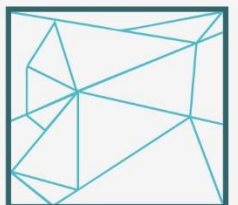


## After Libya and Azerbaijan: A Turkish Private Security Company Deploys Syrian Mercenaries to Niger



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In late 2023, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) obtained exclusive testimonies indicating that a Turkish private security company—close to the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP)—had started sending new batches of fighters from the opposition's "Syrian National Army" (SNA) to Niger as mercenaries. STJ chose not to disclose the information at the time due to insufficient evidence and some discrepancies in reported details about the new recruitment operations, opting to further verify and corroborate the statements and collect additional ones.

The recruitment of Syrian fighters as mercenaries has become a common practice among entities linked to the Turkish authorities, including security agencies. These entities have already used fighters from Syrian armed groups, they support and control, as mercenaries in foreign armed conflicts, in a way that serves *especially* their relations with certain parties to these disputes. The recent deployments thus make Niger the Syrian mercenaries' new destination after [Libya](#) and [Azerbaijan](#).

Notably, Türkiye is not the only side involved in the enlistment and deployment of Syrian fighters as mercenaries. Russia has also engaged in this practice, dispatching Syrian fighters to both [Libya](#) and [Ukraine](#).

While the recent recruitments reportedly aim to "protect Turkish projects and interests [in Niger], including mines", three fighters who spoke to France 24 said they had signed six-month contracts with "SADAT International Defense Consultancy", a private Turkish company. One of them confirmed the contract was signed in the presence of company officers.

Addressing SADAT's activities in relation to Syria in its "[Shadow Armies](#) (2)", the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression cited a 2020 [report](#) by the French website Africa Intelligence. The report sheds light on the company's role in training Syrian opposition fighters, suggesting that **"groups trained by this company might develop stronger allegiances to Turkey and Erdogan, potentially at the expense of Syria."**

In 2021, Melih Tanrıverdi, the company's board chairman, acknowledged that SADAT cooperates with Türkiye's National Intelligence Organization (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MiT) and coordinates with Turkish defense diplomats. Also in 2021, the company's founder Adnan Tanrıverdi said the goal in establishing SADAT was to **provide services to Islamic countries that the Turkish Armed Forces cannot reach**, while the company often stressed that "profit is not the sole purpose" but rather **"serving the higher ideal of tilting the balance of power in favor of Islam"**.

According to informed opposition-affiliated military sources interviewed by STJ for this report, several prominent armed groups within the SNA, engaged in the recruitment operations in coordination with Turkish security agencies, sent no less than 1000 Syrian fighters to Niger over three batches. The groups departed through the Hawar Kilis border crossing in northwestern Syria, to the Turkish city of Kilis, on buses of the Turkish military.

One of the sources said the first batch left Syria in the first half of November 2023 and arrived in Niger at the beginning of January 2024. Meanwhile, the second and the third batches departed the country together in the first half of April 2024, reaching Niger in the latter half of the same month.

The dire economic circumstances push many Syrian fighters to accept recruitment offers despite the risks they may face in the destination country, which include the possibility of death

during combat. One source provided STJ with the names of 17 fighters who were killed in Niger in May 2024.

In this report, STJ reveals details about these fighters' deaths, in addition to the terms and process of recruitment, the amounts of money fighters were promised in return for being sent to Niger, the tasks assigned to them, and the ways in which they were transported from northern Syria to Türkiye and then to Niger.

The report builds on four testimonies collected by the field researchers with STJ between January and July 2024, through interviews with the relatives of two dead recruits and two military sources in the SNA, one of whom was a fighter who arrived in Niger early this year.

Three interviews were carried out in person in locations deemed safe and private by the researcher and sources. The fourth interview was conducted online using a secure communication application. All four sources were made aware of the voluntary nature of the interview and how the shared information would be used, including publishing this report. This was done by obtaining their informed consent. As their testimonies were sensitive, the four sources requested anonymity.

In addition to the testimonies, STJ reviewed a number of open-source [reports](#) that covered these recruitment operations, and several had information that aligned with what the sources in this report provided.

