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TURKEY IN THE SAHEL REGION



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1. A SUMMARY OF THE SITUATION IN THE SAHEL

Since 2011, before and after the Tuareg revolution took place in Mali, fuelled by France and nurtured by returning Tuareg after the death of Gadafi, **the whole Sahel region has been in turmoil.**

The European Union's presence in the Sahel was initially formalised with the adoption of **its first regional strategy in 2011**, originally focused on Niger, Mauritania and Mali, before later expanding to Chad and Burkina Faso.

Following the internationalised crisis in Mali, which **included the Tuareg rebellion and the subsequent jihadist expansion**, the EU deployed civilian and military missions under its Common Security and Defence Policy, such as EUCAP Sahel Niger in 2012, EUTM Mali in 2013 and EUCAP Sahel Mali in 2014.

In addition, in 2013 the first EU Special Representative for the Sahel was appointed, **a post strongly promoted by France**, with the aim of coordinating a comprehensive approach combining security and development in the region.

With the adoption of the 2015–2020 Regional Action Plan, the EU made a strategic shift toward **an approach centred on security and migration**, largely in response to the migration crisis and terrorist attacks in Europe.

During this period, international coordination frameworks multiplied and **strong institutional support was provided to the G5 Sahel and its Joint Force¹.**

However, this migration agenda generated deep tensions with local actors, who felt that **the EU was imposing its own interests at the expense of the region's priorities** and ECOWAS² free-movement rules.

Despite the major financial investment and the deployment of international forces, **the security situation on the**

¹ The G5 Sahel was a regional political, development and security framework established in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. In 2017, it created the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) to combat jihadist armed groups and transnational organised crime. The framework effectively collapsed after Mali withdrew in 2022 and Burkina Faso and Niger followed in 2023; Chad and Mauritania subsequently indicated their intention to dissolve it.

² The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional political and economic organisation founded by the 1975 Treaty of Lagos to promote economic integration, free movement, trade, peace, security and democratic governance in West Africa. Originally comprising fifteen states, it now has twelve members following the formal withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger on 29 January 2025.

ground deteriorated dramatically as extremist violence expanded.

Subsequently, the region experienced a wave of military coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Chad (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023), which completely destabilised the European presence and severely limited its influence.

In 2021, the EU launched a second strategy focused on governance and democracy, but this agenda clashed directly with the political reality imposed by the new military juntas. **The EU's inconsistent responses to the various coups—such as strongly condemning the coup in Mali while tolerating the military succession in Chad—seriously damaged its credibility and led to accusations that Europe was applying a double standard.**

The July 2023 coup in Niger caused an almost total rupture, leading the EU to suspend its cooperation and resulting in the expulsion of European missions from the country at the end of that year. This strategic vacuum, combined with the withdrawal of French forces, was quickly exploited by powers such as Russia, Turkey, China and the Gulf states, which intensified their presence through security agreements, arms exports and resource exploitation.

Finally, after the collapse of its relations with the countries that now make up the **Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger)**, the EU approved a more pragmatic and flexible “renewed approach” at the end of 2025.

This new framework **abandons a purely regional vision in favour of a differentiated country-by-country strategy** focused on political dialogue, human security and socioeconomic ties, while avoiding unrealistic ambitions of forced democratisation.

Faced with the hostility of the military regimes in the central Sahel, **Mauritania has become the new anchor of stability and the main recipient of European investment and support**, especially for migration management, while direct cooperation with the military juntas remains largely paralysed because of internal divisions within the EU itself and continuing diplomatic tensions.

2. THE EU, FRANCE AND SPAIN

To wrap it up, **Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso after their respective coups have given up every regional integration initiative.** Those initiatives had been animated by France. France and Spain have been largely involved in the region. France because of economic ties and security needs and Spain because of migration and security requirements.

