



Navigating the Horn: Turkey's Forays in East Africa

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Contents

Introduction	01
<hr/>	
Key Findings and Recommendations	03
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Part 1: Turkey as an Emerging Power	06
1.1. Turkey in the Aftermath of the Cold War	06
1.2. Turkey's forays to the Horn of Africa: Context	07
<hr/>	
Part 2 – Turkey in the Horn of Africa	09
2.1. The Horn	09
2.2. Somalia	11
2.3. Sudan and South Sudan	16
2.4. Ethiopia	19
<hr/>	
Part 3: Conclusion	20
<hr/>	

Introduction

Over the past decade Turkey has emerged as a significant actor in the greater Middle East, North and sub-Saharan Africa due to its development, peacebuilding engagement, and cultural and commercial penetration of these regions. Although this involvement has fluctuated in response to both domestic and international developments, Turkey is now considered an ambitious newcomer amongst the emergent powers in development and peacebuilding.

Turkey's only pre-1990s engagements in peacemaking were its self-styled "peace-operation" in Cyprus (1970s), and its mediation between Iraq and Iran (1980s). These were informed by traditional security considerations, due to the sizeable Turkish minority in Cyprus in the case of the latter, and the shared borders with Iraq and Iran and the presence of Kurdish minorities in the case of Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Ankara's role was limited, due to the introspective nature of its foreign policy and desire to protect its borders.

In the 1990s, Turkey developed a more proactive strategy using peacebuilding to enhance its international presence, such as participating in UN and NATO multilateral peacekeeping in Somalia and the Balkans. Alongside Turkey's aspiration to join the European Union (EU), the Yilmaz government sought to redefine Turkey's international identity from important ally within the Euro-Atlantic institutional architecture to an emerging and constructive global actor.

Ankara, in these efforts, developed a multidimensional foreign policy framework which prioritised – in theory at least – development and peacebuilding. This policy shift was solidified by the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The "Strategy for Improving Economic Relations with African Countries" of 2003 anticipated Turkey's emergence as a significant actor in the Middle East, North, and sub-Saharan Africa due to its development, peacebuilding engagement, and cultural and commercial penetration of these regions. Identifying a "blueprint" for Turkey's development and peacebuilding is difficult, due to its newness to the field. Moreover, this blueprint is inconstant, due to the volatile domestic, regional, and international environments.

This report offers an extensive review of official documentation from the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Presidency of Religious Affairs (DİYANET), the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), analysis and commentary, media reports, and interviews with policymakers, diplomats, and foreign policy, peacebuilding, and development experts. It assesses and analyses the understanding of peacebuilding among Turkey's political leadership and policy community, the contexts and main motivations underlying its conceptualisation and implementation and outlines potential future developments. To stimulate free and candid discussions, and to protect confidentiality at a time of political volatility in Turkey, and in line with the approved ethics protocols of the project, the names of six interviewees and their institutions have been withheld.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Turkish interest in the Horn of Africa (HoA) has been part of a more assertive foreign policy in the context of the emerging multipolar system, providing an opportunity for emerging powers – like Turkey – to attempt to reshape the international system.

Turkey's proactive aspirations included increasing its presence in Southeast Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa through development, capacity building and peacebuilding engagement, as well as its cultural and commercial penetration of these regions. Ankara supported this penetration in the Horn of Africa through initiatives promoting dialogue, mediation, and military presence and assistance. A combination of domestic and international developments prompted Turkey's current leadership to pursue its political and commercial interests in the MENA region and the Horn of Africa more aggressively and, in the process, resort to complex modalities of both cooperation and competition with other regional actors. Focusing on Turkey's foreign policy and peacebuilding engagement over the past two decades, this report suggests the following:

- ▶ Turkey's international engagement over the past decade has been transformed by the following factors: the less active role of the US, the emergence of Russia as a revisionist power and China as a global development actor, regional realignments including the Arab Spring, the Saudi Arabia/UAE vs Turkey and Qatar rift, and domestic challenges (the Gezi protests of 2013 and the attempted coup of 2016).
- ▶ Turkey's successful engagement in peacebuilding and development has been aided by its lack of "colonial baggage". This allows it to articulate an anti-colonial discourse and offer assistance without the unwelcome conditionality attached to mainstream Western approaches.
- ▶ Current policy is largely driven by regime insecurity "within" which has prompted a rethink of Turkey's historical aversion to considerable engagement beyond its national borders, while global and regional changes enabled and encouraged Turkey to play a role not circumscribed by US and EU pressure.
- ▶ Turkey's engagement in the Horn of Africa has been increasingly shaped by the personalistic character of its politics, and an antagonistic approach towards Turkey's Western partners and MENA competitors.

