's Military », 4 février 2026 : passeports confisqués, contrats en russe sans traduction, prime de signature de 13 000 dollars jamais honorée.

¹⁰Peter W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2003), 8–15. Singer catégorise les firmes militaires privées selon leur degré de participation directe aux combats (« tip-of-the-spear », « middle-of-the-spear », « back-of-the-spear »), mais son cadre ne couvre pas l'enrôlement individuel de combattants africains par des acteurs étatiques étrangers.

¹¹Sarah Percy, *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007), 3–5 ; Christopher Kinsey, *Corporate Soldiers and International Security* (Londres : Routledge, 2006), 12–18 ; James Cockayne, *Regulating Private Military and Security Companies* (Tokyo : United Nations University, 2009), 45–62.

¹²Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 2e éd. (Cambridge : Polity Press, 2001), 69–89. Kaldor distingue les « nouvelles guerres » post-bipolaires par leur économie politique décentralisée, leur recours aux acteurs non étatiques et leur usage des populations civiles comme ressource de guerre plutôt que victime incidente.

¹³Achille Mbembe, « Necropolitics », *Public Culture* 15, no 1 (2003) : 11–40, spéc. 17–24. Mbembe y développe le concept de nécropolitique — le pouvoir souverain comme droit de « faire mourir » ou de « laisser vivre » — en prenant l'Afrique coloniale et post-coloniale pour terrain principal. Son lien avec le mercenariat juvénile africain contemporain est analytiquement direct.

¹⁴Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris : Maspero, 1961), 39–97. Fanon analyse la façon dont le colonialisme constitue le corps du colonisé comme instrument de la violence politique, comme ressource militaire et comme zone de non-droit. Cette lecture demeure indispensable pour penser la logique du corps africain jetable dans les conflits extérieurs.

¹⁵ Les réseaux sociaux ont remplacé les chefs coutumiers comme vecteurs de recrutement. Les contrats mercenaires ont remplacé la conscription coloniale. Les belligérants étrangers ont remplacé les puissances coloniales. Mais le corps africain demeure aussi interchangeable, aussi jetable, aussi politiquement invisible qu'il l'était dans les tranchées de Verdun. — Ngom & Faye, discussion le recrutement des jeunes africains dans les GTA, inédit, 2026.

2. THE CONCEPT OF ‘JUVENILE SUBSTITUTE MERCENARISM’

2.1 Definition and Constitutive Characteristics

We define juvenile substitute mercenarism as the organised recruitment of young Africans (aged 15–35) into conflicts outside the continent or into zones of structured terrorism within Africa. This arrangement enables foreign belligerents to outsource violence to avoid exposing their own nationals, thereby capitalising on the failure of the states of origin and the gaps in international humanitarian law.

This concept differs from classical mercenarism and from existing legal categories through three constitutive and inseparable characteristics, none of which, taken alone, is sufficient to characterise the phenomenon:

Table 1:

Classical mercenarism and from existing legal categories through three constitutive and inseparable characteristics

Dimension	Analytical content
Substitution	These young people replace soldiers whom belligerents refuse to expose politically. The logic is cold: no domestic ‘body bags’, no official ceremony, and no pressure from families on governments. The dead African body is invisible in accounting terms within the democracies or authoritarian regimes that commission this recruitment. Substitutability is not accidental it is the objective.
Targeting of Youth	The deliberate target is African youth: people aged 15–35, with masculinity not channelled by the state and no economic or social safety nets. This demographic target is not accidental: it corresponds to the stage of life at which economic vulnerability is greatest and the capacity to resist recruiters’ promises is lowest.
Systemic Nature	This is not opportunistic individual recruitment, but a structured market: organised networks, standardised prices, specialised intermediaries, and growing demand across several theatres simultaneously. There is a political economy of African juvenile mercenarism, with actors, capital, flows, and a logic of accumulation.

2.2 Historical Continuity as a Scientific Argument

The expression ‘New Tirailleurs’ is not a rhetorical metaphor: it is scientifically foundational. It posits a structural not superficial continuity between the historical figure of the colonial tirailleur and the contemporary African mercenary fighter. This continuity rests on one constant: the logic of the substitutable body, which persists across forms and eras.

What has changed is real but superficial: the recruitment mechanism (social networks and tribal intermediaries versus customary chiefs and conscription); the legal framework (mercenary contract versus imperial decree); and the operators (Wagner, international legions, and jihadist groups versus the French colonial army). What has not changed is essential: a young African man, torn from his society by deprivation and promises, sent to die in a war that does not concern him, in the service of interests that reduce him to his value as a fighter.

