



Department of Political Science
Bachelor's Degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics
(PPE)

Chair of African Politics and Society

**Building Stability: an Analysis of the Italian
Commitment in the Sahel through the Bilateral
Support Mission in Niger (MISIN)**

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Accademic year 2024/2025

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RIASSUNTO

La presente tesi intende ripercorrere e analizzare il ruolo dell'Italia nella sicurezza e stabilità della regione saheliana, con particolare attenzione al Niger, dove un contingente militare italiano è presente tramite la Missione Bilaterale di Supporto (MISIN), evidenziandone gli sviluppi, le ricadute strategiche e i limiti strutturali. Inserita nel crescente contenuto d'instabilità dell'Africa Sub-Sahariana, la MISIN rappresenta un caso emblematico della proiezione italiana nel continente africano, a metà strada tra esigenze geopolitiche, contrasto al terrorismo e gestione dei flussi migratori.

Nei primi tre capitoli viene tracciato un quadro storico delle relazioni Italia-Africa, facendo risaltare il passaggio da un approccio coloniale a uno più pragmatico e securitario. Il Niger viene delineato come un punto determinante ma fragile, segnato da precarietà politica, insorgenze jihadiste e vulnerabilità economiche e sociali. In tale scenario, la presenza italiana si configura come tentativo di irrobustire la capacità statale e garantire un concernente equilibrio regionale. Invece, la sezione conclusiva ritrae l'essenza analitica del lavoro, soffermandosi sull'evoluzione della MISIN dal 2018 ad oggi. L'operazione, inizialmente centrata sulla formazione delle forze armate nigerine e sulla lotta contro il traffico di esseri umani, ha via via assunto un'espressione politica più ampia, specie conseguentemente al colpo di Stato del 2023. Sebbene alcuni partner occidentali abbiano sospeso le loro attività e si siano ritirati, il Governo italiano ha deciso di continuare attivamente la propria missione, ricalibrandone obiettivi e modalità esecutive alla luce delle nuove circostanze. Alla luce di tutto ciò il Sahel viene presentato come banco di prova dell'autodeterminazione strategica italiana: la MISIN diventa uno strumento di presenza discreta, ma costante, che permette all'Italia di distinguersi da attori più assertivi come Francia e Russia.

Tale approccio di “low visibility” rafforza l’immagine di un’Italia potenzialmente mediatrice e realista, capace di adattarsi alle condizioni locali senza compromettere la stabilità regionale. La tesi sottolinea anche i limiti dell’azione italiana: carenza di risorse, debilitato coordinamento tra istituzioni e sforzo di integrazione tra strumenti militari e civili. La mera cooperazione allo sviluppo del resto rischierebbe di risultare separata dagli intenti securitari, generando frammentazione della politica estera italiana nel suo insieme. Inoltre la narrativa dell’“aiuto alla sicurezza” può rischiare di scivolare in logiche neocoloniali, soprattutto in assenza di un comprovato coinvolgimento delle autorità e delle comunità locali.

Infine la dissertazione conclude che, per essere funzionale, la presenza italiana nel Sahel deve superare la logica emergenziale e dotarsi di un quadro mirato e adattato. Tramite il rinvigorimento del coordinamento interministeriale, gli investimenti in strumenti analitici e la promozione di sinergie tra difesa, diplomazia e cooperazione allo sviluppo, si potrà stabilire una presenza sostenibile sul territorio nigerino. La MISIN, pur con tutti i suoi vincoli, offre l’opportunità di consolidare il ruolo dell’Italia come attore multilivello, adeguato e credibile nel campo della sicurezza mediterranea.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis aims to examine and document Italy's role in the security and stabilisation of the Sahel region, with particular focus on Niger, where an Italian military contingent is deployed through the Bilateral Support Mission (MISIN) underlining its progress, the strategic repercussions and structural constraints. Placed in the growing instability situation of sub-Saharan Africa, MISIN shows an emblematic case study of the Italian projection on the African continent, halfway between geopolitical requirements, counter-terrorism and migration management.

A chronological description of Italy-Africa relations is sketched out in chapters one to three, reflecting the shift from a colonial to a more pragmatic and securitarian orientation. Niger is portrayed as a decisive but fragile area, scarred by political precariousness, jihadist insurgencies and economic and social vulnerabilities. Within this scenario, the Italian presence is configured as an endeavour to shore up state capacity and guarantee a coherent regional balance. However, the study's analytical perspective is summed up in the final part, which also describes how MISIN has changed since 2018. Since the coup d'état of 2023, the mission, initially aimed at backing Niger's military training and the fight against slavery, has taken on a wider political role. The Italian government chose to pursue its mission with renewed energy, redesigning its goals and implementation modalities to suit the new context, even when other Western allies have retreated and ceased their activities. Bearing this in mind, the Sahel is presented as a proof of the Italian strategic self-determination: MISIN becomes an asset of discreet but constant presence, allowing Italy to distinguish itself from more assertive agents such as France and Russia.

This 'low visibility' attitude reinforces the image of a moderate and realistic Italy, which can adjust to local conditions without compromising regional stability. In addition, the paper stresses the restrictions of Italian action: insufficient resources,

debilitated coordination between institutions and efforts to supplement military and civil tools. Development cooperation is often detached from security intentions, engendering fragmentation. In addition, the ‘security aid’ narrative may risk slipping into neo-colonial logic, mainly if the involvement of local authorities and communities is missing.

Finally, the dissertation comes to the conclusion that in order to be functional, the Italian intervention in the Sahel must go beyond the emergency logic and equip itself with a targeted and adapted policy picture. By reinvigorating inter-ministerial cooperation, investing in analytical assets and promoting synergies between defence, diplomacy and development, so a sustainable presence in Niger can be achieved. Although MISIN has all its challenges, it offers the chance to cement Rome's role as a multilevel, adequate and reliable actor in the field of Mediterranean security.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the Italian government has been progressively tightening its strategic protagonism in the Sahelian quadrant, identifying Niger as a central pivot for the projection of its foreign and security policy in the Wider Mediterranean and beyond. Given a scenario characterised by chronic imbalance, growing jihadist breakthrough and the withdrawal of the traditional Western powers, Italy has been capable of developing a multi-level, tailored and versatile approach which sets it apart on the international horizon. Emblematic of this strategy is the Bilateral Support Mission in Niger (MISIN), established in 2018, which serves as a core instrument to blend military cooperation, operational diplomacy and the promotion of regional stability.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine in depth the relevant geopolitical and historical strategic implications of the Italian military intervention in Niger, challenging to what extent this intervention is compatible with the frameworks and principles of the prevailing global security architectures. The research question guiding the work is: What are the geopolitical and strategic implications of Italy's military engagement in Niger and how far does it align with broader international security settings? This question allows not only to explore the operational effectiveness of MISIN, but also to assess its weight in terms of political symbolism, diplomatic narrative and the international credibility of Italy.

Nowadays, Niger is a platform of global prominence in the world order, the melting pot of migratory flows, the epicentre of the Sahelian terrorist menace and the theatre of strategic rivalries between leading and emerging world players - from Russia to China, from the United States to Turkey. In this scenario, Italy has assumed a peculiar position, managing to preserve positive channels of dialogue and cooperation even in the aftermath of the July 2023 coup d'état. This diplomatic resilience has reinforced Rome's reputation

as an agent capable of matching discretion, realism and confidence building, especially through an attitude geared towards capacity building rather than coercive involvement.

Regarding international awareness, the Italian posture also showed an important discrepancy with other Western partners. Notwithstanding the decline of relations between the Nigerien military junta and some European countries, Italy has managed to carve out a role for itself as a privileged negotiator, precisely because of its ability to listen, adapt and respect local mechanisms. In this respect, Italian intelligence activity has played a decisive game, helping to keep diplomatic canals open and guaranteeing a constant and credible flow of information. This activity has allowed Italy to be considered as a strategic bridge between the security needs of Sahelian authorities and the stability priorities of Southern Europe, proving how intelligence can act as a lever of geopolitical influence while respecting the principle of sovereignty.

The relevance of this study is not only academic, but also political and tactical. Analysing the Italian experience in Niger means wondering about the ability of a medium-sized European power in contributing to collective security in highly complex environments. By fostering observance of the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the enhancement of democratic institutions, this policy approach seeks not only to meet the immediate demands for peace and development, but also to pave the way for lasting prosperity. Thus, a virtuous circle is set up, in which security is no more just the product of foreign intervention but becomes an endogenous value of local societies. Simultaneously, this commitment is part of a more extensive strategic view intended to safeguard national and European concerns. The stability of the areas of operation is, in fact, closely linked to the domestic security of Italy and the European Union, notably with regard to phenomena such as transnational terrorism, illegal trafficking and irregular migration. From this perspective, international collaboration is a far-sighted investment in collective security, boosting both Italy's credibility and its status as a reliable and influential actor in the contemporary geopolitical arena.

The methodology applied is qualitative-interpretive, based on social science paradigms. The investigation is rooted to primary sources (official documents, parliamentary acts, bilateral communiqués) and secondary ones (academic articles, policy papers, think tank reports), with an inductive and multi-scalar focus. The objective is to rigorously trace the Italian political-strategic trajectory in Niger, looking at the interconnections between local African dimensions, national interests and international structures. The intent is to go beyond a technical or normative reading of Italian foreign policy, proposing instead a stratified vision which takes into account the ambivalences, dilemmas and opportunities it entails.

The study is structured along three main axes:

- National and local level: Niger's domestic transformation will be examined, with specific reference to the coup of 2023's aftermath, the growth of the jihadist cells and the centre-periphery divide. The research on the perception by the local populations of the foreign armed forces' presence and the power legitimisation dynamics will also be crucial.
- Regional and continental level: the relationships between Italy and African regional organisations (such as ECOWAS, G5 Sahel and AES) will be explored, as well as the ways in which Italy has attempted to exert soft power through development cooperation, technical support and cultural diplomacy.
- International and systemic level: it will be assessed the Italian placement in the current scenario of inter-power competition and the evolution of the global order, characterised by the crisis of multilateralism and the growing militarisation of European foreign policy. The Italian activity will also be compared with that of other leading players (France, USA, China, Russia, Turkey), with the goal of identifying whether Italy can offer an alternative model of presence

The thesis is articulated in four chapters. The first one recaps the historical and geopolitical background of Niger and the Sahel, outlining the principal inner ruptures, security challenges and post-colonial dynamics. Thereafter, the second part analyses the development of Italy as an African geopolitical agent with a spotlight on the genesis and consequences of MISIN. The third section proposes a critical comparison between the Italian strategy and the ones of other international stakeholders. The fourth chapter focuses on the future perspectives of the Italian effort, also considering the Mattei Plan for Africa, querying the feasibility of building equal and sustainable partnerships.

The work draws to a closure with a critical reflection on the structural constraints and potential of the Italian approach, expressing operational recommendations for a more coherent, multi-layered foreign policy firmly anchored to the cooperative principles. In the final instance, the aspiration of this dissertation is to offer a valuable perspective for both academic research and the strategic consideration of Italian institutions, in an era in which security and development prove to be indissociably connected.

CHAPTER I

NIGER AND THE SAHEL: BETWEEN UNCERTAINTY AND INTERNATIONAL INTERESTS

1.1 Political evolution and security dynamics in Niger

Owing to a multifaceted past of perpetual external influence, civil unrest and regional instability, Niger has evolved its political architecture to protect its borders. Nigerien land, located in the middle of the Sahel, has been an essential trans-Saharan trade crossroads thanks to the major trading hubs that cities such as Agadez and Zinder have provided. Over the centuries, this territory has been ruled by various political entities, from the Hausa confederations to the Songhai and the Kanem-Bornu empires. Alongside this, the spread of Islam from the 7th century onwards strengthened Niger's ties with the commercial and cultural networks of North Africa and the Middle East, increasing mutual influences and interrelations¹.

Nevertheless, the turning point occurred with the arrival of the European colonial powers on the African continent between the 19th and 20th century, a process formalised when France faced strenuous resistance from the populations of the area due to its expansionist intentions carried out using militias². The tragic “Voulet-Chanoine” mission, which brutally suppressed local communities, is a well-known example of colonial aggression. Due to their historical independence and close ties to the Saharan trade routes, the Tuareg also resented French occupation and were the catalyst for the 1916–1917 “Kaocen” insurrection, one of the biggest revolts against European supremacy in the Sahel³.

Thereafter, Niger formally became French rule in 1922, with the integration of the territory into the Federation of French West Africa. Paris, though, played its game by indirect administration, which favoured certain local elites, particularly the Djerma-

¹ OECD/SWAC. (2014). *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security*. OECD Publishing. pp. 36-47.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/978926422359-en>

² Storia In. (n.d.). Niger: Il difficile percorso verso la stabilità. Retrieved from <https://www.storiain.net/storia/niger-il-difficile-percorso-verso-la-stabilita/>

³ Go Afrique. (n.d.). *Storia del Niger*. Retrieved from <https://www.goafrique.it/storia-del-niger/>

Songhai, while marginalising nomadic communities in the north, such as the Tuareg even⁴. Colonisation dramatically altered Niger's political and social framework: the traditional economic system, based on trade across the desert, was progressively dismantled and replaced by an extractive model functional to French interests, centred on agricultural and mining resources, especially uranium.

Within the French imperialist conception, Niger held a peripheral position, receiving scarce investment in the core sectors of its development, including infrastructure and education, thereby leaving it with a narrow bureaucratic capacity. Choosing Niamey as capital in 1926 further exacerbated the internal imbalances, privileging the Southern regions to the detriment of the North. This model of governance, characterised by strong regional disparity, contributed to a lasting rift between the central government and the marginalised areas, a divide that would continue to affect Niger policy even post-independence⁵. As can be seen, consistent French pressure hindered the formation of an autonomous ruling class, while restraining the country's socio-economic development, the effects of which are still evident today.

In August 1960, Niger was formally declared independent following the election of its first president, Hamani Diori. Despite this, French influence persisted to have a significant impact on the new nation's political climate and economic dynamics, making the separation from it purely symbolic rather than practical. In fact, Paris endured to offer financial and technical assistance while guaranteeing preferential access to vital resources, particularly uranium, which served as crucial to its nuclear plans. Niger's new leader imposed an authoritarian political apparatus, whereby his party exercised absolute dominance to exclude any form of dissent. The repression was extremely harsh against his opponents, including the Sawaba movement, which was banned in 1959. The latter, headed by Djibo Bakary, advocated a more radical independence, demanding a decisive break with French control. Many Sawaba members escaped to neighbouring countries after the banishment of their leaders, attempting to organise an armed insurrection with the backing of Guinea, Ghana and Algeria. However, their attempt was brutally

⁴ Storia In. (n.d.). Niger: Il difficile percorso verso la stabilità. Retrieved from <https://www.storiain.net/storia/niger-il-difficile-percorso-verso-la-stabilita/>

⁵ Ibidem

suppressed by the government, which received immediate support from France to crush the uprising⁶.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a profound economic crisis aggravated by severe droughts hit agriculture hard and led to widespread famine throughout the country. This worsened the growing general discontent also among the military, who began to consider Diori an obstacle to national progress. Attempting to remain firmly in power, the president sought to renegotiate uranium royalties with the aim of increasing Niger's revenue, but this approach drove him on a collision course with Paris, jeopardising his support for it⁷. Denied French support, his fate was sealed: in 1974, a coup d'état orchestrated by Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché deposed him, plunging the nation into a critical stage.

With Seyni Kountché's accession to power, Niger slipped into a period of military rule that would dominate the scene for over a decade. He dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution and established a Supreme Military Council (SMC) that centralised all power in the hands of the army. This new regime succeeded in providing some stability to the country, through tighter management of resources and some economic reforms to stem the food crisis⁸. Compared to Diori, Kountché tried to reduce the exclusive dependence on France by engaging diplomatic relations with China, the United States and several Arab countries. However, his government remained authoritarian and repressive: any form of protest was nipped in the bud, and the army maintained an iron grip on the country.

Tensions grew under his regime with the Tuareg communities in the north who felt increasingly side-lined and disrupted by their traditional trans-Saharan trade channels. As a matter of fact, the 1980s witnessed rising protests and malcontent among the Tuaregs, paving the foundation for future insurgencies. Kountché's death in 1987 opened the door to a second transition phase, as the power shifted to his successor, Ali Saïbou, who

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Ibidem

encountered mounting domestic and international pressure to launch a democratisation process⁹.

The preservation of a military oppressive system proved unsustainable for Niger, an awareness which prompted Ali Saïbou to embark on a gradual liberalisation of politics. In 1989, he promulgated a new constitution, and founded the Mouvement National pour la Société de Développement (MNSD), a genuinely pluralist party, although still largely influenced by the army. However, it turned obvious that minor improvements would not be sufficient due to mounting pressure from civil society and emerging political forces; the need for real changes was irrepressible¹⁰. Niger launched its first serious move at a democratic transition as social movements and the global community became progressively assertive. The 1991 National Conference, an important milestone for the entire nation, marked the pinnacle of this process. The first multi-party constitution was drafted during the meeting, establishing robust democratic institutions and an even more distinct distribution of powers¹¹.

A historic step took place in the elections that followed: in 1993, Mahamane Ousmane, the first democratically elected president of Niger, was backed by a coalition of parties, including Mahamadou Issoufou's Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme (PNDS-Tarayya). The recently formed, brittle democracy suddenly revealed itself to be weak and unable to maintain stability and guarantee effective management. Intense internal political struggles quickly crippled the government, with inter-party disputes impeding state operations and threatening the legitimacy of the institutions. Meanwhile, unrest with the army had never truly dissipated: although presumably standing on the edges of authority, the military kept exercising substantial influence behind the scenes, jeopardising any possibilities of political stasis. The Tuareg uprisings, which directly challenged the central authority between 1991 and 1995, exacerbated the circumstances. Since they perceived left out of the social order, these tribes engaged in violence to press for greater autonomy and acknowledgement of their rights. As a means to guarantee the

⁹ University of Central Arkansas. (n.d.). *Niger (1960-present)*. DADM Project. Retrieved from <https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/sub-saharan-africa-region/niger-1960-present/>

¹⁰ Storia In. (n.d.). Niger: Il difficile percorso verso la stabilità. Retrieved from <https://www.storiain.net/storia/niger-il-difficile-percorso-verso-la-stabilita/>

¹¹ Ibidem

Tuaregs' participation in state organisations and development projects in the Northern regions, a reconciliation accords were reached in 1995 afterwards years of war and negotiations¹². On the other hand, most of the pledges made were hardly observed, which stoked animosity and prevented the resolution of lots of the dispute's root causes.

A military overthrow in 1996 proclaimed the end of this brief period of real public sovereignty and the return to tyranny. Colonel Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara coordinated the operation. After taking the helm, he employed opposition repression and electoral fraud to reinforce his hold on power. However, his stint in power was truncated since the leader was assassinated by his own presidential guard in 1999, laying ahead for a new geopolitical revolution in Niger¹³. In the decades that followed, Mamadou Tandja gained notoriety and worked towards restoring stability again to the country by implementing more inclusive governance.

Hence, a subsequent period witnessed the rise of Mamadou Tandja, who strove to civilise the country with more comprehensive governing. Thereafter, his authoritarian aspirations led to a backlash in 2009, when he tried to amend the constitution to prolong his mandate. His action provoked massive strikes, suppression and ultimately another coup d'état in 2010, masterminded by General Salou Djibo, who established a transitional governorship, the umpteenth twist in the country's tumultuous political journey¹⁴.

The global community pushed for a return to democracy, and elections were called in 2011 that brought Mahamadou Issoufou, leader of the Niger Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS) and re-elected in 2016, to the presidency. He tried to consolidate democracy and promote Niger's economic flourishing, at the same time his leadership faced significant threats, including the jihadist menace, the migration crisis and financial dependence on France and international aids. His government programme, commonly known as 'Renaissance', aimed to revitalise the country through reforms in several key fields: governance, security, economy and infrastructure¹⁵.

¹² Ibidem

¹³ University of Central Arkansas. (n.d.). *Niger (1960-present)*. DADM Project. Retrieved from <https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/sub-saharan-africa-region/niger-1960-present/>

¹⁴ Storia In. (n.d.). Niger: Il difficile percorso verso la stabilità. Retrieved from <https://www.storiain.net/storia/niger-il-difficile-percorso-verso-la-stabilita/>

¹⁵ Ibidem

Issoufou placed emphasis on diversifying the economy to reduce Niger's reliance on uranium exports, which accounted for a large share of state revenues. His policy pursued attracting foreign investments, particularly from China, to develop the mining and oil sectors. However, volatile commodity prices and the persistent influence of France hampered Nigerian potential to gain a real sense of economic autonomy. Regarding infrastructure, the government has embarked on projects to enhance road and communication networks, though a shortage of funds made it hard to implement many of these efforts¹⁶. Moreover, widespread poverty and security concerns complicated progress towards improving the living conditions of the population, with Niger still being one of the countries with the lowest human development index in the world.

Under his presidency, Niger turned into a strategic hub for cross-border counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel. The country faced increasing threats from jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, operating in the South-east near Lake Chad, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)¹⁷ and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)¹⁸, active in the North and West of the land¹⁹. In response to these events, the government adopted a two-pronged strategy: strengthening the capabilities of its armed forces and agreeing to a large external military presence.

Through building partnerships with France and the US, Issoufou enabled it to be feasible for them to set up military bases in Niger. The US established a drone station in Agadez to track and strike terrorist cells in the Sahel, while France boosted its own involvement through Barkhane Operation²⁰. Additionally, Niger participated in the G5 Sahel²¹

¹⁶ Ibidem

¹⁷ AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb): A jihadist militant organisation affiliated with Al-Qaeda, born in 2007 from the conversion of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Operating mainly in the Maghreb and Sahel, AQIM mixes terrorist activities with illicit trafficking (arms, drugs, kidnappings for ransom), with the goal of instituting an Islamic State and fighting Western and governmental presences in the region.

¹⁸ ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara): A jihadist group associated with the Islamic State, founded in 2015 by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi as a split from Al-Mourabitoun. Active in the border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, ISGS is responsible for several attacks against civilians, local forces and international missions, distinguishing itself by extreme violence and a destabilising role in the heart of the Sahel.

¹⁹ Storia In. (n.d.). Niger: Il difficile percorso verso la stabilità. Retrieved from <https://www.storiain.net/storia/niger-il-difficile-percorso-verso-la-stabilita>

²⁰ Operation Barkhane: French military intervention started in August 2014 from its base of N'Djamena, Chad, as a follow-up on operations Serval (in Mali) and Épervier (in Chad). The objective of the mission was to confront the threat posed by the jihadists in the Sahel region, i.e. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad, through providing military support to the regional forces, keeping territories and dismantling armed formations. Coordinated with international partners and regional initiatives such as the G5 Sahel, Barkhane was for years the centrepiece of the French counter-terrorism presence in West Africa, before being progressively downsized and officially ended in 2022, also following the decline of relations with local militia juntas.

²¹ G5 Sahel: A regional effort established in 2014 and formalised in 2017 with the foundation of a joint counter-terrorism force (FC-G5S), the G5 Sahel brings together five West African countries - Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger - with the aim of coordinating policies on security, development and counter-terrorism. Endorsed by international partners such as France, the EU and the UN, the G5 Sahel

coalition, an initiative with Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Chad to coordinate the fight against terrorism²². Despite these endeavours, all military operations failed to arrest jihadist aggression, and the country suffered fatal attacks. Furthermore, the population began perceiving the foreign presence as an erosion of national sovereignty, increasing discontent with the government.

