

The Migration–Security Nexus in EU CSDP Missions in Africa

Johan Ekstedt

Abstract *This article explores the link between securitization of migration and the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in Africa. It demonstrates how migration governance has become embedded in the EU's external security engagements, particularly through missions in Niger, Mali, Libya, Somalia, and the Central African Republic. By tracing how CSDP missions increasingly align with the EU's objective to curb irregular migration, the article reveals both overt and concealed links between security operations and migration control. In some cases—such as Niger and Libya—the connection is explicit, while in others—such as Mali and Somalia—it is more implicit. Drawing on official documents and mission mandates, the article shows that the EU's approach to external security is shaped by a migration agenda that reflects broader processes of externalization and securitization. CSDP missions thus serve as a key instrument in the EU's efforts to govern migration beyond its borders.*

INTRODUCTION

Securitization of migration refers to the process by which political actors frame migration as a security threat, thereby often legitimizing extraordinary measures to control and restrict it. Whilst the academic literature on this has expanded significantly over the past two decades, few studies have looked closely at how the European Union's (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in Africa relates to migration governance, and in particular how migration governance is closely integrated into the EU Capacity Building Missions (EUCAPs) and EU Military Training Missions (EUTMs), that are part of the CSDP. The mandates of EUCAP Sahel Niger and the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM) have progressively expanded to include objectives such as combating irregular migration and human trafficking, in particular since the 'refugee crisis' of 2015.¹ In this article,² I show that migration-related policy objectives permeate the entire CSDP. However, due to migration control being unpopular among the populations in many African countries, governments in Africa often

demand that the migration dimensions of CSDP missions be concealed in public documents and communication. In this article, I look at missions in all five countries where the EU has deployed missions under the CSDP.

CSDP MISSIONS IN AFRICA AND CONTROLLING MIGRATION

The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in 2009, established the CSDP and enabled the creation of EU civilian and military missions outside of the EU. These missions are implemented by the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EEAS works under the authority of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who also serves as a Vice-President of the European Commission. This arrangement is intended to bring together the EU's work on diplomacy, crisis management, and foreign policy under one office, making it easier to coordinate resources. Through this framework, the EU can send missions abroad that range from civilian support teams helping with policing and governance to military training efforts, and even naval operations (see figure 1). Indeed, the entire CSDP was adopted with the idea of giving the EU the capacity to conduct peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and international security tasks, while civilian missions were designed to support the rule of law, policing, and governance in fragile states outside the EU.

The section dealing with "the Southern Neighborhood" (i.e., Africa) of the latest CSDP *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* reads as

follows: “We underline in particular that terrorism, violent extremism, radicalisation, cyber and hybrid threats as well as organised crime and increasing challenges regarding irregular migration, are major threats that affect both shores of the Mediterranean and are often interlinked. In this context, we will offer more comprehensive security packages to Southern Neighbourhood partners ready to deepen cooperation on a range of issues, including operational cooperation.”³ In short, the EU’s security and defence policy vis-à-vis Africa sees irregular migration as one of its core priorities, alongside terrorism and organised crime. However, the focus on curbing irregular migration manifests itself differently in different African countries. In the following sections, an overview of how migration governance in general, and curbing irregular migration in particular, relates to the various EU missions under the CSDP.

Niger

Niger serves as a key transit country, linking West African nations—most notably the populous Nigeria—with North Africa. The desert plateau in northern Niger makes it possible to travel directly by car, circumventing the high mountains that otherwise characterize the border regions of sub-Saharan and North African countries. In particular, the strategically located city of Agadez has been a stepping stone for both traders, migrants and travellers for centuries. In the past two decades, the city has therefore become of central interest for the EU, and other European countries, hoping to regulate migration as far away from European borders as possible.⁴

Being a former French colony, France has long had economic and political interests in Niger, resulting in countless military interventions since the 1960s. Niger is, for instance, a major supplier of uranium used to fuel France’s nuclear power plants.⁵ Furthermore, between 2011 and 2024, the United States maintained a significant military presence in Niger, including Africa’s largest drone bases, as part of its ‘War on Terror’ operations in the Sahel region.⁶

