



Turkey in the Horn of Africa: Turkish-Somali Military Connections Focused on the Turkish Military Camp in Mogadishu, Somalia¹

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Abstract:

Turkey has started to build closer ties with Somalia in the last decade. Somalia is in a strategically located at a key point in Africa which is also of global importance as a gateway from the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, leading to the Mediterranean. This indicates that many world powers want to gain influence in Somalia, but when the African country was in serious crisis, Turkey took advantage of the difficult times to step in, show its power and start building connections in the Horn of Africa. In 2011, during the humanitarian crisis, which devastated Somalia, Turkey helped the country with important and unforgettable volume. Since then, the relations between the two countries have been strengthening connections. In 2023 we can state that Turkey has its largest embassy in the world in Somalia, Turkey has a huge military camp in Somalia's capital, Turkish companies run the Mogadishu's international airport and international port, and one of the Mogadishu's biggest hospital is named after Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as Turkey renovated the facility.

In this study we aim to focus on Turkey's military connections in Somalia, as several thousands of Somali soldiers have been trained by Turkey and several thousands more are yet to be trained by Turkish professional soldiers in a military facility build by Turkey: the Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia (STGK) which is one of a kind in the world.

Keywords:

Camp Turksom, Horn of Africa, STGK, Turkey-Somalia connections, Turkish Task Force Command

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Main Questions about Turkey-Somalia Connections

In this study I would like to discuss the following topics:

- 1) Overlook of Turkey-Somalia connections in the last decade. How the political and diplomatic connections altered between the two countries since 2011?
- 2) Turkey and Somalia defence and military industry connections. How Turkey's army institutions and military industry are affected in the Horn of Africa?
- 3) The introduction of Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia (STGK), Turkey's military training facility in the capital of Somalia. How was this built? What does it contain? What are the activities there?
- 4) Conclusion of the ideas about the role of Turkey's military training and support in Somalia. Does Turkey have political or military objectives for its presence in Somalia? What is the role of the Turkish presence from the aspect of Somalia?

Turkey Somalia Connections in the Last Decade

In 2011 there was a massive humanitarian crisis in Somalia that devastated the Horn of Africa. Mogadishu was suffering from lack of food and the country was in the grip of a historic famine and drought. At that time Recep Tayyip Erdogan personally visited the country with his family and a delegation to show his country's support, and launched a humanitarian aid mission from Turkey to Somalia and also pledged, along with other Muslim countries, USD 350 Million for famine relief (BBC, 2011). Erdogan has announced grandiose projects that Turkey wants to implement in Somalia: the launch of Turkish Airlines flights to the Somali capital, the remodeling of a hospital, and the opening of the largest embassy in Africa (Ahmed, 2021). These plans were almost unbelievable at a time when more and more countries were closing their doors to Somalia and many thought of the Horn of Africa as a no-go zone.

According to some experts, before 2011, when a foreign country arrived in Somalia with the above mentioned perspective, Somalis would have seen it as an occupying force, but at this critical time Somalis perceived Turkey differently (Ahmed, 2021). The timing of Turkish visit and assistance in 2011 was truly special, as it was not only a humanitarian crisis, but also the month of Ramadan, a combination that left an indelible impression on Somali society, and Turkey got the credit of "Mother of Humanity" in the Horn of Africa (Abdulle and Gurpinar, 2019). Ahmet Davutoglu, then Foreign Minister of Turkey, stated during his visit in 2011: "We came to Somalia to show our solidarity with our Somali brothers and sisters, but this is not just for one day, we will continue to work for our brothers and sisters and we will never abandon them" (BBC, 2011).

And indeed, since 2011, Turkey has not only done a one-day job with an important diplomatic visit, but over the years has strengthened its connection with Somalia in what many experts consider to be a well-planned strategy on the Turkish side, starting at the humanitarian level and then expanding the scale of cooperation (Abdi, 2021). Erdogan's grandiose announcement became reality since then. In 2011 Turkey reopened its embassy in Mogadishu, which had been closed for two decades since 1991 because of the outbreak of Somali civil war. (Turkey has built an entirely new embassy building within five years in 2016, which is the largest Turkish embassy in the world (Turkish Embassy Mogadishu, n.d.).

Later, the Turkish company (Favori LLC) started operating Aden Adde International Airport in Mogadishu in 2013. Two years later, in 2015, Turkish Albayrak Group took over the operation of Mogadishu International Port. Since 2013, the Turkish state has also been involved in the renovation of Digfer Hospital in Mogadishu, which was abandoned since the 1990's and reopened in 2015 as the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Hospital (Levy, 2023). Turkey also participated in various humanitarian projects and investments, that have helped Somalia to develop and provided several good economic opportunities to Turkish businesses.



