

Beyond Guns for Hire: Rethinking African Agency through Security Cooperation with SADAT

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving landscape of contemporary Turkish foreign policy, marked by its expansive global engagement and the strategic implementation of a multi-track approach that includes non-state actors. While existing scholarship extensively analyzes Türkiye's increasing presence in Sub-Sa-

haran Africa (SSA), insufficient attention has been paid to the nuanced ways African states exercise agency within these partnerships, particularly concerning the growing role of private military security companies (PMSCs). This study addresses this gap by foregrounding the intermediary function of SADAT, a prominent Turkish PMSC, in shaping Türkiye-Africa relations. Drawing on an analysis of public statements, military expert reports,

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and conceptual frameworks of African agency, we argue that SADAT acts as a crucial conduit, affording both Türkiye and African states plausible deniability and strategic ambiguity, respectively. This enables a diversification of security partnerships for African governments, allowing them to pursue national and regional priorities beyond traditional Western blocs or alternative Eastern ones. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how the selective engagement with actors like SADAT, often cloaked in rhetoric of shared values and anti-imperialism, reflects a sophisticated exercise of African agency, challenging one-sided narratives of foreign influence and enriching the understanding of South-South cooperation in a securitized global environment.

Keywords: Turkish foreign policy; private military security companies; african agency; security cooperation; multi-track diplomacy.

Más allá de las armas por contrato: repensar la agencia africana mediante la cooperación en seguridad con SADAT

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el panorama cambiante de la política exterior contemporánea de Turquía, caracterizado por su creciente compromiso global y la implementación estratégica de un enfoque

de múltiples vías, que incluye actores no estatales. Aunque la literatura existente analiza extensamente la creciente presencia de Turquía en el África subsahariana (ASS), se ha prestado poca atención a las formas matizadas en que los Estados africanos ejercen su agencia dentro de estas asociaciones, especialmente en relación con el papel creciente de las empresas militares y de seguridad privadas (PMSC - private military security companies). Este estudio aborda esa brecha al destacar la función intermediaria de SADAT, una destacada PMSC turca, en la configuración de las relaciones entre Turquía y África. A partir del análisis de declaraciones públicas, informes de expertos militares y marcos conceptuales sobre la agencia africana, sostenemos que SADAT actúa como un conducto crucial que otorga a Turquía y a los Estados africanos, respectivamente, una negación plausible y una ambigüedad estratégica. Esto permite a los gobiernos africanos diversificar sus alianzas en materia de seguridad, y perseguir prioridades nacionales y regionales más allá de los bloques occidentales tradicionales o las alternativas orientales. En última instancia, el artículo demuestra cómo la participación selectiva con actores como SADAT, a menudo envuelta en una retórica de valores compartidos y anti-imperialismo, refleja un ejercicio sofisticado de la agencia africana, que desafía las narrativas unilaterales de influencia extranjera y enriquece la comprensión de la cooperación Sur-Sur en un entorno global securitizado.

Palabras clave: política exterior turca; empresas militares y de seguridad privadas; agencia africana; cooperación en seguridad; diplomacia de múltiples vías.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, Türkiye has expanded its global engagement significantly, driven by an evolving foreign policy that leverages trade, development assistance, and an increasing focus on security cooperation (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). This contemporary approach, articulated in the 'Türkiye Yüzyılı' vision and shaped by the Davutoğlu Doctrine, involves a multidirectional, multitrack strategy that integrates nonstate actors alongside traditional diplomatic channels (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, n.d.; Donelli, 2021). The strategic inclusion of entities such as SADAT, a prominent Turkish private military security company (PMSC), highlights the increasing role of the defense sector in advancing Turkish foreign policy objectives, particularly in regions of expanded interest including Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (SADAT, 2023).

While scholarship extensively examines Türkiye's increasing presence in SSA and the drivers behind its foreign policy, there remains a critical lacuna in the literature: insufficient attention to the active and strategic exercise of agency by the governments of African states within these partnerships. Traditional analyses often implicitly or explicitly portray African nations as passive recipients of external influence, obscuring their ability to shape, influence, negotiate, and lever-

age South-South collaborations for their own strategic purposes. Moreover, the specific role of PMSCs, such as SADAT, as critical intermediaries in facilitating these complex dynamics, has largely gone unexplored.

This article addresses this lack of research on PMSCs by arguing that SADAT functions as a crucial intermediary between African governments and Türkiye. SADAT provides Ankara with plausible deniability and enables strategic ambiguity for African governments. Ultimately, this enhances the agency of African administrations within these bilateral relationships. Accordingly, this analysis critically builds upon earlier work on SADAT and Turkish foreign policy, yet it does not cover every facet of these topics. Attempting such a comprehensive survey within one article would be neither possible nor prudent. The task, therefore, is more focused: to discern how African governments negotiate and enact agency in their relations with Türkiye through SADAT's mediations. Examining SADAT's operations within the context of Türkiye's evolving multi-track foreign policy and applying contemporary conceptualizations of African agency demonstrates how African governments selectively engage with external partners to diversify their security portfolios, assert sovereignty, and pursue national priorities beyond traditional geopolitical blocs. Finally, this article should be read as a temporally situated analysis. The dynamics of Türkiye's foreign policy, SADAT's role therein, and African governments' strategies are

constantly changing. Part of this study's value lies in capturing these processes as they unfold. In doing so, the study mitigates hindsight bias and provides future scholarship with a temporal snapshot of an ongoing story rather than a rationalized and retrospective account.

The article proceeds as follows: first, it traces the evolution of contemporary Turkish foreign policy and its underlying ideological influences, particularly in relation to engagement in Africa. Second, it critically reviews conceptualizations of African agency and emphasizes their relevance to understanding external partnerships. Third, it provides an overview of SADAT's history, structure, and operations. Lastly, the article synthesizes these threads to demonstrate how SADAT's intermediary role enables the sophisticated exercise of African agency and promotes a more nuanced comprehension of South-South security dynamics.

CONTEMPORARY TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Over the past quarter century, Türkiye has expanded its global engagement through trade, development assistance, and the establishment of new diplomatic ties and military operations predominantly across the Islamic world (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). Marking its 100th year as a country in 2023, Türkiye launched the '*Türkiye Yüzyılı*' (Türkiye Century), signaling a new shift in its foreign policy. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has communicated an increased focus on strengthening regional

peace and security. The ministry aims to expand the institutional basis of foreign relations, develop regional economic prosperity and welfare, and influence the transformation of the global system (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, n.d.). Not only does Türkiye perceives itself as an active regional leader, but the new foreign policy also emphasizes Türkiye's efforts in more distant regions, including the initiation of the Africa Partnership Policy (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, n.d.). Within the context of the '*Türkiye Yüzyılı*' and its expanded global aspirations, the defense industry has been identified as playing a guiding role in Turkish foreign policy. SADAT has positioned itself within this narrative by advocating for increased attention to the defense consultancy sector. They assert that they are a unique service provider in this field (SADAT, 2023). However, this domestic advocacy represents only one facet of SADAT's engagement with Turkish foreign policy. More critically, SADAT has emerged as a significant nonstate actor, operationalizing the multitrack approach that defines Türkiye's contemporary foreign relations.