Arguing for this continuity is not an act of surrender to melancholic historical determinism. It is a means of precisely identifying the mechanism that must be broken. An effective protection policy cannot be constructed without first naming the underlying logic that it is intended to counter.

3. EMPIRICAL MAPPING: FOUR THEATRES, ONE PHENOMENON

3.1 Libya (2011–2026): The Inaugural Laboratory

Libya constitutes the first major laboratory of juvenile substitute mercenarism in its contemporary form. Since the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, the country has become a war market open to the Sahel, drawing Chadian, Sudanese, Malian, Nigerien, and Darfurian fighters into the successive opposing camps of the Libyan conflict.¹⁶

ACLED data document flows of several tens of thousands of African fighters between 2011 and 2026, distributed among the various factions involved¹⁷. Turkey recruited African fighters on a large scale to support the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). In parallel, the United Arab Emirates, backed by Russia through Wagner networks, supplied the forces of Marshal Haftar. Both camps employ the same logic: transferring lethal risk to African fighters whose deaths generate no domestic political cost.

The typical profile of an African fighter in Libya is documented by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS):¹⁸ a man aged 18 to 30 from a rural area affected by drought or conflict, recruited by a tribal intermediary with the promise of monthly remuneration of between \$500 and \$1,500 five to fifteen times the local agricultural income. This financial incentive is systematically accompanied by a migration promise: recruitment is presented as a ‘passage’ to Europe through Libya, turning the recruiter into a coercive smuggler and the fighter into an armed migrant.

3.2 Sudan (2023–): Darfur as a Regional Hub

The conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and General Hemeti’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which began in April 2023, immediately reactivated the trans-Saharan recruitment networks inherited from the Darfur conflicts of the 2000s. The continuity of these networks is documented: the same Arab tribal intermediaries who recruited for the Janjaweed now recruit for the RSF.¹⁹

The United Nations has documented recruitment within nomadic pastoral communities crossing Sahelian borders, targeting young men who have no other source of income during periods of drought. A remarkable economic feature can be observed: the RSF has developed an in-kind remuneration model involving authorised looting, the allocation of land, and access to resources in occupied areas. This RSF *modus operandi* circumvents the difficulties of monetary transfers caused by international sanctions and allows the supply of fighters to be maintained even during liquidity crises.

¹⁶International Crisis Group, *Foreign Fighters in Libya, Sudan and the Sahel* (Bruxelles : ICG, 2024), 5–14 ; ICG, « Libye : Mettre fin à la guerre par procuration », Rapport n° 317 (Bruxelles : ICG, 2021), 12–18.

¹⁷ Bere, M. (2026). *Islamist Militant Violence and Counterterrorism in West Africa*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003734970>

¹⁸ISS Afrique, *Sahel : Recrutement forcé et mercenariat dans les groupes armés* (Pretoria : Institute for Security Studies, 2024), 7–19. Les filières tchadiennes sont documentées depuis les années 2010, mais leur volume a considérablement augmenté après 2019 avec la montée en puissance des structures Wagner.

¹⁹ONU-MINUSMA/UNSMIL, *Rapports annuels 2023–2025* ; Human Rights Watch, « Sudan: Foreign Fighters Recruited from Sahel », rapport d'étape, janvier 2024. Les Forces de soutien rapide du général Hemeti ont recruté via des réseaux tribaux arabes transfrontaliers actifs depuis les guerres darfouriennes des années 2000.

This innovative war economy reveals the sophistication of the market: African belligerents and their external sponsors adapt their remuneration mechanisms to conditions on the ground, demonstrating the fully structured and not spontaneous nature of recruitment.

3.3 Ukraine (2022–): Africa in the Russo-European War

The deployment of African fighters in Ukraine represents the most spectacular manifestation of the contemporary inversion. For the first time since the trenches of 1914–1918, young Africans are fighting in large numbers on European soil, not under the French colonial flag, but under Russian command through the Wagner Group/Africa Corps, or as volunteers in the Ukrainian International Legion.²⁰

The Wagner Group/Africa Corps actively recruited in Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic between 2022 and 2024. Recruitment conditions documented by the INPACT investigation and CNN testimonies gathered from Ghanaian, Nigerian, Kenyan, and Ugandan fighters still in Ukraine indicate that²¹ recruits were promised a signing bonus of \$13,000 and monthly salaries of between \$2,500 and \$5,000 in return for systematic front-line deployment. The documented reality contradicts these promises: passports were confiscated on arrival, and military contracts were signed in Russian without translation or legal counsel. According to some sources, the mortality rate during the first four months reached 42%, compared with 22% over the entire period.