It is very likely that the reason why those three countries have left those French-inspired initiatives is **precisely due to the French flavour they had.**

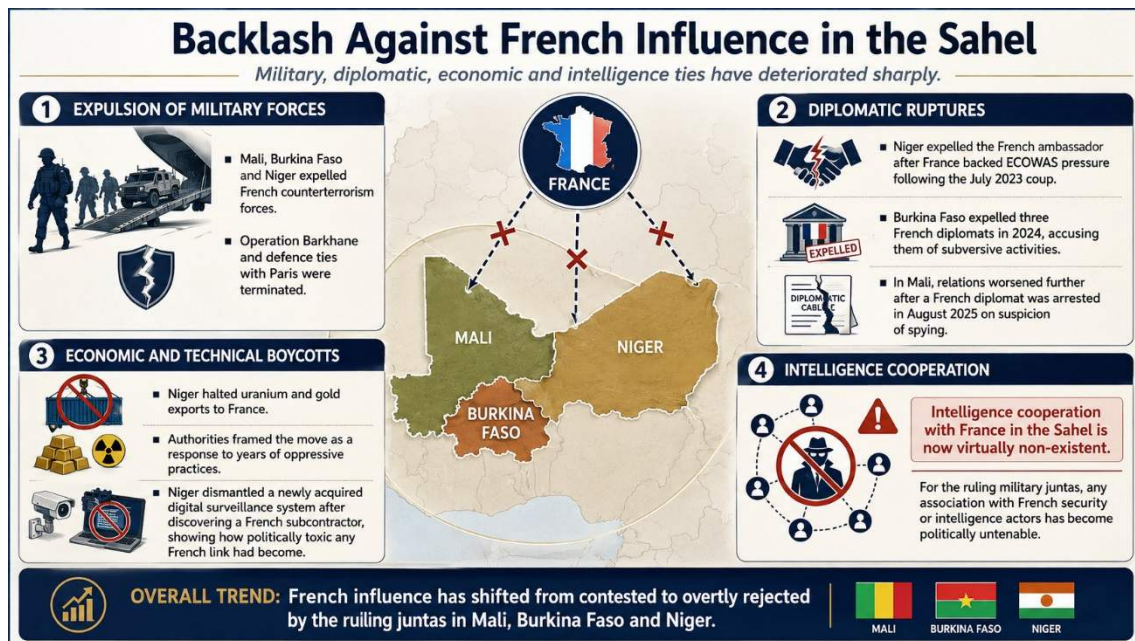
The core of this hostility stems from deep-rooted accusations that France maintains "neo-colonial ambitions" and a "secret agenda" in the region. Military leaders have accused Paris of persistent interference, with **Burkina Faso** officially severing diplomatic ties and alleging that France supports "subversive networks" intended to marginalize the country on the international stage.

Furthermore, the European Union's historical reliance on France to lead its regional Sahel strategy reinforced local perceptions that EU policies were merely a vehicle for French interests, further damaging both French and European credibility.

This resentment has translated into several concrete actions against the French presence:

- ✿ **Expulsion of military forces:** Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have all expelled French counterterrorism troops (such as Operation Barkhane) and severed their defence ties with Paris.
- ✿ **Diplomatic ruptures:** Niger expelled the French ambassador after France supported the ECOWAS in threatening a military intervention to reverse the July 2023 coup. In Burkina Faso, the junta expelled three French diplomats in 2024, accusing them of subversive activities. In Mali, relations plummeted further when a French diplomat was arrested in August 2025 on suspicion of spying.
- ✿ **Economic and technical boycotts:** Niger's military rulers halted uranium and gold exports to France in response to what they described as years of oppressive practices. Niger also immediately dismantled a newly acquired digital surveillance system after discovering the Moroccan supplier had subcontracted a French firm, demonstrating that any association with France had become politically toxic.

Intelligence cooperation with France in the Sahel region is currently virtually non-existent and considered highly toxic by the ruling military juntas. Following the recent coups and the subsequent severing of diplomatic and military ties, any association with French security or intelligence actors has become politically untenable.



3. INTELLIGENCE EFFORTS

Russian disinformation campaigns heavily promoted anti-Western and anti-French narratives to build local support for Moscow and push out Western powers. Disinformation campaigns broke out before the coups took place in those three countries. They were led from Moscow and used local journalists to instil disaffection and create conditions for the support in favour of coups against ruling regimes.

A clear example of this **complete rupture with France** occurred recently in Niger. Niger's military government attempted to rebuild its digital surveillance capabilities by contracting a Moroccan private firm specializing in cyber-espionage.