The *Türkiye Yüzyılı* is not the only shift in recent Turkish foreign policy. Alongside its self-prescribed role as an international actor, Türkiye's foreign policy has undergone significant changes over the past two decades (Donelli, 2021). The 2002 victory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) (Justice and Development Party) marked the rise to the power of a political party with Islamic roots, which has been the source of many of the changes enacted. Under

the AKP, Türkiye sought to attain greater global status. The Davutoğlu Doctrine has served as a guide to transform Turkish foreign policy. The Doctrine is based on three pillars: greater strategic depth; a multi-directional orientation; and the inclusion of non-state actors in foreign policy (Donelli, 2021). The inclusion of non-state actors, widely referred to as the multi-track approach, shifted the focus of foreign policy from government actors to include civil society, such as businesses and non-governmental organizations. Adopting the multi-track approach represented a foundational shift that created an operational space for entities like SADAT, which is central to Türkiye's contemporary foreign policy execution.

Furthermore, Davutoğlu emphasized integrating Muslim heritage into policymaking, framing Islam as a means to strengthen ties with Muslim-majority countries (Sadik, 2012). His doctrine marked a departure from the secular, Western-oriented approach by elevating Islam as a policy instrument and refocusing foreign policy toward Muslim communities and Islamic identity (Öztürk, 2021). This shift was driven by domestic and regional factors; the AKP viewed Islam as a guiding principle of foreign policy (Sadik, 2012).

IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Both the Davutoğlu Doctrine and AKP leadership are widely associated with neo-Ottoman and neo-Islamist ideologies. Consequently, Giray Sadik (2012)

argues that ideologies have become as important as geopolitical realities in influencing the formulation of Turkish Foreign Policy. Neo-Ottomanist foreign policy draws on the Ottoman model of influencing other countries' religious, cultural, and political realms through the use of soft power (Donelli, 2021; Gülbay, 2023). This soft power is employed with 'familiar faces', targeting formerly Ottoman-controlled states (Gülbay, 2023). Adopting a multi-track approach, a pillar of the Davutoğlu Doctrine, is conceptualized as following neo-Ottomanist ideals. The increasing visibility of non-state apparatuses in foreign policy, pointed out by Mehmet Karahan and Ziya Abbas (2022) support this claim, underscoring the growing significance of non-traditional foreign policy instruments.

In line with the religious values and doctrine of the AKP, many NGOs active abroad, as a part of the multi-track approach, have a religious philosophy, and since 2013, the Diyanet Bakanlığı (Ministry of Religion) has become an increasingly important instrument of soft power (Öztürk, 2021). While the use of Islam as a foreign policy tool dates back to the early 1970s in the Turkish context, its use has intensified since 2013 (Öztürk, 2021). Alterations to Islam are not new in Türkiye, as the early founding elite attempted to 'Turkify' Islam, prioritizing Turkishness and transforming Islam into a state-institution (Ozkan, 2013). More recently, the AKP has attempted to reconcile Islamic theology with civilization philosophy, to create a new 'moderate Islam' (Turhan, 2021). These

various reinterpretations of Islam on a national scale have resulted in the creation of a 'Turkish Islam', which, with its moderate approach, is more palatable than the interpretations of other regional actors, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Conversely, Hakki Taş (2020) argues that too much attention is being paid to the Islamization of Türkiye and that this focus on ideological transformations leads to oversight of the increasingly prominent security regime. Such claims of overlooking the securitization of Türkiye warrant inquiry into Turkish foreign policy in SSA, especially given SADAT's growing role.

TÜRKİYE'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD AFRICA

During the 20th century, Türkiye's diplomatic efforts largely overlooked SSA. Effort to expand relations beyond North Africa can be divided into three periods: the Africa Plan in 1998, the declaration of an Africa Year in 2005, and the 2011 famine in Somalia (Donelli, 2021). Although the Africa Plan was published in 1998, the first period was limited to the development of diplomatic infrastructure (Ozkan, 2013). Later, the AKP declared 2005 'Africa Year' and introduced the Africa Açılım Politikası (Africa Opening Strategy). This policy focused on humanitarian aid, and relied on soft power channels, such as scholarships and cultural contracts, to implement Turkish foreign policy (Donelli, 2021). The second period saw an increase in international cooperation in the private sector and NGOs founded in shared Muslim heritage

(Wheeler, 2011). The increase in Turkish NGO involvement as well as private sector investments came as Türkiye adopted a multi-track approach to its foreign policy, which solidified as of 2013 (Donelli, 2021). Türkiye's extensive humanitarian efforts in response to the 2011 crisis in Somalia marked a new chapter in Turkish involvement in SSA, paving the way for more diverse engagement, that would increasingly include security cooperation.

There are a myriad factors that make Türkiye an attractive partner for SSA states. The perceived lack of a colonial past in SSA combined with the emphasis on African agency, present in government discourse in phrases such as 'African solutions to African problems' as famously coined by Erdoğan, positions Türkiye as a trustworthy partner (Wheeler, 2011; Karahan & Abbas, 2022). It should be noted, however, that although Türkiye was not present as a colonial force in SSA, claims of being an anti-imperialist force are incompatible with the emphasis placed on its Ottoman legacy. Islam plays a significant role in both directing religiously motivated Turkish NGOs to the continent's Muslim majority countries, which benefit the Turkish image, as well as placing Türkiye as a desirable partner owing to the more moderate values of Turkish Islam (Turhan, 2021). Claiming the policies to be neo-Ottomanist, Federico Donelli (2021) accepts that Turkish foreign policy towards the continent as a whole possesses religious motives. However, the religious aspects were toned down during the period of opening up to SSA so as not to drive away non-Muslim ma-

jority countries from partnership (Donelli, 2021). Lastly, Türkiye's good relations with both the West and the East, while not being a pillar of either, made Türkiye a safe partner for many countries (Süsler & Alden, 2022).

Although aid and humanitarian efforts are at the forefront of Turkish foreign policy towards the SSA, there are many temporal and political motivations behind its increased diplomatic relations. Donelli (2021) argues that Turkish foreign policy towards SSA was part of the broader goal of establishing Türkiye as a global actor. While Islam is deemed central to Türkiye's approach to the continent, the objective is not to spread Islam, but rather to use it as a tool to achieve global influence. Initially, the difficulties faced in the EU accession process, combined with the search for greater autonomy from traditional Western allies pushed Türkiye to seek new partners to bolster its presence in international forums (Donelli, 2021). The pursuit of material gains through fostering sustainable economic development acted as financial motivators, and the investment opportunities in SSA presented an avenue for the production of domestic consent for AKP rule, by introducing Anatolian entrepreneurship to a new market. Such consent was further produced throughout society through a religious charitable dimension because much of Turkish civil society its involvement was religiously motivated (Donelli, 2021).

