



ANKARA'S DISCREET ARMED ARM:

**SADAT, Syrian auxiliaries
and Turkey's delegated force**

AKRAM KHARIEF

AKRAM KHARIEF is the Director of Peace and Security Projects at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. He previously worked as an independent journalist specializing in defense and security. For more than fifteen years, he has covered military affairs across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Geopolitics of the North African Armed Forces is his first book on regional geopolitics.

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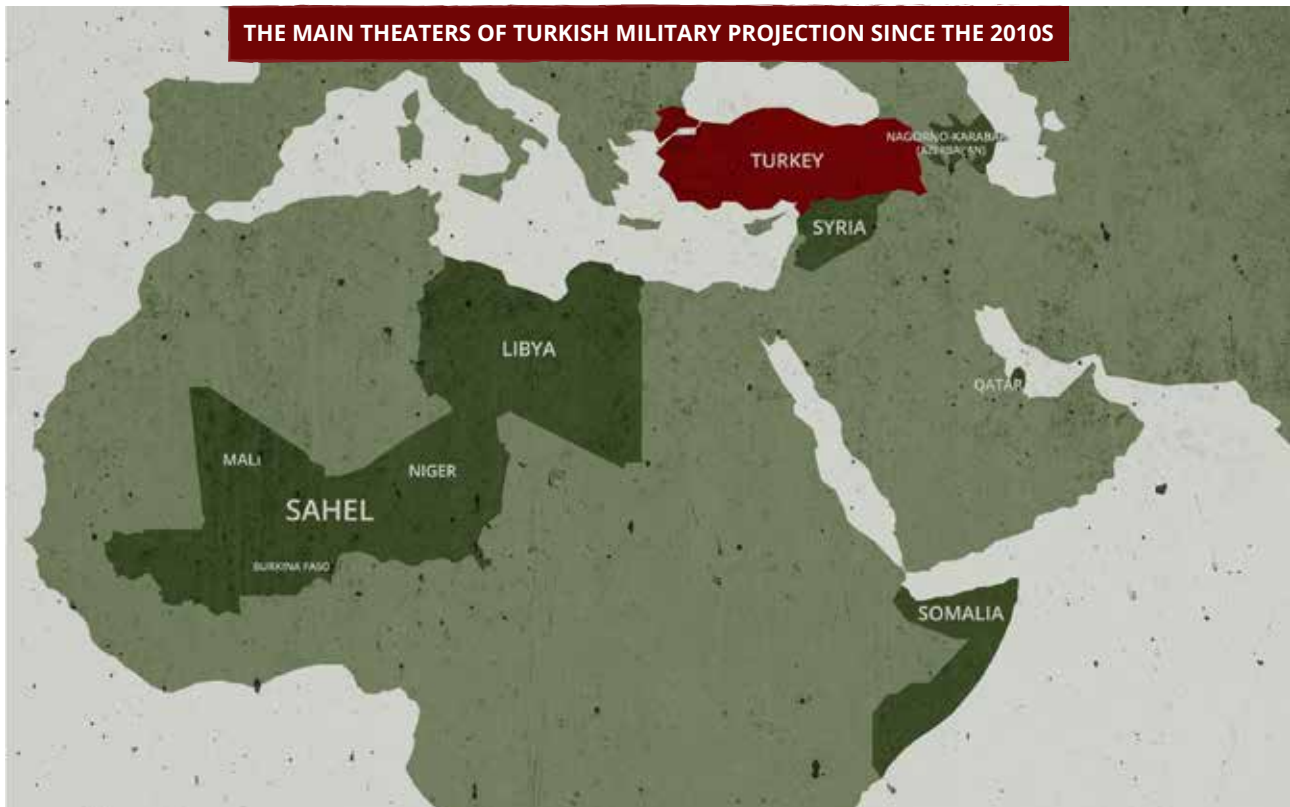
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Akram Kharief

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2010s, Turkey has not merely widened its military reach; it has changed the way it projects war. In Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Qatar, Somalia and, more recently, across several parts of the Sahel, Ankara blends instruments that were once treated as separate: regular soldiers, drones, advisers, private companies, Syrian fighters recruited on contract, training agreements and equipment from its defence industry.



This combination answers a simple constraint. Turkey wants to act far from its borders, but its conventional army cannot be present everywhere without incur-

ring political, human and diplomatic cost, Moreover, its NATO membership places constraints on certain forms of direct engagement. A Turkish soldier killed in an overseas operation creates immediate public accountability. By contrast, A Syrian fighter recruited under contract, moved through an intermediary network and then presented as a volunteer leaves room for denial.



It is in this space that SADAT International Defense Consultancy Inc. operates. Founded in 2012 by retired Brigadier General Adnan Tanriverdi and twenty-two other former Turkish officers and non-commissioned officers, the company presents itself as a military consulting, training and logistics firm. Yet that commercial façade does not explain everything. SADAT is legally private, politically close to the Turkish government, ideologically distinctive, and its name resurfaces at every major episode of Turkey's indirect projection¹.

The central question, then, is the following: how does Turkey use SADAT, Syrian auxiliaries and exported military training to project power while lowering the political cost of direct involvement?

A purely strategic reading, however, leaves out what matters most for anyone interested in power relations: who profits from this system, and who pays for it? Behind the diplomatic flexibility lies a political economy. At the top, an expanding defence industry, tied to business networks close to the Justice and Development Party (AKP), captures profits and symbolic capital. At the bottom, impoverished Syrian fighters sell their labour and their lives for wages that are skimmed before they arrive, while civilians in the theatres concerned absorb a share of the cost. This article therefore follows two intertwined threads at once: the strategic device, and the ways in which it distributes wealth and risk.

Answering this question requires distinguishing established facts from allegations, because the sources are of uneven value. Some are official documents:

1 SADAT International Defence Consultancy, institutional page, states that the company was founded by Adnan Tanriverdi with 23 retired officers and non-commissioned officers and that its statutes were published in the Turkish Trade Registry Gazette no. 8015, 28 February 2012: <https://sadat.com.tr/en/>

communications from United Nations rapporteurs, US government reports, normative texts. Others come from Syrian organisations, investigative media or opposition actors. These are complemented by work on the political economy of the conflict, investigations into the Syrian combatant labour market, and data on the Turkish defence industry. The former set the frame. The latter shed light on the mechanisms but require caution when addressing clandestine operations².

