

Turkey's Foray into Africa: A New Humanitarian Power?

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ABSTRACT

Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan visited Somalia in mid-August to raise awareness on the devastating famine that left tens of thousands of people dead and displaced nearly a million. But the visit had broader undertones for Turkey: as a rising power that straddles the east and west, Ankara was aiming to pronounce its unique foreign policy orientation, predicated upon its moral authority, not its military or economic clout. More importantly, Turkey was laying the foundation for its foray into Africa - a continent that, by and large, remains untouched and underdeveloped. As Ankara re-orientates its foreign and trade policies, it is establishing roots in Africa by making humanitarian assistance its initial point of contact. And while traditional powers (the U.S., EU, China and India) take a wait-and-see attitude towards Africa, particularly with respect to stabilization, Turkey appears to be investing in the stabilization phase and planting the seeds for a long-term engagement.

When prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey made a historic visit to Somalia in mid-August to raise global awareness on the devastating famine there, he not only galvanized the Somali people with his show of mercy, but he also put the traditional world powers on notice: Turkey was making an unconventional foray into Africa, predicated upon its moral authority, not on its economic and military clout.

As a rising power that straddles the east and west, Turkey has been subtly making inroads into Africa by addressing such calamitous tragedies as the Horn of Africa famine, which claimed tens of thousands of lives across the region. In Africa, traditional global powers, chiefly the United States, Europe, China and India, are elbowing each other for military dominance (the U.S. and Europe), and oil and infrastructure deals (China and India). Turkey, in contrast, is approaching the region “with a clean slate, with a humanist approach,”

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as president Abdullah Gül was quoted as saying during a trip to Africa last year.¹

By “clean slate,” Gül was presumably alluding to the crucial fact that Turkey has never been a colonizing power in the region akin to the Europeans, who

are widely seen in Africa as rapacious and opportunistic. And by “humanist approach,” the president might have been diplomatically poking at China’s foreign trade policy, known for turning a blind eye towards repressive trade partners, who, as long as they export oil and raw material, are assured the backing of Beijing on world stages, especially the all-too important UN Security Council. And unlike the security-driven policy of the U.S., Turkey seems to be taking an unconventional approach to its newfound ventures into Africa.

Erdoğan’s Somalia Visit

In many ways, Somalia is frozen in its pre-civil war era: almost everything Erdoğan did, or pledged to do, would be the first steps taken since 1991, when the now 20-year-long conflict first erupted, taking many twists and turns. In 1991, clan-based rebel groups ousted General Mohamed Siyad Barre, a Communist-turned pro-Westerner who had led Somalia with an iron fist since 1969. Once they toppled him, the rebels turned their guns against each other in a bloody civil war, which sparked a catastrophic famine in 1992. The U.S.-led “Operation Restore Hope” was launched that year, and some 30,000 troops from 30 countries, including Turkey, intervened to feed the starving. The operation ended in the now infamous “Black Hawk Down” episode, when 18 American soldiers and hundreds of Somalis were killed in clashes. After the foreign troops withdrew, some clans severed their ties from the rest of the country and declared autonomous or semi-autonomous regions. Years of warlord-dominated violence followed until the emergence of al-Shabaab, a radical Islamist militia that pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. Branded as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the EU, this militia now controls almost half of Somalia, and is fighting a globally recognized but weak government, which controls the capital Mogadishu and few towns, and maintains a tremulous hold on power with the support of 9,000 African Union peacekeepers.

In August, PM Erdoğan became the first foreign leader in two decades to brave into Mogadishu, arguably the most dangerous city in the world. With his wife, Emine, their daughter, five cabinet ministers, and a planeload of food and medi-

cal aid in tow, he ventured into camps set up by Turkish charity organizations for thousands of famine victims. Pictures of Erdoğan and his misty-eyed wife holding malnourished Somali children left a powerful mark on the psyche of the Somali people. Ignored by the rest of the world, Somalis felt that, after 20 years of civil war, statelessness and terrorism, compounded by droughts and famines, a distant leader was compassionate enough to dedicate time for their plight out of his unimaginably overbooked schedule.

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The visit was truly special in Somalia: a red carpet was rolled out for Erdoğan—the first in 20 years – and Turkey's national anthem was dutifully played by a Somali police band. In the days leading up to his visit, Erdoğan's picture, alongside that of Somalia's president, was nailed onto the smashed-up buildings and streets across Mogadishu. There were more Turkish flags on the streets of the capital city than Somali flags. Local radio stations played Turkish music, and hospitals reported that, since Erdoğan's visit was announced, "Istanbul" was by far the most popular name for newborn girls. Put simply, Erdoğan's visit uplifted the morale of Somalis like no other leader before him.