## ▪ The First Batch and Recruitment Prerequisites

The sending of fighter batches to Niger was preceded by two high-profile meetings held in September 2023, according to Yousef al-Muhammed,<sup>1</sup> a commander in the Sultan Murad Division, led by Fahim Issa.

According to the source, the first meeting, held on 5 September 2023 in the Syrian city of Kilis, was attended by representatives of the Turkish authorities and commanders from the Turkish-backed SNA, including Fahim Issa, Mohammad al-Jasem (Abu Amsha), commander of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (al-Amshat), and Saif Abu Bakr, commander of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division.

The source added that after the meeting with the Turkish security officials, several SNA commanders had another meeting at the headquarters of the Sultan Murad Division in the city of Afrin, which included in addition to Fahim Issa, Muhammad al-Jasem, and Saif Abu Bakr, a number of first-rank commanders in the SNA's 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, as well as the personal escorts of each of the present commanders.

Following these two meetings, the commanders agreed to internally announce the intended selection of a batch of fighters to travel to Niger. Yousef said:

**"Those who attended the two meetings agreed to task [their] brigade commanders to announce they were enlisting no more than 500 fighters to travel to Niger as a first batch ... according to specific conditions, but the announcement was made in an internal manner within the joint operations room, not through official channels, media outlets, or other similar means."**

The recruitment announcement included specific selection requirements. According to Yousef:

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<sup>1</sup>The source opted to use a pseudonym during an in-person interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 15 May 2024.

"The fighter must have received previous military training inside Türkiye, not exceed 35 years of age, and be a specialized professional fighter [coming from armored vehicle crews–sniper units–infantry assault teams–medium artillery gunner units, among others], to protect Turkish bases and investments inside Niger in cooperation with Russian forces."

Regarding the salaries of the fighters to be deployed to Niger, Yousef said:

"A first-rate member, 'battalion leader', receives a salary of \$2,500, while a second-rate member, 'fighter', receives \$1,500, whereas a third-rate member, 'supervisor exclusively within headquarters', receives \$1,000."

He added that the poor economic and living conditions in northern Syria formed an incentive for many fighters to go to Niger:

"Many fighters were encouraged to go to Niger due to poverty in the region, and the promises made to them by commanders to provide them with all their salaries, in addition to the growing enthusiasm to get there first to obtain a large share of the spoils of war, such as gold and money, as happened in Libya."

Previously, STJ reports documented the [involvement](#) of some SNA fighters sent by Türkiye to Libya as mercenaries in many rights violations. These included imposing royalties on shops, looting some, attacking civilian homes, and stealing their contents, including gold and money which they considered [spoils](#).

According to Yousef, the preparation of the first batch began around ten days after the commanders' meeting, totaling nearly 420 recruits. Most of the selected fighters were from Aleppo, Damascus, and Deir ez-Zor provinces, chosen from armed groups like the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade, led by Dogan Suleiman (Abu Islam), the Liwa Samarkand/Samarkand Brigade, led by Thaer Maarouf, the al-Waqqas Brigade, led by Saad Abbas, the Sultan Murad Division, the Suleiman Shah Brigade (al-Amshat), and the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, as well as the SNA's 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps.

Regarding the route taken by the fighters from northern Syria towards Niger, Yousef said:

"The personnel were transferred from SNA bases in the city of A'zaz to the Turkish city of Kilis in early November 2023. They were then transported after a short period to [Gaziantep airport](#), then to [Istanbul airport](#) in late December 2023."

Yousef added that the Turkish security liaison officer with armed groups' commanders had confiscated all fighters' phones, and promised to return them each to the relevant group for storage. He noted that:

"Some fighters managed to obtain phones upon arrival in Niger and spoke with friends within the SNA who remained in Syria. They informed them of having arrived in Niger in early January 2024."

STJ obtained additional information about the recruitment process from Thaer al-Ali,<sup>2</sup> a fighter from the Sultan Murad Division who was among those sent to Niger:

"Enlistments took place through WhatsApp groups of the units within the Sultan Murad Division, then names were submitted to the division's personnel office. Some

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<sup>2</sup> The source opted to use a pseudonym during an online interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 9 January 2024.



