



Unorthodox Warfare: The Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin's Hybrid Warfare in the Sahel

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Abstract: Experts defining the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as part of Russia's hybrid warfare (HW) often focus solely on the ROC's propaganda against Ukraine. This leads to an incomplete account of how Russia weaponizes religion. Conceptually, HW refers not merely to disinformation but to a combination of conventional and unconventional warfighting methods. More importantly, empirical evidence indicates that elements of the ROC act not only as a disinformation machine but also as a troop recruitment platform, including in Africa. The recent expansion of the ROC into Africa is critical to Western security since, in some African states, the ROC is reportedly recruiting irregular soldiers to join the war against Ukraine. To offer an updated research and policy agenda, we examine the effectiveness of the ROC's hybrid operations in the Sahel. This case has broader methodological relevance for studying the ROC's activities across Africa. The aim is to lay the foundations for a critical academic discussion of the ROC's HW activities in Africa and to derive best practices practitioners can use to evaluate HW effectiveness. By examining various open-source empirical data, we argue that it is analytically useful to define the ROC's malign activities in the Sahel region as hybrid operations. These operations are thus far effective, producing strategic, operational, and tactical effects in support of Russia's HW against the West. We conclude that a successful HW signature has seven basic elements: adaptability, ambiguity, asymmetry, deniability, irregularity, multimodality, and synchronicity. The West must support African states in defending against such hybrid operations.

Keywords: Africa, hybrid operations, hybrid warfare, religion, Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Moscow Patriarchate, the Sahel.

Introduction

War and religion often intertwine. When, in June 2025, the new Pope spoke by phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Putin promoted the claim that “Kyiv’s deliberate and targeted attack on civilians can clearly be defined as terrorism.”¹ Open-source intelligence (OSINT) reported that this was the highest-level contact between the Holy See and the Kremlin since Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine.²

The Kremlin often attempts to delegitimize the Vatican, as it frames itself as the sole guardian of Christianity and, specifically, Orthodoxy.³ The “Third Rome” doctrine captures this approach. In this worldview, Moscow is the successor to Rome (the First Rome) and Constantinople (the Second Rome) after the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire. This stance has led to a conflict between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (EPC), who is *primus inter pares* among the heads of the autocephalous Orthodox churches. In 2018, the ROC severed its relations with the EPC. Moscow’s decision followed the EPC’s statement that it would grant Ukraine autocephaly. As the Third Rome, the ROC regards Ukraine as part of its canonical territory.⁴ Specific elements within the ROC have thus waged an information operation portraying the war in Ukraine as a “holy war” to free Kyiv from the decadent liberal West and restore Orthodoxy.

Given the alignment between the ROC’s leadership and the Kremlin’s foreign and military policy, scholars have conceptualized the information operations led by the Moscow Patriarchate against Kyiv as hybrid warfare (HW).⁵ The concept

¹ Gerard O’Connell, “Pope Leo XIV and Russia’s Vladimir Putin Have First Phone Call,” *America Magazine*, June 4, 2025, www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2025/06/04/pope-leo-russian-president-putin-phone-call-250837/.

² Robert Moynihan, “Letter #53, 2025, Thursday, June 5: Putin–Pope Call,” *Inside the Vatican*, June 5, 2025, <https://insidethevatican.com/news/newsflash/letter-53-2025-thursday-june-5-putin-pope-call/>; I.Media, “Pope and Putin Speak on the Phone,” *Al-eteia*, June 5, 2025, <https://aleteia.org/2025/06/05/pope-and-putin-speak-on-the-phone>.

³ Iskren Ivanov, “Geopolitics of Russian Orthodoxy as an Instrument in the Hybrid War on the Balkans,” *Fourth International Scientific Conference: Social Changes in the Global World*, Goce Delcev University, Shtip, Republic of North Macedonia, September 6–7, 2017, 891, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372535566_Geopolitics_of_Russian_Orthodoxy_as_an_instrument_in_the_hybrid_war_on_the_Balkans.

⁴ Carlo Lippold, “The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Disinformation Campaigns: A Tool of Modern Hybrid Warfare,” *Enlighten the Day – News, Nonsense & Necessary Truths*, March 15, 2025, <https://enlightentheday.substack.com/p/the-russian-orthodox-church-roc-and>.

⁵ For example: Oleksii Petriaiev, “Russian Orthodox Fundamentalism as an Element of Hybrid Warfare,” *Evropský Politický a Právní Diskurz* 8, no. 5 (2021): 102–109, <https://doi.org/10.46340/eppd.2021.8.5.11>; Yuriy Nedzelsky, “Foreign Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church as a Weapon of the Hybrid War against Ukraine,” *Political Science and Security Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2020): 15–21, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4062360>.

of HW, referring to the synergistic combination of conventional and unconventional methods, gained popularity after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. The European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defined the 2014 campaign as a major hybrid threat.⁶ Russia's cyberattacks, propaganda, use of militias, and election meddling not only denied Ukraine's sovereignty but also created a dangerous international precedent. Evidently, this amounted to a new kind of security challenge, demanding a cross-domain and cross-border response.

It is thus surprising that current academic scholarship on ROC-led HW focuses only on information warfare against Ukraine and some neighboring states. Scholars of the ROC's HW rarely extend their investigation to other domains of operations or other regions. This omission results in an incomplete operational account of how the Kremlin weaponizes Orthodoxy as a hybrid tool. First, OSINT reports indicate that the ROC operates not only as a disinformation machine but also as an irregular troop-recruitment platform.⁷ Second, mounting OSINT evidence points to the ROC's activities in Africa.⁸ The ROC's recent expansion to another continent is important to Western security since, reportedly, in countries such as Burundi and Uganda, the ROC recruits irregular soldiers to join the war against Ukraine.⁹ Thus, defining the ROC's operations in Africa as HW will not only fill gaps in the literature but will also have critical policy implications.

To offer an updated research and policy agenda, this article asks: How effective are the ROC's hybrid operations in the Sahel? The objective is twofold. First, the article aims to lay the foundations for a critical academic discussion of the ROC's HW in Africa. The choice to focus on the Sahel is guided by methodological factors, explained later. Second, based on the assessment of the ROC's HW, the article derives best practices that security analysts and intelligence officers can use to evaluate the effectiveness of HW. Existing literature on HW is abundant in theoretical discussions about whether the HW concept is sufficiently rigorous. Meanwhile, far fewer studies examine specific empirical cases of hybrid operations and the factors that make a hybrid campaign successful.

The opening argument is that it is analytically useful to analyze the ROC's efforts in the Sahel as hybrid operations. This does not imply that all religious

⁶ Naja Bentzen, "NATO Strategic Communications – An Evolving Battle of Narratives," European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing, July 2016, [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586600/EPRS_BRI\(2016\)586600_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586600/EPRS_BRI(2016)586600_EN.pdf).

⁷ Petriaiev, "Russian Orthodox Fundamentalism."

⁸ See, for example, Antonio Graceffo, "Russia's Religious Offensive in Africa," *Providence*, September 19, 2023, <https://providencemag.com/2023/09/russias-religious-offensive-in-africa/>; Olena Snigyr, "The Kremlin Mobilises the Church for War... for Africa," *EUvsDisinfo*, July 4, 2024, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-mobilises-the-church-for-war-for-africa/>.