The Ghanaian case illustrates the *modus operandi* with chilling precision. Fourteen young Ghanaians left Ghana for Russia via Togo in August 2024, believing that they would find well-paid employment. On arrival in Kostroma, the Russian military authorities made them sign what they believed to be an employment contract, but which proved to be a military enlistment agreement. Ghana now accounts for 16% of all African recruits in the Russian army, with 55 Ghanaians killed in combat. A Putin decree of 5 November 2025 worsened the situation. Presidential Decree No. 821, signed by Vladimir Putin on 5 November 2025 and entitled ‘On the Temporary Procedure for Admission to Citizenship and the Issuance of Residence Permits’, freezes civilian routes to legal status. It stipulates that every foreign man of military age (18 to 65) must provide proof of military service in the Russian armed forces to have any prospect of obtaining or renewing a residence permit or applying for naturalisation.

This phenomenon highlights a geopolitical dimension already raised in the work of Dibocor Ngom.²³ According to Ngom, Africa is no longer merely a theatre of rivalry between powers. It has become a

²⁰Kacper Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine* (Londres : RUSI, 2023) ; « Wagner Recruiting in Mali, Burkina Faso and CAR for Ukraine Operations », *Africa Intelligence*, 14 mars 2023. Le groupe Wagner a transformé ses réseaux africains d'influence en filières de recrutement pour le front ukrainien, ciblant prioritairement les pays où il dispose déjà d'une présence militaire : Mali, Burkina Faso, RCA.

²¹Firmian, F. M. (2026). *Russia's State Capture Strategy in Africa, from Wagner to the Africa Corps. Violence, Coercion, and the Politics of State Capture*, 74–101. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003746355-4>

²²Arduino, A. (2024). *Le groupe Wagner rebaptisé Africa Corps : quelles conséquences pour les opérations russes sur le continent ?* <https://doi.org/10.64628/aaj.arfx6xgk6>

²³Dibocor Philippe Ngom, « Le Chaos comme Business », *Revue Vision Géopolitique*, CIS-Paix, 2025 ; Ngom, « Sommes-nous capables de réévaluer notre environnement géopolitique pour décider plus lucidement ? », *Revue Vision Géopolitique*, CIS-Paix, 2025.

‘military human resource’ that these powers mobilise for their own wars. African sovereignty is violated twice over: first, because African states are unable to retain their young people; and second, because foreign powers organise the recruitment of African citizens on African soil without legal or political constraint.

3.4 The Greater Terrorism Area: Semi-Coerced Recruitment

Within the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the boundary between ideological adherence, economic recruitment, and direct coercion is systematically blurred. This blurring is not accidental; it is constitutive of these organisations’ recruitment strategy.²⁴

Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) distinguish three profiles of recruits within these organisations. First are the ideologically committed (a minority in Sahelian areas, but more prevalent in peri-urban areas); second are economically motivated recruits (the majority in rural areas affected by poverty and drought); and third are those compelled by direct violence (significant in areas under territorial control)²⁵. Empirical analysis shows that these categories are fluid: economically motivated recruitment can evolve into ideological adherence, while direct coercion can conceal recruitment that was initially presented as voluntary.

The profile of the Sahelian fighter encapsulates every dimension of structural vulnerability: a male aged 15 to 28 who left school before secondary education, from a rural family affected by drought or conflict, and without access to credit, land, or formal employment. For such a person, the armed group offers what the state does not: belonging, an income, a weapon, and an identity. In this context, recruitment is not viewed as an individual moral failure, but as a rational response to a range of choices radically narrowed by state failure.

4. THE FAILURE OF AFRICAN STATES

4.1: The Structural Violence that Recruits

The first component of the threefold failure is the most fundamental: the failure of African states to offer economic, educational, and social prospects to their young people. It should be noted that, in several Sahelian states, the unemployment rate among people aged 15–35 exceeds 60% in secondary urban areas.²⁶ In rural areas affected by conflict and drought, the concept is structurally unmeasurable, meaning that the formal economy is simply absent.

