

Reflection on Turkey Engagement in Somalia

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This month marks the 10th anniversary of Somalia-Turkish relationship. Aaran Center looks back Turkish engagement in Somalia and the impact of its 'soft power' strategy.

Turkish engagement in Somalia represents the most substantive outgrowth of Ankara's ambitious "Open to Africa" policy, which emerged in 2005 and aimed to boost Turkish diplomatic and commercial presence across the continent. Turkey's policy in Somalia is intertwined with Turkish general policy on Africa. 2011 was a turning point in Turkey engagement in Somalia when President Erdogan then Turkish Prime Minister first visited Mogadishu amid a devastating famine, the first non-African leader to visit the war-torn capital in two decades.

What began as a principally humanitarian initiative grew into more complex over time. Turkish aid, diplomatic and commercial push in Somalia has gone together as part of

Turkey becoming a global actor and as a competitive player against other powers. Turkey gained the hearts and minds of Somali citizens all over the world and carefully crafted and succeeded in building channels of trust between Somalia and Ankara. Turkey's engagement in Somalia is characterized by the high visibility of its projects and their quick and direct delivery of aid on the ground.

Diplomatically the Turkey had no relationship with Somali authorities until the visit of President Sheikh Sharif of the TFG in 2009. In 2012 Turkey hosted Somalia Conference in Istanbul focusing on Somalia's post-transition future and brought together over 300 Somali civil society groups. In 2016

it opened the largest overseas Turkish embassy in Mogadishu. Most recently, Turkey appointed a special envoy for Somalia - a first in Turkish foreign policy - to reconcile FGS and Somaliland. Turkey abolished visas for diplomatic passport holders with 17 African countries including Somalia.¹



Turkey has surpassed the United Nations' target of allocating 0.7 percent of the national dividend to aid funds this year by dedicating 0.95 percent (\$8.1 billion) becoming the sixth highest ranking country in official development assistance, overtaking many developed countries like the US and UK. In 2011, Turkey contributed over \$400 million to the humanitarian relief efforts in Somalia.² In 2013, According to TIKa report, the Turkish development and humanitarian aid to Somalia has reached \$370 million. The amount of humanitarian and development assistance given to Somalia to date has exceeded US \$1 billion.³

Since 2011, Turkish officials estimate that nearly 3000 scholarships have been provided to Somali students. Turkey has built and equipped two big hospitals in Mogadishu

including the largest hospital in Somalia with est. 5 years budget of \$135.7 million.



The bilateral trade volume between the two countries has reached over \$140 Million becoming the 5th biggest source of imports in Somalia within six years.⁴ Somalia markets are flush with Turkish-manufactured goods. The trade imbalances between the two countries is huge; between 2007 and 2017 Turkey average annual import from Somalia remained US\$1 million where Turkey export to Somalia jumped from 2.3 million to 143 million.⁵

On 6 March 2012 the Turkish Airlines became the first international airline flying to Mogadishu in more than 20 years enabling Somali people to connect to the rest of the world.⁶ Now the Istanbul-Mogadishu route is one of most profitable destinations of Turkish Airlines.⁷ In September 2013, the Turkish company Favori LLC took over the Mogadishu airport operations and built a new airport terminal in 2014 with \$10 million doubling the airport's aircraft capacity to 60. Favori recently built 4 star airport hotel which become FGS favoured venue for political meetings. In 2014, Somalia delegated management of the Mogadishu Port to Turkish firm Al-Bayrak which is known to have close ties to the ruling AK Party and the

¹ <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-africa-relations.en.mfa>

² Yükleyn and Zulkarnian, 14 2015

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³ <https://www.tarimorman.gov.tr/News/3887/The-Amount-Of-Assistance-Given-To-Somalia-To-Date-Has-Exceeded-1-Billion-Dolar>

⁴ TRT World,2018

⁵ www.tuik.gov.tr February 2019

⁶ Somalia: Turkish Airlines begins flights to Mogadishu – BBC, www.bbc.co.uk, 6 March 2012

⁷ Reuters.com/Turkish Airlines profits in Africa, where others fear to fly; 12 September 2017

President Erdoğan. Now Mogadishu Port is the largest source of income for the Somalia government representing almost half of the government budget and almost 80% of the domestic revenue.

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use of country system. The direct budgetary support amounted \$117 million over the past six years. Turkey contributed to debt relief for Somalia by pledging about \$2.4 million in Special Drawing Rights. Turkish state-owned bank (Ziraat Bankasi) is the main correspondence bank that Central Bank of Somalia currently used for its international transactions which enabled the Somali economy to overcome global financial isolation.