⁹ Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian Orthodox Church Recruits African Students for Moscow's War in Ukraine," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, no.132, September 16, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-orthodox-church-recruits-african-students-for-moscows-war-in-ukraine/>.

teachings and staff of the ROC, let alone the wider Orthodox world, are malign. However, the ROC's leadership and its specific posture in Africa are aligned with the Kremlin, steering most of the ROC's operations in a hybrid rather than a spiritual direction. Most critically, this HW has been effective so far because it creates strategic, operational, and tactical effects across the dispersed battlespace of Russia's HW against the West. Western defense and security policy must thus treat Africa as a theater of hybrid operations and support African states in defending against HW.

This article is divided into four sections. First, it examines the ROC's role as a political institution; this section also serves as a literature review and identifies gaps in current scholarship. Second, it defines HW as a theoretical lens and then operationalizes it. Third, the analysis examines three hybrid operations involving the ROC across the Sahel. Finally, the conclusion revisits the opening argument and offers recommendations for assessing the effectiveness of HW.

The Russian Orthodox Church as a Political Instrument

A growing body of scholarship suggests that the ROC should be understood not only as a religious but also as a political institution, increasingly leveraged by the Russian state.¹⁰ Orthodoxy has long been a pillar of "the Motherland," with Peter the Great placing the church under state control as early as 1721. Yet, in contemporary Russia, the relationship between religion and statehood has greatly intensified, with Orthodoxy now serving as a language of loyalty and power. A 2023 poll shows that 72 % of Russians identify as Orthodox, but 60 % claim that religion has little significance in their lives.¹¹ This dichotomy signals that, in today's Russia, Orthodoxy often functions as a national marker rather than solely as a lived faith. It is crucial to identify when the ROC's political profile increased. Experts connect its political weaponization to Putin.¹² In 2000, he devised a new

¹⁰ See, for example, Lippold, "The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Disinformation Campaigns: A Tool of Modern Hybrid Warfare"; Evangelos Thiani, "The Russian Orthodox Church in Africa – For Political or Ecclesial Reasons?" *Studies in World Christianity* 30, no. 2 (2024): 249-268, 253, <https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2024.0473>; Nedzelsky, "Foreign Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church," 17; Ksenia Luchenko, "Propaganda in Holy Orders: Africa, Ukraine, and the Russian Orthodox Church," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 20, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/propaganda-in-holy-orders-africa-ukraine-and-the-russian-orthodox-church/>.

¹¹ Katarzyna Chawryło, "A Holy War. The Russian Orthodox Church Blesses the War against the West," *OSW Commentary* no. 589 (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, April 12, 2024), 5, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-04-12/a-holy-war-russian-orthodox-church-blesses-war-against-west.

¹² See, for example, Niels Drost and Beatrice de Graaf, "Putin and the Third Rome: Imperial-Eschatological Motives as a Usable Past," *Journal of Applied History* 4, no. 1-2 (2022): 28-45, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895893-bja10032>; Mikheil Korkashvili, "The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Kremlin's Foreign Policy," *EGI Rapporteur* 3, Europe-Georgia Institute (EGI), January 27, 2022, <https://egi.ge/en/the-role-of-the-russian-orthodox-church-in-the-kremlins-foreign-policy/>.

National Security Concept alongside a spiritual security doctrine, carefully integrating Orthodoxy into the Kremlin's foreign and military policy.^{13,14} Putin has personified this strong link between the state and the ROC by emphasizing his Orthodox ancestry and beliefs and by proclaiming Moscow the Third Rome.¹⁵ The ROC's political influence operates through various mechanisms under different conditions, as elaborated below, but, in sum, its political role was consolidated under Putin.¹⁶

Considering this strong relationship between the ROC and the Kremlin, it is surprising that scholarship on the Moscow Patriarchate's role in HW remains scarce. In recent years, the concept of HW has become nearly synonymous with the Kremlin's foreign policy; thus, if the relationship between the ROC and the Kremlin is systemic, it would be both expected and analytically advantageous to conceptualize the Moscow Patriarchate as an HW tool. Nonetheless, the academic literature on the ROC's role in HW remains relatively limited, with most writings consisting of OSINT or media reporting rather than peer-reviewed scholarship. As expected, within the existing academic literature, the most extensively covered topic is the war in Ukraine, due to the role of the ROC in propaganda against Kyiv.¹⁷ In fact, most investigations of the ROC's activities in post-Soviet countries focus almost exclusively on the Moscow Patriarchate's disinformation efforts.

Existing works explain that Putin developed the ROC's disinformation capabilities by reviving the decades-old doctrine of *Russkiy Mir*, or the Russian World. The concept holds that Moscow is the sole unifier and guardian of not only ethnic Russians, but also Russian speakers and people with cultural or spiritual ties to

¹³ An emblematic example of the integration between the Russian Church, state, and army is the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces outside Moscow, consecrated in 2020. Its walls and vaults not only depict the customary Orthodox iconographic images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints, but also present battle scenes from Russian military history, Red Army orders, and reliefs of key events in the history of the Russian state; earlier mosaic plans even included Putin, Stalin, and the annexation of Crimea. In that sense, the cathedral symbolically moves beyond traditional Orthodox sacred art and turns the church interior into a visual manifesto of the synergy between faith, statehood, and the armed forces.

¹⁴ Nicholas Chkhaidze, "Moscow Uses Russian Orthodox Church as Covert Foreign Policy Tool in Ukraine and the West," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, no. 55, April 10, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-uses-russian-orthodox-church-as-covert-foreign-policy-tool-in-ukraine-and-the-west/>.

¹⁵ Drost and de Graaf, "Putin and the Third Rome," 34.

¹⁶ Eppie Parker, "Russia, Religion and Soft Power," CHACR Global Analysis Programme Briefing, *In Depth*, issue 20 (Camberley: Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, June 2020), 1-3, https://chacr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CHACR_Briefing_Russia_Religion_June_2020.pdf; Chawryło, "A Holy War. The Russian Orthodox Church Blesses the War against the West," 5.

¹⁷ See, for example, Pedro Constantino, "Russian Orthodox Church: Kremlin's 'Invisible Hand' in War against Ukraine," *Political Observer | Revista Portuguesa de Ciência Política*, no. 20 (2023): 17-26, <https://doi.org/10.59071/2795-4765.RPCP2023.20/pp-17-26>; Petriaiev, "Russian Orthodox Fundamentalism."

Russia. Under Putin, the ROC has been instrumental in promoting this narrative. Critically, the Russian World presents all Slavs as one historical and religious community and defines the liberal West as morally corrupt.¹⁸ In Ukraine, before the 2022 full-scale invasion, this narrative was used to legitimize the illegal annexation of Crimea. In 2014, Putin contended that in the past, “Christianity was a powerful spiritual unifying force that helped involve various tribes and tribal unions of the vast Eastern Slavic world in the creation of a Russian nation [...] All of this allows us to say that Crimea [...] and Sevastopol have invaluable civilisational and even sacral importance for Russia.”¹⁹ The ROC acts as a propaganda machine in other post-Soviet countries as well. In the Balkans, it partnered with the Serbian Church and pro-Russian politicians to adapt the same script into the idea of a Serbian World. In Montenegro, ROC groups mobilized support for Zdravko Krivokapić and complicated the state’s Euro-Atlantic path.²⁰ In these instances, the ROC integrates politics into church practices to amplify Russian propaganda.²¹

While one of the ROC’s key functions is to legitimize the Kremlin’s foreign and military policy,²² this portrayal of the ROC is incomplete. It does not reflect the Moscow Patriarchate’s multimodal operations, which in some cases go beyond information warfare. There is sufficient empirical evidence that the ROC engages

¹⁸ Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and George Barros, “The Russian Orthodox Church Declares ‘Holy War’ Against Ukraine and Articulates Tenets of Russia’s Emerging Official Nationalist Ideology,” Institute for the Study of War, March 30, 2024, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/the-russian-orthodox-church-declares-holy-war-against-ukraine-and-articulates-tenets-of-russias-emerging-official-nationalist-ideology/>.

