

NATO's Europeans Should Tell Turkey to Stop Arming Sudan

John M Nomikos
(RIEAS Executive Director)

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On 11 May 2026, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk, warned that armed drones had become "by far and away the leading cause of civilian deaths" in Sudan's war, killing at least 880 civilians between January and April of this year and accounting for more than eighty percent of recorded civilian fatalities in that period.¹ The statistic deserves closer attention than it has received in European capitals, because some of the aircraft now driving Sudan's increasingly lethal drone war originated in the factories of a NATO member state.

Turkey's expanding military partnership with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) has transformed the battlefield, entrenched the war's logic of escalation, and placed the Atlantic Alliance in the uncomfortable position of watching one of its members operate as an active arms supplier to a belligerent in the conflict that the United Nations describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

This article is addressed to the European members of NATO: governments that sit with Turkey in the North Atlantic Council, that have supported international pressure on the RSF's supply lines, and that have so far declined to make the same demand of their own ally. The reticence is a political choice rather than an evidentiary difficulty, since the Turkish role in Sudan is documented in leaked corporate records, visible in wreckage recovered on the ground, and advertised in Ankara's own official statements.

A War Without Restraint

The war that erupted on 15 April 2023 between the SAF under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo has long since exceeded every regional precedent for destruction. Marking the conflict's one thousandth day in January 2026, the World Health Organization counted 13.6 million displaced persons, the largest displacement crisis on record, alongside 33.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and a health system in which more than a third of facilities no longer function.²

Darfur has borne the heaviest burden. When El Fasher, the last SAF stronghold in the region, fell to the RSF in October 2025 after an eighteen month siege, the United Nations Human Rights Office estimated that at least 6,000 people were killed within the first seventy-two hours.³ Satellite documentation assembled by the Humanitarian Research Lab at the Yale School of Public Health underpinned the finding of the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan, announced on 19 February 2026, that the RSF had committed genocide against the Fur, Zaghawa, and other non-Arab communities of the city.³

The humanitarian catastrophe extends well beyond the battlefield. Cholera has been reported in all eighteen of Sudan's states, dengue in fourteen, and malaria in sixteen, while attacks on health facilities have killed more than 1,800 people since the war began.² Famine conditions, mass displacement, and the collapse of basic services have combined to produce what the World Health Organization plainly calls the world's worst health and humanitarian crisis. Ankara's contribution to the war economy has to be assessed against this background.

The Turkish Pipeline

Turkish involvement moved from the commercial to the strategic in the autumn of 2024, when Bayraktar TB2 armed drones reached the Sudanese army and promptly altered the military balance. Reporting by Middle East Eye traced the aircraft's battlefield debut to Gezira state in late 2024 and recorded their contribution to the SAF's subsequent advances toward Khartoum and El Obeid. An RSF fighter interviewed for that investigation described the new weapon in terms that capture the asymmetry it introduced: "You can't see it. You can't shoot it. And suddenly you find that you have died."⁴

The commercial structure behind these deliveries surfaced in March 2025, when the Washington Post published leaked documents, correspondence, and financial records showing that Baykar, the Turkish defense manufacturer, had covertly supplied approximately 120 million dollars' worth of equipment to the Sudanese military, including at least eight TB2 aircraft and some six hundred guided munitions, with shipments routed through intermediaries to obscure their destination.⁵ The same records indicated that Turkish military companies had dealings on both sides of the conflict.

The pipeline has since widened. The heavier Bayraktar Akinci entered Sudanese service, and by the summer of 2026 it was flying missions of a kind few African air forces could attempt: On 13 July 2026, Turkish and defence-focused accounts reported that an SAF-operated Akıncı had intercepted and destroyed a Chinese-built FH-95 operated by the RSF northwest of El Obeid, although the SAF itself attributed the downing to its air defences.⁶ The Turkish aircraft have also suffered losses: in July 2025 the RSF claimed the downing of an Akinci over El Fasher itself, after what the paramilitary force said was a series of airstrikes on the besieged city.¹⁴

In June 2026, open source analysts identified wreckage of a Turkish HISAR-A surface-to-air missile in Khartoum, the first documented operational use of that Aselsan-Roketsan system by Sudan and further evidence that Ankara's support now spans strike, air defense, and sensor capabilities.⁷ Turkish personnel have accompanied the hardware: trainers instructing Sudanese operators were reported wounded in an RSF attack on Port Sudan in May 2025, while chartered cargo flights continued moving military freight from Istanbul to Port Sudan into early 2026.⁸

