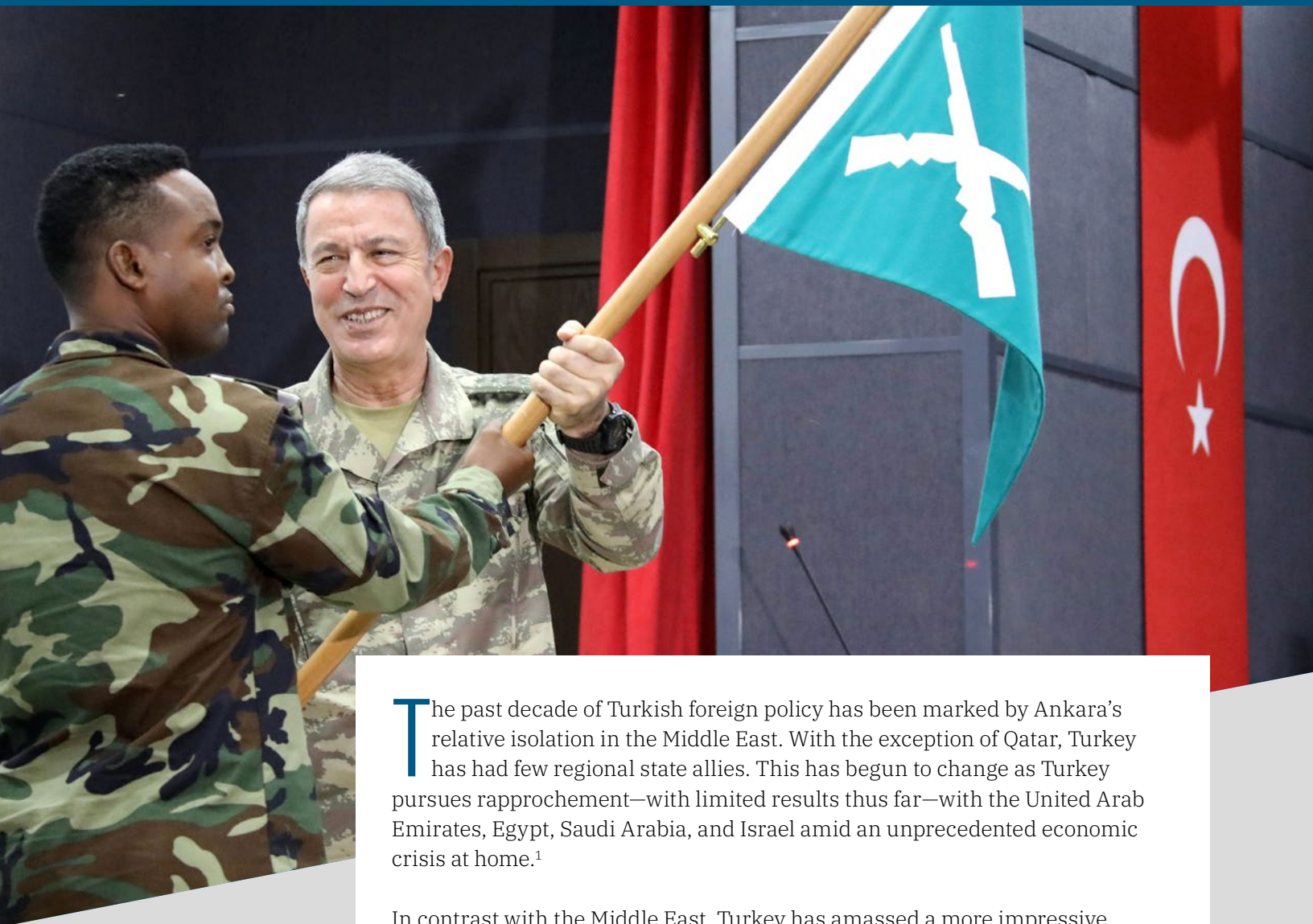




Turkish Influence in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Then Turkish chief of General Staff (and now defense minister) Hulusi Akar raises a flag with a Somali soldier. (REUTERS/Feisal Omar)

