



Mapping Turkish Military Presence in its Near Abroad and Beyond

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The ruling AKP's "New Foreign Policy" agenda has undoubtedly changed the perceptions and conduct of Turkish foreign policy. [i] Yet one may inquire into the incentives driving modern Turkey's investments in overseas military engagements in its near abroad and beyond, and question Ankara's true capacity to fulfil its "regional power" pursuits. Fundamentally, the answer lies with the AKP's radical reconceptualization of Turkey's international strategic role. First, frustration with the strategic narrowness and inflexibility of Kemalist policies, which, according to AKP's scholarly figures, have deprived Turkey of its potential to expand and grow to become an autonomous regional power, has led many to argue for an alternative paradigm. Secondly, drawing inspiration from Turkey's Ottoman Sultanic-Imperial legacy, the AKP network concentrated on cultivating fruitful relations across the regions that were once part of the Ottoman Empire.



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Turkish foreign policy has brought together a variety of means to leverage those historical, cultural, and religious connections that enhance Turkey's influence and gravitas in foreign relations, a grand strategy often referred to as "neo-Ottomanism," a term by which critics would describe Turkey's resourceful and cunning attempt to restore its Ottoman legacy and gain hegemonic control in the broader area stretching from North Africa to the Balkan Peninsula and from Mesopotamia to the Levantine Basin and the Gulf. Indicatively, geopolitical concepts, albeit of purely Turkish inception, such as the "Mavi Vatan" [Blue Homeland] and the "Turkic World", and a sense of post-Ottoman responsibility towards Turkey's religious kin manifest the intellectual heritage in Turkey's meta-imperial pursuits. Furthermore, true to his core Islamist-hegemonic vision, and wishing to remain in NATO, President Erdogan's ambition is to break away with a tacitly imposed "taboo" that has traditionally kept Turkey tied to western monolithic commitments, and instead encourage partnerships with states and non-state actors that happen to fall

outside the spectrum of western affiliations [e.g., Iran, Russia, Hamas, etc.]. Hence, maintaining an affordable level of duplicity in foreign relations, a sign of confidence and autonomy, could allow Turkey to accumulate credit and prestige in global affairs.

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Despite its frequent setbacks, Turkey’s dynamic foreign policy onrush, reflected in Ankara’s assertive diplomatic, economic, and military demeanour, seems to have substantially changed perceptions regarding Turkey’s potential in global affairs.

Turkey’s military built-up

Turkey’s large military apparatus occupies a key role in the country’s foreign policy vision, bolstered by the multiplying benefits of Turkey’s growing national defence industry. With an active personnel of about 352,000 servicemen and a budget of US\$15.8 billion, Turkey maintains over 60,000 military personnel stationed outside its territory, most of whom are illegally located in Cyprus (30,000) under the so-called Cyprus Turkish Peace Force Command. [ii] Undeniably, Turkey’s national defence industry has greatly contributed to increased self-sufficiency and opened up opportunities for business and partnerships. More importantly, a careful examination of Turkey’s experimentation with weapons and advanced platform designs reveals the strong connection with Ankara’s political ambitions. Apart from Turkey’s much-publicised drone technologies, there are a myriad of parallel design, production, and procurement projects representative of the strategic triptych: “Mobility, Range, Penetration.” Such projects include the

commissioning of the Spanish designed amphibious assault ship TCG Anadolu [light aircraft carrier], frigates and corvettes, the development of indigenous command and control systems, simulators, and electronic warfare systems, the production of tactical ballistic missiles, and numerous types of armored personnel vehicles. Turkey operates a production line for attack helicopters (ATAK2), develops a battle-tank project (ALTAY), and has experimented with the production of numerous unmanned ground, navy, and aerial vehicles and with the design and construction of a fifth-generation aircraft, KAAN, whose operationability is nevertheless still questionable. The idea behind Turkey's armaments frenzy is to allow the Turkish Armed Forces to improve their mobility and penetrability in hostile terrains and make long distances less of an impeding factor in warfare by drastically increasing the range of striking capacities [long distance strikes] and reducing their traceability and noticeability. [iii]