An ambitious power facing its military limits

Turkish foreign policy increasingly assertive after 2011. The concept of "strategic depth" theorised by Ahmet Davutoğlu had already established the idea of a Turkey placed at the crossroads of several regional spaces. The maritime doctrine of the "Blue Homeland" (the Mavi Vatan), then provided a more aggressive justification for Turkish claims in the eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean and the Black Sea. The two frameworks do not overlap: the first reflects a broad diplomatic ambition, the second a geopolitical assertion turned toward the sea. Yet both nourished the same conviction, that Turkey should no longer limit itself to defending its own territory. This outward turn was never purely strategic: it answered domestic political and economic imperatives as much as external ones, as discussed later in the article³.

The practical translation was rapid. The Turkish army operates in northern Syria and Iraq against the PKK and the Syrian Democratic Forces, have maintained a significant presence in northern Cyprus since 1974, holds a base in Qatar, and opened its largest overseas installation in Mogadishu in 2017. It saved Libya's Government of National Accord against Khalifa Haftar, then backed Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. To this add drone sales, training, intelligence and an active religious diplomacy⁴.

This geographical dispersal creates a tension familiar to every expanding power: one it can multiply its footholds without being able to multiply direct commitments. Unconventional forces then offer a way out. They make it possible to hold a site, support an ally or supervise local fighters without exposing

2 On private military and security companies, see the Montreux Document, ICRC and Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2008: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/0996-montreux-document-private-military-and-security-companies> ; see also United Nations, International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, New York, 4 December 1989: https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XVIII-6&chapter=18&clang=en

3 Aurélien Denizeau, "Mavi Vatan, la 'Patrie bleue': origines, influence et limites d'une doctrine ambitieuse pour la Turquie", Études de l'Ifri, 29 April 2021: <https://www.ifri.org/fr/etudes/-mavi-vatan-patrie-bleue-origines-influence-limites-dune-doctrine-ambitieuse-turquie>

4 On the recent shifts in Turkish foreign policy and the use of military means in Syria and Libya, see Sinan Ülgen, "Turkey Shifts the Focus of Its Foreign Policy", SWP Comment, February 2020: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C06/> ; on Somalia, Reuters, "Turkey to provide maritime security support to Somalia", 22 February 2024: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-provide-maritime-security-support-somalia-official-2024-02-22/>

the regular army to the same level of accountability.

Ankara did not invent this approach; major powers have long used armed intermediaries. But it has assembled a model of its own, articulating a private military company close to power, a Syrian pool of fighters available since the civil war, and a defence industry able to export not only equipment but also training.



Methodological note

The analysis rests on the critical use of open sources. The primary sources include SADAT's institutional documents, communications from the UN special procedures, American reports and normative texts on private military and security companies. The robust secondary sources are the work of research centres, academic articles and recognised press investigations. As for activist media, opposition sites and organisations tied to one party in a conflict, with due caution and with their limitations explicitly acknowledged.

This method does not reconstruct every chain of command. It does, however, reveal regularities: the same Syrian factions, the same transit routes, the same promises of pay, the same function of deniability. The demonstration therefore concerns a system, not the judicial proof of an order given at every level.

SADAT, a private company caught in a political grammar

SADAT International Defense Consultancy was registered on 28 February 2012, after its statutes were published in the Turkish trade registry. Its birth came as relations were being reshaped between the civilian authorities, the army and the networks of officers sidelined by the Kemalist institution. Its founder, Adnan Tanrıverdi, had left the army in the 1990s, at a time when officers regarded as Islamist were pushed out of an institution still strongly attached to state secularism.

The company claims three lines of business: consulting, training and logistics. It states that it can assess the threats facing a country, reorganise its armed forces, train its units and meet internal security needs. Put this way, it resembles any other military consulting firm. Two elements set it apart, however⁵.

The first is legal. Turkey has not equipped itself with a framework for private military companies comparable to the most developed regimes. SADAT therefore operates as an ordinary commercial defence company, which produces an ambiguity useful to those in power: the state can deny any direct command while the firm maintains that it merely sells services. Deniability begins at the trade registry⁶.

The second is ideological. SADAT does not present itself only as a technical provider. Its discourse has long placed military cooperation among Muslim countries at the heart of its horizon, and its founder ran ASSAM, a study centre promoting a project for an Islamic confederation. This is not a simple doctrinal appendix: that colouring gives SADAT an identity different from that of a purely transactional private military company⁷.

After the attempted coup of 15 July 2016, Tanrıverdi became chief military adviser to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The moment reinforced the sense of porosity between the company and the state apparatus. The purges in the army, the restructuring of military institutions and the sidelining of officers deemed

⁵ SADAT describes its areas of activity as "consultancy, training and logistics". See SADAT International Defence Consultancy, institutional presentation: <https://sadat.com.tr/en/>

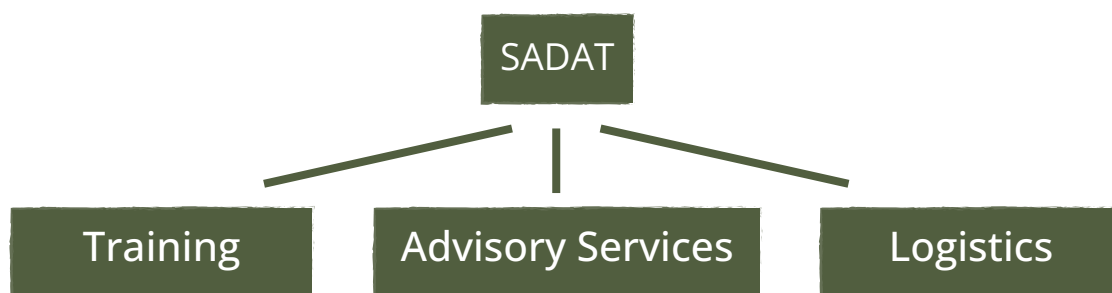
⁶ On the gaps in Turkish regulation and SADAT's claim to the status of a private military consulting company, see War on the Rocks, "Making Sense of SADAT, Turkey's Private Military Company", 8 October 2021: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/making-sense-of-sadat-turkeys-private-military-company/>

⁷ On SADAT's ideological dimension and its manifesto, see War on the Rocks, "Making Sense of SADAT, Turkey's Private Military Company", 8 October 2021: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/making-sense-of-sadat-turkeys-private-military-company/> ; for the ASRICA/ASSAM project, see "ASRICA Islamic Countries Union Confederal Constitution Draft", ASSAM Congress, 2022:

https://assamcongress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/20220616_ASRICA_Confederation_Model_Constitution_Draft-EN.pdf

Gülenist or pro-Western opened space for loyalist profiles. Tanrıverdi left his post in 2020, after a controversy over religious statements about the Mahdi, and died in August 2024. His passing did not settle the underlying question: is SADAT a mere private company, or a para-state instrument serving Turkish projection⁸?

