

# Middle-Power Aid Rivalry in the Horn of Africa

## A Comparative Study of Emirati and Turkish Foreign Aid Policy in Somalia

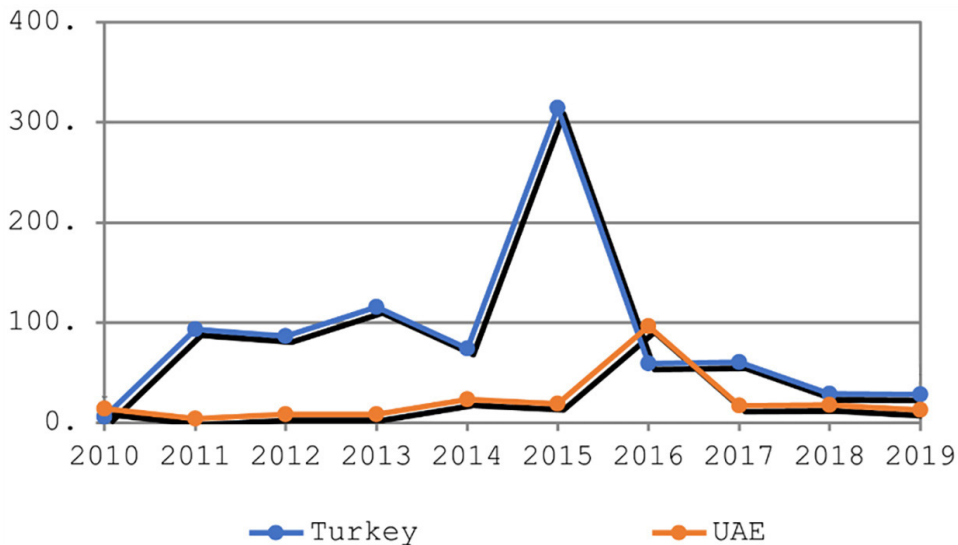
FABIO VAN LOON

The United Arab Emirates and Turkey exhibit vastly different approaches to aid giving in Somalia; their varying approaches reflect an intense economic, military, commercial, and above all, ideological rivalry. Turkey's activities in Somalia, and in the Horn of Africa more broadly, are geared at advancing President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's dream of Turkey's rise as an Islamic power. Leading the Turkish state away from its secular, democratic origins toward an increasingly religious and authoritarian system, Erdoğan has increasingly directed Turkey's international aid missions on religious and allegedly moral grounds; spreading a Turkish form of political Islam that has sparked a renewed competition with Turkey's secular rival, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In contrast, as an avowedly secular and absolutist state, the Emirates seeks to contain the spread of political Islam, an ideological populism that it attributes to the events of the Arab Spring. As a failed state, Somalia has become a central proving ground for this growing ideational and hegemonic confrontation between the two rival powers. As this article will seek to demonstrate, the radically different approaches employed by the two powers not only reflect greater strategic objectives but are inherently shaped by the domestic political circumstances that each respective leader is responsive to. This presupposition is founded in Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's selectorate theory, which posits that leaders must successfully respond to domestic constituencies to remain in power. Given this theoretical framework, this article will analyze the differences of these two cases through the realist presupposition of anarchic self-help, as well as the constructivist theory of state identity. In summary, the foreign aid of any state donor is fundamentally driven by the leader's pursuit of self-help but remains fundamentally buttressed by their ideological perceptions of political developments, both domestically and internationally.

As both the Turkish and Emirati cases demonstrate, an autocrat's dispensation of foreign aid is often tightly linked to an ideological framework that legitimizes and often moralizes their otherwise purely realist considerations. Following this observation, this article will assess how the religious moralism of Erdoğan's political Islam has driven Turkey's predominantly humanitarian engagements in

Somalia, and how the UAE's overt secularism legitimizes a realist approach that conditions humanitarian aid on the fulfillment of the monarchy's vital strategic interests. As this article will demonstrate, Erdoğan's religious and neo-Ottoman ambitions in Somalia have primarily driven Turkish aid toward supporting the Islamist government in Mogadishu. The UAE's more outwardly realist ambitions, supported by the perception that regional security is dependent on the containment of political Islam, has driven Abu Dhabi to almost exclusively pursue economic and military engagements with both the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the separatist regions of Somaliland and Puntland—using desperately needed humanitarian aid as an incentive for their cooperation.

These observations are empirically supported by the OECD's data on Emirati and Turkish official development assistance (ODA) disbursements to the FGS, which is presented in the graph below.