¹⁹ Drost and de Graaf, “Putin and the Third Rome,” 38.

²⁰ Mira Milosevich, “Russia’s Weaponization of Tradition: The Case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 25, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-weaponization-tradition-case-orthodox-church-montenegro>; Miloš Petrović and Dragan Đukanović, “How Does Moscow Influence the Pro-European Course in Montenegro? The Role of the Church,” *East European Politics and Societies* 40, no. 1 (2026): 220-248, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254261423514>.

²¹ Petriaiev, “Russian Orthodox Fundamentalism,” 102-103; Ivanov, “Geopolitics of Russian Orthodoxy as an Instrument in the Hybrid War on the Balkans,” 888-889; Ivana Stradner and George Barros, “How Kremlin Uses the Church in Europe’s East,” Commentary, American Enterprise Institute, December 10, 2021, 1-3, www.aei.org/oped/how-kremlin-uses-the-church-in-europes-east/; Kateryna Shymkevych, “Russia’s influence in the Balkans: Challenges for Supporting Ukraine in Countering Russian Armed Aggression,” New Geopolitics Research Network, August 19, 2024, 6-9, <https://www.newgeopolitics.org/2024/08/19/russias-hybrid-war-in-the-balkans/>.

²² Jeremy W. Lamoreaux and Lincoln Flake, “The Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin, and Religious (Il)liberalism in Russia,” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (2018): article 115, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0169-6>; Drost and de Graaf, “Putin and the Third Rome”; Walenty Baluk and Mykola Doroshko, “The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian Armed Conflict,” *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 56, no. 3 (2021): 121-140, <https://doi.org/10.12775/SDR.2021.EN6.06>.

in sabotage, intelligence gathering, and other irregular activities in post-Soviet countries, especially in conflict zones. Armed Orthodox fundamentalists supported by the ROC have been deployed in several conflicts in the region. These groups fight under religious flags portraying the Virgin Mary or Saint George.²³ There are several fundamentalist subgroups: for example, the Russian Orthodox Army has been accused of kidnapping, torture, and murder in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, while the Cossacks have fought in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Abkhazia.²⁴ Thus, through propaganda, the ROC exercises soft power, but under specific conflict conditions, it also enables hard power.

Grey zone operations enabled by the ROC are not limited to conflict zones; they also occur in EU and NATO member states. In Sweden, for example, a local ROC entity was tied to operations near sensitive infrastructure: a church in the city of Västerås, financed by Russia's nuclear corporation Rosatom, opened near a major airport and a metallurgical plant. Swedish intelligence revealed that it was a Russian espionage hub.²⁵ Mounting OSINT evidence suggests the Kremlin uses the ROC to recruit spies, hackers, and sometimes even armed groups,²⁶ yet most academic work does not define the ROC as a HW actor.

This incomplete account of the ROC's hybrid efforts represents a critical scholarly gap. By failing to grasp the complexity and reach of the Kremlin's HW apparatus, the West risks mounting an inadequate response to Russian aggression, including aggression against Ukraine. As previously reported, Russian parishes in Africa recruit personnel and provide material support for Russia's war

²³ Petriaiev, "Russian Orthodox Fundamentalism," 107.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Ukraine: Rebel Forces Detain, Torture Civilians – Dire Concern for Safety of Captives," August 28, 2014, www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/28/ukraine-rebel-forces-detain-torture-civilians; Valery Dzutsati, "Cossacks Split Between Claiming to Be an Ethnic Group or a Social Class," *North Caucasus Weekly*, Jamestown Foundation, October 28, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/cossacks-split-between-claiming-to-be-an-ethnic-group-or-a-social-class/>; Mariana Karapinka, "Ukrainian Priest Says His Emotional Captivity Was Worse Than Physical," Catholic Near East Welfare Association, July 14, 2015, <https://cnewa.org/ukrainian-priest-says-his-emotional-captivity-was-worse-than-physical/>; "Police Finds Murderers of Pentecostals in Slovyansk," Religious Information Service of Ukraine, January 31, 2018, https://risu.ua/en/police-finds-murderers-of-pentecostals-in-slovyansk_n88983; Sergey Sukhankin, "From 'Volunteers' to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts," *War by Other Means*, Jamestown Foundation, June 25, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/from-volunteers-to-quasi-pmc-retracing-the-footprints-of-russian-irregulars-in-the-yugoslav-wars-and-post-soviet-conflicts>.

²⁵ Patrik Oksanen, "Sweden: The Atomic Church with the Crooked Priest," in *Tracking the Russian Hybrid Warfare – Cases from Nordic-Baltic Countries*, ed. Minna Ålander and Patrik Oksanen (Stockholm: Stockholm Free World Forum, 2024), 23, <https://frivarld.se/rapporter/tracking-the-russian-hybrid-warfare-cases-from-nordic-baltic-countries/>.

²⁶ Teri Schultz, "Is Russia using this church in Sweden as a spying hub?" Deutsche Welle, August 27, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-russia-using-this-church-in-sweden-as-a-spying-hub/video-73775986>.

against Ukraine, fulfilling functions well beyond propaganda. Scholars do agree that the most menacing weaponization of the ROC is evident in the Kremlin's war against Ukraine.²⁷ For example, Patriarch Kirill has declared that Russians who become martyrs in the "holy war" against Ukraine will have their sins forgiven.²⁸ However, by ignoring broader hybrid operations beyond propaganda, including troop recruitment in Africa, authors studying the ROC's role in the war in Ukraine offer an incomplete analysis.

Moreover, the limited scope of current scholarship does not allow us to determine whether the ROC's efforts constitute a successful contribution to the Kremlin's objectives; if scholarship attempts to draw such a conclusion, it may offer misleading evidence suggesting that the Moscow Patriarchate has achieved only sporadic success. That is, if we focus solely on Ukraine and the ROC's role as a propaganda engine, we may argue that the Moscow Patriarchate's efforts have not been successful. For example, Lippold studies Patriarch Kirill's failed 2018 attempt to deny autocephaly to Ukraine.²⁹ He concludes that the Kremlin perceived the eventual establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as a significant defeat. While Russia has undoubtedly failed to retain Ukraine as canonical territory, this does not necessarily mean that the ROC's success rate is similar elsewhere. Africa again comes under the analytical spotlight; according to the Moscow Patriarchate's External Relations Department, as of 2025, the ROC had opened 350 parishes in 32 African countries.³⁰

Transforming this non-academic knowledge into scholarly research is critical to creating a rigorous discussion of Africa's role in Russia's HW. The Ukrainian, Balkan, and Nordic cases suggest that the ROC offers a flexible portfolio of hybrid capabilities that the Kremlin can adapt and deploy across theaters, including, more recently, in Africa. While the baseline function of the ROC is to broadcast propaganda in support of Russia's foreign policy, under specific conditions the Moscow Patriarchate can enable espionage hubs and even mobilize armed groups. It would be important to identify the intensity and scope of the ROC's operations in Africa and determine whether they are limited to information operations or extend to multimodal operations or full-blown HW, as in some post-Soviet conflict regions. The significance of the Sahel case study, therefore, would not be that it presents an entirely new pattern, but that it tests whether a repertoire first evident in the post-Soviet space can be successfully transferred to a culturally different theater of operations. Before that discussion, we will offer a working definition of HW.