The most solid answer holds both ends. SADAT is not an autonomous parallel army running its own wars, but neither is it a routine consulting firm. It functions as a facilitator, connecting political needs, fighter networks, training capacities and theatres where Ankara does not always want to appear in on the front line. It is also, as the political economy below makes clear, an economic actor in its own right, lodged within the patronage networks of the reconstructed Turkish state.



Syria, the human pool of the system

The Syrian war supplies the raw material of the Turkish model. From 2016, Ankara gradually structured part of the armed opposition in northern Syria. The Syrian National Army, aggregated from heterogeneous groups, became a reservoir of fighters dependent on Turkey for their pay, weapons, movements and, at times, their political survival⁹.

These fighters do not form a single bloc. They include former members of the Free Syrian Army, local militiamen, Turkmen factions, Islamist groups and units accused of serious abuses. This diversity complicates analysis, and the vocabulary is never neutral: speaking of "Syrian rebels", "mercenaries" or "auxiliaries" does not produce the same political effect. In many cases the most accurate

⁸ On Tanrıverdi's resignation after the Mahdi controversy, see Duvar English, "Close advisor to Erdoğan, who said 'Mahdi will come,' resigns", 9 January 2020: <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/01/09/close-advisor-to-erdogan-who-said-mahdi-will-come-resigns>; on his death, see SADAT, "Adnan Tanrıverdi walked towards Allah", 4 August 2024: <https://sadat.com.tr/en/adnan-tanriverdi-walked-towards-allah/>

⁹ On the areas controlled by the Syrian National Army and the pro-Turkish factions in northern Syria, see European Union Agency for Asylum, "Syria: Country Focus", sections on armed actors and security institutions, 2025: <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/col/syria/2025/country-focus>

term remains that of auxiliary fighters recruited for pay to conduct overseas operations.

Money is decisive, but it has to be set against the collapse of the Syrian economy. The war destroyed ordinary livelihoods, and armed service became, for many, a survival strategy as much as a political or military choice: as the civilian economy collapsed, the relative value of military pay rose¹⁰. In northern Syria those wages remain meagre nonetheless, on the order of 500 Turkish lira every two months, roughly one dollar a day, enough to cover a family's bread and little more. The contracts offered for Libya promised around 2,000 dollars a month, and it is this gap, not a transnational cause, that explains the departures¹¹. In the Nagorno-Karabakh case, the United Nations rapporteurs likewise stressed that the fighters appeared motivated first by pay, against a backdrop of acute precarity¹².



But the promise and the payment are two different things, and this is where the social hierarchy of the system becomes apparent. To be recruited and shipped abroad, a man usually needs either a personal connection (*wasta*) or to hand

10 On armed mobilisation as a livelihood strategy and on the rise in the relative value of military pay as the civilian economy collapsed, see COAR Global, 'The Economy of War in Syria: Armed Group Mobilization as Livelihood and Protection Strategy', 30 September 2020: <https://www.coar-global.org/2020/09/30/the-economy-of-war-in-syria-armed-group-mobilization-as-livelihood-and-protection-strategy/>

11 On wages (about 500 Turkish lira every two months in northern Syria, against around 2,000 dollars promised in Libya), on the connection (*wasta*) or share of wages required to be recruited, on the share siphoned off by commanders, and on the initial coercion, see Elizabeth Tsurkov, 'The Syrian Mercenaries Fighting Foreign Wars for Russia and Turkey', The New York Review of Books / Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 16 October 2020: <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2020/10/16/the-syrian-mercenaries-fighting-foreign-wars-for-russia-and-turkey/>

12 OHCHR, 'Mercenaries in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone must be withdrawn', 11 November 2020. The experts stress the financial motivation of the Syrian fighters against a backdrop of precarity: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/11/mercenaries-and-around-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-zone-must-be-withdrawn-un>

over a share of his future wage, so that a genuine industry of recruiters and brokers has formed around this poverty, often run by the faction commanders themselves¹³. On the ground a large part of the promised pay never arrives: according to the available investigations, commanders who controlled the payroll siphoned off up to half of it, paid wages in Turkish lira instead of dollars, or simply withheld part of the sums owed, particularly within divisions such as Hamza, Sultan Murad and Suleiman Shah / Al-Amshat¹⁴. Injury compensation, sometimes set at 35,000 dollars, was often denied to the maimed, while thousands of men are reported to have been wounded in Libya alone. The bodies of the dead are returned to families who are sometimes asked to keep silent, and many households in northern Syria now live off these remittances, to the point that the distant fighter's wage structures the domestic economy¹⁵.

Revenue	Approximate Amount
Soldier in northern Syria	≈ 1 USD/day
Contract offered for Libya	≈ 2,000 USD/month
Promised compensation in case of injury	up to 35,000 USD
Observed reality	Delays, deductions, misappropriation

The picture that emerges is not that of an ideological army but of a deeply unequal war labour market. At the bottom, impoverished men sell their labour and risk their lives; above them, commanders and brokers take their cut; higher still, the Turkish state and its industry profit from a cheap and interchangeable workforce whose non-Turkish nationality allows the losses to be presented as foreign. Consent, moreover, was not always secured: the first rotations to Libya met with refusals, which were lifted under threat of expulsion from the ranks, before deployment abroad settled into an established social norm¹⁶.