During these years, Niger has become a central node in the migration routes to Europe. To stem the flow of irregular migrants to Libya and then to the Mediterranean, the government signed agreements with the European Union in exchange for economic aid. In 2015, a law regarding human trafficking prompted to the closure of many migratory routes, significantly reducing the number of individuals entering the country²³. Nonetheless, this approach caused economic repercussions for local communities which had relied on the migrant transit economy for decades.

The subsequent democratic election of Mohamed Bazoum as his successor in 2021 ensured a peaceful transition because Issoufou was the first president of Niger to resign voluntarily after two terms. Bazoum carried on his plan of strong cooperation with Western forces, especially France and the United States. However, his government soon faced growing internal opposition, which involved not only the opposition political parties, but also the armed forces themselves. One of the main factors of tension was his anti-corruption policy, which aimed to limit malpractices within the army and reduce the opportunities for enrichment for some senior officers. Such an attempt to reform aroused strong resistance among the military elites, who saw their established privileges endangered. The tactics used by Bazoum to combat the terroristic insurgency was a second crucial component. In an effort to lessen the severity of the violence while rendering easier for some fighters to reintegrate, the president sought to implement an integrated strategy that combined military operations with dialogue attempts including some armed factions²⁴. However, this policy was met with mistrust by a substantial part

sought to strengthen cross-border collaboration against armed groups active in the Sahel. Nevertheless, inner political tensions, logistical shortcomings and Mali's withdrawal in 2022 have compromised its operational effectiveness and political cohesion.

²² Storia In. (n.d.). Niger: Il difficile percorso verso la stabilità. Retrieved from <https://www.storiain.net/storia/niger-il-difficile-percorso-verso-la-stabilita>

²³ Philippe M. Frowd (2022) Borderwork Creep in West Africa's Sahel, *Geopolitics*, 27:5, 1331-1351, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2021.1901082

²⁴ Storia In. (n.d.). Niger: Il difficile percorso verso la stabilità. Retrieved from <https://www.storiain.net/storia/niger-il-difficile-percorso-verso-la-stabilita/>

of the army, which interpreted it as a symptom of weakness and a potential threat to national security.

Finally, the heavy reliance on Western powers in the administration of the regional security fostered widespread unrest. A multitude of people perceived Bazoum's move to bring back French troops, which had been ousted from Mal, as a violation of national sovereignty. Consequently, the coup of 2023 was made possible by Niger's decision to remain the sole Sahelian nation to continue active military collaboration with Paris in the face of escalating this anti-French sentiment in the area. This decision exacerbated institutional tensions within the territory. The situation blew up in July of that year, when General Abdourahamane Tiani, the head of the Presidential Guard, led an operation that at first glance appeared to be a mutiny but swiftly evolved into a coup d'état²⁵. This suggests that the overthrow was precipitated not only by rivalries between elites but also by an abundance of dissatisfaction among the populace and military over recent political decisions. Tiani and his supporters justified the takeover with the necessity to rectify the counterinsurgency policy and restore statehood by expelling the French troops. This message found fertile ground among many officers and the population, strengthening the position of the military junta, which formed the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland²⁶ (CNSP).

As a consequence of the recent coup d'état, Niger pursued a policy of rupture with France and several Western partners, excluding Italy, gradually aligning itself with new international players such as Russia and China²⁷. This geopolitical reshuffle, however, has placed the country in an extremely sensitive position.

The ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) reacted by imposing severe economic sanctions, reducing access to external financing and aggravating an already ongoing food and financial crisis²⁸. Meanwhile, the jihadist threats continue to be a serious issue: terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State operate

²⁵ Ibidem

²⁶ McCullough, A., & Sandor, A. (2023). How a mutiny became a(nother) coup: The politics of counterinsurgency and international military partnerships in Niger. *African Affairs*, 122(489), 587-601. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adad034>

²⁷ Storia In. (n.d.). Niger: Il difficile percorso verso la stabilità. Retrieved from <https://www.storiain.net/storia/niger-il-difficile-percorso-verso-la-stabilita/>

²⁸ International Crisis Group. (2023, December 5). ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger coup: Sanctions: Time to recalibrate. International Crisis Group. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/niger/ecowas-nigeria-and-niger-coup-sanctions-time-recalibrate>

undisturbed in the Northern and Western regions, benefiting from the institutional vacuum and the precariousness of the military government. In terms of the economy, Niger remains highly vulnerable, given its dependence on uranium exports and international remittances.

Challenges in diversifying Niger's economy, combined with the blocking of external aid, risk further exacerbating the already fragile domestic situation. The country's future prospects have become even more uncertain after the current ruling military junta, during the National Conference for the Re-founding of Niger held in the capital last February, secured itself a minimum of 60 additional months in power. As part of this process, the junta decided to dissolve existing political parties, draft a new law to regulate party activities, and develop a new constitution 'adapted to the country's socio-cultural values', which will replace the one repealed after the coup²⁹.

1.2 Security threats: terrorism and transnational crime

A convergence of historical and geopolitical factors has turned the Sahel into an epicenter of instability, resulting in the expansion of jihadist terrorism in Niger. State fragility, high economic marginalisation, and the proliferation of illicit trafficking have facilitated the transit of weapons and militiamen, and the financing of terrorism through kidnappings for ransom. AQMI has exploited domestic criminal nets to bolster its logistics, connecting jihadism and organised crime. In the territories under its influence, AQMI has replaced state authority, providing basic services to the population and gaining the support of some marginalised local communities, particularly among the Tuareg and Peul³⁰.

Moreover, the meddling of exogenous players has made the region a breeding ground for jihadist infiltration. Radicalisation in Niger was accelerated by both Algerian and Libyan crisis, the Boko Haram uprising and the rising of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), leading to a context of widespread insecurity³¹. To deeply understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to analyse

²⁹ Redazione Nigrizia. (2024, 5 febbraio). Niger, transizione prorogata per altri cinque anni. Nigrizia. <https://www.nigrizia.it/notizia/niger-transizione-prorogata-per-altri-cinque-anni>

³⁰ Venturi, B., & Touré, N. A. (2020). Out of the Security Deadlock: Challenges and Choices in the Sahel. FEPS-IAI-NDI

³¹ Okon, E. N., Ojokrotu, V., & Ebegbulem, J. C. (2023). The Securitisation of Sahel: Issues and Challenges. *Journal of African Union Studies*, 12(3), 83-103

the genesis of jihadism in the Sahel, its expansion in Niger and the current challenges facing the country.

Given the gradual shift from Sufi brotherhoods to the creation of Salafism-Wahhabism, religious conversion has indeed been a major factor in the diffusion of jihadism in the Sahel. The profound influence of Sufi tariqas, such the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya, which have been essential to social cohesion and local governance, has historically defined Islam in the region. However, from the 1930s onwards, with increasing contacts between the Sahelian faithful and Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism began to spread among young Muslims, mainly through students returning from Mecca after pilgrimage. The development of air transport in the 1950s and 1960s facilitated access to Mecca and intensified relations with the stricter currents of Islam. Before long, merchants and travelers began to convert to Wahhabism, seeing it as a 'purer' religious ideology than Sufism, which was seen as associated with syncretic practices and oppressive social hierarchies. The latter had a radical effect on the Sahel's religious structures, leading to the side-lining of Sufi brotherhoods and fostering the emergence of a new, more extremist religious class³².

Hence, Wahhabism also became a vehicle for political opposition to secular and pro-Western regimes in the region during the 1970s. In Mali, for instance, the secularisation desired by President Modibo Keita in 1961 led to the repression of all forms of religious activism in the public space, prompting Salafists to radicalise and support resistance campaigns against the regime. The establishment of AMUPI (Association Malienne pour l'Unité et le Progrès de l'Islam) during the Moussa Traoré administration in the 1980s gave Salafism formal approval and increased its social influence³³. As the state declined, Islamic organisations proceeded to assume the role of the government in delivering essential services like healthcare and education, thereby rendering it easier for extreme ideology to flourish.

In the Sahel, the origin of jihadist terrorism has its roots in the Algerian civil war (1991-2002). The Algerian government's resolution to annul the 1991 elections, which would

³² Dentice, G. (2018). Terrorism in the Sahel Region: An evolving threat on Europe's doorstep. EuroMeSCo (No. 80). European Institute of the Mediterranean. Retrieved from <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/terrorism-in-the-sahel-region-an-evolving-threat-on-europes-doorstep/>

³³ Ibidem

have seen the success of the Front Islamique du Salut – Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), provoked the violent reaction of the Groupe Islamique Armé – Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which waged a terrorist propaganda against the state. In response to the GIA's cruelty, a dissident group named the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédiction et le Combat – Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) was formed. This group took a more targeted strategy, focusing on attacks on Algerian armed forces. The GSPC affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2006 afterwards joining Al-Qaeda³⁴. As the Algerian military's pressure mounted, AQIM progressively switched its operations to the Sahel, profiting of the region's weak regimes to expand its authority.

The collapse of Libya in 2011 was also a determining factor in the diffusion of jihadism in Niger, which led to a massive influx of weapons and fighters into the region. After the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, numerous Libyan militias, largely composed of mercenary Tuaregs, poured into Mali and Northern Niger, bringing with them an advanced defence arsenal. The result has enhanced terrorist organizations' potential to conduct attacks and added to the fragility of the Sahelian region. Furthermore, the breakdown of the Libyan government has allowed accessible for the trafficking of weapons and drugs to thrive, enabling terrorist organizations active in Niger additional sources of funding³⁵.

In 2012, the crisis in Mali marked a watershed with the occupation of the North of the country by AQIM, Ansar Dine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). The alliance between jihadists and Tuareg separatists of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)³⁶ allowed the rapid advance of Islamist forces, which imposed Shari'a in the towns under their control. However, in 2013, the French military intervention with Serval Operation³⁷ dispersed the jihadist forces, which

³⁴ OECD/SWAC. (2014). *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security*. OECD Publishing. pp. 174-216. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264222359-en>

³⁵ Idris, A., & Tutumlu, A. (2022). Nigeria and Niger Republic Trans-border Management Against Arms Trafficking: A Whistleblowing Model. *Security Journal*, 35: 948-965. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-021-00307-0>

³⁶ MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad): A Tuareg political-military group formed in 2011, the MNLA led the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali, claiming the independence of Azawad, a vast desert region historically inhabited by Tuareg tribes and marginalised by the central government. Initially allied with jihadist groups to fight the Malian army, the MNLA later disassociated itself from it, reaffirming its secular and nationalist nature. After the loss of territorial control following the Franco-African intervention, the movement assumed a central role in the 2015 Algiers peace negotiations, while continuing to exert political and military influence in northern Mali in a scenario marred by instability and frequent conflicts.

³⁷ Operation Serval: French military mission launched in January 2013 at the Mali government's demand to stop the advance of armed jihadist networks that had occupied the North of the country and were threatening the capital Bamako. The operation quickly recaptured the main Northern towns (such as Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal) due to the joint intervention of French and Malian forces. Regarded as an initial military success, Serval laid the foundations for the implementation of later international missions, but also highlighted the limits of lasting stabilisation. In 2014, it was integrated into Operation Barkhane, with a wider regional reach.

redeployed to the South of the Sahel, with Niger emerging as one of the main targets of their offensive³⁸.

Concurrently, Niger faced the expansion of Boko Haram, a jihadist group born in Nigeria in 2002 and radicalised in 2009 under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. Since 2014, Boko Haram has been pounding the Diffa region in Southeast Niger through a series of devastating assaults. The network's strategy was based on mass hostage-taking, the use of suicide bombers and the destruction of state facilities³⁹. Radicalisation has also propagated through Koranic schools, which Boko Haram has exploited to recruit susceptible youth and inculcate its ideologies⁴. Even though Niger began cooperating with Chad and Nigeria to prevent the group's expansion, Boko Haram persisted in adopting guerrilla warfare, which made it challenging to eradicate⁴⁰. The emergence of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in 2015, which was founded by MUJAO alumnus Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, posed a further risk.

Considering limited military deployments and an intense reliance on external assistance, the Nigerien government's response has often been ineffectual. Despite Niger's significant involvement in the G5 Sahel's activities, which are part of a regional coalition to combat terrorism, progress has been hindered by the security forces' inadequacy of resources and corruption. However, the French strategy with Operation Barkhane has had a meaningful impact in the struggle against jihadism, on the other hand, the recent withdrawal of French soldiers has left the country even more exposed to terrorist outrages⁴¹. The present situation in Niger is extremely convoluted. At the same time, due to an insufficient and unequipped army, the Niger government is fighting ISGS in the West and Boko Haram. Furthermore, mass protests, including the 2023 coup d'état, have made it tougher for the government to prevail over the Islamic menace. Besides, the progressive withdrawal of the European presence is leaving a vacuum which Russia and China are seeking to fill,

³⁸ Idris, A., & Tutumlu, A. (2022). Nigeria and Niger Republic Trans-border Management Against Arms Trafficking: A Whistleblowing Model. *Security Journal*, 35: 948-965. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-021-00307-0>

³⁹ Adeleke Gbadebo Fatai, Lawal Musediq Olufemi, Ajayi Oluwagbemiga Oluwaseun & Ayantunji Isola Oyelekan (2023) Temporary paramilitary volunteers at Nigeria's Chad and Niger borders: A source of recruitment for Boko Haram, *African Security Review*, 32:1, 3-19, DOI: 10.1080/10246029.2022.2125329

⁴⁰ Umate, M. D. (2023). The Evolution of an Islamic Jihadist Group, the Jama'tul Ahlus-sunna lidda'awati wal jihad, Boko Haram: From local terrorism to an Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP). Niger Basin Authority. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376398240_The_Evolution_of_an_Islamic_Jihadist_Group_the_Jama%27tul_Ahlus-sunna_lidda%27awati_wal_jihad_Boko_Haram_from_local_terrorism_to_an_Islamic_State_in_the_West_African_Province_ISWAP

⁴¹ Venturi, B., & Touré, N. A. (2020). Out of the Security Deadlock: Challenges and Choices in the Sahel. FEPS-IAI-NDI

running the risk of altering the regional geopolitical balance still more without fixing the causes of the issue⁴².

A comprehensive plan encompassing military action, economic growth, and better governance is needed for Niger. Boosting the security forces is vital, nevertheless it is not enough. Investments in education and social services are required to enhance the quality of life for the local population and lower the amount of aspiring jihadist recruits. Unless a bold, future-oriented strategy is not set up, Niger could end itself trapped in a terrible downward spiral of instability and fear. Merely a holistic tactical commitment will ensure the country's sustainability, as jihadism in the Sahel is still an unpredictable phenomenon.

1.3 Foreign actors and strategies of intervention in Niger

During the past few years, there have been many international actors involved in the security of the Sahel, such as the United Nations with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA)⁴³ and the European Union Training Mission, both in Mali, as well as the two EUCAP Sahel missions (European Union Capacity Building Mission)⁴⁴, which have aimed to strengthen regional stability through militia training and logistical support. Still, the greatest role was played initially by France with the Operation Serval (2013) and later the Operation Barkhane (2014). The stated aim was to counter the jihadist menace and promote an equilibrium, but over time the French military presence gained more and more controversy, provoking resistance from local populations and Sahelian governments, who perceived it as neo-colonial interference. These ongoing political tensions reached a climax in 2023 with the

⁴² Okoli, A. C. (2024). The State and Complex Threat Syndrome in the Sahel: Conflict, Crime, and Terror. *Society*, 61(4), 479–488. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-024-01021-4>

⁴³ MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali): United Nations peace mission established in 2013 by Security Council Resolution 2100 to normalise Mali after the conflict of 2012, assist in the enforcement of the Algiers Peace Accord, defend civilians and facilitate re-establishment of state control over the Northern part of the country. Deployed in a highly unstable and hostile context, MINUSMA has become one of the riskiest UN missions across the world, suffering several attacks from jihadist forces. The operation was downsized progressively and officially concluded in 2023, at the request of the ruling military junta in Bamako.

⁴⁴ EUCAP Sahel: European Union civilian missions established under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), targeted at building the operational and strategic capabilities of homeland security forces in Sahel countries. Active in Niger (since 2012) and Mali (since 2014), the EUCAP missions provide training, advice and technical assistance to the police, gendarmerie and national guard, with the aim of improving territorial surveillance, border management and the response to the terrorist threat and transnational crime. By working in areas characterised by institutional weakness and increasing insecurity, the missions have faced substantial difficulties, especially following the erosion of relations between local governments and Western counterparts.

removal of French troops from Niger following a military coup d'état⁴⁵. Thereafter, Paris's withdrawal indicated the bankruptcy of an approach based solely on the militarisation of homeland security, devoid of a proper commitment to territorial development and administration.

Also, the United States had invested in the defence of the Sahel, mainly in Niger through the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP)⁴⁶ and the installation of advanced military facilities, including Air Base 201 in Agadez, a key centre for drone surveillance operations and intelligence gathering⁴⁷. Nevertheless, Nigerien new policy, becoming progressively independent and critical of Western forces, is questioning the future of cooperation with Washington. Moreover, the strategic competition with Russia, the changing priorities of the new US administration, and the growing hostility of the locals are complicating the American role in the Sahel even further.

As well, the EU has undertaken choices to support national security endeavours, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force's operational support and the EUCAP Sahel Niger mission, which aims to train national security forces⁴⁸. In contrast, the EU's reputation has been seriously damaged by its incompetence to reduce political ambiguity and cease the proliferation of terrorist organisations. On the other hand, the Russian presence, through their African corps, ⁴⁹raises concerns regarding human rights violations and the long-term sustainability of the military support offered.

Consequently, the Wagner Group, which is widely recognised for its involvement in offensives in Mali and the Central African Republic, may be present as the nation strengthens its ties with Russia⁵⁰. As an alternative to former colonial powers in the throes

⁴⁵ Carbone, G., & Casola, C. (Eds.). (2022). *Sahel: 10 years of instability. Local, regional and international dynamics*. Ledizioni LediPublishing. <https://doi.org/10.14672/55267823>

⁴⁶ TSCTP (Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership): A US-led strategic initiative launched in 2005 to bolster the counterterrorism capacities of countries in the Sahel and North Africa, while promoting regional stability. The programme blends military aid, civil cooperation, institutional development and radicalisation prevention agendas, with the purpose of supporting partner governments in addressing the threats posed by extremist groups such as AQIM and ISIS. Being active in states such as Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso, the TSCTP has been a core tool of the US counter-terrorism policy in sub-Saharan Africa, although it has received criticism for being too unbalanced on the security dimension compared to the socio-economic one.

⁴⁷ Idahosa, S. O. (2024). *Foreign Powers and Counter-Terrorism Operations in the Sahel Region*. E-International Relations. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/2024/06/17/foreign-powers-and-counter-terrorism-operations-in-the-sahel-region/>

⁴⁸ EUCAP Sahel Niger. (2019). *EUCAP Sahel Niger: General Factsheet*. European Union External Action. Retrieved from <https://www.eucap-sahel.eu>

⁴⁹ Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica. (2025). *Relazione annuale sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza 2025*. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri - Dipartimento delle informazioni per la sicurezza (DIS)

⁵⁰ Marie Sandnes (2022): *The relationship between the G5 Sahel Joint Force and external actors: a discursive interpretation*, Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue

of a diplomatic crisis with the West, Moscow is attempting to broaden its grip in the Sahel, marking a dramatic shift in the continental equations.

Italy, in the first instance, had participated in Task Force Takuba⁵¹, a French-led combat multinational initiative to support the Sahelian forces. With a component of about 250 units and six helicopters, the Italian mission focused on medical evacuation operation and logistical support (MEDEVAC), acting together with the command of Task Force Jacana⁵². In the utmost few years, it has distinguished itself as the only European country with a relevant and collaborative presence in Niger through the Bilateral Support Mission in Niger (MISIN)⁵³. Since 2018, the mission has carried out education, training and advisory activities for the Niger Defence and Security Forces, with over 392 courses and 10,400 participants⁵⁴. Besides the defence component, Italy delivered 59 civil-military cooperation projects in the health, education, food and infrastructure sectors, demonstrating an integrated and less militarised outlook compared to previous international actors⁵⁵. This model would be a possible lasting solution to the failed strategies employed by other Western players, enhancing the Italian role in the securing of the Sahel. The Italian involvement has been reinforced by Niger's willingness to maintain a constructive dialogue with Rome, especially in a period of increasing distance from its traditional European partners.

Turkey has reinforced its leverage by selling Bayraktar TB2 drones and military training programmes, consolidating its ties with Sahelian governments seeking replacements for

canadienne des études africaines, DOI: 10.1080/00083968.2022.2058572

⁵¹ Task Force Takuba: European military intervention initiated in 2020 at the instigation of France, with the aim of supporting the Malian armed forces in the struggle against jihadist groups in the Sahel, especially in Liptako-Gourma, on the border between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Composed of special forces from several European countries (including Sweden, Estonia, Italy and the Czech Republic), Takuba operated in close coordination with Operation Barkhane and the local authorities, providing training, advice and operational assistance. Although there was a high level of cooperation between European partners, the mission was gradually dismantled after the breakdown of relations between the Malian military junta and Western countries, with an official closure in 2022.

⁵² Task Force Jacana: British Army mission deployed in 2020 as the British contribution to the stabilisation of Mali as part of the UN mission MINUSMA. Staffed by around 300 soldiers from the British Armed Forces, Task Force Jacana specialised in long-range reconnaissance, intelligence gathering and civilian protection support operations in the most troubled parts of the country's north. The operation constituted the UK's most meaningful operational commitment in Africa in decades. Due to worsening relations with the Malian military junta and the increasing presence of non-Western actors, such as the Wagner Group, the UK withdrew its troops and officially ended the mission in 2023.

⁵³ MISIN (Bilateral Support Mission in the Republic of Niger): an Italian mission started in 2018 with the aim of lending support to the Nigerien authorities in monitoring the terrain and combating trafficking, terrorism and organised crime. By providing training, assistance and training to local armed and security forces, MISIN constitutes Italy's main tool to contribute to the stability of the Sahel, operating in coordination with European and international initiatives in the region.

⁵⁴ Ministero della Difesa. (2022). Documento Programmatico Pluriennale della Difesa per il triennio 2022-2024. Retrieved from https://www.difesa.it/Content/Documents/DPP_2022-2024.pdf

⁵⁵ Venturi, B. (2022). The EU's Diplomatic Engagement in the Sahel. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI Papers 22|08). Retrieved from <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eus-diplomatic-engagement-sahel>

Western suppliers⁵⁶. Conversely, China keeps a more discrete policy approach, focusing on infrastructural investments and the protection of its economic interests, especially in mineral resources and regional development ventures⁵⁷.

For a long time, Niger has been considered a pillar of regional securisation, hosting international bases and coordinating operations with external actors. Actually, the coup d'état of 2023 overturned the balance, with the renewed junta ousting French troops and redefining relations with the West. This transition highlighted the growing sentiment of national sovereignty, and the rejection of security perceived as imposed from outside, prompting Niger to explore new potential alliances.

