

Turkey seeks larger footprint in Africa as tensions with West and region's countries rise

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Washington

Seeking to expand its regional political and military influence, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan embarked on a 5-day swing through Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal and Mali, a move bound to antagonise other actors in the region. In late 2017 Erdogan toured Sudan, Chad and Tunisia.

Turkey's row with the West over Syria has deepened as Ankara angrily criticised France and the United States for demanding that Turkey halt its offensive in the north-west Syrian region of Afrin.

Erdogan's effort to widen Turkey's military network generated concern in parts of the region. During his trip to Khartoum in December, Sudan and Turkey agreed that Ankara would rebuild a former Ottoman port city on Sudan's Red Sea coast and construct a dock to maintain civilian and military vessels, triggering criticism from Cairo. Ankara also plans to build a military base in Djibouti to add to its military installations in Somalia and in Qatar, which have riled Arab Gulf countries.

"[Erdogan] needs a new space because he's out of manoeuvring space," said Selim Sazak, a non-resident fellow at the Delma Institute, a think-tank in Abu Dhabi. "Turkey is on the wrong side of almost everyone" in the region.

During his visit to Mauritania, Erdogan offered to "share our experience in the field of defence," Turkish news reports said. He announced that Turkey would donate \$5 million to a regional force battling terrorism and trafficking in the Sahel.

With the Turkish pledge, a total of \$515 million has been offered by several countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States, to back the G5 Sahel effort spearheaded by France.

In Africa, the Turkish leader contrasted his approach with that of Europe's former colonial powers, saying Turkey is not out for one-sided gains but for mutual benefits.

"We want to march side by side with Africa," Erdogan said in Mauritania. He repeated his criticism of the US decision to recognise



The other arc. Turkish Chief of Staff General Hulusi Akar (R) hands a flag to a Somali soldier at the new Turkish-Somali military training centre in Mogadishu, last September. (AP)

Jerusalem as Israel's capital, part of a narrative aimed at bolstering his leadership stature in the Muslim world by acting as a defender of the faith.

In a speech in Mauritania, Erdogan called the host country "a land of Quranic schools, a land of the learned and the hafiz," referring to Muslims who have learned the Quran by heart.

Emre Caliskan, of Oxford University in the United Kingdom, noted in an interview with Voice of America that "50% of African countries come from Muslim backgrounds and this gives leverage to Turkey in the eyes of Europe, in the eyes of the West and in the eyes of Africa."

In the Maghreb, Turkey is interested in the potential back-channel role of Algeria, said William Lawrence, a former US diplomat who teaches at George Washington University. In recent years, Algiers has

served as a quiet mediator between Turkey and the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad. "I'm sure Algeria will continue to mediate," Lawrence said.

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Turkey and Algeria share a common concern over Egypt's role and a willingness to engage Islamists in Libya and neither is enthusiastic about France's active anti-terrorism strategy in the Sahel.

Turkey has been systematically expanding ties with Africa for years. The number of Turkish embassies in Africa has increased from 12 to 41 since 2003. Flag-car-

rier Turkish Airlines has 52 connections on the continent. Erdogan has visited about 30 countries there, Turkey's official Anadolu news agency reported.

Economic relations were another goal of the Turkish leader, who was accompanied in Africa by a large Turkish business delegation. "Turkey's foreign direct investment in the continent skyrocketed from \$100 million in 2003 to \$6.5 billion in 2017," noted Anadolu.

Turkey has no oil or gas resources and is keen to diversify imports to ease dependence on Russia and Iran. Algeria's role as a supplier could grow, especially because Turkey has started to operate two ships that serve as floating storage and regasification units for liquefied natural gas. Turkey is also looking for new markets for its food and construction industry, Sazak said.

Erdogan praised Algeria as "an island of political and economic stability in the region" and as Turkey's "first trading partner in Africa." He said both countries wanted to boost their bilateral trade volume to \$10 billion, from \$4 billion at present.

Another goal for Erdogan was to persuade African countries to close schools run by the network of Fethullah Gulen, a US-based Islamic cleric accused by Ankara of being the mastermind behind the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016. Gulen denies the accusation.