The past decade of Turkish foreign policy has been marked by Ankara's relative isolation in the Middle East. With the exception of Qatar, Turkey has had few regional state allies. This has begun to change as Turkey pursues rapprochement—with limited results thus far—with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel amid an unprecedented economic crisis at home.¹

In contrast with the Middle East, Turkey has amassed a more impressive record of influence building in sub-Saharan Africa. This engagement constitutes a relatively new phenomenon, dating to the start of Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule in 2002—with Recep Tayyip Erdogan becoming prime minister in 2003—and has prospered on multiple fronts, including economic ties, military cooperation, and cultural, humanitarian, and religious

initiatives. Accordingly, this paper builds on existing analyses to provide an overview of the many projects pursued by Turkish actors on the African continent, while also seeking to highlight the changing contours of this issue for U.S. policymakers from the perspective of regional competition in Africa and the Middle East.

Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AU	African Union
CSO	civil society organization
EUTM-S	European Training Mission–Somalia
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
MCC	Military Coordination Cell (U.S. mission in Somalia)
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
YEI	Yunus Emre Institute

Turkey’s presence in Africa is far from hegemonic. As a former Turkish diplomat noted in April 2021, a weakened Turkish economy and poor relations with its neighbors pose challenges to Ankara’s broader Africa policy.² Turkey’s economic problems have only worsened since this comment, with inflation hitting a twenty-four-year high in May 2022.³ What is more, in countries such as Somalia and Sudan, leaders with close ties to Turkish president Erdogan have recently been replaced by leaders friendly to the UAE and other regional actors.⁴ Simultaneously, however, Erdogan has pursued rapprochement with Ankara’s Middle East rivals, partly in an effort to seek

investment in Turkish markets, boost the economy, and rebuild his base ahead of the country’s 2023 scheduled presidential and parliamentary elections.⁵