(Source: *Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries 2021*, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/a50961e5-en-fr>)

**Figure 1. Turkish and UAE ODA disbursements to The Federal Government of Somalia FY 2010–2019**

Understanding the political foundations of leadership in both Turkey and the UAE will therefore be the first object of this article and will serve as a frame to describe the forms of aid employed by both states. Submitting to the constructivist maxim that ideology and national identity inherently shape foreign policy making, this article ties foreign political action to domestic political survival, demonstrating the salience of state ideology in driving and vitally supporting a

leader. Understanding the unique content and form of these two foreign aid approaches is the final object of this article. The first two chapters are dedicated to exploring the philosophical underpinnings of each state's foreign aid policy; the final two chapters will explore the relationship between state ideology and the foreign aid dispensations provided to political actors throughout Somalia.

### **Turkey's Foreign Aid Philosophy: Spreading Political Islam**

As a political force “positioned between the state identity, civilisation and elements of power,” political Islam has grown to play a foundational role in the contemporary Turkish body politic.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Kemalist tradition of state secularism has not only been discarded, but it has also been completely overturned by the rise of a politically weaponized Islam supported by Erdoğan and his increasingly personalistic regime. Under his leadership, Turkish scholar Ozturk states that “Turkey brandishes Islam as both an end and socio-political means . . . gradually engender[ing] authoritarianism and trigger[ing] changes in the state identity.”<sup>2</sup> From his ascent to power in 2002, Erdoğan has successfully exploited political Islam, channeling it as a structural element of his domestic political power; one that invariably relies on his core constituency, Islamic civil society.<sup>3</sup>

Leveraging a conservative form of political Islam as a foundational fount of his own political legitimacy, Erdoğan has worked to promote Turkey as an Islamic power through the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, herein referred to as Diyanet). Established in 1924 by the first post-Ottoman governments of Kemal Atatürk, the Diyanet served as the mouthpiece of the Kemalist reading of Islam, a distinctly moderate interpretation of the religion that fit in with the scientific, positivist political tradition of Atatürk's political philosophy. As Turkey's primary “transnational religious state apparatus,” the Diyanet's activities both domestically and internationally reflect the religious interpretations and political posturing of the incumbent.<sup>4</sup> Under Erdoğan, the Diyanet has been revamped and repurposed to play a larger role in Turkish cultural and religious promotion abroad. As a tool for the AKP's conservative public diplomacy, the Diyanet has become a key political bulwark of Erdoğan's legitimacy. As such, Erdoğan has made a remarkable use of the Diyanet as a form of international Turkish soft power, aggressively expanding the Diyanet's budget and international presence in a manner that epitomizes the regime's “injection of Islam into foreign policy.”<sup>5</sup> In Somalia, and more broadly throughout the Horn of Africa, this policy translates to an approach that combines infrastructural investments with the construction of mosques, “offering both hardware and software.”<sup>6</sup>

Viewing Erdoğan's political legacy through the lens of political survival theory, it is unsurprising how central the ideology of political Islam is to his foreign

policy. Courting a conservative domestic constituency which prizes Turkey's image as a protector of the Muslim community (ummah), Erdoğan's legitimacy is vitally reinforced by the enactment of a foreign policy that supports these essential religious prerogatives. Citing Alexander Wendt's theory of national identity, Ozturk argues that "Islam occupies a central position in discussions of state identity, society and their perception around the world specific to Turkey."<sup>7</sup> However Erdoğan-inspired this approach might appear, the process of Turkifying a political form of Islam did not begin with his rise to power. As Gülenist scholar Ozturk notes, "[Post-Ottoman] Turkey's founding elite, harboring an understanding of civilization synthesized primarily with nationalism and positivism, sought to Turkify Islam in a manner that prioritised Turkishness and correlated religion with an institution loyal to the Turkish state."<sup>8</sup> Originating in Atatürk's Comtean approach to governance, which subordinates Islam to the prerogatives of the Turkish state, executives from Atatürk to Erdoğan have more or less controlled religious narratives in a bid to shape the Turkish national image both domestically and internationally. Naturally, Atatürk and Erdoğan represent two extremes; with Atatürk famously introducing the concept of state secularism through the government's control of organized religion and Erdoğan retooling religion through state organs to promote the interests of his own conservative constituency.