"Thanks to our efforts, many countries have now shut down FE-TO-affiliated schools and handed them over to the Maarif Foundation," Erdogan said before leaving on his visit. He was referring to the Gulen movement and an educational foundation created by Ankara in 2016.

The strange cases of Turkish ships off North Africa

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunis

Tunisian authorities impounded a Turkish-operated ship transporting military vehicles, uniforms, transmission equipment and other supplies that would furnish a "camp of irregular military forces," a spokesman for Tunisian Customs said.

The vessel, belonging to Turkish company Akdeniz RoRo Limited, was seized February 14 off the Tunisian coast. It was among a series of Turkish ships transporting weapons in the southern Mediterranean in recent years.

A ship described as a "moving bomb" was intercepted by the Greek Coast Guard in January. It was reportedly en route to conflict-torn Libya with 29 containers of explosives onboard. In 2015, Greek authorities intercepted a Turkish ship off Crete on the way to Libya with 500,000 bullets hidden under support equipment.

In a statement on the recent seizure in Tunisia, Commander Haythem Zanned, spokesman of

Tunisia's customs service, said: "The ship is being impounded because there are suspicions of a link to terrorism. The ship violated the customs laws of Tunisia and international maritime law."

Zanned said "after a thorough inspection" it was confirmed that the ship, berthed at Sfax on February 14, was not carrying weapons. However, he said: "We found 66 military trucks of various types, 300 transmitter devices and two satellite transmission units, armoured vehicles, including two cars of the type usually used by military commanders."

Zanned said Tunisian Army experts who inspected the cargo reported that "the equipment and items were suitable for a camp of irregular military forces."

Tunisian Customs referred the case to the criminal court in Sfax, south of Tunis, for suspicions of a terrorist connection and violations of the Tunisian Customs law and maritime rules. The ship's operators allegedly failed to fully disclose the military nature of the cargo in its mandatory listing of the goods it was transporting.

Tunisian authorities were suspicious of the vessel even before

customs officers boarded it for inspection after its captain asked for authorisation to berth at Sfax for repairs after an unspecified breakdown after crossing Libyan waters.

The Russian Embassy in Tunis said in a statement that the ship had sailed from the southern Rus-

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Abdullah al-Thani, prime minister of the Tobruk-based government

sian port of Novorossiysk destined for Douala, Cameroon.

The Turkish-operated and Panamanian-flagged ship was in Turkish territorial waters for several days before reaching the Mediterranean, where it spent days near the Italian coast before returning to Libyan territorial waters between Benghazi and Tripoli.

"If Douala was its true destination, the ship would have crossed the Gibraltar Strait instead of staying in Libyan waters," Zanned said.

Tunisian authorities are constantly looking for jihadist threats from Tunisia's land and sea borders with Libya. Libyan officials in Benghazi and Tobruk have repeatedly accused Turkey of supplying Islamist militias with weapons.

Abdullah al-Thani, prime minister of the Tobruk-based government in eastern Libya, alleged that Turkey sent weapons to Islamist militias allied with the Muslim Brotherhood to help them take control of Tripoli in 2014 after they were defeated in elections by secularist and nationalist factions.

"Turkey was not being honest with us," Thani said in a recent interview. "It exports weapons to

the Libyans to kill each other."

Libyan Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the self-styled anti-Islamist strongman in eastern Libya, accused Turkey and Qatar, another supporter of Islamists in the Arab region, of providing weapons to Islamists in Libya, including powerful militias of Misrata.

In August 2014, Haftar ordered his forces to shell a ship transporting weapons from Turkey and heading to the Libyan port of Derna, a stronghold of Libyan jihadists allied with al-Qaeda.

Libya plunged into chaos after NATO-backed, Islamist-dominated rebels toppled and killed dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

Libya's neighbours Algeria and Tunisia – as well as most Libyans – charge that regional interference and meddling by foreign powers in Libya hinder efforts by the United Nations and others to broker a political solution to Libya's civil war.

The United Nations imposed an arms embargo on Libya in 2011 to quell violence in the North African country.

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