

## **Turkey's Engagement in Somalia: A Security Perspective**



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### ***Abstract***

*Somalia-Turkey relation has been resumed when then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Mogadishu in August 2011. Turkey has recently opened a military training facility in Mogadishu. Since then, Turkey's security engagement in Somalia created some sort of concern for the former actors in Mogadishu's political arena. Almost all studies about this relation explore Turkey's economic and humanitarian contributions to Somalia. Contrarily, this paper focuses on the security dimension of this relation and tries to define the security interests of Turkey in its engagement in Somalia. More on, the paper investigates the current security situation of Somalia, examines the nature of the Turkish military facility and discusses the challenges facing Turkey in Somalia.*

**Keywords:** Somalia, Security, Turkish foreign policy, Turkey in Somalia.

## **Introduction**

The relationship between Somalia and Turkey dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Ottoman Empire used to support and cooperate with Muslim states against the Portuguese and Abyssinian Empires. The aim of that relation seemed defending Ottoman Empire's security and economic interests in both Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. During these times, Ottomans incorporated the country's most important port cities, Zeila and Berbera (Akalın, 2014; Lewis, 1988). In the height of the Adal Sultanate (1415-1577), during the reign of Sultan Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Ghazi '*Ahmed Gurey*' (1506-1543), was the time when the relationship between Turks and Somalis had firstly begun. The empire controlled and/or coordinated with East African countries, though it later faced challenges from the European colonial powers. Akalın (2014) states that Ottomans were challenged by Portuguese and later by British. At the end, Ottomans withdrew from the region in 1884 when the Horn of African countries went under the British, Italian and the French colonization.

The relation changed following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. The newly established Republic of Turkey's pursue of western-oriented foreign policy (Tepecikoğlu, 2012) and the partition of Somalia by the colonial powers were some of the reasons that changed the relation. At the time, there was probably nothing that both states could have offered each other. The establishment of two embassies for the two countries in Ankara and Mogadishu in 1976 and 1979 respectively and Turkey's 10 million dollars contribution to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)'s aid to the East Africa region in 1984 famine (Erol & Altın, 2012) marked the resume of the bilateral relations between the two states. This relation did not last for long as Somalia's state collapsed in 1991.

During the Somali civil war, Turkey has joined the international intervention operations to restore peace and secure the humanitarian aid. It was a part of the UN peacekeeping missions in Somalia. Turkish humanitarian aid agencies contributed to the international humanitarian efforts in the country to alleviate the crisis. From 1990s, Turkey's foreign policy was undertaking a transformation process in which almost all its aspects were changing (Dine & Yetim, 2012). In result of this transformation, the 1998 'Africa Action Plan' was announced under the leadership of the former foreign minister Ismail Cem (Sezal, 2016) and later on 2005 was marked as the 'Year of Africa' (Yukleyen & Zulkarnain, 2015). Additionally, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Mogadishu in 2011 and reopening of Turkish embassy in Somalia two decades later have speeded up the Turkey's opening policy in Somalia.<sup>1</sup>

The current literature about the relation between Somalia and Turkey almost focus on Turkey's political, economic and humanitarian contributions to Somalia. Some studies show Turkey as Somalia's indispensable savior. This paper follows a different path where it discusses the security perspective of Turkish-Somali relations. For this purpose, an overview of the security situation of Somalia will be detailed to gain a common understanding of the security sector in the country. After this section, Somalia-Turkey inter-security interests and the engagement of Turkey in Somalia's security sector such as opening of a Turkish training camp in Mogadishu for training of the Somali National Army (SNA) and contributing to the anti-piracy international efforts in Somalia coasts will be explored. The course of Turkey's engagement in Somalia's security sector created challenges for Turkey's Somalia policy, some of these challenges will also be discussed in the paper.

## **1. Overview of the Security Situation in Somalia**

Before the collapse of the Somali government in 1990, security threats in Somalia were mainly caused by internal factors and state fragility. There were also persistent external factors contributed to the insecurity of Somalia, including the 'history of state building process, the colonial legacy and Cold War policies' (Addow, 2016).

