

DEFENSE & SECURITY

Will Turkish Contractors in West Africa Face the Same Fate as Russia's Africa Corps?

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In recent years, Russian mercenaries in West Africa have gained considerable notoriety for, on the one hand, propping up post-coup military juntas and, on the other hand, suffering setbacks when supporting those juntas' counter-insurgency efforts. For example, 87 Russian fighters who were part of Africa Corps (formerly known as Wagner Group on the continent) were killed alongside 47 Malians in late July in [joint ambushes](#) launched by Tuareg separatists and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in northern Mali. The Russian mercenaries are not containing the spread of insurgency in the Sahel. Rather, JNIM is, in fact, expanding from Mali and Niger into Burkina Faso and is nearly surrounding its capital Ouagadougou, while also launching attacks with increasing regularity in Togo and Benin.

The ongoing Africa Corps struggles in West Africa have coincided with the Ukrainian offensive in Russia's Kursk region, which has reportedly forced some 100 Africa Corps fighters to [redeploy](#) back to Russia from West Africa to defend the home front. It is also possible that Russia seeks to cut its losses in West Africa and redeploy Africa Corps fighters to Ukraine rather than risk them being killed in even greater numbers by JNIM. Whatever Russia's intentions are for Africa Corps, it is still probable that several hundred of its fighters and other Russian military instructors will remain in West Africa. They may, however, operate in smaller numbers than before given the redeployment of some of them to Kursk and focus more on protecting junta leaders than battling JNIM or its rival jihadist group Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) or Tuareg rebels in remote desert regions.

Besides Russian mercenaries, there are also Turkish mercenaries and military “instructors” in Africa as well as a growing number of Chinese companies and workers on the continent, who are increasingly turning to the Chinese government, if not also Chinese private military companies (PMCs), to protect their interests. The Turkish and Chinese PMC presence may be less known, widespread, and controversial than African Corps. However, their role in the region may become increasingly [significant](#) in the coming months and years and could even raise the level of geopolitical [competition](#) between Russia, Turkey, and China in Africa.

Turkish Troops in Africa

The Turkish presence in Africa is highlighted by its operation in Somalia. Most recently, in February, Ankara and Mogadishu [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the Turkish Armed Forces to partner with Somalia in maritime security and law enforcement for the next decade. Not long afterwards, the two countries announced another MOU, which granted Turkey rights in Somalia’s exploration and extraction of petroleum blocks. Indeed, the Somali ambassador to Turkey, Fathudin Ali Mohamed, has [claimed](#) that Turkey is “now Somalia’s most important ally political, military, and economically,” including, other reasons, because thousands of Somali youths have received military training in the Turkish-supported military base in Somalia called Camp TURKSOM.

Although Somalia may be Turkey’s “showcase” on the continent, Turkish military support also includes other countries, such as Uganda. In June, Turkey and Uganda [agreed](#) to a Military Training Cooperation Agreement involving, among other aspects, joint exercises between special forces and cyber defense. More recently, in October, Turkey also [attended](#) a conference in Djibouti to promote its cooperation with African countries, while also working to mediate a dispute between Somalia and Ethiopia.

In contrast to East Africa, where Turkish soldiers are becoming more prevalent, in the more politically unstable West Africa, it appears Turkey is opting instead for deploying PMCs. It is possible that the more fraught security environment in the region makes Turkey more cautious about sending formal Turkish soldiers to West Africa. Rather, the Turkish PMC, Sadat International Defense Consultancy (SADAT), reportedly has [sent](#) at least 1,100 Syrian mercenaries to Niger, who are motivated by the greater pay there than in Syria. In addition,

Turkish contractors have been reported in Togo, where they have aided in flying attack helicopters, and two have been reportedly killed in combat with JNIM.

Trouble for Turkey?

The Turkish government is seemingly following the Russian model in West Africa. SADAT, for example, was founded in 2012 by a former Turkish army brigadier, Adnan Tanriverdi, just as the Wagner/Africa Corps founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, was also part of the Russian government apparatus. Although both of them at times had contentious relations with the state, SADAT's religious tendencies have endeared it to the current Turkish government.

SADAT's first major international foray was in Libya in 2020, where several thousand Syrian mercenaries assisted the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) against rival militias and the Russia-backed forces of General Khalifa Haftar. Now, with evidence of SADAT contractors in Niger and Burkina Faso and, more recently, Togo, SADAT's mandate in West Africa has extended to key economic sites where the Turkish government shares a stake with national governments, such as in the mining sector. It is likely that Turkey is reserving its own soldiers for more specific military purposes, such as sustaining the GNA in Libya and the Somali government in Somalia, while exploiting SADAT for "non-military" economic purposes.

By supporting SADAT contractors—as opposed to Turkish soldiers—to protect Turkish economic interests in West Africa, Turkey hopes to be able to avoid the perception of being "neo-imperialist". Yet, the same array of jihadists and other militants in the region could easily come to see the Turks as using the SADAT contractors to further its national economic interests at the expense of the region's common people. This could lead to SADAT contractors becoming embroiled in the conflict and, if so, it will likely remain impossible for Turkey to avoid the repercussions of such conflict given the clarity of the country's connection to SADAT.

Conclusion

Since the departure of French forces from much West Africa over the past several years, there has been a power vacuum in the region, which is increasingly being filled by Russian and now Turkish PMCs. The widespread and expanding JNIM, if not also ISGS, insurgency in the region on top of existing separatist movements will be too much for these PMCs to counter. The

security situation in the region is unlikely to improve unless more serious issues related to political representation are address. The PMCs will, therefore, likely only provide short-term access and economic opportunities for Turkey and Russia in the region, while in the long run, if the underlying political issues are not address, it is possible that not only the region's juntas, but also Turkey and Russia will find themselves evicted from the region at the hands of JNIM.

That scenario would undermine Turkish [objectives](#) in West Africa, including through employing SADAT as a force for power projection. Turkey seeks to present itself as an “alternative to the West” and as a “more reliable” power than the U.S or long-standing countries with influence in Africa, such as France, while also building “soft power” through promoting religious and cultural exchanges with Africans. However, employing a SADAT in high-risk areas of West Africa could backfire if it can neither protect Turkish economic interests nor promote a positive image of Turkey in the region.

**photo credit: Reuters*

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