As a result, the EU proved unable to build an autonomous and sustainable security framework for Niger, intensifying resentment towards the Western presence. Moreover, Niger has played a key role in the G5 Sahel, a joint initiative with Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Mauritania that was established in 2014 with the purpose of stepping up regional cooperation against terrorism and cross-border threats⁵⁸. The G5 Sahel, supported financially and logistically by the European Union, France and the United States, attempted to erect an integrated security umbrella among the five member countries. They established a combined force of around 5,000 troops, deployed on the critical borders of the Liptako-Gourma region and along the Niger-Chad. Regarding its achievements, the G5 Sahel enabled better coordination between national security authorities and conducted targeted operations against terrorist groups such as ISGS and JNIM⁵⁹. However, continuous jihadist assaults, inadequate financing for equipping and insufficient inter-state collaboration have undermined its effectiveness. Unfortunately, the deterioration of confidence, the ineffectiveness of these initiatives and the reliance on external funds have limited the joint force's operational capability, ultimately leading to

⁵⁶ TASAM. (2024). 7th Türkiye-Africa Defense, Security and Space Forum Declaration. Turkish Asian Center for Strategic Studies (TASAM). Retrieved from https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/73732/7th_turkiye-africa_defense_security_i_declaration

⁵⁷ Alessandri, E., & Mardell, J. (2018). China's expanding security footprint in Africa: From arms transfers to military cooperation. ISPI - Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale. Retrieved from <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/chinas-expanding-security-footprint-in-africa-from-arms-transfers-to-military-cooperation-184841>

⁵⁸ EUCAP Sahel Niger. (2019). EUCAP Sahel Niger: General Factsheet. European Union External Action. Retrieved from <https://www.eucap-sahel.eu>

⁵⁹ Marie Sandnes (2022): The relationship between the G5 Sahel Joint Force and external actors: a discursive interpretation, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, DOI: 10.1080/00083968.2022.2058572

the gradual disengagement of some member countries, with Niger formally dropping out in 2023.

Niger's decision to withdraw the G5 Sahel mirrors its gradual disenchantment with multilateral structures dominated by Western involvement, favouring instead new regional alliances such as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which proposes to build a more autonomous security and detachment from traditional partners.

In September 2023, with the aim of withdrawing from ECOWAS, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a political and military-oriented organization created to enhance their cooperation and address threats to state sovereignty. Such an alliance fits into a broader framework of redefining relations with international powers, marking a turning point in the self-management of security in the area. The AES constitutes an alternative to the G5 Sahel, criticised for its dependence on Western subsidies and weak operational reliability. The establishment of a joint army between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso suggests an autonomous defence strategy with less external interference⁶⁰. However, the main challenge for this new alliance will be to obtain adequate assets to preserve internal stability without backing from the West.

Regardless, credit must be given for the fact the operations conducted by the Niger security forces, with external support, led to the removal of leading figures in regional terrorist networks, such as: Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, Iyad Ag Ghaly, Amadou Koufa and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi⁶¹. However, these accomplishments were not reflected in a substantial reduction of jihadist activities, which adapted to the increasing military strain. Despite criticism of Western cooperation, Nigerien troops have benefited from training programmes that enhanced their operational abilities. With MISIN, Italy has been instrumental in this process, guaranteeing sustainable and locally tailored training.

All these new security units have improved Niger's monitoring and border protection capabilities, reducing arms trafficking and the movement of terrorist groups. They have

⁶⁰ Idahosa, S. O. (2024). Foreign Powers and Counter-Terrorism Operations in the Sahel Region. E-International Relations. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/2024/06/17/foreign-powers-and-counter-terrorism-operations-in-the-sahel-region/>

⁶¹ Istituto Analisi Relazioni Internazionali (IARI). (2024, September 13). La Confederazione degli Stati del Sahel: Quali scenari per la sicurezza? Retrieved from <https://iari.site/2024/09/13/la-confederazione-degli-stati-del-sahel-quali-scenari-per-la-sicurezza/>

been endowed with sophisticated technology for surveillance, reconnaissance drones and mobile patrols to ensure constant vigilance in the highly vulnerable areas. Cooperation with local forces has also allowed them to enhance their rapid response ability in case of imminent threats, resulting in shorter intervention time in high-risk zones⁶². However, the long-term sustainability of these units depends on the availability of financial resources and continuous support in the training of the personnel.

As shown on the Image 1.0, Niger experienced an increase in jihadist violence in 2024, with the number of attacks rising to 101 from 62 the previous year, despite international efforts. The number of deaths is almost than doubled from 930 in 2024 to 479 in 2023, showing a significant escalation in the lethality of these assaults. The Tahoua region, near the Mali border, experienced the worst offensive of 2024 in Niger, with over 300 gunmen killing 237 soldiers. Although the region is widely recognised for the presence of jihadist entities, nobody is yet to take credit for what happened. The event was also the deadliest of 2024 on a worldwide scale. Nonetheless, the zone with the highest level of terrorist activity continued to be Tillabéri. The Islamist insurgency in the central Sahel has caused a significant impact on this region, which is located in the precarious frontier triangle between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger⁶³.

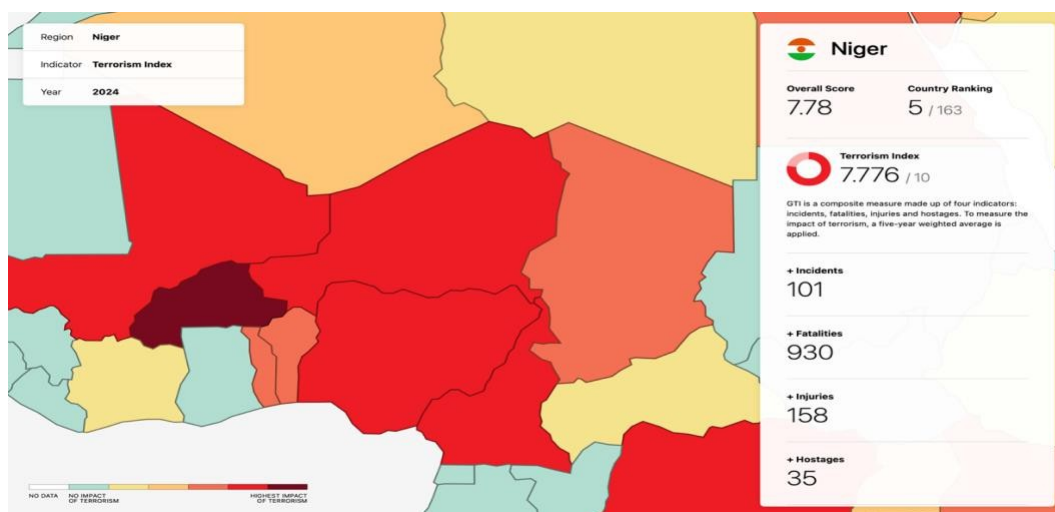


Image 1.0: “Terrorism Index in Niger in 2024: Impact and geographical distribution of terrorists’ attacks”.

Source: Institute for Economics & Peace (2024), Vision of Humanity.

⁶² Önal, B., & Oumar, M. H. (2021). Policies and security strategies of G5 Sahel states against terrorism. *International Journal of Politics and Security*, 3(3), 203-229. <https://doi.org/10.53451/ijps.901334>

⁶³ Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring The Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney, March 2025. Available from: <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources> (accessed 7/03/2025)

Both Niger and the Sahel persist as an arena of competition between Western powers and new actors such as Russia, China and Turkey. The evidence of these last few years proves that external armed interventions have not been sufficient to guarantee stability, and the rejection of Western missions suggests a paradigm shift in the management of regional security.

1.4 Niger as a “transit state” and implications

Nowadays, aside from its geographical position, Niger serves as one of the principle places of passage for African migrants to Europe, turning it into a crucial transit state, which is also the result of a process of discursive co-production in which the Nigerien authorities, the European Union and INGOs such as the IOM (International Organisation for Migration), have steadily consolidated this label, transforming it into a political device functional to containment strategies⁶⁴. It has recorded a dramatic increase in migration flows, especially in 2011, following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime and the crisis in Mali. It is estimated that more than 330,000 migrants crossed the country in 2016, with a significant negative impact on local economies and social equilibria⁶⁵. As illustrated by the Image 1.2, under European pressure, the Nigerien government has implemented restrictive measures to contain illicit migration, radically changing border management and domestic security⁶⁶, given the persistent seasonal and circular movements to neighbouring nations, such as Nigeria and Algeria.

⁶⁴ Brot für die Welt & Misereor. (2023). Country brief on EU-migration partnership with Niger. Retrieved from <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de>

⁶⁵ Migrants & Refugees Section - Vatican. (2020). Migration Profile: Niger - 2020 Country Profile. Migrants & Refugees Section, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Vatican. Retrieved from <https://migrants-refugees.va>

⁶⁶ Philippe M. Frowd (2020) Producing the 'transit' migration state: international security intervention in Niger, *Third World Quarterly*, 41:2, 340-358, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1660633

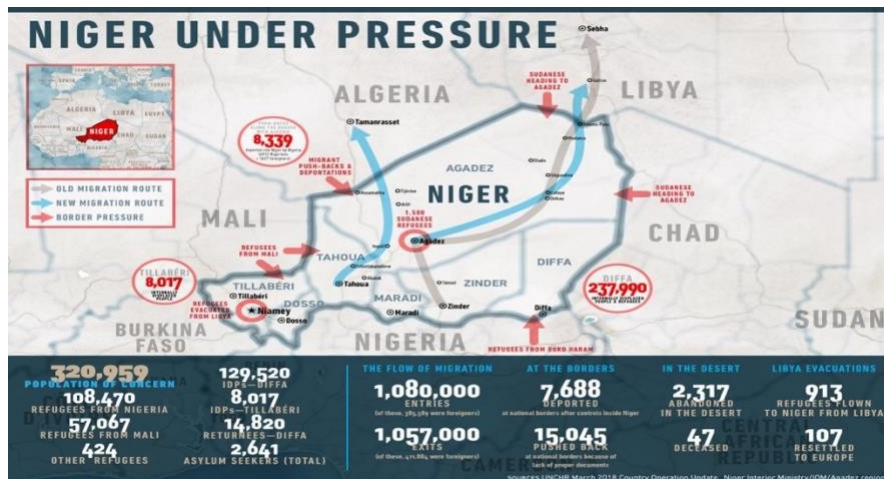


Image 1.2: “Map of migration routes and boarder pressure in Niger.”

Source: UNHCR (2018). Country Operation Update. Niger Interior Ministry/IOM/Agadez region, reproduced by The New Humanitarian (2018), Niger under pressure: Migration routes and border management. Retrieved from <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/articles/2018/05/22/niger-europes-migration-laboratory>

Therefore, it was specifically the EU which supported and financed the enactment of law 2015-36 by the Nigerien authorities, sanctioning the criminalisation of migrant smuggling and related financial assets. By means of the latter, a whole industry was dismantled, and migratory flows were forced to divert towards clandestine and dangerous routes⁶⁷. Unfortunately, this has proved an additional normative failure, as it has generated a surge in local unemployment, especially in the Agadez region, where many former *passeurs* ((i.e. smugglers) and workers in the sector have lost their sole source of income, being forced to rely on more violent criminal networks, increasing the risk of exploitation, abuse and death in the desert.

In parallel, Niger has signed several bilateral agreements with the EU, Libya and Algeria to counter the phenomenon of human trafficking and facilitate the repatriation of irregular migrants. Nevertheless, such agreements have been criticised for their opacity and the frequent human rights violations suffered by deported migrants, often without any international protection assurance⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ Raineri, L. (2018). Human smuggling across Niger: State-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 56(1), 63-86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X17000520>

⁶⁸ Brot für die Welt & Misereor. (2023). Country brief on EU-migration partnership with Niger. Retrieved from <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de>

Through the missions already discussed in the previous paragraph, the EU invested considerable resources in fortifying Niger's frontiers, during which it trained more than 19,000 security agents between 2012 and 2019. Moreover, within this framework it promoted the creation of Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), which operated in conjunction with Niger police and European forces, culminating in the arrest of over 700 individuals between 2017 and 2022. These programmes have included the delivery of mobile vehicles, drones, surveillance devices and biometric identification tools to monitor and track migratory movements in real-time⁶⁹.

These policies have contributed to a progressive militarisation of the country in relation to migration management, fostering an ongoing overlap between border control strategies and those of countering terrorism and transnational crime. Niger has been portrayed not only as a migration corridor, but as a crossroads of hybrid threats, including arms trafficking, drugs and terrorist infiltration. This narrative has legitimised the adoption of mobile security tools, such as desert patrols and rapid response units – GAR-SI Sahel Project (Group d'Action Rapide - Surveillance Intervention)⁷⁰ – designed to adapt to the fluidity of migration channels and trafficking⁷¹.

Moreover, the aforementioned policies of migration containment have had a worrying side effect for the country: the spread of organised crime and the empowerment of terrorist networks in the region. The closure of traditional migration routes and the collapse of the economy associated with these lingering movements have pushed many former passeurs and unemployed migrants into more lucrative albeit similarly hazardous circuits, such as drug and arms trading and recruitment for jihadist groups⁷².

Currently, crime and terrorist organisations target the Northern Niger regions, particularly Agadez and the borders with Libya, for the corruption. The criminalisation of migration

⁶⁹ Ibidem

⁷⁰ GAR-SI Sahel (Groupes d'Action Rapide - Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel): a project funded by the European Union and initiated in 2017, with the goal of creating mobile, trained and rapidly deployable gendarmerie units in the G5 Sahel countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania). These troops serve to strengthen territorial command and respond to terrorist threats and criminal organisations in border areas, promoting stability and domestic security. The project combines technical cooperation, training and equipment provision, and is carried out in collaboration with European security forces, particularly the Spanish Guardia Civil.

⁷¹ Philippe M. Frowd (2020) Producing the 'transit' migration state: international security intervention in Niger, *Third World Quarterly*, 41:2, 340-358, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1660633

⁷² Migrants & Refugees Section - Vatican. (2020). Migration Profile: Niger - 2020 Country Profile. Migrants & Refugees Section, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Vatican. Retrieved from <https://migrants-refugees.va>

has increased the susceptibility of migrants to human trafficking and exploitative networks, placing women and children at higher risk of abuse and violence⁷³. Besides, the growing instability in the Sahel region, worsened by the presence of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and ISGS, has turned Niger into a breeding ground for jihadists to radicalise even more vulnerable segments of the population, mainly young people deprived of opportunities and confidence in state authorities.

Crime and terrorist organisations often target the Northern Niger regions, particularly Agadez and the Libyan border. The criminalisation of migration has increased the susceptibility of migrants to human trafficking and exploitative networks, placing women and children at higher risk of abuse and violence⁷⁴. Besides, the growing instability in the Sahel region, worsened by the presence of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and ISGS, has turned Niger into a breeding ground for jihadists to radicalise even more vulnerable segments of the population, mainly young people deprived of opportunities and confidence in state authorities⁷⁵.

Niger is now a cornerstone of European management of external migration, particularly in the wake of the 2015 migration crisis when European politicians sought to "externalise" border management through the identification of transit countries on the African continent. Through other schemes—chiefly the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa—Niger has received significant sums of financial support and logistical assistance in an attempt to stem irregular migration. This has meant augmenting security personnel, implementing border surveillance technologies, and criminalizing smuggling channels that had been tolerated or even accepted as part of local economic activity. But whereas these measures have produced short-term results in the closing of borders and reduced flows along traditional channels, they have simultaneously introduced a range of unintended and often damaging consequences⁷⁶.

⁷³ Brot für die Welt & Misereor. (2023). Country brief on EU-migration partnership with Niger. Retrieved from <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de>

⁷⁴ Ibidem

⁷⁵ European Commission. (2023). *EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa – Annual Report 2022*. Brussels. <https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/>

The vulnerability of migrants has been one of the most glaring impacts. By and large, around and in Agadez, long-time nexus of Saharan mobility, criminalisation of erstwhile semi-governed migration corridors has forced migrants onto riskier and more clandestine routes, usually on the behest of traffickers and non-state militias. Instead of deterring migration, these policies have driven it underground, worsening human rights abuses, increasing desert death tolls, and denying migrants access to protection mechanisms⁷⁷. For the majority, the experience has become more expensive and uncertain, but also more violent⁷⁸.

At the same time, local populations that once relied economically on migration economy—through transport, accommodation, commerce, and services—have lost substantial amounts of money. In towns like Agadez, which had as much as 80% of the economy based on migration-related activity, the abrupt criminalisation of such flows has resulted in increasing unemployment and mounting resentment⁷⁹. Other sources of income offered by EU-funded development plans have typically been of poor quality, badly implemented, or otherwise disconnected from local concerns, confirming perceptions of marginalisation⁸⁰.

More generally, these forces have solidified regional patterns of instability. With state security forces having been legitimized and militarized to police migration corridors, typically with dubious accountability, tensions between governments and populations have increased. In addition, the disintegration of informal economic networks has opened up a space for criminal groups and jihadist organizations to expand by offering protection, alternative livelihoods, or ideologically-framed narratives that leverage generalized frustration. Therefore, far from stabilizing the region, EU migration control policies have in some cases catalysed an economic breakdown cycle, political instability, and societal fragmentation⁸¹.

⁷⁷ Brachet, J. (2018). Manufacturing smugglers: From irregular to clandestine mobility in the Sahara. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 676(1), 16–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217751730>

⁷⁸ Tubiana, J., Warin, C., & Saeneen, G. (2018). *Multilateral Damage: The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes*. Clingendael CRU Report. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/multilateral-damage>

⁷⁹ Molenaar, F. (2017). *The paradox of the Agadez economy: Why attempts to curb migration are bound to fail*. Clingendael Institute. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/paradox-agadez-economy>

⁸⁰ Cold-Ravnkilde, S., & Plambech, S. (2015). Europe's militarised border control and its human consequences. *Danish Institute for International Studies*. <https://www.diiis.dk/en/research/europes-militarised-border-control-and-its-human-consequences>

⁸¹ Tubiana, J., Warin, C., & Saeneen, G. (2018). *Multilateral Damage: The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes*. Clingendael CRU Report. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/multilateral-damage>

In this scenario the Niger experience is a grim illustration of the EU's external migration policy contradictions. Seventies-era policies to check flows of migration by securitisation and deterrence have not addressed the root causes of mobility—poverty, conflict, and opportunity—are absent, and have not provided durable alternatives to vulnerable groups of people. Simultaneously, by framing mobility primarily as a risk and not as a complex socio-economic process, these policies have increased vulnerabilities and cut short local resilience in an already fragile Sahelian context⁸².

Looking ahead, it seems imperative to overcome an exclusively securitarian approach, embracing a long-term plan based on structural investments, enhancing social cohesion and building legal opportunities. With a view to becoming a realistic protagonist of a sustainable development and regional stabilisation strategy, Niger should not simply be perceived as an advanced barrier to European security, since it is capable of tackling the profound causes of migration and the Sahelian crisis on its own.

⁸² Brachet, J. (2018). Manufacturing smugglers: From irregular to clandestine mobility in the Sahara. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 676(1), 16–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217751730>

CHAPTER II

ITALY AND NIGER: THE ITALIAN STRATEGIC PROJECTION

2.1 Italy and African security: from diplomatic engagement to military operations

Italy and Africa have an extensive heritage of interaction that dates back to the Roman era, when the Mediterranean served as a bridge rather than a barrier bridging peoples and cultures. Actually, the map (Figure 3.0) shows how Africa was essential to Rome's political, economic, and military systems from the conquest of Carthage in 146 BC until the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476. The Roman occupation of North Africa specially left a deep impression that would subsequently affect the Italian relations with the continent.



Image 2.1: "Zones of influence of Rome and Carthage before and during the Punic Wars."

Source: Romano Impero (2016). Roman Expeditions in Africa. Retrieved

from <https://www.romanoimpero.com/2016/09/spedizioni-romane-in-africa.html>

However, the first main Italian-African contact took place through a succession of struggles: the three Punic Wars (264-146 BC), which ended with the total annihilation of Carthage in 146 BC and the annexation of its territory to the Roman Republic, giving rise to the province of *Africa Proconsularis*, thus re-establishing a new balance of power in the Mediterranean. Today, this wide territory, corresponding to Tunisia, part of Libya and Algeria, soon became one of the richest and most stronghold areas for the Empire. Afterwards, Carthage itself was rebuilt as a Roman colony in 44 BC under Julius Caesar and turned into one of the most prestigious imperial cities. In the second century AD, it rivalled Alexandria as the second most influential Mediterranean urban centre after Rome. It also housed other key population poles such as Leptis Magna and Sabratha, which doubled as leading commercial and administrative clusters⁸³.

Thus, Roman Africa was not only a conquered land but also emerged as the primary supplier of wheat to the Romans. The fertile plains of today's Tunisia, northern Libya and Algeria produced enormous quantities of grain, essential to feed the growing Roman population. North Africa was also a fruitful territory to produce dates, olives, figs, and vines, all of which were marketed across the Empire, as along with grains. As a means to sustain this prosperous agrarian economy, the Roman government-built ports, aqueducts, and roadways as part of their advanced infrastructures. An emblematic case study is the *Fossa Regia*, a boundary line drawn after the break-up of Carthage to separate Romanised territories from areas where local tribes were still present. Moreover, the territory prospered thanks to trade, with the import of gold, ivory and exotic animals from the continent's innermost areas. Leptis Magna, in particular, became a crucial junction for exchanges with the Berber kingdom of the Garamanti, located in present-day Fezzan, Libya⁸⁴.

Latin supplanted Punic and Berber as the most common language, resulting in a significant Romanisation of the continent. African villages, including forums, baths, amphitheatres, and basilicas, were fashioned after the traditional Roman urban design. Numerous of these cities, such Volubilis in Morocco and Dougga in Tunisia, still have

⁸³ Bravo, G. (1992). *Africa, bel suoi d'amore. L'Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

⁸⁴ Ibidem

impressive historical proof. Africa's adoption of Christianity was one of the most important cultural outcomes of Roman authority. By the third century AD, North Africa was already an acclaimed powerhouse of Christian scholarship, and the home of influential thinkers like Tertullian, St. Augustine of Hippo, and Cyprian of Carthage con home. Due to their role as the setting for well-known theological disputes such as the Donatist controversy in the fourth century, these sites were essential to the early Christian community⁸⁵.

Rome was constantly threatened by the inland desert areas, despite the fact that the coastal districts of the African Mediterranean were well established within the Empire. Roman defensive lines and fortifications, like the Limes Tripolitanus, were built to keep stable provinces and nomad-inhabited lands apart for the sake of urban people and commerce. In Africa, the Roman legions served two purposes: they guarded the safety of the highways that supplied food and crushed down the Berber tribes' sporadic uprisings. The reign of the first Emperor of African heritage, Septimius Severus (AD 193-211), who was born in Leptis Magna, portrayed a turning point in this military approach. Under his rule, Roman-African relations peaked: investments in infrastructures were stepped up and many members of the African elites were promoted to senior positions in the imperial bureaucracy⁸⁶.

During the fifth century AD, the decline of the Roman Empire led to a stepwise loss of influence on the continent. In AD 429, the Vandals, a Germanic population led by King Genseric, crossed the Mediterranean from Spain and, in AD 439, conquered Carthage. With this event, they marked the beginning of a Vandal kingdom that destabilised the political and economic order of the area for roughly a century. Subsequently, the Eastern Roman Empire attempted to restore its control with the Byzantine reconquest led by Emperor Justinian in the sixth century AD, but by then an irreversible situation had arisen⁸⁷. Towards the end of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth century, as we see in the first chapter, the Arab-Muslim conquests swept away the remnants of Latin

⁸⁵ Ibidem

⁸⁶ Romanoimpero.com. (2016, 13 settembre). *Spedizioni romane in Africa*. Retrieved from: <https://www.romanoimpero.com/2016/09/spedizioni-romane-in-africa.html>

⁸⁷ Bravo, G. (1992). *Africa, bel suol d'amore*. L'Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

rule, assimilating North Africa into the Islamic world and definitively breaking its affiliation with the Roman sphere.