Since the uprisings against the military regime in mid-1980s, the security situation in Somalia was getting in a mess. The collapse of the central government in 1991 followed by the rise of factional armed conflicts directed the country to be marked as a failed state. The rise of the Union of Islamic Courts in 2006 changed the phase of the security situation in Somalia. However, Ethiopian military intervention in 2007 contributed to the publicity of *Al-Shabaab* organization (Ingiriis, 2018; Wise, 2011). Thus, the current security situation has emerged. In one hand, *Al-Shabaab* and *Islamic State (IS)*-affiliated groups operate against the government, where African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM),<sup>2</sup> Ethiopian forces and SNA, on the other hand, are striving to eradicate these groups and 'secure the country'.

According to European Asylum Seekers Office (EASO) 2017 Report, the conflict between the SNA, supported by AMISOM, and *Al-Shabaab*, an *Al-Qaeda* affiliated group, is the main determinant of the current security state in Somalia. Roads insecurity, and land disputes are also common determinant factors. The repetitive inter-state conflict between Puntland and Somaliland also poses another security threat.

Once a main security challenge, piracy in Somali coasts nowadays weakened, thanks to the international anti-piracy troops around the Somali coasts though there are still attempts of vessel hijackings off the coast of Somalia. Now, *Al-Shabaab* is the principal challenge in

Somalia's security sector (UN Security Council, 2018). The group has carried out 22 raids, 51 assassinations, 59 bombing campaign in Mogadishu for the third quarter of 2018 (Hiraal Institute, 2019). Currently, the strongest actor against Al-Shabaab is United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), which has decreased the group's effectiveness in carrying out attacks (Hiraal Institute, 2018).

## **2. Turkish Training Center in Mogadishu**

Turkey's modern engagement in Somalia has started since 1979, the bilateral relation between the two countries has not been deepened to a good level. Turkish domestic policy and the traditional western-oriented foreign policy have been key factors in Turkey's Africa policy. Since the rise of the ruling Justice and Development Party '*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*' (AKP) in Turkish politics, the focus of the Turkish foreign policy has been transforming from a traditionally passive to seeking leadership in the regional powers conjuncture (Dine & Yetim, 2012; Sezal, 2016; Yukleyen & Zulkarnain, 2015). East Africa has become one of the most focused regions in AKP's foreign policy (Özkan, 2012), thus, putting forward major areas of cooperation in terms of trade, diplomacy and humanitarian development.

Consequently, the most concrete step towards Somalia relations was materialized by the visit of then Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan in 2011. The main objective for that visit was considered to contribute in alleviating humanitarian crisis existed in Somalia at the time. Probably, the prime minister wanted to draw world attention to Somalia, which was hit by a severe drought. This visit marks the turning point in Turkey's engagement in Somalia. Since then, Turkey was deepening its relationship with Somalia. Reopening Turkey's Mogadishu embassy in November 2011, hosting Istanbul Somalia Conference in May 2012 and spearheading the OIC's aid projects to

Somalia were among the initiatives Turkey has taken towards strengthening its presence in Somalia.

However, security was never absent in any Turkish initiative in Somalia because the Somalia's strategic location and the threat of the piracy were always among the determinant factors of the bilateral relations. Soon after Turkey positioned itself as a key humanitarian actor in Somalia, other security, diplomatic and economic interests come into play (Wasuge, 2016). However, according to (Baird, 2016) the focus of Turkish engagement in Somalia was 'humanitarian aid, business and trade, and security sector reform'. Attaining a geostrategic advantage is considered also one of Turkey's interests in Somalia (Yalçın, 2017). It can be argued that Turkey's security interests in Somalia developed even before the 2011 Erdogan visit. This can be drawn from the 2010 Military Training Cooperation Agreement between the two countries which came into effect in 2012 (Turkish Official Gazette, 2011). Participating in the meetings of the Joint Security Committee, where Somali government and its international partners used to coordinate the security sector reform, was also another evidence that Turkey was committed to involve itself in the security sector (Crisis Group, 2012).

