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Unravelling Turkish involvement in the Sahel

Geopolitics and local impact

In the past decade, Turkey has significantly expanded its engagement in Africa, leading to concerns within the European Union (EU) that this influence might be used to undermine EU policy and member states. This policy brief analyses the strategic motives and evolution of Turkish involvement in the Sahel region, focusing specifically on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Drawing from interviews conducted with Sahelian and Turkish political, business, diplomatic and educational stakeholders between October and December 2022, the authors contend that Turkey's foreign policy in the Sahel demonstrates a multifaceted approach that aims to strengthen its presence across economic, cultural, defence and development spheres. However, it is also emphasised that Turkey's engagement in the Sahel remains relatively limited when compared to its activities in other African countries, for example Libya, Somalia and Algeria. In light of these findings, this policy brief recommends that the EU adopt a pragmatic approach, drawing lessons from Turkey's strategy while trying to manage, and where possible benefit from, the impact of Turkish security assistance and to foster opportunities for Sahelian populations in Europe through scholarships and employment initiatives.

Introduction

In recent years, geopolitical competition in and attention on Africa has grown as countries like Russia, China and, increasingly, Turkey have increased their presence across a number of domains. In the Sahel in particular, French and to some extent other European and United States (US) policy makers have seen this presence as a way of countering or undermining Europe in its 'neighbourhood' or 'southern border'.¹ For Turkey,

this involvement has become increasingly public – with its high-level infrastructure projects, cultural and religious programmes, and most recently defence and arms sales to a region mired in insurgency and jihadist conflict. This has drawn

conversations in Europe and the region and evoke France's colonial past in the Sahel as well as *Françafrique*. 'Françafrique' is a term used in academic literature and more popular writing to describe an integrated system of neo-colonial interactions between France and its former colonies in Africa involving a complex interplay between African elites, French business interests and the French government – particularly its military and security services.

1 Source: Dahlia Ghanem, "[The Sahel: Europe's African Borders](#)," *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, 8 (April 2018). At the same time, they have largely avoided terms like 'pré-carré' (backyard) that appear in private



Turkey's involvement in the central Sahel

attention to the country's outreach in the Sahel, and in Africa as a whole.

This paper seeks to understand the growth and evolution of Turkish involvement in the Sahel, particularly over the last five years. To do so, the authors worked with three researchers in Burkina Faso (Paul Koalaga), Mali (Bokar Sangaré) and Niger² – the Central Sahel – conducting limited interviews with political, diplomatic and educational actors as well as some Turkish officials and businessmen in the Sahel. A fourth researcher in Turkey, Zeynep Başaran, actively participated in setting up the project and the desk research phase. This has been complemented with secondary and primary research in Turkish, English, French and German sources to better understand Turkey's motivations for involvement in the Sahel, what programmes and efforts are currently in place in the region, why Sahelian countries have increased their cooperation with Turkey and how the EU and its member states should address this. As a disclaimer, this research was carried out shortly before the outbreak of political

unrest in Niger in late July 2023, including the conducting of all interviews. Therefore, the information related to Niger in this work is based on the period before the outbreak.

This focus on Sahelian motivations, in addition to understanding Turkish motivations for involvement in the Sahel, seeks to counteract two common tendencies in the literature and discussions of Turkey's role in the Sahel. The first is a tendency to solely concentrate on Turkey's interests in the region (which this paper will discuss but complementary) without considering the perspectives and aspirations of the local population; the second is a tendency to focus on top-down Turkish approaches, sometimes imputing all Turkish policy to a kind of 'neo-Ottomanism' and a return to Turkey's 'rightful' place in world politics.³ However, one of the arguments of this paper is that while Turkey's expansive involvement in the Sahel does stem in part from centralised directives and intense diplomatic efforts from Turkish leaders (including

2 The researcher in Niger wished to remain anonymous.

3 Asya Akca, "[Neo-Ottomanism: Turkey's foreign policy approach to Africa](#)," *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy*, issue 17 (Spring 2019).

President Erdoğan), it is also the result of the efforts of others, including networks of students and businesspeople operating organically outside of the government, as well as those close to Turkish and Sahelian governments who nonetheless work for their own interests, rather than on behalf of the Turkish government.

Finally, this paper will emphasise the importance of context in understanding Turkey's presence in the Sahel. In particular, it notes that while Turkish involvement in the region is multisectoral, at least partially integrated, and growing, it is nonetheless dwarfed by Turkish involvement in other countries, for example Libya or Somalia – where Turkey has established large military bases and in some cases intervened militarily – or Algeria, where thousands of Turkish businesses operate and where Turkish defence manufacturers have a more established presence.⁴ This does not mean that the Sahel and West Africa more broadly are not part of a larger Turkish economic and political strategy involving the Maghreb as well.⁵ But it nonetheless shows that the attention paid to Turkey in particular in the Sahel is, perhaps at least for the moment, out of proportion to its actual presence in the region. Although ties have increased, no Sahelian country figures among Turkey's top ten trading partners in Africa, and a majority of Turkish trade and investment remains in North Africa.⁶

Turkish motivations in the Sahel

Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, and especially after the failed coup d'état in 2016, Turkey's foreign policy has transformed into a more assertive, multiregional approach.⁷ With

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the helm, Turkey has expanded its engagement across the world – predominantly in the Muslim world – and tried to forge new ties through a mixture of development assistance, trade, security cooperation and even military operations.