Opinions diverge concerning the extent of the Turkish state's involvement in non-governmental actors of multi-track foreign policy. Some argue that, initial-

ly, these actors were not regulated by the state, and that businesspeople and NGOs acted organically (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). The debate about state oversight is particularly relevant for understanding the strategic ambiguity and plausible deniability provided by non-state actors, such as SADAT. However, accounts of those involved in the Gülen movement confess that said actors did not directly deviate from Turkish operations until early 2013, which coincided with the beginning of the fallout between the Gülen movement and the Erdoğan government (Öztürk, 2021). Coincidentally, 2013 was the year where the activity of the Diyanet increased exponentially (Donelli, 2021). Furthermore, Yunus Turhan (2021) claims that the role of leadership in shaping a country's identity and its subsequent reflection in foreign policy is often overlooked. The religious aspect of the multi-track approach is widely discussed in the literature. Çağlar Kurç (2024) draws attention to the financial interests, by emphasizing Türkiye's goal of pursuing the track to support its arms export policy through its various non-state actors that supplement state-based diplomacy.

AFRICAN AGENCY

Bağrı Süsler and Chris Alden (2022) add to the growing body of literature on African agency. They examine how African states interact with Türkiye's increasingly assertive foreign policy on the continent. The authors propose a dual framework - transactional (through trade, aid, and

cooperation) and ideational (via shared Islamic identity, Ottoman heritage, and anti-colonial solidarity) - to explain how African actors navigate and negotiate South-South partnerships. This model aligns with the broader scholarly shift toward foregrounding African negotiation and agenda-setting in international relations. It seeks to move beyond structuralist accounts that portray African states as passive recipients of foreign influence (Fisher, 2018; Harman & Brown, 2013; Mohan & Lampert, 2013). However, despite this intention, Süsler and Alden's framework ultimately recasts African agency through a Turkish-centric lens. Their reliance on Turkish state rhetoric, particularly Erdoğan's speeches invoking brotherhood and equality, as evidence of ideational co-production risks reducing agency to mere alignment or receptivity, rather than exploring the autonomous preferences, strategies, and institutional pathways of African governments.

A broader conceptualization is offered by Tshepo Gwatiwa (2021), whose analysis of African Union partnerships with global powers emphasizes institutional control, preference alignment, and leadership as key markers of African agency. Through the concepts of *shirking* and *slippage*, Gwatiwa (2021) highlights how the AU has selectively engaged multilateral actors; exemplified by strategic assertion with the EU, versus more passive or deferential relationships with NATO, the UN, and AFRICOM. While Gwatiwa's (2021) analysis is explicitly multilateral and thus not directly applicable to bilateral partnerships like those between

Türkiye and African states, his framework nonetheless underscores the importance of analyzing how agency remains structured, negotiated, and contested internally - something largely absent from Süsler and Alden's focus on Turkish initiative. Adding further analytical depth, Elijah Munyi *et al.* (2022) *Beyond History* adds further analytical depth by expanding the concept of African agency past outcome-shaping power. The volume introduces alternative modalities of agency: agency as identity-deepening through collective action, and as promoting norms and resisting dominant international discourses. However, the book's focus on non-state actors, including filmmakers, women's groups, and traditional networks, demonstrates the importance of informal sites of resistance and agency production. This perspective is critical given the increasing role of extra-institutional actors in African foreign policy. Thus, the concept of agency proposed by Munyi *et al.* (2022) lends itself particularly well to examine Türkiye's multi-actor approach.

This layered and actor-diverse view of agency is particularly important when considering the security-development nexus. However, Süsler and Alden's framework, which focuses on formal co-operation, largely excludes the influence of opaque non-state intermediaries, such as SADAT, which facilitate Turkish security cooperation through paramilitarized, hybrid forms. Thus they are crucial in enabling the agency of African governments through strategic ambiguity. As Paul Nantulya (2023) argues in his analysis of

China–Africa security partnerships that non-state actors, including private security companies and state-linked corporate actors, are reshaping how African states pursue security objectives, often outside conventional diplomatic frameworks. This signals a broader trend of informal securitization in African international relations and one which must be examined through the lens of agency. Accordingly, Jonathan Fisher and David Anderson (2015) offer a particularly incisive critique of the idea that securitized development is merely imposed on African states by Western actors alone. In their study of Chad, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Rwanda, Fisher and Anderson demonstrate how African regimes actively encourage and co-produce securitized aid and development frameworks. They embed these frameworks strategically in militarized, illiberal state-building projects. Their concept of *authoritarian agency*, in which African governments shape donor agendas, outsource security through private actors, and frame domestic threats as global concerns, complicates any simplistic notion of African passivity. Though not centered on formal bilateral diplomacy, this work is crucial for understanding how African agency in security affairs is deeply intertwined with hybrid arrangements, where informal actors, private networks, and narrative manipulation play decisive roles.

Together, these contributions challenge the limited definition of agency proposed by Süsler and Alden (2022). Viewing African agency only through formal cooperation or rhetorical align-

ment is to overlook the complex ways in which African actors - state and non-state - construct, mediate, and even exploit international partnerships for their own strategic ends. Whether through the institutional maneuvering explored by Gwatiwa, the norm promotion and narrative agency in *Beyond History*, or the securitized statecraft analyzed by Fisher and Anderson, a far more layered understanding of agency emerges. This article seeks to foreground this layered, actor-diverse conception of agency—one that accounts for the strategic utility of non-state intermediaries like SADAT, in the context of Turkish-African relations, thereby contributing to the spare body of work on the topic.

PRIVATE MILITARY SECURITY COMPANIES IN AFRICA

If religion can be considered a useful ideological conduit for establishing and maintaining foreign relations, then private military security companies (PMSCs) represent another critical instrument in the contemporary multi-track foreign policy. They are frequently used today as hard power tools with similar objectives. According to Robert Mandel (2001), the modern proliferation of PMSCs can be traced back to the end of the Cold War. The combination of reductions in sizes of state militaries, growing reluctance of powerful countries to officially intervene in high-risk regions abroad, and increases in non-state actor conflicts contributing to heightened perceptions of threat; all helped create the conditions

for the growth of PMSCs (Mandel, 2001). Following the Cold War, many African countries were left especially vulnerable, as foreign powers reduced their overt entanglements. This left unresolved proxy wars, propped-up authoritarians, and easy access to weapons in their wake (Bala & Tar, 2021). In this context, foreign PMSCs have historically been employed in Africa to support weak regimes facing challenges from armed contesters, and also to provide protection to public and private entities, given the insufficient capabilities of national security and military forces (Bala & Tar, 2021).