- ▶ Despite a discourse emphasising respect, humanitarian commitment, and mutuality as drivers of Turkey's involvement in the Horn of Africa, Ankara resorts to more transactional, power-driven approaches.

A closer look at the modalities of Turkey's engagement in the Horn indicates that:

- ▶ Turkish involvement in conflicts is increasingly characterised using violent, militarised, non-inclusive methods alongside the deployment of soft power.
- ▶ Turkey's involvement is usually partisan and often divisive. Lack of coordination with other external actors in the region means that capacity building, know-how transfer projects (especially training of military and security forces), and technical aid are conducive to institutional fragmentation and the cultivation of military, political and economic dependence among the recipients of Turkish support.
- ▶ Efforts should be directed towards:
 - ▶ Measures conducive to the desecuritisation of development, statebuilding in the Horn of Africa, and to greater regional integration;
 - ▶ Dialogue with Turkey in tandem with encouraging democratisation;
 - ▶ Progressively reintegrating Turkey to western institutions and encouraging it to be involved in multilateral initiatives that can engender shared conceptualisations of security and peace and transform the current antagonistic outlook of Turkish policies into complementarity and cooperation.

Report Content and Structure

This report draws upon sixteen interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023 with diplomats, staff at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officials at TİKA, DİYANET, the Turkish Maarif Foundation, and foreign policy commentators. A comprehensive review of the available literature analyses the reconfiguration of Turkish engagement in the Horn of Africa, and explores modalities of cooperation and competition Ankara employs in the region.

Part 1 focuses on the emergence of Turkey as an ambitious regional and global actor, and its move towards active foreign policy. It examines the factors contributing to and the character of Turkey's shift towards international engagement.

Part 2 provides an overview of Ankara's engagement in the Horn of Africa for the last two decades. It examines the underlying characteristics of the AKP's competition with Turkey's Middle Eastern rivals, including Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia.

Part 3 discusses the impact of Turkey's transformed foreign policy. With reference to the Horn of Africa, it explores the modalities of its alliances, partnerships, and competitive engagement.

Part 1: Turkey as an Emerging Power

1.1. Turkey in the Aftermath of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War, the consequent demise of a bipolar international system that left little room for developing independent foreign policy (Balta and Özel; 2021), and the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party, prompted a radical departure from Turkey's conservative foreign policy approach, geared towards preserving the status quo and the territorial integrity of the twentieth century (Aydın; 2000).

Before the emergence of the AKP, the process initiated in the establishment of the Copenhagen Criteria (1993), which culminated in Turkey's recognition as an EU Candidate (1999) instilled optimism and ambition in Ankara's approaches to its region and beyond. Turkey's preferred mode of international engagement – participation in key multilateral Western organisations and missions such as UNOSOM II (1993) – was encouraged by engagement with “kin” countries affected by the conflicts in former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s. In addition to participating in peacebuilding operations alongside NATO and EU allies who had formerly monopolised the field, Turkey developed tools for providing aid, investment and institution building in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia. The Yılmaz coalition government (1997-9) embraced a proactive peacebuilding strategy to enhance Turkey's presence. The foreign minister İsmail Cem looked toward Africa for potential engagement when developing a multidimensional foreign policy, evidenced by the “Opening to Africa Action Plan” (1998).

Several factors curbed Ankara's ambitions until the electoral success of the AKP. The impact of the Cold War's end was not realised until decades after the Soviet Union's disintegration; it wasn't until the 2010s that the US scaled down international engagement, and the contours of a new multipolar system were recognised. Moreover, the fiscal crisis that Turkey faced in the 1990s, and consequent discipline imposed by the IMF stabilisation programme prohibited the Yılmaz and Ecevit governments from acting on their intentions to upgrade Turkish foreign policy (Feridun; 2008).