Everything indicates that this shift in Turkey's approach to foreign policy is rooted in two overarching motives. First, foreign policy is being used by Erdoğan to consolidate his domestic base. In her recent work, Gönül Tol notes how 'foreign policy has helped Erdogan to tell voters what he stands for and how he imagines the national identity'.⁸ She describes Erdogan's utilisation of various ideological perspectives over the past 20 years – ranging from conservative democracy to Islamism to nationalism – to consolidate his power back home.⁹ As an example, Tol highlights Erdogan's Syria strategy and how he adjusted his approach after embracing a more nationalist stance. While the overthrow of the Assad regime took a back seat, Erdogan prioritised curbing Kurdish gains in northern Syria, leading to a military intervention (Operation Euphrates Shield).¹⁰ This incursion not only bolstered Erdogan's nationalist image, but also solidified his anti-Kurdish alliance domestically. Related to this, yet slightly different, is Erdogan's search for 'success stories' outside Turkey's own borders. Since 2018, Turkey has been suffering from a national currency crisis, a growing discontent regarding the reception of almost four million (mostly Syrian) refugees and, more recently, the aftermath of two devastating earthquakes in 2023. More than two-thirds of the Turkish population are struggling to pay for their basic needs, such as food and rent, and some of them blame this on refugees.¹¹ When looking at the timeline of military interventions alongside these events, a pattern emerges. It shows that Turkey's military

4 Akram Khariief, "[Diplomats, Spies, and Arms Deals](#)," Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, published 15 July 2022.

5 Michaël Tanchum, "[Turkey's Maghreb–West Africa Economic Architecture: Challenges and Opportunities for the European Union](#)," Centre for Applied Turkey Studies, no. 3 (June 2021).

6 Emel Parlar Dal and Samiratou Dipama, "[Assessing Turkey-Africa Engagements](#)," Africa Policy Research Institute, 27 April 2023.

7 For more info about Turkey's new foreign policy, see: Nienke van Heukelingen and Bob Deen, [Beyond Turkey's 'zero problems' policy](#) (Clingendael, January 2022).

8 Gönül Tol, *Erdogan's War: A Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 4.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, p. 11.

11 "[Syrians say they're continuously blamed for economic crises in Turkey but can barely get by on their low wages](#)," Stockholm Center for Freedom, published 28 April 2022.

interventions have often taken place when there were economic or political crises at home.¹² To illustrate, Operation Peace Spring began after the government's failure in the Istanbul municipal elections. The AKP lost Istanbul and Ankara to the Republican People's Party (CHP), which made Erdoğan's handling of the economic crisis its main campaign theme.¹³

A second strategic motive is that the Turkish government is looking for ways to play a more autonomous role in a changing geopolitical context. Until 2011, it followed former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's 'zero problems with neighbours' principle, in which it aimed to strengthen neighbourly relations through the use of soft power, cultural links and economic interdependence.¹⁴ In the years thereafter, however, the government slowly began to adapt its approach. Underpinned by a growing belief that the balance of power is shifting – causing the retreat of the West, a weakening of existing multilateral institutions and the emergence of new power blocks – President Erdoğan and his government have been increasingly focused on establishing a good position for Turkey in that new world order.¹⁵ As a result, not only is Turkey involved in areas beyond its immediate neighbourhood, it is also focusing on initiating flexible alliances (for instance with Russia), while trying to reduce geopolitical dependency on the West.

These two strategic motives are reflected in Turkey's recent push to be more involved in Africa, and the Sahel in particular. Ankara is well aware that the Sahel has emerged as a crucial battleground for competition among global and regional powers, and sees the importance of securing a favourable position in the region in the pursuit of economic and security

opportunities. Although Turkey had established cooperation agreements with Niger and Mali in the 1990s, its presence in the region has grown remarkably since the 2010s. In that decade, the Turkish government established embassies in Bamako (2010), Ouagadougou (2012) and Niamey (2012), began to provide financial support for counterterrorism projects and training, and built alliances with the construction of mosques and hospitals.¹⁶

In the following sections, we will explore Turkey's current involvement in the central Sahel, examining its various aspects and activities. However, before delving into that, we will elaborate on Turkey's specific goals in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger below.

i) Securing commercial interests

Turkey is seeking to improve trade relations with countries in the Sahel. Facing domestic pressure on the economic front, good trade relations serve as a way to secure commercial interests for Turkish businesses and boost the country's gross domestic output. Foreign trade amounts to almost 50% of Turkish GDP, making it crucial to the functioning of the Turkish economy.¹⁷ In the last decade, there has been an increase in trade flows as well as investment between Turkey and Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.¹⁸ Over the years, Ankara has meticulously built its image as a reliable trade partner – one that comes without political baggage and is not interested in depth-trap diplomacy. It is a strategy that pays off. Trade relations with Turkey are described by Sahelian interviewees as 'sincere', 'equal' and 'mutually respectful', which clearly contrasts with opinions on the relationship with, for instance, France.¹⁹

12 Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, "[Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?](#)", *International Affairs*, volume 97, issue 4 (July 2021): 1099.