The wide variety and diverse functions of foreign PMSCs operating in Africa complicate attempts to provide a broad definition of PMSCs. For the purpose of this paper, Peter Singer's definition of PMSCs has been used: "private business entities that deliver to consumers a wide spectrum of military and security services, once generally assumed to be exclusively inside the public context" (Singer, 2001, cited in Ameyaw-Brobby & Antwi-Danso, 2024, p. 1053). Foreign PMSCs in Africa can be differentiated by their countries of origin, their capabilities, and their reputations. American PMSCs, such as Academi, PAE Group, and DynCorp International, are known to provide a wide variety of services, including private security, logistical support, weapons provisions, and armed forces training (Gumedze, 2007). These companies are often contracted by the United States government, and in many cases, have been used to achieve foreign policies or economic objectives with minimal finan-

cial and political risk (Ameyaw-Brobby & Antwi-Danso, 2024). Similarly, French PMSCs, such as Amarante International, have historically provided high-level security services, such as protection of the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya, that align with French foreign interests (Bátor & Koníkova, 2025). As Chinese business interests expand, Chinese private security companies have begun operating in Africa, coordinating closely Belt and Road Initiative projects (Yuan, 2022). Chinese companies, such as DeWe Security Group Limited, do not carry firearms, and specialize in risk assessments and coordination with local authorities to protect Chinese businesses and economic assets (Yuan, 2022). Between 2017 and 2023, the notorious Russian PMSC Wagner also expanded its operations across Africa in close alignment with Kremlin diplomatic and economic interests (Ameyaw-Brobby & Antwi-Danso, 2024). In contrast to western counterparts, Wagner's reputation as able and willing to operate in political and ethical gray zones made it a preferable choice for controversial employers, such as authoritarian regimes. (Ameyaw-Brobby & Antwi-Danso, 2024). Depending on the country and context, Wagner provided armed private security services, training of armed forces, and mercenary combat services. This exemplifies the increasingly dynamic role of PMSCs that are beholden to both foreign employers and home country governments (Ameyaw-Brobby & Antwi-Danso, 2024). Following a conflict with regular Russian forces and the death of the company's founder,

Yevgeny Prigozhin, in 2023, Wagner's infrastructure and personnel were largely subsumed by a succeeding Russian paramilitary group, Africa Corps, which is under more direct Kremlin control (Ogbonna, 2025). In June 2025, Wagner announced that it had completed its mission in Mali and would withdraw from the country, even though countries across the Sahel, including Mali, have begun to see increased attacks from Islamic extremist groups (Ogbonna, 2025). After the announcement, the Malian government invited the Russian mercenaries, now operating under the guise of Africa Corps, to stay in Mali and continue to support the country's war against Tuareg 'rebel' forces (Vorobyov, 2025).

In recent years, a new PMSC from Türkiye called the "International Defense Consultancy Construction Industry and Trade Inc.", better known as SADAT, has begun operating in Africa. SADAT's emergence and operational model in the region serve as a primary empirical illustration of how Türkiye leverages non-state actors for strategic foreign policy goals, and how African governments and political elites, in turn, use such intermediaries to enhance their agency. Existing literature has compared SADAT to Russia's Wagner (before its transformation into the Africa Corps in 2023). Both offer African clients a useful alternative to western-affiliated PMSCs. Both were started by founders with close ties to their respective governments' inner circles. Both appear to offer a wide variety of services, including personal and asset security, armed forces training, and

potentially active combat capabilities. However, apparently conscious of Wagner's disreputable image and that of other controversial PMSCs, SADAT distinguishes itself through a low profile and the self-proclaimed mission to bolster the military and anti-terrorist capabilities of armies in Muslim-majority countries. Currently, little publicly available information exists regarding SADAT (Powers, 2021). The following sections describing SADAT largely rely on a combination of local news reports, analyses by military experts, government press releases, and peer-reviewed articles.

BRIEF HISTORY OF SADAT

Adnan Tanrıverdi, a former one-star general in Türkiye's army, founded SADAT in 2012 as a for-profit company designed to train clients in irregular warfare (Taş, 2020). Formed in the midst of the Arab Spring, SADAT can best be understood in the context of the "politicization of the military and the militarization of politics in Turkey" in the early 2010s (Taş, 2020, p. 2). This context, particularly the development of paramilitary forces like SADAT through informal links, created a mechanism for plausible deniability that would become central to Türkiye's execution of foreign policy. Seeking to maintain control and popular support among an increasingly secular population, the ruling AKP party adopted militarized liberation rhetoric against Western influence, and increased military interventions in neighboring countries such as Syria and Azerbaijan (Taş, 2020).

At the same time, coercive power and resources were distributed between the army and the Interior Ministry so that each would counterbalance the other, while a third militarized bloc consisting of paramilitary groups such as SADAT and proxy forces was developed to “insulate the office of the president” through informal links (Taş, 2020, p. 5).

The first mention of SADAT operating outside of Türkiye was in Libya in 2013 (Parens & Plichta, 2025). According to reports by the U.S. Department of Defense Inspector General, SADAT paid and trained as many as five thousand Syrian mercenaries fighting in the Libyan Civil War, while also training fighters from the Turkish-backed Government of National Accord (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Sources have also claimed that SADAT may have played a role in training and supervising members of the Syrian National Army, also known as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, a coalition of rebel factions pursuing Turkish interests in Northern Syria during the Syrian Civil War (Powers, 2021; Vial & Bouvier, 2025). Additionally, SADAT may have also been used to help Türkiye deploy Syrian mercenaries to support Türkiye's ally, Azerbaijan, during the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh from 2020 to 2023 (Taş, 2020).

From the beginning, SADAT's character and capabilities have largely been shaped by the group's founder, Adnan Tanrıverdi. Before forming SADAT, Tanrıverdi worked in the Turkish Armed Forces, where he collaborated with the Special Forces Chief of Staff and trained the country's land forces (Jaklin, 2024).

Early in his career, Tanrıverdi was appointed brigade commander in İstanbul. This position allowed him to develop a friendship with the city's mayor and the future President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Jaklin, 2024). Tanrıverdi and Erdoğan are both ardent supporters of conservative Islamic reforms in Türkiye, and both have framed Türkiye as a force against rapacious Western imperialism throughout their careers (Jaklin, 2024). In 1996, Tanrıverdi was dismissed from the military due to his anti-secular beliefs and Islamist ties. However, his outspoken stance on Turkish nationalism and Islamic conservatism positioned Tanrıverdi as a staunch ally of the president. Following the 2016 attempted coup, Tanrıverdi was appointed Erdoğan's Chief Military Advisor (Jaklin, 2024). Tanrıverdi's position in the Turkish government helped elevate SADAT's authority, however, he resigned in 2020 after making controversial comments about SADAT's role in preparing for the imminent return of the Messiah and the end of the world (Jaklin, 2024). His resignation may have also been an attempt to decrease SADAT's public profile and reduce the company's overt connection to the government at a time when SADAT began operating in Libya (Jaklin, 2024).

