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The New Turkish Presence in North Africa: Ambitions and Challenges

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Introduction

Turkey and North Africa have been linked for centuries by political and cultural ties. But since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey had isolated itself from its traditional spheres of influence, including North Africa. After the end of World War II, Turkey sought to strengthen its relations with the West and refrained from paying attention to Arab issues. With the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, under the leadership of Recep T. Erdogan, Turkey has gradually become more interested in North Africa again.

In the post-2011 Arab uprisings, Turkey's foreign policy towards North Africa has seen a massive turning point. This period witnessed a growing influence of Islamist political movements, which might be potential allies of Turkey in the region. Turkey has sought to strengthen its influence through economic, political, and cultural means, and recently by military presence. However, there are many obstacles and challenges to Turkey's quest to revive its historical influence in the region.

In this new Turkish strategy, North Africa is considered as a goal and a means at the same time: it is a target for Turkish trade and investment, as the region represents a huge market with about 200 million consumers, and a source for potential strategic alliances. It is also a gateway to sub-Saharan Africa. President Erdogan announced during his official visit to Algeria on January 26, 2020, that Turkey is seeking to increase the trade volume with Africa in the near future to 50 billion dollars, which reached 26 billion dollars in 2020¹.

Turkey initially relies on two basic mechanisms to return to the region: First, the economic factor (trade and investment), in which the private sector is playing an important role. Second, tools of soft power (soap operas, films, channels, cultural and educational exchanges, and attraction of foreign students...), by employing cultural, religious and historical ties to improve its image and present itself as a model for the Islamic world.

The paper aims to identify the main goals of Turkey's new policy toward North Africa, analyses how states of the region perceive the new presence of Turkey in the region, and addresses the major challenges facing this Turkish strategy.

¹ Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, "We will increase our trade volume with African countries to \$50 billion," 26 January 2020. <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/116415/-we-will-increase-our-trade-volume-with-african-countries-to-50-billion->

Between Inspiration and Suspicion: Contradictory Perceptions of the North African Countries' about the Turkish Presence

North African States' perception of Turkey's presence in the region varies from one country to another, according to their interests and the nature of their relationship with the Turkish state. Some countries see Turkey's growing role in the region as an opportunity, while others view it as a challenge.

The current Egyptian regime is the most suspicious of Turkey's ambitions in North Africa. Additionally, any influential presence of Islamists in Libya would be viewed by Egypt and its allies in the Gulf as a major strategic challenge, especially if they have a clear link with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is receiving great support from Turkey. Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry condemned the Turkish presence in Libya as a violation of international law² and desired the role of Turkey in the region as 'destructive' because it "causes social and sectarian divisions".³ In the same context, Egypt's Parliament Speaker Ali Abdel-Aal rejected any Turkish attempt to restore the "Ottoman dreams" on Egypt's western borders⁴ and declared that his country would stand strongly against any threats to its interests in the region.⁵

Economically, the vision is different because Egypt remains the most important economic partner of Turkey in North Africa. The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries entered into force on March 1st, 2007, and supposed to have ended in 2020, but it is not in Egypt's interest to end this agreement. According to the Turkish Ministry of Trade, the volume of trade between the two countries "was realized as 4.43 billion US \$ in 2017 with an increase of 4% compared to 2016. In 2017, imports from Egypt were 2.07 billion US \$, whereas exports to Egypt were 2.36 billion US \$."⁶ Also, there are large Turkish investments in Egypt, and it is not easy to abandon them. This is what makes the two countries' relations truly "a love-hate relationship".⁷

On the contrary, there is almost complete consensus between Turkey and the internationally recognized Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). The Turkish presence in Libya is not only determined by political factors that are mainly represented in the circumstances of the Libyan crisis and the need to support its allies, but is also related to its geo-economic interests in the Mediterranean. The fear that the maritime demarcation agreements between Israel, Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt, would turn into an alliance against the vital interests of Turkey in this region, is the main driver for Turkey's recent move towards the southern Mediterranean to protect its economic and geopolitical interests.