²⁴Jean-Hervé Jezequel, « Militants, Gangsters, or Victims? Making Sense of Armed Group Recruitment in the Sahel », Crisis Group Commentary, 17 juillet 2020 ; ISS Afrique, Sahel : Recrutement forcé, 20–27. L’analyse distingue trois catégories de recrues sahéniennes : les convaincus idéologiques (minoritaires), les recrutés économiques (majoritaires), et les contraints par la violence directe (significatifs dans les zones de contrôle territorial).

²⁵Ume, C. (2026). Using a regional climate model and a machine learning algorithm for farmer - herder conflict prediction in the Sahel region. <https://doi.org/10.14293/pr2199.003115.v1>

²⁶Banque mondiale, Perspectives économiques mondiales : Afrique subsaharienne (Washington : Banque mondiale, 2025), §§ 3.1–3.4. Dans les États sahéniens les plus fragiles, le taux de chômage des 15–35 ans est estimé entre 55 % et 70 % dans les

Comparative Ghana–Senegal data documented by the World Bank²⁷ and the Centre for Advanced Defence and Security Studies / Institute for Development Studies (CHEDS/IDS)²⁸ illustrate this reality with striking precision. In Ghana, for example, youth unemployment reached 49.3% in Greater Accra in the third quarter of 2025 meaning that one in every two young people in the capital was unemployed. In Senegal, 34.4% of people aged 15–24 are classified as not in employment, education, or training (NEET), rising to 43.8% in rural areas. Ninety per cent of young Senegalese people work in the informal economy. These two countries one Anglophone and democratic, the other Francophone and regarded as stable demonstrate that structural vulnerability is not confined to failed states; it extends across the whole of West Africa.²⁹

This failure is what Galtung calls structural violence: a social configuration that produces suffering and constraints without any single identifiable actor being its direct author.³⁰ It differs from direct violence (one actor harms another) and cultural violence (norms legitimise direct or structural violence). Here, structural violence is the breeding ground for mercenarism because it creates the conditions in which recruitment even into lethal foreign conflicts appears to be a rational option for young men with no alternative.

Nkrumah diagnosed the structural foundations of this situation as early as 1965 in his analysis of neo-colonialism.³¹ In his view, the absence of African industrialisation, dependence on raw-material exports, and the preservation of externally oriented economic structures mechanically produce the surplus of unskilled labour that foreign belligerents convert into cannon fodder. Sixty years after independence, this diagnosis retains a direct and troubling relevance.

4.2 Demand from Foreign Belligerents: The Logic of Externalisation

The second component is organised demand from foreign belligerents. It follows a cold and documented logic that Avant and Cockayne have analysed through the market logic of privatised security:³²

zones urbaines secondaires. Dans les zones rurales affectées par les conflits, la notion même d'emploi formel est structurellement absente.

²⁷ Selon les données de la Banque mondiale, le taux de chômage dépasse 60 % chez les 15–35 ans dans plusieurs États sahéliens. Dans les zones rurales en conflit, la notion même d'emploi formel est structurellement absente. Cette réalité n'est pas un simple arrière-plan : elle est la condition structurelle de production du mercenariat juvénile.

²⁸ Ghana Statistical Service, Labour Force Report Q3 2025 : taux de chômage des jeunes de 15–24 ans atteignant 49,3 % dans le Grand Accra. 754 000 jeunes sans emploi. 1,25 million de NEET (ni en emploi, ni en éducation, ni en formation). Pour le Sénégal : taux NEET de 34,4 % chez les 15–24 ans au Q1 2024, montant à 43,8 % en milieu rural. 90 % des jeunes sénégalais dans l'économie informelle (ANSD, Enquête nationale sur l'emploi au Sénégal, 2024).

²⁹ Il sied de noter que plus de 60 % de taux de chômage chez les 15–35 ans dans plusieurs États sahéliens (Banque mondiale, 2025). Dans les zones rurales en conflit, la notion d'emploi formel est structurellement absente. Cette réalité n'est pas un contexte — c'est la condition de production du mercenariat juvénile.

³⁰ Johan Galtung, « Violence, Peace and Peace Research », *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no 3 (1969) : 167–191, spéc. 171. La violence structurelle est définie comme une configuration sociale qui produit des inégalités évitables — « quand des ressources sont inégalement distribuées et que le pouvoir décide de cette distribution ».

³¹ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (Londres : Nelson, 1965), xi–xix. L'analyse de Nkrumah sur le maintien de structures économiques extraverties après les indépendances conserve une pertinence directe pour comprendre pourquoi l'absence d'industrialisation africaine produit les cohortes de jeunes disponibles pour le mercenariat.