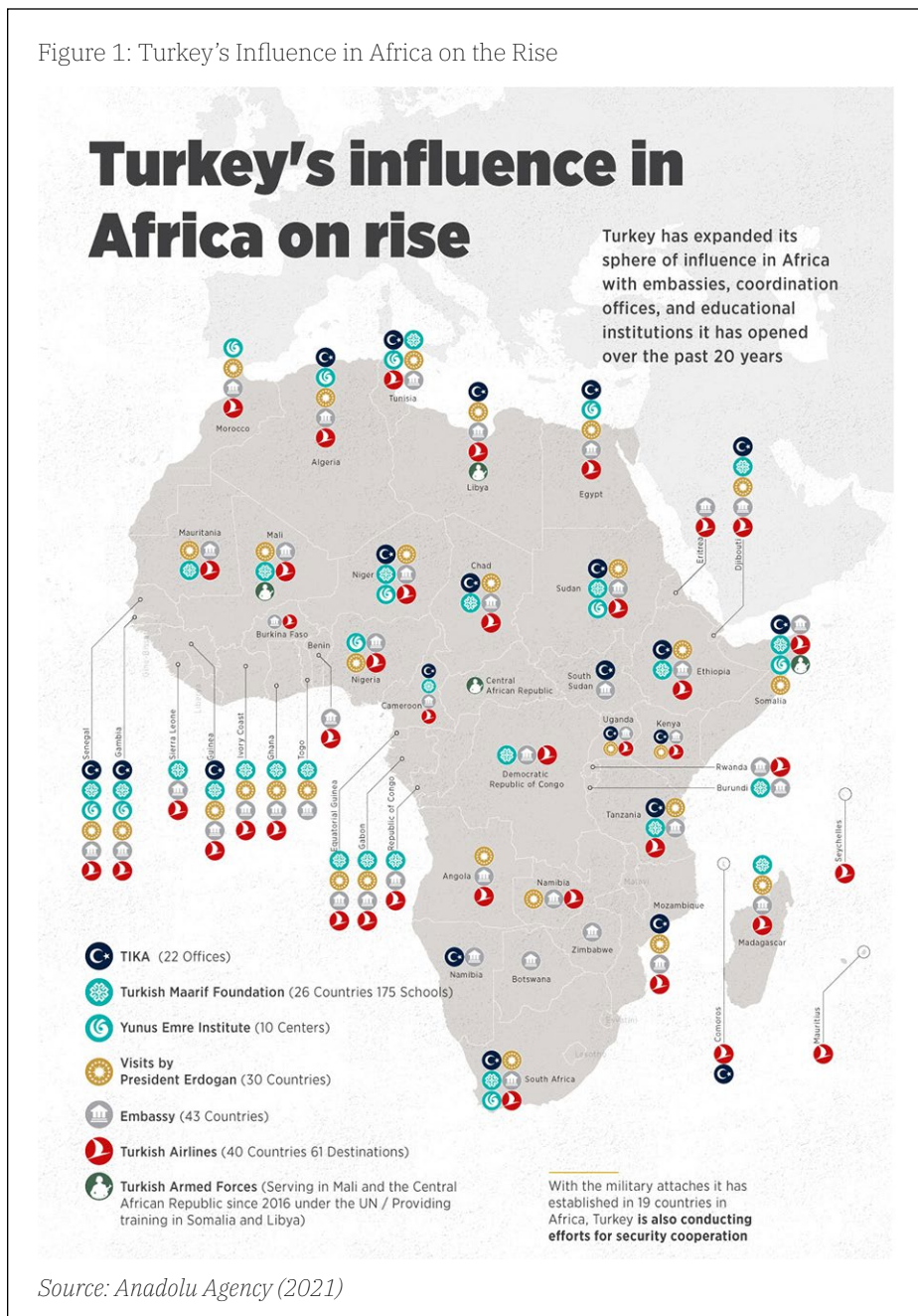
It remains to be seen if such rapprochement—particularly with the UAE—will ease either domestic economic woes or competition for influence building across sub-Saharan Africa, and especially in the Horn of Africa, where Turkish-Emirati jostling has been strongest. The United States should stay abreast of Turkish-African ties, particularly in the Muslim-majority and Muslim-plurality Sahel, Horn of Africa, and East Africa, where Turkish influence appears to be most solid. (For a depiction of Turkey’s activities, see figure 1, “Turkey’s Influence in Africa on the Rise.”)

Historical Background

In North Africa, Ankara has traditionally had a significant presence given that most of the region, excepting Morocco, was once part of the Ottoman Empire. This has not been the case for sub-Saharan Africa, where the Ottoman imprint was minimal, at best, beyond Sudan and littoral regions of the Horn of Africa. Indeed, until the rise of Erdogan—who served as Turkey’s prime minister between 2003 and 2014 and has been president since—Turkish foreign policy decisionmakers have generally neglected sub-Saharan Africa.

While some past Turkish leaders have tried to diversify the longstanding Western orientation of the nation’s foreign policy—such as in Prime Minister Turgut Ozal’s outreach to the Middle East in the 1980s and President Suleyman Demirel’s foray into Central Asia in the 1990s—the sub-Saharan outreach belongs almost completely to Erdogan. At least initially, Erdogan’s Africa policy was informed by his advisor Ahmet Davutoglu, who served as his foreign minister (2009–14) and later prime minister (2014–16). While Turkey officially launched its “African Initiative Policy” process aimed at building soft power across the continent in 1998, major headway was only made several years later under Erdogan and Davutoglu when Turkey became an observer to

Figure 1: Turkey's Influence in Africa on the Rise



These CSOs were often the first Turkish institutions to arrive in a sub-Saharan country. In most cases, Turkish Foreign Ministry missions and flights on the government-owned Turkish Airlines ensued. But following the Erdogan-Gulen split in 2011 and especially after the 2016 failed coup attempt, in which Gulen-aligned officers played a key role, Erdogan has moved against the Gulen network—now called FETÖ by Turkey—including its outposts in Africa.⁸

The Turkish government has successfully convinced many of its African counterparts to shut down Gulen-run entities or transfer their ownership to Ankara-controlled ones, such as the Education Foundation (*Maarif Vakfi*) in the case of schools.⁹ In consolidating its control over the influence-building process, including through official networks such as Maarif Vakfi and state religious, cultural, military, and humanitarian organizations, Turkey has reinvigorated its influence across the continent since 2016.

