



FROM BENIGN DONOR TO SELF-ASSURED SECURITY PROVIDER: TURKEY'S POLICY IN SOMALIA

Pınar Akpınar



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Pınar Akpınar is Scholar and Project Manager at the Conflict Resolution and Mediation Stream of Istanbul Policy Center.

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Istanbul Policy Center
Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 4
34420 Karaköy-Istanbul
T. +90 212 292 49 39
ipc@sabanciuniv.edu
ipc.sabanciuniv.edu

Introduction

The opening of a Turkish military training base in Mogadishu by Somali Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khayre and the Turkish Chief of Staff General Hulusi Akar on September 30, 2017 sparked discussions as to whether Turkey is now set to play a more ambitious role in Somalia. Being its largest forward base in the world, with a cost of 50 million USD and the initial goal of training more than 10,000 soldiers, the base is a solid indication of Turkey's enduring support for its lead partner in the Horn of Africa.¹ It is also a step forward from the benign donor role that Turkey has been capitalizing on in Somalia into a self-assured security provider role.

This policy brief aims to investigate the reasons for and implications of Turkey's military base in Somalia. What are the implications of this base for Turkey, Somalia, and the regional geopolitics in the Horn of Africa? Could its new security involvement damage the benign role Turkey has been carefully crafting in the country? This policy brief aims to answer these questions by first offering background on Turkey's engagement in Somalia, then focusing on the surging rivalry in the region, and finally by investigating the possible implications of Turkey's base.

Turkey's Engagement With Somalia

Turkey's full-fledged engagement with Somalia began in 2010 when it hosted the first Istanbul Conference on Somalia from May 21-23 within the framework of the Djibouti Agreement to establish a roadmap for peacebuilding and development in Somalia. Bilateral agreements were signed between Turkey and Somalia in fields of military, education, and technical and scientific cooperation.² A year after the conference, on May 9-13, 2011, the 4th UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), of which Somalia is a member, was hosted in Istanbul during which Turkey made pledges to help LDCs on many fronts.³ The Horn of Africa, and particularly Somalia, was hit by a deadly famine the same year, which quickly drew Turkey's attention to the country.

Subsequently, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid a visit to the country during the famine as the first non-African leader to visit Somalia in

20 years. Despite poor security conditions, Erdoğan visited Somalia along with his family, several members of his cabinet, businessmen, NGO representatives, and even renowned Turkish celebrities. The visit was validation of Turkey's solid commitment to carry Somalia on to the international agenda through a robust humanitarian and development campaign.⁴ Since then, Somalia has been one of the largest recipients of Turkish aid, which has so far amounted to over 700 million USD.⁵ It was even announced as one of two poster children of Turkey's humanitarian diplomacy alongside Syria.⁶ In 2015, Somalia was the second largest recipient of Turkish aid after Syria.⁷

Turkey has successfully crafted a benign image in the country over the past seven years through the utilization of its soft power assets. In line with its policy of humanitarian diplomacy, it has mobilized its official and civilian actors to contribute to the reconstruction of Somalia through humanitarian assistance, development aid, trade, and mediation. Turkey also built a large hospital complex, the Mogadishu Airport, several vocational centers, an orphanage, and school complex, among other facilities.⁸ In addition to hosting Turkey's largest military base in the world, Mogadishu also hosts Turkey's largest embassy complex. These efforts are in line with Turkey's broader Africa policy that was revisited in 2003 and followed with the declaration of 2005 as the "Year of Africa." Subsequently, the number of Turkish missions in the continent has increased from 12 in 2009 to 39 in 2017.⁹

As such, the main pillars of Turkey's official policy towards Somalia such as promoting Somalia on international platforms; providing intensive and comprehensive humanitarian aid; rebuilding the infrastructure through development projects; helping to restore security in the country by supporting Somali security forces and the African Union Mission in Somalia; and supporting the process of political consensus and state building in the country mirrors its broader Africa policy.¹⁰ In this regard, although the establishment of a military base in Somalia may seem to be a shift in Turkey's policy, it is actually a reflection of its long-term goals, which depend significantly on stability in the country. Moreover, it is also a means to fill in the gap that will be created from the withdrawal of 22,000 African Union forces from Somalia at the end of 2018.¹¹

