

TURKEY, SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UAE IN AFRICA

Power Struggle for Regional Hegemony

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In 2005, Turkey declared the “Year of Africa”, introducing its new foreign policy for the African continent. On top of the continuous release of multiple billions of dollars in development aid and economic investments programmes, the country opened new field offices of its national development agency TICA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), and inaugurated dozens of new embassies and consulates throughout the continent, in order to build the foundations for new, bilateral partnerships. While some scholars characterised these efforts as “humanitarian diplomacy”, which aimed to wage the balance between mutual interests and shared benefits, such policy is more likely to represent a Turkish attempt to stretch its geopolitical influence on the continent. Its regional opponents, Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), suspiciously observed these developments. While their commitment remained on a moderate level for a long time, both actors understood the Turkish strategy as an unacceptable intromission in their regional affairs. Accordingly, UAE and KSA increased their development aid and economic investments in Africa in an unprecedented manner. Therefore, all three actors bundled their political, economic, and military capabilities to support their respective efforts. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE share many objectives, the UAE, particularly since the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, partially dissociated its activities from Saudi efforts in the region, like its partial withdraw from the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen. The ongoing expansion of flag carriers like Turkish Airlines and Emirates to a wide range of African airports, in order to create the premises for new business opportunities, is just one of many examples. Ultimately, with the opening of its military base in Somalia, its largest outside its own territory, Turkey lifts this conflict of interests on a completely new level. Attempting to balance the struggle for power, KSA announced the establishment of a military base in Djibouti, while the UAE introduced bases in Somaliland, Eritrea and Libya. Additionally, these outposts also serve their commitments within the Libyan and Yemeni civil wars. While all actors aim to offer a new cooperation opportunity without a “divisive historical record”, African countries are compelled to choose their side within this power struggle. The full range of this confrontation and its implications on the broader regional stability are not fully predictable yet. Nevertheless, local actors might once again become spectators in an Arab-Turkish expansionist race for resources, influence and power in Africa, with unpredictable consequences. This introduction paper aims to classify these developments and subsequently draw potential outcomes of this new Turkish-Arab power struggle in Africa. The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: the first chapter presents the different strategic approaches adopted by Turkey, KSA and the UAE. Subsequently, the paper highlights the strategic implications of their engagement in Africa. Ultimately, the final section of this paper provides some concluding remarks and introduces a brief outlook.

Humanitarian vs Checkbook Diplomacy

All three actors, Turkey, UAE and KSA likewise, apply their full set of available instruments to gain influence on the continent, however, they do so in different manner.

Turkey understands Africa as its natural sphere of influence, justifying its claims in its historical precedents in the continent. By the end of the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire covered an area reaching from Algiers in the West, to Kassala (modern Sudan) and Zeila (modern Somalia) in the East. While promoting cooperation especially in North Africa, Turkish officials openly base their commitment on the “Ottoman narrative” – the “glorious” past which must be reinterpreted and modernised. In other words, through this kind of “Neo-Ottomanism”, Turkey offers generous cooperation opportunities for the good of all participating parties, aiming to portray Turkey as a respectful global power.

Therefore, they particularly highlight the Ottoman record of accomplishment, differing from European involvement in Africa. These aspirations become particularly evident in

Turkish ambitions to restore Ottoman ruins on Suakin Island, Sudan. In 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir issued a degree granting Turkey a 99-year lease of the island. While Turkish officials affirm the peaceful use of Suakin Island for touristic purposes, some critics argued that Turkey aims to establish a military outpost there. The twofold nature of this effort shows that behind a superficially peaceful and respectful mission, Turkey might be fostering an aggressive strategy in the region. In line with this narrative, Turkey facilitates its development and diplomatic efforts on a large structural scale. In 2005, the national development cooperation agency TİKA (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı* – Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) expanded to Africa and opened its first field office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Since then, TİKA overall opened 24 offices, maintaining projects and activities all over Africa. This expansion was accompanied by a vast increase of official development assistance, mainly through TİKA. While in 2002, Turkey spent US\$ 73 million for its entire external development efforts, the figure increased to US\$ 8.12 billion in 2017. From 2004 until 2016, TİKA spent US\$ 1.43 billion of this budget for its operations in Africa. Thus, some scholars refer to “Humanitarian Diplomacy” in describing contemporary Turkish commitment in Africa.