Today, Turkish activity in Africa is multifaceted and, in the

the African Union (in 2005) and eventually an AU strategic partner (in 2008).⁶ Erdogan has been the one constant in Turkey's sub-Saharan initiatives, with reports suggesting he has visited more than thirty African nations in the past eighteen years, sometimes making multiple visits to a country.⁷

In the first decade of Erdogan's rule, the movement led by Fethullah Gulen helped build Turkish influence on the continent through its network of schools, businesses, and civil society organizations.

words of anthropologist Ezgi Guner, "multiscalar." It involves the state bureaucracy and state-to-state interaction, AKP-aligned businesses, NGOs, and Islamic groups.¹⁰ Bilateral relations are bolstered by a growing list of Turkish diplomatic missions across the continent, as well as summits with African leaders often organized in Turkey.¹¹ The continent now hosts forty-four Turkish embassies (the latest, in Guinea-Bissau, announced by Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Nur Sagman on June 20, 2022), compared to a dozen in 2002, many of which

were in North Africa.¹² Not insignificantly, Turkish Airlines reportedly flew to sixty-one African destinations in 2021, up from a mere handful—again mostly in North Africa—when Erdogan became prime minister in 2003.¹³ These dynamics together contribute to Ankara’s commercial, military, and cultural connectivity with Africa.

Economic Ties

Turkey’s economic ties with the continent have increased significantly over the last two decades. Whereas the total volume of trade between Turkey and sub-Saharan Africa was \$1.35 billion in 2003, Turkey’s semiofficial Anadolu Agency reports that in 2021 it had reached \$10.7 billion.¹⁴ Turkish exports have risen at a similar pace, amounting to some \$7.9 billion in 2021. As of January 2021, according to unnamed Turkish officials, more than a third of the \$6 billion in Turkish investment in the sub-Saharan region had gone toward Ethiopia. This commitment by Erdogan undoubtedly owes at least in part to the country’s 114 million citizens, its status as East Africa’s largest economy—on a purchasing power parity basis—and its role hosting the African Union.¹⁵ In Senegal in the west, meanwhile, Turkey’s ambassador, Ahmet Kavas, recently suggested that Turkey is seeking to grow its trade with the African continent to upward of \$50 billion over 2022–26.¹⁶

Some Turkish initiatives, however, have been affected by domestic political changes in African countries, with one example involving historic Suakin Island on Sudan’s Red Sea coast. Back in 2017, in the highest-level visit by a Turkish official to Sudan since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire almost a century earlier, Erdogan signed a \$650 million deal with then president Omar al-Bashir aimed at restoring and rebuilding the island’s infrastructure.¹⁷ At the time, the Sudanese foreign minister indicated Turkey would be rebuilding the Ottoman-era port and constructing a naval dock for civilian and military use.¹⁸ Part of the island was to be temporarily granted to Turkey during the restoration.¹⁹ In 2018, the Turkish Cooperation and

Coordination Agency (TIKA) began restoration work with the goal of “turn[ing] the island into a major tourism center especially for Hajj-bound pilgrims.”²⁰ Later that year, Turkey and Qatar signed a \$4 billion deal to collaboratively develop Suakin’s port.²¹

Turkey’s agreement with Sudan caused controversy among some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members concerned that Ankara would be building a military base there to expand its regional footprint, and also taking into account rising Turkish-Qatari influence amid the Gulf rift between Doha and its neighbors.²² Erdogan, for his part, denied that Turkey was building a naval base on the island.²³ After Bashir was ousted by a military coup in April 2019, however, reports emerged suggesting the Turkey-Sudan deal had been canceled, even as a Turkish Defense Ministry official denied these claims.²⁴ Nevertheless, the current status of this project remains unclear, especially amid the post-Bashir eclipse of Turkish influence in Sudan by Egypt and the UAE.

