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Turkey and the stormy waters of the Horn of Africa

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Turkey is a key ally and a major donor of the Somali government in efforts to rebuild the country after decades of conflict and famine. Turkey and Somalia signed a Defense and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement in February 2024 during Somali defense and energy ministers visit to Ankara. Turkey will send an exploration vessel off the coast of Somalia and a naval task force to protect the Somali waters.¹

The accord marks a new step in the strengthening ties between Ankara and Mogadishu. Following the ratification of the agreement, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud stated that Turkey is “the only country that has expressed its willingness to help Somalia protect its territorial waters, exploit its resources, and rehabilitate the Somali navy”.²

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

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of neo-Ottoman Empire. *Ankara seeks to increase its influence in the Horn of Africa to counter Egypt and Gulf rivals like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.*³

Turkey has traditionally maintained good relations with the African continent. 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.⁴

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan was the first non-African leader to visit Somalia in nearly 20 years when he traveled there in 2011, as Turkey's prime minister.⁵ Turkey has been very active in Somalia since 2011, helping the country strengthen its public institutions and infrastructures and alleviate a severe famine.

According to the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs, Ankara has provided more than \$1 billion in aid to Somalia since 2011 for a variety of projects in the health and education sectors, municipal services, and infrastructure projects. Turkish companies are also active in Somalia and manage the seaport and international airport of the Somali capital.⁶

The energy agreement

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said on January 20, 2020 that Somalia had invited Turkey to explore for oil in its seas. Speaking to reporters on his flight back from a Libya summit in Berlin, Erdogan said Turkey would take steps in line with the Somali invitation. "There is an offer from Somalia. They are saying: 'There is oil in our seas. You are carrying

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out these operations with Libya, but you can also do them here.' This is very important for us," Erdogan was cited as saying by NTV. "Therefore, there will be steps that we will take in our operations there."⁷

Turkey and Somalia signed on February 8, 2024, an offshore energy cooperation accord. The accord was signed in Istanbul by Turkish Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar and his Somali counterpart. Bayraktar said the two countries would carry out joint activities in the country's internal waters and offshore blocks to allow Somali people to reach hydrocarbon resources.⁸

Some foreign media outlets reported that Turkey will extract oil and gas from Somali territorial waters for 10 years and Turkish companies will handle all installations and industries provided for in the agreement, otherwise, Somalia will need Ankara's permission to cooperate with non-Turkish firms.⁹

Ankara will send an exploration vessel off the coast of Somalia to search for oil and gas as part of a hydrocarbon cooperation deal between two countries. The Turkish research vessel, Oruç Reis, owned by the General Directorate of Mineral Research and Exploration in Ankara, will carry out research for a few months to identify exploration, drilling and oil discoveries. It will carry a 50-person crew along with five support vessels to Somalia.¹⁰

Turkey is set to send a naval task force to the Somali waters to safeguard the coast and territorial waters of Somalia. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan submitted a motion to the Turkish parliament late on July 19, 2024, seeking authorization for the deployment of Turkish military to Somalia including the country's territorial waters.¹¹

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The defense agreement

On February 8, 2024, Turkish Defense Minister Yasar Guler and his Somali counterpart, Abdulkadir Mohamed Nur, signed in Ankara a comprehensive framework agreement for economic and military cooperation between Turkey and Somalia.¹²

According to the Turkish defense ministry the agreement came at the request of the Mogadishu government – aims to support Somalia and help it to protect itself from external threats, terrorism, piracy and illegal fishing.

Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud said “the agreement aims to establish a joint force from both countries to safeguard the coast and territorial waters of Somalia and invest in Somalia’s maritime resources for 10 years. This joint force will be active for 10 years only. After that, Somalia will have its own naval force to perform this task.”¹³

Turkey will construct and sell ships to Somalia and Turkey will help Mogadishu to establish Somali coast guard forces. The Turkish navy will have full rights to use existing Somali ports and establish new ports and naval bases.¹⁴ On February 21, 2024, the Somali cabinet ratified the military cooperation agreement with Turkey.

The Turkish military base in Somalia

Since 2017 Somalia has been home to the largest Turkish military base overseas, and Turkey provides training and military support for Somalia in its fight with al-Shabab and other armed groups.

In September 2017, Turkey opened its military base in the Somali capital, the TURKSOM Military Training Center, massively strengthening its presence in East Africa. The construction of the training camp began in

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March 2015, at the cost of \$50 million. The training camp occupies 400 hectares in Mogadishu. It houses three military schools, dormitories, and depots. It has the capacity to train more than 1,500 troops at any one time, by Turkish military officers. Turkey has deployed 200 officers and soldiers as trainers and to provide the compound with security. The first batch of Turkish military personnel arrived in Mogadishu in August 2017 to commence the training program for the Somali national army.