Today, SADAT is headed by Melih Tanrıverdi, son of Adnan Tanrıverdi, and the organization continues to pursue its goal of “[reorganizing] and [modernizing] the armed forces and internal security forces of Islamic countries in a modern and effective manner to ensure national defense and internal security...”

(SADAT, 2024). Many of these partners are in Africa. As European countries, such as France, that have historically maintained close, albeit controversial, political and economic ties with African countries have disengaged from the continent in recent years, a window of opportunity may be opening for Türkiye and SADAT. The forced removal of some foreign militaries, including those from France and the United Kingdom, as well as a diverse range of UN peacekeeping forces from regions such as the Sahel, has created a security void in which companies like SADAT can operate. Additionally, the reduction of Western development and investment activity, due to increased threats of violence, can be supplemented by Turkish companies, backed by Turkish security (Parens & Plichta, 2025; Ravikumar *et al.*, 2022; Burke, 2022).

OPERATIONS OF SADAT

According to its official website, SADAT is composed of 23 co-owners and 64 officers and non-commissioned officers, all of whom appear to be from the various branches of the Turkish Armed Forces (Tanrıverdi, 2024). At the top of the organization, a Board of Directors (on which Adnan Tanrıverdi sits) and an independent group of "Consultants and Experts" overlook the organization (Fonseca, 2023). Below, is an independent supervisory board and the organization's general manager (Fonseca, 2023). Reporting to the general manager are the finance, personnel and administrative affairs, information and communication technologies, supply

and equipment, defense organization and consulting, and training directorates (Fonseca, 2023). Within each of these directorates are various departments that oversee the operations and service provisioning, such as accounting, purchasing, and unconventional warfare organizations (Fonseca, 2023).

SADAT claims to have worked in 22 countries and aims to work in "all 60 Islamic countries" already (Tanrıverdi, 2024). SADAT is known for providing consultancy and training services to armed forces, as well as personal security services, in these countries. Consulting services include, "assessing possible military threats and identifying collective defense opportunities with allies/other countries as well as (re-) organizing the armed forces; audits of the readiness of the armed forces - offering solutions to deficits; cyber defense and assault software" (Jaklin, 2024, p. 3). Training services include "conventional military training for land, sea and air forces, as well as unconventional training including ambush, raid, road closing, destruction, sabotage, and rescue and abduction trainings and in turn the defense against these operations. Special forces training is also provided for land, air and sea; in conventional and unconventional warfare" (Jaklin, 2024, p. 4). Evidence from Mali also shows that clients can pay SADAT for personal bodyguards (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Additionally, while SADAT does not appear to directly engage in combat, as Wagner and some other PMSCs do, it has been known to deploy trained Syrian mercenaries in active combat

roles, a service which it does not publicly advertised and has been explicitly denied (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Lastly, some evidence suggests that SADAT also provides logistics support, and especially transportation using its own aircraft (Fonseca, 2023). One such example are the allegations of SADAT providing logistical support for proxy fighters in Syria (Powers, 2021).

SADAT's relatively low profile makes it difficult to determine its connection to the broader Turkish Military structure. However, assumptions can be made based on reports of SADAT Turkish military activities. Indeed, SADAT appears to

play a crucial role in enabling Türkiye's plausible deniability, particularly by deploying Syrian mercenaries in conflict zones where direct Turkish military intervention might incur significant international backlash (Taş, 2020). Examples include SADAT's use of Syrian mercenaries in regional hotspots such as Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh and its activities focused on protecting Turkish assets in countries like Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Vial & Bouvier, 2025). Additionally, SADAT also appears to be the entity upon which Türkiye relies upon for training the armed forces of other countries when those countries sign bilateral security

FIGURE 1. SADAT ORGANOGRAM



Note: This organogram is adapted from the one presented by Tomás Fonseca (2023, para. 4).

cooperation agreements (Vial & Bouvier, 2025). All of the African countries in which SADAT has provided training services have signed security cooperation agreements with Türkiye (Vial & Bouvier, 2025). The strategic function of SADAT's plausible deniability capability is further illuminated by the stated operational procedures of SADAT itself. Despite official denial of connections to Türkiye's government and armed forces, SADAT's CEO, Melih Tanrıverdi, was quoted in a 2021 radio interview as saying, "We do the following when we receive an offer that meets our own service provision criteria. We communicate the offer from a country to the Turkish Foreign Ministry. We also provide information to the National Intelligence Organization [MIT] and the Ministry of Defense about the request and ask for their views. This is the way we work" (Bozkurt, 2021).

From a broad perspective, the services offered by SADAT can be seen as part of a broader package of defense-and-security-focused arrangements, such as the sale of weapons, intelligence systems, etc.) This package has played a significant role in the increased economic and political cooperation between Türkiye and African countries in recent years (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). Türkiye now ranks fourth among arms exporters to Africa, and the greatest growth in partnerships between Türkiye and Sahelian countries has been in the defense and security sectors (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023; Parens & Plichta, 2025). In 2018, Türkiye pledged five million euros to the G5 Sahel joint force and signed a

military cooperation agreement with Niger (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). In 2019, Burkina Faso and Türkiye signed a defense industrial agreement (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). In 2020, Türkiye and Niger signed a second security cooperation agreement (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). Defense exports from Türkiye to Burkina Faso jumped from \$277000 in 2020 to \$7 million in 2021 (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). By 2022, at least 30 African countries had signed security cooperation agreements with Türkiye, 19 of which included training services for national armies (Baez, 2024). The agreements often included exports such as armored vehicles, small arms, helicopters, trainer aircraft, and drones (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Surveillance and armed drones, such as the Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı, have become an especially important export from Türkiye to African partners, and purchases have been recorded from Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo, and Djibouti (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Turkish arms and equipment have generally developed a reputation in Africa as being well-priced for their quality. Moreover, Türkiye's willingness to sell weaponry without restrictions sets it apart from Western suppliers (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023; Parens & Plichta, 2025).

In addition to training and weapons procurement, deals signed between Türkiye and African countries sometimes include the deployment of official Turkish military personnel. For instance, in 2025, Chad's government allowed the Turkish military to replace French troops at the

Abéché military base (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Similarly, in 2025, Niger allowed the Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (MIT), Türkiye's national intelligence organization, to establish an operations center Agadez, a city in the north of the country (Parens & Plichta, 2025). The most significant location of the official Turkish military presence in Africa is Camp TURKSOM situated near Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Strategically located near the Indian Ocean, and costing Türkiye around \$50 million, Camp TURKSOM is where the Turkish Armed Forces have agreed to train 10000 Somali soldiers, including special forces (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Türkiye has also signed agreements with Somalia to collaborate together in maritime security and law enforcement, and to provide equipment and training to Somalia's navy (Baez, 2024).

