

## ***Turkey in Africa: Lessons in Political Economy***

***Brendon J. Cannon***<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Turkey's relatively recent engagement with sub-Saharan Africa has been the subject of debate among scholars and policymakers. Various attempts have been made to answer questions such as "Why Africa?" and "Why now?", but these have largely ignored two key variables explaining Turkey's foray: structural/political economy factors within Turkey and within various African states; and African reactions to Turkey's engagement. Using a comparative approach and by exploring the African side of the equation as well as deconstructing the contours of Turkey's engagement with Kenya and Somalia, I argue that Turkey's commitment of resources to Africa has been positively shaped by six key factors. These are the timing of Ankara's initial engagement; the capacity for risk of the Turkish government and businesses; Turkish products and expertise; the projection of Turkish 'soft power'; generally positive or unformed views of Turkey in Africa given its lack of imperial baggage; and Turkey's highly coordinated and unilateral approach to engagement with African states and leaders, which generally eschews entanglements with international organisations or other alliances. These factors are crucial to understanding Turkey's nascent successes in sub-Saharan Africa, but certain political, economic and social factors – if left unaddressed – could spoil what currently seems a mutually beneficial engagement. Should Turkey positively address these deficiencies and better understand Africa and Africans in the process, it could become an indispensable partner, not only for Kenya and Somalia, but potentially for much of eastern and southern Africa.

***Keywords:*** *Political Economy, Turkey, Soft Power, Sub-Saharan Africa, International Relations, Somalia, Trade, Kenya, Security, Balance of Trade.*

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<sup>1</sup> *PhD. Assistant Professor, Khalifa University, Institute of International & Civil Security (IICS), Abu Dhabi, UAE. Email: brendon.cannon@kustar.ac.ae.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Republic of Turkey's projection of power in Africa has met with a largely positive reception inside and outside of Africa. Though Turkey's decision to engage with Africa stretches back 20 years, it is under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AK Party (AKP) that the real drive began and has produced positive dividends. Yet the drivers of Turkey as a rising power in Africa remain ephemeral and ill defined. So too are answers to questions concerning why Turkey's engagement with Africa is novel and asking what can Turkey do to capitalise on its recent successes and its status globally as a rising power.

Using the cases of Somalia and Kenya, I argue that Turkey's unilateral, highly coordinated approach to sub-Saharan Africa – utilising both the hard and soft power tools at its disposal – may be replicated elsewhere on the continent. Should Turkey adopt the same unilateral, highly coordinated approach to taking risks as it has in Somalia and, to a lesser extent, in Kenya, Turkey may increasingly be viewed as an 'essential power' beyond its immediate neighbourhood. The implications for both Turkey and Africa are potentially far-reaching. Turkey's position could shift from being primarily humanitarian and economic to more political, offering a third option as a strategic and diplomatic partner to African states or regional blocs. African states such as Ethiopia and Somalia could cooperate increasingly with Turkey in financial, security, and diplomatic developments both internal and external to their states and Africa, thus bypassing other partners whose efforts and aid often are deemed to come with negative fiscal burdens, such as China (Alves, 2013), or internal meddling by the likes of the US, the European Union, or the UK (Alden & Barber, 2015). This is possible because African views and opinions regarding Turkey in general are either nascent or positive, particularly given the example of Turkey's role in Somalia (Özerdem, 2013; Ankomah, 2016). This contrasts with African views of China and the US, for example (Ali, 2011). Furthermore, many African leaders are currently looking at alternative political and economic partners beyond those traditionally found in the East and West (Cannon, 2016b).

Section I of this article explores Turkey's efforts in Somalia. Section II compares and contrasts these efforts with those of Turkey in Kenya. Though

geographic neighbours, I have attempted to compare Somalia and Kenya using a ‘most different’ comparative analytical approach, and I hope the results prove more reliable and valid than a ‘most similar’ approach. The results should also be generalisable – at least on a surface level – to other Horn of Africa and East African countries, and perhaps to Anglophone African states and states such as Ethiopia that did not experience significant periods of colonialism. Section III explores avenues of potential promise as well as pitfalls affecting the current Turkey-Africa relationship. Section IV concludes the paper by offering basic policy prescriptions by looking at current and potential risks beyond security for both Turkey and its African partners.