13 Ümit Akcay, "[Local elections in Turkey under the shadow of the economic crisis](#)," *I+I Forum* (2019).

14 Nienke van Heukelingen and Bob Deen, [Beyond Turkey's 'zero problems' policy](#) (Clingendael, January 2022).

15 Ibid.

16 Giovanni Carbone and Camillo Casola, [Sahel: 10 Years of Instability. Local, Regional and International Dynamics](#) (Milan: ISPI, October 2022), p.126.

17 Kemal Kirişçi, "[Warming up Turkey: The importance of economic engagement](#)," Brookings, published 6 April 2015.

18 Armstrong, "[Turkey in the Sahel](#)."

19 Interview with a former official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022; Interview with an entrepreneur in the consulting field in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

With the help of the Turkish government, Turkish companies are being encouraged to invest in Sahelian countries (and Africa in general). Interviewees, however, contradict one another as to how far that encouragement extends. A Burkinabè entrepreneur who works on strengthening Burkina-Turkey ties mentioned that ‘the Turkish government [not only] accompanies investors [during trade visits], but also offers tax exemptions once you invest in Africa’, while a Turkish business representative denies any support from the government beyond advisory support, saying, ‘we operate on our own [...] and negotiate directly with the Burkinabè state’.²⁰ One explanation for the apparent divergence could be found in the AKP government’s patronage system.²¹ Since the AKP took office in 2002, it has built a loyal business community through rewards and recognitions,²² meaning that companies loyal to the AKP have been among the main recipients of tax incentives and exemptions, relaxed public procurement practices, and access to credit.²³ Those that are not loyal do not benefit from the same privileges or support.

ii) ‘Nation-branding’ via humanitarian aid, education and religious affairs

Turkey aims to build a strong reputation via humanitarian aid, education and religious affairs. By presenting itself as a reliable partner, Turkey aims to increase the country’s visibility and prestige abroad, and ultimately, its influence in countries with shared history, culture and religion. These shared qualities then allow Turkey

to more effectively bolster its trade and other relationships, including with countries in the central Sahel.

Turkey’s growing involvement in humanitarian assistance and education in Sahelian countries partly fulfils that objective. Over the years, Ankara has rolled out healthcare and water projects in Niger and Burkina Faso, set up educational institutions in Mali, and funded scholarships for Sahelian students to study in Turkey. A former Turkish ambassador summarised it in an excellent fashion, saying, ‘Turkey is trying to create a group of Turkish-speaking (African) ambassadors, who could be the frontrunners of its penetration in Africa.’²⁴ Yet, in the field of education, this has not been the only aim; closing Gülen-affiliated schools constituted another objective. Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen used to be allies due to their shared opposition to secular Kemalist forces and focus on Islamic values. Their relationship deteriorated, however, following the 2016 coup attempt, with Erdoğan accusing Gülen of being the mastermind behind it. The accusation led to a deep rift and widespread crackdown on Gülen’s followers and institutions – including Gülen-affiliated schools in Mali, among other places. Some states, such as Gabon, have extradited Gülen supporters to Turkey, possibly as part of a larger promise of political or other assistance.²⁵ And in 2016, the Turkish government established the Maarif Foundation to take over the administration of these schools to cut ties between the schools and the Gülen movement.

Religion forms another strand in Turkey’s nation-branding activities. Since the early 2010s, and with the Islamist-rooted AKP at the forefront, Ankara has been increasingly trying

20 Interview with an entrepreneur in the field of technology in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022; Interview with a business operator in Turkey who invests in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

21 More info on that ‘patronage system’, see: John Calabrese, “Building in Africa: Turkey’s “Third Way” in China’s Shadow,” Middle East Institute, published 21 June 2022.

22 Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, “Building a Competitive Authoritarian Regime: State–Business Relations in the AKP’s Turkey,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 20:4 (November 2017).

23 Esen and Gumuscu, “Building a Competitive Authoritarian Regime”.

24 Interview with a former official of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

25 Gabon: “récit de l’exfiltration des trois pro-Gülen à destination d’Ankara,” *Jeune Afrique*, 24 April 2018.

to promote a Turkish version of Sunni Islam²⁶ abroad, and putting itself on the map as the leader of a revival of Muslim civilisation. From Latin America and the Balkans to sub-Saharan Africa it has been building mosques, educating young scholars and acting as a ‘patron of Islam’ abroad.²⁷ Its presence in the Sahel fits into that frame. Here too it regularly seeks the connection with Islam in its activities. In contrast to other actors in the region (e.g., China and Russia), Turkey shares religious ties with these Muslim-majority countries, and uses that as a soft power advantage. This outreach helps cement its presence.²⁸

iii) Taking advantage of the French withdrawal from Mali

A third dimension of Turkish involvement in the region is trying to take advantage of the French withdrawal from Mali. France and Turkey have been at odds geopolitically for years, sparring over issues such as the war in Libya and Syria, as well as Turkey’s drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean and Turkish accession to the EU.²⁹ The fact that Turkey has also been strengthening its ties with African countries that were once French colonies has been anything but appreciated by France. Both leaders have repeatedly lashed out at one another, with President Erdoğan and the AKP taking advantage of France’s colonial history. By using an anti-colonial narrative, officials have been seeking to aggravate postcolonial sentiments in countries such as Mali, while presenting