Furthermore, Erdoğan weaponizes religion to cement his own legitimacy and consolidate Turkey's authoritarian slide, a process largely legitimized by his increasing appeal among prominent Islamic civil society organizations.<sup>9</sup> Erdoğan has therefore tooled his own conservative brand of Turkish political Islam as a form of state ideology, a process accelerated by the unprecedented threat to democratic forces during the 2011 Arab Spring and the attempted coup d'état on 15 July 2016, the latter of which Erdoğan personally attributes to the religiously moderate, pro-Western Gülen movement.<sup>10</sup>

Following the events of 15 July 2016, Mandaville and Hamid argue "there has been a draconian crackdown on all entities and figures linked, no matter how tangentially, to what the Turkish government began calling FETO ('Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization')."<sup>11</sup> Erdoğan has in fact made the crackdown on FETO a core element of his public diplomacy, announcing in a 2017 address that Turkey is

. . . making strenuous efforts to clear FETO from friendly and brotherly geographies in Africa. . . This herd of murderers, this organization, which was caught red-handed on the night of July 15, is no longer capable of hiding under the disguise of dialogue, service, education or trade. . . With the support of the Maarif Foundation, TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) and Türkiye Scholarships, we will ensure that this organization no longer poses a threat to our nation and friends.<sup>12</sup>

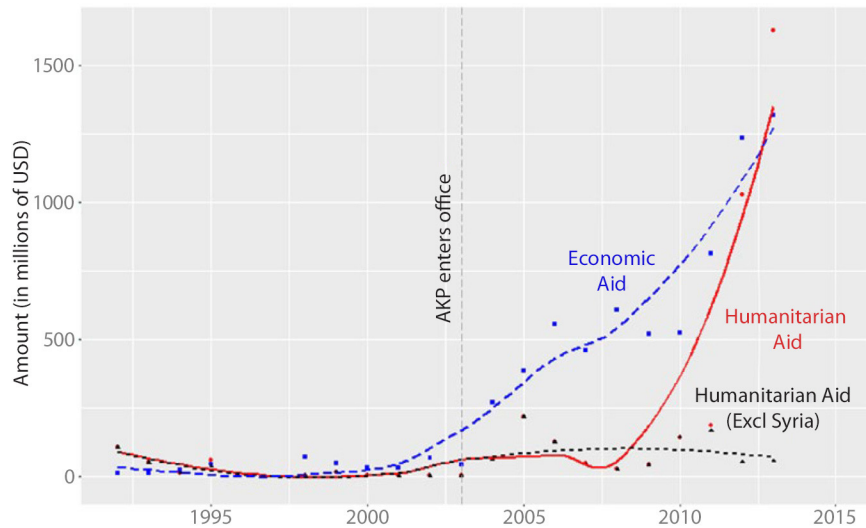
An event marred in infamy for the Erdoğan regime, the 15 July 2016 coup attempt has catalyzed the government's desire to project itself as a conservative defender of Sunni Islam, "revitalizing a distinctly Turkic model of civilizational Islam in which economic and geopolitical power go hand in hand with Muslim identity."<sup>13</sup> Naturally, this Islamic redefinition of the Turkish national image has assumed a central position in the crafting of Ankara's policies toward the predominantly Sunni nations of the Horn of Africa. Projecting the Diyanet as a form of soft power, "Erdoğan's government . . . [is seeking to] creat[e] a chain of 'loyalist Islamist republics' across the Arab world on behalf of 'the oppressed people' as the Turkish President has declared publicly."<sup>14</sup>

Studying the impact of domestic politics on emerging donors, Turkish scholar Kerim Can Kavakli argues that the rise of the AKP has caused a notable shift in Turkey's foreign aid policy. Specifically, he argues that

Before the AKP, the two main determinants of Turkish aid, aside from recipient need, were international alignments and ethnic ties. These factors lost their importance when the AKP came to power; Turkey began to give more economic aid to its trade partners and more humanitarian aid to Muslim countries.<sup>15</sup>

Using the Tobit estimator as a standard regression model to compare historical Turkish aid data from the pre-AKP era to the current AKP government, Kavakli's study demonstrates that religious identity has played a much larger role in Turkey's humanitarian aid disbursements under Erdoğan's rule.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Turkey has provided the majority of its foreign humanitarian aid in the Horn of Africa to Islamist allies such as Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and unofficially, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

As aforementioned, leadership in many of these countries, particularly Somalia, is being materially supported by Turkey, lending credence to the belief that Turkey exerts hegemony over their development. Seeing that "the AKP comes from the Islamist tradition," Kavakli argues that Islamic moralism has in part dictated the prerogatives of Turkish foreign aid giving, "which has emphasized the worldwide Muslim community (ummah) and attacked Turkish nationalists as 'ethnicist' (kavmiyetci)."<sup>17</sup> The public morality of defending the ummah corroborates the findings that religion has become more prevalent in Turkish foreign aid policy. See the graph below for a visual representation of the increased humanitarian aid disbursements under the AKP's rule.



(Source: Kerim Can Kavakli, “Domestic Politics and the Motives of Emerging Donors: Evidence from Turkish Foreign Aid,” *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2018), 617.)