Turkey has seen these agreements between those four states, backed by France and the UAE, as designed to exclude Turkey from participating in reshaping the regional system in the Eastern Mediterranean and benefiting from its natural resources. In addition to these agreements on the delimitation of maritime zones, Turkey was excluded from the East Mediterranean Gas Forum that was launched in Cairo in early 2019 with the participation of seven countries from the Middle East and Europe, with the support of the United States and Europe. Therefore, the Turkish response came quickly against these alliances, by signing two

² Egypt Today, "M Shoukry condemns Turkish practices," 4 June 2020. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/88298/FM-Shoukry-condemns-Turkish-practices-affirm-Egypt-s-commitment-to-anti>

³ Daily News Egypt, "Egypt Foreign Minister highlights 'destructive' Turkish practices in Middle East," 9 September 2020. [h-practices-in-middle-east/](https://www.dailynews-egypt.com/News/1/88298/FM-Shoukry-condemns-Turkish-practices-affirm-Egypt-s-commitment-to-anti)

⁴ Egypt Today, "Egyptian speaker says Turkish ambitions in Libya on its way to fail," 13 January 2020,

⁵ Al-Masry Al-Youm, "Egypt won't accept any tampering at the western borders," 9 December 2019.

⁶ Turkish Ministry of Trade, "Egypt," <https://www.trade.gov.tr/free-trade-agreements/egypt>

⁷ Rami Galal, "Egyptian-Turkish trade: A love-hate relationship," Al-Monitor, June 13, 2019. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/06/egypt-turkey-free-trade-agreement-politics-economy-tension.html>

agreements with the GNA on November 27, 2019: one on military cooperation, which allows Turkey to send military forces to Libya to support the Libyan government in Tripoli, and the second to demarcate the maritime borders between the two countries. These two agreements are both seen as a direct challenge to the new alliances that have been formed in the Eastern Mediterranean and a means to defend vital interests of Turkey in the region. The military agreement had a great impact on shifting the balance of military power among Libyan parties and successfully pushed back Field Marshal Haftar's forces from western Libya entirely. The second agreement not only gives Turkey a free hand to intensify exploration for energy sources in the waters adjacent to the maritime borders of Libya, but will also prevent Israel, Cyprus and Greece from making any geo-economic project in the Eastern Mediterranean without Turkish approval. Also, this agreement hinders Israel's plan to extend the gas pipeline from Israel to Europe, because it should pass through the exclusive economic zone which Turkey considers to be within its territory according to this agreement.

Libya is an arena of completion that clearly reveals not only the nature of relations between Turkey and the Libyan forces, but shows also to what extent Turkish policies are consistent or inconsistent with the policies of North African countries, and even those of EU and some Gulf countries.

On the western border of Libya, many Tunisians view Turkey as a model to emulate. There is an old mutual intellectual influence between the Tunisian Ennahda Party and the AKP. Erdogan has repeatedly expressed his admiration for the experience of the Tunisian Islamic movement and acknowledged that he benefited from the ideas of Rachid Ghannouchi, founder and leader of the ruling Islamist Ennahda Movement. For his part, Ghannouchi regards the AKP of Turkey as "a model of success for his country to follow".⁸ Also, there is a close personal relationship between the two political leaders, Erdogan and Ghannouchi, who met in Ankara about an hour and a half in a closed meeting on July 18, 2019.

Turkey is aware of the importance of Tunisia in the Maghreb, especially in relation to the Libyan issue, and this is what Erdogan explicitly confirmed during his visit to Tunisia on December 25, 2019, where he called for inviting Tunisia to participate in the Berlin conference on the Libyan crisis.⁹ Even if the trade volume between the two countries has increased since the Free Trade Agreement entered into force on June 1, 2005, it is less than the rest of North Africa countries, except Mauritania. The value of their bilateral trade annually amounts to \$1.25 billion and Turkey seeks to increase it to \$2 billion.