However, this initiative collapsed immediately when the junta discovered that the Moroccan company had subcontracted technology and expertise from a French firm. Despite desperately needing the surveillance infrastructure, Niger's military leaders swiftly dismantled the entire system because **any link to France was strictly unacceptable.**

This breakdown in intelligence and security cooperation is part of a **broader trend of extreme hostility and suspicion toward French presence.** For instance, in Burkina Faso, the junta expelled three French diplomats in 2024, directly accusing them of engaging in "subversive activities". Ultimately, France has been completely frozen out of intelligence sharing and security partnerships in these Sahelian states, leaving a vacuum that local governments are struggling to fill.

This anti-French sentiment has been actively fuelled and exploited by geopolitical rivals like Russia and Turkey. Russian disinformation campaigns heavily promote anti-Western and anti-French narratives to build local support for Moscow and push out Western powers as they successfully did.

However, the relation Russia has with juntas is not smooth. Niger terminated its intelligence agreements with Russia and Turkey due to poor performance.

Meanwhile, Turkey has capitalized on the vacuum left by France's departure to expand its military exports and security footprint.

The founder of the Turkish private military company SADAT explicitly stated that their organization aims to offer services to countries whose resources were historically "exploited and plundered by Europe," directly targeting traditional French spheres of influence. In 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron openly accused both Ankara and Moscow of playing a "dangerous game" by deliberately inflaming anti-French sentiment across Africa.

3.1 Turkish MIT

The Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) has transformed from an agency strictly focused on domestic counterintelligence into a highly proactive, autonomous institution executing forward-deployed strategic operations, cyberwarfare, and "intelligence diplomacy". Operating with a massive budget and advanced technologies (including custom cyber tools and UAVs like the Bayraktar TB2 and Anka), MIT operates under the direct authority of the Turkish Presidency, currently led by Director Ibrahim Kalin.

Operations in Africa and the Sahel MIT has openly declared Africa a strategic priority, using the continent to project power and leverage influence against Western rivals.

▪ **Niger and the Sahel:** MIT established a permanent, secret operations hub in the historic desert crossroads of Agadez, Niger, aiming to cultivate assets within trans-Saharan militant and trafficking networks. However, this suffered a massive failure in April 2025 when Niger's junta terminated its intelligence agreements with Turkey due to the poor performance, high latency, and lack of

encryption of MIT-supplied surveillance systems.

- **Hostage rescue:** MIT frequently engages in hostage diplomacy, successfully rescuing an Italian aid worker in Somalia in 2020.
- **Transnational repression:** The agency has actively tracked and abducted suspected members of the Gülen movement (FETÖ) from several African countries, including Sudan, Gabon, and Kenya.

Libya represents one of MIT's most extensive operational environments, where its doctrine shifted from active combat to strategic mediation.

- **Proxy warfare and arms trafficking:** During the Libyan civil war, MIT deployed drones and orchestrated the transfer of over 18,000 Syrian mercenaries (managed by the Turkish private military contractor SADAT) to defend the Tripoli-based government against Khalifa Haftar's forces. **MIT was repeatedly implicated in violating UN arms embargoes** via secret shipments.
- **Covert infiltration:** MIT's Special Operations Directorate ran highly sensitive operations, including **recruiting a Turkish jihadist whose American wife led an all-female ISIS battalion.** This asset infiltrated the Libyan militant group Ansar al-Sharia, directly providing MIT with stolen US government documents following the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi.
- **Diplomatic re-alignment:** Shifting to a peacemaker role, MIT successfully negotiated the rescue of 7 Turkish hostages with Qatari assistance in 2021. **In 2025 and 2026, MIT Chief Ibrahim Kalın held rare meetings with former enemy Khalifa Haftar and his son Saddam in Benghazi to broker a unified Libyan government,** leading to new intelligence-sharing and law enforcement pacts.

4. MIT METHODOLOGY

Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad **MIT's intelligence diplomacy is highly active across other Sahelian states,** often synchronized with defence exports (such as Bayraktar TB2 drones) and military training.

To project power while minimizing political risks, **MIT operates in tandem with private military contractors** like SADAT, whose CEO has admitted to working closely with the intelligence agency.