Surging Rivalries in the Region

Turkey's military endeavor in Somalia should also be examined within the context of surging rivalries in the Horn of Africa. Contrary to waning U.S. interest and President Donald Trump's recent pledge to cut down on aid to Africa, other actors are taking steps to enhance their presence in the region, of which opening forward operating bases is an important part. These bases serve as instruments for these actors both to ensure their own security by containing the conflicts existing in these countries and to increase their existing leverage. While instability in Somalia does not pose a direct security threat to Turkey, the fact that it has invested heavily in the country in the last six years makes opening a military base a worthwhile act. Opening a military base in Somalia should also be seen as part of Turkey's wider policy of instituting a military stronghold from the Arabian Gulf to the Gulf of Aden as has been signaled from the recent opening of its military base in Qatar.¹² The Yemen crisis has been particularly influential in fuelling regional rivalries. As a result regional powers are lining up to open bases in the Horn or support existing machineries. For instance, while Saudi Arabia is preparing to open a base in Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has a base in Eritrea, is funding Puntland's Maritime Police Force, and will soon open a base in Somaliland.¹³ The Africa policies of these powers bare similarities with Turkey, which relies on military bases, aid, and ports as main instruments.¹⁴

In a similar vein, following suit with the United States, Japan, and France, China has opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in August which, according to Chinese officials, aims to operate solely as a logistics base to support its peace-keeping and humanitarian missions in Yemen and Somalia.¹⁵ There are, however, concerns that China may be aspiring for more in the region.¹⁶ Djibouti is particularly significant due to its proximity to Yemen and strategic location at the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which is the chokepoint of the Red Sea along the marine route that transfers Gulf oil to Europe.¹⁷ The base was also opened on the 90th birthday of the People's Liberation Army as a demonstration of the importance China gives to the base. China's military presence in Africa rang alarm

bells for its usual rival, India, which is not surprising given the swift competition between the two Asian powers in the continent. There has already been speculation in India that the initiative could be part of China's "String of Pearls" policy, which allegedly aims to contain the land and maritime routes in the Indian Ocean region through military and commercial facilities.¹⁸

In addition to China, Europe is also likely to increase its engagement with Africa as part of the recently launched "Marshall Plan with Africa" under the leadership of Germany. Reminiscent of the European Recovery Program financed by the United States after World War II, the plan was first presented by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in July during her speech as the president of the 12th G20 Summit. The proposed plan aims to contain Africa's problems within Africa through a comprehensive approach. In addition to promoting business involvement, the plan also aims to enhance EU contributions to Africa's security architecture through regional organizations such as the African Union and other potential partners.¹⁹ Germany is also planning to propose an EU-Africa Peace and Security Partnership framework at the 5th EU-Africa Summit to be held from November 28-29 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel also visited Somalia in May, which marked the first ever visit by a German foreign minister to a country in the Horn of Africa.²⁰

Possible implications of Turkey's military base

The establishment of a Turkish military base in Somalia may have various implications for Turkey, for Somalia, and for regional politics. On the optimistic side, the base could serve to solidify Turkey's commitments in the country. Until the base, Turkey had mainly utilized its soft power tools in Somalia and enjoyed the role of a benign donor. The base, however, would carry Turkey a step forward by positioning it as a security provider and thus an influential player in the country. Moreover, the Turkish military also has a clear history unlike, for instance, the African Union mission, which lacks a very positive image in Somalia.²¹

Somali Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire's statement during the opening ceremony of the base claimed that Turkey is contributing to the reconstruction of Somalia's organized "national" force and therefore helping it overcome clan-based division, which is often seen as one of the main drivers of conflict in Somalia. Such speech indicates that Turkey's initiative is seen as an extension of its peacemaker role in the country.²² It is, however, important for the Somali government themselves to also ensure meritocracy during the enlargement process of the military and avoid clan-based recruitment.

