

## TURKEY AND THE “RED SEA”

**Shaul Shay**

(The author is the director of research of the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzeliya and former Deputy Head of the National Security Council)

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Turkey is seeking to expand Turkey's influence beyond the Middle East to Africa in a bid to transform Turkey from a regional power into a sort of neo-Ottoman Empire.

Turkey has traditionally maintained good relations with the African continent. In the context of Turkish policy of opening up to Africa initiated in 1998, Turkey was determined to improve and develop the political, economic, commercial, and cultural interaction with the African countries.<sup>1</sup>

The Turkish foreign policy towards Africa is not only based on economic and trade objectives but also incorporates a comprehensive approach which includes development of Africa through technical and project assistance in the fields such as fight against diseases, agricultural development, irrigation, energy and education and regular flow of humanitarian aid.

“Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit” held with the participation of 49 African countries on 18-21 August 2008, in Istanbul, is considered as the beginning of a steady and sustainable cooperation process. The Turkish initiatives to help Somalia out of its dire political and economic crisis has to be considered as a part of the Turkish "African strategy".<sup>2</sup>

Relations between Turkey and Africa have gained particular strength since the declaration of Turkey as a strategic partner of the Continent by the African Union in 2008.

In economic terms, Turkey has increased its trade volume about six-fold in the past decade-and-a-half, to \$17.5 billion, with direct investment rising from \$100 million in 2003 to nearly \$6.5 billion in 2017.

In diplomatic terms, Turkey has also increased its profile in Africa considerably. In 2003, Turkey had 12 diplomatic missions. Today, this number has increased to 41 missions across the continent. In the past decade, 32 new foreign missions belonging to African states have also been opened in Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

Erdoğan has visited nearly 30 African countries, some more than once, during his leadership in the country in the past 16 years. In some countries, while Erdoğan was the first Turkish president visiting, in others such as Somalia, Erdoğan's visit was the first by a leader from outside Africa in many years.<sup>4</sup>

The Red Sea region has been the focus of a struggle for power and influence in recent years. The whole of the East African coast from Sudan to Somalia is now in the sights of competing Saudi Arabia and Arab Gulf states and Iran.

The main competition is over the control of the strait of Bab Al-Mandeb at the southern entrance of the Red Sea, through which pass 19,000 vessels carrying 1.5 billion barrels of oil per year from the Gulf to Europe and America. The strait is in a dangerous region that has been witnessing two civil wars, in Yemen in the east and Somalia in the west.

### **The Neo - Ottomanism and the Red Sea region**

The Ottomans controlled parts of the Red Sea region from the 14th to the 19th century as part of an empire which stretched up to modern-day Austria and Hungary, and across North Africa and the Middle East.

A century after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of Turkish Republic, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan believes he can restore the Empire's lost glory. Turkey is a regional power of considerable importance which bases its strategy on the concept of neo-Ottomanism, while denying its existence.

Erdogan has made a dramatic shift in Turkish politics, from a century-long Kemalist ideology which emphasized a secular and liberal Turkey heading westwards, to a neo-Ottoman foreign policy approach.

Neo-Ottomanism drives Erdogan's foreign policy, combining Ottoman and religious rhetoric to gather his supporters around collective imagination. Erdogan's neo-Ottomanism encourages increased engagement in regions where the Ottoman Empire ruled before.

Former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu emphatically echoed his boss's grandiose vision, stating that by 2023 (the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic), Turkey will become as powerful and influential as the Ottoman Empire was during its heyday.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey's relations with countries in the Red Sea region and the Horn of Africa date back to the former Ottoman Empire.

### **Somalia**

Turkey is a key ally of the Somali government in efforts to rebuild the country after more than two decades of conflict and famine. Erdogan became the first non-African leader to visit Somalia in nearly 20 years when he traveled there in 2011, as Turkey's prime minister.

The government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become a close ally of the Somali government in recent years.

Erdogan has visited Mogadishu twice, and when he made his first trip there in 2011 he became the first non-African leader to visit the war-torn country in 20 years.

When the radical Islamist group Al-Shabaab, backed by Al-Qaeda, withdrew from Mogadishu in 2011, Turkey launched famine-relief operations in the country, opening the door to projects that now make it the largest foreign investor in Somalia.

Turkey has built schools, hospitals and infrastructure in the country and provided scholarships for Somalis to study in Turkey. The Turkish Al-Bayrak Group has been operating the port of Mogadishu since September 2014.