Regarding the agreements between Turkey and Somalia, Wasuge (2016) states that as of February 2016, the two countries have signed or were in the process of signing at least 15 bilateral agreements. Turkey seems to have intention of investing in the long-term of its economic and security relations with Somalia (Abdulle, 2019). It comes very clear that such engagement necessitates a strong military presence on the ground, particularly in a country where foreign actors are striving to take advantage of its poor governmental institutions and state fracture. Within the light of these circumstances, Turkey has been contributing forces to the anti-piracy missions off the Somali

coast since 2009, continued with a pledge to contribute in Somalia’s military reestablishment and the training of its personnel, and finally signed different military training and security cooperation agreements with Somalia since 2009. Table 1 shows the military and security related agreements signed between Turkey and Somalia since 2009. The signing of these agreements clearly defines how Turkey was in the intention of military/security engagement in Somalia.

**Table 1:** Turkey-Somalia Military/Security Agreements 2009-2019

<b>Signature Date</b>	<b>Where</b>	<b>Agreement</b>
17 April 2009	Ankara	Technical Cooperation Agreement
22 May 2010	Istanbul	Training, Technical and Scientific Cooperation in the Military Field (Framework)
13 April 2012	Ankara	Military Training Cooperation Agreement
25 January 2015	Mogadishu	Defense Industry Cooperation Agreement

*Source:* Collection from the Official Gazette of Turkey

The public’s acceptance of Turkey as Somalia’s strategic ally; the recently strengthening economic/trade ties; the shared Islamic identity; the historical relations; the successful humanitarian assistance model; the common consensus of the international community to reestablish Somalia’s security forces; and the rivalry between the regional powers in Somalia are considered determinant factors in speeding up Turkey’s intention to establish a military “base” in Somalia. Within the legal framework of the bilateral agreements between the two states, Turkey inaugurated a military training facility ‘*Turksom Military Training Center*’ in Mogadishu on September 2017. Regional and international media defined the facility as part of Turkey’s Neo-Ottoman foreign policy, though (Rossiter & Cannon, 2018) argue that such claims are ill defined and nonsense.

The construction activities of the Turkish Military training facility or “base”, whatever, started in 2015. It is estimated that the construction of the facility costed around 50 million dollars. Speaking at the inauguration ceremony, then Turkish Chief of Staff and the current Defence Minister Hulusi Akar stated that the facility’s main objective is training the Somali armed forces, ‘this facility will increase Turkish efforts in ensuring regional and international peace and security’ he added. Moreover, Somalia Prime Minister also highlighted at the inauguration that this “base” is a part of Somalia’s wider plan to reestablish its army.’ The “base” is expected to train approximately 10,000 Somali forces, with a capacity of training 1,000 soldiers at a time. The training will be carried out by 200-300 Turkish soldiers (Rossiter & Cannon, 2018).

Some studies suggest that Turkey’s military training facility in Somalia should be considered as a military facility, rather than a “base”, regarding the nature of the facility and its declared objectives. Rossiter & Cannon (2018) argue that the facility does not correspond the characteristics of a conventional military base; they state that ‘in functional terms, the Turkish military presence is not an overseas base, [...] it is a natural extension of Turkey’s deepening involvement in Somalia’s development’. On the hand, Turkish officials always emphasize to define the facility as a training camp, not a “base”.

Currently, the Somali people and government show a wide support and strong satisfaction with the Turkey’s security policy in Somalia. Yet, a potential misunderstanding may arise at any time as Somali government is not strongly institutionalized, with most of the current bureaucrats having citizenships of foreign countries<sup>3</sup> of which interests might go against the interests of Turkey. At the beginning, Ankara’s intervention has gained a widespread public support, but



that should not be ‘misinterpreted as a sign that everything is proceeding well’ (Yukleyen & Zulkarnain, 2015).

