

Report

Turkey's Increasing Role in Somalia: An Emerging Donor?



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In what seems to be an extraordinary shift in its involvement in Africa, Turkey is fast becoming an ally – and international actor – in Somalia's theater. Lately, Ankara has shown an increasing interest and willingness to intervene to the devastating situation caused by the acute drought, complicated by terrorism and statelessness in Somalia.

In the midst of biblical famine that starved millions of Somalis to death, Turkey was the first country to unilaterally respond to the drought, while traditional donors for Somalia were unable and unwilling to provide more than a fleeting aid package.

There are, perhaps, three essential factors that can be attributed to Ankara's principled approach to Somalia: Moral authority that defines Ankara's Islamic values; business opportunity that makes Turkey a raising global economic competitor and geo-strategic vision that is part of Ankara's global roundabout ambition – a roundabout of different ideas, cultural, business, people and innovation.

For two decades, Somalia has been plagued by continuous warfare, recurrent humanitarian disasters, terrorism, and statelessness. The international community, for its discredit, has been reconfiguring Somalia's solution for the last two decades, but never succeeded one. The latest pact of such an attempt was just concluded in London, where 50 head of international states, including Turkey, assembled in a one day conference orchestrated by British government, to reset a fresh tone on Somalia.

To top it off, Somalia is fragmented into a multitude of ethnic lines with plenty of transitional governments that are internally paralyzed by stalemates and political bickering. The country is lacking strong central government since the fall of Siyad Barre regime, and the infrastructure is almost totally collapsed.

In a polemic essay by Erodgan at Foreign Policy after his trip in Mogadishu, he mildly slammed the international community for their mortal failure in Somalia, letting the country become its own drama that seems going to nowhere. Contrast to that view, Turkey has strenuously – and more modestly – approached to the crisis in Somalia on a delivery-basis, rather than promises and plans as other donors, and made significant inroads that were not seen before.

Turkey, at the crossroad of civilizations between East and West, has put itself forward as a fellow Muslim nation who, unlike other Muslim countries, cares about what happens in Somalia partly because of the religious and historical ties.

Historic Visit, Galvanizing Somalia

When Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erodagn was visiting Mogadishu on Friday 19 August 2011 in a well remembered visit, most of the cheering crowds who waited for him at the airport barely knew who Erodgan was, but recognized his face through the aloft posters of Erdogan that were pitched all over the Adden Airport. This is a gentle reminder of how ordinary Somalis are alienated towards foreign leaders and disconnected from the world of technology.

The visit marked an important mission as Erdogan was the first leader to brave into Mogadishu, arguably among the most dangerous city over the past two decades, whilst most of the international donors are on the periphery capably unable to make more than a fleeting visit. Erdogan's visit also marked an awkward position within the so called "international community." Ankara is unilaterally taking a risk in Somalia, a country that has been dismally bungled by outsiders, and driven upon its moral authority rather than its superior might.

Moreover, after his meeting with President Shiekh Sharif at Villa Somalia, Erdogan immediately instructed the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu for the first time in 20 years, to assign a new ambassador who submitted his credentials on the same day as a subtle proof of Ankara's urgency on its local representative.

In the days that followed Erdogan's visit, Turkey alone pledged 250 million USD in humanitarian relief assistance. The magnitude of the Somalian tragedy – that the UN estimated as 3.2 million people who are in a dire situation – deserved an enormous international consolidation appeal.

Prior to his visit, Erdogan's picture – or Turkish's flag – became commonly visible throughout Mogadishu. By most measures, the visit was symbolically historic: it coincided with holy Ramadan, red carpet and honor guards and gun salutes were set out for Erdogan – the first gesture in 20 years seen by Somalis. Erdogan defied the UN categorization of Mogadishu as an unsafe and no-go-zone.

In nutshell, his visit warmed the hearts and the minds of many proud Somalis, both inside and outside, who infatuated Erdogan's trip as, in their own words, "Somali's only true Muslim friend".

What made Erdoğan's visit to Somalia particularly groundbreaking is that, unlike other visitors, who routinely make brief appearances on the ground, typically confined to military bases, Erdoğan drove into the city and toured the refugee camps and hospitals galvanizing Somali's plight once and for all.

Historic Ties and a Fellow Muslim Nation

Practically, Turkey's most recent involvement in Somalia can be linked to its 2010's conference on Somali business communities in Istanbul. Before the summit, Ankara's interest in Somalia was quite marginal. Turkish interest in Somalia, however, is not new. Both countries have historic relations that dates way back to the Ottoman Empire. Somalia had an extensive relationship with the Ottoman Empire during the Sultan Salim rule in 1517. In the most recent history, Turkey helped Somalia during the US led operation called Operation Restore Hope, also infamously known as Black Hawk Down Operation, and had sent battalion of Turkish army under the auspices of the UN and reestablished cultural and educational facilities in Mogadishu. Turkey's contingent used to distribute milks, food and beverages to schools and madrases in Somalia, a sign of maintaining its old relation with Somalis. Through the years, Turkey, the only Muslim member in NATO, and Somalia has maintained a cozy relationship.

When Prime Minister Erdogan decided to bring his wife Emine, and five key ministries with limited security detail to visit Mogadishu, days after al-Shabab was driven out of Mogadishu city, gave unprecedented validity to the Turkish efforts and reinforced the popular theory that Turkey is distinctly – and uniquely – a reliable fellow Muslim nation that can elevate global awareness on Somali's plight. Turkey's principled approach helped to create an atmosphere of mutual confidence between Somalis and Turkish as whole.