²⁷ See, for example, Drost and de Graaf, "Putin and the Third Rome," 38.

²⁸ "Orthodox Church Leader Says Russian Soldiers Dying in Ukraine Will Be Cleansed of Sin," *Reuters*, September 26, 2022, www.reuters.com/world/europe/orthodox-church-leader-says-russian-soldiers-dying-ukraine-will-be-cleansed-sin-2022-09-26/.

²⁹ Lippold, "The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Disinformation Campaigns."

³⁰ "The number of ROC parishes in Africa has reached 350 in 32 countries – Metropolitan," African Initiative, March 2, 2025, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2025/02/the-number-of-roc-parishes-in-africa-has-reached-350-in-32-countries-metropolitan>.

Hybrid Warfare

Defining the Concept

While he did not coin the term, Frank Hoffman of the U.S. Marine Corps is widely regarded as the “father” of the HW concept. His 2007 monograph formulated what is considered the original detailed conceptualization of the phenomenon:

A full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. [...] These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects.³¹

Evidently, the original HW concept focused on kinetic and violent methods. However, it may be conceptually advantageous to distinguish between HW definitions before and after the annexation of Crimea.³² That is, when the European Union and NATO decided to incorporate the HW concept into their strategic messaging in response to Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, the theory was significantly transformed to fit the real-world events in Ukraine in 2014. At the time, Russia had not yet mounted a full-scale invasion of Ukraine but focused on non-kinetic cyberattacks, disinformation, and election meddling. Thus, before 2014, the term focused on military action, while after 2014, it has mostly been used to describe below-threshold-of-war activities.

The existence of two different definitions or schools of HW is not inherently an issue. However, this becomes problematic when experts who use the HW framework fail to acknowledge which definition they are using or, worse, develop their own arbitrary definition of HW. This has led to an uncontrolled proliferation of HW definitions, clogging the field with theoretical debates that are rarely operationalized in empirical cases. To counter this trend, this analysis takes Hoffman’s pre-Crimean HW as a starting point and operationalizes the concept.

Hoffman briefly references religion in his 2007 work. He juxtaposes HW with other theories on the changing nature of war, including unrestricted warfare (UW). Two Chinese colonels developed UW in the late 1990s to argue that today’s adversaries have nearly unrestricted access to various domains of operations.³³ Their access is not constrained because globalization has given rise to new domains of operations, such as cyberspace. These new domains are much cheaper to operate in than the traditional domains of land, air, and sea, which

³¹ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, Virginia: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 8, www.potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf.

³² Borislav Bankov, “The Decline of Russian Hybrid Warfare? Lessons from Ukraine,” *Balkan Social Science Review* 22, no. 22 (2023): 319-343, 321, <https://doi.org/10.46763/BSSR23222319b>.

³³ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, 22.

demand years-long investments in equipment. Hoffman supports this view and cites the *religious domain of operations* as one of these emerging fields.

The reference to religion fits Hoffman's work well, as he illustrates his overall argument about HW with Hezbollah. He considers the Shia militant group, whose ideology combines religious, political, and social elements, to be the archetypal HW actor. Hoffman notes that the 2006 Lebanon War demonstrated that Hezbollah had reached full operational capability to combine various conventional military assets with irregular methods.³⁴ However, Hoffman did not discuss whether the paramilitary group's sectarian underpinning played any role in its posture.

Operationalizing the Concept

All things considered, it is analytically useful to expand Hoffman's initial thinking on the relations between HW and religion by examining new empirical cases. The ROC's HW in Africa is a fertile case study for such an analysis because sufficient empirical evidence exists to support investigation. The analytical part will examine US government reporting; think tank investigations; domain-specific news sources, such as the Catholic Church's *La Croix International*; OSINT, such as that produced by the Institute for the Study of War; and primary sources from Africa and Russia.

Given that the article will need to lay the foundations for academic discussion of the ROC's HW in Africa, it would not be feasible to attempt to cover the entire continent; thus, the analysis focuses on the Sahel, which, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan.³⁵ The region is selected based on its religious context. Unlike Central, Southern, or Eastern Africa, Sahel countries are predominantly Muslim.³⁶ Having had limited historical exposure to Christianity, the Sahel represents a *least-likely case* for successful religious influence by the ROC. Thus, if the analysis finds that the ROC's operations gain traction there, this would lend greater weight to the argument that the ROC's presence in the Sahel is driven not by religious factors but by strategic considerations. Crucially, it would offer evidence that the ROC's hybrid influence can function even without cultural affinity. Thus, the Sahel is not merely another case but a crucial stress test of whether the ROC's hybrid model works in Africa.

Guided by Hoffman's original understanding of HW, the analysis needs to consider four interrelated questions in parallel. First, it must study the ROC's relations with Moscow. According to Hoffman, most HW is waged through covert relationships between state and non-state actors to keep the targeted population uncertain about who the perpetrators are. Second, it needs to examine

³⁴ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, 35.

³⁵ Britannica Editors, "Sahel, Region Africa," Encyclopaedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/place/Sahel.

³⁶ Nearly 90 % of the people of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sudan identify as Muslim; Burkina Faso is approximately 60 % Muslim; Chad and Nigeria are the exceptions, with Muslim populations of only 55 % and approximately 50 %, respectively.

whether the ROC is involved in any grey-zone campaigns that combine military and criminal efforts. Third, it needs to consider whether those activities are multimodal and extend beyond disinformation. Fourth, it needs to explore the coordination structure behind the ROC's operations given Hoffman's claim that most HW efforts are tightly synchronized across the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war.

The Russian Orthodox Church in the Sahel

For crucial context, the analysis first reviews the ROC's presence in the Sahel. In only a few years, the ROC opened nearly 200 parishes in more than 25 African countries.³⁷ Kenya is the primary target of the ROC's efforts, with 80 or more ROC events between January and August 2024 alone.³⁸ Relative to Kenya, the ROC's activities in the Sahel are modest; still, they are significant, with reports of ROC activity in seven of the eight Sahel countries, with Niger as the exception.

First, the ROC has opened permanent churches in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. For example, there are four Russian parishes in Nigeria – in the states of Benue,³⁹ Delta,⁴⁰ Ogun,⁴¹ and Imo.⁴² Symbolically, in 2022, Archimandrite Ambrose, became the first Nigerian priest to join the ROC's community, thus reinforcing the presence of the Moscow Patriarchate. Reports also cite similar activities in Burkina Faso, where there has been a Russian church since 2023,⁴³ and in Mauritania, where the ROC is based at the Russian embassy.⁴⁴

³⁷ Lippold, "The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Disinformation Campaigns."

³⁸ Mikhail Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South: Recalibration of the Geopolitical Culture of the Church," *Religions* 15, no. 12 (2024): article 1517, 9, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121517>.

³⁹ ROC, Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "On the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, the Divine Liturgy Was Celebrated at St. James Parish in Nigeria," October 2, 2023, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/news/on-the-feast-of-the-exaltation-of-the-cross-the-divine-liturgy-was-celebrated-at-st-james-parish-in-nigeria/>.