In 2012, the EU launched the EUCAP Sahel Niger mission to help strengthen Niger’s Internal Security Forces. The mission’s mandate did not originally include a migration component. However, after the ‘migration crisis’ in 2015, the mandate was updated to “support the security forces’ capability to better control migration flows and to combat irregular migration and associated criminal activity more effectively.”⁷

At the same time, the EU persuaded Niger to adopt national legislation to criminalize assisting irregular migration towards Libya and Algeria. This law became highly unpopular in the Agadez region, where many people’s livelihoods have included transporting people northwards. Indeed, the central government in Niamey has been hesitant to enforce the law rigorously, especially after 2017 when relations between local elites in Agadez and the authorities in Niamey became particularly tense. High-level arrests only ever happened when European security forces actively participated in operations.⁸

In effect, EUCAP Sahel Niger became the EU’s tool for assisting Nigerien security forces in combating irregular migration in the country. However, in July 2023, Niger underwent a military coup. European-backed President Mohamed Bazoum was detained by members of the presidential guard, and General Abdourahmane Tchiani proclaimed himself the head of a newly established military junta. The new regime fostered strong anti-French and anti-Western sentiments and was militarily backed by the Russian Wagner group.⁹ The EUCAP Sahel Niger mission had its equipment confiscated, including weapons, body armour, and vehicles.¹⁰ European and American troops were asked to leave the country, a process completed by mid-September 2024.

Mali

The EU’s military training mission in Mali, EUTM Mali, was set up in 2013 as part of the broader effort to fight terrorism in northern Mali, as well as more generally strengthen the capacity of the Malian military authorities. In parallel, EUCAP Sahel Mali

was tasked to train the Malian internal security forces. In general, both missions maintain close ties to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the UN peacekeeping mission.

Mali, too, experienced a Russian-backed coup d'état. In 2021, General Assimi Goïta took power and has since suspended elections indefinitely. The new government later asked all French troops to leave the country and terminated the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, that had been operating in the country since 2013. By late 2023, all troops had left the country. However, EUCAP Sahel Mali continues to operate in the country, albeit with a reduced capacity.¹¹

Unlike in Niger, the Malian government never accepted that EU missions formally included curbing migration in their mandates. This is partly due to the population's culture of cross-border travel and the importance of remittances for the Malian economy.¹² Therefore, both the EUTM and the EUCAP missions in Mali were given mandates to generally assist various ministries and the security forces, but no official document or publication ever mentions the issue of migration.¹³ However, a leaked internal annual review by the European Council from 2022 of the two missions states that "stimulating economic growth and private investments to foster job creation and curb irregular migration" is one of four core priorities for the EU's actions in Mali.¹⁴ That is to say, the idea of 'combating root causes' of migration is central to the mission's activities. Considering the increased Russian presence, notably via the Wagner Group, in the country around this time, the review recommends that missions increasingly prioritize migration-related issues. It reads:

*"The Mission [...] prioritizes the activities currently not subject to interference with Russia-affiliated forces, in particular by further supporting investigative units against transnational organised crime (drugs, human trafficking, firearms and environmental crime), terrorism and illegal migration..."*¹⁵

In short, the EU missions in Mali have been closely related to the issue of irregular migration, even though this is not officially stated in openly published documents. The connection to security is both under the auspice of 'combating root causes' as well as supporting security forces in their fight against 'illegal' migration. Since the EU and EU member states lost influence over the Malian government since the military coup in 2021, the missions nevertheless continued to focus on the sensitive issue of irregular migration, albeit with reduced capacity.

Libya

After the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, the Libyan state lost the ability to provide basic services, maintain order, and exercise authority over its territory. At the same time, the massive increase in displaced people in the entire Middle East and North Africa region due to the 'Arab Spring' uprisings made Libya a main transit country for migrants aiming to enter the EU. This led to the establishment of the EU Border Assistance Mission, EUBAM Libya. EUBAM Libya's mandate has always included "the fight against cross-border crime, including human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and against terrorism."¹⁶ As such, the EUBAM mission is closely intertwined with security, crime prevention, and irregular migration.