What made Erdoğan's visit to Somalia particularly important is that, unlike leaders of neighboring countries, who routinely make fleeting appearances in Somalia, typically confined to military bases, Erdoğan drove into the city—or what's left of it—and appeared remarkably calm. Moreover, neighboring countries are party to Somalia's prolonged conflict: they arm rival militias and clans, and have been torpedoing genuine efforts to resuscitate Somalia back into the world community. Turkey, on the other hand, is not.

President Gül's "clean slate" theory applies in terms of political neutrality, too: Somalis of all political persuasions welcomed Erdoğan's visit as a genuine effort by a fellow Muslim nation to help famine victims. Unlike neighboring countries, Turkey has no vested interest in the intricate domestic politics of Somalia. All that Ankara wanted to see was an end to the epic humanitarian catastrophe in the country. During his visit, Erdoğan stated that it was a global shame that thousands of people would starve to death in the 21st century. Echoing Turkey's unique foreign policy approach, he said the world, and particularly Turkey, had "a moral responsibility" to tackle the humanitarian crisis. And tackle, he dutifully did.

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When Erdoğan departed Mogadishu on that historic Friday in August, he left behind an army of Turkish charity workers, manning Turkish-built camps and makeshift clinics across the city. A major hotel in Mogadishu ejected its Somali guests to make room for dozens of Turkish aid workers. More importantly, Erdoğan brought along with him Tur-

key's newly minted ambassador to Somalia, who submitted his credentials on the same day. Although the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu had been destroyed, like most other embassies, Erdoğan instructed the new ambassador to work out of his hotel room, or any other office he could find, until Ankara rebuilds its facility in the capital. Turkey thus instilled a sense of urgency on its local representatives.

To top it all off, Erdoğan announced major reconstruction projects in Somalia. Turkey plans to rebuild the main road connecting Mogadishu's airport to the rest of the city. (The Somali government vowed to rename it "Jidka Turkiga.") Ankara will also build several hospitals and schools. But perhaps the most important announcement was that 500 Somali students would attend Turkish universities on government-sponsored scholarships. And in September, a delegation of 200-strong Turkish officials and business leaders, including the head of the fast-growing Turkish airlines, descended upon Mogadishu with instructions to explore ways to implement the pledges made by Erdoğan. The Turkish airlines chief said he would seriously consider starting scheduled flights out of Mogadishu, which, if initiated, would make the Turkish national carrier the first to do so in two decades. Still, Turkish Airlines makes frequent unscheduled flights to Mogadishu. On two consecutive days in early October, Turkish airlines landed in Mogadishu to airlift victims of a suicide bombing on October 4th, and students who would study in Turkey. The weak and embarrassingly incompetent Somali government was awe-struck not only by the sheer number of delegation members, unforeseen before, but also by the niceties of their offers. Turkish charities are found at every corner in Mogadishu, and unlike Western agencies, Turkish aid workers travel confidently and typically with less or no security detail at all.

Reigniting the Identity Debate

For decades, there has been a raging debate in Somalia over the roots and true identity of the Somali people. A plurality had always maintained that Somalis are black Arabs, much like the Sudanese. After all, Somalia was a member of the Arab



Photo: AA, Kayhan Özer

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League and a sizeable portion of the society speaks or at least understands Arabic. But a growing segment of Somali society had been vocally debunking that claim, and with it the underpinning argument that Somalis must be ethnically rooted somewhere— as Arabs, Africans, etc. Erdoğan's visit reignited this debate in the most unusual way: anti-Arab forces have capitalized on his landmark visit to argue that Arabs, Somalia's erstwhile "brothers," were conspicuously missing in action during the most unimaginable suffering. This camp argues that the Arabs, as the unkind "brothers" they have turned out to be, have broken the fragile umbilical cord that supposedly linked them to the Somalis. If famine or any other disaster of this magnitude was to hit Yemen, the Arabs would flock there in droves. It took a non-Arab leader—a Turk, of all people—to spark global attention while the surviving Arab leaders busied themselves consolidating their power to pre-empt Egypt-style revolutions.