Furthermore, Turkey should be careful in striking a balance between peacemaker and security provider roles since the latter could tarnish Turkey's impartial mediator role in Somalia. Having mediated five rounds of talks between Somalia and Somaliland in the last five years, Turkey has been enjoying a positive mediator role in the country. Unless well managed and well communicated, a military role could damage Turkey's positive image since it could be seen as a means of empowering one party against the other. There are already criticisms that Turkish aid is more focused in and around Mogadishu than Somaliland. On the other hand, if well managed, Turkey's military presence could also strengthen its hand as a mediator by enhancing its ability to provide security reassurance in a possible peace accord, which is usually important to ensure sustainable peace in post-conflict settings.

Another risk for Turkey is that Somalia is a post-conflict country that still faces numerous problems both with internal actors such as Al Shabaab, which enjoys noteworthy authority over parts of Somalia; regional authorities such as Somaliland, which is seeking its independence from Somalia; and neighbors such as Ethiopia.²³ A militarily stronger Somali government could be considered a threat by these actors, and Turkey could be blamed for contributing to it. It is important not to forget that Turkey has already been a direct target of attacks by Al Shabaab in Somalia a few times before. In addition, Al Shabaab has also targeted military bases in Somalia such as the attack on the Somali military base in Barire in September²⁴ or the one targeted at a Kenyan military base in Somalia earlier this year.²⁵ Furthermore, there are allegations that Turkey's military base was the intended target of the

recent horrendous attack in Mogadishu that killed more than 300 people and was allegedly carried out by Al Shabaab.²⁶ As such, the base has already become a target for terror attacks.

The growing competition among different external powers in the Horn of Africa is proof of the region's rising prominence. However, it also demonstrates that Turkey needs to carry out a prudent and cautious policy in order to secure a long-standing role in Somalia. There is already evidence that the area is turning into a zone in which rival regional powers exert their influence. For instance, given the ongoing rivalry between Turkey and the UAE that has intensified with the Qatar crisis, the fact that the latter is planning to open a base in Somaliland could change the balance of power in the country and risk the chance for peace in the ongoing negotiations between Somalia and Somaliland, which is being mediated by Turkey.

For Turkey, opening forward operating bases is also a means to bring in success stories from outside and fix the image of the Turkish military, which has been notably tarnished in recent years. As such, the failure of such policy could further damage the military's image and raise criticism at home for wasting Turkey's financial and human resources. Turkey has already experienced enough loss in the last few years as a consequence of the numerous terror attacks in the country and the ongoing battle in Syria. It could be difficult for the Turkish government to justify similar losses within the context of a distant country like Somalia.

Concluding Remarks

Turkey has so far enjoyed a benign donor role in Somalia, which has generally been appreciated in the country. Although Turkey's security provider role brings with it both risks and opportunities, it is certainly a solid indication of its commitment to Somalia and its enthusiasm to assume a greater role in the country. While the base has already been a target for attacks, the fact that Erdoğan's name was chanted by thousands during a rally in Mogadishu organized to denounce Al Shabaab is an indication that Turkey's policy already enjoys a certain level of public recognition.²⁷

However, a critical dilemma remains. While providing security is necessary to institute order and peace in post-conflict countries like Somalia, the means to achieve it could also trigger further destabilization. It is important to ensure institutionalization within the Somali state while strengthening security forces in order to prevent the use of force for political gains. It is also important to be careful about the rising rivalry between regional powers in the Horn and prevent the area from becoming a zone of proxy wars. On the optimistic side, this rivalry could also benefit the region in terms of turning into a center of attraction. In this regard, coordination between different stakeholders, a comprehensive risk analysis, and a prudent approach could enable Turkey to secure a long-term presence in Somalia both as a benign donor and a self-assured security provider.

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