Turkey as a like-minded alternative.³⁰ In 2021, for example, Erdoğan stated that Turkey would ‘never approach cooperation with African countries from a short-term and interest-oriented perspective. We are not one of those who seek to maintain their old colonial orders through new ways and methods’, thereby referring to France.³¹ However, it could be argued that Turkey’s push for influence in the Sahel is equally driven by domestic goals, which raises questions about the consistency of Erdoğan’s statement.

On 17 February 2022, President Macron announced the withdrawal of its military contingent in Mali due to a breakdown in relations with the ruling junta. The news came just weeks after a second coup attempt in Mali. Both events contributed to a shift in the balance of power in the region and a power vacuum, which Turkey seems eager to fill. The Turkish media – which is more than 90% government-owned³² – has highlighted the large support for both coups in Mali (especially the first in August 2020),³³ and portrayed Turkey as an anti-colonial alternative for cooperation.³⁴ In fact, the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, said in 2020 that Turkey would be the country to help the Malian people return to civilian and constitutional order.³⁵ Some interviewees point towards the progress made by Turkey since France’s departure, saying that ‘there has been a rapprochement in geostrategic terms’, with some

26 Turkey’s Sunni Islam is considered moderate, tolerant and flexible, particularly when compared to other variants of Sunni Islam, such as observed in, for instance, Saudi Arabia (where it is viewed as more absolute and puritanical). Source: Evangelos Venetis, *The Struggle between Turkey & Saudi Arabia for the Leadership of Sunni Islam* (Athens: ELIAMEP, February 2014).

27 Just recently, Erdogan lashed out firmly at Sweden, after a leader of a Danish far-right party was given permission to burn a copy of the Quran in Stockholm. Also: Gönül Tol, “Turkey’s Bid for Religious Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs*, published 10 January 2019.

28 Kharief, “Diplomats, Spies, and Arms Deals”.

29 Jana Jabbour, *France vs. Turkey in the EastMed: A Geopolitical Rivalry between a ‘Keeper’ of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power* (Paris: French Institute International Relations, May 2021).

30 Ioannis Grigoriadis and Dawid Fusiek, *Turkey’s “Anti-Colonial” pivot to Mali: French-Turkish Competition and the Role of the European Union in the Sahel* (Athens: Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, January 2022).

31 “We want to advance our relations with Africa on the basis of win-win and equal partnership”, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, published 17 October 2021.

32 Merve Tahiroğlu, Snapshot – Media in Turkey: Why it Matters and Challenges Ahead (Washington: POMED, June 2022).

33 Fehim Tastekin, “Does France’s failure in Mali spell a victory for Turkey?”, *AI-Monitor*, published 14 September 2020.

34 Grigoriadis and Fusiek, “Turkey’s Anti-Colonial Pivot to Mali”.

35 “Turkey’s Cavusoglu calls for elections in Mali without delay”, *TRT World*.

tangible results, which will be detailed later in this paper.³⁶

A growing, multisector presence

Much of the analysis so far on Turkey's role in the Sahel has focused on the role of Turkish 'soft power', particularly cultural and educational cooperation and efforts to promote Turkey's image in the region, including its image as a Muslim power keen to assist other majority or predominantly Muslim states.³⁷ In each of the countries surveyed as part of this project, Turkish investments varied according to respondents, often focused on sectors that are traditionally strong in Turkey – construction, mining, textile production and the defence industry, as well as restaurants and hospitality more broadly. Although respondents diverged on the exact role of the Turkish state in pushing these different initiatives, it is clear that, particularly since 2016, the state has taken a much more direct role across various sectors in the Sahel, particularly in the religious and defence sectors. Another important factor is the overlap between various sectors, and the ways in which they mutually reinforce each other.

Interestingly, in each sector examined here, Niger was the lynchpin and focal point for Turkish engagement across the region. Although Turkey has proved willing to work with transitional governments in Mali and Burkina Faso, the political instability and tenuous security situations there temporarily delayed collaboration in some areas, according to respondents. Niger's relatively stable political and security situation, and its tenuous connections to Ottoman history,³⁸ may have made Niger a more appealing centre for regional activity than its neighbours, although Turkey has dramatically strengthened security and business ties with Burkina Faso under Captain Ibrahim Traoré.

36 Interview with an expert in the cultural sector in Mali, December 2022.

37 Armstrong, "Turkey in the Sahel."

38 Armstrong, "Turkey in the Sahel."

Economic investment

Turkish merchants have operated in a small capacity for many decades in the Sahel, with travel and connections across a variety of sectors made easier after the opening of direct flights between Istanbul and the region's capitals.³⁹ Turkey's economic investment in the region has grown significantly over the past several years.