Reports of SADAT's activities have coincided with the presence of Turkish business enterprises and the Turkish military in some African countries. For instance, conflicting reports from regional news outlets in Somalia describe varying degrees of SADAT intervention in Mogadishu to support the Somali National Army in defending the capital against Al-Shabaab increasingly successful campaign that began in February 2025 (Mogadishu24, 2025; Mohamed, 2025; Somali Guardian, 2025; Tejeda, 2025). According to the *Somali Guardian* (2025), Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud recently requested that Türkiye send at least 3000 mercenaries to help stop Al-Shabaab's advance towards the capital. The same article describes SADAT as al-

ready having a presence in Mogadishu, where they are training Somali soldiers (Somali Guardian, 2025). However, accounts vary. Different sources indicate as few as three SADAT "officers", hundreds of SADAT "mercenaries", or 5000 SADAT "personnel" have been contracted from Türkiye to assist the Somali armed forces (Agenzia Nova, 2025; Mogadishu24, 2025; Mohamed, 2025; Somali Guardian, 2025; Tejeda, 2025). Another article from *Somaliland Concurrent* claims that, in addition to pushing back Al-Shabaab, SADAT's forces will also take on security roles in the capital and enforce martial law (Mohamed, 2025). Incidentally, it has not been confirmed what sort of SADAT forces might be deployed (Syrian mercenaries, SADAT trainers, SADAT forces in active combat roles, etc.), or if any SADAT forces have in fact been deployed to Somalia at all. On April 4th, SADAT released a public statement concerning its suspected involvement in Somalia. The statement clearly denied any current or planned activity in the country but claimed that SADAT is prepared to offer support services to the Somali Armed Forces (Mogadishu24, 2025).

SADAT has also reportedly been present on the ground in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Parens & Plichta, 2025; Vial & Bouvier, 2025). Following a Turkish delegation's visit to Bamako in 2024, Mali purchased arms and drones from Türkiye, and SADAT assumed the role of providing personal security for the country's junta leader, Assimi Goïta (Vial & Bouvier, 2025). This may be especially significant given reports of growing anonymity and

division between the president and the Malian Defense Minister Sadio Camara. According to at least one source, Camara is personally guarded by Russian mercenaries (The North Africa Journal, 2024; The Editorial Staff, 2025). Following this, in August 2025, Mali announced plans to host its first ever arms fair, "Bamex", in Bamako (Africa Intelligence, 2025). The event is scheduled for November of 2025 and will reportedly feature predominantly Turkish defense industry technology (Africa Intelligence, 2025). In Niger and Burkina Faso, SADAT may have been contracted to protect Turkish financial interests, including mines and the Niamey International Airport in Niger (Rigoli, 2025). SADAT appears to have used Syrian mercenaries for these security operations, which may have caused friction with Russian mercenaries and mine workers at the Russian owned Nordgold mines in Burkina Faso (Parens & Plichta, 2025). According to BBC reporting, Syrian mercenaries working for SADAT in Niger have at times been commanded by Russian forces, despite Russia's numerous war crimes in Syria and its support of the authoritarian Assad regime (Africa Defense Forum, 2025). In interviews, Syrian mercenaries said they hate their Russian counterparts in Niger, but still go to work in Niger for economic reasons (Africa Defense Forum, 2025).

BENEFITS FOR AFRICA

Partnerships with Türkiye, particularly through intermediaries like SADAT, provide strategic ambiguity that empowers

African governments and ruling elites to pursue their interests in ways that enhance their agency on the global stage. The Turkish government has presented itself as a neutral alternative to traditional colonial and exploitative powers in Africa; positioning itself as an ally in the fight against Western imperialism and as a proponent of Islamic solidarity (Parens & Plichta, 2025). This framing resonates with the longstanding postcolonial African political tradition of rejecting binary allegiances. During the 1960 Conference of Independent African States, Kwame Nkrumah declared, "We face neither East nor West: we face forward" (Nkrumah, 1960, 1967). This ethos reflects the strategic ambiguity that partnerships with countries like Türkiye may offer African states, enabling them to assert their independence by forming alliances based on national priorities and leaders' personal interests rather than on external geopolitical blocs. Moreover, formerly colonized African countries may find common cause with Türkiye's anti-colonial rhetoric and may view these partnerships as less politically risky than closer ties with Russia or China (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Similarly, SADAT portrays its value to African states as enabling the training, reorganization, and modernization of their armies in order to reduce "dependence on Western imperialist crusader countries" and to promote "defensive collaboration and defensive industrial cooperation among Islamic countries with the [intent] of serving Islamic Union" (Tanrıverdi, 2024). While JNIM, an al-Qaeda-affiliated organization in the Maghreb and West Africa,

has espoused similar anti-Western and militant Islamic rhetoric, many African governments have so far found SADAT to be a reliable ally in fighting Islamic insurgencies (Parens & Plichta, 2025). In 2024, JNIM issued a message in which it described Russia and Türkiye as “foreign mercenaries” working for criminal governments and called for Muslims across the Sahel to unite in their fight against groups like SADAT and Wagner (BBC Monitoring, 2024).

Although it is difficult to determine how all African governments view the benefits of collaborating with Türkiye and SADAT, a few countries have released brief press statements in recent years that offer some insights. For example, after Türkiye’s ambassador to Mali visited Major General Daoud Aly Mohammedine, Mali’s Minister of Security and Civil Protection, in February of 2024, the ministry released a statement describing cooperation between the two countries as “rich and fruitful”, “diversifying and growing in volume”, and “focused primarily on the defense and security sectors” (Ministère de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile, 2024). The document also described the partnership as “mutually beneficial” (Ministère de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile, 2024). A second Malian press release following a subsequent meeting between the two officials in September 2024, referred to Türkiye as a “strategic partner” for Mali, and highlighted Türkiye’s contribution to “Mali’s stability” and its apparent “commitment to supporting Mali in its efforts to restore peace and security throughout its territory” (Ministère

de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile, 2024). The press release also noted Türkiye’s willingness to train Mali’s security forces, and described Türkiye as an asset in “collaboration in the fight against terrorism, transnational crime, intelligence, cybersecurity, and experience sharing” (Ministère de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile, 2024). In 2024, Burkina Faso’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Cooperation and Burkinabé Abroad published a news report describing a meeting between Mr. Karamoko Jean Marie Traoré, the head of Burkinabé diplomacy, and Mr. Hakan Fidan, Türkiye’s minister of foreign affairs (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, de la Coopération Régionale et des Burkinabé de l’Extérieur, 2024). Similar to that of Mali and Somalia, the report highlights Burkina Faso’s and Türkiye’s partnership in combating terrorism and protecting national sovereignty, however it also describes mutual interest in expanding educational opportunities and economic partnerships between the two countries (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, de la Coopération Régionale et des Burkinabé de l’Extérieur, 2024). This report may show how the Burkinabé government sees military cooperation with Türkiye as a useful initial step in building relations that could lead to beneficial arrangements in other sectors.