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equipment procurements. On the one hand, sanctions have been imposed by the United States on Turkey's defence industry for the purchase of the Russian S-300 missile system, whereas Turkey has also been ejected from the F-35 fighting jet program. More recently, the US upgraded its punitive measures targeting Turkish procurement companies for providing materials, services, and technological support to Russia and Iran's nuclear and defence sectors. [iv] Moreover, the Turkish military industry is still largely dependent on

foreign technology and mechanical parts, usually imported from Austria, Canada, Germany, and South Korea, rendering the Turkish military industry vulnerable to policy shifts decided by major providers. However, despite U.S.

sanctions and EU criticisms, the US has approved [on January 20, 2024] a substantial \$23 billion deal that includes the sale of 40 new F-16 fighter jets and the modernization of 79 existing jets in Turkey's fleet for the sake of helping Turkey keep up with alliance standards. [v] At the same time, Turkey expects the delivery of six Type 214 submarines from Germany, and maintains relations with the Spanish defence industry.

Turkish Military Footprint

Over the past decade, Turkey has significantly expanded its military footprint in the Middle East and Africa, shifting from a focus on internal security to expanding its external military presence. Turkey's proxy-held military operations in Syria, support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, military interferences in Libya and Iraq, and the establishment of military bases in Qatar and Somalia are indicative of its desire to upgrade its geostrategic role by expanding its military reach. Turkey's military expansion is congruent with the geopolitical spirit of its new foreign policy, and Ankara understands very well that the struggle for influence and regional hegemony hangs over the control of five critical geopolitical hotspots, namely: the Hormuz Strait in the Gulf region, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden, the Caucasus-Caspian corridor, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Syria

Turkey has carried out a series of large-scale military operations across the border with Syria [Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019)]. These operations represent the largest Turkish footprint in an Arab state since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. Turkey justified its military operations in Syria as a necessary security response against cross-border incursions by Kurdish militias [PKK and YPG] and against the looming threat of ISIS. To do so, however, Turkey has hired, trained, and equipped

groups of Syrian Salafi-jihadists, Turkmen fighters, and Muslim Brotherhood militias [SNA] with the task of undertaking the bulk of its ground-force operations in Syria's north. [vi] The use of paramilitary proxies has effectively allowed Turkey to displace the depleted local Kurdish militias [YPG] from Syria's northwestern areas, and establish a "buffer zone" that extends over 30 kilometres deep into Syria's northern territory, thus aiming to fend off Kurdish forces from operating near its territory and prevent the formation of a contiguous Kurdish-held region, which it fears could embolden Kurdish separatism within Turkey. Alongside the SNA, Turkey mobilised its air force, mechanised infantry, and commando units in high-intensity combat and special operations against Kurdish militias and ISIS. At present, Turkey has around 10,000 soldiers stationed together with their allied Syrian militias in several key areas across northern Syria, including Afrin, Jarabulus, al-Bab, Tel Abyad, and Ras al-Ayn, while it still maintains observation posts in Idlib. [vii] The Russian-controlled areas surrounding the Kobani and Manbij areas, as well as the US-Russian controlled northeastern borderlands, remain outside Turkey's military control, thus disabling the Turkish-backed militias from entering across the entire Syrian border. However, warnings by the US, Russia, and Iran have so far restrained Turkey's ambition to occupy the entire border with Syria and Iraq. Despite being unable to exert full control over Syria's borderland, it has nevertheless succeeded in obtaining a strong foothold in Syria's northern territories by establishing a protectorate under Turkish administrative and military supervision. [viii] Indicatively, Turkey's strategic plan for the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Kurdish populated territories under Turkish control, has only raised additional concerns over Turkey's interference and manipulation of the humanitarian crisis.