**800 fighters were enlisted from the division, but completely secretly and without details on contract duration, duties in Niger, or even the name of the commander to be in charge of the batch [there]. Salaries were reported as \$1,500 for fighters, with \$1,000 going to the fighter and \$500 to the faction's commander."**

According to Thaer, the Sultan Murad Division's commander Fahim Issa appointed Lieutenant Uraba Idriss responsible for recruitment. Idriss then coordinated with other brigade leaders and collected names of fighters to be sent to Niger. Idriss commands the division's 123<sup>rd</sup> Brigade and previously oversaw fighters dispatched to Libya, Azerbaijan, and [preparations](#) to send some to Ukraine (even though plans were cancelled due to Turkish-Russian understandings and Türkiye's intention to play the role of mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict). STJ's database indicates that some fighters under Idriss' command in Libya were implicated in rights abuses.

Thaer confirmed departure from northern Syria was via the Hawar Kilis border crossing on Turkish buses and that, during the journey, Turkish officers accompanying them confiscated all fighters' mobile phones.

## ▪ The Second and Third Batches

The second and third batches of fighters were completed at a closed camp for the Sultan Murad Division in Afrin, then sent to Niger aboard cargo planes, according to Yousef:

**"The second and third batches were transported together in mid-April 2024 to military barracks in Kilis province of Türkiye under the supervision of Fahim Issa and Sami Abu Abdo. They were taken to Gaziantep airport by tourist buses, then to Istanbul airport and finally to Niger by cargo planes."**

Regarding numbers and specialties, Yousef said:

**"The batches consisted of 610 fighters of varied military roles [deterrent battalion, infantry battalion, sniper platoon]. Our role was escorting them to Gaziantep airport only, where we received their belongings, including money, military IDs, phones, etc."**

Yousef stated that, information arrived days after departure confirming their arrival at the Turkish base in Niger:

**"On 16 April 2024, information reached our military headquarters about the arrival of the fighting batches to the Turkish base in Niger through the Turkish security coordination official Kamal T. He was visiting us at the headquarters of commander Fahim Issa on the Syrian-Turkish border near the Kilis military crossing."**

Several SNA commanders attended the aforementioned meeting with Kamal T., namely: Fahim Issa, Muhammad al-Jasem (Abu Amsha), Saif Abu Bakr, Uraba Idriss, Sami Abu Abdo, who is the chief of staff of the Sultan Murad Division, Mamoun Kabso (Abu al-Furat Tal Rifaat), commander of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Brigade in the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, Aseed al-Turkmani, a military commander within the SNA's 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, and close to Fahim al-Issa. The seven prominent figures are considered the most relied upon by Türkiye in pushing mercenary activities in SNA-held areas, recruiting fighters, and sending them outside Syria.

Yousef said those present agreed to recruit a fourth batch of fighters:

**"There was discussion about preparing a new group of nearly 1000 fighters, who would be added to the previous batches at combat bases in Niger. There was agreement to train and prepare this group in Tal Abyad city's training camp, inside the Turkish base"**

in al-Maksoura village, under the supervision of Uraba Idriss, Aseed al-Turkmani, and a number of Turkish military officers. "

He added:

"A few days after the meeting, particularly on 26 April 2024, around 700 fighters from the SNA were gathered with orders from [above-mentioned] commanders. They were transported by tourist buses after gathering at the training camp in Afrin city to Kilis province in Türkiye, arriving at the Turkish base in al-Maksoura village near Tal Abyad city."

According to the source, this group was undergoing preparation as of 15 May 2024, intended as the fourth batch to Niger the following month.

## ▪ Mercenaries Killed

STJ spoke to Mazen Khateeb,<sup>3</sup> father of a fighter sent to Niger. On 13 May 2024, he received news that his son was killed there along with other militants. His son fought with the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and "had participated in battles within and outside Syria, including in Libya two years ago from where he returned unharmed after about a year."

Regarding his son's recruitment in Niger and salary offered by the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, Mazen said:

"In late 2023 (around September-October) my son [Muhammad] informed me he intends to go to Niger. His battalion leader Suleiman al-Sheikh (Abu Nassar) of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, requested his enlistment given his skills and experience in Syria and Libya in exchange for a \$1500 monthly wage contract for a full year."