Picture 1. The largest Turkish embassy in the world is in Mogadishu, Somalia

Somalia imported goods from Turkey worth USD 4.8 million in 2010, but in 2019 these Turkish imports were USD 256 million. This can be seen as the fruit of developing relations and years of cooperation, but some critics say Turkey has

unilaterally expanded trade, mentioning the fact that Somali exports to Turkey increased from USD 1.36 millions to only USD 6.7 million in the period 2010-2019 (Ahmed, 2021).

As some experts highlighted “Turkey's involvement in Somalia dramatically increased from humanitarian to economic, developmental, and political and security dimensions” (Abdi, 2021). In this study we would like to focus now on the security dimension between the two countries.

Turkey-Somalia Defence and Military Industry Connections

On the security dimension between the two countries, we can mention several areas in which Turkey is involved in Somalia. Turkey took part in UN missions in Somalia during the past decades, but its contribution to UN missions has also increased since 2011.

Turkey contributed to UNOSOM II, the second attempt by the UN to deal with the instability and violence in Somalia between 1993 and 1995. UNOSOM was once commanded by a Turkish general named Cevik Bir. However, until 2005, Turkey did not participated as actively in most UN peacekeeping operations in Africa as it did after the AKP came to power in the country (Siradag, 2018, p. 9). In 2013 the UN established a mission in Somalia, UNSOM (United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia), which was renewed until 31 October 2024 with the goal “to achieve peace, reconciliation and stability” in Somalia (UNSOM, n.d.). Turkey continues to contribute to this mission (United Nations, 2023). Hundreds of Turkish soldier have been deployed throughout the history of the mission (Abdi, 2021).

Turkey also participates in NATO operations initiated in support of international efforts to combat piracy off the coast of the Horn of Africa, such as Combined Task Force-151 (CTF-151) and NATO Ocean Shield Operation, in which Turkish forces participate with naval vessels. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, “Turkey supports a long-term role for NATO in combating piracy and contributes actively to these endeavors” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Türkiye, n.d.).

Turkey has military attachés in several African countries, and this position helps to represent Turkey’s military institutes and military industry in the actual country. Turkish military attachés also observe military missions and developments in the country and contribute to cooperation between Turkey and local African defence forces (Prout, 2002, pp. 47). In Somalia, the official name is „Office of the Armed Forces Attaché in Mogadishu” (Ministry of National Defence of Republic of Türkiye, 2022).

There are only two African states where Turkey has troops, one of them is Somalia, the other is Libya. This fact also shows the security and military connections with Somalia are important for Turkey (Besenyő, 2021). Since 2008, Turkey has deployed naval elements in the Gulf of Aden, to ensure the effective protection of



Turkish-flagged vessels and commercial vessels with links to Turkey sailing in the region, and to support humanitarian activities in the region (Middle East Monitor, 2022). In the beginning of 2022 Turkey extended the mandate of Turkish troops in the Gulf of Aden, Somalia until February 2023 (Middle East Monitor, 2022) and then extended the mandate until February 2024 for the stability of the region and to halt piracy (Cimen, I., Balta, A., 2023). Turkish land forces are present in the Capital, Mogadishu in the Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia (STGK), whereof we will write later.

Another aspect of Turkish-Somali defence and military industrial connections is the military industry. Somalia is one the African states that signed an agreement with Turkey on cooperation in the defense industry and one of the countries on the continent that has already imported various weapons and military vehicles from Turkey (Bayram, M. 2022). For example Turkish-operated TB2 drones are now being used on the battlefield in the Horn of Africa, helping Somalia attack al-Shabab targets (Levy, I. 2023). The Somali Army also uses the Turkish military's MPT-76 assault rifles (Akwei, I. 2019).

According to United Nations COMTRADE database, Turkey has exported USD 44.880 worth of arms and ammunition, parts and accessories to Somalia in 2022, mainly pistols and revolvers. This category of export exceed USD 1 million all together since 2013. Turkey has also exported aircraft, spacecraft and ships, boats, and other floating structures worth over USD 6.5 million to Somalia between 2021-2022 (Trading Economics, 2023).

Turkey has also donated some military equipment and vehicles to Somalia in recent years. For example, in 2020, Turkey delivered 12 off-road vehicles to Somalia as part of bilateral military and financial cooperation agreements (Ozkaya, 2020). In 2021, Ankara donated 22 military vehicles to Mogadishu: 8 fully armored Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected 'Kirpi' military vehicles and 14 military trucks (Dhaysane, 2021a). Turkey also provided necessary equipment for Somali coastguard and navy as well (Aksoy, 2021).