Despite the old Turkish presence in Algeria during the era of the Ottoman Empire, relations between the two countries were not always good, especially in the second half of the 1950s, when Turkey had not been in favor of Algeria's independence from France. During this period, Turkey voted in the UN General Assembly against the independence of Algeria in 1955, while abstaining in 1957, 1958, and 1959.¹⁰ This position can be explained by Turkey's Western-oriented foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II.¹¹ However, these relations began to improve in recent decades, especially after the AKP came to power in Turkey and showed remarkable progress in the post-Bouteflika era. In the last three decades, Algeria's influence has significantly declined in many regions where it was an influential player, including the Maghreb and the wider African continent. Immediately after President Abdelmadjid came to

⁸ "Ennahda leader says Turks are model, inspiration for Tunisia," Today's Zaman, July 15, 2012, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=286550 cited in Azeem Ibrahim, "The Turkey Model: Does Turkey Offer a Model for Tunisia and Egypt?" Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, April 2013, p.5, odel.pdf

⁹ The New Arab, "Erdogan invites Tunisia, Algeria and Qatar to discuss Libyan crisis in Berlin,"

¹⁰ Eyüp Ersoy, "Turkish Foreign Policy Toward the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62)," Turkish Studies, Vol. 13, No. 4, (2012), p.688.

¹¹ Ibid. p.686.

power, he expressed his intention to restore Algeria's international role.¹² The new Turkish-Algerian relations are an aspect of this new dynamic in Algerian diplomacy.

The economic factor is an important determinant of the current Algerian perception of Turkey. Algeria's Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad, describing Turkey as a "brotherly country", affirmed that the Algerian government is keen to promote the bilateral cooperation that relies on the investment and investors as a solid basis.¹³ Despite the absence of a free trade agreement, Algeria is the second largest trade partner of Turkey in North Africa with a bilateral trade volume of \$3.2 billion in 2018. The two countries agreed, during Erdogan's last visit to Algeria on January 26, 2020, to increase the volume of their bilateral trade to \$5 billion.¹⁴ It was also announced that the two countries will jointly build a petrochemical plant in the Turkish province of Adana on the Mediterranean coast.¹⁵

In the far west of North Africa, there are many factors that made Morocco look realistically, and with a degree of suspicion, at this growing presence of Turkey in North Africa. Since the Cherifian Empire and the Ottoman caliphate, Turkey-Morocco relations have always been characterized by cooperation rather than conflict or subordination. Turkey's foreign policy in North Africa differs from one country to another according to the nature of its historical relations. While the Ottoman legacy remains to some extent present in Turkey's relations with North African countries, Moroccan-Turkish relations have been always based on equality and reciprocity since Morocco had never been under the Ottoman rule. Therefore, it is more likely that the two countries build balanced relations and remain partners.

At the economic level, the bilateral trade volume between the two countries has grown significantly since the entry into force of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2006. According to the Turkish Ministry of Trade, the volume of trade between the two countries "amounted to 2.5 billion US \$ in 2017 with an increase of 8% compared to 2016. In 2017, imports from Morocco were 924 million US \$, whereas exports to Morocco were 1.657 billion US \$."¹⁶ Recently, the influence of an anti-Turkish lobby has appeared in Morocco when some politicians and media raised the deficit of the trade balance between the two countries at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. On January 13, 2020, the Moroccan Trade Minister Moulay Hafid Elalamy stated in the Chamber of Representatives that if Turkey could not find a solution to this deficit, his ministry would then be obliged to unilaterally review the FTA and threatening that "Morocco is asking either to review the terms of the agreement or to tear it up".¹⁷ Some months later, on the initiative of Morocco, the two countries agreed to amend the FTA on August 24, 2020. The trade deficit between the two countries in favor of Turkey is about 16 billion Moroccan dirhams (MAD), while it is about 44.7 billion MAD with China, about 25.3 billion MAD with the US, and about 15.1 billion MAD with Italy.¹⁸ It seems that Morocco's pressure on Turkey to modify the terms of this agreement came in the context of the lack of consensus between the two countries on how to solve the Libyan crisis. Although the Islamists have been leading the Moroccan government in coalition with other parties during the post-2011 period, this is not reflected positively on the Morocco-Turkey relations because Moroccan foreign policy remains an exclusive domain of the king.