### **TURKEY AND SOMALIA**

The results of Turkey’s development and diplomatic efforts in Somalia are striking. Turkey has only been involved in Somalia since 2011, yet it can point to a string of successes, physical edifices, and an arguably outsized presence in the country (Harper, 2013). Turkey’s overall efforts in Somalia and its projection of soft power in the forms of money, trade, in-kind donations, infrastructure rehabilitation, and development projects have met a positive reception inside and outside of Somalia. In my analysis of Turkey’s efforts in Somalia, I argue that Turkey’s timing, capacity for risk, products and expertise on offer, soft power assets, and ability to effectively project this power, as well as a coordinated and unilateral approach, have paid dividends for Turkey on the humanitarian, diplomatic, economic, security, and political fronts, leading to its increased status as a rising power (Cannon, 2016a). In addition, Turkey’s lack of historical and political baggage in the eastern Africa region has been a net positive. That is, while many studies have cited Turkey’s Ottoman past as a partial impetus for Turkey’s engagement in Somalia (International Crisis Group, 2012), for example, I argue that this is decidedly not the case. Rather, Turkey’s status as an unknown quantity in the region has smoothed its acceptance as an emerging power and viable, alternative partner (Cannon, 2016a, p. 105). In order to offer further analysis and understanding, I explicate the variables behind Turkey’s foray into and successes in Somalia below.

## **Timing**

It is impossible to understand Turkey's successes in Somalia if one ignores when Turkey became involved in Somalia. Turkey fortuitously waded into Somalia in late 2011. In this the Turks were blessed with good timing, even though dabbling in what is considered the world's prime example of a failed state necessarily carries great risk. However, Turkey's involvement happened at a time when, by most estimates, the threat of terrorism had ebbed in large parts of Somalia, in particular in Mogadishu (Tran, 2011). Furthermore, a new famine crisis brought Somalia back to international headlines. Thus, Turkey was able to put in place positive, coordinated actions that brought relief and long-term commitments because the security situation allowed for such operations. Correspondingly, with Somalia again in the news for negative reasons, Turkey's successful efforts were understood locally and internationally as proactive and positive (Lough, 2012). Turkey succeeded not only where so many others had failed but also succeeded quickly. If Turkey had embarked on its foray into Somalia 10 years earlier when the security situation was dire, it is safe to say that its ability to achieve success would have been severely curtailed.

## **Somali resilience**

With the election of the Somali Federal Government (SFG), the first in over 30 years,<sup>2</sup> Turkey was blessed with willing partners who had a mandate to rule and distribute resources until well into 2016. In addition, intrepid Turkish businesses found willing partners in Somalia. Though a bit cliché, trade and entrepreneurship are considered by many to be the lifeblood of the Somali people and have flourished in many areas during the last two decades in spite of the instability, terrorism, and lack of infrastructure (Nenova, 2004). Given the relative peace and stability dating from late 2011, a relatively stable government, and the entrepreneurship of Somalis, the access to cash inflows and technology have increased, thus easing Turkey's transition into Somalia.

## **Capacity for risk**

Turkey is now viewed globally as a political and diplomatic rising power largely because of the risks it has taken in Mogadishu and its subsequent successes (Kubicek, Dal, & Oğuzlu, 2016; Çağaptay, 2013). It is important