The Gorgor Brigade - Gorgor ('The Eagles') is the Somali commando force trained by Turkish military assistance, both in Somalia and in Turkey. Turkey has committed itself to train and equipping at least 5000 special forces to strengthen the Somali National Army (NSA). As of September 2020, about 2 500 troops or 5 infantry battalions of the Gorgor brigade had been trained in Somalia (TURKSOM base in Mogadishu) and in Turkey. On August 24, 2020, Turkey delivered 12 off-road vehicles to Somalia. The vehicles are used by Somalia's Gorgor unit.¹⁵

The supply of basic infantry small arms

Turkey has supplied the SNA with Turkish-made H&K G3 battle rifle (probably the Turkish MKEK variant), the M2 Browning heavy machine gun and the MPT-76 battle rifle.

The MPT-76 is the new standard rifle of the Turkish army with production shared between the state-owned manufacturer MKEK and other privately-owned enterprises.

In 2023, Turkey provided Somalia's federal ministry of defense a shipment of 100 handguns —Girsan MC28SA pistols.¹⁶

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“Kirpi”- armored vehicle

Aside from basic infantry small arms Turkish armored vehicles have also been supplied to Somalia. On August 24, 2020, Turkey delivered to Somalia 12 Turkish-made Kirpi armored vehicles and another 12 utility trucks.

The Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) “Kirpi” is the first fully armored vehicle owned by SNA.¹⁷

The "Kirpi" is manufactured by Turkish vehicle manufacturer BMC Otomotiv Sanayi ve Ticaret. The "Kirpi" can be armed with a 7.62mm or 12.7mm machine gun. The vehicle offers protection from armor-piercing rounds, mines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and other ballistic threats.¹⁸

The delivery of the vehicles to Somalia was part of bilateral military and financial cooperation agreements. Somali Defense Minister Hassan Ali Mohamed and Somali armed forces commander Gen. Odawa Yusuf Rageh received the donation at a ceremony held in the capital Mogadishu on August 27, 2020. Turkish Ambassador to Somalia Mehmet Yilmaz and other Somali government officials also attended the ceremony.¹⁹

Drones

Intelligence obtained by the UN investigators indicated that Turkey delivered Bayraktar TB2 drones to Mogadishu on December 6, 2021 via two Airbus A400M military cargo planes operated by the Turkish Air Force.²⁰

The Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones have joined Somalia's offensive against the militant group al-Shabaab in October 2022. Somalia's federal

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government confirmed reports that the armed drones produced by Turkish company Bayktar are active in Somalia.

Turkey's move to provide drone's air support to the SNA has not come as a surprise, given Ankara's immense military presence in the country and its efforts to increase its foothold in the Horn of Africa and beyond.²¹

Somalia's interior minister, Ahmed Malim Fiqi, said Turkey's drones are providing aerial combat and military reconnaissance and Turkish drone operators are closely coordinating with Somali commanders.²²

UN investigators claimed that Turkey violated international sanctions on Somalia by supplying armed drones without notification to and approval of the UN. In response to letters of inquiry from the UN, Turkey claimed it had delivered the drones to a Turkish base in Mogadishu and that the goal was to contribute to the fight against terrorism.²³

Turkey and Al Shabaab

In a statement, Al-Shabaab has voiced its rejection of the agreements between Somalia and Turkey, deeming it null and a means of expanding Ankara's domination in the region.²⁴

The Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujahideen, or Al-Shabaab, (Movement of Warrior Youth), is the branch of Al Qaeda in the Horn of Africa. Al-Shabaab seeks to overthrow the government in Somalia and to establish an Islamic emirate ruled by a strict version of Shariah law. It regularly targets security forces and government officials. Bystanders are regularly killed or wounded by its indiscriminate bombing attacks. Al-Shabaab opposes the presence of foreign troops and regularly attacks foreign interests and peacekeepers in the region including Turkish military and civilian targets.

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For al-Shabaab, Turkey is an unwelcome actor, helping the Somali government fight the group. It seems unsurprising, then, that Turkey has become a major enemy.

The Somalia – Ethiopia tension

The Defense and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement between Somalia and Turkey came amid growing tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia over a deal Addis Ababa signed with the breakaway region of Somaliland.

The Somali government felt threatened after Ethiopia signed the Berbera Port agreement with Somaliland in early 2024. This agreement allows Addis Ababa to rent a land route from Ethiopia to the Red Sea along the coastline of Somaliland and use Berbera Port for 50 years in exchange for Addis Ababa's recognition of the independence of Somaliland.²⁵

Somalia staunchly rejected the deal, under which Ethiopia reportedly pledged to recognize Somaliland's independence in return for access to the Red Sea through a port in the breakaway region. The Ethiopia-Somaliland deal prompted the Mogadishu government to declare Ethiopia an "enemy," stoking fears of an armed conflict between the two regional countries.