¹² Said Saddiki, "Will Algerian Foreign Policy Change Towards its Neighbors in the Next Decade?" Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, 31 March 2020. <https://mipa.institute/7654>

¹³ Algeria Press Service, "Algeria-Turkey: Business Forum lays foundations for new era in bilateral economic relations" 27 January 2020,

¹⁴ Hürriyet Daily News, "Turkey, Algeria aim for \$5 billion trade," <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-algeria-aim-for-5-billion-trade-151454>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Turkish Ministry of Trade, "Morocco," <https://www.trade.gov.tr/free-trade-agreements/morocco>

¹⁷ Mounia Kabiri Kettani, "Les ficelles de 'l'expansionnisme' turc," L'Observateur du Maroc et d'Afrique, 8 March 2020. <https://lobservateur.info/les-ficelles-de-lexpansionnisme-turc/>

¹⁸ Office des Changes, Commerce Extérieur du Maroc: Rapport Annuel 2018 (Rabat: Office des Change, 2018), p.17. https://www.oc.gov.ma/sites/default/files/2019-07/Rapport%20BC_2018.pdf

As for Mauritania, any emerging country would view it as an important gateway to West African markets. Turkey and Mauritania signed a set of agreements in the last decade in various fields, which led to the growth of their bilateral trade six times during this period. It is expected that in the coming years, Mauritania will be an arena for competition between some countries, including Turkey, France, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

A Difficult Balancing Game: Complex challenges of Turkey's foreign policy in North Africa

There are two sets of obstacles that could prevent Turkey from achieving its goals in North Africa. The first group of concerns implies geopolitical restrictions, and the second group regards the difficulty to balance different interests and concerns of North African states.

With regard to the first group, there are three main geopolitical restrictions. The first one is Turkey's troubled neighborhood. Turkey is surrounded by both old problems and new ones in the eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus, and on its southern borders with both Syria and Iraq. This turbulent environment makes its backyard insecure and restricts any ambition to move beyond its adjacent regions.

The second obstacle is the limits of Turkey's military and financial capabilities. Although Turkey is a large military power, it cannot fight battles on multiple fronts— northern Syria, East Mediterranean, Libya, and Azerbaijan, especially as it faces forces backed by rich (the UAE and Saudi Arabia) or militarily powerful states (Russia and France). Moreover, getting involved in these conflicts would put an additional financial burden on the Turkish economy, which is suffering from a decline in the local currency.

The third obstacle concerns Turkey's lack of reliable major allies. Turkey's relations with its traditional allies in the West, including the US, have been witnessing ups and downs in recent years. Today, there are major points of contention between Turkey and its NATO allies: Turkey's acquisition of Russian S-400 defense systems, the delimitation of maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Libyan crisis, and the Kurdish issue in Syria.

The second type of restrictions is related to the competing policies of North African states. Each country has its own interests and concerns that conflict with those of other states. Perhaps the biggest challenge to Turkey's strategy in North Africa is Egypt. Their relations have been in crisis since the rise of General Al-Sisi to power in Egypt and the overthrow of the late President Mohamed Morsi in 2014. Currently, the two countries' strategies compete each other in Libya. Egypt and Libya shares a porous and unguarded 1,100 km (685-mile) long desert border, which may be easily infiltrated by armed groups from both sides. Therefore, the vital interest of the current Egyptian regime is not only the stability of Libya, but also to be ruled by an Egyptian-aligned government. Additionally, Egypt has many economic interests in Libya. Egypt's need to obtain oil and gas at a preferential price is also one of the main determinants of Egypt's interest in Libya and its support for Field Marshal Haftar, especially in Libya's oil-rich crescent. That is why the Egyptian President declared on June 20, 2020, the city of Sirte, which is considered as the key to controlling the “oil crescent”, a red line against Turkish-backed Libyan forces.¹⁹ One month later, Egypt's parliament authorized the President to deploy military forces outside the country to fight “armed criminal militias and foreign terrorists.”²⁰ This authorization was regarded as an intention to intervene militarily to protect its economic interests in Eastern Libya. Moreover, Libya has always been a destination for a

¹⁹ Samy Magdy and Andrew Wilks, “Egyptian President Says Libyan City Sirte a Red Line,” Associated Press, 20 June 2020,

²⁰ Samy Magdy, “Egypt approves Libya deployment, risking clash with Turkey,” The Washington Post, 20 July 2020.

large number of Egyptian workers. It is estimated that about 1.5 million Egyptians had been working in Libya before the current crisis²¹ and almost half of them still reside there.