Turkey and Somalia have a number of several military and security agreements for cooperation in the fields of 1. Military Training, Science and Techniques, 2. Police training, 3. Security cooperation, 4. Defense Industry and Scientific Cooperation (Kitio, 2020).

Signature Date	Where	Agreement
17 April 2009	Ankara	Technical Cooperation Agreement
22 May 2010	Istanbul	Training, Technical and Scientific Cooperation in the Military Field (Framework)
13 April 2012	Ankara	Military Training Cooperation Agreement
25 January 2015	Mogadishu	Defense Industry Cooperation Agreement

Table 1. Turkey-Somalia Military/Security Agreements 2009-2019

Source: Abdulle and Gurpinar, 2019

As seen the previous agreements in Table 1., Turkey helps in the professional training of Somali armed forces. Turkey has played a major role in organizational modernization of the Somali Army, providing professional training to several Somali soldiers and policemen (Kenez, 2022b). Since 2010 there is a military training cooperation accord between Somalia and Turkey, and several Somali officials have been trained in Turkey at the Turkish National Defense University (TNDU). The impact of the Turkish training on the Somali armed forces cannot be better demonstrated than the fact that General Odawaa Yusuf Rageh, who was the commander of the Somali National Army between August 2019 and June 2023, also completed his master's degree at Turkish National Defense University, before became the Chief of Defence Forces. Furthermore, in the past decade, the Turkish Armed Forces provided language courses and the “Officer Basic Indoctrination Training” to hundreds of soldiers from Somalia (Kitio, 2020).

Since 2017, Turkey has been training Somali soldiers and policemen in Somalia. The location is special in its kind, called the Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia (STGK) (Can Kasapoglu, 2020). This topic is the focus of this study and will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

The Introduction of Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia (STGK)

Since 2017, Turkey has been training Somali soldiers and policemen in a special facility in Somalia, the Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia (STGK), known also as Camp TURKSOM (Kasapoglu, 2020). Some call it a military base, but Turkey's ambassador to Somalia, Olgan Bekar, clarified that it is “not a military base like the one Turkey has in Qatar,” but “a military training camp” (Rossiter and Cannon, 2018). Although a foreign military base would be not so problematic in Somalia, as the UK, the USA, and the UAE already have military bases in the Horn of Africa (Seleshie, 2022).



Picture 2. Somali soldiers in Turkish Task Force Command

The STGK complex was built from the ground by Turkey at a cost about 50 million USD, started in March 2015 and completed in early 2017. It is located on a 400 hectares land on the coast of the Indian Ocean in Mogadishu, which territory worth approximately USD 1,5 billion, although Turkey did not buy the land and does not have to pay rent to Somalia (Ahmed, 2021). The STGK houses three military schools, dormitories, barracks, depots and lounge, sport fields, and an area for testing weapons and combat situations. It is the base of the Turkish Contingent of about three hundred soldiers and officers, one hundred of the Turkish soldiers are instructors in the complex and the other two hundred protect the facility. That is why some experts say that, in a functional sense, the Turkish military presence at Camp Turksom is not an overseas base (Rossiter and Cannon, 2018).

Picture 1. Territory of Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia (STGK) before 2015.





Picture 2. The Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia (STGK) finished in 2017.

Many of the soldiers arrive at the training course without proper equipment and weapons. Turkey gave Turkish-made rifles to the first 400 graduates. “Turkey equipped them, and Turkey promised to equip every soldier who is being trained at the camp”- said Somali State Minister for Defense Mohamed Ali Haga in 2018. (Maruf, 2018)

What does the training and education at Turkish Task Force Command in Somalia look like?

1. First, Somali Soldiers first receive 6 months of accelerated Turkish language training at the school.
2. After that, NCOs receive one year of education, while officers receive two years of education. (Africanews, 2022.)
3. Many of the Somali trainees are sent to Isparta, Turkey to receive modern commando training. (Dhaysane, 2021b)

As we can see, the language of the training is Turkish. Somalis trained in the STGK also follow the same ceremonial rituals as the Turkish Armed Forces, including singing the Turkish Military Academy’s traditional anthem, furthermore Somali soldiers commemorated a memorial, important for Turkish soldiers, for the fallen troops in the Ottoman Empire’s Gallipoli (*Çanakkale*) defensive campaign against Britain (Kasapoglu, 2020).

In addition to courses such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, computer science, military history, military geography, operations management and intelligence, students



receive practical training in combat training, mechanics, marksmanship, shooting and combat formations (Africanews, 2022).