Turkey's investments in Sahelian countries unsurprisingly favour areas where Turkish companies and industry are strong, especially construction, textile manufacturing and mining. These industries have been used to develop particularly strong showcase projects in the region, including the new airport in Niamey as well as the luxury Radisson Blu hotel built in 2019 for the African Union summit there, both built and operated by Turkish firms, such as the Summa group.⁴⁰ Turkish construction projects have also played a role in both humanitarian aid and increasing security cooperation. The large Turkish-built and operated Golden Life hospital on the banks of the Niger River in Bamako, Mali, is a reminder of Turkish strengths in construction and medical care; and in 2014 Turkey began constructing hospitals and other care facilities in Niger.⁴¹ Turkish firms have also constructed military hospitals and housing in Mali.⁴² Turkish trade patterns vary from country to country, although Turkey has focused extensively on building partnerships and continuing to expand trade.⁴³ Although Turkish economic interests and investment tend to focus on primary export materials to Turkey, attention is increasingly

39 Armstrong, "Turkey in the Sahel"; These connections were established to Niamey and Ouagadougou in 2015, and Bamako in TKT. "Turkish Airlines will add six new destinations for 2015 in Africa, for a total of 48 cities," Centre for Aviation, published 25 December 2014.

40 Armstrong, "Turkey in the Sahel." Also see Antoine Izambard, "Les ambitions d'Ankara en Afrique," *Challenges*, 4 February 2023.

41 Nur Gülsoy, "L'association turque IHH inaugure un hôpital au Niger," Anadolu Agency, published 10 September 2014.

42 Interview with a former official of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

43 Amarana Maiga, "Mali : Turkey prête à fournir le marché malien à hauteur de 500 millions de dollars," Anadolu Agency, published 11 June 2022.

being given to imports and business development in the Sahel. The Turkish state is involved to some degree in these operations, particularly those related to larger firms close to the government and the defence industry, as detailed later in this policy brief. Each of the countries covered in this paper has a joint chamber of commerce or similar partnership with Turkish counterparts, who help coordinate and promote business opportunities; in addition, Turkish officials travel regularly to the Sahel, and vice versa, in order to discuss additional business ties.⁴⁴ In Mali, meanwhile, Turkish businesses are involved in mining, petroleum and agriculture, with a special interest in cotton production. Turkish businesses have also increasingly invested in the construction of factories in the Sahel to process the primary materials popular in Turkish industry, ranging from cotton and other textile production to cement.⁴⁵ In all three countries, smaller Turkish-led businesses operate in sectors like mining but are increasingly operating in restaurants and bakeries.⁴⁶

On the Turkish side, these meetings, and more broadly the work of cooperation councils focused on business between each of the Sahelian countries and Turkey, are organized by the Turkish Council of International Economic Relations (DEIK), which also helps train and support Turkish businesspeople working internationally.⁴⁷ After a visit to Turkey in 2019 by then-Burkinabè president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, for instance, DEIK organised an investment forum which, according to a respondent involved in economic issues in Burkina Faso, involved some 500 businesspeople

from both countries, with similar forums organised elsewhere in the region.⁴⁸ DEIK representatives have also met with Mali's transitional leaders to promote further economic exchanges,⁴⁹ with similar initiatives ongoing in Niger.⁵⁰

One reason that Sahelian respondents favour closer economic cooperation with Turkey is an interest in moving value chains to the Sahel, creating factories where primary materials could be converted from their raw state before being used locally or exported, or used in sectors of less interest to the West. One Malian respondent, for instance, noted the possible synergy between Mali's cotton sector and Turkish textile manufacturing, building on existing interest and investment.⁵¹ However, security challenges and other difficulties continue to disrupt some Turkish economic plans in the region. In Mali, for instance, efforts to gain greater footholds in mining and cotton production has lagged, while unpaid bills for Turkish-provided electricity stalled relations that were not relaunched until mid-2022.⁵² Nonetheless, respondents urged greater cooperation, expressing a generally high regard for Turkish investment and the frequent visits of Turkish business leaders to the Sahel and vice versa, as well as government promotion of such investments and exchanges.

Humanitarian and development aid

Humanitarian and development aid has been a fixture of Turkish outreach and soft power in the Sahel, and in Africa more broadly. As of last year, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) had 22 offices on the continent. TIKA has an office in Niger, and there are reportedly plans to establish offices

44 Demba Tounkara CR; Boureima Balima, "[Création d'un Conseil d'affaires Turquie-Niger pour une coopération commerciale fructueuse](#)," Anadolu Agency, published 27 January 2016.

45 Interview with an entrepreneur in the consulting field in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022; Interview with an entrepreneur in the consulting field in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022; Interview with Malian investment specialist, Bamako, December 2022.