The repeated use of terms like “mutually beneficial,” “strategic partner,” and “shared values” across African government communications indicates more than just diplomatic convention. Rather, it indicates a deliberate rhetorical strategy to frame Türkiye as a part-

ner that aligns with African priorities and demonstrate the abilities of African governments to foster partnerships and create narratives in pursuit of their own domestic and international objectives. This consistent language suggests that these states are actively shaping the narrative around the partnership to assert control over its terms, rather than passively receiving aid or security assistance. Although the emphasis on counterterrorism and defense collaboration is significant, it is not presented as a coerced choice or a default option. Instead, countries like Burkina Faso explicitly link military cooperation with broader engagement in areas such as education and economic development. This suggests that African governments may view security partnerships as pragmatic way to build long-term, multidimensional relationships. The repeated emphasis on shared struggles, including Somalia's reference to domestic terrorism, further positions Türkiye as a peer rather than a patron. In doing so, African states thus frame these alignments as strategic choices that reflect national and regional priorities, not as signs of opportunism or dependency. Thus, the pattern of official language reflects a larger exercise of agency for African governments, who use partnerships like those with Türkiye to diversify foreign relations, build institutional capacity, protect themselves, and expand resources for domestic development and authority enforcement on their own terms.

The framing of partnerships with Türkiye as mutually beneficial may be

viewed as an example of the selective and strategic international engagements pursued by Sub-Saharan African countries, as described by Gwatiwa (2021). The emphasis placed by Sub-Saharan African governments on counter-terrorism and anti-imperialist rhetoric is especially significant. The security and self-determination references in the press releases not only bolster Türkiye's international self-projection but also orient and affirm national purpose and goals for domestic African audiences. Building on the ideas of Munyi *et al.* (2022), these narratives about partnerships with Türkiye may play a role in identity-building and norm promotion for African governments that promote nationalism and defiance against neocolonialism while also facing internal security threats.

Beyond military partnerships and arms sales, many African governments have materially and economically benefited from increased cooperation with Türkiye (Süsler & Alden, 2022). Driven by private and public business initiatives and investments, trade between Türkiye and African countries increased from US\$4.3 billion to \$25.3 billion between 2002 and 2019 (Süsler & Alden, 2022). This increase in trade may be partially attributed to Turkish government policies, such as tax exemptions, that encourage Turkish investment in African countries (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). Simultaneously, the Turkish government has also provided traditional development aid in the form of schools, commercial airline partnerships, healthcare and water projects, and funded scholarships to study

in Türkiye (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023; Süsler & Alden, 2023).

In addition to economic engagement, Türkiye has also provided political support for some African countries (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). Türkiye's military interventions provide valuable coercive capabilities that can legitimize and enable the government with which Türkiye works. This assistance is particularly important for countries whose national governments have relatively weak power and are contested by domestic or foreign entities. Additionally, Türkiye's political support can be symbolically valuable, particularly when governments are viewed as controversial by foreign power blocs, such as the West. For instance, Türkiye's vocal support of the 2020 coup in Mali may have helped legitimize the new political leadership and encouraged other countries to normalize relations with Mali (Lebovich & van Heukelingen, 2023). Working with SADAT specifically may also afford various benefits to African governments beyond the scope of security. As previously mentioned, choosing SADAT over other PMSCs may be a strategic decision for African governments seeking economic and political gains, such as foreign direct investment and support in the United Nations, through closer relations with Türkiye.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, since Türkiye is not seen as a direct adversary with other foreign powers in Africa, such as Russia, China, the US, and European countries, countries that choose to work with SADAT face less risk of compromising their relationships with

other countries and their PMSCs (Parens & Plichta, 2025). Through such strategic ambiguity and by inserting SADAT as an insulating layer in bilateral relations, African governments further increase their agency as active brokers negotiating external influence and calibrating their partnerships. In addition, SADAT's ability to protect economic assets, such as infrastructure projects and mineral and energy deposits, can benefit both Türkiye and domestic owners or partners (Rigoli, 2025). In general, the protection offered by SADAT may help increase investment from countries that might otherwise be dissuaded from investing due to security concerns. For example, during brief periods of relative stability in Somalia since the outbreak of civil war in 1991, oil and gas companies, such as ExxonMobil and Shell have expressed interest in extracting Somalia's nearly 30 billion barrels of untapped oil (Baez, 2024). The possibility of receiving rents from such vast reserves would further increase state capacity for Somalia, potentially enabling a positive feedback loop.

Although the use of SADAT and other PMSCs may give political elites in countries like Mali and Somalia more power and agency, questions remain about the benefits and disadvantages to average citizens. In this paper, we claim that choosing SADAT and Türkiye for partnerships is a strategic decision that can provide African governments with increased leverage and options, however further research is needed to analyze the effects of these partnerships on average citizens. Considering that African govern-

ments use SADAT to enhance and bolster their armed forces, and that government forces have, in many cases, been used against citizens of their own countries, there is reason to suspect not all citizens of African countries see partnerships with SADAT and Türkiye as beneficial (Rubin, 2020). While this paper is specifically dedicated to analyzing the relationships between governments and how SADAT has been a strategic resource for African leaders, future research is encouraged to study how SADAT's employment in African countries affects and is perceived by people outside of governments.

While working with SADAT may benefit some African governments, there may also be drawbacks. Although SADAT advertises itself as wholly dedicated to the needs of its clients, the company's apparent close connections with the Turkish government may cause it to prioritize Ankara's interests as well as those of any client (Powers, 2021). Additionally, SADAT and Türkiye's rhetoric about championing inter-Muslim solidarity and leading Islamic security and defense may be challenged by non-Muslim SADAT clients who, in some cases, attack Muslim communities (Parens & Plichta, 2025). For example, reports from Togo, a predominantly Christian country, describe SADAT contractors supporting the Togolese army in combating JNIM (Zenn, 2025). Recently, concerns have also been raised about the quality of Turkish military and intelligence exports (Africa Defense Forum, 2025). In May of 2025, Niger ended its intelligence-sharing cooperation with Türkiye and Russia citing dissatisfaction

with "the quality of telephone communications interceptions" (Africa Defense Forum, 2025). Finally, SADAT's use of Syrian mercenaries may create conflicts with other actors in the areas where SADAT operates. As previously mentioned, reports indicate that Syrian mercenaries may come into conflict with Russian mercenaries. The latter committed numerous human rights abuses in Syria and played a key role in supporting the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War (Parens & Plichta, 2025).