Notwithstanding the demise of Roman political domination, its ties in Africa remained intense. The roads, aqueducts and infrastructure built by the Romans remained in use for ages. Additionally, the incorporation of African provinces into Mediterranean commercial chains provided a model for future economic interrelationships between Italy and Africa. The bond between Rome and Africa is a fundamental factor to understand the historical evolution of Italy's engagement on the continent. Beginning with the grain supplies of antiquity to the modern energy trade, the economic interdependence of both regions has lasted for over two thousand years, shaping Italy's position in its dealings with Africa to the present day.

Over the course of the Middle Ages, Italian city-states assumed a decisive importance in Mediterranean trade, acquiring extensive economic ties with North Africa. Venice, Genoa and Pisa, among others, consolidated trade links with landmark African ports, including Tunis, Tripoli and Alexandria. Such connections also favoured the transfer of knowledge, technology and cultural influences across the two shores of the Mediterranean. The centrality of Italy's economies in the mediaeval period largely depended on these linkages, which fostered the maritime cities' business expansion and consolidated their dominance in the entire Mediterranean basin. Since the eleventh century, the Mediterranean became the scene of fierce competition between the European maritime powers and the Islamic realm, with Italian cities striving to gain trading privileges in the main African centres. Genoa and Pisa, contending for control of the routes in the western Mediterranean, managed to establish foundations and merchant colonies, securing a monopoly on certain strategic routes. Venice, on the other hand, owing to its powerful fleet and dexterous diplomacy, succeeded in asserting its status as the main intermediary between Africa and Eastern Europe, by controlling the commerce with Alexandria in Egypt⁸⁸.

⁸⁸ Natili, M. (s.d.). Un laboratorio coloniale nell'Italia post-unitaria (Tesi di dottorato, Università della Tuscia, XIX ciclo). Retrieved from: <http://hdl.handle.net/2067/683>

The African-Italian commerce traffic entailed a broad range of products. From Northern Africa flowed spices, carpets, fine textiles and precious raw materials such as gold, which came from the sub-Saharan lands via the Saharan caravans. Likewise, Italian cities exported luxury artefacts, weapons, woollen fabrics and handicrafts, which were extremely attractive to African markets. Consider gold, which played a central part in the exchanges between Europe and Africa. With the growing European demand for precious metals, trade with the kingdoms of the Sahel and the western parts of the continent turned out to be an extraordinarily profitable business, so much so that Genoa and Venice, in order to satisfy this request, established agreements with Arab and Berber merchants, gaining access to gold from the mines of Mali and Ghana, which reached North Africa via the vast trans-Saharan wagon ships⁸⁹.

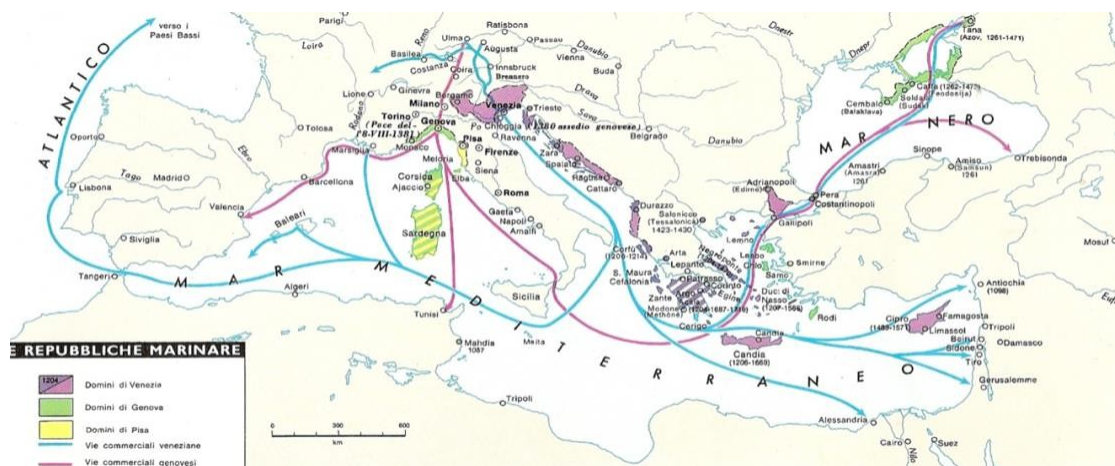


Image 2.2: “Trade routes and domains of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa during the height of the Maritime Republics’ influence.”

Source: *Appunti di Storia (n.d.). Le città marinare*. Retrieved from <https://www.appuntidistoria.net/le-citta-marinare/>

Among the most controversial aspects of Italian involvement in continental Africa during the same century was the slave trade. Although the Italian maritime republics were already protagonists in the Slavic and Tatar slave market in the Black Sea, they began to turn their attention to the African side as well. Italian merchants, through Arab and Berber intermediaries, bought slaves from sub-Saharan Africa, employing them in their Mediterranean colonies or selling them to the great European overlords. This human

⁸⁹ Bravo, G. (1992). *Africa, bel suol d'amore. L'Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

trafficking did not develop on a massive scale as the Atlantic trade did in later centuries, but contributed to create an exploitative network involving European, Arab and African actors⁹⁰. An additional factor was the increased demand for labour in sugar plantations on Mediterranean islands, including Sicily, Crete and Cyprus, which stimulated this practice. The necessity of cheap workforce prompted many Italian traders to invest in this activity, which, although economically advantageous, raised moral questions already debated in the universities and ecclesiastical courts of the epoch⁹¹.

Whereas in the Middle Ages the interplay between the Italian and African political entities was mainly centred on the northernmost areas, in the Renaissance the Italian commercial horizon widened. From the 14th century, with the consolidation of maritime routes along the Atlantic coast, Genoese and Venetian traders explored the possibilities offered by West African markets. Genoa, which was already collaborating with the Portuguese in their expeditions along the coast of Senegal and Gambia, obtained access to local businesses, involved in the purchasing and selling of gold, spices and ivory⁹². Conversely, Venice, while not directly implicated in the Atlantic exploration, retained a strong attraction for African goods, which were still arriving via the sub-Saharan routes. This openness of West Africa to European merchants deeply altered the Mediterranean economic equilibrium: whilst in the past African trade had been mediated by the Arab and Berber states, now Europeans began to establish direct contact with coastal African realms, changing centuries-old mercantile dynamics⁹³.

Alongside this, the Renaissance also witnessed a developing religious commitment in the continent. Supported by the Church and the Italian rulers, Catholic missionary orders worked to spread Christianity among the indigenous populations. Franciscans and Dominicans sent missionaries to regions controlled by the Muslim states of North Africa, attempting to convert local communities and forge diplomatic relations with the Berber

⁹⁰ Del Boca, A. (1998). Il colonialismo italiano tra miti, rimozioni, negazioni e inadempienze. In Atti del Convegno "Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana" (pp. 1–25). Roma: Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano.

⁹¹ Bravo, G. (1992). Africa, bel suol d'amore. L'Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

⁹² Colapietra, R. (1959). L'Italia in Africa da Assab ad Adua. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.

⁹³ Atti del convegno "Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana". (1996). Roma: Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano

monarchs⁹⁴. By means of direct funds from major Italian cities, some monastic orders participated in operations to ransom Christian slaves held in North African ports, caused by the raids of Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean, who captured thousands of Europeans, all of whom were sold as slaves in the markets of Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli⁹⁵.

The interactions between Italy and Africa during these two historical periods left a lasting impression. Thus, the impact of Italian marine ports on Mediterranean trade aided in the development of an integrated economy spanning Europe, Africa, and the Middle East⁹⁶. Although often marked by exploitative practices, trade exchanges laid the foundations for an economic and intellectual relationship that would last for centuries to follow. Moreover, the experience accumulated by Italian merchants in the African routes furnished a model for later colonial expansions. Consequently, when in the 19th century, unified Italy launched its policy of expansion into Africa, many scholars and politicians referred to this mercantile heritage to justify the legitimacy of Italian ambitions on the continent⁹⁷. The idea of a ‘historical continuity’ between medieval and colonial Italy became a recurrent theme in the propaganda of the time, showing how past experiences affected future choices⁹⁸.

Political, economic, and social goals were among the many interrelated reasons that compelled the monarchical governance to launch the colonial endeavour. If it was going to compete with the other European countries that already controlled sizable colonial empires, Italy, which became a nation in 1861, sought to determine its identity and position on the panorama of the world. Having colonies was seen as a mark of modernity and prestige, and it was a necessary condition for being acknowledged as a major power⁹⁹.

⁹⁴ Deplano, V. (2012). *Educare all'oltremare. La Società Africana d'Italia e il colonialismo fascista*. Firenze: Le Monnier Università.

⁹⁵ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. (2020). *Il partenariato con l'Africa: priorità tematiche e geografiche della politica estera italiana*. [https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/12/2020_12_10_partenariato_con_lafrica_-_versione_italiana.pdf​:contentReference\[oaicite:1\]{index=1}](https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/12/2020_12_10_partenariato_con_lafrica_-_versione_italiana.pdf​:contentReference[oaicite:1]{index=1}).

⁹⁶ Carbone, G., Donelli, F., & Dentice, G. (2013). *Scommettere sull'Africa emergente*. ISP. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/scommettere-sullafrica-emergente-8791>

⁹⁷ Focardi, F., & Ganapini, L. (2008). *Le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia fascista in Africa e in Europa*. In *Annali della Fondazione Ugo La Malfa*, 23, 101–129.

⁹⁸ Maiani, G. (2021). *Il colonialismo italiano: storia di un imperialismo straccione* (Tesi di laurea). Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

⁹⁹ Curato, M. (1982). *Aspetti nazionalistici della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1914*. In *Atti del Convegno "Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana"* (pp. 55–76). Roma: Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano.

The drive towards the continent was prompted by the belief that an overseas empire could elevate Italy's status and ensure its place on the global chessboard¹⁰⁰.

Coupled with this were important economic concerns. Despite the young peninsula having embarked on a process of industrialisation, it still suffered from an unfavourable standing compared to other nations such as Great Britain, France and Germany. For the purpose of sustaining industrial growth, the government envisaged the colonies as an ideal chance to gain access to valuable raw materials, such as cotton, cereals and minerals, and to open up new markets to which national products could be exported¹⁰¹. Hence, colonial expansion was perceived as a means to boost the Italian economy and reduce dependence on foreign imports¹⁰².

Furthermore, the mounting demographic pressure must be taken into account. By the end of the 19th century, the country was experiencing a sharp increase in population, while employment opportunities remained neglected, especially in the South. Such a situation led to massive migration, with millions of Italians leaving their homeland seeking better living standards. Some politicians and intellectuals of the time argued that colonies could be a solution to this problem, offering new land for emigrants to settle. While this vision may have seemed reasonable to fringe this crisis, there is no doubt that this prospect turned out to be largely illusory: most Italians continued to head for the Americas, where expectations were more abundant and living circumstances comparatively superior to the often hostile and difficult to develop African territories¹⁰³.

Overall, Italian colonialism stemmed from the desire for prestigious and powerfulness, the need to create new economic spaces and the hope to curb the migration trend. However, the country's limited financial and military resources and the weak organisation

¹⁰⁰ Deplano, V. (2012). *Educare all'oltremare. La Società Africana d'Italia e il colonialismo fascista*. Firenze: Le Monnier Università.

¹⁰¹ Atti del convegno "Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana". (1996). Roma: Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano

¹⁰² Maiani, G. (2021). *Il colonialismo italiano: storia di un imperialismo straccione* (Tesi di laurea). Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

¹⁰³ Deplano, V. (2012). *Educare all'oltremare. La Società Africana d'Italia e il colonialismo fascista*. Firenze: Le Monnier Università.

of colonial policy made Italian expansion more aleatory than that of the rest of the European powers, making imperial ambition a complex and often failed path, lacking a unified vision¹⁰⁴.

In 1869, the first expansionary move was the purchase of Assab Bay by the Rubattino nautical company with the implicit approvals of the Italian authorities. Assab, on the shore of the Red Sea, was initially depicted as a purely commercial outpost, but in reality, it was an early concrete shift towards colonial expansion¹⁰⁵. With regard to the advantageous location along the maritime routes that link Europe with India and the Far East, the Red Sea coastline was chosen, and once the Suez Canal was built in 1869, the area became an essential platform for commerce worldwide¹⁰⁶. Afterwards assuming control of the seaport in 1882 and understanding how crucial it was, the Italian administration progressively expanded its authority in the region¹⁰⁷.

In subsequent decades, Italy advanced towards the Eritrean hinterland, encountering resistance from the local populations, who did not fully accept the colonial establishment. Even so, in 1890 the Kingdom of Italy officially proclaimed the birth of the colony of Eritrea, thus reinforcing its prime possession in Africa¹⁰⁸. Admittedly, the management of the territory turned out to be more complex than expected: economic constraints, a hostile climate and turbulent relations with the inhabitants made it expensive and less profitable than initially foreseen. Thereafter, the Kingdom of Italy addressed its attention to Somalia. Under a series of agreements with local leaders, the Italian leadership succeeded in consolidating its ownership of several shore areas and progressively widening its grip on the hinterland. In 1908, Somalia was officially declared an Italian settlement, marking a further phase in the colonial plan¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁴ Colapietra, R. (1959). *L'Italia in Africa da Assab ad Adua*. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.

¹⁰⁵ Natili, M. (s.d.). *Un laboratorio coloniale nell'Italia post-unitaria* (Tesi di dottorato, Università della Tuscia, XIX ciclo). Retrieved from: <http://hdl.handle.net/2067/683>

¹⁰⁶ Colapietra, R. (1959). *L'Italia in Africa da Assab ad Adua*. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.

¹⁰⁷ Maiani, G. (2021). *Il colonialismo italiano: storia di un imperialismo straccione* (Tesi di laurea). Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

¹⁰⁸ Colapietra, R. (1959). *L'Italia in Africa da Assab ad Adua*. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.

¹⁰⁹ Maiani, G. (2021). *Il colonialismo italiano: storia di un imperialismo straccione* (Tesi di laurea). Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

Nevertheless, the Italian ambitiousness clashed with a formidable obstacle: Ethiopia. Contrary to many other African kingdoms, Ethiopia possessed a strong state and military tradition, with a capable leadership to resist imperialist pressing. Believing it could turn the Ethiopian reign into its own protectorate, Italy signed the Treaty of Uccialli with Emperor Menelik II in 1889. Although, the Italian version of the agreement indicated that Ethiopia accepted Italian tutelage, the Ethiopian one interpreted it as a purely friendly deal. When Menelik refused to recognise the Italian patronage, Italy opted to coerce the situation with a military intervention, but the campaign turned into a disaster. In 1896, at the Battle of Adua, the Italian army suffered a catastrophic defeat. The better organised and numerically superior Ethiopian troops inflicted a mortal blow to the Italian eagerness, forcing the government to recognise Ethiopian independence¹¹⁰.

Adua represented one of the most humiliating episodes in Italian colonial memory and the fragility of the country's imperialist will. Instead of renouncing Ethiopia once and for all, however, Italy continued to cultivate the prospect of a future conquest, a project that would be vigorously revived during the Fascist period¹¹¹. In the wake of the Ethiopian failure, the Italian Kingdom tried to compensate for its own failure by shifting its attention to North Africa. Libya, then under the control of the Ottoman Empire, appeared as a more accessible target, both because of its geographical proximity and the relative tenuousness of Ottoman domain¹¹². As a consequence, in 1911, the Italian government declared war on the Ottoman Empire, triggering the Italian-Turkish War. Their invasion was swift, and, in 1912, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were formally annexed to Italy by the Treaty of Lausanne. Although the military occupation did not yield effective territorial control, the endurance of the local tribes, led by the Senussite Order, proved stubborn and well-organised, making Libya a theatre of permanent guerrilla warfare¹¹³.

¹¹⁰ Curato, M. (1982). Aspetti nazionalistici della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1914. In Atti del Convegno "Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana" (pp. 55–76). Roma: Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano.

¹¹¹ Deplano, V. (2012). Educare all'oltremare. La Società Africana d'Italia e il colonialismo fascista. Firenze: Le Monnier Università.

¹¹² Atti del convegno "Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana". (1996). Roma: Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano

¹¹³ Maiani, G. (2021). Il colonialismo italiano: storia di un imperialismo straccione (Tesi di laurea). Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

On the heels of the uncertain and contradictory phase of liberal colonialism, it was under fascism that Italy assumed a more determined, ideologically structured and militarily offensive expansionist posture. According to Mussolini, the conquest of an African empire was not simply a foreign policy objective, but a cornerstone of national regeneration. The colonial exploit was destined to transform Italy into a great power, to compensate it for the indignities suffered after the First World War and to consecrate the authority of fascism as the leader of the Italian population¹¹⁴.

Under Mussolini's vision, Ethiopia represented more than just a territorial achievement: it was the epitome of national 'revenge' after the defeat at Adua, the closing of the historical circle of Italian penetration in the Horn of Africa¹¹⁵. The imperial rhetoric aimed at building a new imaginary: Italy was not only claiming a piece of land, but proclaiming itself direct heir to the Roman Empire, which had returned to shine in the Mediterranean skies. The war began on 3 October 1935 with the invasion from the North, through Eritrea, and from the South, through Italian Somalia. The command was initially entrusted to General Emilio De Bono, who conducted the operations cautiously, arousing Mussolini's impatience. In a few weeks, De Bono was replaced by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who was written a blank check to quickly conclude the campaign. Against this background, it was opted to pursue a military approach based on the systematic destruction of Ethiopian resources, accompanied by the extensive use of aviation and - most seriously - banned chemical weapons. In open violation of international conventions, the Italian army made broad use of yperite (mustard gas) and phosgene, dropped on camps, villages, supply lines, field hospitals and even on columns of civilian refugees. The Ethiopian populace was subjected to an all-out aggression, aimed at sapping not only the enemy's war capabilities, but also its moral endurance. Italian military superiority was overwhelming. Within seven months, the main Ethiopian forces were defeated and, on 5 May 1936, Italian troops entered Addis Ababa without facing any additional organised resistance. The announcement of the occupation of the capital city was celebrated by the regime with unprecedented spectacularity: four days later,

¹¹⁴ Bravo, G. (1992). *Africa, bel suol d'amore. L'Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

¹¹⁵ Del Boca, A. (1998). *Il colonialismo italiano tra miti, rimozioni, negazioni e inadempienze*. In *Atti del Convegno "Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana"* (pp. 1–25). Roma: Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano.

Mussolini proclaimed the Empire, awarding King Victor Emmanuel III the title of Emperor of Ethiopia.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, the occupation of the country ushered in a much longer and more dramatic chapter. Ethiopian resistance, far from being defeated, rapidly regrouped, taking the form of a widespread and entrenched guerrilla insurgency, especially in the interior and mountainous regions. The colonial command, entrusted to Viceroy Rodolfo Graziani, responded with repressive methods of extreme brutality. The attack of 19 February 1937 in Addis Ababa, in which some Ethiopian patriots threw bombs at Graziani during a public ceremony, triggered a ferocious reprisal: for three days, Italian soldiers carried out summary executions, destruction and mass violence, causing thousands of civilian deaths. The crackdown did not stop there. In the next weeks, the regime ordered the elimination of entire social groups considered to be supporters of the opposition: Coptic monks, clan chiefs, civil servants of the former imperial government. The massacre at the monastery of Debra Libanos, where more than a thousand monks and pilgrims were murdered in cold blood, was one of the most dramatic episodes. In the meantime, the colonial administration implemented an urban and infrastructural programme that intended to materialise the fascist presence in the African landscape. Roads, barracks, public buildings and foundation towns were built to enshrine the Italian presence as permanent and ordering. In turn, behind this modernising facade lurked a deeply segregationist system. The colonial laws of 1937 set up a clear racial segregation: African citizens were denied civil rights, access to higher education and even the right to reside in the ‘cities of the Italians’¹¹⁷. Mixed marriages were forbidden, and ‘mestizaje’ was subject to police control and stigmatisation¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁶ Bravo, G. (1992). *Africa, bel suol d’amore. L’Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli

¹¹⁷ Del Boca, A. (1998). Il colonialismo italiano tra miti, rimozioni, negazioni e inadempienze. In *Atti del Convegno “Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana”* (pp. 1–25). Roma: Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano.

¹¹⁸ Deplano, V. (2012). *Educare all’oltremare. La Società Africana d’Italia e il colonialismo fascista*. Firenze: Le Monnier Università.

L'espansionismo italiano



Image 2.3: “Italian expansionism between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.”

Source: “Archivi visuali e colonialismo italiano,” by G. Mancosu, 2022, PowerPoint presentation for the training course “La decolonizzazione. Uno sguardo oltremare,” ISRpt, slide 31.

The Empire, therefore, was never an inclusive structure, but a construction based on violence, racism and exploitation. Its basis was shaky. Regardless of the overwhelming propaganda and material investment, Italian East Africa proved to be economically unsustainable, administratively chaotic and politically isolated. Worldwide condemnation for the use of gas, League of Nations sanctions, and the failure of most European powers to recognise the imperial title marked the illegitimate nature of the conquest from the outset¹¹⁹. Beginning in 1940, with Italy's entry into World War II, the empire's frailties became apparent. British forces, together with Ethiopian patriots led by Hailé Selassié, launched an offensive that recaptured the entire territory in less than a year. In May 1941, Addis Ababa was liberated and the Fascist Empire formally ceased to exist¹²⁰.

¹¹⁹ Bravo, G. (1992). Africa, bel suol d'amore. L'Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

¹²⁰ Del Boca, A. (1998). Il colonialismo italiano tra miti, rimozioni, negazioni e inadempienze. In Atti del Convegno “Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana” (pp. 1–25). Roma: Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano.

The Ethiopian window, which lasted just five years, symbolised the culmination of Italian imperial aspiration and, at the same time, its most obvious fiasco. It was the occasion when Italian colonialism revealed, in its most extreme form, the brutal, authoritarian and racist side of an ideology that aimed at re-founding the nation by projecting it beyond its borders, but which encountered the insurmountable limits of its realisation in the rejection and resistance of the colonised. As can be seen, the Second World War marked the definitive disintegration of the Italian colonial empire, which due to the various military defeats in African lands led to the expulsion of Italian forces from East Africa and Libya. The 1947 Treaty of Paris formally sanctioned the loss of all colonies and the impossibility for Italy to maintain any direct sovereignty on the continent. It should be noted, however, that although a formal act, it did not end Italy's interest in Africa¹²¹. As a matter of fact, the granting by the United Nations of the trusteeship mandate over Somalia in 1950, which represented a sort of 'reparation examination' for Italy, was an attempt to demonstrate to the international community that it was capable of a diverse colonial management, marked by cooperation rather than exploitation¹²².

The reality, though, was quite different. The Italian Trusteeship Administration (AFIS) was set up according to highly bureaucratic and paternalistic logic, reproducing many of the pre-existing colonial administrative mechanisms¹²³. The declared goals of modernisation, literacy and building a local ruling class were only partially achieved, and often hindered by internal Italian economic interests, particularly those linked to agrarian capital and the residual colonial apparatus of the Ministry of Italian Africa¹²⁴. In July 1960, Somalia became independent. After this, Italy formally withdrew the country, although, maintaining a dense network of political, cultural and business relations with Mogadishu, which resulted in bilateral aid flows and support for various technical and military cooperation programmes. Somalia became the fulcrum of Italian influence in the

¹²¹ Bravo, G. (1992). *Africa, bel suol d'amore. L'Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

¹²² Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali. (1996). *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana*. Tomo II. Roma: Ufficio Centrale per i Beni Archivistici. Atti del convegno tenutosi a Taormina-Messina, che raccoglie saggi e contributi focalizzati sull'analisi delle strategie e delle dinamiche amministrative e politiche della gestione coloniale italiana in Africa.