The political framework was displayed openly on 2 June 2026, when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan received General Burhan at the presidential complex in Ankara and announced deepening cooperation in "trade, agriculture, energy and defence."⁹ The warmth of that reception should be read together with the manner of the deliveries that preceded it: shipments structured through third parties, financing kept off the books, and public silence in Ankara, all of which sit uneasily with United Nations, European Union, and United States restrictions on arms transfers into the Sudanese theater.⁸

The Character of the Client

The army receiving these aircraft is the subject of an active chemical weapons finding. On 24 April 2025 the United States determined that the Government of Sudan had used chemical weapons in violation of international law and imposed sanctions under the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act.¹⁵ A second round of measures, decided on 23 June 2026

and effective from 20 July, followed Washington's conclusion that Port Sudan had met none of the conditions for relief.¹⁶ France 24 documented the underlying attacks in October 2025, tracing chlorine barrels dropped from SAF aircraft near the al-Jaili refinery on 5 and 13 September 2024.¹⁷

On 5 September 2026 the Washington Post reported on roughly 150 documents and several thousand messages recovered from the phones of senior Sudanese officers, describing the assembly of close to three hundred chlorine munitions, a desert test in July 2024, storage at the Merowe air base, and instructions attributed to General Burhan to remove the traces once the sanctions arrived.¹⁸ Port Sudan denies the allegations and has withheld the independent verification that the United States demanded at the OPCW Executive Council in July 2026.¹⁹

The sequence is what should concern Ankara's allies. Erdogan received Burhan at the presidential complex on 2 June 2026 and announced expanded defence cooperation three weeks before Washington decided on the second round of chemical weapons measures, and more than a year after the first determination had been published in the Federal Register. The character of the client has been a matter of public record throughout the period in which the deliveries continued, which puts the question to European governments in its simplest form: an ally is arming, training and equipping a force operating under an active chemical weapons determination, and the alliance has said nothing about it.

Darfur Under the Drones

The consequences of this technology transfer are most visible in Darfur itself. Armed with long-endurance Turkish platforms alongside Iranian-supplied systems, the SAF has extended its strike campaign deep into RSF-held territory. Conflict data assembled by ACLED recorded seventeen SAF strikes on Nyala in May 2026 alone, the highest monthly total registered in the South Darfur capital since the war began, as the army targeted RSF strongholds and the supply corridors running toward Chad and Libya.¹⁰ As recently as 24 August 2026, suspected army drones struck RSF positions across Nyala, including neighborhoods adjacent to the airport and the university campus, hours after a cargo aircraft landed at the RSF-controlled airfield.¹¹

The siege and fall of El Fasher unfolded under the same technology. Drones surveilled the starving city, struck displacement camps in its environs, and gave both belligerents the means to sustain operations that older Sudanese wars could not have supported logistically. The RSF has answered in kind far from Darfur: its drone attacks on Port Sudan in May 2025, in which Turkish trainers

were reported among the wounded, demonstrated that no Sudanese city now lies beyond the reach of this war.⁸

Two observations follow. The first is that the drone war is reciprocal and escalatory. The RSF fields Chinese-made aircraft of its own, and the transactions that deliver them potentially run through the United Arab Emirates rather than directly from Beijing.⁶ Iran, for its part, began delivering Mohajer-6 combat drones to the SAF as early as January 2024, as Bloomberg first reported.¹² Sudan has thus become the arena in which Turkish, Iranian, Chinese, and Emirati systems are tested against one another, with each delivery justifying the next and with no supplier willing to accept that its own client bears responsibility for the carnage.

The second observation concerns the distribution of casualties. The UN High Commissioner's May 2026 statement recorded twenty-eight drone strikes on markets, a dozen on health facilities, and repeated attacks on fuel depots and supply routes, with Kordofan suffering the heaviest civilian losses and the campaign spreading to Blue Nile, White Nile, and Khartoum.¹ The discrimination of a precision weapon depends on the targeting doctrine of the force that employs it, and in the hands of an army fighting an existential war against an adversary embedded in urban terrain, the TB2 and Akinci have served a campaign of attrition in which the civilian toll has risen accordingly.