46 Interview with an economist in Niger, Niamey, November 2022.

47 Interview with a former official of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

48 Interview with an official of a public institution in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

49 Maiga, "[Mali : Turkey prête à fournir](#)."

50 Boureima Balima, "[Création d'un Conseil d'affaires Turquie-Niger](#)."

51 Interview with an expert in the Malian cultural sector, Bamako, December 2022.

52 Interview with a former official of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ouagadougou, November 2022; Summary of June 2022 visit by Turkish business leaders to Mali consulted by authors.

in Mali and Burkina Faso.⁵³ TIKA finances or is directly involved with a number of humanitarian and development projects. Across the region, for instance, Turkish non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or TIKA directly provide assistance, meals and other services during Ramadan, reinforcing religious ties between Turkey and the Muslim-majority region, as well as providing medical care during the month of Ramadan and in Turkish-constructed hospitals year round.⁵⁴ TIKA also supports educational initiatives and the construction of public and private schools in Niger and elsewhere in the region,⁵⁵ and has put in place plans for a new metrobus system in Bamako, although that project remains stalled.⁵⁶

TIKA also works through and supports networks of Turkish-led NGOs as well as local NGOs with Turkish ties, particularly in places like Burkina Faso. There, respondents noted that TIKA and the Turkish government in general support some NGOs led by Burkinabè who studied in Turkey, with these associations serving as a bridge between Turkey and Burkina Faso.⁵⁷

Defence and security

Compared to other areas of investment and attention, Turkey's defence and security cooperation in the Sahel has recently grown more than cooperation in other sectors. Although Turkey has had agreements for limited training and equipment for several years, this cooperation has accelerated since 2020, despite the Turkish pledge of EUR 5 million to the G5 Sahel joint force in 2018.⁵⁸ Both Mali and Niger signed cooperation agreements with Turkey in relation to their defence industries and to some training of security force units and other forms of

security cooperation.⁵⁹ Niger signed additional agreements with Turkey in 2018,⁶⁰ and another security cooperation agreement in 2020 whose contents have not been made public.⁶¹ Burkina Faso, meanwhile, signed a defence industrial agreement with Turkey in 2019, although it has taken several years to fully bear fruit – Turkish defence exports to the country were only \$277,000 in 2020, but increased to nearly \$7 million in 2021.⁶² Plans for another agreement negotiated in 2021 were briefly put on hold due to the coup in January 2022, although that has not stopped the purchase and deployment of equipment such as Bayraktar drones.⁶³

Before the more recent purchases of heavy weapons by Sahelian security forces, Turkish defence companies and the Turkish government provided a wide range of training and equipment programmes. In Burkina Faso in the last decade this included training programmes for the country's police and gendarmerie, as well as purchases of small arms, armoured vehicles, and surveillance and anti-aircraft weaponry.⁶⁴ Similarly, in Mali there were some training programmes for members of the security forces even under the presidency of Ahmadou Toumani Touré,⁶⁵ while some Malian officers have studied at Turkey's War College since 2018.⁶⁶ Mali's

53 Interview with a former official of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ouagadougou, November 2022

54 Ibid.

55 Interview with Nigérien economist, Niamey, November 2022.

56 Interview with an expert in the Malian cultural sector, Bamako, December 2022.

57 Interview with an entrepreneur in the consulting field in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

58 "Turkey announces \$5m for Sahel anti-jihadist force," France 24, published 1 March 2018.

59 Mehmet Özkan and Aissatou Koné, "[L'Afrique de l'Ouest et la Turquie forment une nouvelle alliance sur la sécurité](#)," ISS, 31 March 2022.

60 Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, "[Unpacking Turkey's Security Footprint in Africa](#)," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, published 30 June 2022.

61 Armstrong here? "[Réunion et signature d'accords de partenariat entre le Niger et la Turquie: Plusieurs accords signés dont celui relative à la sécurité](#)," Le Sahel, published 22 July 2022.

62 Göksel Yıldırım, "[Le Burkina Faso se dote d'équipements et de véhicules de défense turcs pour la lutte antiterroriste](#)," Anadolu Agency, published 17 September 2021.

63 Interview with a former official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022; "Burkina Faso: Le Parlement approuve l'acquisition de drones militaires auprès d'une firme [turque](#)," TRT Afrika, 15 April 2023.

64 Ibid.

65 Interview with an expert in the Malian cultural sector, Bamako, December 2022.

66 Interview with a former official of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

weapons purchases from Turkey, as in Burkina Faso and Niger, also include small arms and ammunition, as well as armoured vehicles.⁶⁷

Although still much less extensive than Turkish security support and cooperation in Libya and Somalia, Turkish security presence has grown in the Sahel, and covers a range of basic and sophisticated armaments as well as training programmes. This growth provides economic and political benefit for Turkey on the one hand, particularly for those close to Erdoğan. As Donelli documents, the arms industry in particular is controlled by businesspeople close to Erdoğan who exercise influence over the country's Africa policy. This includes his son-in-law, who runs the defence division at the large-scale firm Baykar.⁶⁸ The sale of larger weapons systems has also increased in the past few years, notably via surveillance and armed drones acquired by Niger in 2021,⁶⁹ Burkina Faso in 2021⁷⁰ and Mali in late 2022.⁷¹ Niger has also acquired training aircraft from Turkey set to be delivered in 2023.⁷²