In the first few years, EUBAM Libya reflected divisions among EU member states. Whilst Italy backed the Tripoli-based government—driven partly by Italy's interest in curbing migration and reviving its former political influence—France supported rival eastern factions based in Benghazi. This lack of consensus among EU member states weakened the mission's coherence and delayed its deployment. When EUBAM Libya was finally deployed in May 2013, Italy pushed to have an Italian retired general lead the mission, offering to fund it and provide a contingent of Italian military police for security. However, due to concerns over Italy's colonial past in Libya, its bid was rejected by the other member states in favour of Colonel Antti Juhani Hartikainen from Finland. In protest, Italy

withdrew its personnel and intelligence support. With no EU country other than Italy contributing security forces, the mission lacked adequate protection. It was first based in a secure compound in Tripoli before relocating to Tunis, where it operated with limited operational capacity between 2013 and 2019.¹⁷

On 13 April 2015, a vessel carrying up to 550 migrants capsized off the coast of Libya, resulting in the estimated loss of more than 400 lives. The tragedy became emblematic of the extreme dangers associated with irregular migration across the Mediterranean and was frequently cited as a key example in the discussions leading to the establishment of the EU Naval Force Mediterranean (EU NAVFOR Med). This naval operation's primary purpose was to disrupt people smuggling networks in Libya and to participate in Search and Rescue operations. Later replaced by the EU Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Irini (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI), its primary task was enforcing the United Nations-imposed arms embargo on Libya, while also being mandated to disrupt people smuggling and trafficking networks. It also provided capacity building for the Libyan authorities responsible for Search and Rescue at sea.

Central African Republic and Somalia

In the case of the two CSDP missions in Somalia and the Central African Republic (CAR), the connection to migration governance is less evident than in the missions in Mali, Niger, and Libya. Their budgets are also significantly smaller (see figure 1 below), and these missions are more focused on training security forces. Both the mission in Somalia and the CAR are military training missions, EUTMs. EUTM Somalia primarily operates in and around the capital, Mogadishu, and EUTM RCA in and around the capital, Bangui.¹⁸

Migration and border management are not part of either EUTM RCA¹⁹ or EUTM Somalia's official mandates. And, since no document like the *Strategic Holistic Review* for EUTM Mali has been leaked, it is difficult to know for certain to what extent migration governance is a part of the missions in practice.

However, EUTM Somalia operates in a region that has historically been a major point of origin for displaced people heading to Europe (and other regions). However, EU policymakers and analysts often draw links between improved security in Somalia and reduced irregular migration pressures. Indeed, there has been a significant amount of development aid channelled to Somalia via the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), with the explicit aim of 'combating root causes' of irregular migration. Over €74 million was allocated via the EUTF between 2016 and 2022, within projects such as "Inclusive local economic development" and "Enhancing Somalia's responsiveness to the management and reintegration of mixed migration flows".²⁰ To make such projects feasible, a minimum level of security is essential—rendering EUTM Somalia a critical component not only for military stability but also for enabling development initiatives in the country.

In contrast, very few citizens of the CAR make the long journey to Europe to seek asylum but instead find protection in neighbouring African states. Thus, the direct connection between the CSDP mission in CAR and migration governance is less explicit than in contexts such as Libya or Niger. The missions in the Central African Republic are primarily concerned with training and advising national security forces rather than migration control or border management. Nevertheless, it is possible to speculate that migration considerations are not absent from the EU's calculus. Given the CSDP's overarching emphasis on addressing the root causes of irregular migration, the EU's efforts to stabilise a highly fragile state, such as the CAR, may also be understood as part of a longer-term strategy to mitigate displacement and ensure that migration from the region towards Europe remains limited. Although migration is not formally included in the mandates of these missions, the EU's broader external agenda suggests that stabilisation and migration management are often interlinked.