Additionally, Turkey also increased its diplomatic presence on the continent. Today, the country maintains diplomatic missions in 42 of the 54 sovereign African states, in relation to 12 in 2003. In May 2018, foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced the number of embassies in Africa would rise to 50 in the medium term with ‘the ultimate target of being represented in every African country’. While some missions have rather symbolic than operative functions, many Turkish embassies and consulates fulfil tasks beyond traditional diplomatic issues. Turkish missions, particularly in Africa, act as junctions to pursue Turkish interests in many fields. Beside representative operations, Turkey supports two institutions with far-reaching implications through its diplomatic missions. First, since its establishment in 2016, the Maarif Foundation operated numerous schools in Africa; however, since the failed coup in Turkey in June 2016, the foundation primarily aims to overtake schools run by the Gülen movement. Turkey considers this faith-based civil society organisation, led by the Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen, as a terrorist group, which initiated the failed coup in 2016. Therefore, Turkish officials focus their capabilities on increasing pressure on the host country which in many cases, like in Chad, Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia, led to the forced handover of schools from the Gülen movement to the state-run Maarif Foundation. Second, numerous Turkish diplomatic missions in Africa host offices of the Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*). Although Turkey is constitutionally a strict secular state, Diyanet facilitates the distribution of the Turkish conception of Islam by the provision of scholarships to future imams, in countries like Togo, Mozambique, Mauritania, Uganda and Sudan, in addition to financial contributions to local religious communities all over the continent.

All these efforts continuously find vast support from the highest political level. Beside constant visits by ministers and deputies to Africa, President Erdoğan visited 26 African countries since his first Prime Ministry term. Frequent personal presence of Turkish top-officials highly affects and thus facilitates the establishment and the extension of bilateral relations with states all over the continent. In 2011, President Erdoğan was the first non-African head of state in two decades who visited Somalia.

On the other side, UAE and KSA are increasing their commitment in Africa since the early 2000s. Their approach is mainly characterized by economic investments rather than by the establishment of an institutional network. Both the Emirati Vision 2021 (released in 2014) as well as the Saudi Vision 2030 (released in 2016) put strong emphasis on the diversification of their economy and the improvement of regional security, implying an increased involvement in external affairs. Although the former strategy does not particularly refer to Africa, its strategic objectives set the tone for its engagement abroad. Thus, both countries increased their focus on the neighbouring continent in the West, particularly in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region.

On the forefront of their engagement in Africa, both countries utilise a wide range of national companies as investment agents. Giving the Emirati example of DP World, one of the largest port operators in the world, which provides vast investments for concessions and ownerships in strategic positions. DP World operates ports inter alia in Egypt, Senegal, Mozambique, Algeria and Somaliland. It illustrates a double-sided strategy where economic private activities follow national security objectives. This case highlights potential controversies as it raised criticism in Somalia, which subsequently banned DP World from doing business on its soil. The reason for the dispute were Somali allegations that the port deal included training assistance for Somaliland security forces, which, to some extent, act hostile to the Federal Republic of Somalia. However, this port is not the only one in the Horn operated by DP World. Beside ports in Djibouti and Eritrea, the Emiratis also run facilities in Bosaso (Puntland), Kismayo (Jubaland), and Barawe (southern Somalia), all semi-autonomous states which aim for independence from Somalia, adding additional pressure to the stressed relationship between Somalia and the UAE. In the words of an EU diplomat: the UAE is 'pursuing a one-belt-one-port strategy in the Horn', simulating China's One Belt and One Road initiative. Saudi companies, however, put strong emphasis on the agricultural sector. The calculus behind these investments is the establishment of sustainable conditions for local agriculture, which serve both the Saudi and the local needs. Therefore, countries like Sudan, Egypt, Tunisia, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Mauritania are of particular focus.

In order to facilitate their massive investment campaigns, the UAE and KSA operate a set of commerce organisations to foster investment opportunities through local offices. The King Abdullah Initiative for Saudi Agricultural Investment Abroad, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, or the Dubai Chamber of Commerce have leading roles in the construction and maintenance of ties with local enterprises, or even entire states. Although all organisations operate internationally, their focus lies on Africa. The Dubai Chamber for Commerce, for example, runs four of its nine offices in Africa. Nevertheless, both countries, particularly the UAE, also established development initiatives. The Abu Dhabi Development Fund (ADFD) and the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), likewise, annually release multibillion grants and loans to local initiatives and to African countries in general, particularly to Arab states in North Africa. These commitments increased significantly in the past years. While in 2011, the ADFD's and the Abu Dhabi government's grants and loans to African and Arab countries amounted to US\$ 6.3 billion, their financial support more than tripled to US\$ 19,7 billion in 2018. Comparatively, the SFD offered US\$ 250 millions in grants and loans to African countries in 2007, in relation to US\$ 829 millions in 2018. Concerning diplomatic missions, both countries increased their presence on the continent as well.