Military sales provide important sources of income for a major Turkish industry, while also helping Turkey cement a wide-ranging presence as an influential international security actor. For Sahelian states, Turkey's arms industry and sales approach marks a welcome difference from European countries in particular. Respondents have observed the willingness of Turkey to deliver military equipment without the restrictions

placed on military sales by the West.⁷³ Similarly, the purchase of military equipment is a way for Sahelian states to create deeper engagement with Turkey; the well-connected Burkinabè businessman Mahamadou Bonkougou – who has reportedly grown close to the government of Ibrahim Traoré after sidelining Traoré's predecessor Damiba – served as an intermediary to secure the delivery of TB2 drones to Burkina Faso.⁷⁴ According to *Jeune Afrique*, Bonkougou may have also played an intermediary role in securing concessions to a new Turkish mining company for gold mining at Inata and Manganese mining at Tambao, although Bonkougou denies this report.⁷⁵

Education and cultural politics

For at least the past decade, some aspects of Turkey's foreign policy in the Sahel have focused on education, comprising both explicitly religious education as well as secular educational programmes with a Turkish-developed curriculum and Turkish language education.⁷⁶ Both types of education include opportunities for students to obtain scholarships to study in Turkey. Some of these programmes, particularly the schools run by the Maarif Foundation, are directly managed by the Turkish state. Others are administered by local NGOs, but with some support from Turkish NGOs and Turkish personnel or the Turkish state.

In 2019, schools run by the Maarif Foundation in Niger educated as many as 1,000 students.⁷⁷ In Mali, this presence appears even larger. After 2017, Maarif took over some 18 *Collèges Horizons* previously run by adherents of Gülen.⁷⁸ The foundation now manages at least four

67 "La Turquie en embuscade au Sahel," Mondafrique, published 29 July 2022.

68 Federico Donelli, *UAVs and beyond: Security and defence sector at the core of Turkey's strategy in Africa* (Megatrends Africa, 2019).

69 Laurent Lagneau, "La Turquie va livrer des blindés, des drones Bayraktar TB-2 et des avions d'entraînement Hürkuş au Niger," Zone Militaire, published 21 November 2021.

70 But made operational in 2022. *Le Burkina Faso commence à faire voler des drones armés de fabrication turque*, Radio France Internationale, published 14 September 2022.

71 "Le Mali s'arme avec les drones turcs Bayraktar," APA News, published 22 December 2022.

72 Burak Ege Bekdil, "TAI to deliver Hürkuş-C combat aircraft to Niger, Chad," Defense News, published 28 October 2022.

73 Interview with an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mali, Bamako, December 2022.

74 "Ibrahim Traoré a-t-il fait de Mahamadou Bonkougou le maillon fort de sa stratégie turque?" *Jeune Afrique*, 4 May 2023.

75 Ibid; also see "Burkinabe gov't sells mines for CFA30bln", APA News, 26 April 2023.

76 Interview with an economist in Niger, Niamey, November 2022.

77 Kané, "Niger : L'ambassadeur turo salue la coopération."

78 Arwa Ibrahim, "What was Turkey's failed coup about – and what's happened since?" *Al Jazeera*, 15 July 2022.

schools in Bamako, with another in Segou that welcomes nearly 3,000 students.⁷⁹ The schools appear successful by several measures: their numbers and growth are significant, and these schools accept not only Sahelian students but also the children of expatriate families.⁸⁰ In Burkina Faso, Maarif Foundation schools have operated since 2019.⁸¹ However, these schools have not always proven popular; Armstrong for instance notes that the ‘heavy-handedness of the takeover [of the *Collèges Horizon in Bamako*] alienated some alumni, and the schools’ reputation has suffered’.⁸² The schools have also created controversy in Mali for a variety of reasons, from traffic jams caused by concentrating the schools in certain parts of Bamako to protests from teachers and staff who feel they have been mistreated by new administrators.⁸³

Some schools benefit directly from the assistance of Diyanet, Turkey’s Presidency of Religious Affairs. In Burkina Faso, where Diyanet does not have an official presence, the ministry’s foundation has since the early 2000s supported religious education in urban and rural areas, and distributes food during celebrations like Tabaski (*Eid al-Adha*) and Ramadan.⁸⁴ Turkish religious support and involvement in education, humanitarian and cultural activities occupies a particular place in an increasingly crowded field. While Moroccan and Algerian religious support has at least in some ways emphasised the shared religious histories of North and West Africa as well as shared Islamic practices (particularly the Malaki school of Islamic law that is predominant

in both regions), Turkish religious education and involvement has been largely non-sectarian according to respondents, focusing on the Qur’an and hadith,⁸⁵ without favouring any school of interpretation.⁸⁶

Instead, according to respondents involved in these activities, the Turkish government supports religious education and training for imams largely in the domain of Arabic and Turkish promotion and an understanding of basic tenets of Islam and prayer, rather than a direct emphasis on Islam as it is practised specifically in Turkey.⁸⁷ Diyanet offers some support to the construction of religious schools and the training of instructors and imams, but also works through local NGOs led by Turks or Sahelian citizens.⁸⁸ Turkish programmes also work at times through local religious leaders to achieve their goals; one Malian respondent observed that in order to ease the process of taking over the *Collèges Horizon*, for instance, a Maarif official travelled with Malian officials to Nioro-du-Sahel to see the influential Chérif de Nioro, whose support helped convince the IBK government to allow the takeover to proceed.