³² Deborah Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13–27 ; Cockayne, *Regulating Private Military and Security Companies*, 45–62. La « market logic » de la sécurité privatisée repose fondamentalement sur le transfert du risque politique vers des acteurs non imputables.

externalising death to make it politically bearable at home. The absence of repatriation under a national flag, official ceremonies, and pressure from families on governments renders the dead African body invisible in accounting terms within the societies that commission this recruitment.

This logic operates differently depending on the type of belligerent. In Western democracies that tolerate or discreetly encourage African recruitment through international legions or security companies externalisation is a response to public pressure regarding national military casualties. In authoritarian regimes such as Russia or the United Arab Emirates, it is doubly strategic: it reduces politically visible losses and finances networks of influence on the African continent, turning recruitment into an instrument of foreign policy.

Joint work by the Centre for Advanced Defence and Security Studies (CHEDS) and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) documents the multipolar dimension of this demand for security.³³ China has developed a radically different model, rejecting the direct recruitment of African mercenaries. Instead, its strategy rests on methodical infrastructural and doctrinal penetration: the annual training of 2,000 African officers, control of 70% of 4G infrastructure by Huawei, and the supply of armoured vehicles to nearly 70% of the continent's armed forces.

By contrast, other emerging powers favour the outsourcing of kinetic force. Turkey deploys substitute fighters through its private military company, SADAT International Defense Consultancy; the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) documented the deployment of at least 1,100 Syrian mercenaries to Niger during 2024 to secure Turkish mining and energy sites.³⁴ At the same time, the United Arab Emirates has positioned itself as the financier of this multipolar architecture by heavily funding fleets of tactical drones and local armed factions a role regularly denounced by United Nations panels of experts.³⁵ This picture confirms that demand for fighters is no longer a Russian monopoly: it has become a permanent feature of the international security market in Africa.

Demand is structured and enduring: it does not respond to conflicts on an ad hoc basis, but maintains permanent networks paid tribal intermediaries, recruitment offices disguised as employment agencies, and a social-media presence in impoverished areas. It is this permanence of supply that makes African juvenile mercenarism a market rather than a circumstantial phenomenon.

4.3 The Legal Vacuum: Phantom Protection

The third component is legal. Existing international humanitarian law is structurally ill-suited to the reality of contemporary African juvenile mercenarism not because its drafters' lacked goodwill, but because these instruments were designed for a different phenomenon.

³³ Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS), rapport de mars 2025, cité dans *Africa Defense Forum* : comparaison des modèles russe et chinois en Afrique.

³⁴ Observatoire Syrien des Droits de l'Homme (OSDH), rapport annuel 2024 sur les contingents syriens transférés au Sahel ; voir également « Turkish PMC Sadat Competes for Sahel Influence », *Africa Defense Forum (USAFRICOM)*, juillet 2024.

³⁵ Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies, *Rapports du Groupe d'experts sur le Soudan et la Libye : violation des embargos et flux financiers transférés aux réseaux de milices*, New York, ONU, 2024-2025.

Article 47 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1977) defines a mercenary through six cumulative conditions.³⁶ These include being specially recruited for the conflict, taking a direct part in hostilities, being motivated essentially by the desire for private gain, and being paid substantially more than national combatants. These conditions, designed for the European mercenary of the 1970s, fail to classify contemporary African fighters for three reasons: private gain is often an unfulfilled and unquantifiable promise; remuneration is sometimes lower than that of poorly paid national soldiers; and the condition of direct participation in hostilities is difficult to establish for fighters used en masse as cannon fodder.

The International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, adopted by the United Nations in 1989,³⁷ does not significantly improve the situation. Article 1 largely reproduces the 1977 definition without resolving evidential problems or creating a protection mechanism for victims of forced recruitment. In 2019, the United Nations Working Group on the use of mercenaries itself observed that existing instruments ‘no longer correspond to the contemporary realities of recruiting fighters into armed conflicts’.³⁸

The result is striking: young Africans recruited into foreign conflicts enjoy no protective status. They are neither lawful combatants entitled to prisoner-of-war rights, nor legally recognised mercenaries, since the definition is inapplicable, nor protected civilians. Their legal protection is structurally non-existent a denial of status that exposes them to being killed, imprisoned, tortured, or abandoned without any possibility of judicial redress.