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Libya

The second phase of the civil war in Libya (2019–2021) offered Erdogan the opportunity to expand his influence in North Africa and advance its “Mavi Vatan” agenda by setting up a valuable platform at the entrance of the Eastern Mediterranean. In Libya, Turkey has supported the crumbling Government of National Accord (GNA), initially headed by al-Saraj, with military advisors, UAVs, and heavy armoury, playing a crucial role in turning the tide of the conflict against the Libyan National Army (LNA). The entirety of the ground-fighting in Libya was again assigned to the Syrian mercenaries, Turkey’s sponsored soldiers of fortune. In return for Turkey sustaining the GNA administration, Tripoli agreed to allow Turkey to exploit Libya’s vast energy resources and granted Turkey military and naval access in the southern Mediterranean. Turkey has established two key military bases in Libya, one in Al-Watiya (Air Base) equipped with Turkish-made HISAR missiles, and another in Misrata (Naval Base). This strengthening of dependency ties would allow Ankara to sign an outrageously provocative and illegal EEZ “memorandum” with the rump government in Tripoli that was followingly denounced as “null and void” by the EU and the international community.

Iraq

Turkey maintains a significant military presence in northern Iraq (Kurdistan Region), justified on the premises of securing its border and protecting its national security against cross-border attacks by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). In fact, Turkey has a long history of military operations inside Iraqi territory dating back to the 1990s. Two permanent Turkish bases in Northern Iraq, in Bashiqa near Mosul and Dohuk, and numerous smaller forward-operation posts with an estimated permanent deployment of 5,000 to 10,000 were established in 2018 through informal agreements between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), despite the lack of approval and the occasional objection from Baghdad. [\[ix\]](#) [\[x\]](#)

Qatar

Far beyond its immediate surroundings, Turkey maintains a large military base in Qatar, which serves as a strategic location for its operations and training missions in the region. The Turkish military base Khalid bin Walid [Military Command] was established following a military cooperation agreement with Qatar signed in 2014. Turkey's military installation has seen significant expansion since then, hosting around 3,000 Turkish soldiers and officers. The base serves multiple purposes, including training Qatari military personnel and conducting joint military exercises. The military base is equipped with armoured vehicles and APCs, artillery, helicopters, command and control systems, engineering units, and UAVs. In contrast to other major Arab states, such as Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, both Qatar and Turkey have expressed their support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, while Qatar retains good relations with the theocratic Shi'ite regime in Iran. Erdogan identified the rift between Qatar and the Gulf monarchies as an opportunity to deepen its presence in the Gulf region, and hence Qatar has welcomed Turkey's beefed-up military installation as an additional security layer against threats directed against the small sheikhdom [see, for example, the 2017 crisis with Saudi Arabia and the UAE]. In exchange, Qatar has provided Turkey with a strategic platform in the Gulf region near the Strait of Hormuz and offers Turkey valuable financial loans to support its economy.

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Somalia

Somalia is a central focus for Turkey's overseas military designs. Turkey operates near Mogadishu, its largest overseas military base, TURKSOM, and has trained a sizable portion of the Somali National Army. TURKSOM was established in 2017 with a focus on building a professional Somali National Army (SNA) to combat threats such as Al-Shabaab. Turkey's support includes building up the Somali special forces, providing logistics support, and assisting the naval and air force development of the country with equipment to protect Somalia's territorial waters from piracy and illegal fishing. Turkey's military base in Somalia and its broader involvement in the country's defence infrastructure underscore Ankara's desire to obtain a strategic role in the Horn of Africa, a region of tremendous strategic importance due to its proximity to critical maritime chokepoints in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