In September 2017, Turkey opened its largest military base abroad in the Somali capital, massively strengthening its presence in East Africa. More than 10,000 Somali soldiers will be trained by Turkish officers at the base of Mogadishu, which, costing \$50 million, reflects the growing ties between Mogadishu and Ankara, which also has its largest foreign embassy in Somalia.

Trade between the two countries has grown rapidly. In 2010, Turkish exports to Somalia stood at \$5.1 million. But by last year they had reached \$123 million. In the space of six years, Turkey has moved from being Somalia's 20th-largest source of imports to its fifth. One Turkish official said at the time that the Turkish military base in the capital was in line with Ankara's priority of expanding arms sales "to new markets".

### **The Qatar connection<sup>6</sup>**

Turkey and Qatar have been acting in tandem in the Horn of Africa, like in other regions. In Somalia, Qatar's action is aligned with that of Turkey, which has sided with Doha in its dispute with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. The two countries' alliance was sealed by Turkey's opening of its first military base in the Middle East in Qatar in April 2016 in an indication of its support of Doha against the diplomatic isolation imposed by the other Gulf countries.

In Somalia, almost all their investments are in Mogadishu and they focus on supporting the sitting president. Somalia is an ally of Qatar and relations have strengthened since the break between the latter and Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Manama and Cairo. The central government's support for Qatar can be explained by the fact that Doha financed the president's election campaign in 2017 and pledged \$385 million in aid to the Somali government in infrastructure, education and humanitarian assistance.

### **Sudan**

Turkey was among the first countries to open an embassy in Sudan, after its independence in 1956. Following the lifting of US sanctions on Sudan in October 2017, Erdogan made the first visit of a Turkish president to Khartoum in December 2017.

### **The "Suakin island "crisis**

The visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sudan in December 2017 and the " Suakin island deal " have heightened an already tense political situation between Egypt and Sudan.

Turkish President Erdogan accompanied by a large delegation, has arrived in Khartoum on December 24, 2017, on a two-day official visit, making the first trip by a Turkish president to Sudan. This visit to Sudan was the second by Receb Tayyip Erdogan .The first was in 2006 when he was a prime minister.<sup>7</sup>

The two sides discussed bilateral relations and ways to enhance cooperation as well as issues of common concern. At the end of the talks, the two sides signed 12 cooperation agreements worth \$650 million in total. Turkey will construct the new

Khartoum airport and Turkish private-sector will invest in cotton production, electricity generation and the construction of grain silos and mills.

The Sudanese President Omer al-Bashir and visiting Turkish President Erdogan have agreed to raise trade exchange between the two countries to \$1 billion within one year and they are planning to increase bilateral trade up to \$10 billion.<sup>8</sup>

Sudan and Turkey also agreed to approve the establishment of a higher political committee headed by the two presidents, saying the committee would annually meet in Khartoum and Ankara alternately.<sup>9</sup>

The most important agreement signed during Erdogan's visit was on the temporarily allocation of the Island of Suakin on the Red Sea to Turkey.

### **The military cooperation - Turkey – Sudan - Qatar**

Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik arrived in the Sudanese capital Khartoum on January 9, 2017, to hold talks with his Sudanese and Qatari counterparts. Sudanese Defense Minister Brig. Ahmed al-Shami said that the three ministers discussed military ties along with regional and international developments.<sup>10</sup>

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and three defense ministers attended the opening of the Soor factory in Khartoum that will produce military uniforms for Sudanese army.<sup>11</sup>

The Soor military and civilian clothing factory is jointly owned by Qatar, Sudan and Turkey.

The factory aims to provide high quality military, logistic and civilian products to the Middle East and Africa following global standards. The Soor factory will produce 2,000 military uniforms for Sudanese army and also export its uniforms to other countries, including Qatar, Turkey, Kenya, Somalia , Chad and other countries.<sup>12</sup>

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani met, at his Emiri Diwan office on April 30, 2017, with Minister of Defense of Sudan, Lieutenant General Awad Mohamed Ahmed Ibn Auf. During the meeting, they reviewed fraternal relations and ways of developing them.<sup>13</sup>

One example of military cooperation between the two countries is the joint training conducted by Turkish military ships carrying 700 military personnel with their Sudanese counterparts in Port Sudan harbor, the Red Sea, in June 2015.<sup>14</sup>

Turkish National Police Forces provide various training courses every year to Sudanese police officers in the framework of the security cooperation between the two countries. Up to now more than 3800 Sudanese officers trained by Turkish National Police.<sup>15</sup>