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<sup>2</sup> *The previous, post-civil war governments were transitional and referred to as the Transitional Federal Governments (TFGs) of Somalia.*

to note that much of the literature involving Turkey's role in Somalia has argued that Turkey found virgin territory in Somalia; i.e. a lack of interested actors (Heaton, 2012; Sezgin & Dijkzeul, 2015; Linehan, 2013). In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, I argue that the presence of too many interested actors with competing aims has contributed to the protracted crisis in Somalia (Cannon, 2016a, p. 114-115). Yet, herein lies the positive nature of Turkey's role in Somalia. That is, in order to involve itself in Somalia, Turkish political and business leaders needed a large appetite for risk, realising that the potential payback could be significant. I hypothesise that the economic rationale for risk among Turkish businesses, particularly the so-called Anatolian Tigers, is a result of Turkey's foray into northern Iraq over the past decade and, prior to that, in Central Asia (Cannon, 2016a, p. 106). In learning to quickly play the 'Somalia game' like other actors, it has gained access to Somalia's leaders and grabbed up lucrative contracts in the process, but it has also proceeded to positively add to Somalia's economic and social capacity. This has been done by building of roads and hospitals, running the port and airport, offering international air connections, and overseeing a series of robust humanitarian efforts. It has also come in the form of hard power assets and cooperation, including troop training (Wasuge, 2016) and the building of Turkey's first military base in Africa in Somalia (Knodell, 2016).

### **Products and expertise**

The risks taken by Turkey in Somalia have translated into the form of greater potential Somali dependence on Turkish goods, expertise, and services. Somalia has become a destination for Turkish goods and services, to include construction material, medical equipment, education development and schools, engineering expertise, and household items that range from teapots to clothing. And the Turkish presence is ubiquitous. According to one Somali resident, "Turkey has become the McDonald's of Mogadishu. Their flags are everywhere, just like the yellow arches of McDonald's are everywhere in America" (Harper, 2013, p. 164). Additionally, expertise in the form of engineering, management, medicine, education, and security (military and counterterrorism) has been largely welcomed given the high demand for such readily-available services in Somalia ("Turkey finalizes", 2016).

### **Soft power**

Turkey's pragmatism in Somalia leads it to simultaneously pursue self-interested goals (prestige as a rising power) as well as furthering its business interests. But it also has led Turkey to deploy an array of soft power approaches, from educational opportunities for Somalis to diplomatic fraternity to humanitarian actions (Özkan, 2012, p. 22). Indeed, some have argued that Turkish policy in Somalia vis-à-vis soft power represents a unique model and therefore a promising break from the traditional mold of conducting foreign policy in Africa by more traditional East/West partners such as China and the US (Camacho, 2016).

### **Lack of baggage**

Turkey's Ottoman past and Muslim identity have been raised as major variables driving Turkey's engagement with Somalia. To the contrary, I argue that it is Turkey's distinct lack of politico-historical baggage – particularly its lack of an imperial/colonial past – in eastern Africa that partially explains Turkey's rapid successes in the region, from Somalia to Ethiopia to Kenya. On the economic front, Turkey generally eschews something many Africans resent: free market capitalist baggage aimed at securing the best agreement, regardless of cost (Özkan, 2008).

### **Coordinated and unilateral approach**

A recurring theme in relation to Turkey's presence in Somalia is the need for coordination of its efforts with other international and regional actors (International Crisis Group, 2012). According to this logic, coordination and cooperation are the only means of ensuring Turkey's overall and continued success in Somalia. My analysis of the situation in Somalia leads to the opposite conclusion. That is, Turkey's success in Somalia is precisely because it has chosen to act in a unilateral and highly coordinated fashion. Indeed, it is precisely because the international community is at cross-purposes in Somalia that so much money has been wasted on policies that counteract one another (Hearn, & Zimmerman, 2014; Farah, & Handa, 2016). The multiplicity of actors lacking a coherent vision or the veneer of coordination has arguably done more damage to Somalia than anything else. As Özkan (2014, p. 50) states:

While Turkey's interest in Somalia has brought it into international

spotlight, the interest that has been shown by the international community has been nothing more than ‘pseudo acts of kindness’ towards Somalia. To this day, the international community has been reluctant to solve any of Somalia’s long-standing problems.