¹²³ Ibidem

¹²⁴ Maiani, G. (2021). *Il colonialismo italiano: storia di un imperialismo straccione* (Tesi di laurea). Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

Horn of Africa for decades, also for geostrategic reasons related to maritime control and presence in the Indian Ocean trade routes¹²⁵.

In this way, a post-war Italian foreign policy towards Africa can be traced as strongly influenced by three elements: colonial memory, the need to carve out a space for itself on the international arena and migratory pressure, destined to grow in the following decades. Italy sought, albeit amidst many contradictions, to refound its image as a 'cooperative partner' of the continent, with a predictable focus on the former colonies: Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Libya remained at the centre of Italy's African strategy¹²⁶.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Italy commenced to alter its diplomatic action, by means of a more formalised development cooperation framework, even though it lagged far behind other European countries. Law 1222 of 1971 represented the first organic effort to define a regulatory structure for Italian involvement in the sector, but it was mainly based on multilateral aid and on forms of 'tied' assistance, which tied the disbursement of funds to the purchase of goods and services from Italian companies, thus limiting its effectiveness for the beneficiary countries. Moreover, Italian-African collaboration itself reached its peak. Italy affirmed itself as the continent's second largest bilateral donor behind France, allocating over \$15 billion in the decade, with a focus on Somalia, Mozambique, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It must be considered that these latter initiatives were often motivated by clientelist and geopolitical considerations rather than a coherent development policy. Somalia, especially, was the object of an extraordinary flow of support that sometimes exceeded the levels of funds allocated to Italian regions, without however producing real institutional stabilization¹²⁷.

¹²⁵ Bravo, G. (1992). *Africa, bel suol d'amore. L'Italia e la cooperazione internazionale in Africa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

¹²⁶ Maiani, G. (2021). *Il colonialismo italiano: storia di un imperialismo straccione* (Tesi di laurea). Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

¹²⁷ Carbone, M., & al. (2013). *Scommettere sull'Africa emergente*. Milano: ISPI.

In the following decade, the Italian contribution entered a stage of steady decrease, both in absolute terms and in relation to GDP. The share of assistance fell dramatically from 0.30% of GDP in the 1980s to 0.13% in 2012, well below the UN target of 0.7% and the OECD average of 0.43%¹²⁸. This downturn coincided with the emergence of new players on the African arena - such as China and other BRICS countries - that began to occupy the gap left vacant by Europe, including Italy¹²⁹. All along, Italian foreign policy persisted with an amble approach: on the one hand, it valorised multilateralism and its involvement in international missions, while on the other, it tried to preserve a privileged influence in former colonial lands through opaque and often personalistic forms of bilateral diplomacy¹³⁰.

Since 2011, with the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the consequent disruption of North Africa, specially the Sahel, Italy has been forced to profoundly rethink its relationship with the African continent. Previously, Italian African policies appeared fragmented, based mainly on occasional economic ties and sporadic diplomatic endeavours. Nevertheless, following the post-2011 events, Rome was forced to regard Africa with different eyes, recognising the urgency of a structured and sustainable long-term strategy, capable of addressing crucial issues such as security, energy, migration and development partnerships¹³¹.

A crucial turning point in the public and political perception of Africa in Italy was the so-called 'migration crisis' in the central Mediterranean of 2014-2016. The intensification of migratory movements, especially from Libya and Niger, led the Italian government to intervene with an initially humanitarian rationale, represented by the 'Mare Nostrum' naval operation (2013-2014). Nevertheless, the management of the immigration phenomenon soon turned into a securitarian and containment approach. The decision to partner with the Libyan Coast Guard from 2017, accompanied by strong international

¹²⁸ Ibidem

¹²⁹ Dentice, G., & Donelli, F. (2021). Reasserting (Middle) Power by Looking Southwards: Italy's Policy Towards Africa. IAI.

¹³⁰ Focardi, F., & Ganapini, L. (2008). Le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia fascista in Africa e in Europa. Bologna: Il Mulino.

¹³¹ Carbone, M. (2023). Italy's return to Africa: Between External and Domestic Drivers. IAI.

criticism, represented a first meaningful switch in Italian foreign policy in the continent, increasingly oriented towards externalising migration control through controversial agreements with transit and origin countries such as Libya, Niger and Tunisia¹³². Migration thus became the element that pushed Italy to identify Africa as a strategic space, no longer only to be helped through isolated development agendas, but as a priority space for political, diplomatic and military measures, with the aim of preventing unregulated flows and potential terrorist menaces¹³³. Concomitantly, the growing instability in the Sahel due to the rise of jihadism led Rome to consider this region as a direct extension of the Mediterranean, referred to in Italian governmental documents as the ‘enlarged Mediterranean’¹³⁴. Thus, the Bilateral Support Mission in Niger (MISIN) was born in 2018, as mentioned in the first chapter, it aims to cross-train local security forces to tackle terrorism, illegal trafficking and irregular migration¹³⁵. It can be seen, how the aforementioned operation is having great results because, despite the military coup of 2023 that made the expulsion of France and the United States possible, Italy has managed to keep dialogue open with the Niger military junta, consolidating its reputation as a pragmatic and reliable partner in the country¹³⁶.

Alongside MISIN, the Italian administration has multiplied its engagement in multilateral operations such as EUTM Somalia, EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUNAVFOR Atalanta (European Union Naval Force Operation) and MINUSMA¹³⁷. These missions have demonstrated Italy's strong focus on cooperative security, centred on the training of local agents, rather than direct intervention, thus positioning Italy as a pivotal interlocutor in both the Sahel and the Horn of Africa¹³⁸.

¹³² Strazzari, F., & Grandi, F. (2020). Government policy and the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean and African arenas. In S. Bognandi (Ed.), *Mediterranean Geopolitics* (pp. 213–236).

¹³³ Carbone, M. (2023). Italy's return to Africa: Between external and domestic drivers. IAI.

¹³⁴ Limes. (2024). *La nostra profondità strategica in Africa*. Limesonline. Retrieved from: <https://www.limesonline.com/rivista/la-nostra-profondita-strategica-in-africa-14630093/>

¹³⁵ Stato Maggiore della Difesa. (2023). MISIN debriefing COVI – Relazione del Gen. B. Marceddu.

¹³⁶ ISPI. (2025). Policy Paper – Il Piano Mattei per l’Africa: strategia italiana tra partenariato e sicurezza. Milano: ISPI.

¹³⁷ Coticchia, F., & Mazziotti di Celso, A. (2024). La partecipazione italiana alle missioni internazionali.

¹³⁸ Limes. (2024). La triste fine del metodo italiano e qualche idea per ravvivarlo. Limesonline. Retrieved from: <https://www.limesonline.com/rivista/la-triste-fine-del-metodo-italiano-e-qualche-idea-per-ravvivarlo-14630146/>

In the meanwhile, Italy has deployed a complementary strategy based on soft power and cultural diplomacy, which remains often underestimated but crucial to consolidate its presence in Africa. Since 2019, the 'Italy, Culture, Africa' initiative promoted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) has targeted deep cultural relations through university programmes, artistic activities and support for local youth entrepreneurship, such as the E4Impact project, running in fifteen African countries. The reopening of Italian Cultural Institutes in numerous countries, the relaunch of the 'Luigi Broglio' space centre in Malindi, Kenya, and the several scientific agreements signed with Algeria, South Africa, and Egypt are concrete examples of a political intention based on education and scientific diplomacy. This attitude has enabled the Italian Republic to build stronger relationships of trust with local governments and civil societies, thereby strengthening its symbolic capital and influence¹³⁹.

It should be pointed out that, the launch of the Mattei Plan for Africa in January 2024 marks a stage of ripeness and consolidation of Italy's strategic role on the continent. It is the most ambitious and set attempt ever made in the recent history of Italian foreign policy to integrate the multifaceted lines of action that have shaped its relationship with Africa over the past decade. Born from a proposal put forward by the present Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni during the 2022 election campaign, the Plan is named after the memorable personality of Enrico Mattei, emblem of an autonomous national energy policy that is attentive to global geopolitical dynamics. The project, with an initial investment of approximately EUR 5.5 billion, consists of 55 equally dispersed projects in priority nations like Angola, Kenya, Niger, Algeria, Tunisia, and Senegal. Public health, sustainable agriculture, education and local talents' capacity building, energy, water, and basic facilities are among them¹⁴⁰. In contrast to the conventional paradigm of development cooperation, which could be perceived as being welfarist and paternalistic,

¹³⁹ Lobasso, F. (2021). Value Oriented Diplomacy and Italy's Soft Power in Africa. *Rivista IAI*, 21(1).

¹⁴⁰ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. (2020). Il partenariato con l'Africa: priorità tematiche e geografiche della politica estera italiana. Retrieved from: [https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/12/2020_12_10_partenariato_con_lafrica_-_versione_italiana.pdf​;contentReference\[oaicite:0\]{index=0}](https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/12/2020_12_10_partenariato_con_lafrica_-_versione_italiana.pdf​;contentReference[oaicite:0]{index=0}).

the Mattei Plan is a partnership based on funding that benefits both sides. This contrasts sharply with other foreign entities' predatory or neo-colonial activities on African soil¹⁴¹.

This concept clearly aims to promote the principle of a 'partnership of equals', based on political debate and concrete plans that can bring tangible benefits to both Italy and the African countries involved. For achieving these purposes, the Plan envisages flexible governance, with the active commitment of African local authorities, Italian companies (such as Eni, Saipem, Bonifiche Ferraresi and Italferr), universities, NGOs and multilateral agencies¹⁴². The Italian example is thus configured as an operation of advanced financial diplomacy, which attempts to combine national interests, sustainable development and regional stability¹⁴³. Despite presenting positive intentions and a rhetoric of genuine and peer-to-peer cooperation, however, the Mattei Plan is not without considerable contradictions and strategic ambiguities, which put its political and operational credibility to the test. One of the main criticisms concerns the strong implicit link between cooperative interventions and the migration restraint policy, which seem to reflect a predominantly securitarian vision of the relationship with Africa¹⁴⁴. Albeit official statements tend to emphasise the balanced and tenable aspect of the partnership, the Italian and European political landscape continues to push for an externalised and control-oriented migration management, rather than openness and regular mobility. This dubious liaison generates misgivings and mistrust in African governments and civil societies, which often see Italy and Europe as mainly interested in blocking migratory flows and securing their frontiers¹⁴⁵.

Furthermore, one other concrete and telling example of diplomatic equivocation and inconsistencies in the Mattei Plan concerns the delicate issue of Western Sahara. In the aftermath of the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022 and the ensuing

¹⁴¹ Dentice, G., & Donelli, F. (2021). Reasserting (Middle) Power by Looking Southwards: Italy's Policy Towards Africa. IAI Papers.

¹⁴² ¹⁴² ISPI. (2025). Policy Paper – Il Piano Mattei per l'Africa.

¹⁴³ Lobasso, F. (2021). Value Oriented Diplomacy and Italy's Soft Power in Africa. *Rivista IAI*, 21(1).

¹⁴⁴ Carbone, M. (2023). Italy's return to Africa: Between external and domestic drivers. IAI.

¹⁴⁵ Strazzari, F., & Grandi, F. (2020). Government policy and the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean and African arenas. In S. Bognandi (Ed.), *Mediterranean Geopolitics* (pp. 213–236).

energy crisis, Italy significantly strengthened its strategic partnership with Algeria, which quickly became Italy's main supplier of natural gas. The signing of relevant agreements on energy with Alger has enabled Italy to address the European energy crunch by reducing its dependence on Russia, such as the one signed by Mario Draghi in April 2022 and the recent incentive to accelerate the completion of the Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline (TSGP), an infrastructure project also involving Nigeria and Niger, which, once completed, will have the potential to transport around 30 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year to Europe¹⁴⁶. Inevitably, however, the intensification of relations with Algeria has generated tensions with Morocco, a country sensitive to the conflict over Western Sahara and historically a rival of Algeria. Rabat has expressed worries about a possible Italian alignment with Algerian positions on the Sahrawi dispute. While Rome has repeatedly attempted to reassure Morocco about the impartiality of its policy, the issue remains unresolved and risks compromising the diplomatic poise painstakingly maintained by Italy in the Maghreb region. The Italian government is thus faced with a difficult and complex choice: continue to pursue a diplomatic ambiguity that runs the danger of undermining its credibility, or take a straightforward stance that could, however, entail significant political and economic costs, at a time when the enlarged Mediterranean has become a key area for the country's security and energy supply¹⁴⁷.

The Mattei Plan undoubtedly constitutes the highest peak of Italy's contemporary African policy, the culmination of a political and diplomatic journey that has matured over more than a decade of intricate relations with the continent. It must be kept in mind that in order to translate its ambitious vision into tangible and credible results, Italy will necessarily have to squarely face the still pending ambivalences and paradoxes. It will be essential, firstly, to clarify the relationship between cooperation and migration policies, and avoid transmuting the programme into yet another disguised securitarian measure. In the second instance, the Italian administration will have to carefully manage the delicate regional and diplomatic balances, especially in the Maghreb and the Sahel, without compromising its international credibility with contradictory and incoherent policies, while striving to

¹⁴⁶ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023, ottobre 23). L'Italia in Niger mette alla prova la sua nuova maturità strategica. Retrieved from: <https://aliseoeditoriale.it/litalia-in-niger-mette-alla-prova-la-sua-nuova-maturita-strategica/>

¹⁴⁷ IAI. (2022). Italy's energy partnerships in the Mediterranean. IAI.

affirm the role it is carving out for itself on the global scene as an influential and constructive regional power, capable of promoting sustainable and shared development that is truly beneficial both for the African continent and for Italian national interests¹⁴⁸.

2.2 MISIN: structure, objectives and activities



Image 2.4: “Distribution of Italian military forces in the enlarged Mediterranean.”

Source: “Le forze armate come strumento geopolitico” [The armed forces as a geopolitical instrument], by Limes, 2022, Limesonline. <https://www.limesonline.com/rivista/le-forze-armate-come-strumento-geopolitico-14576842>

As previously analysed in the preceding chapter and shown in the map (Image 2.4), Italy's military presence in the African continent is articulated through a series of missions that reflect the country's growing desire to play an active role in international security. Given this premise, the Bilateral Support Mission in Niger (MISIN) establishes itself as the main operational instrument of Italy in the Sahel, which has already largely proven to be one of the most unstable and politically relevant regions of contemporary Africa. The mission was formally established by a joint bilateral agreement signed on 26 September 2017

¹⁴⁸ ISPI. (2025). Policy Paper – Il Piano Mattei per l’Africa.

between the Italian and Niger governments, and entered into force on 30 August 2019, thus marking the official beginning of operations on the ground¹⁴⁹. Its initial mandate is based on three fundamental functional pillars: supporting the Armed Forces of Niger in the fight against terrorism, strengthening border control capabilities to counter transnational trafficking and contributing to the stabilisation of the territory through military-technical cooperation¹⁵⁰.

The deployment of MISIN is part of a wider Eurafrican strategy of Italy, designed to intervene in the areas of origin of migratory phenomena and to contrast the expansion of jihadist insurgencies that, if left unchecked, risk disrupting the entire Saharan quadrant and having direct repercussions on the security of the Mediterranean. It is no coincidence that Niger was chosen not only for its geographical location - a crossroads between the Maghreb, the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa - as well as its value as a relatively strong partner open to mutual cooperation, in a context in which other Western players, such as France and the United States, were already beginning to experience rising troubles¹⁵¹.

In terms of operational capability, MISIN's structure is distinguished by its modularity, high level of specialisation and dynamic adaptability to the needs of the local scenario. The beating heart of the mission is represented by the Mobile Training Teams (MTT), operative teams made up of selected personnel from the Italian Army, Carabinieri and Special Forces, in charge of providing training, mentoring and direct assistance to the Niger troops. These courses, organised according to flexible modules, covered highly sensitive areas such as urban combat, counter-terrorism techniques, improvised explosive

¹⁴⁹ Stato Maggiore della Difesa. (2023). MISIN debriefing COVI – Relazione del Gen. B. Marceddu.

¹⁵⁰ Ministero della Difesa. (2025). Documento Programmatico Pluriennale per la Difesa per il triennio 2024–2026. Roma: Ministero della Difesa.

¹⁵¹ Carbone, G. (2023). *Italy's return to Africa: between external and domestic drivers*. Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica, 53(3), 293–311. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2023.2>

device (IED) clearance, territorial surveillance, tactical use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and intelligence at the battlefield level¹⁵².

Running alongside the bipartite action carried out by Italy through MISIN, the European Union has promoted an important region-wide initiative for security in the Sahel: the GAR-SI Sahel (*Groupes d'Action Rapide - Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel*) project. Begun in 2016 and operational until 2023, this programme was financed through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, with a comprehensive budget of more than €74 million. Its focus was quite ambitious: to enhance the capacity of the security forces of the G5 Sahel countries (Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad) and Senegal by setting up mobile, self-reliant and versatile units modelled on the experience of the Spanish rapid action groups. Consisting of around 100 personnel, each unit was formed by trainers from different European forces - Spanish Guardia Civil, French Gendarmerie, Italian Carabinieri and Portuguese National Republican Guard - with the task of improving territorial supervision, especially in the remotest areas prone to terrorist or criminal infiltration, as well as reacting rapidly to threats of a cross-border nature¹⁵³.

In comparison with MISIN, the GAR-SI Sahel provides a more systemic and plurilateral approach, centred on permanent operational capacity building and structural embedding of local troops. If MISIN favours a flexible and tailor-made training model, with Italian mobile teams deployed in dedicated courses that can be adapted over time, the GAR-SI on the contrary aims at equipping partner countries with intervention units prepared for direct and ongoing deployment on the ground. Nevertheless, the two programmes are not alternatives, but complementary: they both share the same overarching goal - the consolidation of stability and security in the Sahel territories - and show how the European strategy for African safety is being articulated along several lines, which are able to conjugate bilateral collaboration and operational multilateralism¹⁵⁴.

¹⁵² Coticchia, F., & Mazziotti di Celso, M. (2024). La partecipazione italiana alle missioni internazionali. Quaderni CeSPI – Donzelli Editore.

¹⁵³ European Commission. (n.d.). *GAR-SI Sahel – Groupes d'Action Rapide – Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel*. EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. Retrieved May 6, 2025, from https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmes/gar-si-sahel-groupes-daction-rapide-surveillance-et-intervention-au-sahel_en

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem

In the period between October 2023 and October 2024 together, 34 formation sessions were conducted for a total of 968 trained Niger military personnel, including elite units such as paratroopers, GIS (Special Intervention Group) special forces, bomb disposal experts and military medical technicians. An important innovation of MISIN compared to other Italian missions in the continent was the inclusion of the air dimension within the local training: in this framework, complex medical evacuation operations (MEDEVAC) were carried out thanks to the transfer of four AB 412 helicopters by Italy, accompanied by the advanced training of Niger pilots, mechanics and medical personnel. Alongside operational training, the mission has developed a robust civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) programme, which has progressively become one of the most appreciated expedients by the local population and regional authorities. This component is rooted in a holistic outlook on security, which recognises the relevance of the social and infrastructural dimension as a necessary condition for consolidating military achievements. Through projects termed ‘Quick Impact Projects’ (QIP), the mission has financed targeted interventions such as the construction of water access points, the donation of health and school supplies, the provision of standard necessities in remote areas and the improvement of access to essential services¹⁵⁵. CIMIC activities are not marginal but structural: the budget earmarked for them has grown year after year, reaching around one million euro planned for 2025, confirming the weight given to the soft component of the Italian presence in the country¹⁵⁶.

Sustaining this long-term integrated projection, Italy has invested in the building of an autonomous strategic facility near Niamey: the CEMEDAN + APRON compound, i.e. the Niger Aeronautical medical centre and logistic-operational area for the support of aeronautical assets. It - unique of its kind in the field of Italian missions abroad - houses sanitary areas, dormitories, commands, depots, a power plant and a space for C4

¹⁵⁵ Stato Maggiore della Difesa. (2023). MISIN debriefing COVI – Relazione del Gen. B. Marceddu.

¹⁵⁶ Ministero della Difesa. (2022). Documento Programmatico Pluriennale per la Difesa per il triennio 2022–2024. Roma: Ministero della Difesa.

(Command, Control, Communications and Computers) operations, making MISIN fully self-sufficient from a logistical and practical standpoint¹⁵⁷.

Strategically speaking, MISIN is part of a broader process of evolution of the Italian posture in foreign and defence policy, which aims to overcome the conventional approach based on subordinate multinational actions, towards the development of an independent and direct capability of engagement in theatres of national interest. From this perspective, the mission in Niger can be considered as an advanced test-bed of the new Italian war vision, based on stable bilateral partnerships, on a strong expeditionary ability of the Armed Forces and on a combined use of diplomacy and military force in a stabilisation effort¹⁵⁸. The overall economic commitment foreseen for MISIN in 2024 alone - amounting to 9.46 million euros - shows that, although it is a fairly 'lean' mission in terms of numbers, it is of considerable and growing value for Italy¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁷ Ministero della Difesa. (2025). Documento Programmatico Pluriennale per la Difesa per il triennio 2024–2026. Roma: Ministero della Difesa.

¹⁵⁸ Coticchia, F., & Mazziotti di Celso, M. (2024). La partecipazione italiana alle missioni internazionali. Quaderni CeSPI – Donzelli Editore.

¹⁵⁹ Ministero della Difesa. (2023b). *Documento Programmatico Pluriennale per la Difesa per il triennio 2022–2024*. Roma: Ministero della Difesa.

2.3 Impact and challenges of MISIN in the Nigerien context

Prior to the breakdown of the constitutional order in July 2023, as demonstrated, MISIN had consolidated an effective and recognised operational position, contributing significantly to strengthening the skills of Niger's armed forces, namely in core domains such as special operations, counterterrorism and boundary monitoring¹⁶⁰. Nevertheless, the rise to power of the Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (CNSP), following the military coup d'état of General Abdourahamane Tiani, drastically redefined Niger's political and strategic landscape. The suspension of the constitution, the end of cooperation with EU missions (such as EUCAP and EUMPM), and the ouster of French and American troops progressively isolated the country from the Western block, creating a security vacuum that generated new challenges for the Italian space¹⁶¹.

Contrary to other transnational missions perceived as external interference, the Italian participation has managed to retain a margin of legitimacy thanks to its two-faced approach and its discreet and pragmatic attitude. The political decision not to suspend activities, but to adapt them flexibly to the new scenario, allowed Italy to strengthen a relationship of enduring trust with the Niger authorities, avoiding the institutional rupture witnessed by other partners¹⁶². In this picture, the Italian government has confirmed its support through the free transfer of 110 T10-C parachutes and 110 T10-R MIRPS auxiliaries to the Niger Armed Forces, a gesture with a strong symbolic and operational meaning that reinforces the interoperability between the Italian and Nigerien forces¹⁶³.