13. Elizabeth Tsurkov, art. cited (see note 11).

14. On the diversion of wages by faction commanders, payment in Turkish lira instead of dollars and the units involved, see Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Syrian Mercenaries in Libya: Fraudster Commanders and Recruits Involved in Serious Violations", 16 July 2021: <https://stj-sy.org/en/syrian-mercenaries-in-libya-commanders-and-recruits-involved-in-serious-violations/>

15. On injury compensation promised (up to 35,000 dollars) then denied, the number of wounded in Libya and families' dependence on remittances, see Hevdesti / Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Syria/Libya: Complaint to the UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries", 27 March 2022: <https://hevdesti.org/en/syria-libya-complaint-to-the-un-working-group-on-the-use-of-mercenaries/>

16. Elizabeth Tsurkov, art. cited (see note 11).

It is in this chain that SADAT appears as a possible interface. The available documents and testimonies suggest involvement in selection, training, paperwork or supervision, but the exact degree of command remains hard to establish. It is better to speak of a role of operational mediation than of a directly proven command.

Libya, the first major test

Libya is the theatre where the model becomes visible. After the offensive launched by Khalifa Haftar against Tripoli in April 2019, Ankara chose to save the Government of National Accord, recognised by the UN. The Turkish-Libyan memorandum of November 2019 provided the political framework; drones, advisers, air defence and intelligence provided the means; Syrian fighters provided the auxiliary infantry.



The first groups arrived in late 2019. Figures vary across sources, which mention several thousand men. The report of the American Lead Inspector General for the second quarter of 2020 mentions the dispatch of Syrian fighters and attributes to SADAT a role in supervising and paying roughly 5,000 pro-GNA fighters.

ters, a phrasing since taken up by several specialised analyses¹⁷.

The role ascribed to SADAT concerns the supervision, payment, oversight or training of these men. Caution is warranted, since both Ankara and the company have rejected any accusation of mercenarism. The general pattern is nonetheless well documented: Turkey did not merely supply drones and advisers, it organised, directly or through intermediaries, the transfer of Syrian fighters to a foreign theatre where they were defending neither their country nor a national cause¹⁸.

The military effect was real: the Turkish intervention helped halt Haftar's offensive and shift the balance of power around Tripoli. The economic payoff matters as much. The 2019 memorandum was inseparable from a maritime-boundary agreement that advanced Turkey's claims to gas-rich waters in the eastern Mediterranean, and the intervention opened the Libyan market to Turkish construction and defence firms while showcasing Turkish drones to prospective buyers. The decisive capacities and the rewards thus stayed with the Turkish state and its industry, while part of the human cost was displaced onto non-Turks. That displacement also opened a legal vulnerability: the use of foreign fighters, especially when some sources report the presence of minors, exposes Turkey to accusations that a simple denial cannot neutralise¹⁹.



17 Lead Inspector General, "East Africa Counterterrorism Operation and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operation, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020 - June 30, 2020", published in September 2020: <https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/2331453/lead-inspector-general-for-east-africa-and-north-and-west-africa-counterterrorism/> ; see also War on the Rocks, "Making Sense of SADAT", 2021, which cites the passage on the supervision and payment of Syrian fighters in Libya

18 United Nations Security Council, "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1973 (2011)", S/2021/229, 8 March 2021: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3905159/files/S_2021_229-EN.pdf

19 On the accusations of recruitment and use of minors among SNA factions in Libya, see Syrians for Truth and Justice, "SNA Factions in Libya: Ongoing Child Recruitment and Other Violations", 21 April 2023: <https://stj-sy.org/en/sna-factions-in-libya-ongoing-child-recruitment-and-other-violations/>

Nagorno-Karabakh, the same circuit reactivated

In the autumn of 2020, the Nagorno-Karabakh war offered a second case. Azerbaijan, a close ally of Ankara, received political, military and technological support from Turkey. The Bayraktar TB2 drones and the support for planning drew most of the attention; the Syrian fighters, far less, even though they show how transferable the Libyan model was.

According to the United Nations rapporteurs, men linked to the Hamza Division, Sultan Murad, Al-Amshat and the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade were allegedly recruited for Azerbaijan in exchange for pay. The routes described pass through Turkish territory, with flights to Baku, and the sums promised could reach several thousand dollars a month, well beyond the incomes available in northern Syria²⁰.

Behind the alliance lies a concrete economic stake. Azerbaijan is a cornerstone of Turkey's ambition to become a regional energy hub: gas from the Shah Deniz field crosses Turkish territory through the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline, the central segment of the Southern Gas Corridor that carries Caspian gas to Europe, and Turkey draws from it both transit weight and gas on preferential terms. Backing Baku militarily is therefore not only a matter of ethnic and diplomatic solidarity; it also protects an energy corridor on which part of Turkey's economic strategy rests. Here too, the Syrian auxiliaries sit at the bottom of an arrangement whose rewards accrue elsewhere²¹.

The conflict confirms two things. First, that Ankara can reactivate the same channels within weeks. Second, that those channels remain opaque enough to complicate direct attribution, which allows Turkey to support an ally and weigh in in a war while keeping a formal distance between its regular forces and the transferred fighters.

The tactical weight of the Syrians in the Azerbaijani victory should not be overstated, however; it owed far more to superiority in drones, intelligence and fire-and-movement coordination. The auxiliaries did not win the war; they accompanied a larger apparatus. Their interest lies less in their performance

20 OHCHR, communication from the special procedures to Turkey, 6 November 2020, concerning the recruitment of Syrian fighters for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: <https://spcomm-reports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25683> ; see also Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Turkey Recruited 2,580 Syrian Fighters to Azerbaijan- 293 Died There", 16 July 2021: <https://stj-sy.org/en/turkey-recruited-2580-syrian-fighters-to-azerbaijan-293-died-there/>

21 On the Turkey-Azerbaijan energy stake (the Southern Gas Corridor and the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline, Turkey's energy-hub ambition and the preferential gas terms it obtained), see Gareth Winrow, "The Southern Gas Corridor and Turkey's Role as an Energy Transit State and Energy Hub", Insight Turkey, 2013: <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/the-southern-gas-corridor-and-turkeys-role-as-an-energy-transit-state-and-energy-hub> ; and the project facts, Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "The Southern Gas Corridor": https://minenergy.gov.az/en/layiheler/cenub-qaz-dehlizi_2196

than in what they reveal about the Turkish repertoire.