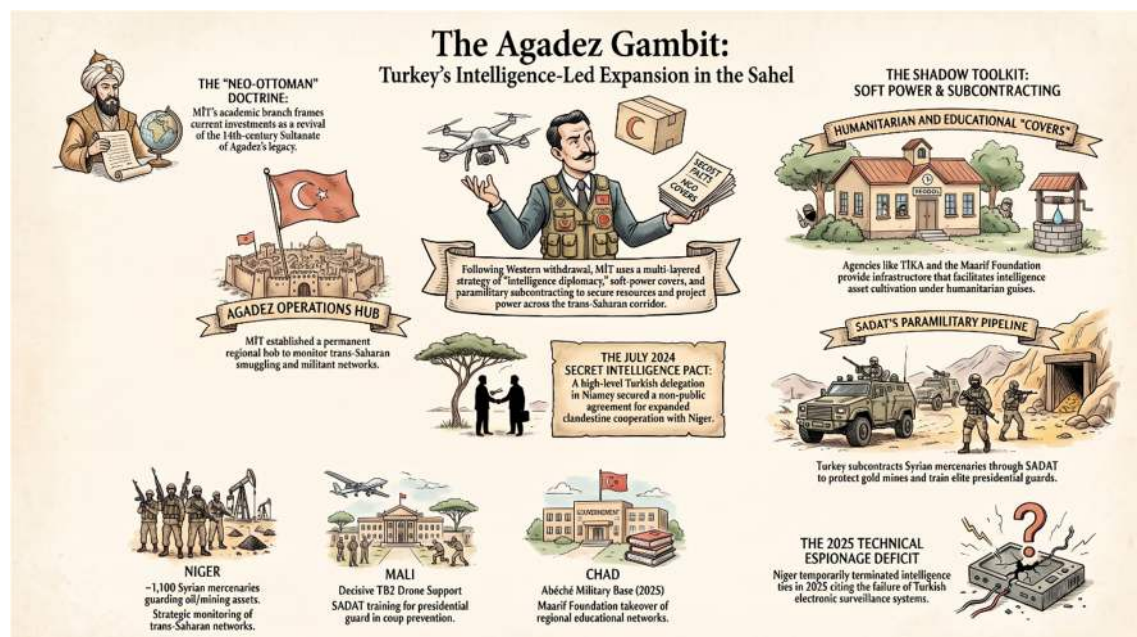
SADAT has deployed approximately 1,100 Syrian mercenaries to Niger and Burkina Faso primarily to guard economic assets where the Turkish state holds a stake, such as gold mines and oil installations.

In Mali, **SADAT personnel have reportedly embedded with elite presidential units** to train the junta's security details in coup-prevention techniques.

In Chad, Turkey's influence is expanding through intelligence coordination and the **reported acquisition of a military base in the city of Abéché**.

To obscure its hard intelligence and paramilitary activities, **MIT frequently utilizes the soft-power cover of Turkish state-aligned development and humanitarian organizations**.

Agencies such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (**TIKA**), the **Maarif Foundation** (which took over regional schools to eradicate the influence of the Gülenist movement), and the Turkish Religious Affairs Foundation (**TDV**) help **MIT build relationships with municipal leaders** and cultivate ideologically sympathetic local actors. Furthermore, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (**IHH**) is known to work closely with **MIT**, serving as a logistical conduit in highly volatile desert environments.



5. CONCLUSIONS

Turkey and Russia have a **conflicting relationship in many different regions**, and the Sahel is one of them. They support different parties in Libya but share the same goal of displacing the West from the Sahel.

The relationship between Russia and Turkey in the Sahel is characterized by a complex mix of **tactical, pragmatic cooperation and long-term strategic competition**. Both nations are actively capitalizing on the security vacuum left by the withdrawal of French and other Western forces to expand their military, diplomatic, and economic footprints in the region.

On a tactical level, Russia and Turkey have demonstrated a highly transactional willingness to cooperate. In Niger, **Turkey has deployed Syrian mercenaries—reportedly managed by the Turkish private military company SADAT**—who are actually operating under the direct command of Russia's **Africa Corps** (the successor to the Wagner Group). Because Russia's military resources are stretched thin by the protracted war in Ukraine, **the Kremlin has essentially "subcontracted" parts of its security mandate in the Sahel, such as guarding critical oil and mining facilities, to these Turkish-backed fighters**. The deployment of up to 1,000 of these fighters to Niger could only have occurred with the explicit approval of the Kremlin, **highlighting a mutual comfort in sharing security responsibilities**.