The AKP, moreover, were faced with a series of challenges. Turkey's EU accession had stalled as Ankara's EU allies expressed reservations, and the democratisation-drive and economic-reforms consequently halted. Disillusionment, and the diminished potential of the democratising impact of EU accession, led to barely concealed threats to the AKP issued by the armed forces (2007). A failed attempt by the Constitutional Court to ban the party (2008) prompted Erdoğan to pursue the consolidation of his political power more aggressively.

Erdoğan gained the support of forty-seven percent of the electorate at the 2011 polls (Sofos; 2011) and managed to curb the military's ambition, eventually dismissing senior officers and creating a more malleable leadership. In May 2013, however, the Gezi protests represented the first notable challenge to the AKP and its policies. Regime insecurity, combined with the removal of key "checks and balances" of Turkey's tutelary democracy, forced the AKP to adopt relatively cautious politics. This enabled and prompted more authoritarian and revisionist strategies (Duran; 2013, Öniş; 2015, Sofos; 2022b, Tziarras; 2022). Internationally, Turkish foreign policy became more assertive and focused on reshaping regional and international order "in accordance with its growing desire for influence" (Danforth and Stein; 2023).

1.2. Turkey's forays to the Horn of Africa: Context

Despite its ambition for a greater role in Africa, it was not until the tenure of the AKP and the appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu as author of Turkey's new foreign policy that Ankara developed an ambitious approach to international engagement, with the aim to become an emergent power with interests beyond its borders.

Davutoğlu himself had stressed (2001) that Turkey can no longer overlook Africa, which had been ignored and exploited by the Western former colonial powers. Turkey's "Year of Africa" (2005), kickstarted a rapid process of establishing commercial, peace, security, and humanitarian partnerships, leading to Turkey's recognition as strategic partner of the African Union (AU) (2008). Since then, Turkey has established political and economic ties across the continent through aid, trade, economic penetration, security promotion, institution building and peacemaking. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan travelled to the region – as both Prime Minister and President – tirelessly promoting the package, framing Turkey as a custodian of Islamic culture and encouraging the development of religious networks that enhanced Turkey's status.

Turkey's success in Africa has been supported by Ankara's emphasis on its lack of "colonial baggage". Its anticolonial discourse was coupled with refusing conditionality attached to aid, development investment and trade. Commenting on Turkey's approach to Africa a Turkish diplomat replicated the official discourse, suggesting that unlike the US and western European countries Turkey "had never colonised Africa", "shares with the continent the memory of anti-imperialist struggle", is supporting "a win-win situation", and that its success is because of "policies that meet Africa's actual needs and demands". He also contrasted China's "profit driven approach" to Ankara's emphasis on a "mutually beneficial partnership", exemplified by its multifaceted engagement in Somalia since 2011 and the numerous peace and security accords Turkey has signed, as well as its longstanding commitment to UN and African Union peace and stabilisation missions in the continent (Sofos; 2022a).

Excepting Turkish diplomacy's efforts to distinguish Turkish African strategy and motivations from its Western partners, Turkish foreign and peacebuilding policy became often critical, and sometimes antagonistic – as this paper will discuss when examining Ankara's policy in the Horn countries.

Institutions such as TİKA, the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), DİYANET, and the Turkish Maarif Foundation were mobilised in this effort. Turkish charities and NGOs created during the Balkan wars, or more recently, also stepped in to provide support for communities with accessing water, schooling, and religious education. Hard and soft power, peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, investment, and trade were integrated into key elements of Turkey's new foreign policy toolkit.

Within this new framework, the Horn of Africa became one of the primary regions in which Ankara has increased its presence. Turkey's diplomats worked to open or upgrade embassies throughout the region and initiate a series of diplomatic level exchanges, accompanied, or followed by trade agreements.