**Figure 2. Humanitarian and economic aid before and during the AKP’s rise to power**

## The UAE’s Foreign Aid Philosophy: Supporting Secular Absolutism

The UAE’s core foreign policy objective is to contain and reverse the expansion of political Islam, a force to which it not only attributes the populist, destabilizing Arab Spring but, more broadly, to Salafi jihad.<sup>18</sup> From the UAE’s founding in 1971, the nation has worked closely with its American and Western allies to monitor and counter populist Islamic groups throughout the Middle East; the most recent and perhaps most salient example being the UAE’s fight to contain the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. As Italian scholars Federico Donelli, and Giuseppe Dentice note, “political Islam constitutes the main threat . . . to its [the UAE’s] own stability and regime survival. The Emirates’ fear is that the rise of a government led by an Islamist political group could trigger a domino effect that would involve the Gulf monarchies—a fear supported by the presence on its soil of Al-Islah, a party affiliated with the MB [Muslim Brotherhood].”<sup>19</sup>

However, to fully understand the UAE’s approach to Somalia, it is important to grasp the underlying philosophy of the sheikdom’s ideological narrative in relation to the nation’s geostrategic ambitions. The concepts which define the UAE’s regional goals have been clearly and consistently delineated by Emirati officials in a myriad of public pronouncements. These conceptual goals are also outlined in

the Tolerance & Inclusion page of the UAE Embassy to the United States website, which states that

The UAE has a new vision for the Middle East region—an alternative, future-oriented model that supports moderate Islam, empowers women, embraces diversity, encourages innovation and welcomes global engagement.<sup>20</sup>

These “progressive”<sup>21</sup> goals are ideologically buttressed by the sheikhdom’s promotion of “Moderate Islam.”<sup>22</sup> Accusing radical Islamists of misrepresenting and distorting the true Islam, the UAE seeks to promote a form of the religion that is compatible with Western values, and more specifically, is supportive of a secular state.<sup>23</sup> In many ways, the UAE’s moderate Islam mirrors some of the secular goals of the religiously moderate Gülenist movement, which vitally supported Turkish soft power diplomacy until 2013. In fact, according to Abu Dhabi’s Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, the UAE seeks to promote the following:

- (a) Reviving the spirit of coexistence that used to preside in Muslim societies;
- (b) Reviving the humanistic values among all religions;
- (c) Resorting to scientific methodologies to correct distorted views on religion;
- (d) Encouraging the Ulema to preach tolerance and peace;
- (e) Enhancing the role of the United Arab Emirates in spreading peace, security, and prosperity in Muslim and non-Muslim societies alike.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, consistent with the belief that the Arab Spring was fueled by popular disenchantment with absolutism, the UAE has publicized these goals in a bid to market itself as a modern state that understands the perils of extremist ideology and stands firmly with the aspirations of the region’s youth. Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan’s cabinet made this policy clear in a 2019 statement:

The changes [Arab Spring] reflect what we have learned from events in our region over the past five years. In particular, we have learned that failure to respond effectively to the aspirations of young people, who represent more than half of the population in Arab countries, is like swimming against the tide. . . . We do not forget that the genesis of the tension in our region, the events dubbed the “Arab Spring,” was squarely rooted in the lack of opportunities for young people to achieve their dreams and ambitions. . . . We have also learned from hundreds of thousands of dead and millions of refugees in our region that sectarian, ideological, cultural and religious bigotry only fuel the fires of rage. We cannot and will not allow this in our country. . . . When the Arab world was tolerant and

accepting of others, it led the world: From Baghdad to Damascus to Andalusia and farther afield, we provided beacons of science, knowledge, and civilization, because humane values were the basis of our relationships with all civilizations, cultures, and religions. Even when our ancestors left Andalusia, people of other faiths went with them.<sup>25</sup>

As this statement demonstrates, the UAE's promotion of a modern, youth-oriented moderate Islam serves to counter the appeal of political Islam, and by extension, Turkey's activities in the region. To that end, the UAE's foreign aid has largely focused on supporting nations that support the regime's commitment to a secularist and absolutist form of governance—policies which Abu Dhabi believes are “essential to maintaining calm at home.”<sup>26</sup> Viewed as policies of stabilization, these policies are based on the belief that “your prosperity as a country depends on the security of your region. It depends on your neighbors, not only yourself.”<sup>27</sup> As a UAE official explained in a Crisis Group interview, “for us, stability in the Horn of Africa is very important. This is our main priority in the region.”<sup>28</sup> This view was recently corroborated by the UAE's Ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, who when asked about the UAE's regional goals, replied “what we would like to see is more secular, stable, prosperous, empowered, strong government.”<sup>29</sup> In emphasizing the need for a secular and strong government, the Ambassador's comments succinctly summarize the UAE's guiding philosophy, namely the perception that Islamism and weak states are inherently destabilizing. To this point, the aforementioned UAE official stated the following:

What we worry about is the sweep of ideology in our region's governance. We are worried about the Muslim Brotherhood and their threat to the neighborhood. . . . It's the calling of our time to overcome this regional situation.<sup>30</sup>

Considering these policy pronouncements, it is unsurprising that the largest recipients of the sheikhdom's ODA disbursements were released to Abu Dhabi's strategic allies, Egypt and Yemen; both countries receiving an annual average of \$1.81 billion and \$838 million in foreign aid respectively.<sup>31</sup>

The UAE's aid to Egypt is of particular relevance, especially as it relates to the country's relative wealth and stability in the region. Receiving 97 percent of the sheikhdom's aid to the North Africa region, the case of Egypt lends credence to Woods's theory of politicized aid in the context of emerging donors.<sup>32</sup> It is in fact difficult to evade the UAE's significant interest in supporting Gen. El-Sisi's stability as the Egyptian head of state.

Under that framework, it is easy to see how the Emirates continue to condition aid on the success of purely transactional economic and security relationships. This has proven especially true for Somalia and its autonomous regions, where



UAE aid efforts are given to the highest concessional bidder, as opposed to being channeled in the long-term interests of stability. This approach was arguably cemented by the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring, an event that heightened the monarchy's perception of regional insecurity, and in turn fueled Abu Dhabi's selective investments in strategic economic, commercial, and military capabilities throughout Somalia and the surrounding region.

The UAE has tasked its global logistics company, DP World, with carrying out much of its strategy to the region, establishing a policy that ties key port investments in Somalia and the autonomous regions on their strategic alignment in the Gulf rift. In fact, as was recently demonstrated by the UAE's rifts with Somalia and Djibouti, these allegedly private sector investments are highly conditional on the political relations between Abu Dhabi and the host country—highlighting the government's tight control on Emirati private sector business interests.

This relationship is made particularly evident by the nature of Emirati investments in Somalia, where humanitarian aid remains secondary and conditional on concessions made to DP World. In fact, as Telci notes, after the Somali parliament legislated against expanding DP World investments in the Horn nation's ports and Somali authorities seized an Emirati aircraft carrying \$10 million in financial aid allegedly destined for Somaliland and Puntland, the UAE “halt[ed] all humanitarian work in the region” and ended all military programs it held with Somali security forces.<sup>33</sup> The UAE's retaliation resulted in the closing of the UAE-run Sheikh Zayed hospital in Mogadishu, which provided free medical services to the city's residents. Despite the Somali federal government's pleas to reopen the hospital, the UAE has to this day withheld all necessary financial aid, instead opening two new hospitals in Somaliland, at Berbera and Burao.<sup>34</sup>

These policies exemplify the UAE's approach, which conditions humanitarian aid on strategic concessions, such as the sale of Somaliland's Berbera Port; highlighting the salience of strategic military and economic goals over the publicly declared quest for stability.

### **The UAE's Approach to Aid in Somalia**

The content and form of Emirati investments in Somalia differ significantly from those of Turkey. The UAE, as aforementioned, has channeled investments in Somalia as part of its core security and economic interests. Providing Mogadishu with a fraction of the aid it provides to Cairo, a much wealthier and close political ally of the Emirates, the UAE has used Somalia as an economic and military base of its “strategic extension” into the Horn of Africa.<sup>35</sup> Seeking to counter the hegemonic power of Iran, and in part, the extending influence of Turkey, the UAE has historically focused on building security and economic partnerships with factions

throughout Somalia; from the central government in Mogadishu, to the separatist Somaliland and Puntland. However, as aforementioned, diplomatic tensions emanating from Mogadishu's 2018 aircraft seizure of a UAE humanitarian assistance aircraft, and the resulting closure of the UAE-funded Sheikh Zayed hospital in Mogadishu have all but shattered relations between Abu Dhabi and the struggling federal government of Somalia. Given the lack of cooperation between the two states, the UAE has primarily channeled its aid to the separatists in Somaliland and Puntland. The most important and arguably controversial element of the UAE's foreign aid policy to the separatists in Somaliland has been the acquisition of Berbera Port, which the UAE obtained from Somaliland in 2016.<sup>36</sup> As a 2019 Brookings Institution brief explains, the sale of the port was conditioned on a series of deals, specifically "a seven-point economic and military pact, which also included a major highway, cargo airport, dams, a series of development projects, and security guarantees for Somaliland. Representatives of Somaliland assert the base is to be completed as soon as June 2019, though this remains unconfirmed."<sup>37</sup> According to the UAE's *The National*, the construction of the \$90 million, 16-square mile military base at Berbera was scrapped in 2020, whereas the port, run by the UAE's DP World, was opened in June of 2021. Despite conceding the development of a military base, the UAE's purchase of the Berbera Port was carried out ignoring "angry protests from Somalia's federal government in Mogadishu, [which says] concessions constitute violations of sovereignty, as they cut the federal government out of profits and oversight while giving Somaliland a hook in its decades-old bid for international recognition."<sup>38</sup>