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Sudan and Yemen

Turkey signed multiple agreements with Sudan's Islamist dictator, Omar al-Bashir, concerning the development of Sudan's infrastructure, such as building a new international airport in Khartoum. However, Turkey's plans crashed in 2019 when Sudan's dictator was overthrown in a military coup. More specifically, Turkey's plans for a military presence in Sudan centre around the utilisation of Suakin Island, an important historical and strategic location in the Red Sea. In 2017, Turkey and Sudan signed an agreement that allowed Turkey to lease Suakin Island for 99 years. The agreement included the reconstruction of the island's infrastructure, including the development of a port that can be

used for both civilian and military purposes. The port on Suakin Island was expected to serve as a naval base for Turkey, something that would allow Turkey to obtain military proximity in the Red Sea. Suakin Island's location across Jeddah and the route to Mecca would render Turkey a major regulator of pilgrimage traffic from Africa to the Holy City. Yet Turkish ventures have raised concerns among other regional powers, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, who view Turkey's efforts to penetrate the Red Sea region with suspicion since they are wary of Turkey's hegemonic aspirations. Turkey's effort to set a military foothold in Yemen, and the Socotra Archipelago, by siding with Yemen's overthrown Sunni government following the Iranian-backed Houthi Shi'ite coup in 2014 backfired. Albeit consistent with Turkey's "master plan" to extend its influence in the Horn of Africa and project influence in the Bab el-Mandeb maritime chokepoint, Turkey's efforts were thwarted by the overarching antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran's proxies in the country. Turkey's attempt to stretch beyond its capacity was practically nipped in the bud before taking any meaningful shape, while the catholical lack of external approval has really exposed the pragmatic limitations that constrain Turkey's visionary expectations. Turkey's less than fruitful involvements in Sudan and Yemen are didactic of the pragmatic limitations and dependability of Ankara's grandiose geopolitical ambitions.

Balkans and the Caucasus

Turkish military deployments in the Balkans and the Caucasus include joint security-keeping missions and bilateral partnerships. Following a defence agreement [1998] with Albania, Turkey was granted a license to reconstruct and use the Pashaliman Naval Base opposite the Otranto Strait for the docking of ships, submarines and for the conduct of joint military exercises. Nonetheless, Albania has offered the Pashaliman base to NATO as part of its efforts to enhance its strategic value within the alliance. Yet relations with Albania remain particularly strong. Turkey also maintains a strong relationship

with Azerbaijan, capitalising on its shared linguistic and historical heritage. The two countries signed a mutual defence pact in 2010, and during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, Turkey supported Azerbaijan's effort to recapture the Armenian-held territories by equipping the Azeri army with Bayraktar TB2 UAVs and other military equipment. [xi] From 2021–2024, following the Russian-brokered

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ceasefire agreement, Turkey dispatched a small number of peace monitors under the Turkish-Russian Joint Monitoring Center, tasked with overseeing the 2021 ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The deepening of relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey has provoked Iranian reactions, especially over the possibility of constructing a direct corridor through Armenian soil that connects the Azeri Nakshivan enclave with mainland Azerbaijan, bypassing Iran. Such a prospect would effectively leave Iran dependent on the goodwill of Ankara and Baku for the security of its northern borders and for accessing transit routes to Russia. [xii] However, for such a thing to materialise, it would first require Armenia's and Russia's consent to hand over a major strip of land to Turkish and Azeri control, and given Tehran's incentive to contain Turkey's further penetration in the Caspian [including freeing the visa regime with Azerbaijan], we would expect Iran to object to any such effort. Finally, Turkish armed forces operate in two UN-authorized peacekeeping missions, namely, the NATO-led KFOR mission in Kosovo and the EU-led EUFOR Operation Althea in Bosnia with a few hundred troops.