⁴⁰ ROC, Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "First Liturgy Celebrated in Emevor, Nigeria," June 28, 2023, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/news/first-liturgy-celebrated-in-emevor-nigeria/>.

⁴¹ ROC, Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "Divine Liturgy Celebrated at the Parish of the Protection of the Mother of God in Nigeria on 7th Sunday of Pascha," June 1, 2023, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/news/divine-liturgy-celebrated-at-the-parish-of-the-protection-of-the-mother-of-god-in-nigeria-on-7th-sunday-of-pascha/>.

⁴² ROC, Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "Divine Liturgies at Nigerian Parishes of the Protection of the Mother of God and of St. Leonid Celebrated on Pentecost," June 6, 2023, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/news/divine-liturgies-at-nigerian-parishes-of-the-protection-of-the-mother-of-god-and-of-st-leonid-celebrated-on-pentecost/>.

⁴³ DECR Communication Service, "Orthodox Community in Burkina Faso Moves into the Russian Orthodox Church," The Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, June 12, 2023, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/90437/>.

⁴⁴ ROC, Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "Chapel Consecrated in the Territory of Russia's Embassy in Mauritania," April 15, 2023, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/news/chapel-consecrated-in-the-territory-of-russias-embassy-in-mauritania/>.

Second, while credible data on permanent ROC establishments in Senegal and Mali are lacking, the Moscow Patriarchate conducts regular high-level visits to both countries, especially on key Christian holidays. For example, a ROC delegation to Senegal celebrated Christmas on January 7, 2025, when Russia observes the Nativity.⁴⁵ A U.S. missionary confirmed the event on social media.⁴⁶ The ROC delegation was headed by George Maximov, a prominent Russian reverend and scholar at the Moscow Theological Academy. Mali also often hosts high-level ROC delegates, such as Leonid Gorbachov, the former Russian Patriarchal Exarch of Africa.⁴⁷

Third, Chad and Sudan have also hosted the ROC, albeit less frequently and with less coverage. In the first eight months of 2024, the Moscow Patriarchate organized between one and three events.⁴⁸ Given that the Sahel is the least likely region for ROC expansion, these activities represent a critical development. Figure 1 visualizes the ROC's presence in the Sahel. To be thorough, the analysis will cover countries with varying degrees of ROC presence.

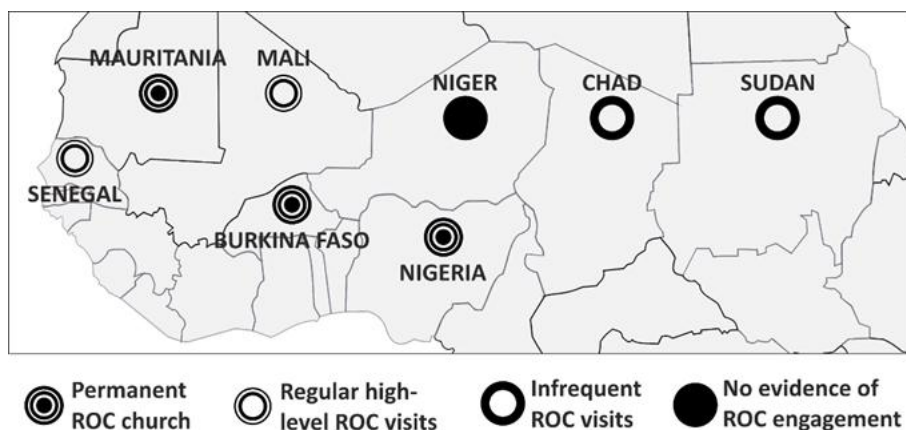


Figure 1: Mapping the ROC's Presence in the Sahel.

⁴⁵ ROC, Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "Believers Welcomed the Nativity of Christ in the Capital of Senegal," January 10, 2025, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/novosti/rozhddestvo-hristovo-vstretili-veruyushhie-v-stolicze-senegala/>. – in Russian

⁴⁶ "Orthodox Community in Dakar, Senegal," *Instagram*, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CpJ25aVOHg8>.

⁴⁷ ROC, Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "Divine Services for the Faithful of Russian Orthodox Church Celebrated in Mali," July 21, 2023, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/news/divine-services-for-the-faithful-of-russian-orthodox-church-celebrated-in-mali>; African Digital Democracy Observatory (ADDO), "Spiritual Spear: The Russian Orthodox Church Expands in Africa, Blending Faith with Geopolitics in Russia's Soft Power Play," *Disinfo.Africa*, February 28, 2025, <https://disinfo.africa/spiritual-spear-9d0b91b750ca/>.

⁴⁸ Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 9.

The ROC's Operation to Push Out the Patriarchate of Alexandria in Nigeria

To trace the ROC's expansion in Africa, one must consider its relations with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria (PA). The PA has existed since the fifth century. For a long time, ROC-PA relations were excellent, with the PA supporting Moscow's autocephaly in 1589.⁴⁹ In the 1920s, it was agreed that the PA had authority over all Orthodox churches in Africa.⁵⁰ However, ROC-PA relations changed drastically in 2020, when the PA supported Ukrainian autocephaly.⁵¹ In 2021, the ROC declared its Exarchate in Africa, effectively proclaiming Africa as its canonical territory and challenging the PA. The PA and the ROC have since competed for greater membership, with Moscow being at a disadvantage because it faces a centuries-old institution with hundreds of parishes. Hence, the ROC has waged an asymmetric operation against the PA's superior religious infrastructure.

A clear example is Nigeria, where the ROC's efforts have many characteristics of HW. The ROC has deployed financial, diplomatic, legal, and other non-religious tools to offset the PA's religious supremacy in Nigeria. First, the ROC has offered African priests who convert to its jurisdiction double the salary.⁵² It has also organized study trips to Russia for Nigerian theology students. To provide financial incentives, the ROC has utilized Rosatom funds.⁵³ According to Hoffman, this coordination, or synchronicity, between various actors is a characteristic feature of HW.⁵⁴

A second vector of the partnership between the ROC and the Kremlin is diplomacy. According to official ROC statements, the Moscow Patriarchate obtained legal registration in Nigeria very quickly, circumventing lengthy procedures.⁵⁵ The U.S. Institute of Peace clarifies that the ROC's use of legal loopholes was facilitated by Russian diplomats, who negotiated expedited registrations.⁵⁶ Such lawfare is often understood as a key HW instrument.

Third, the ROC has mounted an information operation to strengthen its foothold in Nigeria. Specifically, it has advertised itself as a welcoming alternative to

⁴⁹ Thiani, "The Russian Orthodox Church in Africa," 250.

⁵⁰ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 957-960.

⁵¹ Thiani, "The Russian Orthodox Church in Africa," 249.

⁵² Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 7.

⁵³ Luchenko, "Propaganda in Holy Orders: Africa, Ukraine."

⁵⁴ Jeremy W. Lamoreaux and Michael Mabe, "The Kremlin's Strategy vis-à-vis the Baltic States: A Role for Orthodoxy," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 19, no. 4 (2019): 286-301, 291, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2019.1678374>.

⁵⁵ ROC, Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa Receives Official Registration Certificate in Tanzania," January 20, 2023, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/news/patriarchal-exarchate-of-africa-receives-official-registration-certificate-in-tanzania/>.