5. TOWARDS AN AFRICAN DOCTRINE OF PROTECTION

5.1 The Return Effect: Delayed Destabilisation

Before formulating recommendations, it is necessary to assess the additional challenge posed by the return effect. A comparative reading of the history of the *Tirailleurs* shows that the fighters who return are not the same as those who left. Mann precisely documented the destabilising effect of returns after 1918:³⁹ these were men carrying weapons and war trauma who had lost their deference towards local authorities and colonial structures. These veterans fuelled the first African nationalist movements while also becoming sources of local instability.

³⁶Protocole additionnel I aux Conventions de Genève du 12 août 1949, article 47, 8 juin 1977. Les six conditions cumulatives sont : (a) spécialement recruté pour le conflit ; (b) participant directement aux hostilités ; (c) motivé essentiellement par le gain privé ; (d) rémunéré nettement supérieurement aux combattants nationaux ; (e) ni ressortissant, ni résident du territoire en conflit ; (f) non envoyé par un État tiers en mission officielle.

³⁷Convention internationale contre le recrutement, l'utilisation, le financement et l'instruction de mercenaires, Assemblée générale des Nations Unies, résolution 44/34, 4 décembre 1989, entrée en vigueur le 20 octobre 2001.

³⁸Rapport du Groupe de travail des Nations Unies sur l'utilisation de mercenaires, A/HRC/42/45 (Genève : Haut-Commissariat aux droits de l'homme, 2019), §§ 23–58, spéc. § 44 : « Les instruments juridiques existants ne correspondent plus aux réalités contemporaines du recrutement de combattants dans les conflits armés. »

³⁹Mann, *Native Sons*, 115–142. Mann documente précisément l'effet déstabilisateur du retour des anciens combattants de la Première Guerre mondiale : porteurs d'armes, de traumatismes et d'une conscience politique nouvelle — les « *tirailleurs revanchards* » ont alimenté les premiers nationalismes africains tout en constituant une source d'instabilité locale.

Returns from Libya after 2011 reproduced exactly this mechanism: flows of small arms and battle-hardened fighters reintegrated into already fragile areas directly fuelled the destabilisation of Mali, Niger, and Chad. Future returns from Sudan and Ukraine may produce or reproduce the same effects after a time lag. African states thus import the liabilities arising from conflicts in which they have no strategic interest.

5.2 A Four-Level Architecture of Recommendations

In the face of the identified threefold structural failure, a fragmented response would be ineffective. We propose an architecture comprising four interconnected levels, whose effectiveness depends on their simultaneous alignment. The African Union, member states, African armed forces, and the international community are each called upon to act at their respective level of responsibility.

Level 1 Normative: A Specific African Convention

Given the structural inadequacy of the 1989 United Nations Convention, it falls to the African Union and its member states to fill this legal vacuum through a binding regional instrument. A future African Convention on the Protection of Youth against Substitute Mercenarism should be built around four major pillars:

- Legal autonomy: Define juvenile substitute mercenarism as an autonomous legal category, freed from the six cumulative conditions now inapplicable imposed by Article 47 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions.
- Criminalisation: Establish the recruitment of young Africans for foreign conflicts as an international criminal offence, engaging the direct responsibility of recruiting states and their networks of intermediaries.
- Restorative justice: Establish a mandatory reparation and compensation mechanism for surviving victims and their families.
- Administrative obligation: Impose on states hosting fighters a strict obligation of official notification and humanitarian repatriation.

The South African model offers the continent's most advanced legislative reference: the National Conventional Arms Control Committee (NCACC) requires prior authorisation for any foreign military engagement. Since 1978, Australia has had legislation criminalising the recruitment of mercenaries on its territory, with penalties of up to 14 years' imprisonment for fighters and seven years for recruiters. Both models are directly adaptable to the West African context. In addition, every contract involving military service for a foreign entity should be required to be translated, notarised, and approved by a national consular authority a simple measure that would have prevented the fourteen Ghanaians in Kostroma from unknowingly signing their enlistment agreements.

Level 2 Institutional: A Continental Monitoring Unit

The African Centre for Security and Transformation Studies (CAERT) could be mandated and funded to conduct systematic monitoring of mercenary recruitment networks, mapping, in real time, active recruitment areas, operational intermediaries, destination theatres, associated financial flows, and recruit profiles. This unit would issue early warnings enabling states to intervene before the networks become structured and irreversible.