It is a testament to the disjointed, competing, and ultimately ineffective nature of the work done by hundreds of stakeholders in Somalia over the past quarter of a century that Turkey has found fertile ground for its development projects, business interests, educational endeavours, and military agreements. Indeed, though I argue that Turkey’s reasons for engaging with Somalia ultimately rest on burnishing its image by raising its international prestige and making money, Turkey’s activity is largely welcome precisely because it is effective in areas where so many others fail (Cannon, 2016a, p. 100). It can be argued that the current unilateral nature of its engagement in Somalia is precisely the reason for Turkey’s relative gains vis-à-vis other stakeholders. It also rests on the coordination of Turkish efforts. It also rests on the coordination of Turkish efforts. These involve not only the Turkish Foreign Ministry, the Turkish Health Ministry, the Religious Affairs Directorate, the Turkish Red Crescent, and other government entities, but NGOs such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İnsani Yardım Vakfı/İHH). Smaller groups like Dost Eller (Friendly Hands), which offers civil society assistance also operate in Somalia. The efforts and actions of these stakeholders are coordinated from Ankara by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) (Bingöl, 2013; Özkan, 2014, p. 35-46).

Turkey may justifiably be criticised for some of the ways it prosecutes business in Somalia (“İçi para dolu”, 2014). However, I argue that Turkey is only doing what other regional and international actors have been doing in Somalia for decades. The key difference is that Turkey, unlike other external actors, has attempted to assuage Somalia’s current problems on the social, economic, and political fronts. It has shown less interest in an attempt to craft expensive, long-term solutions that are short on detail and involve the usual suspects of foreign-funded civil society organisations, NGOs, and consultancies. These result in conferences and policy papers but rarely offer anything concrete such as medical facilities or roads. Because of its efforts, Turkey is now viewed as a peacemaker in Africa and, to some,

as a saviour to Somalia (Gullo, 2012). Turkey is also considered by many as an honest broker in the Horn of Africa. Turkey and Turkish businesses are regarded favourably, at least by Somali stakeholders who engineered Turkey's control of the airport and port. Furthermore, Turkey is close enough geographically to be considered a friendly power by Somalis but far enough away to remain aloof in a way that the Arab states, Ethiopians, and Kenyans cannot.

Given the current climate of corruption, the competing goals of regional and international players, and the inability of the government to broadcast its power beyond portions of Mogadishu, it is politically and economically savvy for Turkey to act in a unilateral, highly coordinated fashion and carve out its own sphere of influence in Somalia and the wider region. By exploiting the status quo in Somalia, Turkey has helped itself as well as Somalia in some visible cases.

### **TURKEY AND KENYA**

The case of Kenya differs from that of Somalia in a number of ways. First, Kenya is not considered a failed state. Indeed, Kenya is viewed as a robust African state and one that offers a strategic gateway to East Africa given the importance of its port, roads, and rail networks as well as its economic clout. Second, Kenya attracts a variety of economic and political actors and has been firmly in the West's camp since independence. Third, Kenya has reciprocated Turkey's charm offensive on the political and economic levels. The contrast with Somalia is indeed stark, given its history of instability and inability to broadcast power effectively throughout the entire state. Fourth, though Kenya presents unique opportunities and challenges vis-à-vis Turkey, nowhere near the appetite for risk is needed to invest political and economic capital in Kenya when compared with elsewhere in East Africa and the Horn. Correspondingly, less risk also may mean less visibility and lower returns. For example, no one outside Nairobi and Ankara discusses Turkey's pivotal role in Kenya the way they do in Somalia.

A combination of domestic and international factors as well as leadership in both countries undergird increasing Turkish-Kenyan relations (Cannon, 2016b). Indeed, the relationship is best explained through an analysis of

the foreign policies of both countries and, in particular, a combination of international factors and domestic constraints rather than systemic variables, as dominant realist orthodoxy claims (Waltz, 2010). It is submitted that domestic factors including economic, demographic, leadership and geopolitics provide a better rationale for Turkey's budding relationship with Kenya, and vice-versa, than the pure struggle for power in an international system characterised by anarchy and autarky (Snyder, 2002). International relations cannot be de-linked from domestic politics (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2012), and the two always work in tandem in shaping foreign policy (Adnan, 2014). The most compelling explanations for Kenya's relationship with Turkey therefore lie somewhere at the intersection of international relations and comparative politics – and this study draws upon that literature in elucidating that partnership. These factors help explain Turkey's spearheading of a diplomatic, economic and strategic charm offensive that dovetailed with Kenya's search for alternative geo-strategic and trade partners.