Military Ties

Security issues have been another priority for Ankara, which seeks to solidify a political presence in Africa—and globally—and has thus involved itself in several conflicts across the continent. Under Erdogan, Turkey has spread its wings militarily beyond its immediate neighborhood (e.g., in Iraq, where it has maintained a permanent military presence since the 1990s to fight the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK), sending troops overseas to fight in wars (e.g., in Libya) and establishing bases and training militaries of Turkey-aligned governments (e.g., in Somalia).

In this regard, Somalia, which currently hosts the world’s largest Turkish embassy,²⁵ has witnessed a growing Turkish presence since 2017, when Ankara completed a military facility to support the central government in its struggle against militant groups, including the al-Qaeda-aligned al-Shabab.²⁶ Similarly, in February 2022 Turkey’s parliament



The Turkish embassy in Mogadishu. *Source: REUTERS/Feisal Omar*

green-lighted an extended troop deployment around the Indian Ocean, including in Somalia, until February 2023.²⁷ Ankara has also signed military cooperation and training agreements with Ethiopia, Niger, Senegal, and other countries.²⁸ In total, Turkey is said to have established thirty-seven military offices on the continent.²⁹

Moreover, Turkey clearly sees a market for its military exports in Africa—through state-owned and private companies alike—including its robust drone industry, with drones playing a crucial role in Turkish-African ties.³⁰ On the drone front, technology innovated by Selcuk Bayraktar, a son-in-law to Erdogan, recently drew high-profile attention for helping the Ukrainian military contest the Russian invasion.³¹ African nations such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Niger are reported to have already purchased Turkish drones.³² And countries like Angola and Rwanda are reportedly part of a growing list of potential buyers.³³ Meanwhile, overall Turkish defense and aviation exports to Angola, Chad, and Ethiopia increased significantly in 2021.³⁴ For example, Niger

made headlines as “the first foreign customer of Turkey’s Hurkus aircraft,” a manned military training aircraft, in November 2021, and Chad was the first African country to purchase the Turkish Yoruk 4x4 armored vehicle (Senegal has also purchased armored vehicles from the producers of the Yoruk).³⁵

Despite significant exports of defense technology, Turkey’s military ties with African countries have not been without problems. This is especially true of Ethiopia, which has used Turkish-made drones in its war against rebels in the Tigray region. Turkish drones were reportedly used in a January 2022 Ethiopian attack that killed fifty-eight civilians hiding in a school. Overall, Ethiopia’s reliance on drones, which it buys from multiple countries, including the UAE, China, and Iran, has resulted in more than three hundred civilian deaths in the Tigray conflict.³⁶ U.S. officials reportedly voiced concern to Turkey about weapon sales to Ethiopia.³⁷ Turkey also reportedly moved its Ethiopian embassy to Kenya following threats relating to the use of Turkish drones in the Tigray conflict.³⁸ Turkish

embassies and consulates in the United States even became sites of protest by diaspora Tigrayans voicing their anger at Turkey's arming of Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed.³⁹

Cultural Links, Humanitarianism, and Religion

Beyond economic and military ties, Turkey has worked to cultivate its image as a benign partner—with “no colonial baggage”—seeking mutual benefits for Turks and Africans alike.⁴⁰ Turkey's soft power initiatives accordingly assume that the Turkish approach to Africa is not exploitative relative to Western European nations—the traditional colonial powers on the continent—and others. In an article that encapsulates this approach, Turkey's state broadcaster TRT World quoted experts and Turkish diplomats who make the following arguments: Turkey has emerged as a “strong alternative” to Western states—because it does not have a colonial history in Africa—and to China, another rising self-professed “no colonial baggage” power but one whose partnerships often incur sizable debts for African states; Turkey's approach is based on “developing and winning together”; and Turkey has adopted a “win-win policy that grants fair cooperation for mutual development and humanitarian aid.”⁴¹ (Whether or not Turkey is actually and completely perceived as such in Africa is another matter.)