Part 2: Turkey in the Horn of Africa

2.1. The Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa comprises six sovereign and one de-facto states - Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, and the self-governing state of Somaliland. Kenya is also a notable actor in regional politics, facing similar challenges and participating in the regional architecture. The Horn and the Red Sea coast constitute a significant geostrategic region located next to the maritime trade route linking Europe and the Indian Ocean and Asia – approximately ten percent of the world's commerce passes through. The expansion of Somali piracy in the early twenty-first century prompted various states to station naval forces in the region, creating military bases and protecting Red Sea transit routes. Across the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar rely on food imports from the Horn and have been vying to establish and protect infrastructure that ensures uninterrupted supplies. Since 2015, the ongoing conflict in Yemen has increased the region's importance as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been seeking to isolate Yemen's Houthis and deprive them of supplies originating in the HoA.

The Horn is a volatile region, encompassing multiple and porous borders and disputes, secessionist movements, and unresolved trans-boundary water-rights issues. Authoritarianism and state fragility have compounded the volatility of the region, as has a history of famine and conflict, including the 1983–85 Ethiopian famine and the controversial 1992–93 humanitarian intervention in Somalia. Today, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan are sites of ongoing conflicts which displace populations and create refugee flows, while food insecurity affects populations in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia.

This combination of volatility and geostrategic importance has prompted international and regional actors to establish their presence in the region, pursuing both stabilisation of the regional architecture and their strategic and economic interests. Turkey has been one of the many actors that have engaged with the Horn through aid, institution-building, military assistance, trade, and the deployment of its mediation services. It has been perceived by other regional powers as posing a potential threat to their strategic interests, giving rise to competition and confrontation. Here, we will provide an outline of Turkey's preferred types of engagement in the region, a mapping of its motivations, and the ways its regional competitors react to these.



Figure 1: Turkey's main competitors in the Horn of Africa

2.2. Somalia

Somalia's protracted civil war plunged the country into lawlessness and fragmentation. After almost two decades of inconclusive conflicts and negotiations, the failure of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to effectively deliver government services and restore order led to further fragmentation, with warlords carving out territories and ruling over local communities. In 2006 the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) planned to impose control over the country, promising to bring order. Despite the multifaceted character of the Union, its Islamist orientation alarmed the international community, particularly Somalia's neighbour Ethiopia, which considered the ascendance of the UIC a national security threat. As the Courts extended their control over southern and central Somalia and advanced towards Baidoa – the provisional seat of the TFG – Ethiopia moved to confront the Courts on the battlefield and, by early 2007, the Ethiopian and TFG forces, and US intelligence and airstrike support, gained ground over South Somalia and seized Mogadishu.

The UIC's most moderate leaders fled to Kenya, Yemen, and Eritrea. Those remaining splintered into several factions, with radical elements joining local al Qaeda-affiliated groups and the militant Islamist al-Shabaab organisation.

The TFG relied heavily on Ethiopian forces, and its control was limited to a few key strategic areas in Mogadishu as it faced considerable opposition by several clans and Islamist forces. In March 2007, after a military confrontation between TFG's Ethiopian backers and insurgents of the Hawiye clan, the high level of casualties and the destruction of West Mogadishu further weakened the thin legitimacy of the TFG.

Additionally, al-Shabaab proved to be a stronger and persistent opponent, seizing key towns and ports in central and southern Somalia in 2007-8, and denting Ethiopia's determination to support the TFG's chronic internal problems (International Crisis Group; 2008). By January 2009, Al-Shabaab and other militias had forced Ethiopia's troops to retreat, leaving behind a weak and under-resourced African Union peacekeeping force (AMISOM).

After a stalemate of almost two years Kenyan troops crossed the border into Somalia and waged a campaign against al-Shabab. The TFG and the AMISOM forces, reinvigorated with the injection of Kenyan units began to push back Al-Shabaab, starting with forcing its forces to move out of Mogadishu in August 2011.

Simultaneously, Erdoğan, accompanied by his wife, daughter, and cabinet members paid a visit to the capital, promising to open an embassy in Mogadishu to support aid and reconstruction efforts. A few months earlier, Turkey's AFAD had contributed \$201 million to humanitarian relief efforts in drought-affected parts of the country, signalling the start of Turkey's humanitarian and peacebuilding involvement in Somalia. This initial humanitarian relief effort facilitated TİKA's activity in Somalia, which to date numbers close to 160 projects including education, health, infrastructure, and community development.