The Alliance Question

Turkey's conduct in Sudan follows a pattern familiar from Libya, the South Caucasus, and the Horn of Africa: drone exports as the entry point for political influence, port and infrastructure concessions as the strategic objective, and deliberate ambiguity about the state's role behind the commercial facade. Ankara's interest in the Sudanese Red Sea coast is longstanding; the ninety-nine-year lease on Suakin Island concluded in 2017 alarmed Cairo and Riyadh precisely because they suspected a military purpose, and Turkish ambitions for port development on that coast have persisted through the war.⁸

For the Atlantic Alliance, the problem is not new in kind. Turkish drone exports to Ethiopia during the Tigray war, to Libya's Government of National Accord, and to Azerbaijan before the 2020 Karabakh campaign each generated friction with allied capitals, and each was absorbed in the name of alliance cohesion. Sudan tests that tolerance more severely, above all for the European allies, because the recipient army is a party to a conflict of exceptional brutality, because the transfers cut directly against the restraint allied governments themselves demand from other suppliers, and because the humanitarian stakes dwarf the earlier cases.

A further distinction of the Sudanese case is the alignment it produces. In arming the SAF, Turkey stands on the same side of the war as the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose Revolutionary Guards have operated weapons flights into Port Sudan.¹³ A NATO member state is thereby co-supplying an army alongside the alliance's principal regional adversary even as NATO's European members maintain arms restrictions of their own and press other external suppliers to curb the flow of weapons into Sudan, while the United States and the European Union sanction entities supplying the opposing side. The cost of that incoherence falls on European diplomacy, since every statement on atrocity prevention in Darfur can be answered with a single observation, that the drones overhead were sold by an ally which has met no allied objection worth the name.

None of this settles the question of who arms the other side, or absolves those who do. A range of governments, among them the United Arab Emirates, China, Russia, and Egypt, have been named in United Nations Panel of Experts reporting and press investigations as suppliers to one belligerent or the other, and most of those allegations remain contested by the governments concerned. What is not a matter of allegation is that Turkish-built combat aircraft are flying missions for a state force, the Sudanese Armed Forces, from airfields that army controls. That distinction cuts both ways. It exposes Ankara in a way that deniable channels do not expose others, but it also places the Turkish transfers in the ordinary category of state-to-state supply, and nothing here denies that governments have the right to procure arms. The SAF is the internationally recognized custodian of the Sudanese state, and Ankara will argue that its exports support legitimate authority against a paramilitary force responsible for the killings in El Fasher. The argument would carry more weight if the transfers were transparent, licensed, and accompanied by end-use controls rather than routed through intermediaries and denied in public, and if Turkish companies had not been documented dealing with both camps.⁵

What Should Be Done

International pressure on the RSF's supply chains, exercised largely through the United Nations system and through United States and European Union sanctions, is welcome and should continue, but it addresses only part of the issue. The supply chain feeding the other side runs through the territory of an alliance member, and only Turkey's European allies are positioned to close it.

First, the European members of NATO should raise Turkish arms transfers to Sudan directly with Ankara, bilaterally and in the North Atlantic Council, and state plainly that they want them

stopped. Requests unaccompanied by consequences have been made before, over Libya and the South Caucasus, and their results are now visible over Nyala and El Fasher.

Second, Sudanese arms flows, including those originating on allied territory, belong formally on the agenda of alliance political consultations and of the European Union's own deliberations.

Third, the High Commissioner's call for a halt to transfers of advanced drone technology to both belligerents deserves formal European endorsement, together with export control scrutiny of the dual-use components, many of them European-made, that sustain these aircraft.¹

Finally, European governments engaging Ankara on regional files, from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Caucasus, should cease exempting Africa from the conversation. Turkey values its standing as a NATO member and as an aspirant regional mediator, and that standing is the lever available to its allies. Where persuasion fails, defence-industrial cooperation with Turkish manufacturers and the European market access their exports depend upon are the instruments that remain.

Whatever settlement eventually emerges in Sudan will reflect a military balance now being shaped by aircraft built in Istanbul, Tehran, and beyond. European governments cannot prevent every arms transfer to a distant war, and the other suppliers to this conflict, whether their role is documented or merely alleged, lie beyond their institutional reach in a way that Turkey, as an ally sitting inside the very political architecture through which those governments exercise influence, does not. The demand that Ankara withdraw from this war is one that only its European allies can credibly make. It should be made openly, in terms Ankara cannot misread, and with the cost of refusal borne in Ankara rather than in Darfur, Kordofan, and Khartoum.

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