Citing sovereignty violations, the Somali parliament enacted a resolution banning DP World from Somalia.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Somalia's federal government was unable to enforce the legislation with regards to the UAE's purchase of the Port of Bosaso, located on Somalia's northern coast, which is currently under the control of the autonomous region of Puntland. Further extending "the UAE's strategic footprint in the Horn of Africa," Bosaso is a major economic and geostrategic concession for the UAE in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>40</sup> Similarly to the sale of the Berbera Port in Somaliland, the UAE's presence at Bosaso lends Puntland greater international credibility while securing strategic power projection for the UAE in the Gulf of Aden. Vying for domestic legitimacy as a regional stabilizer, the president of Puntland Said Abdullahi Dani has sought greater UAE investment in the autonomous region, recently stating: "We ask our UAE friends, not only to stay, but to redouble their efforts in helping Somalia stand on its feet."<sup>41</sup>

The nature of the agreements with both Somaliland and Puntland, which have jointly combined Abu Dhabi's economic interests with security assistance to the local government, reveal the true focus of the UAE's actions in the region.

Firstly, these investments highlight the UAE's strategic military interest in developing the Somali landmass as one of many "military perches on the African coast," with which it can successfully project power in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>42</sup> Sabotaging its relations with the Federal Government of Somalia by building military capabilities within the separatist Somaliland and Puntland autonomous regions, it is difficult to deny that the UAE's core interests do not align with the aforementioned principles of regional stabilization. Unsurprisingly, Turkey's state-run news agency, Anadolu, was quick to notice the Somali government's confrontation with the UAE, sharing a statement made by Somalia's Information Minister, Osman Dubbe, alleging that "The United Arab Emirates wants Somalia to be like Yemen and Libya and wants to create in Somalia displacement, violence, and backwardness . . ."<sup>43</sup>

The UAE's core approach is centered on expanding military and economic opportunities in the Horn that, as Jamal Machrouh notes, will "pave the way for the development of its national economy . . . [and] prevent any hegemonic inclination in the region."<sup>44</sup> The exclusive focus on these two areas of investment, as opposed to more humanitarian ODA flows, also points to the transactional nature of its interactions with the Federal Government of Somalia.<sup>45</sup> This transactional approach was evidenced in Abu Dhabi's UAE Foreign Aid 2015 Report, which attests that 92 percent of the UAD's aid was oriented toward development projects, with only 6.7 percent going toward humanitarian causes.<sup>46</sup> More broadly, the UAE's official reporting shows Somalia received \$31 million in aid in 2015, and that aid to East Africa comprised a mere 1.7 percent of official aid, 97 percent of it going toward nations in North Africa with Egypt in the lead at \$2.452 billion in aid received in 2015 alone.<sup>47</sup>

Viktor Marsai and Máté Szalai have classified the nature of the UAE's aid to Somalia as a form of "borderlandization," in other words engaging in policies that treat the Horn nation as a borderland for its own regional interests.<sup>48</sup> The authors refer in particular to the Gulf Crisis of 2016–17 in which the UAE pressured Somalia to align with the "anti-Brotherhood alliance," "in return for financial incentives and the reopening of a medical facility."<sup>49</sup>

This process of borderlandization, Marsai and Szalai argue, was therefore triggered by the "export of conflicts at two levels (interstate and transnational), as well as by using both political-economic incentives and ideological tools."<sup>50</sup> Unsurprisingly, the authors contend that this transactional relationship, particularly the UAE's dismissal of the Federal Government of Somalia in its complaints to UAE investments in Somaliland and Puntland, is a form of conflict-exportation that has ultimately caused regional instability.<sup>51</sup> It is important to note that the UAE's development-aid, buttressed by robust economic and political incentives "has not

taken place through coercion; local actors took part willingly, mostly motivated by short-term profits.”<sup>52</sup> Framing the discussion of Emirati aid to Somalia through the lens of transactional relationships, short-term profits and immediate political incentives, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the sheikdom’s approach to aid is focused primarily on the securitization of its near abroad. Having made these observations, the UAE’s approach is easily distinguished from that of Turkey, which has employed a much more long-term view of developing Somalia as an economic, military, and ideological ally in the pursuit of its own regional interests.