Turkey had previously demonstrated its interest in Somalia by hosting a first international conference (2010), followed by further conferences in 2012 and 2015, and the High-Level Partnership Forum on Somalia in Istanbul in February 2016.

From 2012, as Ankara started taking a more active role internationally, Turkey's involvement in Somalia became more diverse (Sucuoglu and Stearns; 2016). Turkey's aid increased rapidly over the years (OECD; 2015). Although Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict eventually absorbed most funds allocated to international aid, the East African country is still the recipient of substantial aid (TİKA; 2014-9).

Concerned about the de facto statehood of Somaliland and similar aspirations in Puntland, Turkey encouraged dialogue between the internationally recognised Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the six Federal States. Somaliland's policy of non-negotiation with Somalia was rescinded as talks began in London in 2012 and continued briefly in Dubai. Turkey hosted negotiations in Istanbul and president-level talks in Ankara in 2013 and 2014, with further talks planned for Istanbul in 2015 which did not materialise.

Ankara hosted meetings of civil society and intellectuals, hoping to reinvigorate the negotiations in 2016. Turkey sought to establish its credentials as mediator by establishing a consulate in Somaliland's capital Hargeisa. Additionally, it sought to circumnavigate the most challenging issues and encourage a series of confidence-building measures, including agreements on collaboration in the distribution of humanitarian aid, air space control and monitoring, establishing a joint regulatory body in Somaliland's capital Hargeisa, a formula of sharing the revenues accrued from overflights by the two parties, security sector cooperation, and combating illegal fishing. Somaliland remained cautious, and eventually pulled out of the process; after the breakdown of talks, the implementation of the agreements that had been concluded stalled as the Federal government declared them void. Somaliland saw in Turkey's silence at the abrogation of the agreements a sign of support of the SFG.

Indeed, a Turkish diplomat noted that although the intention of Turkish mediators was to bring the two parties together, the underlying assumption that Somaliland was a breakaway region and not a de facto state with legitimate claims to sovereignty made the Somaliland representatives weary of a process they perceived as biased. He added that this concern was not unfounded, as Turkey's position was informed by its approach to its own Kurdish issue and emphasis on a unitary state solution. Turkey's inability to engage creatively and impartially in the mediation process meant that it was Ethiopian, U.S. and EU involvement that paved the way for resumed contact.

A significant factor in the breakdown of negotiations was the competition associated with "regional congestion" in the Horn. Turkey and Qatar, for example, cultivated a close relationship with Mogadishu, the UAE – one of their regional competitors – became uncomfortable with the influence Ankara and Doha wielded over Somalia. Abu Dhabi viewed Somaliland as an important counterweight to Ankara's and Doha's presence in the region, and supported Somaliland's bid for international recognition, thus providing more latitude for Hargeisa in the negotiations.

This competitive dimension of the relationship between Ankara and Abu Dhabi in the Horn of Africa was further evident in their military penetration of the region. Turkey signed a military training agreement with Somalia in 2010 and five years later, concluded a further agreement with Mogadishu to engage in more substantial military and security cooperation, and open a 400-hectare military training base – Camp TURKSOM – to provide training to the Somali National Army (SNA) and security forces. Turkey's ambition, according to a one interviewee, was to become "Somalia's main partner in terms of security provision", especially as international funding for AMISOM has seen substantial reductions over the years and its future is under discussion.

As several Turkish interviewees suggested, the Turkish base in Mogadishu represents an important dimension in Turkish regional policy. This is because of its centrality to Turkey's military presence in the region, its symbolic character as a token of Ankara's commitment to Somali statehood and security, and because it stakes a claim on this strategic and congested area, putting Turkey on par with global and regional powers such as the US, the UK, the UAE, and China. The UAE, which had supported Somalia's federal government and trained Somalian troops since 2014, was unhappy to see its influence over Mogadishu waning, especially as the federal government resisted Emirati and Saudi pressures to break diplomatic relations with Qatar after the 2017 rift between the Gulf neighbours. As Somalia refused to participate in isolating Doha, the relationship between Mogadishu and Abu Dhabi deteriorated. The Emirates started looking to the breakaway region of Somaliland as a regional partner, while Somalia dismissed the agreements between Abu Dhabi and the breakaway Somali region as "non-existent, null and void", calling on the UN to act. The presence of Emirati military instructors in Somalia became politically problematic for the Somalian authorities and for Turkey. Somalia increased its surveillance of UAE activities in the country and in July 2018 revealed that the Emirates had been illicitly importing funds to Somalia in conjunction to their military training mission. Mogadishu subsequently decided to disband the UAE training programme, increasing tensions in bilateral relations.