Ankara has thus sought to establish a cultural rapport with sub-Saharan Africa through various means. The head of the country's global cultural agency, Yunus Emre Institute (YEI), which is named after a medieval Turkish humanist poet, said in 2021 that the institute is planning to open ten new cultural centers in Africa in 2022, and added that YEI needs to open centers in at least twenty to twenty-five more African countries. YEI, he said, plays the role of “cultural ambassador” beyond Turkey's borders.

Already, Turkey has ten cultural centers across Africa, including in Nigeria and Rwanda, where people can study Turkish.⁴² Relatedly, President Erdogan has said that more than 14,000 African students have studied in Turkey, including those who have received grants from the country's “Turkiye Scholarships” grant program.⁴³

On the humanitarian front, Turkey has established “a maternal and child healthcare center in Niger, several women's shelters in Cameroon, and a vocational training center in Madagascar,” according to Turkish first lady Emine Erdogan, who wrote in a 2018 op-ed that “women's empowerment” forms a cornerstone of Turkish development in Africa.⁴⁴ (Interestingly, the first lady also published a book in 2021 about her travels to twenty-three African countries with the president.⁴⁵) Turkey has also assisted in fields such as water provision, among others, in Africa.⁴⁶

As for Turkish involvement in Africa's religious life, Erdogan has over the years heavily funded and deployed Diyanet, the public agency that oversees Sunni Islam in Turkey, in hopes of sparking pro-Islamic sentiment on the continent and situating Turkey as a leader. These efforts extend especially to the Horn of Africa. For example, in Djibouti, Diyanet completed construction in November 2019 of the impressive Abdulhamid II Mosque—named for the nineteenth-century Ottoman sultan who took an interest in pan-Islamic causes while trying to rebuild Ottoman influence globally—and previously, in 2015, helped renovate a Somali mosque initially funded by Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷ Similar charitable acts have been initiated in other Horn countries such as Ethiopia and African states such as Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, South Africa, and Chad.⁴⁸ Beyond mosques, Turkey's Islam-related work in Africa includes funding educational facilities run by Sufi networks in cooperation with the Turkish state.⁴⁹

Finally, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Turkey has used “vaccine diplomacy” to further improve its ties to African countries. In December 2021, Erdogan expressed Turkey's intent to deliver 15 million doses of the indigenously developed Turkovac vaccine to

the continent pending its authorization for use.⁵⁰ Three months later, on March 22, 2022, the first shipment of vaccines (although not Turkovac) went to Somalia,⁵¹ whose relationship with Turkey, as the next section shows, has been unique.

Somalia as a Case Study

Even in the context of a large Turkish footprint in the Horn of Africa, Turkey's relations with Somalia stand out.⁵² This is not surprising given Somalia's strategic value for Turkey, notably as a gateway to the Indian Ocean.

But Turkey's relationship with Somalia, as successful as it has been, also underlines challenges in Ankara's larger Africa policy. For Turkey's extensive diplomatic relations with Somalia, Erdogan deserves credit. He traveled to famine-afflicted Mogadishu in 2011, becoming the first non-African leader to visit the country since 1991.⁵³ He visited again in 2015 and 2016. Specifically, in showing its commitment, Turkey has facilitated talks between the Somali central government and the leadership of breakaway Somaliland, which declared its independence in 1991.⁵⁴

Beyond diplomatic relations, Turkey has been a major provider of aid to Somalia, although Turkish policy has moved past humanitarianism alone. Bilateral trade volume reached \$280 million in 2020, and Turkish companies now operate Mogadishu's main port as well as its airport.⁵⁵ In early 2020, Erdogan also claimed the Somali state had invited Turkey to search for oil in its territorial waters, although this seems not to have happened.⁵⁶

