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New players on the block: Turkey in the dash for Africa

Background

France, the United States (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and Russia are not newcomers to the African strategic landscape where own interest and that of African regions and countries are in constant rise and decline. Although Russia waned in the recent past and the USA regularly indicate a desire to [shrink its African footprint](#), world realities are somewhat different and contraction of one power often leads to expansion of another. While this appears relevant to the US, UK, French, Russian and Chinese presence in Africa, current dynamics on the continent reflect roles of often neglected players as well. One such player that is growing its African influence is Turkey.

Discussion

After a long absence, Russia re-entered the African continent in a more aggressive posture with its presence characterised by [hard security initiatives](#) built around weapons packages, security consultancy and backing rulers in Sudan, South Sudan, Libya and the Central African Republic with coercive instruments such as military advisors and arms. Russia also follows in the wake of other actors and now often employ Wagner linked private security personnel to lower its military visibility. Russia's military presence reaches down into Southern Africa and even South Africa as demonstrated by their Wagner-based intrusion into [northern Mozambique](#) and a brief naval and airpower display in [South Africa](#) during November 2019. China's approach is more nuanced with its security profile masked by extensive soft security initiatives largely woven around aid packages, infrastructure development and [peace support contingents](#) on land and [anti-piracy patrols](#) in the Gulf of Aden. Much of the foreign presence clusters around the Horn of Africa and in [Djibouti](#) in particular. This trend did not go unnoticed by Arab countries willing to flex their foreign interest and military muscles.

While the above is perhaps not unfamiliar and regularly portrayed in the media as a power competition between established, rising and returning big powers to Africa, the role of Turkey is underplayed. Turkey's entry into the African scene showed in the Horn of Africa region alongside, but not as a member of the [Saudi-led Coalition](#) fighting in Yemen. Initially the Turkish presence revealed a close affiliation with Qatar who disengaged from the Saudi coalition under the cloud of supporting terrorism. Turkey initially premised its role in Africa upon [economic aid](#), rather than military backing. The latter soon became apparent with the opening of a [military base in Mogadishu](#) following in the

wake of the withdrawal of the United Arab Emirates. The Somali drive features alongside Turkey's perceptions of a new economic zone of interest accentuated by the intense clustering of foreign powers in the Red Sea region.

A more recent and perhaps disturbing Turkish venture into Africa is in North Africa. The [Turkish-Libyan cooperation](#) rests upon two drivers. First, military support from Turkey to the Tripoli government faction and second, maritime cooperation pinned upon reciprocal support of Libya's UN-backed Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli for brusque Turkish maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean holding real potential to upset or further strain relations with [Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt](#) and Italy. As of 2020 Turkey is preparing to deploy combat support forces to Libya which sets a different tone to its initial economic and aid driven grounding for entering the African scene. A combat deployment is bound to up the ante in Libya, increase existing tensions off the African coast on the Mediterranean where Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt are not bound to idly watch as Turkey reinforces its claims on large ocean tracts and energy resources located in the [eastern Mediterranean](#) and in Libya.

Although much of the reporting on Turkish and Libya refers to NATO, the European Union (EU) and Greek dissatisfaction, African interests are at stake as well. First, another aggressive [military entry](#) into the Libyan cauldron is uncalled for. Second, more foreign military aid and soldiers risks prolonging a conflict. The Haftar-led forces of the Libyan national Army (supported by Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE) are opposing the UN-supported Tripoli GNU, but with little progress to resolve the ongoing political deadlock. Third, Africa can ill-afford a third destabilised maritime zone off its coast if the Turkish maritime claims are settled in a confrontation or blockades at sea over resources, sea lanes of communication and maritime infrastructure. Fourth, Turkey seems to view Libya as a theatre to test or market its defence industry products, and showcase its military in Africa as a Turkish foreign policy instrument. Fifth, the Libyan deployment holds the potential of setting up Turkish military forces in Africa against [Russian regular and irregular contingents](#), or even fellow Muslim countries including some from Africa. Sixth, if the pending armed posturing turns on energy access, the array of actors could well define their interests as vital and defend them with military force in Libya and the adjacent oceans territory. Perceptions of a military victory in Libya for the GNU could also place Turkey in a strong position for energy deals and contracts regarding reconstruction – a disturbing outlook of [military destruction as a catalyst for future contracts](#) on the territory of a weakly governed African country.

Conclusions

Media outlets, analysts and commentators label Africa as a lucrative continent harbouring markets, labour, resources and geostrategic landscapes of interest to international players. Such depictions also tend to prioritise certain international actors as main players – whether as constructive or destructive agents manoeuvring on selected African landscapes. In this vein, players like Turkey frequently operate below the media radar. Turkey nonetheless harbours strong national ambitions, interests and a willingness to grow and use its military muscle at sea and on land alongside economic instruments, national goals and eventual gains in weakly governed African states – a drive not unlike that of known big power actors competing in the 21st century dash for Africa.

Further Reading:

Thiessen, C. & A. Özerdem. Turkey in Somalia: challenging North/Western interventionism. *Third World Quarterly* 40/11. 2019. pp. 1976-1995.

Venkatachalam, M. Turkey in Africa: Voyeurism, Neo-Ottomanism and Islamic Humanitarianism. ASC Working Paper 145/2019. Africa Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands.

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