Strategic Implications of Turkey's Military Expansion

Turkey's military expansion has drastically changed the way in which Turkey is perceived in the global arena. If nothing else, Erdogan deserves credit for translating Turkey's natural geopolitical significance into critical political power. However, Turkey's ambitious military endeavours carry significant

strategic risks that could impact its military effectiveness, political stability, economy, and diplomatic relations. Ankara's external military interferences and defence partnerships in the Middle East and North Africa have strained

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relations with other major regional states and drawn frequent criticism from Washington and other major European capitals [especially on Syria and Libya]. The outcome of Erdogan's orientalist brinkmanship has been a subject of debate and skepticism. Turkey's mediation initiatives with Iran, Russia-Ukraine, and Israel-Palestine have all failed dramatically. Turkey's military presence in Syria and Iraq relies on US

and Russian tolerance, whereas relations with NATO allies, such as the US, Germany, and France, are sustained only by cynic utilitarianism and the West's excessive reluctance [or fear] to risk throwing Turkey into Russia's arms. This allows President Erdogan to perform a new genre of “multi-aligned” politics, suitable for a regional power. Yet Erdogan knows very well when and how to manipulate international legitimacy [Syria, Libya, Iraq], mixing pro-western objectives with selfish and unsanctioned military and political ventures. Admittedly, regional and great power limitations have constrained Turkey's expanse in a world dominated by much larger or more substantive hegemonic struggles between the US, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and major European states. Furthermore, despite Turkey's dynamic growth in several manufacturing sectors, resource draining remains a major risk factor for the country's military engagements. Turkey's economy has been long suffering from huge inflationary pressures, successive currency devaluations, low wages, and poverty, whereas emergency sustenance loans tend to quickly deplete. Seeking to boost its struggling economy, and improve relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Turkey signed a 50 billion dollar deal with the UAE, making the Emirates a major stakeholder in the vital banking and energy sectors. [\[xiii\]](#) Besides, Qatari loans and investments have been steadily flowing into the Turkish economy. Amidst all these, we cannot ignore that Turkey's

political record is abundant with numerous army-led plots, coups, and interventions in the country's domestic political affairs, whereas the capacity to exercise credible political oversight over military affairs has always been a controversial subject. The ongoing military build-up, with its deficits and setbacks, may be an option for helping Turkey assert a more advantageous global position, and it has paid off in several sectors. Yet Turkey's inclination to "deep state politics", including successive political persecutions, and its constant diplomatic juggling have only helped to increase the trust deficit with concern to Ankara's true values and commitments.

Endotes

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Turkish Companies Accused of Helping Iran, Balkan Insight, March 21, 2024: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/21/us-sanctions-turkish-companies-accused-of-helping-iran/>

[v] U.S. Clears Sale of F-16 Jet Fighters to Turkey, The Wall Street Journal, Jan. 26, 2024: <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/f-16-sale-to-turkey-clears-congressional-hurdle-604f9204>

[vi] Estimates of the number of fighters vary between 20.000 - 35.000 trained and equipped individuals, formerly members of the FSA, who later joined the ranks of the SNA. Turkey-sponsored proxies include the Salafi and MB militia NLF, and the Salafi-jihadi HTS, whose members had previously joined the ranks of al-Qaeda's branch in Syria [Jabhat al-Nusra Ahls al -Sham]

[vii] Intended to monitor ceasefires and prevent a large-scale offensive by Syrian government forces, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4137231/t%C3%BCrkiye-establishes-presence-syria-10000-soldiers-dozens-military-bases>

[viii] Turkish civilian officials, such as governors, have been appointed to oversee the area. Turkey also funds education and health services, supports the region's economy, and has trained a new police force. Some locals describe these developments as "turkification" of the region.

[ix] Salim Çevik, Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik SWP Comment 2022/C 37, May 30, 2022: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C37/>

[x] Yousif Ismael Turkey's Growing Military Presence in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Fikra Forum, May 18, 2022: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-growing-military-presence-kurdish-region-iraq>

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[xii] Kian Sharifi, Iran Fears Loss of Clout in the Caucasus, Radio Free Europe, March 18, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-fears-loss-influence-caucasus/32867388.html>

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