The Sahel, a still poorly documented extension

The Sahel is the most recent and the hardest extension to establish. Since France's gradual withdrawal and the rise of the juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, Ankara has multiplied its offers: drones, armoured vehicles, light weapons, training, police cooperation and economic projects. On a ground already occupied by Russia and its Africa Corps, it advances with a lower political cost than the former Western powers.

Syrian organisations and several media outlets have reported the dispatch of pro-Turkish Syrian fighters to Niger from late 2023, assigned to guard mines,

economic facilities or sites linked to Turkish interests. Testimonies gathered by the press mention six-month contracts signed with SADAT, for a force estimated at around a thousand men, but independent proof is more fragile here than in the Libyan case²². These missions say something about the model: poor men brought from Syria are used to protect foreign economic interests, often extractive, in one of the poorest countries in the world. Delegated force here serves capital directly.

The Sahel should therefore be treated as a strong hypothesis, not a closed file. The information converges toward an already familiar pattern: recruitment in northern Syria, transit through Turkey, private contracts, and guard missions sometimes leading to combat exposure. But the chain of command, the exact link with the Turkish state and SADAT's operational role still need confirmation. One new element does appear, however. Several reports have signalled a coexistence, an even occasional coordination, between auxiliaries tied to Turkish networks and Russian actors on Nigerien soil. If this is confirmed, it will show that Russian-Turkish competition does not rule out local arrangements: Ankara and Moscow can clash in Syria, negotiate in Libya, tolerate each other in the Caucasus and cross paths in the Sahel. Rivalry does not preclude transaction²³.

CANiK Academy: exporting training, or a new grey zone?

The Turkish ecosystem is not limited to SADAT. The defence industry now exports weapons, drones, vehicles and training. CANiK, a brand of the Samsun Yurt Savunma group, illustrates this shift: through CANiK Academy, the company sells training tied to its products.

In Mali, images circulated and then were withdrawn that allegedly showed instructors linked to CANiK Academy training elements of the Malian armed forces. The sequence fed the idea of a new Turkish private military company stepping in to compete with Wagner on the training segment. The hypothesis deserves attention, but it should not be forced²⁴.

22 Syrians for Truth and Justice, "After Libya and Azerbaijan: A Turkish Private Security Company Deploys Syrian Mercenaries to Niger", 30 July 2024: <https://stj-sy.org/en/after-libya-and-azerbaijan-a-turkish-private-security-company-deploys-syrian-mercenaries-to-niger/> ; VOA, "Turkey Sends Syrian Mercenaries to Niger to Secure Strategic Interests", 17 May 2024:

<https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-sends-syrian-mercenaries-to-niger-to-secure-strategic-interests/7616771.html>

23 Le Monde, "Sadat, le 'Wagner turc' dont l'ombre plane sur le Sahel", 7 June 2024, notes that the information on the Sahel should still be handled with caution: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/06/07/sadat-le-wagner-turc-dont-l-ombre-plane-sur-le-sahel_6237821_3212.html

24 Intelligence Online, "Turkish private military company squares up to European open-source analysts", 3 December 2024, on Canik Academy and the training in Mali: <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/12/03/turkish-private-military-company-squares-up-to-european-open-source-analysts,110346954-art> ; see also Le Monde, "La Turquie, alliée de plus en plus présente auprès de la junte au Mali", 28 January 2026:

https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2026/01/28/la-turquie-allie-de-plus-en-plus-presente-aupres-de-la-junte-au-mali_6664498_3212.html

Training foreign soldiers as part of an industrial offer is not the same as recruiting fighters, transferring them and employing them on a front. CANiK Academy belongs more to the export of training than to mercenarism. It nonetheless takes part in the same transformation, in which military expertise itself becomes a commodity. Selling instruction alongside equipment turns military knowledge into a market and binds the client over the long run: a force trained on Turkish systems, doctrines and standards keeps coming back for parts, upgrades, software and further training. For African states seeking to diversify away from Western or Russian suppliers, the offer is attractive precisely because it is flexible and cheap, yet it installs a durable dependency, the commercial successor of the older arms-client relationships it claims to replace. That is what blurs the line between military cooperation, defence trade and security subcontracting.



The assumed footprint: Somalia, Qatar, Central Asia

Not all of Turkey's instruments belong to deniability. Somalia is the clearest example. The TURKSOM base, opened in Mogadishu in 2017, is an openly claimed official presence, where Turkey trains Somali units, notably the Gorgor and Haramad forces, with curricula shared between the two countries. Ankara is building a lasting military partner there, without seeking to conceal anything²⁵.

Qatar belongs to the same register. The 2014 agreement, the Tariq bin Ziyad base and the deployments accelerated after the 2017 Gulf crisis turned Turkey into a political and military guarantor of Doha against Saudi and Emirati pres-

25 Reuters, "Turkey to provide maritime security support to Somalia", 22 February 2024: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-provide-maritime-security-support-somalia-official-2024-02-22/>; The Washington Institute, "To Halt the Jihadist Advance in Somalia, Work with Turkey and the UAE", 20 August 2025 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/halt-jihadist-advance-somalia-work-turkey-and-uae>

sure. The intended effect here is the opposite of SADAT's: the aim is to make the Turkish presence visible, not to mask it²⁶.

Central Asia follows yet another logic. Since the 1990s, Ankara has trained officers there, developed military ties and leaned on Turkic affinities, which drone sales and the rise of the Organization of Turkic States have reinforced. SADAT's footprint there remains faint; influence runs mainly through academies, bilateral agreements, exercises, arms sales and cultural networks²⁷.

These three cases throw the Turkish model into relief by contrast. Ankara does not always choose deniability. It turns to it when direct engagement would be costly, contested or legally risky, and abandons it as soon as an assumed presence better serves its interests.

SOMALIA	QATAR	CENTRAL ASIA
-TURKSOM BASE -TRAINING -GORGOR FORCES -OFFICIAL PRESENCE	-TARIQ BIN ZIYAD BASE -PERMANENT DEPLOYMENT -PROTECTION OF DOHA -OFFICIAL PRESENCE	-MILITARY ACADEMIES -OFFICER TRAINING -BILATERAL COOPERATION -INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCE

The political economy of the model: who profits?