The anti-Arab forces argue, compellingly, that Erdoğan's visit underscores the idea that ethnicity brotherhood has given way to faith brotherhood. Muslims are the real brothers of the Somali people in times of suffering. To be clear, this camp—or any other, for that matter—isn't claiming that Somalis are somehow

Turkish. They adamantly maintain that Somalis are Muslims first, and Africans second. After all, Islam reached Somalia before it reached the holy city of Medinah, during the Hijra (migration) to Abyssinia in the year 613. Be that as it may, while Erdoğan's visit to Somalia will probably not settle the age-old question of Somali identity, based on an unscientific survey of Somali media discussions, many who bought into the notion that Somalis have Arabic blood are reassessing their position. Similar arguments flared in the 1990s, when thousands of Somali refugees, fleeing a deadly civil war, ended up in the Gulf countries only to be deported back into a war zone, while Western Europe, the U.S., Canada and Australia were resettling hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees and granting them citizenship.

The Bandwagon Effect

Erdoğan's visit to Somalia first caused a lot of jaws to drop before sparking a flurry of visits by global bigwigs. Soon after he departed, Iran sent its foreign minister to Mogadishu, and several European countries sent cabinet members to the city for the first time in 20 years. Perhaps the most interesting visit was by top UN and African Union representatives, who had previously shunned Mogadishu because UN-developed security categorization had marked the city with the lowest (and most dangerous) ranking, requiring top UN officials to avoid it altogether. But once Erdoğan rolled into the city with style, and, to the surprise of many, a fairly modest Turkish security detail, Mogadishu was no longer off-limits to such tycoons as Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, the Saudi billionaire, who, after visiting a camp for famine victims, pledged millions of dollars in food and medical aid.

To the chagrin of many foreign dignitaries who visited Mogadishu after Erdoğan, the red-carpet reception was no more, and certainly not a sign remained of the ornate and over the top welcome. In fact, some Somali leaders traveled out of the country when many European ministers were visiting Mogadishu—a huge leap from the 'pre-Erdoğan era,' as it is now referred to half-jokingly, when the Somali president and his prime minister would routinely meet with embarrassingly low-level officials who would demand to see them, in total secrecy, at Mogadishu's heavily fortified airport due to security concerns. Erdoğan essentially helped Somali leaders recognize—and appreciate—the value of their positions.

Politicizing Humanitarian Aid

While the Somali people hugely welcomed the Turkish involvement and the global awareness it sparked toward the famine disaster, the traditional global powers—the U.S., the EU, the African Union and a host of international organizations led by the UN—were deeply unimpressed and even upset. Labeling Turkey as a

“non-traditional player” in Somalia, this “cabal,” which has practically dictated whatever they wished for Somalia for 20 years, went on the offensive and even became cantankerous. One senior EU official in Nairobi lamented that Turkey was a “naïve, newcomer to Somalia with too much emotion and too little substance.”² The Nairobi-based power brokers are quietly expressing unhappiness that a far-away Turkey, indeed a newcomer to Somali affairs, would make such a splash and steal the thunder away from them. They contend that, when the dust settles, Turkey’s involvement in Somalia will be seen as no more than a onetime stunt designed to divert attention from Ankara’s inconsistent and at times hesitant reaction to the Arab Spring.

Turkey’s approach is a radical contrast to the security-driven approach of the U.S., and is also very different from the strings-attached European style

The so-called “international community representatives” in Nairobi accuse the Turkish government—of providing direct assistance, including cash, to the Somali government, which they see as notoriously corrupt and inherently incompetent. For two decades, this group, often represented by low-level diplomats in Nairobi, has streamlined their “assistance” to Somalia through a coterie of international aid organizations, principally the United Nations Development Program, the World Food Program and handful of smaller organizations. The Nairobi crowd has comfortably railroaded the politics of Somalia to their liking, and they see Erdoğan as a force for disruption. Behind the scenes, they are currently urging the Turkish government to reverse its direct aid program to the Somali government and the Somali people, and channel its funds through their “tested and transparent” systems.