Given the broader regional competition between the UAE and Turkey, Abu Dhabi pursued a strategy with Somaliland mirroring the one underlying Turkey's approach to Somalia, offering investments, security guarantees and recognition. The UAE was the first Arab state to establish diplomatic relations with Somaliland and appointed a new representative in 2020 (Somaliland Standard; 2021). In 2017, Somaliland accepted UAE's offer to establish naval, air and military training bases in the main port city of Berbera, along with the redevelopment of Berbera Airport (although in 2020, this work was halted without explanation). Dubai World Port has also invested in Berbera's port, holding a thirty-year lease contract.

Apart from Ankara's ambitions to overshadow AMISOM's efforts in the peace process, Turkey's involvement in the training of Somalia's National Army has hindered the integration of trained soldiers, police personnel and their units to a national framework. Turkish weaponry, communication, and other equipment supplied to trainees and their units in Somalia is incompatible with the AMISOM-trained Somalian National Army (Ahmed; 2021). Command structures remained separate, and Turkish-trained "Gorgor" forces nearly clashed with other SNA units in Mogadishu in April 2021 ([International Crisis Group; 2021](#)). In an already fractious security environment, the unit has acted in a partisan fashion, supporting particular factions within the government (Robinson; 2021), favouring closer ties with the Turkish government – such as former President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (Farmaajo) – while its brigade commander's name featured among those the opposition wants to replace. An interviewee specialising in Turkey's presence in Somalia has noted that AMISOM has expressed concerns at how Turkey's military training programme and presence in Somalia is undermining its own training programme and efforts to unify Somalia's fractious armed forces.

The discovery of illicit cash imports by the UAE for possible use by elements of the Somalian forces trained by the Gulf country suggests that this cultivation of the fragmentation of Somalia's armed and security forces is not a unique feature of Turkey's ambitions, but an element of the competition among emerging powers in the region.

2.3. Sudan and South Sudan

Turkey's efforts in MENA and Africa extended to Sudan. Although less of a priority for Turkish foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War – especially compared to the Balkan countries emerging from the collapse of Yugoslavia – Sudan became important as the AKP took office, and Africa became more prominent in this policy. TİKA became active in Sudan from 2006, undertaking projects that included the construction of the Nyala Turkish-Sudanese Research and Training Hospital.

Despite notable humanitarian efforts in Darfur, Turkey has sought to maintain its relationship with Sudan's former president, Omar al-Bashir, whom Erdoğan had repeatedly praised. Ankara thus refrained from criticising the government's role in the province, or, following human rights activists and some governments in using the term "genocide". Perhaps, as some interviewees suggested, Ankara is sensitive to such terminology, particularly regarding the late Ottoman treatment of Ottoman Armenians. With reference to a longstanding challenge to Sudanese territorial integrity, in 2012 Sudanese foreign minister Ali Ahmed Karti mentioned Turkey's proposals to resolve outstanding issues between Sudan and South Sudan. Moreover, foreign minister Davutoğlu told press that Juba and Khartoum had agreed to Turkey's mediation. Although these processes were unsuccessful, there was widespread media attention.

The 2013 ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the loss of a key post-Arab Spring ally intensified Turkey's interest in Sudan as a potential regional ally that could support Turkey's regional policies.

In 2017, TİKA launched programmes to support South Sudanese refugees in Sudan fleeing famine and drought, providing humanitarian aid, wells, equipment, and materials for women living Darfur's refugee camps to become self-sufficient. This was an expression of commitment to support the peace agreement between the two countries. In the same year, Turkey and Sudan intensified their relationship, concluding a host of cooperation agreements, including the establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Mechanism, and the controversial ninety-nine-year lease of Suakin Island, a port city in north-eastern Sudan, to Turkey (Amin; 2018).