Not everyone is happy about Turkey's new engagement in Somalia as critics differ on Turkey's involvement in Somalia. In one camp's view is that Ankara's modern engagement in Africa amounts to reviving the "neo-Ottoman empire's" heritage that has profound root in Somalia. Another critic, but perhaps more incendiary, accuses Turkish government for naively pumping direct cash to Somalia government, who are is widely considered as a bunch of syndicate corrupted officials. Ankara, for its own good, have undermined this allegation and extensively nurtured its relation with Mogadishu.

Making a Difference

The policies towards Somalia have focused on alleviating the situation for those affected by the drought. But with thousands of IDPs coming to Mogadishu and with a will to reflect more than the short term possibilities of saving lives, Turkey has also noticed "that you cannot sustain Somalia by simply providing food and medicine." To this end, Turkey has expressed desire to participate and contribute to initiatives that are aimed at

In this commitment, Turkey has launched a bilateral support for Somali by providing aid in critical sectors like health, education, roads, garbage storage facilities, sanitary system, airports and more importantly, building Somali national army. "The ultimate aim of these projects are institutional building and make Somalia self-sufficient", said Mr. Bekir Bozdog, Turkish deputy prime minister who was also visiting Mogadishu last week to announce Turkish flights.

More compassionately, Turkey is available for free medical support to those effected October 4, 2011, heinous attack in Mogadishu which sadly claimed the lives of some 100 students, lined up for scholarship exams to Turkey. Shortly after the attack, Turkey dispatched an emergency plane to carry the victims to Turkey for specialized medical treatment.

The Turkish role in Somalia has grown consistently since last August's visit. A development office was established in Mogadishu, with the effect that both the Turkish government and its non-governmental organizations can fearlessly arrive in Mogadishu – a city that even the Nairobi crowd UN agencies have categorized as no-go-zone since the civil war. Moreover, two new offices, one in Puntland and one in Somaliland, are to be opened within a short period of time. Furthermore, Turkish Airlines have introduced a regular flight – twice a week – to Mogadishu via Sudan, a clear indication that Turkey is open for business opportunities. From Turkey's perspective, a stable, viable and reliable ally in the Horn of Africa, preferably Muslim nation, is critically important with economic calculations.

In Somalia, Turkey is rebuilding the social fabrics by reconstructing roads, airports, hospitals for Somali peoples' wellbeing and paving the way for political resettlement. The list of some projects that Turkey is doing in Somalia is encouraging: up to 1000 students have been granted full scholarships in different fields in Turkey, schools that teaches Turkish language have open up, Turkish Red Crescent feeds up to 15,000 IDPs, a major hospital and outpatient clinic have been reconstructed which benefiting nearly three million Somalis coming from Mogadishu and other remote areas.

The net effect of Turkey's contribution to the impoverished country of Somalia is mind-boggling. For the first time in two decades, Somalia is receiving global attention that might make a difference for the better.

A new Ally and Mediator

Lately, there have also been reports that Turkey has been clandestinely establishing some type of line of communication between al-Shabaab, an Islamist organization that paid allegiance to al-Qaeda, and Transitional Federal Government (TFG). This underscores Turkey's ability to play a larger diplomatic role in the mediation process. To be sure, Turkey has notable advantages in mediation, including its historical connection to Somalia, notwithstanding its shared Islamic values and its lack of local proxies or other incentives to meddle in the internal politics.

In addition, Mr. Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkish foreign minister recently outlined Turkey's interest in mediating between conflicting factions in Somalia and asserted that "despite our advantage and special relation with Somalis of all stripes, Turkey would play a role in mediating conflicting parties in Somalia."

In light of this unorthodox approach to Somalia, what possibilities does the Turkish engagement show for long term positive development in the country? Could Turkish engagement prove to be the catalyst for nation building that is much needed in this fragmented country? The method with which Ankara is approaching Somalia is undoubtedly one to envy. It screams of pragmatism, of hope, of a country that dares to aim for development before the outcome of the political unrest is settled. If implemented properly, public goods, such as garbage cleaning, may not only help Mogadishu to become a cleaner environment but could also provide a fruitful basis for cooperation between the districts in Mogadishu and their respective leaders. Similar actions have

previously shown to provide a good basis for conflict prevention in other parts of the world. Needless to say, Turkey has aptly proved to be capable of delivering what Somali people need the most – relief, rebuilding, investment. A major question in the backdrop of the London conference is what will happen now that many other countries possibly also want to take part in Somali development? While Turkey has a long history of approaching the EU, and is possibly aiming to become a member state in the relative close future, Turkish actions in the recent past shows that it will not bend its position just to satisfy the wishes of major EU powers. In order to avert possible clashes of interests between Turkey and other stakeholders, which is likely, there is a need for donor cooperation.

The future of the Somali state building process needs “donor stability”. In this process, Turkey should be the go-to actor for international actors interested in the aspects of development where Turkey has already made significant difference.

It is increasingly apparent that Turkish expressed interest in Somalia is far more than mere lip service to score extra credit in relation to a possible EU membership. In the future of Somali state building, Turkey should play an active role, benefiting from the trust it has gained amongst Somalis and its exceptional position of being a Muslim fellow. The international community, for its part, should recognize Turkey for its humanitarian model in Somalia.

Here it remains to be seen to what degree other nations will be willing and able to cooperate with Turkey's relentless efforts, and to what degree Turkey will feel that other nations intervene in their territory?

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