So far, Ankara seems to have ignored this self-righteous group. And by doing so, Turkey is having more impact on the ground. The Nairobi group itself is notorious for waste and fraud. A number of independent studies have found that as much as 70 percent of the funds meant for Somalia funneled through the UN are spent on the lavish life styles of thousands of so-called “aid workers,” who live and work in Nairobi. An entire industry has flourished on the periphery of UN aid, and many Somalis argue, with some justice, that these aid workers deepen Somalia’s crisis in order to continue living off of it. The status quo in Somalia—perpetual wars, political stalemate and terrorism—means job security for this crowd. And these overpaid staffers have repeatedly resisted relocating to Mogadishu and other cities, so that they could spend the money domestically and benefit the local Somali economy. Moreover, they have refused to deliver aid to regions controlled by al-Shabaab. The famine has thus affected these regions more acutely than in

the government-controlled capital. Turkish charity agencies have broken this taboo, and are currently delivering much-needed assistance to these areas as well, because, unlike the Nairobi-based charity agencies, Turkish agencies don't have a predisposed opinion on who should receive aid, and where. After all, humanitarian assistance is supposed to be apolitical, and that is what Turkey is providing.

Unconventional Foray into Africa

While traditional powers are on the periphery waiting for Somalia to stabilize before investing, Turkey is investing in the stabilization of Somalia. Ankara is rebuilding roads, schools, hospitals, and airports, and is also helping with other infrastructure projects. By bypassing the bureaucracy of the UN and delivering humanitarian aid directly to Somalia's needy people, Turkey is laying the foundation for its unconventional foray into Africa. It is sending a powerful and resonating message that Turkey does business unlike anyone else. And while humanitarian aid could be a point of initial contact, Turkey is keeping its options open, and is clearly eyeing out business opportunities in Africa. The announcement by Turkish Airlines to start scheduled flights out of Mogadishu—as long shot as that appears—is indicative that Turkey is open for business. In Somalia, Ankara wants to have an early start ahead of the flock. More than half a dozen Turkish aid and development agencies are operating in Somalia. Ankara appears to be in for the long haul.

For decades, western countries have dominated the traditional humanitarian assistance model, where wealthy governments contribute to a UN fund for a disaster-hit country. The UN, whose staff is overwhelmingly from western countries, then has the final say in how that aid is eventually distributed. In short, the west has politicized humanitarian aid. Muslim populations—both on the giving and receiving ends—have always harbored deep suspicions about how these funds are being used. With the now-infamous Gaza flotilla and its new venture into Somalia, Turkey appears to favor direct assistance to the impacted population.

Turkey's approach is a radical contrast to the security-driven approach of the U.S., and is also very different from the strings-attached European style. It is also unlike the Chinese and Indian model of "give me oil and raw material and you have my unquestioned support." The U.S. and the European approaches smack of imperialism and arrogance; the Chinese and Indian styles ooze recklessness and make the two countries complicit in human rights abuses.

The Turkish model, on other hand, is groundbreaking and fundamentally centrist, in that it avoids the imperialist tendencies of the U.S. and Europe, all the while

establishing “a moral” standard anchored in protecting human rights and helping the weak. It gives Turkey the credentials it needs to engage African states on a totally new basis. Africa remains by and large untouched and underdeveloped. In Somalia, Turkey’s access point is humanitarian assistance, with the idea that once the country settles, it will need a “non-traditional power” to rebuild it from scratch, because the traditional powers, whose reputations have been tarnished by years of negative interference, are perceived as having ulterior motives.³

More importantly, Somalia, once stabilized, could become a natural gateway for Turkey into Africa. Somalia occupies one of the most strategic locations in the world, at the intersection of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Some 30 percent of the world’s commerce goes through this route. Moreover, Somalis are inherently business-minded, and, notwithstanding the crippling wars, are far more advanced in trade than most developed and functioning African states.

As Somalia’s economy takes off, Turkey can capitalize on its prudent approach and outdo traditional players in Africa. Shunned by the European Union, Ankara needs to widen its footprint in the developing world. And in some ways, it is doing just that. Turkish Airlines is now flying to more African cities, and the country has opened more than a dozen embassies on the continent in just the past three years. To Turkey’s advantage, many African countries are majority Muslim states, and they prefer to trade with a fellow Muslim nation.

Many African businesspeople are having a difficult time accessing European markets due to immigration red tapes. European embassies in Africa continue to decline visa applications for African small business owners, fearing that they would seek asylum in Europe. This adds to the humiliation and imperialistic attitude that many Africans feel directed at them when dealing with western countries. Turkey could provide a crucial gateway for these businesspeople, since it doesn’t have a similarly overarching immigration problem.

Endnotes

1. “Ottoman Dreaming,” *The Economist*, May 2010.
2. A conversation with a western diplomat in Nairobi.
3. Pinar Akpınar: “Turkish Aid to Somalia: A New Pulse in Africa” *Al Jazeera English*, September 2, 2011.