BENEFITS: TÜRKİYE & SADAT

When considering the benefits gained by SADAT through operating in SSA, and furthermore the benefits gained by Türkiye through these operations, it is challenging to separate the two actors and their respective benefits. By operating in majority-Muslim Sub-Saharan countries, SADAT can actively pursue its vision of modernizing "the armed forces and international security forces of Islamic countries" as well as establishing "defense collaboration and defense industry cooperation among Islamic countries" (SADAT, nd-a; SADAT, nd-b). Up until now, Türkiye's primary partners in Africa have been countries in which SADAT operates. The convergence between African countries that have received training services from SADAT and those that have signed security cooperation agreements with Türkiye demonstrate such bilateral relations (Vial & Bouvier, 2025). Furthermore, SADAT has stated that they naturally advise client countries to purchase Turkish

defense systems, making the expansion of their operations on the continent financially lucrative for Türkiye (SADAT, 2024). In turn, supporting the creation of a new market for Turkish arms sales makes SADAT the natural instructor for such weapon systems.

After facing criticism in the French media, SADAT released a statement that framed the criticism as an attack on Turkish foreign policy in the region. The statement emphasized the lack of a colonial past in SSA. This juxtaposed Türkiye and France, highlighting their different historical engagements with Africa. The statement also emphasized the aid and the African-centered that Türkiye provides (SADAT, 2024). By continually referring to the positive approach Türkiye is taking in SSA, the dialogue shifts away from SADAT's questionable activities and reinforces the positive nature of Turkish foreign policy in SSA. Notably, by emphasizing African agency in their partnerships, Türkiye, and by extension, SADAT, can strategically deflect responsibility for potential missteps or controversial actions. By framing African states as autonomous and equal partners, Turkish actors can position any outcomes, including negative ones, as the product of joint decision-making rather than external imposition. Thus, the rhetoric of African agency becomes not only a tool of empowerment but also a foreign policy instrument that diffuses accountability. Hence, the interconnectedness of SADAT and Türkiye extends the benefits in both directions.

In line with the multi-track approach, although Islam is at the center of the debate, it is difficult to conclude that Türkiye is actively promoting its Turkish Islamic values. Instead, Islam is viewed as a means of establishing connections with SSA countries, both through direct government initiatives, such as the expanded operations of the Diyanet, and allegedly through independent bodies with Islamic foundations like SADAT. Thus, Islam ultimately serves as a tool in Turkish foreign policy toward the SSA, enabling Türkiye to build strong bilateral relations aligned with its material and strategic interests. Furthermore, through these policies, Türkiye has developed its foreign policy's overarching goals: Turkish autonomy in the international sphere and establishing its role as a regional security actor. Statements released by the Malian and Somalian governments demonstrate the international support that Türkiye has received. The Malian government's statement emphasizes the "importance of sharing experiences in the fight against terrorism", suggesting that Mali views Türkiye as facing similar challenges with domestic terrorism (Ministère de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile, 2024). Such a statement aids in legitimizing the fight against terror. Türkiye claims to be fighting at home. These sentiments were echoed in 2024 press release from Somalia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation (2024) which strongly condemned what it described as a "heinous terrorist attack on Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAŞ) in Kahraman Kazan, Ankara." The

document describes how Somalia empathized with Türkiye because it faced “similar challenges”, while also emphasizing Somalia’s commitment to “standing with Türkiye and the international community in the fight against terrorism, with a partnership grounded in shared values and mutual trust” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, 2024).

Although it is well established that Turkish foreign policy has taken on neo-Ottoman characteristics, some theoretical parameters limit its applicability to the SSA region. There is a disagreement over whether geographies outside of historical Ottoman territories can be considered within the realm of neo-Ottoman ideology. Regardless of whether the ideological aspect is accepted or not, the operational manner of employing a multi-track approach is undoubtedly neo-Ottoman. A crucial point for consideration is the degree of independence afforded to non-state actors within Türkiye’s multi-track approach. The close linkage between seemingly independent non-state actors like SADAT and the Erdoğan government highlights the calculated nature of Türkiye’s multi-track approach and its capacity to exert influence while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability. This dynamic is central to understanding contemporary Turkish-African relations.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the intricate evolution of contemporary Turkish foreign policy, which is marked by an expansive global reach and a multi-track approach

that incorporates non-state actors such as private military security companies (PMSCs). By focusing on Türkiye’s growing involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and the specific role of SADAT, this study addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship that often underestimates the active role of African states in their bilateral relations. The analysis affirms that SADAT operates as a pivotal intermediary, providing Türkiye with plausible deniability in sensitive security operations while simultaneously enabling African governments to achieve strategic ambiguity and diversify their partnerships beyond traditional blocs.

It has been demonstrated how Türkiye’s foreign policy, shaped by ideological influences such as neo-Ottomanism and a reinterpreted “Turkish Islam,” has strategically embraced a multi-track approach that fosters connections through both official and non-state channels. In SSA, this has translated into an expansion of relations initially driven by humanitarian aid and soft power, now significantly augmented by security cooperation and the deployment of actors like SADAT. Critically, this analysis shows that African states are not passive recipients in this dynamic. Using frameworks that highlight African agency, such as those emphasizing institutional control, norm promotion, and even “authoritarian agency,” the analysis has illustrated how African governments actively engage with, negotiate, and leverage these partnerships. SADAT’s presence, as an opaque non-state actor, provides an additional layer of strategic maneuverability for African capitals, al-

lowing them to pursue security objectives and economic gains while managing external perceptions and minimizing political risks associated with more overt alliances.

The reciprocal benefits of this arrangement are clear. SADAT expands its operational reach and promotes Turkish defense interests, while Türkiye reinforces its ambition to become an independent global actor with significant regional security influence. For African states, partnerships involving SADAT offer diverse security solutions, access to competitive arms markets, and often, political support and economic investment. Furthermore, African governments' framing of these collaborations with rhetoric of mutual benefit, shared values, and anti-imperialism serves as both diplomatic convention and a deliberate strategy to assert control over the narrative and affirm national purpose for domestic audiences.

This study significantly contributes to the literature on South-South cooperation, non-state actors in foreign policy, and the multifaceted nature of African agency in international relations. It underscores the necessity of moving beyond structuralist accounts to recognize the complex, layered ways in which African actors, both state and non-state, actively shape their external engagements. While this analysis highlights the strategic value of intermediaries like SADAT, future research could explore the long-term implications of such opaque security arrangements for governance, human rights, and regional stability in SSA. Additionally, comparative studies

examining the specific mechanisms and conditions under which African states gain or lose agency in partnerships with other non-traditional external actors would provide valuable insights into the evolving global security landscape.

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