### **Turkey’s Approach to Aid in Somalia**

Contemporary Turkish aid to Somalia has been defined as a “multi actor and multi-track policy,” spanning virtually every area of the struggling nation’s development; with assistance ranging from the construction of schools, to the drilling of water wells, to the opening of the Erdoğan Hospital in Mogadishu.<sup>53</sup> From the data available at the time of the author’s writing, it is apparent that Ankara’s relations to Mogadishu are far broader, and far more intense than those between the UAE and Somalia, Somaliland, or Puntland.

Moved by the tragic events of the 2010 East African drought, which killed an estimated 260,000 Somalis, Turkey acted to quickly develop close humanitarian and development assistance to Somalia’s weak federal government in Mogadishu. As “the first non-African leader to visit the country in two decades,” Erdoğan’s interest in Somalia resounded internationally. Defining his humanitarian mission to the country in a 2011 Foreign Affairs article titled “The Tears of Somalia,” Erdoğan committed Turkey to an expansive humanitarian and institutional presence in the country, involving not only Turkey’s official development agency, TİKA, but the Ministries of Health, Development, Justice, and Interior, in addition to the Diyanet.<sup>54</sup> Through its intense presence on the ground, Gizem Sucuoglu and Jason Stearns argue that Erdoğan has exploited the situation in Somalia as a means to not only fulfill his ambitions “as an emerging donor,” but as a means to achieve his desired “foreign policy ambitions [to portray Turkey] as a regional model and a model for the Islamic world.”<sup>55</sup>

In fact, as a leader whose domestic legitimacy is ideationally undergirded by the conservative forces of political Islam, it is perhaps unsurprising that Erdoğan’s disbursements to Somalia have revolved around moralistic and normative concerns.<sup>56</sup> In fact, as a representative of the Turkish aid organization IHH stated in April of 2016:

The political, economic, or geopolitical reasons [of Turkey’s involvement in Somalia] should not be overemphasised. The main driving force for Turkey is stand-

ing up to the challenge of responding to a famine in a Muslim country, especially during Ramadan, which has been leading to a loss of prestige in the Muslim world. The 2011 visit of current president Erdoğan served to boost the visibility of Turkey as a humanitarian actor and allowed it to carry the Somalia issue into the United Nations.<sup>57</sup>

As some Somali observers have noted, Turkey's Islamic identity has played an important role in legitimizing and deepening Ankara's assistance to the Somali people.<sup>58</sup> In fact, "as a Muslim state, Turkey is seen as an ally rather than an external power to be feared."<sup>59</sup> As aforementioned, Erdoğan has used international aid missions as an opportunity to promote Turkey as a defender of the Muslim world. As he noted in a 2015 election rally:

Despite all threats, we went to Somalia without any fear. We opened a modern hospital, a nursing school, and a mosque. . . . Turkey embraced Somalia, who everyone had left alone. Today, there is a Turkey that determines the global agenda. We will reach out to wherever we can reach out. We will reach out to the oppressed. We will do whatever a great state has to do.<sup>60</sup>

A closer reading of this statement, specifically Erdoğan's reference to the Somali population as "the oppressed" and to Turkey as "a great state" highlights his portrayal of Turkey as an effective liberator. Erdoğan's description of Turkey as a great power also speaks to his neo-Ottoman ambition to inject Turkish influence into the unstable, vulnerable region. On that note, Turkish officials have certainly not cautioned from tying Ankara's foreign aid policy to its role as Somalia's great power patriarch. In welcoming Somali officials to Istanbul in 2012, then-Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated "You are home, Turkey is your motherland."<sup>61</sup> According to a Chatham House paper, the AKP's foreign policy favors "restoring the grandeur of the Ottoman Empire, highlighting official statements and writings that 'include fanciful assertions about Ottoman influence in Somalia.'"<sup>62</sup> Coupled with the construction of a military base in Mogadishu, Turkey's neo-Ottoman self-perception has been viewed by many locals as a "sign of power projection and securitisation."<sup>63</sup> In this respect, Turkey's "military involvement in the Horn of Africa cannot be seen in isolation from other foreign powers. . . ."<sup>64</sup> Unsurprisingly, in this respect, Turkey's great power designs have pitted its strategic interests in direct conflict with those of the Emirates, "heightening intra-Somali disputes and . . . contributing to increased instability."<sup>65</sup>

However, according to a broad collection of relevant literature on Turkish aid to Somalia, Turkey's public, religious morality is sincerely reflected in the approach taken by its officials in dealing with the local population. As one Somali minister is quoted as stating, "[the Turks] have knowledge of the country, they are

learning Somali, they are on the streets and they are driving the trucks. Who else can do that?”<sup>66</sup> In a 2014 interview released to TIKA, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud hailed the Turks as having a unique approach to aid, stating:

We have been constantly preaching to our international partners—“Don’t do the work for us, do the work with us.” This is the difference—the Turks are doing the work with us. They are training the Somalis, improving their capacity and introducing a new work culture to Somalia.<sup>67</sup>