Over the course of 2024 and 2025, MISIN worked with a reduced contingent (279 units), but with an operational mandate focused on highly qualified tasks: local command support, specialised training, intelligence, MEDEVAC missions, migration monitoring

¹⁶⁰ Stato Maggiore della Difesa. (2023). MISIN debriefing COVI – Relazione del Gen. B. Marceddu.

¹⁶¹ Ministero della Difesa. (2025). Documento Programmatico Pluriennale per la Difesa per il triennio 2024–2026. Roma: Ministero della Difesa.

¹⁶² Ibidem

¹⁶³ Camera dei Deputati. (2025). Atto del Governo n. 251: Cessione gratuita di materiale militare al Niger. Roma: Camera dei Deputati.

and technical cooperation. The operations centre at the AB101 military airport remained fully active, supporting the Nigerien staff in the planning and execution of internal security activities, with a focus on containing the terrorist threat in unstable districts¹⁶⁴.

Besides the military dimension, the political component of the mission has become ever more prominent. The emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) has enshrined the will of these states to build an autonomous regional security architecture, disengaged from ECOWAS and traditional Western influences. In this context, Niger has also been aggressively courting new strategic allies, strengthening relations with Russia, Turkey, China and Iran - as evidenced in Russian soldiers stationed in Niamey and the signing of new bilateral military and technological cooperation agreements. In spite of this, the CNSP authorities have not broken off cooperation with Italy, recognising the non-invasive and respectful nature of its presence. Rather, the institutional visits carried out by Italian delegations - including the Chief of Defence Staff, the Director General for Security Policies of the MAECI and other officials - have confirmed the desire to maintain an open diplomatic line, which may prove crucial in the medium term¹⁶⁵.

The Italian deployment, in this setting, is a rare example of strategic adaptation. MISIN has revealed remarkable operational resilience, demonstrating how a force of modest size can exert a significant influence, if equipped with advanced technical-military capabilities, authority and flexibility in adjusting to the changing circumstances. This is no longer just a training mission, but an authentic geopolitical laboratory in which Italy experiments with new forms of strategic projection, based on balance, respect and the ability to mediate¹⁶⁶. Indeed, it now constitutes a decisive element in Italy's approach to international security in the Mediterranean: it embodies a sober but effective model of intervention that combines military expertise, soft power and the capacity for dialogue in complex environments. Its future will depend on the Italian capacity to remain a credible

¹⁶⁴ Ministero della Difesa. (2025). Documento Programmatico Pluriennale per la Difesa per il triennio 2024–2026. Roma: Ministero della Difesa.

¹⁶⁵ Ibidem

¹⁶⁶ Cotichia, F., & Mazziotti di Celso, M. (2024). La partecipazione italiana alle missioni internazionali. Quaderni CeSPI – Donzelli Editore.

and self-reliant agent in the Sahel, in an international landscape that increasingly demands adaptive leadership and ingenious vision.

CHAPTER III

INTELLIGENCE AND COOPERATION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM IN NIGER

3.1 The role of intelligence in countering security threats in Niger

As has been proved in past chapters, Niger is consolidating itself as a key geostrategic hub for Sahelian regional security and international stability. The country is a natural proliferation ground for criminal activities of various kinds - arms, drugs, human beings and commodities. In this scenario, the risks have multiplied: not only the persistent threat of jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, but also the penetration of transnational criminal networks capable of exploiting the governance gap and the conditions of the population's socio-economic fragility.¹⁶⁷

The hybrid and highly adaptable fluid nature of these menaces makes the systematic and advanced use of intelligence imperative. It is not limited to the mere gathering of information, but acts as a true driver of the situational knowledge (Comprehensive Understanding of the Operating Environment) needed to anticipate emerging crises, direct policy decisions and plan security operations. In the Sahelian environment, the possibility of producing an accurate and timely information picture reveals itself to be essential to counter these evolving phenomena¹⁶⁸.

With the 2015 White Paper for International Security and Defence, Italy had already grasped the urgency of turning its military deployment around: flexibility, interoperability

¹⁶⁷ Casola, C., & Baldaro, E. (2021). *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*. ISPI Policy Brief.

¹⁶⁸ Lesti, S., & Fiorani, A. (2021). *Ruolo dello strumento militare nell'area sahariana: stabilità e sicurezza*.

and rapid projection capabilities in sensitive theatres were set as strategic priorities. From this perspective, the Sahel and Niger took on the value of areas of interest for Euro-Mediterranean defence, but the approach was still focused on crisis prevention and mitigation. A comprehensive policy was outlined aimed at integrating military, diplomatic and development cooperation components, alongside a substantial investment in autonomous ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) capacities, including the use of UAVs for aerial observation and HUMINT collection through mentoring activities with local forces. The method involved reducing dependence on Western forces through capacity building of African armed forces: a concrete instance is the Italian Support Mission in Niger (MISIN), in charge of training Niger special forces in counter-terrorism, trafficking and border management¹⁶⁹.

Nevertheless, the speeding up of the international conflict - marked by the Russian-Ukrainian war, the growing instability in the Middle East and the fragmentation of Sahelian states such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger - has forced a radical paradigm shift. The 2024-2026 Multiannual Defence Planning Document embraces this new reality: wartime competition has given way to a permanent hybrid confrontation, in which the challenge is not only militaristic but also crosses simultaneously cyber, space, economic, information and civil domains¹⁷⁰.

The first major revolution introduced by the 2024-2026 Multi-year Defence Planning Document concerns the overcoming of the traditional logic of 'crisis management' in favour of active deterrence and a high-intensity attitude. The Italian Armed Forces are no longer called upon only to intervene to stabilise emergency situations, but to be ready to sustain prolonged and asymmetrical conflicts against opponents with technological and military capabilities comparable to ours. This entails a massive enhancement of operational readiness, the systematic replenishment of stocks of armaments and

¹⁶⁹ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

¹⁷⁰ Ministero della Difesa. (2024b). *Documento Programmatico Pluriennale della Difesa per il triennio 2024-2026*.

ammunition, and a profound restructuring of defence logistics to ensure the continuous support of manoeuvres over the long term¹⁷¹.

A crucial cornerstone is the expansion of operational capacity to the cyber and space realms. However, cyberspace is acknowledged as a full-fledged arena, within which Italy must be prepared to perform both defensive and offensive tasks, thereby shielding its critical assets from cyber attacks. In a similar way, space emerges as the new frontier of national security: protecting satellite systems, ensuring the security of communications and keeping an eye on enemy activity outside the atmosphere becomes an inescapable operational concern¹⁷².

Standing closely to these advances in technology, the DPP launches the concept of cognitive warfare, recognising that the control of information, the manipulation of perceptions and the ability to guard against disinformation are now indispensable components of homeland protection. The cognitive dimension, the one that directly influences public opinion, democratic dynamics and the legitimacy of the army's actions, is thus considered a battleground on a par with the traditional physical ones. This vision is accompanied by the adoption of a systemic whole-of-government approach, which definitively breaks down the compartmentalisation between the various dimensions of the state. Crisis response can no longer be only military: it must concurrently involve diplomatic, economic, industrial and development cooperative instruments. This framed strategy is designed to tackle emergencies at their root, working concomitantly on the physical safety, social resilience and economic sustainability of partner countries, primarily African ones like Niger¹⁷³.

Ultimately, the power to track, predict and react to threats is strengthened through the enhancement of multi-domain ISR capabilities. Surveillance, intelligence and

¹⁷¹ Ministero della Difesa. (2024b). *Documento Programmatico Pluriennale della Difesa per il triennio 2024–2026*.

¹⁷² Ibidem

¹⁷³ Ibidem

reconnaissance operations rely no longer only on traditional means, they are now amplified by the intensive use of newly emerging techniques: artificial intelligence, predictive big data analysis, quantum computing and unmanned ground, air and space systems. These tools make it possible to maintain capillary, continuous and real-time control over wide territories such as the desert areas of Niger, reducing the direct exposure of operators and improving decision-making capacity even in extremely volatile and changing environments¹⁷⁴.

The Italian secret services in Niger are not acting in isolated manner, rather they are included in an articulated network of multilateral cooperation comprising both European missions and broader international alliances. Among the most significant collaborations is the one with the French operation Barkhane, active until 2022 as the main European effort in the fight against jihadist terrorism in the Sahel. Despite the fact that Barkhane has progressively scaled down its presence since its withdrawal from Mali, its network of bases, ISR assets and intelligence-gathering channels continues to provide an important source of data and logistical support for Italian operations and for MISIN in particular¹⁷⁵.

Meanwhile, the involvement in the Takuba Task Force, a French-led initiative that has seen the engagement of several European countries, including Italy, has bolstered the capacity for integrated execution in the counter-terrorism field in Liptako-Gourma, an area lying between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Takuba, which was set up to assist local armed forces in operations against jihadist groups, has fostered a seamless exchange of information between European contingents, improving the joint response capacity to nascent threats¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem

¹⁷⁵ Casola, C., & Baldaro, E. (2021). *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*. ISPI Policy Brief.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem

Moreover, there is the crucial role played by the EU missions, especially EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger. The EUTM mission, dedicated to training and building the operational capacity of the Malian armed forces, also indirectly contributes to Niger by providing an up-to-date picture of the dynamics of cross-border armed groups, as many jihadist movements operate without recognising national borders. On the other hand, EUCAP Sahel Niger works directly on Nigerien soil, supporting internal security forces in border management and countering illicit trafficking, providing valuable information that Italy can integrate into its strategic analyses¹⁷⁷.

On the non-European front, coordination with the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) is an irreplaceable capability multiplier. US ISR assets, mainly based at the Agadez and Niamey bases, deliver aerial surveillance coverage, satellite imagery, communications interception and large-scale screening of suspicious movements. Such backup is vital to compensate for the structural and technological constraints of European forces, allowing Italy to have access to a much wider and more timely information pool than it would be possible to manage autonomously¹⁷⁸. This multi-layered partnership's added value is measured in the ability to build a shared situational awareness (Common Operational Picture), which is fundamental to anticipate threats and plan targeted and effective interventions. Therefore, it deals not only with a passive sharing of information, but with a moving process in which each actor enriches the overall picture with its own operational, linguistic, cultural and technological specificities¹⁷⁹.

Against this background, intelligence is confirmed as the absolute core of Italy's strategy in the Sahel, and notably in Niger. It not only makes it possible to neutralise immediate threats - such as terrorist attacks, kidnappings or cross-border incursions - but above all constitutes a key long-term investment. The aim is not only to respond to crises, but to

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem

¹⁷⁸ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

¹⁷⁹ Ministero della Difesa. (2024b). *Documento Programmatico Pluriennale della Difesa per il triennio 2024–2026*.

prevent them, helping to build lasting stability that serves both Italian and European and, more broadly, the Mediterranean security interests¹⁸⁰.

Thus, the Italian presence in Niger through MISIN is more than a mere military projection: it is a forecast of strategical influence, based on intelligence, multilateral cooperation and the ability to operate in an environment characterised by chronic instability, institutional shocks and growing geopolitical competition. The security of Niger, and more generally of the Sahel, is today seen as interdependent with that of Europe: the collapse of the region, besides directly threatening Europe through uncontrolled migratory waves and the empowerment of terrorist organisations, would have devastating effects on the political, economic and social stability of the enlarged Mediterranean¹⁸¹.

Hence, for these reasons, the Italian government intends not only to entrench its informational and operational footprint in Niger, it aspires to enhance it in the coming years, in line with what is mapped out in the DPP 2024-2026. Indeed, the ongoing issue is not only to maintain a temporary security posture, rather to build a resilient architecture, capable of adapting to the ever-changing Sahelian scenario and to stand as a bulwark against rising global threats.

3.2 Cooperation between Italy and international partners in intelligence

The cooperation of Italy with international partners in the field of intelligence in Niger develops as a sophisticated, multi-tiered action, which can integrate traditional and innovative tactics in an extremely complex operational setting. In a regional context marked by the presence of terrorist groups such as JNIM and ISGS, transnational criminal

¹⁸⁰ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

¹⁸¹ Ministero della Difesa. (2024b). *Documento Programmatico Pluriennale della Difesa per il triennio 2024–2026*.

networks, and phenomena of food and economic insecurity, cooperative intelligence is the main tool to anticipate, prevent and neutralise those risks¹⁸².

The Italian government adopts a multidimensional method, based on a three-pronged approach: providing targeted support to the capacity building of local forces, multilateral coordination within the EU-NATO-UN, and the integration of civilian and military sources in the operational information cycle. In the former sphere, Italy has set up highly specialised training programmes, aimed at both armed forces personnel and domestic security forces agents. These courses focus on advanced HUMINT collection techniques, SIGINT analysis, OSINT source management and counter-IED intelligence, which are pivotal in a theatre of operations where the use of IEDs is a daily menace¹⁸³.

Alongside training, the Italian Republic has implemented an operational mentoring system that envisages the permanent presence of teams of intelligence advisors, embedded in the local chains of command and tasked to support Niger counterparts on a routine basis in planning, assessing risks and managing information. This initiative, inspired by the principles of mission command and partnership-based security, aims to transfer operational and methodological skills in a progressive manner, fostering the decision-making independence of local partners¹⁸⁴.

From the multiple perspectives, Italy plays an active role in European and international intelligence coordination mechanisms, guaranteeing a qualified presence in regional fusion centres, where information from a multitude of sources (military, civilian, economic and social intelligence) converges. Moreover, intelligence cooperation is articulated through target analysis activities, the production of shared threat assessments, and the elaboration of early warning indicators on migration flows, terrorist activities and organised crime trends. The Italian contribution stands out for its focus on predictive analysis, made feasible by the adoption of big data analysis tools and machine learning models applied to intelligence¹⁸⁵.

¹⁸² Ibidem

¹⁸³ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

¹⁸⁴ Stato Maggiore della Difesa – Reparto Operazioni. (2025). *BRIEFING CIMIC – Executive Plan 2025*.

¹⁸⁵ CIMIC Centre of Excellence. (2022). *CIMIC Handbook*.

A special emphasis is placed on the mainstreaming of cultural and human intelligence, through the involvement of CIMIC teams with expertise in intelligence collection among local communities. As part of this effort, information gained through contacts with traditional leaders, religious authorities, village leaders and NGOs is systematically incorporated into military analysis mechanisms, offering an in-depth comprehension of the social dynamics that can fuel insurgency, terrorist recruitment or political unrest¹⁸⁶.

Regarding the field of technology, Italy contributed to help the Nigerien security personnel and armed troops implement safe, encrypted communication methods. In a region that is known for frequent cyberthreats and coordinated group interception attempts, these solutions have been essential in enhancing the resilience of telecommunication. By the same token, operational protocols were developed for the protection of classified information, the reliable management of sources and the prevention of leaks, crucial elements for the success of joint operations¹⁸⁷. Whereas, considering the operative plan, the Italian intelligence provided support to the organisation and management of regional information fusion and liaison centres (Regional Fusion and Liaison Centres), fostering the connection between international troops, Niger authorities and civil intelligence bodies. In these centres, multi-sector risk analyses are elaborated to assist the operational planning of multinational missions and local forces, from the defence of humanitarian convoys to anti-terrorist actions in the most isolated rural lands¹⁸⁸.

¹⁸⁶ Aniekwe, C. C., & Salami, A. O. (2023). *Regional Study on CIMIC Best Practices and Lessons*. African Union – Stabilisation Facility.

¹⁸⁷ Ministero della Difesa. (2024b). *Documento Programmatico Pluriennale della Difesa per il triennio 2024–2026*.

¹⁸⁸ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.



Image 3.1 – “CIMIC activities carried out by the Italian component in Niger (MISIN): meetings, liaison, inspections and projects carried out up to 2025.”

Source: Ministry of Defence. (2024.). CIMIC briefing [PowerPoint slide 4]. Unpublished document.

An innovative aspect of Italian cooperation lies in the adoption of dynamic population behaviour analysis models (Behaviour Analysis Modeling), which combine demographic, social, economic and cultural data with patterns of terrorist activity, in such a way as to identify potential sites at risk of radicalisation or armed insurgency. These patterns have been used, for example, to plan prevention operations in the Tillaberi and Tahoua territories, reducing the escalation of intercommunal conflicts¹⁸⁹. Furthermore, on the strategic side, Italy promotes an ‘intelligence partnership’ approach, based on building mutual trust that enables sensitive and timely information sharing. This has also been made possible through the political and diplomatic success of the MAECI, which has incorporated intelligence collaboration into the broader strategy of the Italian role in the Sahel, aimed to stabilise the entire Wider Mediterranean area¹⁹⁰.

In the final analysis, the coordination between Italy and the various international players is not limited purely to the provision of technical or operational assistance. It takes the form of a fundamental milestone in the process of building a cohesive, resilient, autonomous and sustainable security. Italy engages in strengthening domestic capacities through training missions, institutional support, and capacity building initiatives,

¹⁸⁹ CIMIC Centre of Excellence. (2022). *CIMIC Handbook*.

¹⁹⁰ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024a). *Nota d’Inquadramento 2025 – Niger*.

advocating for a strategy aimed at gradually equipping regional allies to handle their own security concerns¹⁹¹.

The stabilisation of the Sahel intervention areas can no longer be considered an objective narrowly circumscribed to the regional framework, but as a structural element of Italian and European internal security. Phenomena such as transnational terrorism, illicit trafficking in arms, drugs and human beings, and irregular migratory movements develop in surroundings marked by institutional weakness and socio-economic vulnerabilities, and spread extremely rapidly beyond state frontiers, affecting the Euro-Mediterranean space head-on. In this regard, Niger, due to its geographical position and level of sensitivity, stands out as a vital crossroads, a point of friction but also of feasible containment, provided that it is invested in in a systematic and coordinated manner¹⁹²

Therefore, Italy perceives international cooperation as not merely an act of solidarity, but as a strategic investment in its own national security. Italian intervention in the Sahelian lands is inserted in a broader 'Greater Mediterranean' rationale, which goes beyond the customary distinction between the global North and South and recognises the interdependence between African stability and European security. In this light, the action in the Sahel does not simply address an imperative of external projection, but an domestic need, since preventing the collapse of states in the region is equivalent for reducing the pressure on boundaries which are already exposed to frequent stresses and for curbing access to criminal and jihadist networks operating on an intercontinental scale¹⁹³.

Such approach allows the Italian government to place itself as a leading player on the international landscape, capable of marrying national interest and multilateral support. The engagement in the Sahel reinforces Italy's credibility, especially in a geopolitical sphere increasingly marked by the dynamics of polarisation and competition between powers. Due to the result of an Italian pragmatic policy directed at creating well-structured alliances, Italy is a promoter of stability that actively takes part in the European Union and multinational environments. This role is not only an extension of the Italian

¹⁹¹ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

¹⁹² Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

¹⁹³ Casola, C., & Baldaro, E. (2021). *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*. ISPI Policy Brief.

political influence in the African context, but also enriches the European collective security system, making it converge with the hybrid and interconnected demands of the modern times¹⁹⁴.

3.3 Obstacles and opportunities to boost intelligence operations

Niger's geopolitical placement and internal conditions generate an array of institutional and environmental obstacles that hinder the progress of Italian intelligence operations in the nation. The primary hurdle was the political disruption, which significantly undermined trust between several European and African partners and weakened the fabric of multi-stakeholder cooperation which, until then, had also sustained intelligence-gathering and analysis activities¹⁹⁵. The breakdown of many programmes, such as the European Multi-Annual Indicative Plan, deprived Niger of fundamental tools for regional coordination against the jihadist threat, also hampering Italian intervention¹⁹⁶

Besides this uncertain political framework, the operational complications are amplified by the geography of Niger itself: a vast, predominantly desert and sparsely populated terrain that naturally offers refuge to terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). However, the regions of Tillabéri and Diffa, in turn, have become theatres of low-intensity disputes which often escape detection by regular forces. Under these circumstances, the work of intelligence is obstructed by the restricted access to the territories, the lack of an adequate infrastructure network and the organisational weakness of local forces, which, although showing effort, tend to remain poorly equipped and under-trained¹⁹⁷.

The distrust towards foreign forces, fuelled by increasing anti-Western sentiments in the Sahel, poses a supplementary impediment: in order to gain valuable information, it is indispensable to win the consent of local populations, who are often victims of the jihadist

¹⁹⁴ Ibidem

¹⁹⁵ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

¹⁹⁶ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024a). *Nota d'Inquadramento 2025 – Niger*.

¹⁹⁷ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

narrative which portrays external militaries as new colonisers¹⁹⁸. Moreover, such situation makes the intelligence activities' complement to the civil-military cooperation initiatives even more strategic, which through the establishment of school, health and water projects promoted by MISIN contribute to build a capital of mutual reliability¹⁹⁹.

Nevertheless, in this intensely challenging scenario, concrete opportunities for the eventual enhancement of Italian intelligence missions also appear. An initial chance lies in the resilience of the Italian presence. Since the French, American, and other European partners withdrew, Italy is now the only Western player still operational and recognised by the new Niger government²⁰⁰. This privileged status, earned thanks to the persistence of diplomatic dialogue and the professionalism demonstrated in the field of army training, guarantees direct channels of communication and confidence which can be exploited to gather substantial data.

In addition, the work carried out by the MISIN contingent was capable of integrating dedicated training activities, such as C-IED (Counter-IED) courses, parachuting and operational intervention techniques, with tactical intelligence formation for the Nigerien security forces. This method not only elevates the local ability to tackle threats independently, but also sets up reliable interlocutors for shared intelligence tasks²⁰¹.

In terms of civilian operations, the action of the Italian Cooperation is also a crucial strategic lever for the indirect strengthening of intelligence activities in Niger. Especially, initiatives such as the PAMIRTA Programme, aimed at improving access to agricultural markets in the Tahoua region, and the ZARESE II project, dedicated to environmental resilience and sustainable management of natural resources, intervene on the socio-economic vulnerabilities that have always been fertile ground for jihadist proselytism²⁰². By acting on the root causes of insecurity - such as poverty, youth unemployment and

¹⁹⁸ Casola, C., & Baldaro, E. (2021). *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*. ISPI Policy Brief.

¹⁹⁹ UNDP. (2023). *Regional study on CIMIC good practices and lessons on the implementation of UNDP stabilization programme in the Lake Chad Basin*

²⁰⁰ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

²⁰¹ Ibidem

²⁰² Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. (2024). *Cooperazione Italiana in Niger – Progetti AICS*.

environmental degradation - these projects help boost the resilience of local communities, while reducing the potential recruitment pool for armed groups²⁰³.



Image 3.2 – “Map of the area affected by the Boko Haram crisis in the Lake Chad Basin. The Diffa region in Niger is highlighted among the areas of insecurity and internal dislocation.”

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UN OCHA]. (2023). Regional study on CIMIC good practices and lessons: On the implementation of UNDP stabilization programme in the Lake Chad Basin (p. 12).

Through these initiatives, especially in the most isolated rural areas, the fabric of interaction between Italian populations and civil actors is strengthened. This daily contact, often mediated by local associations and partner civil society organisations, enables the development of informal channels for gathering information. Whenever there is scarce or no state presence, such as in the rural districts of Illéla, Malbaza or Bouza, hearing the communities and building relationships of mutual trust become privileged conduits for the acquisition of sensitive data on the movements of armed groups, security dynamics and local perceptions of menaces. To this extent, cooperation projects are not only economic development tools, but also true multipliers of situational awareness for Italian agents in the field²⁰⁴. Alongside these local dimensions, an alternative perspective is emerging at the regional level through the institution of knowledge management platforms, such as those promoted by the Regional Stabilisation Secretariat of the Lake Chad Basin Commission. Such platforms respond to the demand to overcome the conventional intelligence approach, founded on vertical flows of information, favouring

²⁰³ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

²⁰⁴ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. (2024). *Cooperazione Italiana in Niger – Progetti AICS*.

instead the construction of shared information ecosystems between military, governmental and civil society entities²⁰⁵.