Despite the father objecting to his son's recruitment in Niger due to concerns over the "harsh desert environment," Muhammad insisted on joining a camp under the Sultan Murad Division in the farmlands of the Rajo district in rural Afrin. There, soldiers receive special training for combat in Niger. The father narrated:

"A few days later, [Muhammad] informed us he would join a camp run by the Sultan Murad Division in rural Afrin, along with the other members traveling to Niger, and that he could no longer return home until the end of his assigned mission."

Muhammad packed his personal belongings in a small bag which, according to his father, contained "military clothes, sleeping clothes, underwear, his mobile phone, military ID, civilian ID, personal handgun, a carton of cigarettes, and \$200 in cash."

Regarding Muhammad's transfer from home to the camp, the father stated:

"[Muhammad's] battalion leader [Suleiman al-Sheikh] came in his personal car accompanied by his escorts, in addition to seven buses belonging to the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, inside of which were the militants who would go to fight in Niger. Muhammad boarded the bus and that was the last time we saw him."

Over the two months since Muhammad traveled, his family tried to get news of him in Niger but were unable to obtain accurate information as communications were extremely difficult

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<sup>3</sup> The source opted to use a pseudonym during an in-person interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 15 May 2024.

and limited to the commanders and their escorts. Until they received news that Muhammad was killed along with other fighters in a well-planned ambush.

The father immediately went to the Command Office of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and requested a meeting with one of the senior military commanders responsible for the Niger fighters. One of the fighters there asked him to wait outside the office for the arrival of a high-ranking officer of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division named al-Battar:

**"After three hours of waiting ... the attendant ushered me into [al-Battar's] office, and the official confirmed to me the death of my son in Niger, saying he was martyred in an ambush with several other militants, and the SNA forces were unable to retrieve their bodies because the area is a grinding war zone, and they cannot advance at all to the site of the ambush. I was shocked by the news and sat crying and lamenting for my son."**

Regarding the procedures and compensation after the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division acknowledged Muhammad's death, the source said:

**"[Al-Battar] informed me that he would hand over Muhammad's belongings, because they withheld all fighters' possessions before their travel to Niger. He asked the attendant to bring my son's bag, which contained his mobile phone, civilian ID and personal handgun only. "**

He added:

**"[Al-Battar] said my son [Muhammad] had two months' salary in their records, and we would be given the salary upon its arrival from the Turkish side, in addition to compensation for his death ranging from \$15,000 to \$20,000, which would also be delivered to us from the Turkish side. [Al-Battar] asked me to check back with them at the end of each month until receiving the mentioned amount of money."**

The source said that "al-Battar" strongly emphasized that he should not appear in the media or disclose any information related to him or his son, "so that I do not face accountability one day."

According to STJ's database, "al-Battar" participated in battles in Libya and Azerbaijan, and was responsible for coordination between Turkish officers and the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division's officers in those battles.

Muhammad's name was on a list of 17 names, the source Yousef said it belonged to Syrian fighters killed in Niger in May 2024:

**"On 9 May 2024, Suleiman al-Sheikh, commander of the infantry battalion in the first deployment to Niger, reached out via one of the Turkish military officers at the Turkish base and informed him that 17 of his fighters died in a landmine ambush, as they went to fortify and dig trenches on contact lines. He said he was unable to recover their bodies because the area is covered with an intensive barrage of fire, and the Nigerien fighters collected the bodies and burned them at night after pouring flammable substances on the corpses."**

According to the source, those killed were:

1. Abdulrahman H.-Idlib
2. Abdulrahman G.-Idlib
3. Abdulhameed B.-Idlib
4. Kareem B.-Idlib
5. Khaled Sh.-Daraa



6. Taiseer S.-Homs
7. Yousef A.-Homs
8. Muhammed F.-Damascus
9. Ra'ed D.-Damascus
10. Fareed Q.- Damascus
11. Amer D.-al-Raqqa
12. Maisara A.-al-Raqqa
13. Hatem Gh.-Deir ez-Zor
14. Mansour Gh.-Deir ez-Zor
15. Mansour H.-Aleppo
16. Qasem M.-Aleppo
17. Mamdouh N.-Aleppo

On 7 July 2024, the body of Ahmad D., a 29-year-old fighter with the Suleiman Shah Brigade (al-Amshat), arrived in northern Syria. Ahmad's relative Hussam Rizq said the brigade received the body through the Azaz military crossing,<sup>4</sup> which is adjacent to Hawar Kilis city.

