



Above: Crowds welcome President Erdogan at the new Turkish-renovated Aden Abdulle International Airport in Mogadishu, Somalia.

countries that previously had little contact with Turkey, such as Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger.

This trend has been reciprocated by African governments opening offices in Turkey. There are now 32 African embassies in Ankara, while more have other forms of representation. Ambassadors to African countries are being regularly changed, so the diplomatic corps as a whole is gaining much more experience of a continent that one diplomat described as “previously little known in Turkey”.

The ambassador to Uganda, Sedef Yavuzalp, says: “Turkey’s African expansion is one of the most successful areas for our foreign policy. In this context, our Foreign Ministry’s Africa General Directorate offers good opportunities in this area.”

The Somali connection

No country embodies Turkey’s approach better than Somalia. International media usually focus on the battle by African Union forces against the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab group, but Turkey has made a point of defying the aversion with which much of the world views the East African country.

In 2011, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan was the first non-African head of state to visit Mogadishu, Somalia’s war-ravaged capital, in 19 years – accompanied by his family. His visit came on the back of the high-profile Istanbul Conference on Somalia in May 2010. The summit, co-convened by the United Nations and the Turkish government, brought together delegates from 50 countries, with a focus on building a viable and sustainable economic future in the East African country. A follow-up conference took place in Istanbul in 2012, and this February, the city hosted the High Level Partnership Forum for Somalia, part of the wider New Deal Somalia initiative.

The Turkish Red Crescent has run refugee camps in the Somali capital since al-Shabaab was forced out of the city, filling a gap left by other aid agencies, which pulled out of the country following the kidnap or murder of their employees.

Turkish ministers describe Somalis as their

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“brothers and sisters” and promise that they are in the country for the long haul. Various Turkish state agencies are involved in areas as varied as education, agriculture, health, road construction, rubbish collection and support for the army and police. There are also unconfirmed reports that Turkey will set up a military base in Somalia to help train government troops in their fight against al-Shabaab.

African ambitions

Engagement goes well beyond Somalia. Across the continent, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) now operates in 28 countries, utilising an Africa aid budget that has averaged \$800m a year over the past three years.

The Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (Tuskon) has arranged a number of large-scale events, while the military has been used as a diplomatic tool. Most notably, the Barbaros Turkish Maritime Task Force sailed around the entire coast of Africa in late 2014, visiting 24 countries in the process and promoting Turkish interests as it went.

This February saw President Erdoğan undertake a high-profile tour of key economies in West Africa, including Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire. High on the agenda of discussions was the fight against Boko Haram, with Erdoğan going as far as offering to help train Nigerian forces.

Last November, Equatorial Guinea hosted the second Turkish-African summit, which was attended by 30 African governments, with a third summit planned for 2019.

Ankara had sought to promote its version of Islamic democracy in Africa but this strategy has been badly hit on two fronts: firstly, the sheen has well and truly been taken off the Turkish model by growing religious and social tensions within that country; and secondly, the failings and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt in July 2013 hit the reputation of Islamist parties working within a secular framework.

In some ways, Ankara is replicating Beijing’s approach, albeit on a much more limited scale, using diplomatic activity and aid to complement investment. Yet with a common religion with many Africans, it also brings a cultural connection that China lacks.

While some commentators see the West and China as the main influences in Africa, Turkish efforts provide evidence of what is becoming an increasingly multi-polar world. Alongside Brazil, Singapore, Japan and others, it is creating a wider array of suitors that will only benefit Africa, Africans and African economies.

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