In practical application, these interfaces enable the rapid exchange of integrated analyses, risk maps, early warning reports and lessons learned from CIMIC missions, humanitarian agencies, local security forces and civilian observers. This continuous flow of data expands the ability to predict and prevent crises, improving the efficiency and timeliness of operational intelligence. The possibility of overlaying humanitarian information (such as movements of displaced populations, food crises or epidemics) with military data (presence of armed groups, illicit activities) provides a 360-degree view of the actual threat, which is crucial for a multi-domain approach to security²⁰⁶. Equally important is the standardisation of information protocols and analytical methodologies. Indeed, the adoption of common criteria for data collection, storage and interpretation facilitates interoperability between different players - be they armed forces, police, development agencies or international organisations. In perspective, this will also allow Italy to join regional multilateral intelligence networks with a qualified role, drawing on the experience gained in projects such as those conducted in the framework of the Lake Chad Basin Stabilization Programme²⁰⁷. Another aspect that should not be underestimated is the technological innovation: the possibility of stepping up the use of ISR assets by means of small drones and satellite observation systems, also within the scope of cooperation with the European Copernicus programme, can compensate, at least in part, for the difficulties arising from the physical accessibility of hostile territories²⁰⁸.

After all, the synergy between civil cooperation and military intelligence is not just a tactical option, but a real long-term strategy. The building of trust networks in rural communities, combined with the hi-tech advancement of knowledge-sharing platforms, significantly enhances Italy's ability to monitor, comprehend and anticipate the unstable waves in Niger and the entire Sahel-Saharan context²⁰⁹. To conclude, the Nigerien setting

²⁰⁵ UNDP. (2023). *Regional study on CIMIC good practices and lessons on the implementation of UNDP stabilization programme in the Lake Chad Basin*

²⁰⁶ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024a). *Nota d'Inquadramento 2025 – Niger*.

²⁰⁷ UNDP. (2023). *Regional study on CIMIC good practices and lessons on the implementation of UNDP stabilization programme in the Lake Chad Basin*

²⁰⁸ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

²⁰⁹ Casola, C., & Baldaro, E. (2021). *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*. ISPI Policy Brief.

presents itself as a rugged but rich terrain for Italian intelligence operations. Being able to integrate human intelligence (HUMINT), development cooperation and technical improvement is the real answer to turn the fragilities of the current Nigerien situation into an asset to consolidate the Italian projection in the region²¹⁰.

3.4 The effects of intelligence on regional security in Niger

As a consequence, the impact of Italian intelligence activities on regional security in Niger has manifested itself in a profound and multilevel manner, going far beyond the mere tactical dimension. From the initial phase of MISIN's deployment in 2018, to the most recent evolutions which followed the takeover in 2023, intelligence work has become an essential component of Italian foreign policy in the Sahel, which is capable of producing both immediate and structural effects²¹¹.

On an operative front, one of the main positive results has been the improvement of surveillance and territorial control capabilities by the Niger forces, mainly in the border areas most exposed to the infiltration of armed groups such as Boko Haram, ISGS and JNIM. The intelligence collected through training and mentoring activities - such as infantry and special operations programmes - has made it possible to enhance advanced observation techniques, construct up-to-date risk maps and implement preventive operations against trafficking in arms, drugs and migrants²¹². Between 2021 and 2024, the number of unexpected attacks in the Tillabéri and Diffa regions significantly decreased due to the widespread adoption of data collection and analysis protocols among the security forces' ranks, which strengthened the resilience of local government garrisons²¹³.

Another notable effect has been the potential to generate a more robust early warning system. The collection of intelligence from open sources, local community networks - often fed through CIMIC initiatives - and institutional channels has allowed the development of an early warning system that has improved emergency management and

²¹⁰ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. (2024). *Cooperazione Italiana in Niger – Progetti AICS*.

²¹¹ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

²¹² Ibidem

²¹³ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024a). *Nota d'Inquadramento 2025 – Niger*.

the sheltering of susceptible groups. In several cases, the intelligence gathered has allowed for the pre-emptive evacuation of villages at risk of jihadist attack, thus safeguarding the lives of thousands of civilians and preventing escalations of violence²¹⁴.

The transformative impact which intelligence work has had on Niger's security governance model has been no less impressive. Prior to the start of collaboration with the Italian mission, security operations were marked by a strong reactivity, based on ex-post interventions rather than informed planning. As a result of the introduction of targeted intelligence procedures, there has been a gradual shift from a purely responsive model to a proactive and predictive one, in which foresight of threats has become an operational priority. Underpinned by Italian training, this cultural change has helped strengthen the legitimacy of security institutions in the eyes of local populations, hitherto often distrustful or overtly hostile²¹⁵.



Image 3.3 - “Activities carried out by the Italian MISIN mission in Niger between 2018 and 2024, including military training sessions, trained soldiers, and civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) projects.”

Source: Ministero della Difesa. (2024). Missione Bilaterale di Supporto Italiana in Niger (MISIN): Scheda di sintesi (p. 3). Not published document.

One additional consequence, of a more strategic origin, concerns the reinforcement of regional ties. The Italian Intelligence Services have indirectly facilitated cooperation between Niger, Chad, Nigeria and Cameroon within the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), providing analytical methodologies that have aided coordinated operations

²¹⁴ Aniekwe, C. C., & Salami, A. O. (2023). *Regional Study on CIMIC Best Practices and Lessons*. African Union – Stabilisation Facility.

²¹⁵ Casola, C., & Baldaro, E. (2021). *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*. ISPI Policy Brief.

against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad islands. Furthermore, the Italian involvement in the implementation of regional knowledge-sharing systems partly filled the gap left by the withdrawal of some traditional international stakeholders, such as France after the end of Operation Barkhane, contributing to the continuity of the stabilisation effort²¹⁶.

Even in terms of international perception, the role of Italian intelligence activity proved decisive. Despite the deterioration of relations between Niger and some Western actors, Italy has maintained a distinctive position, enhanced precisely by its discreet, pragmatic and capacity-building-oriented approach. This has allowed Rome to cement its position as a privileged interlocutor, placing itself as a bridge between the security needs of the Sahelian governments and the stability priorities of Southern Europe²¹⁷.

Inside Niger, the power to conduct built-in intelligence operations also produced indirect effects in countering the humanitarian crisis. The close correlation between security and development became evident: with a better understanding and anticipation of the movements of displaced populations, the coordination of humanitarian aids could be implemented better, mitigating the danger of further social distress and fostering local resilience. Rural development projects already mentioned, such as PAMIRTA, and food security programmes such as ZARESE II have benefited from the information provided by intelligence officers in selecting the safest and most crucial areas of intervention²¹⁸.

Ultimately, looking to the future, the most promising and structurally transformative outcome of Italian intelligence operations in Niger is manifested in the incremental building of a participatory security culture. This process does not only concern the transmission of technical or operational expertise, but implies a real paradigm shift in the way local communities conceive the concept of security: no longer as an exclusive function of the armed forces or central institutions, but as a shared responsibility articulated on several stages²¹⁹.

²¹⁶ UNDP. (2023). *Regional study on CIMIC good practices and lessons on the implementation of UNDP stabilization programme in the Lake Chad Basin*

²¹⁷ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024a). *Nota d'Inquadramento 2025 – Niger*.

²¹⁸ Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. (2024). *Cooperazione Italiana in Niger – Progetti AICS*.

²¹⁹ Casola, C., & Baldaro, E. (2021). *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*. ISPI Policy Brief.

Towards this direction, a fundamental role is played by the promotion of community vigilance networks which, in many suburban and peripheral zones, constitute the first line of defence against the infiltration of armed groups or criminal organisations. Italy, also owing to its historical experience in the field of decentralised cooperation and civil security, has been able to stimulate a bottom-up approach, encouraging the establishment of local security committees, which are often informal but highly effective in picking up early signs of instability²²⁰. These mechanisms have proved crucial, especially in fragile scenarios such as the villages of the Tillabéri region, where the absence of the central state makes systematic control of the territory problematic.

In the meantime, the sensitisation of traditional and religious leaders - reference figures still central to Niger's social fabric - has facilitated dialogue between the population and the forces of law and order, helping to mend the trust deficit that for years had fuelled ambiguity between local groups and jihadist actors. Involving these players not only in the passing on information, as well as in the shaping of alternative narratives to radical propaganda, is a decisive step in setting up an extremism-averse environment²²¹.

A supplementary piece of this process is the active inclusion of women and young people in security-related decision-making processes. Women, who are often excluded from the formal seats of power, nevertheless play a key role in community cohesion and the circulation of information. Educating them, involving them in oversight committees or awareness-raising campaigns against radicalisation, means strengthening the inner resilience of communities and recognising the strategic value of human security. The same goes for young people - the dominant demographic group in Niger - who are often the most vulnerable to the rhetoric of armed groups: embedding them in participative security programmes allows them to be pulled out of marginalisation and offered a concrete alternative²²².

These results, although less visible than the numbers of military operations, embody the most lasting and sustainable effects of Italian action. As a matter of fact, a shared and

²²⁰ Ministero della Difesa. (2024a). *Scheda Missione MISIN*.

²²¹ UNDP. (2023). *Regional study on CIMIC good practices and lessons on the implementation of UNDP stabilization programme in the Lake Chad Basin*.

²²² Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. (2024). *Cooperazione Italiana in Niger – Progetti AICS*.

participatory security culture has the potential to survive the presence of foreign contingents and to take root in the social tissue as a mechanism of endogenous stability, capable of reacting to crises in an autonomous and non-violent manner. According to this perspective, Italian intelligence - far from being an exclusively technical tool - is configured as an agent of social change, which can bind state security to local justice, and crime repression to the consolidation of mutual trust between citizens and institutions²²³.

²²³ Casola, C., & Baldaro, E. (2021). *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*. ISPI Policy Brief.

CHAPTER IV

GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES AND THE FUTURE OF THE ITALIAN PRESENCE IN NIGER

4.1 Future security scenarios for Niger and the Sahel

Today, the Sahel region is facing an acute and multidimensional crisis, amplified by recent extremely destabilising political and military changes. The coups that have taken place in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and especially in Niger, until lately deemed the main Western ally and benchmark in the area, have pushed the entire territory into a spiral of militarism and authoritarianism that has significantly aggravated the already precarious local socio-political conditions²²⁴. This environment has made it especially conducive to the expansion of jihadist violence, which can successfully utilize the vacuum of power and existing apprehension at a generalized level to increase its domain and gather new recruits. A major northward flow of migrants has been a result of the deepening humanitarian crisis, one that has served to make the regional context worse and heap pressure on countries neighbouring it as well as the borders of Europe²²⁵.

These evolutions have profoundly changed the geopolitical dimensions in the Sahel, which are now characterised by the growing influence of Russia, which has taken advantage of the turmoil to forcefully insert itself through the Wagner Group, recently re-branded Africa Corps. The Russian surge has led to a progressive side-lining of conventional Western military presences, such as Operation Barkhane and the UN's MINUSMA²²⁶. This replacement of the traditional tactical alliances has made the regional

²²⁴ Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica. (2023). *Relazione annuale sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza*. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

²²⁵ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform.

²²⁶ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

picture extremely intricate and unforeseeable, considerably reducing the Western capacity to take effective action to curb emerging threats²²⁷.

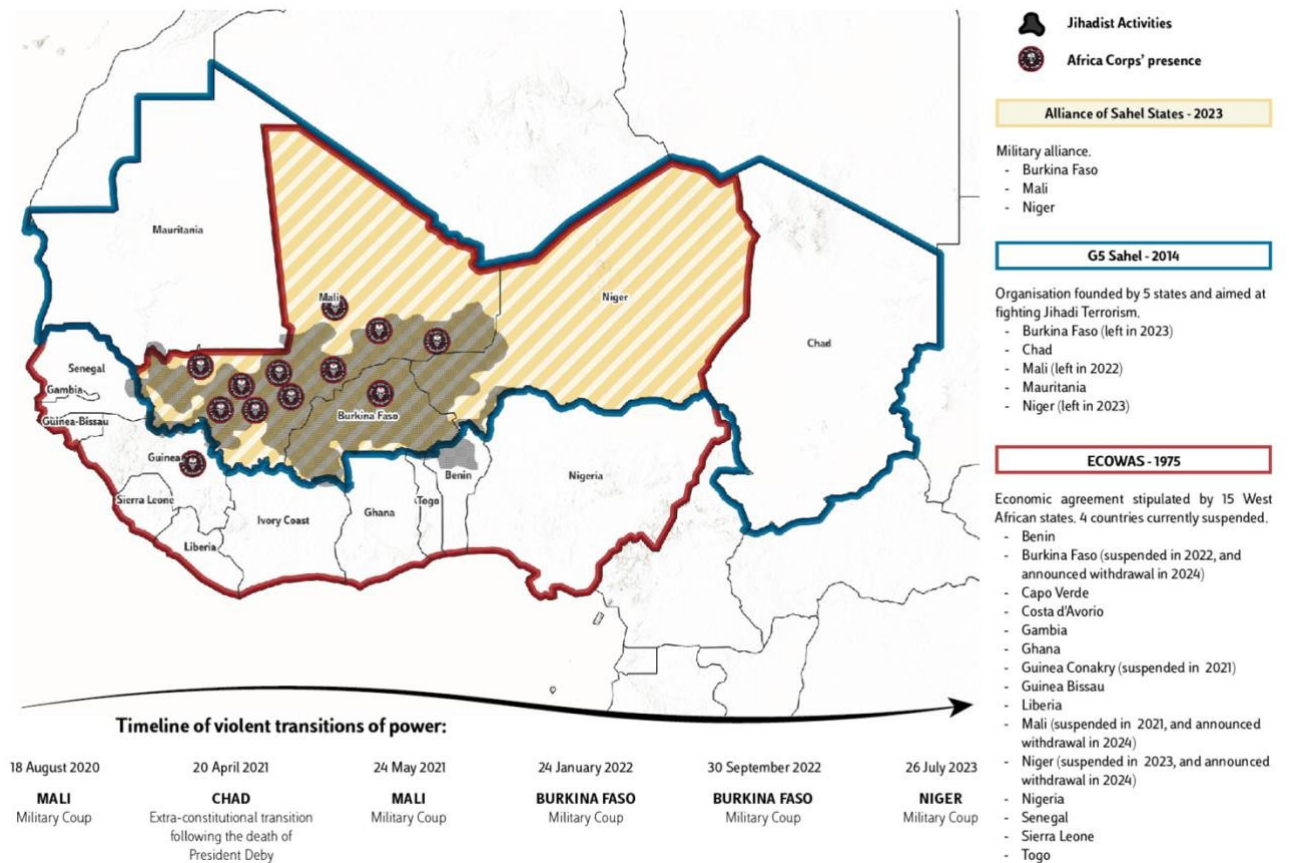


Image 4.1: “The Sahel turmoil”

Source: Italian Intelligence System for the Security of the Republic. (2023). Annual report on security information policy. Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

Evaluating possible future scenarios, a multiplicity of feasible trajectories clearly appears. The first perspective, termed ‘point of no return’, represents an extremely negative picture in which the region would descend further into chaos and instability. Military regimes would consolidate their control with ever more authoritarian and repressive governance, showing little or no care for the welfare of the civilian population. This authoritarian attitude would inevitably worsen the domestic frictions and fuel tribal and intercommunal conflicts. The presence of hostile external actors, especially Russia, would become

²²⁷ Tauber, M. (2021). *Il Sahel come sfida strategica per l'Italia: la crisi del Niger e la prospettiva europea*. Tesi di Master in Geopolitica, SIOI.

increasingly entrenched and dominant, contributing to an irreversible marginalisation of Western forces. Conversely, jihadist groups could take advantage of the unrest to greatly enlarge their range of action, not limiting themselves to the Sahel alone, instead advancing towards the Gulf of Guinea, thus further escalating migratory shocks and directly and substantially increasing attacks on Europe²²⁸.

By contrast, a second, more optimistic scenario, dubbed ‘oasis in turmoil’, imagines the concrete chance to initiate national and local reconciliation processes. Although political stability would remain precarious and fragile, governments in the region could undertake concrete attempts to establish channels of dialogue with non-extremist armed groups, thus seeking to diminish inter-communal tensions through targeted negotiations and agreements. With these premises, Russia would continue to maintain a relevant influence, but local populations and political elites could gradually become aware of the risks associated with this external partnership, stimulating a return to dialogue and cooperation with European partners and regional organisations such as ECOWAS and the African Union. This setting could offer a real prospect of restoring, at least partially, a more balanced and inclusive system of governance²²⁹.

A follow-up and third vision called the ‘mirage of stability’ scenario could present an apparently positive situation, but one that is inherently fractious and doomed to deteriorate rapidly. In this perspective, military regimes would strive to legitimise themselves by organising symbolic elections or establishing civilian governments lacking real autonomy and decision-making power. Such a strategy, aimed primarily at obtaining formal international legitimacy, would not solve the region's structural troubles, and the failure to genuinely involve civilian institutions and local populations would make the whole situation intolerable in the long run, with a subsequent degeneration towards an even deeper and more lasting recession²³⁰.

In conclusion, the best of the scenarios, although extremely unlikely in the short term, envisages a return to a genuine democratic transition sustained by new inclusive social

²²⁸ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform.

²²⁹ Ibidem

²³⁰ Ibidem

pacts. In this optimal vision, military forces would play a crucial but temporary role, guaranteeing the security required for a peaceful changeover to truly representative civilian governments legitimised by popular consensus. These new players would possess the ability to form solid international relationships, especially with the various European and Western actors, enhancing democratic institutions along with promoting sustainable socio-economic development. Institutionalisation of local peace-building and community reconciliation processes would also be crucial in addressing the deep root causes of insecurity and radicalisation, thus effectively putting an end to the jihadist menace²³¹.

Regardless, it is evident that the future of safety in the Sahel and precisely in Niger, a focal spot of the Italian and Western presence, will require an articulated, far-sighted and coherent strategic policy approach. The growing Russian involvement, widespread political instability and persistent threats from armed groups impose an extremely dynamic and adaptable Italian and European foreign and defence policy, capable of combining geopolitical realism with constant endorsement of democratic values and human rights in a balanced manner²³². Therefore, it is imperative that Italy and its European allies engage proactively in the region, investing not only in security and defence cooperation, but also in economic growth, training and cultural collaboration, in order to provide the necessary foundation for a durable and sustainable peace. This multidimensional approach is the single best way to mitigate the current risks and turn the existing challenges into concrete windows of opportunity for the stabilisation and renaissance of the Sahel²³³.

4.2 The prospects of MISIN and the Italian commitment in the Sahel

Nowadays, the Bilateral Support Mission in Niger (MISIN), as described in the previous chapters, stands as a pivotal element of Italy's interests in the Sahel, a region of great strategic importance for the Mediterranean and the whole of Europe, especially in terms

²³¹ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

²³² Reitano, T., & Shaw, M. (2021). *The evolution of civil-military cooperation: Lessons from West Africa*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

²³³ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform.

of security, migration management and counter-terrorism²³⁴. Since 2018, MISIN has had the primary goal of bolstering the operational capacity of the Nigerien military by training and education programmes, so as to contribute to the stabilisation and security of the country as well as to the whole Sahel region²³⁵.

The mission has proved to be not merely a military affair, but a cornerstone of Italian foreign policy, complementing a broader strategy that includes diplomatic, economic and civil collaboration. Since its inception, this operation has envisaged activities aimed at training Niger's military and security personnel, mainly focused on improving the response capacity of local armed forces against terrorist threats. To be precise, Italian instructors, from different components of the Armed Forces, played a leading role in specialised training, covering different operational areas such as countering improvised explosive devices (IEDs), patrolling and frontier control operations, information management, rapid intervention techniques, and advanced logistical assistance²³⁶.

Nevertheless, Italian activity is not limited to the military sphere; MISIN's multidimensional approach is part of the broader framework of Italian cooperation for development, as highlighted in the Guidelines for Programming 2025. These in fact forecast interventions intended to alleviate the economic dependence of partner countries, promote food security, guarantee access to primary services such as education and health, and invest in professional and technical-specialist formation of local populations²³⁷. In this respect, Italy seeks to enhance synergies between Italian and local private enterprises, NGOs, educational institutions and governmental bodies, thus contributing to the construction of sustainable and resilient business and social ecosystems, capable of effectively counteracting the root causes of regional instability and forced migration.

Furthermore, MISIN is embedded in an extremely fluid and volatile geopolitical landscape, deeply marked by the 2023 coup d'état in Niger. This takeover, which saw a military junta come to power, triggered a process of international isolation of Niger by

²³⁴ Murgia, N. (2024). *Priorità e obiettivi della Difesa nel Documento Programmatico 2024–2026*. In *Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2024*.

²³⁵ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (p. 83).

²³⁶ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform.

²³⁷ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

many Western players. Despite these complex circumstances, the Italian government has decided to hold an open and ongoing debate with the local authorities, in the belief that a complete breakdown in diplomatic and military relations would have negative consequences both for the country's domestic stability and for Italian and European security and strategic interests in the Sahel²³⁸.

The Italian choice of staying in Niger is also explained by the desire to prevent the gap left by an eventual withdrawal from the region to be rapidly filled by hostile external actors, first and foremost Russia, whose presence has become increasingly consistent in the region, especially through the deployment of mercenary groups²³⁹. Indeed, in recent years, the Sahel has become an area of struggle between world powers, where the progressive disengagement of the West has favoured the reinforcement of relations between some countries in the region and Moscow. Although the risk that Niger will follow the example of Mali and Burkina Faso, as regards strategic rapprochement with Moscow, is one of the main factors driving Italy and other European partners to keep a direct and concrete commitment in the country, notwithstanding the critical issues that have emerged since the coup²⁴⁰.

Alongside the political and military dimension, as described above, MISIN also fulfils a considerable task in the management and prevention of irregular migration fluxes. Indeed, it has been noted that Niger is a key hub for migration routes to the Mediterranean, and cooperation with local authorities aims to boost local abilities in border control and the fight against human trafficking²⁴¹. To this extent, MISIN acts in conjunction with other European and international missions operating in the Sahel, seeking to foster an integrated and coordinated action that sees security, economic development and the protection of human rights as inseparable components for a lasting stabilisation of the region²⁴².

²³⁸ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (p. 84).

²³⁹ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

²⁴⁰ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

²⁴¹ Ibidem

²⁴² Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (p. 84).

In the light of these considerations, it is apparent how MISIN constitutes a substantial component of the broader ‘Mattei Plan’ promoted by the Italian government. This plan intends to redefine Italy's strategic engagements in Africa, focusing on equal dialogue and multi-level partnerships with African countries, with particular emphasis on energy security, socioeconomic development and the fight against violent radicalisation and terrorism²⁴³. Precisely Niger, due to its geographical and political location, becomes a priority interlocutor in this challenging scenario, requiring a constant and multifaceted commitment from the Italian side²⁴⁴.

As a final point, and in spite of the extremely uncertain and ever-changing conditions that characterise Niger and the entire Sahelian space today, the Bilateral Support Mission in Niger (MISIN) is confirmed as one of the unavoidable pivots of Italy's strategic projection in Africa. It epitomises not only the political will to maintain an active garrison in a neuralgic arena for the geopolitical equilibria of the enlarged Mediterranean, but also the ambition to assert itself as a credible actor in the management of global security crises, in accordance with the role of ‘middle power’ that Italy pursues at the international arena²⁴⁵.