Turkey’s less-coordination with the international community, and the less engagement with regional states may pose a potential challenge in the long run (Yalçın, 2017; Yukleyen & Zulkarnain, 2015). Currently, Turkey engages with different regional states such as Puntland and Somaliland, but the level of this engagement seems not enough. Later, Turkey noticed this and tried to strengthen its engagement with regional states effectively; however, the expectations of the regional states are yet to be met. On the other hand, Rossiter & Cannon (2018) emphasized the fear that Turkey trained army be as “*Turkey’s proxy force*” and could find itself in conflict with other proxy actors, like the troops trained by other foreign countries. This may critically harm the currently semi-agreed upon national interests of both Turkey and Somalia.

Regarding the “*base*”, some regional countries like UAE and Saudi Arabia are concerned about the Turkey’s military presence in Somalia.<sup>4</sup> They are probably worried about losing their influence on Somalia politics. For instance, UAE describes Turkey’s base as a threat to its interests in the region. The rivalry between the two states, Turkey and UAE, can be deduced from their intentions to maintain military presence though the UAE lost public support for its presence.

Apart from the training activities, Turkey is not militarily operational on the ground. However, Al-Shabaab group in Somalia currently pose a challenge to Turkey’s military engagement in Somalia. The groups certainly assure ‘they don’t accept foreign presence in Somalia (Yalçın, 2017), and any facility, base and/or training center is a potential target for them. Al-Shabaab’s attack on Turkish Mission in Somalia<sup>5</sup> with a suicide car bomb on July 2013 (Yalçın, 2017), the discourses that Turkish Airlines and Turkish military training facility was the intended target for the 2016 Daallo Airlines at Aden Abdulle

International Airport (Mohamed, 2016; Vogt, 2016), the deadly 14 October 2017 Mogadishu attack (Maruf, 2017) and targeting of Turkish citizen in May 2019<sup>6</sup> (Maruf, 2019) respectively affirms the existence of such kind of challenges. Thus, Turkey needs to develop strategies to deal with the challenges coming from Al-Shabaab organization. Though it seems illogical, negotiating and settling with the group, like some international aid agencies do, can be a one alternative for the Turks to overcome this challenge.

### **3. Turkey's Security Interests in Somalia**

Turkey's main interests in Somalia do not seem, for now at least, to be military or security centered. Abdulle (2019) concludes that Turkish security interests are part of a wider development aid plan including, 'public service support, peace-building support etc.' The need of Turkey to strengthen its geostrategic position in the world reiterated its military engagement with the Horn of Africa. One of the main interests for turkey is investing in Somalia's political scene, thus, guaranteeing a strong influence in the politics at a high level. The fragile political situation of Somalia and the interconnected Western and regional countries` influence on Mogadishu's politics may hint that Turks can have the same level of influence.

The interests of Turkey in Somalia can be defined as sophisticated and multifaceted. Economic and security interests come at the top. Abdulle (2019) gives a hint that Somalia's non-processed natural resources can be one of the reasons Turkey has engaged in the country, though Turkish officials always stress their involvement is humanitarian. Somalia's location on the edges of the Bab el-Mandeb strait and the world trade routes brought a strategic prominence for the country. From 2007, Turkey defined itself as an Afro-Eurasian country, thus, it strives to get the ability of protecting its trade ships and economic interests in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

However, countering any potential threat will be a ‘possible objective’ for the Turkish facility in the future. Yet, by now, it is not clear if the military agreements with Somalia contain such issues.

Turkey’s defense industry has been recently growing, it has reached an export capacity of 1.65 billion dollars in 2016 (Presidency of Defence Industries, 2018). ‘Development of defense industry exports and creating new international cooperation fields to increase its competitiveness in international markets’ is one of the strategic goals of Turkish defense industry (Presidency of Defence Industries, 2017). In line with Turkey’s 2023 Vision, the country endeavors to open new markets in Africa and Asia for its defense industry products. Of course, at the top of these markets comes Somalia. Rossiter & Cannon (2018) project that SNA ‘will be equipped with arms produced in Turkish factories’ but the country now suffers 25-year old arms embargo, though the Security Council maintains occasionally a partial embargo lifting in one-year periods. In the future, if this embargo lifted, such as the Eritrean case, Somalia might be a source of income market for Turkey defense industry.