⁵⁶ Andrew Hoyle, "As Russia Builds Influence in Africa, Its Church Takes a Role," United States Institute of Peace, July 24, 2024, accessed October 24, 2025, www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/russia-builds-influence-africa-its-church-takes-role.

the PA. In this effort, the ROC has shown remarkable adaptability by moving away from the otherwise prominent Russian World narrative it promotes in the post-Soviet states. The ROC has calculated that the *Russkiy Mir* worldview would be too Slav-centric for the targeted African communities and has instead constructed a narrative of a *universal mission* that includes various ethnicities. For example, the ROC has supplied liturgical books in Tiv—the indigenous language of Nigeria’s Benue State—to be as inclusive as possible. Hoffman has also suggested that a key feature of hybrid challengers is their ability to adapt continuously.

Altogether, the data confirm that the ROC’s operation in Nigeria has several features of HW. Importantly, the operation is multimodal, since the Moscow Patriarchate does not rely solely on propaganda but combines financial incentives, diplomatic and legal facilitation, and an adapted information narrative. That is, the Moscow Patriarchate operates simultaneously across religious, legal, information, diplomatic, and economic domains, using different methods and means to pursue its objectives.

Indeed, the above efforts have been productive, as the ROC has opened at least four churches across Nigeria. According to the ROC’s own website, the PA’s influence is shrinking as a result.⁵⁷ Moscow has claimed that, as early as 2022, half of the Nigerian priests had joined the Russian Exarchate. Even if this statement is part of the ROC’s propaganda, the PA has acknowledged the rising competition by stating that the state’s official legal registration of a new ROC church does not amount to an endorsement by the Nigerian government.⁵⁸ This is a clear attempt to keep the remaining Nigerian priests within the PA’s orbit. In sum, the defining features of the ROC’s hybrid operations on Nigerian territory include *asymmetry* (adding non-religious tools to challenge a superior religious infrastructure), *synchronicity* (collaboration with the Kremlin), *adaptability* (shifting the narrative to fit the African context), and *multimodality* (applying different means across different domains of operation).

The ROC’s Anticolonialism Disinformation Operation in Burkina Faso

The ROC’s disinformation in the Sahel merits further study. While Hoffman’s original concept does not focus on operations with limited kinetic effects, he makes one exception – information operations. Burkina Faso offers a case that can shed light on the ROC’s propaganda. Before examining the country-specific circumstances, let us first unpack Russia’s broader messaging in Africa.

The ROC not only presents itself as more inclusive toward Africans but also frames the PA and the West as decadent colonialists who exploit and morally corrupt Africa. This broader narrative has two core messages. The first argument

⁵⁷ “Half of Nigerian Priests Join Russian Church, According to Exarch of Africa,” *OrthoChristian*, February 22, 2022, <https://orthochristian.com/144609.html>.

⁵⁸ “Metropolis of Nigeria: The Russian Presence in the Country Serves Specific Purposes, Drawn Up over Many Decades,” *Orthodox Times*, December 4, 2022, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/metropolis-of-nigeria-the-russian-presence-in-the-country-serves-specific-purposes-drawn-up-over-many-decades/>.

is that the West not only has a long colonial history but also currently pursues neocolonial goals through financial dependence and restrictions on religious freedom. Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian president, published an article on this topic in 2024.⁵⁹ His article created an information space that the ROC can exploit by weaponizing a statement by the late Pope Francis criticizing the West for imposing its values on non-Western countries.⁶⁰ Taken out of context, the quote appears to be a stark rebuttal of Western policy toward Africa.

Moscow's second argument is that, in contrast to Western colonialism, Moscow—or the Third Rome—pursues social justice against U.S. and EU tyranny. Russia reminds African audiences that it never had colonies in Africa and that, whatever colonies it did have, it underwent a process of moral reassessment and now stands for a just world order. Putin made this claim in June 2022 at an African Union summit.⁶¹

Burkina Faso has been a frequent target of this information operation, which has clear HW characteristics for several reasons. First, the Kremlin and the ROC have worked in concert to push these narratives. The synergistic coordination between Russia's government and religious leaders fits Hoffman's proposition of state and non-state actors working in tandem. On June 4–5, 2024, Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Burkina Faso. In a long speech in Ouagadougou, he criticized the West for harboring neocolonial ideas. His remarks generated numerous soundbites on social media.⁶² In October that year, the ROC amplified this message, arguing that, unlike Western oppressors, the Moscow Patriarchate champions a postcolonial world and social justice. Metropolitan Konstantin, the head of Russia's African Exarchate, made this statement during a liturgy in Burkina Faso. His statement spread across several outlets, such as *Burkina24*.⁶³

Second, the ROC's messaging is not intended only to expand Russian Orthodoxy but also carries subtle political undertones. This ambiguity elevates the ROC's disinformation to a prime example of HW. That is, the condemnation of Western colonialism is utilized to delegitimize the sanctions imposed on Russia following its full-scale war against Ukraine. The sanctions are framed as an expression of the West's colonial reflex.⁶⁴ Russia mixes its alleged struggle for religious freedom with its military goals in Ukraine.

⁵⁹ Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 6.

⁶⁰ Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 6.

⁶¹ Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 6.

⁶² See, for example, "Russia's Minister Sergey Lavrov Bold Speech in Burkina Faso," *YouTube* video, accessed September 8, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTbqPy2_wsU.

⁶³ Serge Pacome Zongo, "Burkina Faso: 'The Russian Orthodox Church Prays for the Leaders, the People and the Army so that Peace and Security May Return' (Metropolitan Constantine of Zairisk)," *Burkina24*, October 19, 2024, <https://burkina24.com/2024/10/19/burkina-faso-leglise-orthodoxe-russe-prie-pour-les-dirigeants-le-peuple-et-larmee-afin-que-la-paix-et-la-securite-reviennent-le-metropolitain-constantin-de-zairisk/>.

⁶⁴ Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 6.

Disguising geostrategic interests as a moral battle for religious freedom has yielded results. For example, prior to the aforementioned visits, Burkina Faso abstained from voting on all United Nations resolutions regarding the war in Ukraine.⁶⁵ Its delegation continued to do so through 2024. However, in 2025, Burkina Faso explicitly supported Russia for the first time by voting against the UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/7, “Advancing a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine.” Thus, while it is challenging to determine whether this diplomatic shift can be attributed solely to the Kremlin’s and the ROC’s messaging, some of their disinformation efforts appear to have had an effect.

In sum, what enabled the effective hybrid operation was, once again, *synchronicity* (between state and non-state actors) and *ambiguity* (the mixing of religious and military agendas).

The ROC’s Support to the Operations of Russia’s Africa Corps in Mali

This section explains how the Moscow Patriarchate helps justify the presence of Russian mercenaries in Mali. Recently, the Wagner Group and—after Prigozhin’s death—its successor, the Africa Corps (AC), have greatly expanded their activities in Mali. Two interlinked reasons drive their interest in Mali.

First, geopolitics. By operating in Mali, Wagner/AC—in coordination with the Kremlin—have nearly displaced France’s geopolitical influence in the country.⁶⁶ The U.S. Congressional Research Service reported that Wagner/AC signed a deal with Mali’s authorities; the agreement outsourced the security of some of Mali’s critical infrastructure, such as Bamako’s airport, to Wagner/AC in exchange for \$10 million a month.⁶⁷ Second, the Russian mercenaries are pursuing financial gain from their presence. Still, \$10 million does not seem sufficient to support the enormous apparatus of Wagner/AC. Analysts have uncovered evidence that Wagner/AC has mined gold in Mali, which it then ships to Russia to fund the war against Ukraine.⁶⁸ For example, the Institute for the Study of War reported that in 2024 Wagner/AC seized control of the Intahaka mine to help offset the effects

⁶⁵ Including the 2022 landmark ES-11/1 “Aggression against Ukraine.”