Between 2010 and 2018, the UAE opened 9, and KSA 6 new embassies in Africa, amounting to 23 Emirati and 29 Saudi embassies in Africa. In terms of religious support, both countries significantly finance Sunni communities and clerics all over the continent in order to push back Shia and particularly, from their perspective, non-compliant Sunni influence by Saudi and Emirati adversaries. Giving the example of the Islamic Preaching Association for Youth (APIJ), sustained by UAE and KSA, which runs around 200 mosques across Senegal and ultimately confines Iranian Shia influence in the country.

In summary, these developments highlight the ongoing and escalating power struggle between Turkey and the Gulf states in Africa, which touches on all spheres of regional influence. With Turkey on one side, and the UAE and KSA on the other, all three actors seemingly try to outbid each other in political, financial, religious and, most problematically, in military terms. The following part of this paper examines the underlying strategic implications of these developments.

Strategic Implications

The ongoing power struggle between both camps conceals comprehensive and interconnected strategic implications of broader regional relevance. Initially conceptualised as an opportunity for lucrative investments, the African continent quickly turned into a battleground for broader regional supremacy. In this regard, the involved actors do not hesitate to apply coercive measures against African actors in order to gain advantage over their adversaries. Increasing development and economic efforts are instrumentalised to gain geopolitical influence and to increase the three actors' regime resilience. Thus, this paper identifies three areas of particular relevance in terms of strategic implications, which are closely intertwined: food security, general security, and economic diversification.

First, food security is a crucial factor for prosperity and economic growth in the entire region. While Turkey, in this regard, is well provided, the UAE and KSA are almost fully dependent on the import of goods. Furthermore, existing tensions with supplying states might decrease the reliability of imports. Thus, it is in their utmost interest to secure existing supply channels and to create new alternatives. Therefore, both countries significantly increased their activities in Africa, and established partnership programmes with several states. Giving the example of the UAE, which invested multiple billions in Sudanese agricultural projects and established a 2,500-hectare "agricultural free zone" in Uganda. While KSA also maintains several projects in Sudan, they engaged in Ethiopia, Tunisia, Angola, South Africa, Mauritania and Tanzania. The latter two states exemplify the sheer dimension of these projects. In Tanzania, Saudi Arabia purchased 500,000 hectares of land, amounting to 0.5% of Tanzanian territory. Furthermore, in Mauritania, the Saudi National Prawn Company (NPC) eyed aquaculture projects worth US\$ 1 billion, making up the size of one fifth of the Mauritanian GDP. Ultimately, these investments entail a high potential to be used as instruments to exert pressure on local governments to gain political support for Saudi and Emirati ambitions in the region.

Second, general security and its understanding by the respective actors is another key underlying motive for their commitment in Africa. The Arab uprisings, the emergence and increased presence of terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as well as growing instability caused by internal conflicts, regime changes or climate change, significantly transformed Africa's security environment. These developments also imply consequences for Turkey, the UAE and KSA likewise. By countering these developments, while following their own distinct objectives, the three actors often tangle with one another, leading to confrontations in Africa. The predominant facet of the security perspective is the military component. In order to tackle terrorist activities, threatening its own territory as well as its strategic interests, Saudi Arabia, in 2015, initiated the IMCTC (Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition), predominately composed by Sunni, African states. This informal alliance officially aims to coordinate efforts to fight terrorism in Africa and the Middle East.

Since then, however, the track record does not show any notable success. Rather, it serves as a recruitment platform for Saudi military activities, like the military campaign in Yemen. Therefore, Saudi Arabia skillfully uses its wealth to gain military support, mainly troop contributions and intelligence sharing, from countries like Egypt, Senegal or Sudan, in order to reach its geopolitical objectives, in exchange for generous financial contributions. Furthermore, in terms of counter-terrorism efforts, Turkey, the UAE and KSA likewise set particular focus on the Sahel region. Beside their broad economic commitment in the region, all three actors financially support the counter-terrorism efforts of the French-initiated G5 Sahel security force. While in February 2018, Turkey announced a donation of US\$ 5 millions for the forces' training and equipment, it did not take long until Emirati and Saudi announcements followed. In order to surpass the Turkish donation, the UAE and KSA announced financial contributions of US\$ 30 millions and US\$ 100 millions respectively, together 26 times higher than the Turkish donation. However, it is highly questionable if these investments successfully support counter-terrorism efforts due to the acquisition of, for this conflict and environment, impractical arms and defense systems. In many cases, the recipients were not capable to provide the basic requirements, in terms of training and maintenance, to operate such systems successfully.