The maintenance of MISIN, even following the recent institutional crisis and the deterioration of relations between Niger and some Western partners, illustrates a pragmatic and resilience-oriented Italian approach. Unlike other European countries that have opted for an immediate suspension of activities on the ground, Rome has chosen an alternative diplomatic path, keeping communication channels open and focusing on the pursuit of bilateral dialogue²⁴⁶. This strategic choice reflects a profound awareness: abandoning Niger would mean leaving space for rival powers, which are already largely capitalising on the gaps left by France and the European Union in Mali and Burkina Faso.

The centrality of MISIN thus lies in its dual function. On the one hand, it acts as a stabilisation and counter-terrorism tool, providing qualified training to Nigerien security

²⁴³ Simonelli, F. (2024). *Il Piano Mattei: rilanciare l'Africa Policy dell'Italia*. Aspen Institute Italia.

²⁴⁴ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

²⁴⁵ Murgia, N. (2024). *Priorità e obiettivi della Difesa nel Documento Programmatico 2024–2026*. In *Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2024*.

²⁴⁶ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

troops in key fields such as border surveillance, counter-IED, critical infrastructure protection and rapid response to asymmetric threats. On the other hand, the mission represents an operational platform to monitor and manage the migration dynamics crossing Niger, a strategic crossroads of the main routes leading from the Gulf of Guinea and sub-Saharan Africa to the central Mediterranean. Moreover, the Italian presence has a significant symbolic and political value: it contributes to strengthening the perception of Rome as a reliable and consistent partner, capable of proposing a cooperation that is not extractive but built on common interests, concrete operational capabilities and long-term vision²⁴⁷. This approach is also reflected in the aspiration of the Mattei Plan, which aims to structure equal and interdependent relations with African countries, combining diplomacy, investment, technical assistance and integrated security²⁴⁸.

Because of these reasons, MISIN is no longer a military presence alone, in fact it is a political and tactical tool which allows Italy to exert a proactive and qualitatively distinctive influence in a critical zone for Euro-Mediterranean security. Its relevance stretches far beyond the operational sphere: it is configured as an instrument of defence diplomacy capable of projecting stability, credibility and institutional reliability in a setting punctuated by mounting geopolitical rivalries. By means of MISIN, as a matter of fact, the Italian government manages to modulate a multi-tiered intervention by blending hard power assets - such as the training of local armed forces - with soft power initiatives, for example institutional talks, technical assistance and coordination with development cooperation²⁴⁹.

This aptitude to react on a variety of fronts at once brings added value compared to other more rigid or exclusively coercive models of operation, and contributes to build an image of Italy as a credible, non-invasive and future-oriented partner. To this extent, MISIN can also be interpreted as a 'laboratory of external projection', a trial field for Italy's strategic posture, in which new forms of international influence are tested which combine deterrence, cooperation and reciprocal legitimisation²⁵⁰. Moreover, the mission serves as

²⁴⁷ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

²⁴⁸ Simonelli, F. (2024). *Il Piano Mattei: rilanciare l'Africa Policy dell'Italia*. Aspen Institute Italia

²⁴⁹ Taufer, M. (2021). *Il Sahel come sfida strategica per l'Italia: la crisi del Niger e la prospettiva europea*. Tesi di Master in Geopolitica, SIOI.

²⁵⁰ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

an anchor for the inclusion of Italy in future regional security architectures, consolidating its place at European and international concertation tables. Rome's ability to work on the front line, whilst paying attention to local contexts and sensitivities, gives it a potential role of mediation and soft leadership, which is fundamental to assist in the process of shaping a Sahel which is steadier, more self-reliant and less exposed to outside shocks - whether security, environmental or socio-economic²⁵¹. All in all, MISIN enhances Italy's projection in the enlarged Mediterranean both in terms of military capacity and, first and foremost, as a promoter of a cooperative and fully integrated security model, which is required now more than ever²⁵².

4.3 The Sahel as a test for Italy's foreign and security policy

In the decade since the fall of Gaddafi and the collapse of the existing regional security architecture, the Sahel has emerged as one of the most unstable spaces on the African continent, but also as a strategic laboratory in which to test the effectiveness, coherence and ambition of Italian foreign and security policy. In this area, where balances are precarious and shifting, and there is increasingly fierce competition between global and regional actors, Italy is confronted not only with the operational and diplomatic complexity of action, but also with its ability to act as an independent regional power, capable of protecting its own interests and wielding influence in its 'foreign neighbour'²⁵³.

From this standpoint, the Sahel - and Niger in particular - provides a crucial benchmark to assess whether and how Italy is able to articulate a coherent, multilevel and strategically oriented foreign policy. Beginning in 2013, with the progressive abandonment of the exclusively Mediterranean and Middle Eastern horizon, Rome has in fact developed a steady awareness of the geopolitical weight of sub-Saharan Africa. The escalating unrest in the Sahelian border area, coupled with the upsurge of migratory phenomena, the threat of transnational jihadism and the penetration of non-European actors - Russia, China,

²⁵¹ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (pp. 85–86).

²⁵² Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

²⁵³ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

Turkey - has forced Italy to revise its posture and no longer operate only in response to contingent crises, but with a more structured and continuous strategic outreach²⁵⁴. However, this new projection has also highlighted the unresolved tension between aspiration and capacity. The experiences of its presence in the Sahel - started by MISIN, but also through development cooperation and diplomatic instruments - show an Italy that intends to strengthen its international profile, but is often constrained by architectural limits: restricted spending capabilities, excessive fragmentation of the decision-making process, poor synergy between civil and military bodies, and weaknesses in communication and the media²⁵⁵.

The crisis triggered by the coup d'état in Niger in July 2023 aggravated these knots. On the one hand, the Italian side has chosen an alternative position with respect to other European players, avoiding immediate disengagement and seeking to maintain relations with the new military authorities in a logic of pragmatic pursuit; on the other, it has had to manage the risk of diplomatic isolation and the growing pressure of global public opinion on respect for democratic values and the rule of law. The Sahel has thus become a terrain of struggle between principles and interests, between geopolitical realism and normative aspirations²⁵⁶. Italy's ability to handle this tension is an indicator of the strategic maturity of its foreign policy. Along with this, the Sahelian region has proved a crucial litmus test to evaluate the consistency, coherence and above all the effectiveness of Italy's soft power instruments, put to the test in one of the most unstable and competitive environments on the entire African continent²⁵⁷. Development cooperation, one of the cornerstones of the Italian presence in Africa, has also been formally relaunched within the Guidelines for the 2025 Programming, which call for a switch from sector-based and segmented interventions to integrated, territorialised projects with strong added meaning. In this way, the aim is to establish real 'resilience ecosystems' around shared priorities with local counterparts: food security, health, technical and vocational education, women's empowerment, climate sustainability and youth work²⁵⁸.

²⁵⁴ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (pp. 84–85).

²⁵⁵ Taufer, M. (2023). *Tesi Master Geopolitica: La politica estera italiana nell'Africa Sub-Sahariana*. LUISS School of Government.

²⁵⁶ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

²⁵⁷ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

²⁵⁸ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

Nonetheless, this transformative paradigm, although ambitiously outlined at a programmatic level, fails to translate into practical operability. Italian missions in the Sahel, including MISIN, are often still perceived as watertight compartments with respect to civil cooperation. There is a lack of a real mechanism of tactical coordination between military activities and diplomatic actions, between ‘hard’ security and ‘structural’ development²⁵⁹. In fact, the combination of civil and military dimensions - the key to a win-win strategy in sensitive environments - is still partial, episodic and linked to the ability of individual agents on the ground rather than to an organic policy design.²⁶⁰ Furthermore, the interplay between Italian foreign policy and European initiatives is still uneven, sometimes even conflictual. The heterogeneity of the member states' strategic agendas and the absence of a real common foreign and defence policy prevent the European Union from presenting itself as a cohesive and credible actor in the Sahel, leaving Rome with the task - and the burden - of filling increasingly evident political gaps on its own²⁶¹.

The gradual disengagement of France - which was once considered a leading power in the region - and the selective and opportunistic stance of the United States, more committed on maintaining certain logistical assets than on handling local crises, have forced Italy to radically reconsider its strategic position. Rome has thus found itself in the unprecedented condition of ‘walking alone’ in an increasingly challenging geopolitical scenario, marked by the assertive entry of Russia and the growing economic-infrastructural influence of China, which acts mainly through tools of debt diplomacy and bilateral cooperation²⁶². Against such a backdrop, Italy has sought to place itself as a ‘non-hegemonic’ partner, attentive to the sovereignty of African countries and devoid of a colonial past in the area. This uniqueness constitutes an outstanding and still undervalued strategic advantage: in the Sahel, where anti-Western feelings and anti-French retorics have contributed to the erosion of consensus towards conventional European partners, the

²⁵⁹ Tauffer, M. (2023). *Tesi Master Geopolitica: La politica estera italiana nell'Africa Ssub-Sahariana*. LUISS School of Government

²⁶⁰ Reitano, T., & Shaw, M. (2021). *The evolution of civil-military cooperation: Lessons from West Africa*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

²⁶¹ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (pp. 84)

²⁶² Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

Italian approach - dialogic, discreet, cooperative - benefits from greater legitimacy²⁶³. Even so, this reputational gain risks remaining symbolic if it is not accompanied by a coherent strategic overview, adequate operational instruments and stable resources that will last over time²⁶⁴.

Out of this framework, the Mattei Plan emerges as the potential lintel of the renewed Italian presence in Africa. It proposes itself as an innovative model compared to the extractive or paternalistic logics of the past, promoting structured, multi-level cooperation based on co-planning, partnership and mutual interest²⁶⁵. To ensure, however, that the Mattei Plan will not be exhausted in a rhetorical or propagandistic operation, it needs to be endowed with a precise strategy, adequate regulatory instruments, funds that can really be demanded, and, above all, inter-ministerial governance which coordinates the action of the Farnesina, Defence, MIMIT, AICS, businesses, universities, and civil society²⁶⁶. In the absence of this, the Plan risks replicating the limitations of previous African seasons, proving incapable of affecting the structural drivers of instability²⁶⁷.

In short, the Sahel is not solely an exogenous arena in which Italy measures itself against remote and apparently peripheral issues: it is, first and foremost, an inward exam. A yardstick questioning the Italian Republic's capacity to articulate a strategic outlook on its role in the world, to overcome the traditional reactivity of its foreign policy and to develop a coherent, multidimensional and self-determined perspective²⁶⁸. The Sahel, in its geopolitical complexity, forces the Country System to confront its limitations in terms of cohesion, inter-institutional governance and long-term vision²⁶⁹.

Hence, the Sahelian space also turns out to be a valuable chance for the consolidation of Italy's international posture. By demonstrating that it is capable of independently managing such a multifaceted crisis, cooperating efficaciously with the local

²⁶³ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

²⁶⁴ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (pp. 86)

²⁶⁵ Simonelli, F. (2024). *Il Piano Mattei: rilanciare l'Africa Policy dell'Italia*. Aspen Institute Italia

²⁶⁶ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

²⁶⁷ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

²⁶⁸ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (pp. 113)

²⁶⁹ Taufer, M. (2023). *Tesi Master Geopolitica: La politica estera italiana nell'Africa Sub-Sahariana*. LUISS School of Government

governments, preventing the emptiness left by others, and countering the hostile narratives of rival forces, it would mean establishing itself as a reputable intermediary in an area of direct exposure²⁷⁰. Italy, historically penalised by a discontinuous strategic culture and an often subordinate attitude to global trends, could, by means of the Sahel, redeem its image and strengthen its influence. This is obviously not a matter of assuming 'great power' status, but rather of building a compact presence based on a national identity: a responsible 'middle power' working within the parameters of international law, one that makes the most of its technical skills and human capital, one that favours dialogue and co-planning over power confrontation, but at the same time does not hesitate to take on the burden of the leadership when necessary²⁷¹.

The geopolitical arc that goes from the Gulf of Guinea to the central Mediterranean is today one of the epicentres of international competition and humanitarian and security crises. This space interwovens migratory flows, jihadist networks, criminal trafficking, climate pressures, energy interests and political ambitions of foreign actors such as Russia, China, Turkey and, in part, the Same United States²⁷². Ignoring or underestimating this chessboard would be tantamount to giving up protecting the boundaries of one's own national security and social well-being. It is no coincidence that Sicily - Italy's natural platform towards the Sahel - is destined to become a nodal point of the future Euro-African equilibrium, as also recalled by numerous Italian intelligence analysts in the most recent reflections on the imperative of looking "southward" to guarantee stability to our own Country System²⁷³.

Thereby, the Sahel test is a proof not only of operational capacity, but also of political ripeness²⁷⁴. It compels Italy to answer a fundamental question: does it want to be merely a pawn in the game of others, a bystander to world unrest, or does it intend to pose - albeit with scarce means - as a builder of order, promoter of stability and guarantor of shared interests with its African and European partners?

²⁷⁰ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

²⁷¹ Simonelli, F. (2024). *Il Piano Mattei: rilanciare l'Africa Policy dell'Italia*. Aspen Institute Italia

²⁷² Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica. (2023). *Relazione annuale sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza*. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

²⁷³ Murgia, N. (2024). *Priorità e obiettivi della Difesa nel Documento Programmatico 2024–2026*. In *Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2024*

²⁷⁴ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

A positive performance in this challenge would mean for Italy not only strengthening its international role, but also finally developing a solid ‘foreign policy culture’, understood as a structural component of national governance, which would not be conditioned by electoral cycles, domestic contingencies or temporary crises. A foreign policy that is accountable, predictable and capable of consistency is nowadays an indispensable prerequisite for the protection of the country's strategic interests in an increasingly fractioned, interconnected and competitive global landscape²⁷⁵. This implies a radical shift: outward action can no longer be interpreted as an extraordinary extension of internal policy to be activated in exceptional conditions, but as an ordinary and permanent tool to anticipate threats, seize opportunities and enhance the overall resilience of the Country System²⁷⁶.

An authentic cultural strategy must therefore be based on three pilasters: the recognition of international interdependence; the establishment of a long-term outlook founded on shared purposes between public and private actors; and the stable and far-sighted allocation of political, human and financial resources. From this standpoint, the Sahel becomes the field in which to concretely measure Italy's ability to structure an external outreach which is not reactive, episodic or flagship, but consistent with a common and multidimensional national strategy²⁷⁷.

By contrast, failing this aforementioned test would mean consciously accepting a borderline fate in a global scenario that is rapidly reshaping itself around major axes of friction and geopolitical competitiveness, among which the enlarged Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa occupy a place of primary prominence. As a result, Italy runs the risk of losing the opportunity to influence dynamics that, de facto, directly relate to it: from energy and food security to the regulation of migratory flows, from climate resistance to maritime security, and even to the holding of economic and industrial supply chains²⁷⁸.

²⁷⁵ Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (pp. 113-114)

²⁷⁶ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

²⁷⁷ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

²⁷⁸ Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica. (2023). *Relazione annuale sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza*. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

In an era in which foreign policies are becoming more and more ‘inward looking’ and the boundaries of national security are expanding far beyond the territory, choosing not to invest in a credible and strategic presence in the Sahel would be tantamount to preemptively renouncing the defence of one's functional sovereignty, reducing one's influence, and delegating to others the decision-making that directly conditions the future of the country. It would imply abdicating the possibility of contributing to the definition of regional equilibria in an area which bears a great impact on energy security, the management of migratory routes, and the stability of West African coastal countries. Besides, leaving room for competing players - often proponents of authoritarian, predatory or destabilising models - would also call into question Italy's value projection and its reliability in the eyes of its European and African partners²⁷⁹. Contrariwise, a structured involvement in the Sahel would cement the Italian position as a reference power in the enlarged Mediterranean, capable of acting not only in defence of its own interests, but also as a facilitator of stability, transparency, dialogue and multilateral cooperation²⁸⁰.

Ultimately, the Sahel is not a sphere of extraneous intervention alone, but also a region of responsibility where Italy can - and must - measure its international stature. Investing in this region in an united, forward-looking, integrated manner means ensuring its critical interests, yet also actively arguing for the birth of a safer, more sustainable and cohesive regional order. This is where a significant part of the Italian geopolitical future is at stake: choosing to be there today is the equivalent of deciding the role one wants to play in the world of tomorrow²⁸¹.

Therefore, being present in the Sahel is not an accessory option but a strategic must for a country that intends to assert its voice in the international concert. Italy has the chance to distinguish itself as a pragmatic and reliable agent, which is able to offer concrete alternatives in the most precarious situations, without replicating interventionist or predatory patterns. However, this requires a consolidated long-term perspective, grounded in coherence, inter-institutional coordination, and the ability to generate actual

²⁷⁹ Giuseppe Dentice & Federico Donelli (2021) Reasserting (middle) power by looking southwards: Italy's policy towards Africa, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:3, 331-351, DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309

²⁸⁰ Tafer, M. (2023). *Tesi Master Geopolitica: La politica estera italiana nell'Africa Sub-Sahariana*. LUISS School of Government

²⁸¹ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

impact on the ground²⁸². In this way, the Sahel can also become not only a challenging issue, but also an occasion to enhance Italy's global identity as a promoter of stability, cooperation and joint security²⁸³.

For this reason, Italy must demonstrate its willingness to upgrade its commitment in the Sahel from a reactive response to a structural component of its comprehensive strategy. This calls not only for political will, but also for constant investments in human capital, diplomacy and operational capacity. Achieving success in this region would also fortify the Italian stance in Europe, accrediting it as a leader in crisis management in the south of the continent²⁸⁴. In the final analysis, the Sahel is a frontier that invites Italy to make a choice between irrelevance and prominence, from passivity to international liability. To adequately respond properly to this perpetually challenging hurdle entails affirming, in concrete terms, the value of a foreign policy which is capable of foreseeing, influencing and constructing²⁸⁵.

²⁸² Aliseo Editoriale. (2023). *L'Italia nel disordine mediterraneo: Rapporto sulla proiezione internazionale del sistema Paese nel Mediterraneo allargato* (p. 86).

²⁸³ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI). (2024b). *Allegato: Linee guida per la programmazione 2025*.

²⁸⁴ Murgia, N. (2024). *Priorità e obiettivi della Difesa nel Documento Programmatico 2024–2026*. In *Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2024*.

²⁸⁵ Palleschi, C. (2024). *Strategic choices in the Sahel: A vademecum for Italy*. LUISS Mediterranean Platform

CONCLUSION

Following this journey of research, it can be said that the present thesis aimed to offer an in-depth, critical and nuanced observation on the evolving security scenario in the Sahel, by focusing in particular on the role of Italy in Niger and the bilateral support mission MISIN. Through an investigation divided into four sections, an attempt has been made to restore the intricate political, historical and strategic setting in which the Italian action is grafted, viewing it from several angles: from the inside dimensions of the Nigerien society to the rationale of the inter-power rivalries, up to the wider framework of the international security apparatus.

The research question, centred on the geopolitical and strategic repercussions of the Italian engagement and on its place among the multilateral Euro-Atlantic paradigms, has been the thread running through an analysis which has deliberately refrained from providing unambiguous or prescriptive answers, instead privileging the surfacing of transversal ties, unsolved dilemmas and long-period outlooks. The case of Niger, apparently marginal, proved exemplary towards comprehending how Italy's international pose and its effort to carve out an autonomous and recognisable space for itself amidst the global geopolitical panorama.

Among the primary findings that have emerged is the capacity of Italy to assert itself, in a highly competitive and demanding context, as an actor endowed with its own strategic coherence. Considered historically as a secondary power in African theatres, the Italian government has been able to turn its presence in Niger into a test case of its will to international projection. MISIN, far from being a mere technical or training operation, embodies a political move that weaves together security concerns, diplomatic goals and development cooperation instruments. In a period in which other longstanding players - such as France - are stepping down and the United States is redesigning its role, Rome has chosen to stay on, maintaining a communication conduit with the new post-Golpe authorities, and preserving its operations in a situation beset by profound institutional instability.

This choice, though not without its criticalities and potential contradictions, mirrors a maturation of the Italian strategic position. The approach adopted is characterised by sobriety, discretion and pragmatism: distinctive traits which have permitted Italy to place itself as a trustworthy counterpart, capable of bridging the security requirements of Sahelian governments and the strategic priorities of Mediterranean Europe. Even at the forefront of international recognition, the performance of Italian intelligence proved decisive: while other Western players saw their relations with the Niger authorities worsen, Italy solidified its reputation due to a policy of constructive dialogue, strengthening of local capabilities and absence of direct interference.

Such approach is included in a larger and more forward-looking view, grounded in the strengthening of legality, the promotion of human rights and the bolstering of democratic institutions. By working along these tracks, not only is action taken on immediate urgencies - such as the fight against terrorism and organised crime - but the groundwork is laid for lasting, self-sustaining stability. Thus, a virtuous circle is triggered whereby security is no longer an imposed commodity, but a value generated and internalised by local societies themselves. This attitude reveals a conception of international collaboration not as an episodic or residual act, but as a strategic investment for the benefit of collective security, of the international competences of Italy and, more generally, of European positioning in Africa.

Moreover, the stability of the areas of intervention is closely related to the inner security of Italy and the European Union, mainly in regard to transnational phenomena such as human trafficking, irregular migration fluxes and the jihadist menace. In this light, the Italian commitment in the Sahel becomes an external projection of its national defence: an enlargement of the security perimeter allowing the challenges to be tackled at their root, before they manifest themselves on European soil.

Nonetheless, the scenario in which Italy operates is anything but straightforward. The epicentre of a growing strategic competition is confirmed in Niger. The Russian presence - reinforced by paramilitary operators - is intensifying, China is continuously expanding its infrastructural assets and Turkey is consolidating its influence through soft power

tools. In this polymorphous landscape, the Italian position is as meaningful as it is precarious: in order to preserve its role, it will have to avoid lapses in coherence of values, handle the contradictions of operational realism with diplomatic intelligence and, above all, prevent itself from being perceived as yet another exogenous player moved by contingent interests.

On the basis of what has emerged, some avenues for future research arise which deserve deeper examination. First of all, it would be beneficial to conduct a systematic assessment of MISIN's actual impact on the capacity of the Niger forces, including through the recourse to qualitative data and testimonies collected in the field. In second place, it would be interesting to investigate the local population's public perception of the Italian presence, an aspect that is often neglected but crucial for the legitimisation of any foreign involvement. Lastly, it appears essential to supervise the implementation of the so-called Mattei Plan, to ascertain its concrete scope and to understand whether it really embodies the beginning of a new stage in Euro-African relations or whether it risks functioning as a rhetorical exercise lacking executive tools.

To sum up, this thesis has not sought to offer definitive solutions or indisputable truths. On the contrary, it has attempted to furnish a reading key to interpret a paradigmatic instance of present-day security, in which foreign policy, defence, diplomacy and development are intertwined. The Italian presence in Niger is arguably a niche dossier, but through it emerge questions of considerable strategic weight: what kind of international actor does Italy want to be? How can the safeguarding of the national interest be reconciled with the promotion of common values? Is it possible to cooperate with non-democratic regimes without betraying one's own principles?

If this study has succeeded, even in part, to stimulate such questions, to bring out new interpretative horizons and to promote a more conscious debate on how Italy can play its role in the world, then its purpose can be said to have been achieved. The Sahel, more than a mere periphery to be stabilised, is configured as a lens in which Italy is called upon to acknowledge not only its structural weaknesses, but also its future potential.

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