Ankara attempted to reassure critics, stressing that the lease didn't involve Turkish military designs and citing a desire to develop the port into a tourist destination. Others, however – Egypt and Saudi Arabia – expressed concern at the development, speculating that Turkey intended to create military facilities (see also, Sofos 2022a).

The potential threat posed by the establishment of a Turkish military facility in the area to the Saudi-led coalition's control over the Red Sea coast brought the region to the brink of conflict. In January 2018, unfounded reports emerged of Egyptian forces transferring to Assab in coordination with the UAE, and an imminent military incursion into Sudan from Eritrea (Plaut; 2015) to frustrate Ankara's putative plans in the region and retaliate against Sudan's rapprochement with Ethiopia. In response, Sudan closed its border with Eritrea, called reservists and moved army units to the area. The escalation was averted, as no evidence could be found of the alleged transfer of forces, but the incident demonstrated how competition of external actors can escalate.

Ankara's close links with Omar al-Bashir continued, even as the popular mood in Sudan turned against him. Turkey has voiced support to his government during growing protests and was one of the few countries that offered to send food when it was in short supply. Turkey was not alone, however, as the UAE – another emerging power vying for influence in the region – reiterated their support of the Sudanese government, and offered economic assistance, while Russia – another traditional supporter of the al-Bashir regime with interest in the strategic location of Sudan – pledged assistance in the form of fuel and wheat (Abdelaziz; 2019).

Ankara's support of President al-Bashir was clearly a liability after his overthrow in April 2019. The transitional government regarded Turkey with suspicion, whilst Turkey struggled to adjust to the new situation; as one interviewee suggested, one of Ankara's weaknesses is its inability to demonstrate flexibility in a changing environment. Turkish-Sudanese relations deteriorated, as the Suakin island lease agreement was annulled. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – strong supporters of Sudan's new leader, Lt. Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan – sought to capitalise on their relationship with post-al-Bashir Sudan, to shape Sudan's foreign policy in the Red Sea and Africa, and prevent Turkey and Qatar from exerting influence.

The freeze in the Turkish-Sudanese relations, however, was unsustainable; Ankara grew isolated in other fronts, including the Eastern Mediterranean, and its relationship with Egypt deteriorated. In August 2021 Erdoğan disavowed his prior relationship with al-Bashir, meeting with Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (Daily Sabah; 2021) and signing agreements that progressed the countries towards sustained cooperation. Moreover, Ankara offered its services toward peaceful resolution of a dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan over the al-Fashaga region. Sudan's willingness to accept Turkish mediation indicates it considers it a trustworthy partner (Duvar English; 2021). Interviewees in Ankara suggested the initiative was partly an attempt by Ankara to insert itself as mediator in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute, that renewed tensions between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt, due to the latter's reliance on the Nile waters, and the former's move to making the dam operational.

In South Sudan in 2021, Turkey agreed to support the unification of South Sudanese forces, contributing to the implementation of chapter two of the peace agreement after years of conflict (Middle East Monitor; 2021). Although Ankara's support did not materialise in substantive contributions – except surplus military uniforms dispatched to the country – the unification of South Sudanese armed forces relied on the political desire between the different parties, which materialised later and remained fragile.

TİKA, however, were active in the country before its independence, working hard to demonstrate Turkey's support of the peace process launching in 2021 on a modest project to support South Sudan's Ministry of Peacebuilding work (interview with TİKA official, 8 January 2023, details withheld).

Turkey's engagement with South Sudan has been overshadowed by Ankara's interest in engaging its larger neighbours, Sudan and Ethiopia. In January 2023, however, Erdoğan invited South Sudan President Salva Kiir to attend a diplomatic conference and pledged his government's support of the peace process in the country according to a Turkish MFA official.

2.4. Ethiopia

The tensions between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam ([Al Jazeera; 2020](#)) provided Turkey with an opportunity to deepen its relationship with Ethiopia. Their longstanding trade relations had been impacted by Ethiopia's alignment with the UAE and Saudi Arabia regarding conflict in Yemen, and the exchange of the June 2018 regional security environment for a \$1bn injection into Ethiopia's foreign currency reserves, a package of investments worth \$2bn and support to the Ethiopian government in its conflict against the TPLF.