⁶⁶ Mucahid Durmaz, “Analysis: Did the French Mission in Mali Fail?” *Al Jazeera*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/2/18/despite-macrons-denials-did-the-french-mission-in-mali-fail>.

⁶⁷ Alexis Arieff et al., “Russia’s Wagner Group in Africa: Issues for Congress,” *In Focus* IF12389, version 2, Congressional Research Service, April 26, 2023, 2, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12389/IF12389.2.pdf.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Liam Karr, “Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, February 15, 2024: Wagner Strikes Gold in Mali, and al Shabaab Terrorizes Mogadishu,” Critical Threats Project (AEI) and Institute for the Study of War, February 15, 2024, www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-february-15-2024; ADF Staff, “Russia Tightens Control of Malian Gold,” *Africa Defense Forum*, April 9, 2024, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/04/russia-tightens-control-of-malian-gold/>; John Kennedy et al., “Gold Rush: How Russia Is Using Gold in Wartime” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024; updated June 2025), www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA3200/RRA3230-1/RAND_RRA3230-1.pdf.

of sanctions imposed due to the war against Ukraine.^{69,70} The illicit operations that the Kremlin conducts in synergy with mercenaries fit Hoffman's concept of HW.

Focusing on the ROC's role in these operations, one quickly discovers that the Moscow Patriarchate provides a cover story for why Wagner/AC are in Mali and, if their mining activities are exposed, argues that Mali's natural resources are sustaining a holy war against the colonial West. First, Leonid Gorbachev, once the head of the ROC in Africa, publicly declared that the "people from Mali and the Central African Republic are very happy with the presence of those military specialists who 'protect our rights and freedoms'."⁷¹ This creates ambiguity about the self-serving motives behind Wagner/AC's presence in Mali. It also creates a degree of deniability, since Moscow does not need to justify its interests in Mali directly but can instead rely on irregular soldiers in the field and the ROC's ideological backing to obscure the operation's political and economic logic.⁷² Of note, Leonid Gorbachev, known as "Prigozhin in a cassock," was replaced by Metropolitan Constantine after the Wagner founder's demise.⁷³ Second, the ROC's anticolonial messaging in Mali offers ideological validation in case the local population voices concern that Russia is depriving Mali of its own natural resources.

Therefore, it seems evident that the ROC provides crucial support to Russia's mercenaries in Mali. Still, skeptical voices admit overlap between the irregular operations of the ROC and Wagner/AC but suggest it is a stretch to conclude that actual coordination exists, since the geographical spread of the ROC and Wagner/AC across Africa is uneven.⁷⁴ For example, while Kenya is by far the ROC's favorite target, credible evidence of a large Wagner/AC presence there is lacking.

⁶⁹ Karr, "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, February 15, 2024."

⁷⁰ The natural resources of Sudan and the Central African Republic have also been exploited.

⁷¹ Luchenko, "Propaganda in Holy Orders: Africa, Ukraine."

⁷² Deniability is also a hallmark of cyber-enabled HW. A remarkable, though still inconclusive, example of such activity may be the 2023 distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against the West, attributed to the cyber actor Anonymous Sudan (AS). AS claimed its attacks were religiously motivated as a response to the Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Denmark. Meanwhile, the ROC also condemned the burnings in the strongest terms, highlighting its inclusivity in contrast to the morally corrupt West. The efforts of AS and the ROC cannot be confidently connected to a single multidomain operation, and for that reason, this case is not examined here separately. Still, there was notable parallelism in the actions of the two actors following the acts of Islamophobia: the DDoS attacks and the ROC's condemnations followed the same two-wave timetable. In addition, AS is affiliated with the Russian hackers Killnet and Moscow's apparatus. Thus, both the ROC and AS could be linked to the same handler, the Kremlin. The DDoS attacks successfully disrupted Western infrastructure. Whether this reflected a degree of synchronization between the ROC and AS or simple parallelism remains unclear based on the currently available OSINT. As more data on AS emerges, the case may merit further investigation.

⁷³ Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 9.

⁷⁴ Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 10.

In fact, in 2024 Kenya was named a major non-NATO ally for the United States, making any Wagner/AC presence unlikely.⁷⁵ However, as noted, Kenya is an outlier, with many more ROC events than any other African state. Hence, if one excludes Kenya and instead looks regionally or, better yet, focuses on the Sahel or Mali, there is evidence to suggest that the ROC supports Wagner/AC. This is why most analysts still argue that Wagner/AC and the ROC are linked.⁷⁶

To conclude, the ROC has enabled Wagner/AC's presence in Mali by providing ideological legitimacy to the mercenaries' operations, thereby masking their true intentions. Coordination between the ROC and the irregular soldiers has produced an effective hybrid campaign. Following Wagner's deployment, Mali expelled the French ambassador and forced the withdrawal of the French counter-insurgency operation.⁷⁷ Bamako also pushed out the United Nations operation, solidifying the Kremlin's position as the security provider.⁷⁸ The *ambiguity* provided by the ROC, combined with *irregular* mercenary operations, increased Russia's influence. The operation also had a degree of *deniability* because the Kremlin's role was filtered through proxies and obscured by the ROC's anticolonial messaging.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The analysis validated the opening argument. By weaponizing Orthodoxy, Russia has waged a hybrid operation in the Sahel, producing strategic, operational, and tactical effects across the extended battlespace of the Kremlin's HW against the West. Strategically, the ROC has successfully challenged the religious jurisdiction of the PA and the Western influence in Africa; it has also helped Moscow shape the diplomatic choices of Sahel countries in favor of the war in Ukraine; critically, the ROC has contributed to the decline of Western and, specifically, French influence in Mali and the region. Operationally, the ROC has provided cover for Wagner/AC in creating an illegal mining economy that supports Russia's war against Ukraine. Tactically, the Moscow Patriarchate sought to convert Nigerian

⁷⁵ Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Memorandum on the Designation of Kenya as a Major Non-NATO Ally," Presidential Determination No. 2024-05, The White House, June 24, 2024, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/06/24/memorandum-on-the-designation-of-kenya-as-a-major-non-nato-ally/>.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Malo Tresca, "Putin's Orthodox Crusade in Africa," *La Croix International*, May 29, 2024, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://international.la-croix.com/religion/putins-orthodox-crusade-in-africa>.

⁷⁷ "Last French Troops Leave Mali, Ending Nine-Year Deployment," *Al Jazeera*, August 16, 2022, www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/16/last-french-troops-leave-mali-ending-nine-year-deployment; "Mali Expels Paris Envoy over 'Hostile and Outrageous' French Comments," *Reuters*, January 31, 2022, www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-expels-french-envoy-over-authorities-hostile-remarks-2022-01-31/.

⁷⁸ Sarah Cope, "The End of MINUSMA: Russia Competes with the UN for Global Influence," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, April 12, 2024, <https://gssr.georgetown.edu/the-forum/regions/africa/the-end-of-minusma-russia-competes-with-the-un-for-global-influence/>.

priests and members of the broader population by providing ideological and financial incentives to local actors. The analysis showed that it is analytically useful to conceptualize these efforts as a hybrid operation.