Figure 1: EU CSDP missions in Africa²¹

Name	Period	Thematic focus	Connection to migration	Budget (Circa)
EUCAP Sahel Niger	2012-2023	Civilian crisis management	Border security	€72m (Oct 2022-Sep 2024)
EUCAP Sahel Mali	2015-present	Civilian crisis management	Border security	€73m (Feb 2023-Jan 2025)
EUTM Mali	2013-2024	Military capacity	Combating root causes	€134m (May 2020-May 2024)
EUBAM Libya	2013-present	Border management	Border management	€85m (Jul 2021-Jun 2023)
EUTM RCA	2016-present	Military capacity	Combating root causes	€37m (Sep 2020-Sep 2022)
EUTM Somalia	2010-present	Military capacity	Combating root causes	€25m (Jan 2021-Dec 2022)
EUNAVFOR MED IRINI ²²	2015-present	Naval capacity	Disrupting smugglers & traffickers	€17m (Apr 2023-Mar 2025)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined how the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, the CSDP, missions in Africa relate to the governance of migration. While the official mandates of these missions rarely state migration control as a primary objective, a closer analysis reveals that migration-related concerns permeate many of them, especially in the context of post-2015 EU policy developments. Through a review of documents on all CSDP missions in Africa, the article has shown that curbing irregular migration is an increasingly embedded, though often understated, dimension of EU security operations on the continent.

In Niger, the connection between the CSDP mission and migration control was explicit and part of the official mandate. The revised mandate of EUCAP Sahel Niger, along with its role in implementing anti-smuggling legislation, illustrates the mission's direct efforts to curb irregular migration. In Mali, the relationship is more subtle but no less significant. Despite the absence of any mention of migration from official mission mandates, a leaked internal review reveals that EU efforts explicitly link security assistance and development to migration deterrence. This covert linkage underscores the political sensitivity of migration governance in Malian domestic politics

yet affirms that migration remains a core objective of EU engagement.

Libya, as a major transit country, represents the clearest case where the nexus between migration and EU security policy is overt. Both the EUBAM mission and the naval operations are explicitly tasked with combating smuggling and reinforcing border control capacities. Somalia presents a different dynamic: In this context, EU actors frame the mission's contributions to stability and development as a means of addressing the 'root causes of migration'—despite the absence of any formal migration-related objective in the military mission's mandate. The link is indirect, but strategic development funding tied to reducing irregular migration, reinforces this connection.

In the Central African Republic, the relationship is the weakest. Migration is neither a stated nor an obvious concern of the military training mission. Nonetheless, given the CSDP's overarching strategic emphasis on irregular migration as a threat, it is plausible that EU support in the CAR also serves to address long-term stability as a precondition for migration control, even if only implicitly.

Taken together, the analysis supports the assumption that EU military and civilian missions in Africa are increasingly concerned with stopping irregular migration. Whether through explicit mandates, covert strategic reviews, or broader narratives of security and development, the EU has embedded migration control within the operational logic of its external security engagements. This development reflects not only a securitized approach to migration but also the Union's evolving efforts to externalize migration management beyond its borders—often in subtle and politically nuanced ways.

Author bio: Johan Ekstedt is a Postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for European Studies at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB-IEE), within the Horizon Europe-funded NAVIGATOR project. He holds a PhD in International Migration and Ethnic Relations (IMER) at Malmö University's Department of Global Political Studies. Johan.ekstedt@ulb.be

¹ Bergmann, J., & Müller, P. (2023). Spillover dynamics and inter-institutional interactions between CSDP and AFSJ: moving towards a more joined-up EU external migration policy? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(12), 3005-3023.

² The article is part of ongoing research on the Horizon Europe-funded NAVIGATOR project, which analyses how the EU manages the growing complexity and conflicts within the institutional arenas of global governance.

³ European Union. (2022). *A Strategic Compass for security and defence. For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security*. p. 57. Online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf

⁴ Bøås, M. (2021). EU migration management in the Sahel: unintended consequences on the ground in Niger? *Third World Quarterly*, 42(1), 52-67.