Turkey built largest overseas military facility in Mogadishu with the cost of \$50 million to train recruits for the Somali National Army.⁸ Turkey is also training Somalia army and providing armory and equipment.⁹



Both Somalia's chambers of the Parliament are currently housed in Turkish funded

buildings and in 2013 Turkey pledged to construct parliament building at cost of \$100m.

In January 2020, the Turkish government stated that Somalia invited Turkey to explore oil in its seas. While Turkey has been able to focus on development and construction in Somalia without coming to direct conflict with other states in the region, its involvement in securing offshore oil reserves may complicate matters.

Over the last few years, Turkey has increasingly become major attraction for Somali politicians, businessmen and diaspora. Faced unsold housing stock of more than 1 million units, the government cut the investment threshold for gaining citizenship in September 2018 from US\$1 million to US\$250,000. This scheme has appealed to Somali politician and businessmen and it become easy pathway to gain a Turkish passport which allows them to travel and do business abroad. The devaluation of the Turkish lira is making properties in Turkey more affordable. Other attractions for Somalia diaspora community are climate, close distance, food and similar culture as a Muslim country. Now there is sizable Somali community in Turkey. Istanbul increasing become the second meeting place after Nairobi for political deals. Although one part of Istanbul street has been dubbed "Somalia Street" because of the number of African migrants, many of the Somalis, now living there trying to migrate to Europe.

Ankara's approach to Somalia, underwritten by it's Islamic solidarity appeal, has been widely lauded by Somalis. However, Turkish aid, development, investment and political

⁸ Middle East Monitor, 'Turkey opens largest overseas military base in Somalia', 5 Oct. 2017

⁹ Stratfor, 'Somalia: Turkey to provide maritime forces with training, equipment', 9 Nov. 2018.

support is not evenly distributed and geographically constrained. Turkey's engagement in Somalia remains overwhelmingly focused on Mogadishu instead of larger vulnerable Somali population. In 2015 Turkey offered to build 10,000 homes for poor families in Somalia¹⁰ but was never fulfilled. For instance, Southwest State the epicenter of humanitarian crises with large concentration of IDPs have yet to see any significant Turkish investment/development.



Turkish investment in Africa is not only focused on Somalia. For instance, while Somalia has proven the most natural target for Turkish cooperation, Turkish commercial investments in Ethiopia far outweigh Somalia. Given Ethiopia's 2018 policy shift in Somalia—in which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed pledged to work with Somalia — Turkish observers saw new opportunity for cooperation with Ethiopia on Somalia, they believe a partnership with Ethiopia could provide useful leverage against Egypt.¹¹ Now Ethiopia in a civil war and Somalia election is underway Turkey ought to play more active role in Somalia's political impasse.

Turkey is perceived as biased toward the capital potentially creating disparity among the Somali people.

Gulf rivalry has impacted the Turkish posture in Somalia. The change of US leadership has given Turkey added advantage as its Gulf rivals Saudi Arabia and the UAE lost a major ally in the White House and the new US administration quickly moved to heal the inter-Gulf rift which Turkish ally Qatar may get reprieve from damaging boycott. Turkish-Qatari relations is underwritten by ideological commonalities for supporting political Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. Both Qatar and Turkey are expected to jointly support one candidate in the upcoming Somalia presidential election. However, Turkey is in delicate position having Qatar as ally in Somalia political context is not a wise move. Qatar's lavish political financing to the current administration is widely seen as destabilizing factor while Turkey remained Somalia's most effective strategic partner. It is important to note that Turkey has successfully intervened Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan though with coercive diplomacy, Turkey now turned its attention to Ethiopia which is at crossroad instead of Somalia.

Turkish authority should review it's Somalia strategy and ensure it's investments and development aid are distributed equitably across the country. Turkey should also use it's leverage to pro-actively engage in the Somalia state-building efforts. Somalia political leadership should view Turkey as long term strategic partner for the good of the country and it's people.

¹⁰ <https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/news/turkey-offers-build-10000-homes-poor-families/>

¹¹ Brookings, "Turkey and the new scramble for Africa ottoman designs or unfounded fears"

Contact Details

HornAfric Suite, National Theatre, Mogadishu, Somalia

Tel: +252 613 777 708

P.O Box 52743 Valley Arcade, Nairobi, Kenya Tel: +254 723 022 444

Email: info@aarancenter.org

Website: www.aarancenter.org