To reduce the Turkish device to a matter of strategy would be to overlook the wealth it generates, and the actors who benefit from it. Ankara's outward projection rests on a defence industry in full expansion, one of the few flourishing sectors of an economy otherwise weakened by inflation and the fall of the lira. Turkish arms exports reached a record of about 7.15 billion dollars in 2024, after being multiplied roughly two and a half times since 2020, and the defence-aerospace branch employs some 100,000 people across more than 3,500 firms. Measured by weight, arms sell at around 67 dollars a kilogram, compared with

26 Al Jazeera, "No timeline set for further Turkish forces in Qatar", 31 January 2018: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/1/31/no-timeline-set-for-further-turkish-forces-in-qatar> ; DefenceTurkey, "The State of Qatar and Qatar Armed Forces", 2 April 2020: <https://defenceturkey.com/news/the-state-of-qatar-and-qatar-armed-forces>

27 Toni Alaranta, "Turkey in Central Asia: Possibilities and limits of a greater role", Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2021: <https://fiia.fi/en/publication/turkey-in-central-asia> ; Orbelli Center, "Turkey's Military-Technical Cooperation With the Turkic Nations", 18 November 2019: <https://orbelli.am/en/post/316/2019-11-18/Turkey%E2%80%99sMilitary-TechnicalCooperation%2BWith%2Bthe%2BTurkic%2BNations>

1.5 dollars for the average Turkish export: war has become, in very concrete terms the most profitable niche of the country's foreign trade, and Turkey is reported to control a large share of the world market in combat drones²⁸.

At the top of this pyramid sits Baykar, the maker of the Bayraktar drones, whose case illustrates the fusion of private capital and state power. The company is owned by Selçuk Bayraktar, President Erdoğan's son-in-law since his 2016 marriage to Sümeyye Erdoğan, and by his brother Haluk; both men now feature on the Forbes billionaires list, their combined wealth exceeding five billion dollars. Baykar posted around 1.8 billion dollars in exports in 2024, close to a quarter of all Turkish arms sales, and earns most of its turnover abroad. The president himself acts as chief salesman, promoting the drones on his tours through Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, and the state has at times eased these sales through debt relief or grants to purchasing countries. Competitors, including public ones, have complained of being sidelined in favour of the family firm²⁹. The overall logic is one of socialised risk and privatised profit: research, guaranteed orders and diplomatic support are provided by the state, the margins accrue to a narrow circle.

This economy also has a distinctly political function. The narrative of the "national and indigenous" (yerli ve millî), carried by the successes of the TB2 in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and then Ukraine, feeds a carefully staged national pride, through televised unveilings and technology festivals. In a country marked by economic crisis and authoritarian consolidation, the drone has become a symbol of recovered sovereignty and source of political legitimacy for the government, regardless of the actual proportion of imported components in the aircraft. The force projected abroad and the industry celebrated at home are part of the same movement, which consolidates a political order as much as it

External

Drone - Exports
Military Partnerships

Internal

National Pride - Political Legitimacy
Patronage Networks

28 On the 2024 export record (about 7.15 billion dollars, up nearly 30 percent), see the Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB), reported by Defense News, "Turkey's defense exports hit record high of \$7.1 billion in 2024", 4 February 2025: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/02/04/turkeys-defense-exports-hit-record-high-of-71-billion-in-2024/> on the five-year trend (a roughly 2.5-fold increase since 2020), the value per kilo (about 67 dollars against 1.5 dollars for the average export) and the workforce (around 100,000 employees, more than 3,500 firms), see Daily Sabah, "Türkiye's defense exports race past 2024 record, capping 5-year boom", 5 December 2025: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/turkiyes-defense-exports-race-past-2024-record-capping-5-year-boom> on Turkey's share of the world combat-drone market (estimated at about 65 percent by the Center for a New American Security), see TRT World, 1 February 2025: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkish-defence-giants-secure-over-55-billion-dollars-in-exports-for-2024-18260510>

29 On the Bayraktar brothers' wealth and their entry among the Forbes billionaires, see Nordic Monitor, "Sharp rise in drone wealth moves Erdogan family-linked defense contractor into world's richest ranks", 3 March 2026: <https://nordicmonitor.com/2026/03/sharp-rise-in-drone-wealth-moves-erdogan-family-linked-defense-firm-into-worlds-richest-ranks/> on Baykar's share (about 1.8 billion dollars in exports, close to a quarter of Turkish defence exports, 90 percent of turnover from exports), see Daily Sabah, "Drone magnate Baykar remains Türkiye's top defense exporter in 2024", 2 February 2025: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/drone-magnate-baykar-remains-turkiyes-top-defense-exporter-in-2024>

on contracts reserved for those close to power, state facilities and the president's role as salesman, see Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, "Turkey's Drone Diplomacy", 24 April 2026: <https://centralasiacaucasusinstitute.substack.com/p/turkeys-drone-diplomacy-how-erdogan>, and Nordic Monitor, 4 April 2024: <https://nordicmonitor.com/2024/04/erdogans-son-in-law-manufacturer-of-military-drones-joins-billionaires-list/>. Nordic Monitor and some of these outlets are Turkish opposition media, to be read with due caution; their figures nonetheless align with the official SSB announcements and with the Forbes and SIPRI rankings.

extends an influence³⁰.

SADAT belongs to the same logic, but a different level. Its trajectory follows an economy of loyalty. The purges after July 2016 emptied the army of tens of thousands of officers and officials, and the rebuilding of the security apparatus opened careers to profiles judged reliable. A company run by former officers close to power offers an outlet for this loyalist pool, while legal deniability simultaneously protects a patronage network. Subcontracting violence is not only a diplomatic tool; it is also a way of redistributing posts and incomes within the reconstructed Turkish state.