This clearly shows the complete contradiction between Turkish and Egyptian strategies in Libya and North Africa. Therefore, in the near term, it is difficult for the two countries to achieve a compromise or even engage in direct negotiations.

In contrast to Egypt, Algeria is more likely to align with Turkey in the region. In addition to gradually growing economic relations between Turkey and Algeria, there is some convergence between them in key issues in the Middle East and North Africa. However, the nature of the Maghreb regional sub-system characterized by suspicion and distrust between the countries of the region, will prevent the establishment of such an alliance in the region. Moreover, Algeria is still suffering from the legacy of the civil war of the 1990s, as well as the political and social crisis of recent years. Therefore, Algeria is primarily concerned with the stability of the region and securing its borders with neighboring countries, especially Libya. This explains why it has not engaged in the Libyan crisis, even though the two countries share a common land border spanning about 1000 km.

Regarding Morocco, although its political and economic goals do not align completely with the Turkish ones, there is a great possibility to find a middle ground to solve some regional issues, including the Libyan crisis. Regardless of its geographical distance and the fact that Algeria is a buffer state, Libya is of great importance to Morocco, mainly at the political level. Morocco's primary goal is to ensure that the Government of Libya has good relations with Morocco, or at least not as hostile as the Gaddafi regime was for an important part of his reign. Turkey will face great challenges to reconcile the contradictory goals of Morocco and Algeria. On the other hand, Turkey's efforts to enhance its influence in West Africa will undoubtedly worry Morocco, because it considers this region as its "strategic depth".

As for Tunisia and Mauritania, their regional ambitions are very modest. They are more preoccupied with their domestic affairs and have always sought compatibility with neighboring countries. The stability of the region and the economic benefits are the main concerns of the two countries at this time, whether in their relations with Turkey or other countries of the region.

What currently worries Turkey in Tunisia is the Gulf-backed opposition, which seeks to prevent Turkey from strengthening its relations with Tunisia. However, it appears that Turkey will not face many problems in developing its relations with Tunisia in the future, given that the political forces supporting establishment of advanced relationships with Turkey are stronger than the forces opposing it. Tunisia's good relationship with various North African countries, and the lack of competition between them, will enhance the chances of success of Turkey's strategy in Tunisia. Therefore, Tunisia is expected to be a mainstay of the Turkish strategy in North Africa, especially if the Islamist Ennahda Movement remains in the coming governments. The Ennahda Movement was the most prominent opposition party during the rule of both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali and most of its leaders, including Ghannouchi, were living in exile during this period. Since the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in 2011, Ennahdda has ruled Tunisia with other partners and gradually strengthened its political position despite the relative decline in the electoral support for the party in last elections.

²¹ IOM, Egyptian Migration to Libya,

Conclusion

The contradictory goals of North African states, the stalemate of the Maghreb Arab Union, European Influence, and transnational terrorist threats pose major challenges to Turkey's strategy in North Africa. Turkey can build strong and wide relations with some North African countries, but it is difficult to form real alliances because such a step may lead other countries to establish counter-alliances. Therefore, Turkey will seek to balance these multiple contradictions, which require to make political and economic concessions.

The success of Turkey's strategy in North Africa does not require only reconciling different concerns of North African countries but also European ones. Although EU countries do not have a unified position, they look with suspicion at the growing presence of Turkey in North Africa. Therefore, Turkey strives to take advantage of conflicting positions of EU members, such as the competition of France, Italy and Germany, for political influence and economic benefits in North Africa.

There are many obstacles that stand in the way of Turkey to strengthen its presence in North Africa, yet there are also great incentives. The growing economic and military powers of Turkey in a multipolar system encourage it to pursue an independent strategy from its traditional Western allies. Therefore, there will likely be an increasing role of Turkey in the region in the coming years, especially with the weakening of the European Union and the apparent decline of French influence in the Maghreb.

Turkey, as an emerging economic power, would aspire to expand its sphere of influence and promote its interests. Accordingly, if Turkey's economic power grew and its investments expanded, it would need political and even military means to protect its interests and those of its partners. Turkey's military intervention in Libya is evidence of the possibility of using hard power to defend its vital interests in the region.

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