While Turkish officials hail bilateral military ties as contributing to Somalia's security and fight against terrorism, these ties have not been free of controversy. As a baseline, in the past decade Turkey and Somalia have signed multiple military pacts, with Turkey opening a military training facility in Somalia (for Somali soldiers) in 2017 known as Camp TURKSOM.⁵⁷ Turkish ambassador to Somalia

Mehmet Yilmaz said in 2020 that Turkey has trained one-third of Somalia's military forces, including special forces, such as the Gorgor and Haramcad units.⁵⁸ Some members of these units were even trained in Turkey.⁵⁹

Somalia researcher Guled Ahmed has commented on the associated controversy.⁶⁰ For example, the Gorgor forces have been implicated in using live ammunition against civilians demonstrating in Mogadishu against election delays.⁶¹ The Haramcad units have been involved in the arrest of journalists as well as alleged attacks against them, and purportedly in an attack by former president Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmajo" on his political adversary, the newly elected president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.⁶² Farmajo also used them as a means to curb political dissent.⁶³ Indeed, the Somali opposition even wrote a letter to Turkey requesting that the latter stop arming the Haramcad during the election dispute in December 2020.⁶⁴

The Turkish training facility, one must note, is not the only training mission in Somalia: the U.S. Military Coordination Cell in Somalia (MCC), the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and the European Training Mission–Somalia (EUTM-S) are all involved in efforts to enhance security in the country. Moreover, all such actors do appear to engage in some level of coordination and cooperation.⁶⁵

Furthermore, Turkey's cultural impact has been significant. In Somalia, nearly 100,000 Somalis reportedly have some Turkish-language skills, according to Turkey's semiofficial Anadolu Agency, which suggests that Turkish could soon be the "number 2 language" in Somalia.⁶⁶ Indeed, "Istanbul" has become one of the most popular female names in the country. Also, according to reports, Turkey's state broadcaster TRT is set to boost the Somali filmmaking industry.⁶⁷ And through the "Turkiye Scholarships" for international students, Somalia has become "one of the top countries in Africa for sending students to Turkey for higher education."⁶⁸ In fact, Somalia's current justice minister, Abdulkadir Mohamed Nur, was educated in Turkey and served at the Somali embassy in Ankara.⁶⁹

Cultural concerns about Turkish involvement sometimes blend with those relating to the military. In remarking on potential Turkish “indoctrination” of Somali troops, for example, Guled Ahmed notes instances such as Somali troops “singing the Turkish national anthem with a background video showing Turkish army propaganda commemorating the Ottoman Empire.”⁷⁰

Turkey’s relationship with Somalia embodies the image the country is trying to cultivate in the region—that of a benefactor lending a helping hand—as seen through Erdogan’s 2011 visit to Mogadishu and the rhetoric surrounding Turkey’s military facility Camp TURKSOM. Indeed, one op-ed in the AKP-aligned *Daily Sabah* referred to Turkey as “Somalia’s long-lost brother” who was there to “rebuild the country,”⁷¹ while another discussed the countries’ historical ties dating back to the sixteenth century, when the “Ottoman Empire sought to prevent Somalia from becoming a Portuguese colony.” The piece went on to commend “the Ottoman presence in Berbera...[for being] the guarant[or] of peace in the region,” just as “the presence of the military training center in Somalia [is] today.”⁷²

Yet Turkey’s efforts are not immune to Somali domestic politics. The May 2022 election of UAE-backed Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as Somalia’s new president could potentially cool the rapport, given the break it constitutes with Farmajo, who maintained very close ties with Turkey and Qatar.⁷³