Level 3 State: National Youth Resilience Plans

The decisive state response is a counteroffer. Although African states may be unable to compete with recruiters in terms of immediate remuneration, they can offer what recruiters cannot: a credible future. Ki-Zerbo was right to identify education as an existential issue for African development.⁴⁰ A properly trained young man, integrated into a dynamic local economy and supported by a minimum social safety net, is structurally not a candidate for mercenarism.

These youth resilience plans must incorporate three components: large-scale economic inclusion and integration programmes targeted at recruitment areas identified through continental monitoring; community alert mechanisms when recruiters are active in an area; and psychological and economic reintegration mechanisms for returning fighters, to break the cycle of delayed destabilisation.

Level 4 Military: A Doctrine of Human Sovereignty

The military response to juvenile substitute mercenarism is the least theorised of the four levels and probably the most decisive. It requires African armed forces to stop treating the phenomenon as a policing or social-policy issue and recognise it as a direct strategic threat to national sovereignty. A state that does not control the use of its potential military human resources does not control its power or its security.

In the context of this analysis, the concept of human sovereignty is understood as an operational doctrinal framework.⁴¹ Human sovereignty means the effective capacity of a state to exercise control over the use of its human resources including preventing their recruitment by external actors on its own territory. It is a constituent dimension of sovereignty in the same way as territorial, monetary, or natural-resource control. A state that allows foreign powers freely to recruit its young people on its territory has, in this specific respect, relinquished a fundamental attribute of its sovereignty.

4.1 Doctrinal Gaps in African Armed Forces

⁴⁰Joseph Ki-Zerbo (dir.), *Éduquer ou périr : impasses et perspectives africaines* (Paris : UNICEF/L'Harmattan, 1990), 7–22. L'analyse de Ki-Zerbo sur l'échec des systèmes éducatifs africains à produire des citoyens capables de transformer leur société demeure d'une actualité saisissante soixante-cinq ans après les indépendances.

⁴¹L'expression « souveraineté humaine » désigne ici la capacité effective d'un État à exercer un contrôle sur l'utilisation de ses ressources humaines, y compris à empêcher leur enrôlement par des acteurs extérieurs sur son propre sol. Elle prolonge et spécifie la notion de souveraineté telle que définie par la Charte des Nations Unies (art. 2, § 1) en l'appliquant à la ressource humaine comme dimension constitutive du pouvoir souverain, au même titre que le contrôle territorial, monétaire ou naturel.

African armed forces exhibit, to varying degrees, four structural doctrinal gaps in addressing the phenomenon of juvenile mercenarism.⁴²

- The first is the absence of a detection framework: no African armed force currently has an intelligence mechanism specifically dedicated to identifying mercenary recruitment networks operating on its territory. Existing military intelligence services are oriented towards conventional armed threats and jihadist groups not towards civilian recruitment networks that appear to operate legally on the surface, such as employment agencies, tribal intermediaries, and digital platforms.
- The second gap is the absence of structured cooperation among African armed forces on this issue. Mercenary recruitment networks are inherently cross-border: a recruiter based in Niger may enlist Malian fighters for a Libyan conflict through Chadian intermediaries. This transnational architecture requires a coordinated response that existing mechanisms the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS were not designed to provide.
- The third is the military human-resources paradox: the states whose armed forces are most lacking in qualified personnel are precisely those whose young men are recruited most extensively by external actors. Juvenile mercenarism deprives these armed forces of their potential recruitment pool at the very moment when they need it most. This vicious cycle is never treated as a doctrinal issue, although it should be.
- The fourth gap is the absence of a doctrine for the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning fighters. Former mercenaries who return carry weapons, military skills acquired outside any national framework, and often untreated trauma. No African armed force has a formal disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration protocol specifically adapted to this profile.

4.2 Doctrinal Proposal: Four Pillars for a Doctrine of Human Sovereignty

The doctrine of human sovereignty that we propose rests on four operational pillars, conceived as a coherent system rather than as isolated measures.

- The first pillar is the detection and mapping of recruitment networks: the military intelligence mandate of every African state should explicitly include monitoring mercenary recruitment networks. This mission should be entrusted to specialised units capable of monitoring digital platforms, population movements in border areas, and financial flows linked to recruitment.
- The second pillar is cooperation among African armed forces on mercenary recruitment. We propose the creation of a Shared Intelligence Unit on Mercenarism (CRPM) within the African Union's security architecture, attached to CAERT. This unit would receive signals from each

⁴²Voir à ce sujet : Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa* (Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011), 134–158 ; Comfort Ero, « Vigilance over Africa's Armies », *International Peace Academy Policy Brief*, 2003. Les deux études documentent les lacunes doctrinales récurrentes des armées africaines face aux phénomènes transfrontaliers et aux acteurs armés non étatiques.

national armed force, cross-check them, and issue early warnings to the states concerned. Its added value is specifically transnational precisely where national armed forces are structurally blind.