I argue that this relationship is driven, on the one hand, by the desire of the leadership in both countries to develop their economies through a search for international markets and development partners and to enhance domestic security and, on the other, to gain international clout and secure international partners outside the traditional East/West paradigm. As economic powerhouses in their respective regions, Kenya and Turkey potentially have much to offer one another – if they manage their nascent relationship well.

As discussed and analysed below, opportunities exist for both to combine their respective, comparative economic and strategic advantages in order to improve their economies and security and expand their diplomatic reach. First, I explore domestic factors; second, international factors; and third, risks, constraints and opportunities.

### **Domestic factors**

Turkey's foray into Kenya and East Africa is indicative of the Erdoğan government's approach to foreign relations in general. That is, foreign relations and outreach are highly personal, often including state visits by Erdoğan himself, as well as the closely coordinated involvement of

a whole suite of Turkish institutions, to include government agencies, NGOs, and businesses (Görener & Ucal, 2011). This has dovetailed nicely with Kenya's own interest in locating new alliances and alternative partners, and Kenya has responded positively to Turkey's overtures under the leadership of both President Kibaki and President Kenyatta, attempting to establish or rejuvenate business ties with non-traditional partners and to attract investment to Kenya from countries like Turkey. Both Kenyatta and Kibaki have also demonstrated a keen interest in finding non-traditional outlets for Kenya's exports (Ochami, 2008). Turkey is correspondingly searching for new markets for its products and has developed a strategy of engaging key countries in Africa along these lines. In this, as in Somalia, I argue that a critical group of supporters of the AKP, the so-called Anatolian Tigers, have played a critical role (Korkut & Civelekoğlu, 2012). Denied for many years of viable opportunity spaces in Turkey, their appetite for risks – first in Central Asia, then Iraq, and now Somalia and East Africa – is supported not only by the AKP but by their own experiences and understanding of working in difficult environments.

### **International factors**

In recent years, Turkey has emerged as an alternative strategic and development partner for Kenya, offering a fresh approach with arguably fewer strings attached than countries such as China and the US. Turkey's interest in Africa is informed by its interest in flexing its political and diplomatic muscles on the world stage commensurate with its new-found confidence and wealth (Harte, 2012). To this end, Turkey views Kenya as a unique and strategic launching pad for the expansion of its strategic interests in the Horn of Africa, East Africa, and beyond. As President Erdoğan noted in 2012, "We have chosen Kenya to be the natural hub and launch pad for our [Turkish] operations due to the country's physical and trade connectivity" (Ngigi, 2012).

In the arena of development, Turkey's focus in Africa on smaller-scale, lower profile development projects such as agriculture offers an alternative to mammoth infrastructure projects grabbed up by more traditional partners from the East or West. This approach is generally welcome and potentially will have a greater effect on the lives of ordinary Africans, to include Kenyans (Daly, 2008). Furthermore, as in the case of Somalia,

Turkey also tends to take a highly coordinated approach in development as well as trade and diplomacy. These efforts are largely coordinated by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA).

### **Risks, constraints, and opportunities**

Both countries will need to gain a greater understanding of one another and address certain constraints and risks in order to capitalise on a mutually beneficial and long-term relationship, to include compromising in areas such as tariffs and export quotas. In the area of trade, Turkey and Kenya need to do more to foment bilateral trade flows. Second, they must manage the current trade deficits between the two countries. Lastly, perceptions of Africa and expectations of Africans in Turkey need to be managed, better understood, and improved. This is also true of Turkey and Africa as a whole.