Another security factor of increasing relevance is the presence of the respective actors' armed forces and their establishment of military outposts in Africa. In 2015, the UAE established its first military base in Africa. The original purpose of the outpost in Somalia was to train local armed forces. However, due to growing tensions between both countries about their stance in the Qatar crisis, the UAE subsequently moved its base to Somaliland, a semi-autonomous region hostile to the Somali government. Shortly after, the establishment of bases in Puntland, southern Somalia, neighboring Eritrea, as well as in Libya followed. Besides being strategic footholds on the African continent, these outposts serve as supply bases of the Gulf States for their military campaigns in Libya and Yemen. On the other hand, the Emirati shift of sides offered a welcomed opportunity for Turkey, which subsequently established its own military base in Somalia in 2017. With the construction of this military outpost, its largest abroad, Turkey not only aims at balancing the regional power hegemony by aligning with opponents of the Gulf States, but also shows its determination to actively pursue its geopolitical objectives. Similarly, in the same year, Saudi Arabia declared to establish their base in Djibouti. However, its current status remains unclear. Ultimately, the calculus of maintaining military bases in Africa, and openly staking out its area of influence, entails three underlying implications: first, they provide the operational capability to autonomously conduct military missions in the broader region, second, they safeguard economic supply routes, and third, military bases in Africa act as pillars for their respective "security belts", evidence for determined, geopolitical force which poses some kind of regional deterrence. Finally, the security perspective also entails a religious component. In this regard, the respective states frequently declare opposing religious movements and clerics as security issues, which must be countered, implying broad and fluent definitions of the security term. As mentioned before, while Turkey actively influences local religious affairs by state officials, based in their next embassy, the UAE and KSA try to compensate potential imbalanced support with significant financial contributions. Because of the interactions between Turkey and the two Arab states, countries like Nigeria, Cameroon, Mauritania, Sudan, Uganda and Senegal turned into battlegrounds for ideological proxy conflicts.

Third, economic diversification is another key objective, particularly of the UAE and KSA, to improve resilience and to secure future prosperity. Therefore, these countries conduct investments of entirely new dimensions. Besides the agricultural sector, the energy, defense and tourism sectors are of particularly focus. Turkey additionally eyes the textile and the infrastructure sectors. For example, in 2014, Turkish investments in Ethiopia, especially in the textile industry, amounted to US\$ 1.2 billion, compared to US\$ 836 million of Chinese investments during the past decade.

On the other side, in 2018, the UAE and KSA made investments in unprecedented manner, when each invested US\$ 10 billion in the mining and tourism sectors as well as in the energy sector respectively. In this regard, Turkey, the UAE and KSA likewise aim to position their companies in relatively less competitive local industries of strategic interest. By positioning their national companies in new, underdeveloped markets, these countries have the opportunity to advance their own national industries and actively shape new market environments. These efforts overall also boost the bilateral trade volumes with Africa. Turkish trade volume reached US\$17.5 billion in 2015, which tripled since 2003. On the other side, UAE, Africa's biggest trade partner in the Gulf, quadrupled its non-oil trade with the Africa from US\$ 5.6 billion in 2005 to US\$ 24 billion in 2016. Beside the economic perspective, these investment efforts comprise an even more far-reaching strategic implication: the sustainable consolidation of influence by creating partial dependence of the target state. Thus, many investments turn out as strategic, geopolitical assets. Take as an example the Emirati investment flagship DP World. After the dispute between the Somali and Emirati governments concerning the Qatar blockade, the UAE moved its naval facilities to the neighboring country Eritrea, where DP World already owned the deep-water port of Assab. The Eritrean expulsion of its former ally Iran facilitated the military expansion of the port by an airfield and multiple barracks. Subsequently, Assab quickly turned into a crucial foothold for the war in Yemen.

