

Turkey - Sudan strategic relations and the implications for the region

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The visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sudan and the "Suakin island deal" have heightened an already tense political situation in the region. Turkey is seeking to expand Turkey's influence beyond the Middle East to Africa in a bid to transform Turkey from the regional state into a sort of neo-Ottoman Empire. As a part of the new strategy, Turkey inaugurated its largest foreign military base in the world on September 30, 2017, in Mogadishu, Somalia.¹

The Sudanese-Turkish relations have their roots in the history of the two nations since the days of the Ottoman Empire that ruled wide swaths of the Muslim World, including the Sudan.

Turkish President Erdogan accompanied by a large delegation, has arrived in Khartoum on December 24, 2017, on a two-day official visit, making the first trip by a Turkish president to Sudan. This visit to Sudan is the second by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The first was in 2006 when he was a prime minister.

Sudan is seen as a gateway to Africa helping Turkey to increase its diplomatic, military and economic presence across the continent. The Sudanese-Turkish relations had continued to gear up in the political, economic, military and cultural spheres and Turkey has supported Sudan politically over the years in the efforts to get US sanctions lifted.

The delegation that accompanied Erdogan included: Defense Minister Nurettin Canikli, Turkish Chief of General Staff Hulusi Akar, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Education Minister Ismet Yilmaz, Agriculture Minister Ahmet Esref Fakibaba, Energy Minister Berat Albayrak, Culture and Tourism Minister Numan Kurtulmus, Transport, Maritime Affairs and Communications Minister Ahmet Arslan, Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci, and 150 Turkish businessmen.²

The two sides discussed bilateral relations and ways to enhance cooperation as well as issues of common concern. At the end of the talks, the two sides signed 12 cooperation agreements worth \$650 million in total. The Sudanese President Omer al-Bashir and visiting Turkish President Erdogan have agreed to raise trade exchange between the two countries to \$1 billion within one year and they are planning to increase bilateral trade up to \$10 billion.³

According to a report issued by the Sudanese Ministry of Investment, the volume of Turkish investments in Sudan amounted to 2 billion dollars from 2000 to 2017. It further indicates that there are 288 Turkish investment projects in Sudan.⁴

Sudan and Turkey also agreed to approve the establishment of a higher political committee headed by the two presidents, saying the committee would annually meet in Khartoum and Ankara alternately.⁵

The Turkish President hailed Sudan's stance against the failed coup in Turkey in July 2016, saying "we wouldn't forget the solidarity you have shown in this regard".⁶ Under Ankara's direction, Sudan has closed schools once run by the FETO Gülen movement and helped to secure the arrest of Turkish nationals suspected of financing the movement's coup attempt.

Erdogan addressed the Sudanese Parliament where he announced full cooperation with Sudan in the military, energy, health and agriculture domains. He also vowed to support Sudan in all international forums, pledging to continue support for the Palestinian cause and rejection for the United States decision to recognize Jerusalem as capital of Israel.

Turkey will rebuild a ruined Ottoman port city at Suakin

Turkey will rebuild a ruined Ottoman port city at Suakin on Sudan's Red Sea coast and construct a naval dock to maintain civilian and military vessels.⁷

The ancient Red Sea Suakin port was located in strategic location close to Makkah & Madinah. Suakin was Sudan's major harbor when it was ruled by the Ottoman Empire and Ottoman forces used to use this sea port to secure Ottoman Empire's Hejaz province. Over the last century, Suakin port went out of operation after Port Sudan had been constructed 60 km to the north.⁸

The restoration at Suakin was agreed during a visit to the ancient port by Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan said Turkey had been temporarily granted part of Suakin so it could rebuild the area as a tourist site and a transit point for pilgrims crossing the Red Sea to Mecca.⁹

The military cooperation - Turkey – Sudan - Qatar

On the sidelines of Turkish President Erdoğan's visit to Sudan, Turkish, Sudanese and Qatari Army chiefs met in Khartoum on December 27, 2017. However, no further details were released about the meeting or the issues that were discussed.¹⁰

Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik arrived in the Sudanese capital Khartoum on January 9, 2017, to hold talks with his Sudanese and Qatari counterparts. Sudanese Defense Minister Brig. Ahmed al-Shami said that the three ministers discussed military ties along with regional and international developments.¹¹

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and three defense ministers attended the opening of the Soor factory in Khartoum that will produce military uniforms for Sudanese army.¹² The Soor military and civilian clothing factory is jointly owned by Qatar, Sudan and Turkey. The factory aims to provide high quality military, logistic

and civilian products to the Middle East and Africa following global standards. The Soor factory will produce 2,000 military uniforms for Sudanese army and also export its uniforms to other countries, including Qatar, Turkey, Kenya, Somalia, Chad and other countries.¹³

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani met, at his office, on April 30, 2017, with Minister of Defense of Sudan, Lieutenant General Awad Mohamed Ahmed Ibn Auf. During the meeting, they reviewed the relations and ways of developing them.¹⁴

One example of military cooperation between Turkey and Sudan is the joint training conducted by Turkish military ships carrying 700 military personnel with their Sudanese counterparts in Port Sudan harbor, in June 2015.¹⁵

Turkish National Police Forces provide various training courses every year to Sudanese police officers in the framework of the security cooperation between the two countries. Up to now more than 3800 Sudanese officers trained by Turkish National Police.¹⁶

Qatar investments in Sudan

Since June 2017, Qatar has been considered a controversial country due to its “continuous support for terrorism” according to the Arab quartet, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. Therefore all of the four countries decided to cut all diplomatic ties with it, closing their airspace and seaports to Qatari traffic. Since then, a diplomatic crisis erupted in the Middle East.