This tactical alignment has created a bizarre paradox on the ground. **The Syrian mercenaries deployed by Turkey are now taking orders from the Russian Ministry of Defence**—the exact same forces they historically fought *against* during the civil wars in Syria and Libya. Many of these fighters harbour a deep hatred for the Russian military, but they accept the deployments because the financial incentives are vastly superior to what they earn in Syria (often \$1,500 per month compared to roughly \$46).

Despite this temporary coordination, **Turkey and Russia are locked in direct competition for influence and resources**. Their approaches inevitably clash over several key areas:

- ★ **The scramble for resources:** Both countries are vying for lucrative concessions over the same critical minerals in the region, including uranium, gold, and oil. This mutual pursuit of resources is highly likely to **generate strategic friction in the long run**.
- ★ **Competing for security contracts:** Turkey's use of SADAT has led observers to dub the firm the "Turkish

Wagner," as it directly competes with Russia's Africa Corps to offer regime survival packages, coup-prevention training, and mercenary deployments to Sahelian juntas.

- ★ **Providing an alternative to Moscow:** For Sahelian military leaders, contracting Turkish firms provides an alternative that could **reduce their heavy over-reliance on Russia's Africa Corps**, allowing them to diversify their security partners.
- ★ **Geopolitical obstacles:** Russia currently maintains a much larger security presence in Mali and Burkina Faso, which actively poses a significant obstacle to Turkey's ambitions to expand its own military and economic cooperation in those specific countries.

Ultimately, while Ankara and Moscow are currently sharing the spoils of the Sahel pragmatically, their parallel ambitions to export military hardware, secure resource concessions, and act as the primary security guarantor for local juntas **make them long-term strategic rivals in the region.**

What it means for the West is a permanent instability in the region. **For France is a complete disaster.** The uranium France extracted in Niger is lost. Intelligence from the area is also lost and it has an impact on the fight against jihadism.

For Spain is concerning. Migration movements are likely to increase as jihadism expands in the region. Mauritania is the only barrier left to contain the wave which inevitably will impact the Canary Islands. **Morocco will make use of the waves of migrants** it receives according to the state of its relationship with Madrid.

Russia and Turkey will finally fight in the region which will only bring more instability which will affect, neither Moscow nor Ankara. No mercy is expected.

If jihadist groups expand their territorial control, **Moscow and Ankara are likely to pursue pragmatic arrangements with them**, thereby providing these organisations with additional financial resources, operational space and strategic leverage.

Overall, despite the military juntas in the region bringing in Russian and Turkish private military contractors (such as the Africa Corps and SADAT) to help fight these insurgencies, **these foreign forces have failed to contain the spread of the extremist groups, JNIM and ISGS (Islamic State Greater Sahara).** It should also be noted that Western forces were unable to contain these groups either. However,

the end of Operation Barkhane gave them room to expand at a time when they had previously been under greater pressure.

In the meantime, **Turkey and Russia are also able to cooperate** in other areas such as the vital field of the Russian shadow fleet.

Turkish companies are instrumental for the functioning of Russian-oil sales scheme. The EU and Ukraine have cooperated to expose Turkish companies which facilitate this business. **Turkey has not adopted the EU/G7/UK unilateral sanctions regime against Russia.** The UK House of Commons Library notes that **Turkey, despite being a NATO member,** has refused to implement those unilateral sanctions.

Turkey is the seat of companies which own vessels of the so-called shadow fleet such as:

22 February 2024	UK sanctions Beks Ship Management and Trading and Active Denizcilik
March 2024	Management of many Beks-linked vessels shifts to Spark, Sand, Tokyo and Cape-related structures (all Turkish entities)
20 May 2025	EU sanctions Cape Gemi
15 June 2026	EU sanctions EMT Gemi

The network's resilience comes from making attribution, insurance, cargo tracing and legal responsibility difficult enough that **enforcement lags behind operations.**

And it is not only about the vessels but the refining, storage and re-export of Russian oil through Turkey.

Moscow and Ankara cooperate where mutual dependence is profitable, compete where regional influence is at stake, and negotiate constantly to prevent competition from escalating into confrontation.