Three years after this alliance Ankara saw an opportunity to engage with Ethiopia, due to persistent problems of Abiy Ahmed's government. After extending an offer to mediate between Sudan and Ethiopia on the al-Fashaga conflict, Erdoğan and Abiy signed a military agreement ([Al Jazeera; 2021](#)), and Erdoğan offered to mediate Ethiopia's conflict with Tigray, which had displaced 500,000 people and caused extensive famine ([The Independent; 2021](#)). Despite this support for peaceful conflict resolution, Ethiopia has reportedly taken possession of combat and reconnaissance drones to deploy against Tigrayan forces and civilians ([Bearak et al; 2022](#), [Al Monitor; 2021](#), [Gatopoulos; 2021](#)).

Part 3: Conclusions

Analysis of official statements by various Turkish agencies and discussion with interviewees indicates that the underlying motivation of Turkey's engagement in the Horn of Africa is providing humanitarian and development assistance; peace, capacity and institution building; and enhancing trade with emerging economies.

Beyond this, Turkey's forays in the HoA are more complex as Ankara's pattern of engagement, official references to Turkey as "a great nation", or "a power to be taken seriously", and interviews suggest. They reflect a combination of:

- (i) status-oriented diplomacy (directed towards both domestic and international audiences);
- (ii) appreciation of the strategic importance of the region in general, and;
- (iii) Turkey's current alliances and antagonistic relationships. These have been evolving since the Arab Spring, the subsequent collapse of Turkey's aspiration to lead a region of like-minded states, and its attempt to reposition itself in the regional system and maximise its influence.

Turkey's engagement in the HoA has given Ankara opportunities to project soft power, emerge as a mediator, and increase its regional and global visibility – reflecting the desire to project Turkey as a model partner. Aside from this, Turkey's regional policy offers additional political, security, and economic elements. Economically, Turkey's aid and infrastructure projects are used to maximise influence, reward political allies, and provide opportunity for activity in the region. Politically, Turkey works to maximise its regional influence, and gain advantage over regional rivals; in tandem with its regional competitors – Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – it exports competition to the region, territorialising and "domesticating" it whilst building local allies and proxy networks. The competition between Turkey, the UAE, Egypt and other regional actors has increased the militarisation of the Horn of Africa. The establishment of Camp TURKSOM is part of broader – symbolic – competition that has rendered the region overpopulated by military contingents and bases. This balance of power remains precarious, and susceptible to rumours as the mobilisation of Sudanese troops at the Eritrean border, and the prospect of Turkey leasing Suakin Island demonstrates. Both crises evidenced the Horn's vulnerability to proxy wars.

Turkey has also become more adaptable and pragmatic. Its involvement in Ethiopia displays flexibility, and progression in viewing regional rivalries as more than zero-sum-games. Its military support of the Ethiopian government, alongside regional rivals UAE and Iran, indicates a newly found ability to make complex calculations.

The potential, however, of external rivalries to inflict damage on the Horn is still present, as demonstrated by Somalia. Friction between Gulf powers and Turkey has been translated into a struggle over how power and resources are apportioned between the capital and the country's federal units, as Ankara encourages the Federal Government in Mogadishu, and Abu Dhabi counters this support by offering similar support to Somali regional leaders.

A closer look at the modalities of Ankara's engagement in the Horn indicates that:

- ▶ Turkish involvement in conflicts is increasingly characterised using violent, militarised, non-inclusive methods alongside the deployment of soft power.
- ▶ Turkey's involvement is usually partisan and often divisive. Lack of coordination with other external actors in the region means that capacity building and know-how transfer projects (especially training of military and security forces), as well as technical aid are conducive to institutional fragmentation, and the cultivation of military, political and economic dependence among the recipients of Turkish support.

Efforts should be directed towards

- ▶ Measures conducive to the desecuritisation of development and state building in the Horn of Africa and to greater regional integration;
- ▶ Dialogue with Turkey in tandem with encouraging democratisation;
- ▶ Progressively reintegrating Turkey to Western institutions and encouraging it to be involved in multilateral initiatives that can engender shared conceptualisations of security and peace and transform the current antagonistic outlook of Turkish policies into complementarity and cooperation.

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