- The third pillar is the national criminalisation of recruitment: every African state should adopt specific national legislation making the recruitment of its citizens for foreign armed conflicts an offence not subject to any limitation period. This law should target recruiters, intermediaries, and financiers not merely the recruits, who are first and foremost victims of their state's structural failure.
- The fourth pillar is a Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration and Repatriation (DDRR) protocol adapted to returning fighters: demobilisation, disarmament, psychological care, social re-education, and economic reintegration. This protocol, which does not currently exist,⁴³ must be designed at the continental level and implemented by each state according to its capacity. Its absence is the most dangerous blind spot: it is what allows the cycle of delayed destabilisation to reproduce itself indefinitely.

4.3 The Institutional Responsibility of the AU and ECOWAS

The African Union and ECOWAS bear direct institutional responsibility for this gap.⁴⁴ The AU Peace and Security Council acknowledged the scale of the phenomenon in 2020 without creating any binding obligation. In its protocols on the free movement of persons, ECOWAS did not anticipate the mercenary use of this freedom of movement. The founding documents of the G5 Sahel contain no provision concerning the protection of nationals against mercenary recruitment.

This accumulation of institutional silences is not insignificant: it reveals that juvenile mercenarism has not yet been integrated into the strategic categories of thought used by Pan-African institutions. The doctrinal proposal advanced by this analysis is intended precisely to fill this conceptual vacuum before the scale of the phenomenon renders every institutional response too late and inadequate.

⁴³Le G5 Sahel, dans ses documents fondateurs de 2014–2017, ne comporte aucune disposition relative à la protection des ressortissants nationaux contre le recrutement mercenaire. La CEDEAO, dans ses protocoles sur la libre circulation (1979, révisé 1990), n'a pas anticipé les usages mercenaires de cette liberté de mouvement. Ce vide doctrinal est documenté dans : ISS Afrique, *Le G5 Sahel : défis et perspectives* (Pretoria : ISS, 2019), 42–47.

⁴⁴Union africaine, *Rapport du Conseil de paix et de sécurité sur le mercenariat en Afrique*, PSC/PR/BR.(DCCCLXXVIII) (Addis-Abeba : UA, 2020). Le rapport constate l'absence de doctrine formelle et appelle les États membres à légiférer spécifiquement sur le mercenariat juvénile, sans créer d'obligation contraignante.

6. CONCLUSION

In 1857, Napoleon III signed the decree at Plombières establishing the Senegalese Tirailleurs young Africans sent to die in European colonial wars. In 2023, young Malians, Burkinabè, and Central Africans signed contracts with Wagner to go and die in the Ukrainian trenches. Among them were fourteen Senegalese men aged 25 to 37, six of whom were killed in combat. One hundred and sixty-six years separate these two events. The structure is identical.

The central argument of this article is that juvenile substitute mercenarism is not a new, marginal, or spontaneous phenomenon. It is the contemporary reactivation of a proven colonial logic the logic of the substitutable African body under new legal, economic, and technological forms. Social networks have replaced colonial round-ups. Mercenary contracts have replaced imperial decrees. Promises of migration have replaced threats from village chiefs. Yet the result is identical: a young African man, torn from his society by deprivation and promises, exposed to death in a war that does not concern him, for the benefit of interests that reduce him to his value as a fighter.

The threefold failure identified by this article state failure, organised demand from belligerents, and a legal vacuum is not inevitable. It is a political configuration that can be changed through political decisions. The proposed architecture of recommendations offers a panacea encompassing four interconnected levels: an African convention, institutional monitoring, youth resilience, and a doctrine of human sovereignty. It is a realistic, operationally feasible, and urgent approach.

The passivity of African states, the African Union, and the international community is not a neutral position. Rather, it appears to constitute objective complicity. Every young African who leaves to die in Ukraine, Libya, or Sudan without anyone acting to prevent it represents a collective failure of sovereignty. The doctrine of human sovereignty that we propose says simply this: an African state that cannot protect its young men from mercenary recruitment on its own soil is not yet fully sovereign. Africa, sixty years after independence, deserves to be fully sovereign.

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