On the circumstances surrounding Ahmad's death, Hussam said:

**"Three days ago, a fighter with the Suleiman Shah Brigade (al-Amshat) informed us that he overheard the escorts of Abu Amsha (commander of the brigade), saying that Ahmad died from a heart attack caused by a drug overdose and that Abu Amsha is actively engaging with the Turkish side and Fahim Issa to return Ahmad's body [to Syria]. This is because Ahmad has a close relationship with him; they are relatives, and both come from the same home region."**

Hussam noted that Mohammad al-Jasem (Abu Amsha) sent Ahmad to Libya and then to Niger because he deeply trusted him:

**"Abu Amsha previously ordered Ahmad's deployment to Libya. I believe this happened in mid-March 2020. He was paid a lucrative sum of money to oversee ammunition deliveries, examine weapons, and ensure the fighters [in Libya] did not steal and sell the arms. Ahmad was one of the people Abu Amsha trusted. He remained in Libya for a year and a half, then safely returned to Afrin to rejoin [the brigade] as the deputy armament officer."**

Hussam added:

**"Recently, Abu Amsha sent Ahmad and a group of the brigade's fighters to the training camps run by the Sultan Murad Division in Afrin. The camps serve as training grounds for approved recruits destined to defend Turkish bases and interests in Niger. I recall he [arrived in Niger] around May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024."**

The command of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (al-Amshat) called Ahmad's family, originally hailing from Hamah, to bid their son goodbye at the Brigade's command center in Afrin city on July 8, 2024. Later that day, they transported the body in a coffin and buried it in the *Ahel Hamah* (Hamah's People) [cemetery](#) in Atarib city, affiliated with Aleppo province. The family hosted the

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<sup>4</sup> The source opted to use a pseudonym during an in-person interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 8 July 2024.

funeral ceremony in a tent near their home in Tal al-Karamah village, affiliated with Idlib province.

Hussam reported that Abu Amsha contacted one of Ahmad's relatives to share the following information:

"Ahmad had a sum of money that his brother or any of his relatives must collect, amounting to the salaries Ahmad did not receive in Niger, and that he [Abu Amsha] will follow up with the Turkish side on the family compensation, of about \$30,000, for Ahmad's death."

## ▪ Why Niger?

On 26 July 2023, Niger witnessed a coup carried out by the presidential guard that led to the overthrow of President Mohamed Bazoum, and the formation of a new military council to run the country under the presidency of the commander of the presidential guard General Abdourahmane Tiani. This was considered a blow to traditional Western influence represented by the United States and France, in favor of another alliance represented by Russia, China, Iran and Türkiye.

Researcher Gabriella Korling from the Swedish Defense Research Agency [said](#) the defense component in the relationship between Niger and Türkiye has become more important over time with the signing of a military cooperation agreement in 2020, and that the coup did not disrupt diplomatic relations between the two countries, but rather contributed to strengthening them.

Ankara announced its opposition to threats by the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) group of military intervention in Niger to reinstate the ousted president, then appointed its first military attaché to Niger last March as part of further diplomatic steps, followed by sending Syrian fighters from the SNA with the aim of protecting its interests there.

The Nigerien army had justified the coup as an attempt to counter violent attacks launched by terrorist groups, including groups that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS, also known as Daesh) and others that had pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, however, the pace of attacks did not decrease.

In 2021, STJ published a [report](#) revealing 27 names of IS commanders, security officials, and militants who had become commanders or fighters within the ranks of the SNA, including armed groups that had sent Syrian fighters and civilians as mercenaries to fight in Libya and Azerbaijan.

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## ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unflinching dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.