Based on the analysis, we can also briefly compare the ROC's role in the Sahel with its efforts elsewhere. Evidently, the Moscow Patriarchate is not equally assertive across theaters. In Ukraine and neighboring countries, the ROC has operated more directly and forcefully, relying on deeper historical roots, canonical claims, and denser religious and political networks. By contrast, in the Sahel, the ROC is less deeply embedded and thus less assertive doctrinally, but more adaptive and opportunistic. For example, instead of using the Russian World narrative, the ROC has adjusted its propaganda to local audiences and supports the Kremlin's multimodal operation through legal, diplomatic, and irregular channels. However, this current, less aggressive mode of operations cannot reliably indicate the ROC's future posture. The ROC has already conducted a successful initial hybrid infiltration and has thus created conditions for a more forceful presence in the future, should Moscow decide to escalate its efforts. This risk is not abstract, since the ROC already operates alongside irregular troops.

Developing an Assessment Framework of Hybrid Operations

Based on empirical evidence, we can identify two clusters of best practices for analysts assessing hybrid operations and their effectiveness. To begin with, there are at least *seven factors* that constitute the signature of a successful hybrid operation. First, *synchronicity*, or a coordinated approach between state and non-state actors, is a key HW enabler. If an operation needs to combine different methods, it naturally involves more operators. For instance, the Moscow Patriarchate cooperates with the Kremlin's lawfare experts to ensure that the ROC's expanding activities in Africa take advantage of any legal loopholes. Second, and relatedly, *multimodality* is another characteristic, as these operators operate across multiple domains. For example, ROC missionaries have worked in the field to mobilize support in the information space, while Rosatom has provided resources to leverage financial instruments. Third, the use of proxies such as Wagner/AC provides deniability, allowing adversaries to rely on the veil of a third party to sow confusion about their identity. Fourth, deploying information tools also creates ambiguity about the real purposes of any hybrid operation, which could be disguised as a humanitarian operation or, in the ROC's case, as the mission of a guardian against the colonial West. Fifth, successful hybrid challengers are defined by their high level of *adaptability*. The ROC adapted its information narrative of the Russian World, so its message resonated with African audiences. Sixth, when facing a superior entity, hybrid actors can create *asymmetry* by employing non-traditional methods. For example, to mount successful operations against the PA's centuries-old religious structure, the ROC used non-religious instruments such as diplomatic and financial tools. Finally, hybrid operations include an element of *irregularity*. We discovered that the ROC supports Russian mercenaries in extracting natural resources from Mali, which are reportedly

used to sustain the war against Ukraine. In sum, analysts are encouraged to look for these seven enabling elements of HW.

Notably, the seven-fold signature becomes apparent only when one examines empirical evidence at the appropriate level and unit of analysis. That is, the scope of the research target—in this case, any prospective hybrid operation—is crucial to producing rigorous findings. Finding an appropriate level and unit of analysis is challenging in general, especially in international relations. Our analysis shows that the HW environment adds to this complexity because hybrid operations are inherently ambiguous and deniable.

In essence, to factor a specific event into their analysis, a scholar or investigator must be alerted to the possibility that the event has relevance to broader adversarial activity. Such prompts are subtle in HW. To minimize the risk of oversight and arrive at the right level and unit of analysis, HW assessments require an interdisciplinary approach, with different experts detecting unusual trends in otherwise noisy situational pictures and timely, reliable, comprehensive datasets covering intelligence across all critical sectors. For instance, without combining data on the ROC's disinformation activities with data on Russia's illegal mining economy in the Sahel, we could not have understood the full extent of the Kremlin's HW. Likewise, only a scholar of theology could fully differentiate between the ROC's religious teachings and propaganda.

Further Research and Policy Implications

Evidently, further analysis is needed. First, it would be useful to assess existing ecclesiastical tensions between the ROC and the African religious and cultural traditions. Such tensions could be exploited when crafting countermeasures to the ROC's HW. For example, while sacramental marriage in Orthodoxy is monogamous, virtually all Sahel countries tolerate polygyny, whereby men are allowed to have more than one wife.

Second, future analysis must expand geographically. The Sahel states offer meaningful insights, as their Muslim legacy would reduce their susceptibility to the ROC's influence; however, an Orthodox heritage does not automatically mean a larger ROC foothold. For example, it would be useful to study Ethiopia. The East African country has the largest Orthodox population on the continent, but it belongs to the so-called Oriental Orthodox Church; the Oriental Orthodox tradition and the ROC fundamentally disagree on the Christological definition of Jesus. This is another fault line that can be instrumentalized when evaluating response options to the ROC's influence.

Third, to pursue an interdisciplinary approach, such theological studies need to be combined with further research into the ROC's financial and legal support. For example, to examine the financial aspects, research must assess ROC-affiliated entities—such as foundations or diocesan charities—through which the partnership with the Kremlin operates. Moreover, the canonical lawfare playbook should be evaluated to identify the ecclesiastical decrees, land-registration practices, and clergy visa policies that facilitate the ROC's expansion. Such studies would inform countermeasures against the ROC's contribution to HW.

Several reasons require prompt implementation of new policy measures to curb the ROC's growing influence in Africa. First, the fact that Moscow's hybrid operations in the Sahel are effective is a significant finding, as predominantly Muslim countries such as Mali and Nigeria constitute least-likely cases for the ROC's influence. Thus, our empirical findings are a warning sign that Moscow's use of religion will continue to yield results regardless of the social environment. Second, while Russia spearheads an aggressive operation that seeks to exploit Africa, the West does not appear to work systematically to keep the continent in its orbit. This softer approach must be balanced against the zero-sum mindset that Russia applies to Africa.

If one applies Hoffman's counter-HW toolbox, there are three main lines of effort in this regard. First, Euro-Atlantic leaders must actively support the resilience of African communities and infrastructure to minimize their vulnerability to hybrid infiltration. This includes traditional measures such as energy security, as well as newer resilience tools such as media literacy programs that can specifically target the ROC's disinformation.

Second, the West must offer African forces capacity-building assistance to mount multimodal operations that, if resilience measures fail, can match Russia's hybrid operations on the continent. Improved capabilities in this regard could not only reduce reliance on mercenaries for security services but also strengthen defenses against Russia's irregular forces if armed hybrid operations occur. For example, in 2021, Central African Republic troops and Russian mercenaries attacked the Chadian border.

Third, if multimodality is a critical enabler of HW, Sahel government forces must be able to disrupt adversaries' ability to combine various methods of warfare synergistically. This task is often assigned to special forces, which can conduct electronic and psychological warfare; such operations degrade enemy command and control and, consequently, the enemy's ability to combine different methods of warfare.

Religious infrastructure can support psychological operations. Without following in the ROC's hybrid footsteps, the PA can assume a more active role in demoralizing Russian mercenaries by questioning the narrative of the "holy war" in Ukraine and the Kremlin's broader Third Rome doctrine. At a minimum, the PA must work to insulate the religious sphere from geopolitics and hybrid operations and refocus it on its spiritual purpose.

This article had the limited objective to draw scholars' and practitioners' attention to the Moscow Patriarchate's role in Russia's hybrid operations on the continent. More research is needed to elaborate on these efforts and develop an effective full-spectrum response to the Kremlin's HW in Africa.

Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy

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