Turkey’s Challenges in Africa

Among Turkey’s challenges in sub-Saharan Africa are its competitors for position. From the Middle East alone, the UAE and Israel are making a play,⁷⁴ as is Qatar, although it tends to align with Turkey. Globally, China, the United States, and France are perhaps most prominent; Beijing, a clear competitor for Washington and Paris, outpaces Ankara in almost every category.⁷⁵ At the same time, some analysts

have noted a dip in Chinese interest in Africa,⁷⁶ with a recent *Economist* overview explaining that “Turkish [construction] firms are chipping away at the dominance of Chinese ones, helped no doubt by a drop in lending by China.”⁷⁷

Global media sources have also published stories on Turkish competition with France, particularly in Francophone Africa.⁷⁸ Sahelian popular opinion on French involvement in domestic affairs, for example, has evidently soured, often favoring “Turkey as less overbearing than the European Union or France, and as a partner with similar interests.”⁷⁹ Interestingly, during the Turkey-Africa Media Summit in May 2022, Fahrettin Altun, who heads media and communications for the Turkish presidency, said the launch of TRT French in April was a “good development” for Turkey’s ties with Africa.⁸⁰ Indeed, while Ankara has sometimes seen itself in competition with Paris, experts have noted that these narratives may be overblown, particularly given that French influence is most significant in West Africa, where Turkish influence is relatively weaker.⁸¹ It is unclear if the recent French-Turkish rapprochement, linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, will affect these dynamics.⁸²

Turkish competition with the UAE, especially in Somalia, bears mention here. While Turkey has historically partnered with the central government in Mogadishu, Abu Dhabi has mostly been building influence in Somaliland, the country’s breakaway region, and in the semiautonomous region of Puntland. Specifically, Turkey built a military facility in Mogadishu, where Turkish companies operate the capital’s main port and airport, and the UAE has sought to establish a military facility in Somaliland, where it initially planned to train Somaliland forces—although the site is now apparently set to be converted to a civilian airport. Moreover, Emirati companies have developed and operated Somaliland’s Berbera port and Puntland’s Bosaso port.⁸³ Yet recently, the central government in Mogadishu has changed hands from Turkey-backed Farmajo to Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who was reportedly supported in his election campaign by the UAE and other regional powers.⁸⁴ It remains unclear

whether potentially improving ties between Turkey and the UAE—or the change in Somali leadership—will lessen or aggravate the countries’ competition in Somalia or elsewhere.

It also remains to be seen whether the embrace of Ankara by African capitals will stand the test of time. Skeptics have asserted that Turkey’s true Africa engagement has recently thinned, offering as evidence officials’ lip service to flashy installations like embassies, new flight routes, and summits. This is especially important as Turkey’s economy faces its most serious downturn since Erdogan’s rise in 2003, and it is unclear if Ankara can continue to prioritize African relationships as it has thus far.⁸⁵ Yet notwithstanding the downsides, along with the state-to-state interaction, benefits have surely accrued to Turkish industry such as construction and defense companies.

Conclusion

In late February 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine interrupted President Erdogan’s visit to Africa, and four months later the war persists, even if it has ceded preeminence in news headlines. As for other leaders, the war has concentrated the Turkish leader’s attention.⁸⁶ This is the case even though Turkish foreign policy in Ukraine, and elsewhere, faces constraints caused by the country’s economic troubles—a situation that could have ripple effects in Africa.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the Turkish presence in Africa is worth watching for U.S. officials, especially given the question of China competition. Recent opportunities for cooperation with a less isolated Turkey, as in Ukraine, could bear fruit for the bilateral relationship and should ultimately benefit African governments and their people.

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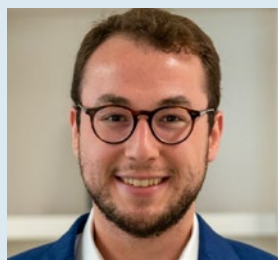
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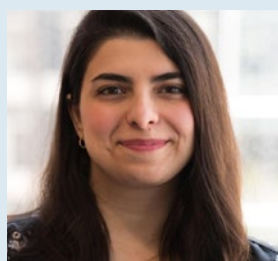
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