Somali soldiers trained in the STGK will be Somali National Army troops (SNA) but are also known as ‘African Eagles’, ‘Somali Eagles’ or in the local language ‘Gorgor’ (Eagle) commandos, who already demonstrated its combat effectiveness in the country against terrorists. The characteristic that a Somali unit is specially trained by a foreign power does not apply only to the Gorgor unit. Somalia’s elite forces known as ‘Danab’ (Lightning) are trained by the USA, which power also has a military base in Somalia. (Maruf, 2022) What is more problematic is that during the previous president, Mohamed Abdullahi ‘Farmaajo’ the Gorgor commando was accused to be deployed by the president to compel political support (Levy, 2023).

Role of Turkey’s Military Training and Support in Somalia

The mission of Camp TURKSOM is, according to Turkish officials:

1. to protect Somalia from the scourge of al-Shabab, and
2. to provide meaningful security assistance and training to Somalia armed forces. (Ahmed, 2021)

The idea to establish such a facility is the result of years of process to strengthen connection between Turkey and Somalia, which began with the framework agreement on military training, technical and scientific cooperation in the military field signed between Turkey and Somalia in 2010, followed by the agreements, protocols and the decision of the Council of Ministers (Africanews, 2022).

The goal with this huge facility is to train 10,000 members of the Somali National Army (SNA) and since its opening in 2017, until the summer of 2022, a total of 5000 SNA soldiers and officers have graduated here, which is already a third of the Somali Army. The other goal is to train 1,000 police officers, and by 2022, 600 policemen completed their studies at the STGK. (Kenez, 2022b) Turkey also created and trained a special police unit called the ‘Haramcad’ (Cheetahs) (Ahmed, 2021).

The Turkish contingent aims to generate three Somali battalions per year through the training program in Somalia followed by a customized commando specialization course in Turkey (Kasapoglu, 2020). Turkish officials stated: “These battalions will form the backbone of the Somali National Army in the future. We believe that the personnel trained by the Turkish Armed Forces will serve not only the security of Somalia, but also the security of Africa and beyond.” (Maruf, 2022)

So, on the one hand, Turkish training in Somalia contributes to the rebuilding of a professional, organized, modern national military force in Somalia that can sustain

itself. This helps Somalia to maintain order in the country and fight against terrorist and militant groups, mainly against Al-Shabaab.

On the other hand, the Turkish training in Somalia helps Turkish-Somali connections and strengthens Turkey's influence in a highly strategic economic and political location in the Horn of Africa. Focusing on security and the military, some critics say Turkey is using its connections to the Somalia's armed forces to create a bigger market for its military industry. One example is that Turkey equips Somali soldiers trained in the STGK with Turkish-made weapons (e.g. MPT-76) which on the one hand provides them with modern, NATO-compatible technology, and on the other hand hinders the integration of soldiers into the SNA, because older types of weapons, such as Kalashnikovs, are much more widespread in Somalia (Ahmed, 2021).

Many of the critics do not agree with the system that Turkey trains the Gorgors in Turkish, adding that it is also problematic for them that the Somali Ministry of Defense does not participate in the training of the STGK and does not exercise any supervision over it. (Ahmed, 2021) As mentioned earlier, the Gorgors used weapons against civilians protesting against the then president 'Faarmajo' who is said to be an ally of Turkey. What's more, 'Farmaajo's rival, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, stated that „army under the command of the [...] president attacked my residence” (Reuters, 2021). The Turkish-trained 'Haramcad' police unit took part in raiding on independent radio station and journalists, (Ahmed, 2021) These facts also strengthened the accusations that the Turkish-trained armed forces support politicians favorable to Turkey.

Conclusion

Seeing the facts, we can say that Somalia has one of the closest cooperation with Turkey in Africa in the security sector. Somalia is connected to Turkey in several key areas of the security:

1. UN and NATO missions with Turkish participation in Somalia,
2. Import of Turkish defense products to Somalia,
3. Defence agreements between Turkey and Somalia,
4. Turkish training to Somali troops inside and outside of Somalia,
5. Turkey provides Turkish military products and know-how to the Somali armed forces,
6. Turkey has troops in Somali territory

As we have seen, Turkey has invested a huge amount of money in Somalia's security sector (built a 50 million USD training camp, provided training to Somali armed forces, donated high-end Turkish-made weapons and military products to the Somali



army etc.) Adding that Turkey entered Somali politics at a very difficult time when Somalia was mostly abandoned by others, but Turkey helped Mogadishu with large humanitarian aid and infrastructure investments. Overall, Turkey's presence in Somalia's armed forces and military equipment helped the country to modernize and acquire resources to become a stronger national army, police, and navy, which the African country could not afford on its own in the past decade. On the other hand, according to critics, Turkey used this situation to create great projects for Turkish businesses, create a market for its products, and influence Somali politics in a pro-Turkish direction.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that they have no financial interest in this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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