As in other domains, Turkish educational approaches differ across the Sahel. Whereas educational support in Burkina Faso appears to largely focus on the Maarif schools as well as support to other primary and secondary education, in Mali Turkey has set up university partnerships with the *Université des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques de Bamako*, which one official described as a ‘pilot’ programme.⁸⁹ The respondent noted that given the role of universities as a ‘space of influence’, such

79 Mamadou Makadji, “Mali: Festival culturel des écoles Maarif de Bamako : La Fondation Maarif mobilise les élèves et leurs parents pour la cause des orphelins,” Mali Actu, published 26 January 2020.

80 Makadji, “Mali : Festival culturel des écoles.”

81 “La Turkey met en garde ses pays amis contre l’organisation «terroriste» FETÖ,” Agence d’Information du Burkina, published 15 July 2022.

82 Armstrong, “Turkey in the Sahel.”

83 “Maarif de Turquie : Qui veut saboter la fondation?” L’Alerte (Mali), 18 January 2022.

84 Interview with an expert in the cultural sector in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022; Interview with an expert in the humanitarian sector in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

85 Sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohamed and his companions.

86 Interview with an expert in the cultural sector in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

87 Interview with Turkish religious activist in the Sahel, Bamako, November 2022.

88 Interview with an expert in the humanitarian sector in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022; Interview with an entrepreneur in the consulting field in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, November 2022.

89 Interview with an expert in the Malian cultural sector, Bamako, December 2022.

positioning could be an avenue for Turkish scholarship and other partnerships to influence Malian social and political debates,⁹⁰ although this is not particularly different from how other countries use educational and cultural partnerships. One respondent reported that Turkey has plans to construct a Turkish university in Niger.⁹¹ These efforts speak to an ongoing policy of supporting education at different levels in target countries in order to advance Turkish soft power appeal while cultivating ties with Sahelian populations.

Conclusion and recommendations

Turkey has pursued a multi-faceted set of policies in the Sahel for much of the last decade, slowly increasing its presence across the defence, economic, cultural and development spheres. This expansion was first diplomatic, then increasingly became focused on economic and security issues, particularly as the Sahel's security situation worsened and Turkey's economic and political tumult since 2016 necessitated greater exports and deeper political ties outside of Europe. Although Turkish trade and presence in the Sahel remains small compared to other regions, it is not only growing but has taken shape in key sectors, particularly construction (including showcase construction projects like the airport in Niamey), as well as in healthcare, security cooperation and equipment, mining, education and development.

Turkey has also increasingly espoused anti-colonial (and particularly anti-French) discourses in the region, presenting itself as a different kind of partner, one that shares interests as well as religious and some historical ties with the Muslim-majority countries of the central Sahel, although its diplomatic, political and economic investments are by no means limited to countries formerly colonised by France. Turkey has expressed support for coup governments in Mali and Burkina Faso, and pursued closer military

and economic ties despite the region's political and security tumult. In turn, Sahelian countries have increasingly called on Turkish expertise and assistance in key areas, and experts interviewed for this study frequently cited Turkish approaches and the broad-based (even if relatively small) Turkish presence across the region as representing a reliable partnership with Sahelian countries, one they often contrasted with European approaches.

Recommendations:

1. **Learn from the Turkish approach in the Sahel.** While Western countries have at times expressed concern about the growing Turkish presence in the region and the possibility of it creating further geopolitical tensions, the Turkish approach to cultivating partnerships with Sahelian countries can provide lessons as Europe seeks to re-envisage and recast its relationship with the region. This approach includes cultivating a sense of active partnership among Sahelian officials, increasing non-defence-related delegations and visits to the region, and ensuring that regional European and US embassies are well staffed and in regular contact and coordination with Sahelian counterparts.
2. **Where possible, seek to leverage Turkish security assistance.** Although current policies and political tensions restrict European and US security assistance to Mali and Burkina Faso, Europe and the US can still seek to provide human rights-oriented training and augment capacity building in cooperation with Turkish authorities in order to improve regional counterterrorism capacity and ensure that equipment is monitored and employed in ways that comply with international law.

90 Ibid.

91 Interview with an economist in Niger, Niamey, November 2022.

- 3. Improve scholarship and work opportunities for Sahelian populations in Europe and the US.** One significant soft-power advantage is the ability to provide scholarships and programmes to work and study abroad, one made complicated by the European focus on illegal migration and long delays for visa applications in Europe and the US. A broader emphasis on smart power through scholarships, leadership opportunities, and work, educational and cultural travel and exchange between the Sahel, Europe and the US will reinforce a sense of partnership and cooperation, as well as contributing to a more positive image for Europe and the US in the Sahel.
- 4. Encourage and improve investments in diverse manufacturing infrastructure.** In addition to significant inroads in construction, Turkish manufacturing and industry has expanded in the Sahel and West Africa through a wide range of industries producing consumables at lower prices, including textiles, food imports and iron ore. These lower-level industries and the prospect of creating factories in Sahelian countries themselves often gives a positive image to Turkish products used by Sahelians on a daily basis, sectors that Western industries largely do not compete in but which could be opportunities for investment that would encourage growth in Sahelian societies.

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