### **Turkey will rebuild a ruined Ottoman port city at Suakin**

Turkey will rebuild a ruined Ottoman port city at Suakin on Sudan's Red Sea coast and construct a naval dock to maintain civilian and military vessels.<sup>16</sup>

The ancient Red Sea Suakin port was located in strategic location close to Makkah & Madinah. Suakin was Sudan's major harbor when it was ruled by the Ottoman Empire and Ottoman forces used to use this sea port to secure Ottoman Empire's Hejaz province. Over the last century, Suakin port went out of operation after Port Sudan had been constructed 60 km to the north.<sup>17</sup>

The restoration at Suakin was agreed during a visit to the ancient port by Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan said Turkey had been temporarily granted part of Suakin so it could rebuild the area as a tourist site and a transit point for pilgrims crossing the Red Sea to Mecca.<sup>18</sup>

The possibility of Turkey using the Island for military purposes remains unclear.

### **The Qatar connection**

Like in Somalia, Qatar's actions in Sudan are aligned with those of Turkey. In the wake of the rapprochement between Ankara and Khartoum, Doha agreed with the Sudanese government three months after Erdogan's visit to finance a \$4 billion plan to develop and manage the port of Suakin.

The project, planned to be completed in 2020, is conceived as a logical extension of Turkey's development of a naval facility in Suakin.<sup>19</sup>

### **Summary**

Turkey is seeking to expand Turkey's influence beyond the Middle East to Africa in a bid to transform Turkey from the regional power into a sort of neo-Ottoman Empire. Turkey has a host of motivations to extend its presence and influence in Africa from cultural to economic, military and geopolitical.

Over the past decade, Turkey has been steadily raising its profile in Africa, including in some of the most troubled countries on the continent such as Somalia and Sudan.

Turkey's use of soft power instruments such as humanitarian and development aid programs supports its aim of increasing economic and strategic relations with African countries.

Turkey's primary motivation for stronger relations with African countries is economic. Africa has natural resources that Turkey needs for its manufacturing and industrial sectors, including oil and gas, and Africa needs income, infrastructure and jobs for its people.

Erdogan has been trying for a long time to position Turkey as a protecting power for Muslims in Africa and in the whole world. Turkey's credentials as a defender of Muslim heritage are part of the motivation for the Suakin Island restoration project.

Turkey's military presence in Somalia and may be in the future in Sudan are an essential part of Erdogan's strategy combining soft and military powers to promote Turkey's interests in the region. The military presence of Turkey in the sensitive theater of the Red Sea will destabilize the region and deteriorate an already tense political situation between Egypt and Turkey and Sudan.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Shaul Shay, *Somalia in Transition*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, USA, 2014, pp 197 – 198.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Africa central to Turkey's push for new world order, *Daily Sabah*, August 24, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Africa central to Turkey's push for new world order, *Daily Sabah*, August 24, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Alon Ben-Meir, Albania must choose between the EU and Turkey, *Jerusalem Post*, February 5, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Hicham Mourad, The scramble for the Red Sea, *Al Ahram Weekly*, Issue 1413, (11 - 17 October 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Sudan, Turkey agrees to increase trade exchange to \$1 billion, *Sudan Tribune*, December 24, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Ali Kucukgocmen, Khalid Abdelaziz, Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval dock, *Reuters*, December 26, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Sudan, Turkey agrees to increase trade exchange to \$1 billion, *Sudan Tribune*, December 24, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Turkey, Qatar, Sudan defense ministers meet in Sudan, *Pakistan Observer*, January 9, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Sudan president, Qatar's Defense Minister open Sur clothing factory, *Gulf Times*, January 9, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Turkey, Qatar, Sudan defense ministers meet in Sudan, *Pakistan Observer*, January 9, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> HH the Emir Meets Sudan's Defense Minister, *Tribune*, April 30, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Horizons of Sudanese-Turkish Relations, the Sudanese Media Center, December 25, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Relations between Turkey and Sudan, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>16</sup> Ali Kucukgocmen, Khalid Abdelaziz, Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval dock, *Reuters*, December 26, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Turkey Temporarily Granted Ancient Ottoman Red Sea Port in Sudan for Rebuilding, *Sputnik*, December 26, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Ali Kucukgocmen, Khalid Abdelaziz, Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval dock, *Reuters*, December 26, 2017.

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<sup>19</sup> Hicham Mourad, The scramble for the Red Sea, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue 1413, (11 - 17 October 2018).