

The West versus Hezbollah

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Through lenses of Kuwaiti woman photographer

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Hariri in Saudi Arabia

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Erdogan moves to expand arc of influence in North Africa, Sahel

Thomas Seibert

Washington

Facing a series of crises in its relations with the West and increasing isolation in the Middle East, Turkey is seeking ties further afield. It has extended military and political associations to Africa in a sign that Ankara is determined to expand its zone of influence.

After establishing a foothold in Sudan and reinforcing his presence in the Horn of Africa, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan turned his sights on North Africa and the Sahel region when he embarked on a visit to Algeria and three West African countries on February 26.

Much like China, Turkey is selling its economic ambitions as beneficial to Africa.

Turkey's ties with the West dimmed over the refusal by the Czech Republic to extradite Salih Muslim, a leader of a Syrian-Kurdish group that Ankara views as a terrorist organisation. Turkish government spokesman Bekir Bozdogan accused the West of ignoring terrorism if victims were "Turks or Muslims."

Turkey also rejected calls by France and the United States to extend a UN-ordered ceasefire in Syria to Afrin. Ankara is at odds with

the United States over Washington's support for Syria's Kurds and is facing growing criticism from Europe over Erdogan's crackdown on dissent and a standoff with Cyprus over hydrocarbon rights in the eastern Mediterranean.

"Instead of turning East, Turkey is going it alone," Nicholas Danforth, a senior political analyst at the Bipartisan Policy Centre, a Washington think-tank, wrote in an analysis for War on the Rocks, a website on security matters. "The West is in real danger of losing Turkey but this has not resulted from, or been accompanied by, improved relations between Turkey and any of its Eastern neighbours," Danforth added.

Erdogan's action in Afrin shows a Turkish leader ready to use military means to achieve his objectives, a fact that is hardly reassuring to the West and regional powers. Only three months ago, Turkey increased its military presence overseas when it reached an agreement with Sudan to modernise a former Ottoman fort on the Red Sea to include new naval base facilities. Turkey already has bases in Somalia and Qatar.

Turkey's military ambitions are stoking tensions between Ankara and Cairo. The two countries downgraded diplomatic ties following the ousting of Egyptian Islamist President Muhammad Morsi in 2013. Erdogan has avoided all contact with Morsi's successor, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and has been greeting supporters at rallies with the four-fingered Rabia sign, used by the Muslim Brotherhood to pro-



African ambitions. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reviews a Senegalese honour guard during ceremonies in Dakar, on March 1.

(AP)

test Morsi's overthrow.

"The Turkish presence in the ports of the Red Sea is bad news not only for Egypt but also for Saudi Arabia," analyst Einat Elazari wrote in a report for Global Risk Insights, a UK-based risk analysis publication.

Elazari said Qatar's posture in the Gulf region combined with Turkey's activity in the Red Sea "represent a potential foundation for a new Turkey-Sudan-Qatar alliance," especially considering "their mu-

tual support for the Muslim Brotherhood and relations with Iran."

Elazari added: "It is clear that the Turkish president intends to pursue opportunities for partnerships in Africa that will strengthen the country as a regional and international actor."

Turkey also sees huge economic dividends to be reaped in Africa. "Over the last 15 years, the trade volume between Turkey and African countries rose six-fold to \$17.5 billion," the Turkish news agency

Anadolu reported.

Much like China, Turkey is selling its economic ambitions as beneficial to Africa. "Turkish entrepreneurs generated 78,000 jobs in Africa and the value of projects undertaken by Turkish construction firms topped \$55 billion," Anadolu said.

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Mohamed Salah, a football player with impact beyond stadiums

Mahmud el-Shafey

London

"Mohamed Salah is so good, he's even usurped 'God' at Liverpool" read a headline in the Liverpool Echo, the city's most popular daily newspaper.

The 'God' here is veteran Liverpool striker Robbie Fowler who scored more than 180 goals in 350 appearances for the Merseyside club and whose nickname perhaps demonstrates how serious Liverpool fans take their football.

On February 24, Salah broke Fowler's record in scoring 20 Premier League goals in the shortest period of time. Egyptians are hoping that Mo Salah, as English commentators and fans have taken to calling him, can replicate that form at the World Cup this summer.

With half the season to go, Salah has 31 goals in all competitions; Liverpool's top scorer last season had 13 goals. If the Egyptian maestro secures Liverpool some silverware, he will go down as an Anfield legend. For many Egyptians like myself, Salah already has that status.

"He is a great positive example of an Arab and Muslim and this summer he will do that on the world stage alongside other Arab and



Ready for Moscow. Liverpool's Mohamed Salah (R) goes past FC Porto's Jose Sa before scoring the team's second goal, on February 14.

(Reuters)

Muslim players," said Britain-based Egyptian expat and football fan Ashraf Taha.

For the first time, four Arab teams – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Morocco – have qualified for the

World Cup. Unlike previous tournaments, Arab players now mix it up in the best leagues in the world, from the English Premier League to Italy's Serie A and Spain's La Liga.

Arab teams rarely make it past

the group stages at the World Cup but many are hoping that Russia 2018 will see a few Arab teams advance. The World Cup is traditionally a place to showcase talents, with many other Arab players hoping to attract transfer requests to Europe's big clubs.

Salah's effect is felt not just on the pitch but also on the terraces. He has, almost overnight, become one of the most prominent Arab and Muslim representatives in Europe. Although he does most of his talking on the pitch and one would be hard-pressed to find a post-match interview of Salah breaking out of the confines of the stereotypical footballer talking about heeding "the gaffer" and the importance of securing three points, he is more than eloquent with his feet.

Football chants are a staple of the English game. In addition to the old chestnuts about this team being on the road to Wembley or that player running down the wing, there are the more comedic or risqué versions that seem to emerge spontaneously and live long in the memory.

A recent chant by Liverpool fans about Salah – it went viral on social media – belongs in this category and contains perhaps the only positive representation of Islam on the football terrace. Sung to the tune of 1990s Britpop band Dodgy's "Good Enough," the chant contains

the lines: "If he's good enough for you/He's good enough for me/If he scores another few/Then I'll be Muslim too," and ends with the line "He's sitting in the mosque/That's where I want to be."

Salah is not the only Arab or Muslim footballer in the Premier League. His teammates Sadio Mane of Senegal and Emre Can of Turkish descent are Muslim. There are Manchester United's French midfielder Paul Pogba, Leicester's tricky Algerian winger Riyad Mahrez and Arsenal's German midfield maestro Mesut Ozil, to name a few. However, it is Salah who has caught the imagination in a way that nobody before has.

"We are all mad for Mo across the mosques of Liverpool. This chanting has brought a huge change in perception about the Muslim faith. It has done so much to break down hatred and fear, showing we are all one nation," said Mumin Khan, CEO of Liverpool's Abdullah Quilliam Society Mosque, in comments carried by Britain's Sun newspaper.

The World Cup begins June 14, with the first game featuring the host Russia against Saudi Arabia. Many across the region are hoping that Russia 2018 will finally be the tournament where the Arab teams cut loose.

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