

Erdogan's inauguration tells a story of Neo-Ottomanism in the Balkans and Neo-colonialism in Africa

by The Region - 10/07/2018 17:05



As Erdogan was sworn in as president on Monday, he was accompanied by dignitaries and heads of states from 22 countries. The visitors watched as Erdogan attended a visit to the grave of Mustafa Kemal, the founder of Turkey, and engaged in festivities that sought to connect modern Turkey with its Ottoman past. 10,000 guests attended the ceremony, making it one of the biggest in the world. As grandiose as it may have been though, conspicuously absent were key leaders of Western Europe, a move, analysts say that shows Turkey is trying to send a message to the West.

Of those in attendance were leaders in Bulgaria, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sudan, Guinea, Zambia, Guinea Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Somalia, Mauritania, Gabon, Chad, Djibouti, Venezuela, the occupied Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and the Emir

of Qatar.

Many dignitaries invited have been accused of showing a disregard for human rights in their own countries, some have even been banned from International travel by the International Criminal Court, like Omar Al-Bashir of Sudan, who is wanted for genocide and war-crimes. Beyond sending a message that Turkey is willing to diplomatically associate itself with such governments, however, there are also signs that Turkey seeks to deepen foreign ties that have been developed over the years that AKP has been in rule.

Some allege that the ceremony itself signals Ankara will continue with what some have called Neo-Ottoman ambitions. The presence of African leaders has also led some to believe that Turkey's growing footprint in a continent long described as a terrain for neo-colonialism will only grow.

Turkey's attempt to become leader of the Muslim World

The AKP's Foreign Policy, from its activities in Syria to its bilateral ties with the religiously volatile Balkan states is rooted in a doctrine which seeks to have Turkey be presented as the leader of the Muslim world, experts say. In so doing, Turkey is able to pursue its strategy in the Balkans and Africa. As Cagri Ozdemir, an editor with DW's Turkish Service puts it, "It's easier to engage if a country that Turkey is dealing with has this kind of common ground." Kristian Brakel, the head of Germany's Heinrich Boll Foundation in Istanbul has argued that this has been the principle doctrine of Erdogan's incursion into Somalia, "While in Somalia, Erdogan told the Somalis ' the West has abandoned you, but now Turkey will step in", Brakel told DW, "We are Muslims and we understand your country much better," is what Erdogan told the Somalian people to conclude. Emre Caliskan, a Turkey, Africa analyst at Oxford University says that Turkey has three key ambitions in Africa "economy, being a global leader, and the use of Islam."

Some, however, say that Erdogan expanding Turkey's political and military footprint in Africa has led to instability.

Neo-colonial ambitions in Africa?

The first allegation, we mention, claiming that Turkey is sowing discord in Africa just came last week in Libya. As a General of the Libyan National Army put it, Qatar and Turkey developed a plot "conceived to transform Libya into a launchpad for terrorists to head to neighbouring countries after they completed their defeat of the military forces." Such claims of a plot might be hyperbolic, but they demonstrate how Turkey's incursion into Africa -- particularly in Eastern and Northern Africa -- is pulling

the country into regional conflicts.

Turkey's decision to invite the prince of Qatar shows, in particular, more about Ankara's positions in the Arab speaking portions of Africa than in the Middle East itself. It shows which side Ankara has chosen in one of the most important conflicts in the Arab world today.

In late 2017, Turkey decided to set up its largest military base on foreign soil in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. Later, it signed defence agreements with Sudan to station its military personnel along the port cities facing the red sea. With Omar Hassan al-Bashir of Sudan, Turkey signed 13 deals worth \$650 million to establish a new airport, a free trade zone, grain silos, power stations, a new hospital and university. The decision will increase bilateral trade 20-fold. But the most important move that Turkey made was its offer to reconstruct the Suakin Island, which formerly belonged to the Ottoman Empire, and which will end up becoming an economic and military base of operations for Turkey along the Red Sea.

This has aggravated Saudi Arabia, particularly due to the trade links that Suakin Island has historically had with Jeddah. "Turkey's new Red Sea foothold may create new friction in Saudi-Turkish relations.." write Theodore Karasik and Giorgio Cafiero of Gulf State Analytics, and we are afraid that they are right.

More importantly, Cairo under the Sisi regime has been the most outraged. Egypt, which already feels that Erdogan represents the expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, is worried as Einat Elazari a Global Risk analyst wrote that Turkey's expansion into the Red Sea represents "a potential foundation for a new Turkey-Sudan-Qatar alliance,", considering "their mutual support for the Muslim Brotherhood and relations with Iran." This fear has expanded because of Turkey's military base in Qatar.

After Erdogan visited Sudan, Cairo deployed its military on the Eriteria/Sudan border. Sudan followed suit. Some analysts believe that this diplomatic spat was influenced by Turkey's decision to have a military outpost in Suakin Island, which could embolden Sudan to contest area's long disputed by both countries.

Furthermore, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Turkey also seem to be competing with a military buildup in Africa. While the Turkish military base in Somalia is said to contain three military schools, and Turkish officers are expected to train 10,000 Somali soldiers, Saudi Arabia has finalised a deal to establish a naval base in Djibouti while its ally UAE has built naval and air facilities in Eritrea.

"The immediate imperative behind these moves in the Horn of Africa is the growing

rivalry between the two new Middle Eastern blocs, David Brewster of the Lowy Institute argues, "Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt on one side; and Turkey, Iran, and Qatar on the other."

Overall, though Turkey is not only interested in East Africa but has been making its overtures across the continent itself. Turkey currently has 41 embassies in Africa, up from 12 in 2009.

The main reason has been to increase economic bilateral ties and to also establish regional dominance. One of the most significant moves, recently, has been its increased ties with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has seen a 10 fold increase in trade from \$200 million to over \$2 billion in the last decade. This hasn't been innocent either though, as Turkey has attempted to try to gain contracts in energy, and construction in order to exploit the natural gas of West African States. Furthermore, Erdogan has also used his influence to compete with that of his nemesis Gulen, which he blamed for the failed coup of 2016. And he has been able to get multiple extraditions from the continent as well.

Turkish colonialism in Africa? Some may argue that this might be the case.

Neo-Ottomanism in the Balkans?

Erdogan's inauguration also demonstrates the increasing influence that Ankara has gained in the Balkan States. Nearly all Balkan leaders invited were from areas that were from former Ottoman lands.

Europe leaders in specific have accused Turkey of trying to woo the Balkan states away from the EU and towards Turkey, something which could prevent EU countries from having influence over those countries with the carrot stick of EU ascension. As Emmanuel Macron put it, he didn't want the Balkans to "turn towards Turkey or Russia.", a statement which prompted a rebuke from Erdogan himself. "Nobody can try to drive a wedge between us and another country," Erdogan responded.

Beyond bringing the Balkans within its sphere of influence, however, Turkey has also been accused of having a destabilizing influence in the Balkans. This at least was the case when Kosovo arrested and deported six Turkish nationals who were accused of being Gulenists. This too had a twist. Kosovo's Prime Minister was not even aware that such a move was taken behind his back and without his consent. In response, Haradinaj fired his Interior Minister and the head of Kosovo's Intelligence Agency. Erdogan accused him of protecting terrorists.

The Balkans and Africa seem to have a prominent role in Turkey's future foreign

policy. It is a wonder how that will affect Turkey's relations with the west.