Sudanese Minister of Transport Makkawi Awad said that his country agreed with Qatar to establish the largest port in the Red Sea coast amid growing cooperation between the two countries in many fields. He told in a session of the Sudanese parliament that Qatar intends to develop the port "Port Sudan" to be the largest container port to serve Sudan and its neighbors.¹⁷

The Qatari Finance Minister Ali Sharif Al-Emadi visited the Sudanese capital of Khartoum recently, where he met with President Omar al-Bashir and discussed economic relations between the two countries. Sudanese Finance Minister Mohammed Osman said he had held talks with his Qatari counterpart and signed many agreements for joint projects in various fields that would push the Sudan economy forward. For his part, the Qatari minister said that his country continues to contribute significantly to support various developmental projects to build roads, bridges and dams in Sudan. The amount of Qatari investments in Sudan is estimated at more than \$ 3.8 billion, according to the Sudanese Ministry of Investment.¹⁸

Summary

The Suakin island deal with Turkey has heightened an already tense political situation in the region. Relations between Egypt and Sudan are strained over the disputed border area of Halayeb and Sudan's support to the Ethiopian dam on the Blue Nile. For months, Sudan and Egypt have exchanged accusations, with Cairo claiming that Khartoum had been supporting Muslim Brotherhood members and Khartoum alleging Cairo was supporting Sudanese dissidents. The relations between Egypt and both Turkey and Qatar are also strained since July 2013, over their support to the Muslim Brotherhood, that is now outlawed in Egypt.

Egypt's pro-government media criticized Sudan over its expanding ties with Turkey and Qatar, saying the three are conspiring against Egypt.¹⁹ Of particular concern to Egypt is Sudan's military tie with Turkey, including a joint naval facility on the Red Sea to repair civilian and military vessels that was announced by Bashir and the Turkish leader in Khartoum.²⁰ Turkish President and Sudanese government denied the alleged agreement to build a military naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast island of Suakin.²¹

Khartoum responded to the Egyptian accusation by recalling its ambassador to Cairo, hours after the head of the Sudanese Border Technical Committee, Abdullah al-Sadiq, accused Egypt of trying to "drag Sudan into a direct [military] confrontation".

The Sudanese embassy in Saudi Arabia responded by saying that "Suakin belongs to Sudan, no one else", and promising that the deal with Ankara would not harm the security of Arab countries.²² As Egypt, Turkey and the UAE make efforts to expand their influence in the region, it is unclear whether relations between African states will continue to sour.

Notes

- ¹ Khaled Mahmoud, Turkey Opens Largest Foreign Military Base in Somalia, Asharq Alawsat, October 1, 2017.
- ² Sudan, Turkey agrees to increase trade exchange to \$1 billion, Sudan Tribune, December 24, 2017.
- ³ Ali Kucukgocmen, Khalid Abdelaziz, Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval dock, Reuters, December 26, 2017.
- ⁴ Sudan, Turkey agrees to increase trade exchange to \$1 billion, Sudan Tribune, December 24, 2017.
- ⁵ Sudan, Turkey agrees to increase trade exchange to \$1 billion, Sudan Tribune, December 24, 2017.
- ⁶ Sudan, Turkey agrees to increase trade exchange to \$1 billion, Sudan Tribune, December 24, 2017.
- ⁷ Ali Kucukgocmen, Khalid Abdelaziz, Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval dock, Reuters, December 26, 2017.
- ⁸ Turkey Temporarily Granted Ancient Ottoman Red Sea Port in Sudan for Rebuilding, Sputnik, December 26, 2017.
- ⁹ Ali Kucukgocmen, Khalid Abdelaziz, Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval dock, Reuters, December 26, 2017.
- ¹⁰ Turkish, Sudanese, Qatari army chiefs' meeting raises doubts, Egypt Today, December 27, 2017.
- ¹¹ Turkey, Qatar, Sudan defense ministers meet in Sudan, Pakistan Observer, January 9, 2017.
- ¹² Sudan president, Qatar's Defense Minister open Sur clothing factory, Gulf Times, January 9, 2017.
- ¹³ Turkey, Qatar, Sudan defense ministers meet in Sudan, Pakistan Observer, January 9, 2017.
- ¹⁴ HH the Emir Meets Sudan's Defense Minister, Tribune, April 30, 2017.
- ¹⁵ Horizons of Sudanese-Turkish Relations, The Sudanese Media Center, December 25, 2017.
- ¹⁶ Relations between Turkey and Sudan, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- ¹⁷ Qatar-Sudan deal to build the largest port on Red Sea coast, The Peninsula Online, November 16, 2017.
- ¹⁸ Qatar-Sudan deal to build the largest port on Red Sea coast, The Peninsula Online, November 16, 2017.
- ¹⁹ Hamza Hendawi, Egypt, Sudan relations at a new low over Erdogan's visit, A.P, December 28, 2017.
- ²⁰ Hamza Hendawi, Egypt, Sudan relations at a new low over Erdogan's visit, A.P, December 28, 2017.
- ²¹ Sudan, Turkey deny military naval base deal, Sudan Tribune, December 29, 2017.
- ²² Why are tensions rising in the Red Sea region? Al Jazeera, January 10, 2018.