In conclusion, Turkey’s security interests in Somalia can be limited to *four* points: Counter-Pirates, face competitive regional powers, protect Turkish economic interests in the region, and selling defense industry’s products. It is worth noting that these goals can only be achieved with the integration of the work of Turkish training “base” in Somalia and the recently proposed base in Sawakin Island of Sudan. If Turkey achieves successfully these four goals at the end, it will become presented a significant effective policy in the Horn of Africa. A lot of supporting factors exist also on the ground, it depends how Turkey deals with the Somali governments and the high-level bureaucrats. Achieving these goals, Turkey will be recognized as a model for other interested countries to engage with Somalia.

#### **4. Somalia's Security Interests with Turkey**

Since 2011, Somalia is in very strong relations with Turkey, this relation lays the foundation for Turkey's success in its Africa policy. Some of this relation's short-term advantages have been seen recently and lots of returns are expected in the long run. The political stalemate, and the security instability caused by Al-Shabaab is the main challenges in the country. Somalia strives to deal with these challenges, though its security entities are weak to get into action alone. The support of the international community is a prerequisite for overcoming these challenges and paving the way for stable Somalia.

The current [political] situation may not be improved unless the security situation substantially stabilizes (Ozkan & Orakci, 2015). The Somalia Security Pact which is approved on May 2017 by the Somali government and endorsed by its international partners clearly defines the security priorities of the current government. At the top of these priorities comes political stabilization and reconfiguration of the armed forces. The Somali army is required to prepare itself for direct takeover of the security when the AMISOM Transition Plan comes effective in 2021. The planned drawdown of AMISOM pushes the Somali government to speed up rebuilding its forces. Thus, Turkey can be seen a potential main actor in the security sector.

In this context, Somalia will surely benefit from the security experience and the military strength of a NATO-member and EU-full membership candidate Turkey, a country that contributed forces to more international missions, starting from the Korean War, Kosovo, Bosnia Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Iraq and nowadays Syria (Sazak & Özkan, 2016). If properly coordinated, this will obviously open new horizons for Somalia's security sector. Somalia may be expected to utilize the Turkish engagement properly in a way that serves the strategic interests of both states. Rossiter & Cannon (2018) argue that

Ankara's direct goal in training the SNA is to create a cohesive force strong enough to handle security duties in the country.

To control the security situation and defeat the militant rebels, Somalia requires very tough strategies and, of course, trained and equipped army. Currently, the Somali army is not supplied with the required weapons. The UN arms embargo on Somalia is another challenge facing the army. The embargo decreases the chances of Somalia army to own weapons, thus, cripples any potential military capability to manage security situation. Thus, Somalia needs to lobby for embargo lifting at the international platforms. In this matter, with its strong presence in the international diplomacy, Turkey may contribute to the process. Though, Somalia's poor management of its security entities is still a point of concern for international partners.

Turkey may probably become an alternative actor for the Gulf States and Ethiopian manipulation in the Somalia politics. Williams (2018) indicates that "*Ethiopia has been the most important external actor in Somali affairs in the twenty-first century, having a bigger strategic impact on local politics than any other actor*". It is clear the western partners including USA and EU members established their semi-failed Somalia strategies based on Ethiopia's point of view. The Gulf States also maintained a strong presence in the humanitarian and economic sectors and a little political influence recently. Improving the relations with Turkey will enable Somalia to find new powerful actor, which can play more positive role. If Turkey has the will to be this actor, it has all the supporting factors to engage much faster and effectively.