⁵ Yülek, M., Karabulut, S. & Karçı, A. O. (2023). On economic security and the political economy of neocolonialist capitalism: the case of France and Niger's uranium resources. In *Capitalism at a Crossroads: A New Reset?* (pp. 159-180). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ European External Action Service. (2016). Common security and defence policy - The EUCAP Sahel Niger civilian mission. Online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet_eucap_sahel_niger_en.pdf

⁸ Bird, L. (2020). *Human smuggling in Africa - The creation of a new criminalised economy?* ENACT Continental Report. p.46

⁹ Marangio, R. (2024). *Sahel reset - Time to reshape the EU's engagement*. EUISS Brief 2. Feb 2024. p. 4.

¹⁰ Powers of Africa. (2024). *Niamey: weapons, ammunition, and military equipment seized at Eucap Sahel headquarters*. Online:

<https://powersofafrica.com/article/346/niamey-weapons-ammunition-and-military-equipment-seized-at-eucap-sahel-headquarters>

¹¹ Meyer A., Simonet L. & Späth J., (2025). *The European Union and the Sahel: The day after*. Austrian Institute for International Affairs. Online: <https://www.oii.ac.at/en/publications/the-european-union-and-the-sahel-the-day-after/>.

¹² Molnár, A., & Vecsey, M. (2022). The EU's missions and operations from the Central Mediterranean to West

Africa in the context of the migration crisis. *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies*, 15(1). p. 71.

¹³ EEAS (2024). *EUCAP Sahel Mali*. Fact sheet. Online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/Factsheet%20EUCAP%20Sahel%20Mali%20-%20FRENCH%20VERSION_3.pdf

¹⁴ Council of the European Union. (2022). *Holistic strategic review of EUTM Mali and EUCAP SAHEL Mali 2022*. Encl.: EEAS(2022) 670., p. 18. The documents veracity has been confirmed by EUObserver.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁶ Eur-lex.europa.eu (2013). Summary of decision 2013/233/CFSP – EU Integrated border management assistance mission in Libya. Online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum:4340621>

¹⁷ Bures, O., & Cusumano, E. (2025). Bridging which gaps? The European Union's use of private military and security companies in common security and defence policy missions. *Defense & Security Analysis*, 1-26.

¹⁸ See EUTM Somalia (n.d). *About us*. Online: <https://www.eutmsomalia.eu/about-us/> and EUTM RCA. (n.d.). and Ministerio de Defensa. *Ongoing Operations – EUTM RCA*. Online: <https://emad.defensa.gob.es/en/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/45-EUTM-RCA/>

¹⁹ RCA refers to the French acronym of CAR, i.e. *République centrafricaine*.

²⁰ European Commission. (2023). *Annual report emergency trust fund for Africa*. Publications Office of the European Union. p. 65.

²¹ Data compiled from: COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2022/1505 of 9 September 2022 amending Decision 2012/392/CFSP on the European Union CSDP mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger). Art. 1(2); COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2023/96 of 10 January 2023 amending Decision 2014/219/CFSP on the European Union CSDP Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali. Art. 1(2); Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/434 of 23 March 2020 amending Decision 2013/34/CFSP on a European Union military mission to contribute to the training of the Malian Armed Forces (EUTM Mali). Art. 1(2); COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2021/1009 of 18 June 2021 amending Decision 2013/233/CFSP on the European Union Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM Libya). Art 2(3); COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2020/1133 of 30 July 2020 amending Decision (CFSP) 2016/610 on a European Union CSDP Military Training mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA).

Art. 1(3); COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2020/2032 of 10 December 2020 amending Decision 2010/96/CFSP on a European Union military mission to contribute to the training of Somali security forces. Art. 1(4); COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2023/653 of 20 March 2023 amending Decision (CFSP) 2020/472 on the European Union military operation in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI). Art. 1(2).

²² Previously Operation Sophia

© 2025 Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits the user to copy, distribute, and transmit the work provided that the original author(s) and source are credited.