On January 4, 2024, the Turkish government said in a statement that "Ankara follows with concern the signing of an agreement between Somaliland and Ethiopia to establish land roads and build a port. Ankara reaffirms the need to protect Somali territorial integrity, respect of the international law, the settlement of disputes between Somalia and Somaliland through diplomatic dialogue."

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Summary

Turkey has built up a modern navy and a fleet of energy research ships and expands its navy's so-called "blue-water" capabilities.²⁶ The Somali deal comes as a part of Turkish military capabilities expansion in the maritime domain— both in protecting its own exclusive economic zones and waters, while also helping its allies in Libya and Cyprus.

Somalia is a critical springboard for Turkey's efforts to deepen its footprint in the Horn of Africa and beyond as Ankara has been seeking to increase its influence in the continent. Somalia has a 3,000-kilometers coastline near the strategic Bab Al Mandeb strait and Turkey has found in Mogadishu's request for military support a key opportunity to boost its influence and military presence in the strategic Horn of Africa region.

Somalia is believed to have major oil and gas reserves both on land and within its territorial waters. Turkey could reap key economic benefits if oil and gas reserves are discovered along the Somali coast.

The Horn of Africa is already one of the tensest regions in the world. In recent months, the Horn of Africa and the southern Red Sea region have become the scene of a series of tensions that have led to international concern that the situation there could spiral out of control.

The current Red Sea crisis –started after the Houthi rebels in Yemen attacked Israel by drones and cruise missiles and ballistic missiles and attacked the international maritime traffic in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden under the pretext of supporting Hamas in Gaza as a part of the Iranian axis of resistance. The US leading a multinational naval task force to protect the freedom of maritime traffic in the region and the US and

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Britain have launched military strikes on the Houthis in response to the attacks.²⁷

The agreement between Turkey and Somalia come amid mounting fears that a military escalation between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu could further destabilize the region. *The possibility of Turkey becoming an active security actor in the Gulf of Aden is a source of concern for various regional actors and viewed as a threat to the stability of the region.*

Notes:

¹ Turkey to send navy to Somalia after agreeing oil and gas search, Al Arabiya, July 20, 2024.

² Abdolgader Mohamed Ali, will the Turkey-Somalia defense deal fuel Red Sea tensions? The new Arab, March 5, 2024.

³ Erdogan says Somalia has invited Turkey to explore for oil in its seas: NTV, Ahram online, January 20, 2020.

⁴ Shaul Shay, Somalia in Transition, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, USA, 2014, pp 197 – 198.

⁵ Africa central to Turkey's push for new world order, Daily Sabah, August 24, 2018.

⁶ Abdolgader Mohamed Ali, will the Turkey-Somalia defense deal fuel Red Sea tensions? The new Arab, March 5, 2024.

⁷ Erdogan says Somalia has invited Turkey to explore for oil in its seas: NTV, Ahram online, January 20, 2020.

⁸ After defense deal, Turkey and Somalia ink energy accord amid Somaliland tensions, Al Monitor, March 7, 2024.

⁹ The Turkish-Somali Agreement: a calculated adventure or a Step into the unknown? EPC, April 5 2024.

¹⁰ Turkey signs agreement for oil exploration in Somalia, Offshore Technology, July 19, 2024.

¹¹ Turkey to send navy to Somalia after agreeing oil and gas search, Arab news, July 20,2024.

¹² Turkey, Somalia sign agreement on defense, economic cooperation, Anadolu Agency, February 9, 2024.

¹³ The Turkish-Somali agreement: a calculated adventure or a Step into the unknown? EPC, April 5 2024.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Turkey donates 12 military vehicles to Somalia, Hurriyet daily news, August 28, 2020.

¹⁶ Handguns provided by Turkey to Somali government are traded on open arms market in Mogadishu, Horn observer, April 11, 2023.

¹⁷ Kazim Abdul, Turkey donates Kirpi armored vehicle and utility trucks to Somalia, Military Africa, August 28, 2020.

¹⁸ Turkey donates 12 military vehicles to Somalia, Hurriyet daily news, August 28, 2020.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ UN says Turkey violated arms embargo by sending drones to Somalia, Nordic monitor, April 26, 2023.

²¹ Somalia: Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 drones join offensive against al-Shabab, Middle East Eye, October 1, 2022.

²² Ibid.

²³ UN says Turkey violated arms embargo by sending drones to Somalia, Nordic monitor, April 26, 2023.

²⁴ The Turkish-Somali Agreement: a calculated adventure or a step into the unknown? EPC, April 5, 2024.

²⁵ Ibid.

The Turkish-Somali Agreement: a calculated adventure or a step into the unknown? EPC, April 5 ,2024.

²⁶ The ability to operate on the open oceans, far from the country's home ports.

²⁷ Abdolgader Mohamed Ali, will the Turkey-Somalia defense deal fuel Red Sea tensions? The new Arab, March 5, 2024.