The increased attention for the continent by the three actors also offers advantages for local states. Beside the significant contribution of development aid, the economic investments in infrastructure, agriculture and energy supply positively influence the conditions for local communities. Even relatively small donations like Turkey's sponsorship of the Malian parliament building are contributions of high symbolic relevance. Furthermore, the state-sponsored settlement of foreign businesses stimulates regional economies. The commencement of numerous new routes to Africa by some of the respective state-led flag carriers, like Turkish Airlines and Emirates, positively effects these business conditions and thus offers an economic win-win situation for both sides. Additionally, the symbolic establishment of new diplomatic missions and other state offices, even in more remote African regions, demonstrates the committed partnership of Turkey, the UAE and KSA likewise. However, all three actors skillfully exploit the new-acquired influence. Therefore, they virtually apply a "good cop, bad cop-strategy", with patronizing support on one hand, and coercive pressure on the other. The former attitude became particularly evident when KSA and the UAE mediated the settlement of the 20-year conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This historic event was largely enabled by previous Saudi and Emirati pledges of extensive aid and investment packages. Nevertheless, this settlement ultimately also met the mediators' interests. A peaceful environment in the Horn of Africa is vital for Turkey, the UAE and KSA's strategic objectives. The other path, however, is the application of coercive measures. During the Qatar crisis, Saudi Arabia and the UAE used a mix of diplomatic pressure and financial carrots to gain support for the blockade against its neighboring state. Based on their recently gained influence, the UAE and KSA forced countries like Sudan, Eritrea, Senegal, Comoros or Mauritania to shut down their ties with Qatar. However, not all African states complied with this requests. Less vulnerable states like Nigeria and South Africa, for example, refused to comply to maintain their neutral stance in the conflict. Morocco, recipient of extensive Saudi direct investments, offered to mediate the conflict between Qatar and the other Gulf states, additionally providing Qatar with food supplies. Shortly after, Qatar and Morocco even tightened their ties by signing eleven memoranda of understanding in the fields of investment, trade, education, and media. Saudi officials interpreted this move as Morocco siding with Qatar. Subsequently, Saudi direct investments collapsed from around US\$ 400 million in 2014 to US\$ 51 million in 2018. A few months later, KSA even responded with a "provocation" by voting against Morocco's bid to host the FIFA World Cup in 2026. Similarly, as mentioned before, Turkey also deployed this carrot-and-stick policy to acquire schools run by the Gülen Foundation in order to limit its - from Turkish perspective- hostile action.

Additionally, the large number of African guest workers, particularly in the Gulf States, constitutes another potential coercive instrument. The diaspora of some African countries contribute a significant share to their respective Gross National Product (GNP). For example, large parts of the Sudanese and Ethiopian diaspora live in the Gulf States. While over 100,000 Ethiopians work in the UAE, approximately 540,000 Sudanese live in the Gulf States, around one third of the entire Sudanese diaspora. In 2013, Saudi Arabia understood that taking advantage of this leverage was a viable option, when it conducted the mass deportation of 120,000 Ethiopians. The expulsion of entire foreign communities from the host state is a powerful instrument to exert pressure on the respective states. Thus, the application of this instrument has far-reaching economic and social consequences for the affected citizens as well as their home country likewise.

Conclusion and Outlook

Turkey, the UAE and Saudi Arabia rapidly expanded their global footprint in the past decade. Leveraging on the interconnected deployment of national assets in development, economic and security fields, all three actors significantly expanded their influence in Africa. Their commitment even overshadowed Chinese and Western action on the continent. However, their concurrent engagement on the continent, in addition to their opposing interests, created significant tensions between the respective actors. This paper identified two distinct approaches of Turkish as well as Saudi and Emirati engagements in Africa. Beside the local establishment of a range of its national agencies, Turkey puts strong emphasis on development assistance and the strengthening of local structures, summarised under the term “Humanitarian Diplomacy”. Furthermore, this approach is accompanied by the notion of “Neo-Ottomanism”, the aspired re-emergence of Turkey as global power. Although Saudi and Emirati engagement on the continent differ in size and manner, their approach can be summarised under the term “Checkbook Diplomacy”. Both actors emphasise the acquisition of influence as well as the attainment of their objectives through large-scale investments by national companies, particularly in the infrastructure and agricultural sectors. Furthermore, the UAE and KSA deploy substantial development aid in an endeavour, which significantly surpasses their Turkish counterpart. Overall, this paper identified three areas of particular relevance in terms of strategic implications: food security, general security, and economic diversification. Although the military component of the security perspective offers potential for further escalation of the dispute, it remains dubious whether a direct-armed conflict would be in any of the three actors’ interest. Furthermore, this comparably tense situation raises the question of which country will be more successful in their respective approach. While Turkey successfully builds confidence by their relatively moderate financial, but country-fitted commitment, the UAE and KSA might be left standing due to their volatile behaviour. Furthermore, the unprecedented dimensions raise the question if the UAE and KSA will comply with their announced investments. Additionally, other regional actors like Qatar, Iran and Israel also significantly increased their commitment on the continent, creating additional cooperation opportunities for African states. Africa offers great potentials for aspiring regional and global powers. Therefore, it can be expected that Turkey, the UAE and KSA likewise continue or might even increase their commitment in Africa. However, if the respective actors insistently favour their own over local interests, they are likely to fail and ultimately lose their stance in the struggle for regional hegemony.