In short, Somalia's security interests in dealing with Turkey come in *five* Points. *First*, training the national army, *second*, finding weapons supplier for its army, *third*, compromise with an alternative actor to support its political, economic and security ambitions, *fourth*, finding an ally to lobby for lifting the arms embargo, and *fifth*, utilization of

Turkish counter-insurgency model. From its cautious engagement in the security sector, it seems that Turkey is *au fait* with the Somali interests, though some of these interests may not be fully accomplished, for now at least, due to interconnected international and local constraints. The expectations of the Somali government from Turkey imply the nature the strategic cooperation between the two states. Turkey, unlike the traditional actors like the USA, UK and other EU members, always sees its relationship with Somalia as a strategic partnership, not a donor-beneficiary relation.

## **5. Conclusion**

The economic and political stability which Turkey maintained since 2002 enabled it to seek for an active role and to emerge as a key player in the world politics. The recently increasing humanitarian and development aid delivered by Turkey to some African countries must be considered to have related to this issue. In the interest of that, Turkey was engaging in strong economic and political relations with African countries since 2007. The newly emerging Turkish security engagement in Somalia materializes the ambitions of Turkey to show itself as a powerful actor in Africa politics and, of course, to protect its interests in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

The interests of Turkey in Somalia can be defined as sophisticated and multifaceted. The paper underlined that Turkey's security engagement in Somalia is a part of an overall strategy which pursues a wider long-term plan of deep involvement in the country. However, the Turkish military training facility serves as a symbol of commitment to the shared interests of both states. The security interests of Turkey in Somalia are determined as counter-pirates, face competitive regional powers, protect Turkish economic interests in the region, and selling defense industry's products. In return, Somalia's security interests are also determined as training the national army, finding weapons supplier for its army, compromise with

an alternative actor to support its political, economic and security ambitions, finding an ally to lobby for lifting the arms embargo, and utilization of Turkish counter-insurgency model.

Within this framework, the bilateral relation of the two states stands at a turning point and faces challenges. The nature and the characteristics this relation will have in the future will depend on how both states deal with challenges evolving from the security sector of Somalia as AMISOM troops already begun to apply its drawdown plan. The relation also faces a political challenge from the neighboring countries, the Gulf States and other actors. Al-Shabaab's threat will also be a determinant factor in this regard. In all, the paper anticipates that Turkey will deal all these challenges without overlooking the strategic geopolitical importance of Somalia.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Turkish-Somali relations revived under AKP leadership. The then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with the Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2007. Accordingly, former Somali President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed visited Ankara on several times before Erdogan's first visit to Somalia in 2011, followed by another in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> AMISOM, on its website it is defined as "The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is an active, regional peacekeeping mission operated by the African Union with the approval of the United Nations. It was created by the African Union's Peace and Security Council on 19th January 2007 with an initial six month mandate" It is mandated "to conduct Peace Support Operations in Somalia to stabilize the situation in the country in order to create conditions for the conduct of Humanitarian activities". Its mandate was extended in each period that it has been up for review, lastly in May 2019. For more details, refer to its website [<http://amisom-au.org/>]

- <sup>3</sup> According to <https://wakiil.org> by January 2017, 38% of the House of the People members (105 out of 275) have dual citizenship. UK (29 MPs), USA (22 MPs), Kenya (10 MPs), Canada (9 MPs), Ethiopia (7 MPs) and Dutch (6 MPs) come at the top.
- <sup>4</sup> A number of countries are interested in playing a role in training the Somali army. The British Government has opened a military training center in Somalia on 8 June, 2019. This new centre (The Baidoa Security Training Centre (BSTC),) will train up to 120 Somali National Army soldiers at a time. {For more details refer to <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-opens-new-training-centre-for-the-somali-national-army-in-baidoa--2>] accessed on 13 June, 2019. In addition there are other countries signed a security agreement with Somalia, such as Italy.
- <sup>5</sup> A suicide car bomb pushed into an office housing Turkish embassy staff in Mogadishu. In this attack, one Turkish police died, and three others wounded in addition to two Somali security guards and one university student. Al-Shabaab claimed the attack.
- <sup>6</sup> A Turkish engineer has been killed in a car bomb explosion on May 12, 2019 in Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab claimed the responsibility, saying he was working at the Turkish military training facility in Mogadishu. The Turkish embassy stated that the victim was an engineer working for a Turkish company.

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