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## **A Crowded Horn of Africa: Turkey's New Military Base in Somalia**

Turkey is going to open a military outpost in Somalia, almost two years after the opening of its first military base abroad, in Qatar. Ankara has traditionally invested in Eastern Africa, attempting to maximize religious ties and shared economic interests. But this step marks a new start for Turkish-Somali relations, and for security balances in entire Horn of Africa, underlying Turkey's ambitious African politics, deeply tied with the Middle Eastern one.

According to public statements, 200 Turkish militaries will train soldiers of the Somali National Army (SNA), fragmented among rival clans: this would be the main reason behind Ankara's choice. For electoral purposes, former Mogadishu's government refused to define the Turkish project as a "military base", opting for a "training installation" aimed to improve Somali soldiers' professionalization against the Al-Shaabab's threat. Turkish ambassador in Somalia refers to the outpost as a "military training camp" [Tom O'Connor, Turkey's military to move into Somalia after backing Qatar in Gulf crisis, Newsweek, August 7, 2017], so downplaying power projection's aspirations.

However, the new Somali president Mohammed Abdullahi Farmajo, elected in January 2017 and supported by Turkey and Qatar (against United Arab Emirates' backed candidate), didn't hesitate to sustain the Turkish initiative, so implicitly emphasizing the security extent of the new hub.

In the last decade, Turkey has consistently invested in Somalia, with particular regard to basic reconstruction (infrastructures, health and education). For Ankara, the stability of Somalia is a national interest in order to consolidate trade connections with Eastern Africa, pivoting on Horn of Africa's ports to expand maritime commercial routes. This is why Turkey uses to support the federal government of Mogadishu, and not self-declared states or semi-autonomous regions as Somaliland or Puntland, differently from what the UAE are, for instance, doing.

Establishing a military base abroad also means long-term investments for security and development in the neighbourhood: such an economic and political effort can't be detached from a clear geopolitical intent. In the Horn of Africa, Turkey acts in the footsteps of some Arab Gulf states (Saudi Arabia in Djibouti, the UAE in Eritrea and Somaliland) and Iran (although Teheran doesn't have official military bases in the area).

Eastern Africa has become a crowded arena for Middle Eastern and international players, interested not only in African business opportunities, but also in Asian routes and markets: this is also the case of an exporter country as Turkey. As a matter of fact, economic and commercial penetration are strictly tied to geopolitical influence. However, the opening of many military bases, at the same time, in the same sub-region, by actors coming from the same region, reveals an indirect power struggle: also in East

Africa, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as among Saudi-Emirati vs Turkish-Qatari, is likely to rise.

Turkey's new military base in Somalia sheds light on another point. Charities, media and soft power tools are necessary to acquire influence, and Ankara used to rely on them in the Horn of Africa, but they are not sufficient. Hard tools, as military outposts, make the difference at a geopolitical level: Middle Eastern states, as Turkey, are more and more ready to bet on them.

**Eleonora Ardemagni** - *Analyst of the Middle East, focused on foreign policy and security issues of Yemen and the GCC region. External researcher (Mediterranean and Middle East Program) at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies and regular contributor for the Aspen Institute Italy*