A system of delegated force

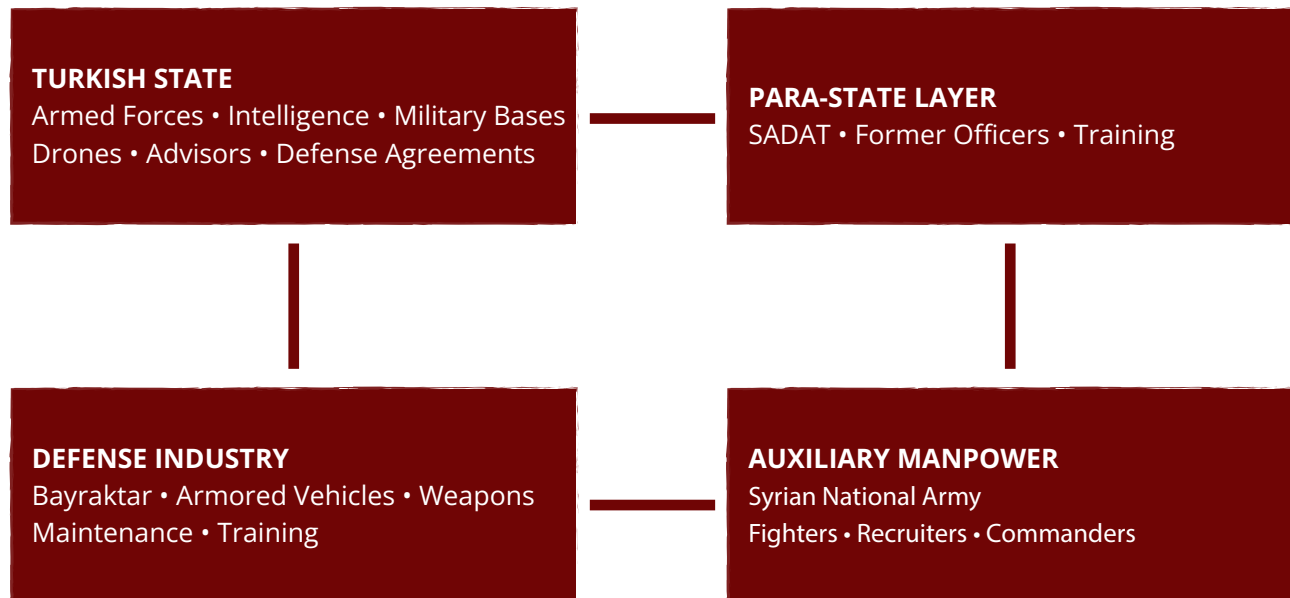
The whole can be described as a system of delegated force, made of layers that reinforce one another without obeying a single chain of command. At the centre is the state: armed forces, intelligence, defence agreements, bases, drones, advisers. This is the foundation, and without it the rest would lose its coherence. Around it sits a para-state layer made of SADAT, former officers and training networks close to power, which provides flexibility and makes it possible to act where Ankara prefers to stay in the background. Then comes the auxiliary manpower, that is, the Syrian fighters, the Syrian National Army factions, the recruiters and the local commanders, who supply the exportable infantry. The final layer is industrial: Bayraktar drones, light weapons, vehicles, academies, maintenance network. It is this layer that makes the influence lasting, because a client who buys equipment then depends on the parts, the software, the instructors and the doctrine of use.

That dependency is precisely the economic lock-in of the model: each sale is the beginning of a relationship, not the end of a transaction. The layers do not form a single chain of command; they form a value chain. The Turkish state does not need to control every move to benefit from the whole; it is enough that the interests converge. The companies sell, the Syrian factions seek income, the partner regimes seek protection, and Ankara gains influence.

Read this way, the system is anything but socially neutral. Each layer captures a

30 On the "national and indigenous" (yerli ve milli) narrative as a resource for domestic legitimization, and on the gap between the rhetoric of self-sufficiency and the share of imported components, see Adem Yavuz Arslan, "Turkey's defense industry: politics, propaganda and reality", Turkish Minute, 1 October 2025: <https://turkishminute.com/2025/10/01/opinion-turkeys-defense-industry-politics-propaganda-and-reality/>; see also Middle East Institute, "Turkish Foreign Policy", 23 April 2026: <https://mei.edu/backgrounders/turkish-foreign-policy/>

share of the value, and both risk and human cost are pushed downward, onto the Syrian fighters, and outward, onto the civilians of the countries where these forces operate. The model's effectiveness lies precisely in this capacity to concentrate profit and political capital at the top while externalising death at the bottom.



The "Turkish Wagner": a comparison to be handled with care

The phrase "Turkish Wagner" is convenient. It captures, in two words, what SADAT appears to offer, an indirect, deniable force that can be mobilised beyond the national territory, and it captures a reality visible in the Sahel, where the Russian and Turkish models cross³¹.

But the analogy has its limits. Wagner rested on a Russian core, on a fighting culture inherited from the post-Soviet wars and on a predatory economy tied to mines, concessions and security contracts. SADAT, by contrast, works with a mostly Syrian pool and does not appear as an autonomous private army able to run overseas campaigns on its own. It looks more like a politico-military broker linking Ankara, factions and foreign partners.

The ideological difference matters too. Wagner's Russian nationalism was

31 The phrase "Turkish Wagner" is used by several analyses, including Sinan Ciddi, "SADAT: Turkey's Wagner Group", Foundation for Defense of Democracies /The National Interest, 7 May 2026; <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2026/05/07/sadat-turkeys-wagner-group/> ; this source is useful for identifying the analogy, but it should be read as engaged analysis, not as a legal qualification.

brutal, but its concrete functioning remained largely transactional. SADAT, for its part, has placed itself within a pan-Islamic imaginary and in the proximity of Turkish conservative networks. The Syrian fighters recruited for abroad do not necessarily share that horizon, and many leave for the money, but the company that supervises them, or claims to train them, speaks a civilisational language. Both models ultimately belong to the same tendency, the commodification and privatisation of violence, but Ankara's is backed by a NATO member and a defence complex in full ascent. The phrase should therefore remain a tool of comparison, not a category of analysis.

The weak points of the model

This architecture, effective in the short term, remains vulnerable on several fronts.

The first is legal. International law strictly regulates the recruitment, financing and use of mercenaries, but the legal qualification remains hard to establish, because the definition of a mercenary is narrow and cumulative. The communications of the UN rapporteurs nonetheless show that the practices attributed to Turkey raise real questions: recruitment for pay, transfer to foreign conflicts, the role of private companies, the opacity of the chain of command. Even where mercenarism is not legally constituted, the responsibility of the state can be debated under the headings of due diligence, the regulation of private companies and respect for humanitarian law³².