### **Trade**

The current balance of trade favours Turkey, and Kenyan businesses face barriers to entering the Turkish market. These include taxation and demand. Turkish products are often in high demand in Kenya, particularly manufactured goods. The same cannot be said for Kenyans investing in Turkey. This is because many of the items Kenya plans to export are readily available in Turkey, to include fruit, produce, flowers, and tea. In this respect, Kenya hopes to meet an increasing demand both inside Turkey and in Turkey's near abroad for produce and items that Turkey cannot meet given its current capacity (Mbogo, 2012). To assist Kenya and other African states, Turkey could act proactively in two areas: one, it could lower its import taxes to facilitate the direct export of Kenyan goods; and two, it could allow Kenya to utilise the direct Turkish Airlines flights for its exports and as an alternative trade hub. This would allow Kenya to avoid double taxation, as it currently exports goods to Turkey via European hubs, so it is taxed twice. This is a net positive for Turkey as well, as it would further cement Istanbul's place as a global entrepôt.

### **Tariffs and trade barriers**

On these important fronts, Turkey has taken two proactive steps. First, Turkey made changes to both its applied 'most favoured nation' and preferential tariffs that cumulatively affect nearly nine percent of

manufacturing imports and 10 percent of import product lines. Second, Turkey's cumulative application of temporary trade barrier (TTB) policies – antidumping, safeguards, and countervailing duties – is estimated to have impacted an additional four percent of imports and six percent of product lines (Bown, 2014). These changes were made at the same time that Erdoğan's government was aggressively pursuing new markets for Turkish exports in places like Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Ethiopia. Additionally, other promising areas of cooperation and mutual benefit in Kenya and Turkey as well as potentially in other East African states include oil and mining, manufacturing, renewable energy (Kavaz, 2015), agriculture, and security and counterterrorism (Cannon, 2016b, p. 63).

### **Managing perceptions and expectations**

Turkey is increasingly seen as a viable and even desired partner in Africa. Its successes in Somalia, in particular, have resonated well inside and outside of Africa. Yet these successes risk being erased if a greater understanding of Africa and Africans is not soon in the offing in Turkey. As Özkan presciently noted, “Domestically [in Turkey], the biggest challenge is the lack of understanding of Africa in both policy circles and academia, which remains the case despite more than a decade of engagement with the continent. There continues to be a shortage of African affairs experts in Turkish think tanks and academia” (Özkan, 2016). Offering graduate studies programmes at major universities in Turkey to qualified African students from across the continent and encouraging Turks to study and perform research on Africa may eventually alleviate this deficit. However, negotiating the minefields of African civil society, politicians, and patrimonial, neo-colonial governance throughout much of the continent is fraught with risk. Indeed, I argue that it is not enough for Turks to ‘listen’ to Africans. Rather, an in-depth understanding of particular regions or polities is needed that can substantively discriminate between false and real needs as well as seizing business opportunities that benefit both Turks and Africans.

### **CONCLUSION**

Turkey's unilateral, highly coordinated approach in both Kenya and Somalia is not only welcome but likely holds one of the keys to Turkey's current and future success on the continent. I argue that lessons learned in Kenya

and Somalia potentially hold true for much of East Africa, in particular Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan. This is not to say that Turkey should discontinue its multilateral work on diplomatic and humanitarian fronts with other states and non-government actors to alleviate hunger or broker solutions to conflicts. Rather, coupled with these actions and in practice, Turkey should be willing to take risks and operate independently, doing what is good for Turkey and, correspondingly, tailoring its policies to address the needs and desires of African leaders and their polities as based on mutually-constitutive engagement as well as reactive and proactive measures taken by Africans such as President Kenyatta. Rather than sandwiching Turkey's policies and actions within larger, more international development or structural adjustment goals that so often founder because of corruption and the competing (if unspoken) interests of other actors, Turkey should substantively engage Africa and African polities based on mutual interests. In other words, by not tying its Somalia actions and policies to AMISOM, US, UN, EU, or GCC goals, Turkey has been able to achieve major successes and cement its status as a rising power on the diplomatic and international fronts. It has done so because it has acted nimbly, with great coordination from Ankara, and without the constraints that come with false alliances and competing agendas.

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