The human vulnerability is just as serious, and it is above of all social. The model depends on the availability of impoverished Syrian fighters, that is, on the perpetuation of a misery that drives men to rent out their lives. Yet the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 and the reshaping of the Syrian armed forces are changing the picture. Some factions of the former opposition have been integrated, dissolved or reconfigured within the new security apparatus; if this integration consolidates, the Syrian pool could become less available, more costly or politically more sensitive, and the cheap labour on which the device rests would grow scarcer³³.

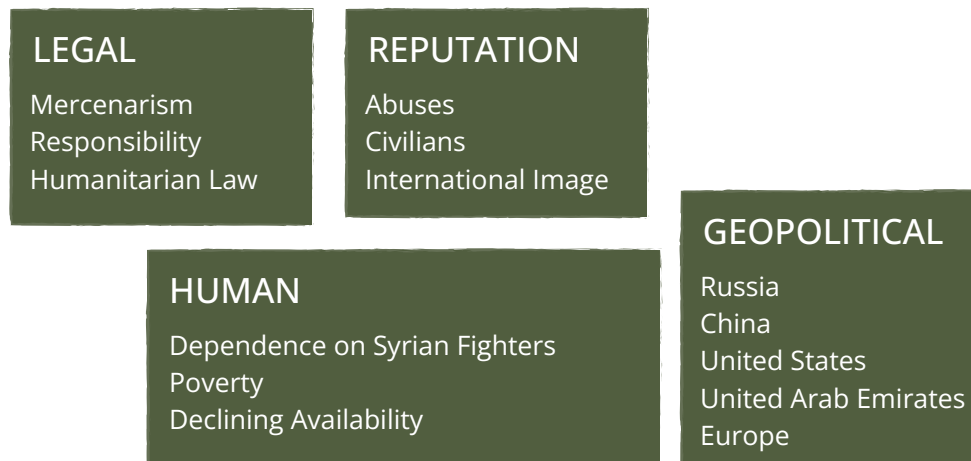
32 For the normative framework, see the Montreux Document, ICRC/Swiss Confederation, 2008: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/0996-montreux-document-private-military-and-security-companies> ; see also United Nations, International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries: https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XVIII-6&chapter=18&clang=_en

33 On the fall of the Assad regime and the reshaping of the Syrian security apparatus, see Brookings, "The Assad regime falls. What happens now?", 9 December 2024: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-assad-regime-falls-what-happens-now/>

European Union Agency for Asylum, "Integration of armed groups", Syria Country Focus, 2025: <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/col/syria/2025/country-focus/13-security-institutions/132-integration-armed-groups>

Reuters, "Syria sets deadline for small groups to join Defence Ministry", 18 May 2025: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-sets-deadline-small-groups-join-defence-ministry-2025-05-18/>

Then comes competition. In Africa, Turkey operates on ground already occupied by Russia, the United Arab Emirates, China, the United States and former European partners. The Sahelian juntas know how to play on this rivalry: they buy Turkish drones, negotiate with Moscow, accept some training and refuse other constraints. Ankara can gain positions, but it does not hold the game alone.



Finally there is reputation, and this is where the question of civilians weighs most heavily. Turkey sells the image of a Muslim, non-colonial, effective and pragmatic partner. The use of fighters accused of abuses, the reported enrolment of minors and the harm done to the populations of the theatres concerned can damage that image, and the cost of denial grows as testimonies, reports and images accumulate. A model that shifts the human cost onto the most vulnerable ends up producing, in return, a political risk for the one who deploys it.

Conclusion

SADAT is neither the all-powerful secret army its opponents sometimes describe, nor the mere consulting firm with no political reach. It occupies a more complex position, that of the political subcontracting of violence.

Through successive attempts, Turkey has built a repertoire of action that lets it advance without always showing itself. In Libya, it combined drones, a regular army, advisers and auxiliaries. In Nagorno-Karabakh, it transferred an already tested scheme. In the Sahel, it seems to be exploring a more uncertain extension, tied to the protection of economic interests and to security competition. In Somalia and Qatar, by contrast, it assumes an official presence, because visibility there serves its strategy.

The model thus cannot be reduced to SADAT. It rests on the articulation between the state, the defence firms, the fighter networks and the local partners. SADAT is its symbol, sometimes its interface, but not the whole.

There remains the question that any analysis attentive to power relations must ask: who profits from this device, and who bears its weight? The benefit concentrates at the top, in within a defence industry tied to the AKP's business networks and in the hierarchies that control recruitment. The cost is paid at the bottom and abroad, by impoverished Syrian fighters whose wages are skimmed and whose bodies are sent home, and by the civilians of the countries where these forces intervene. Delegated force is effective because it makes violence profitable for a few and distant for those who decide it.

Seen from below, the model raises a sharper question. Turkey presents itself as a post-Western partner, free of the colonial baggage of France or the heavy-handedness of the old powers, yet the structure it exports is itself hierarchical. Capital, command and political reward stay in Ankara and its allied business networks; risk, dependency and death are distributed outward and downward, onto Syrian fighters, onto precarious and displaced labour, and onto the civilians of the theatres where these forces operate. Selling security in this form does not dissolve dependency so much as reproduce it under a new flag. That is the dimension a critical reading cannot leave aside: behind the language of sovereignty and partnership lies a regional order that remains profoundly unequal.

In the short term, this construction gives Ankara considerable flexibility: it

reduces Turkish losses, blurs attribution and opens markets. In the medium term, it exposes Turkey to three risks: the law, if international investigations consolidate; the human resource, if the Syrian pool is transformed; and reputation, if the auxiliaries and their victims become a political burden.

The phrase "Turkish Wagner" helps illuminate the functional similarities with the Russian model. Yet it obscures what sets Ankara apart: a NATO member, equipped with a rising defence industry, able to alternate between an official presence and indirect action, and holding a human reservoir shaped by the Syrian war and Syrian poverty. SADAT is only one piece of this apparatus. The real novelty lies in Turkey's capacity to delegate force, and to externalise its cost, without giving up the political initiative.



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