This approach, founded in the religious moralism of the conservative AKP, has been well received by Somalis, many of which view “Turkey, as a new humanitarian donor ‘who talks to Somalis and stands beside them,’ [and] wants to foster an identity and image different from other donors, which are viewed with skepticism.”<sup>68</sup> As Mehmet Ozkan notes, “the common religion of Islam plays an important role in legitimizing Turkey’s presence in Somalia and in creating trust between actors, as opposed to Western actors.”<sup>69</sup> As Mehmet Ozkan and Serhat Orakci argue in an article for the *Journal of East African Affairs*, “the Islamic identity of Turkish NGOs was essential to their ability to deliver humanitarian aid in 2011,” a status that has allowed Turkey to “coordinate humanitarian projects with greater success than other countries.”<sup>70</sup> Directing aid efforts through the Diyanet, Turkey’s official aid body, TIKA, and the Turkish Red Crescent, Turkey’s humanitarian activities in the country have effectively projected Ankara’s distinctly Islamic identity. Overseeing the “distribution of copies of the Quran, sending local Imams to Turkey for training, and repairing ruined Somali mosques,” the Turkish mission has focused heavily on the promotion of a joint-religious identity with the Somali population, which Ozkan argues has come to view the Turks as “saviours,” with former prime minister of Somalia Abdiweli Mohamed Ali defining their involvement in the country as a “holy grail.”<sup>71</sup> It is noteworthy that Turkey’s diplomatic mission to Somalia is the only non-African mission present in Mogadishu, and that the Ambassador was not selected from the Department of Foreign Affairs. Hailing from the UK branch of Doctors Worldwide, an international NGO, Turkey’s mission is headed by Kani Torun, “a humanitarian worker with a sensitivity to Islam.”<sup>72</sup>

Alongside providing religious services, Turkey has effectively filled the security void created by the UAE’s withdrawal of support for the Federal Government of Somalia. With the Emirates now directing security assistance toward the separatist Somaliland and Puntland, Turkish forces are unilaterally training FGS security forces.<sup>73</sup> This alignment of proxies delineates the Emirati-Turkish rivalry and has advanced Turkey’s legitimacy as the effective supporter of Somalia’s humanitarian and infrastructural development. These efforts, combined with Turkey’s active role

at the United Nations in raising awareness on the situation in Somalia and its hosting of the Istanbul Conference on Somalia in 2015, an international forum aimed at rebuilding the failed state, have made Turkey the de facto protector of Somalia's struggling central government.

## **Conclusion**

As this comparative study has sought to highlight, the Turkish-Emirati rivalry in Somalia has produced two very different approaches to foreign aid. The Turkish approach, which engenders political Islam as a moral driver of its predominantly humanitarian aid, has succeeded in developing strong ties with the Islamist government in Mogadishu, whereas the UAE's aid strategy has focused on gaining favorable economic and military concessions for the regime, leading to a more sporadic, short-term focus. In this respect, the UAE's approach is demonstrably more realist in its form, as it is based on the immediate security considerations for the warring Gulf power. Prioritizing its military and economic interests in the Gulf of Aden, the monarchy dispenses aid to whomever will provide continued, generous concessions. This cost-benefit calculation was made abundantly apparent by the monarchy's severing of all ties to the FGS, in exchange for strong bilateral ties with Somaliland and Puntland; the separatist regions providing the UAE with considerable concessions in the Port of Berbera and Bosaso, unsurprisingly, two cities which have seen significant humanitarian investments on the part of the UAE.

Unlike the Emirates, Turkey's aid policy toward Somalia reflects Erdoğan's much more long-term interests. Committed to returning Turkey to its historic status as a regional great power, Erdoğan has gone to great length to deepen and intensify Turkey's involvement in the failed state—treating the FGS as its religious, economic, humanitarian, and military protectorate. As demonstrated in section two, the religious zeal of Erdoğan's core domestic constituency has led his administration to employ an expansive and muscular aid strategy vis-à-vis the Federal Government of Somalia—mobilizing multiple core Turkish government agencies in what is a highly diversified aid package. Creating economic incentives for Turkish nationals to invest in Somalia through a state-sanctioned approach, Erdoğan has revolutionized Turkey's philosophy to foreign aid giving—combining state capitalism with the often-unspoken prerogatives of political Islam in a model that Willem van den Berg and Jos Meester have defined as the Ankara Consensus.<sup>74</sup>

Seeking to counter the hegemonic inclinations of any state (especially those supportive of the MB), Abu Dhabi seeks to contain Ankara's influence in a profoundly ideational confrontation that spans the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. As a promoter of state secularism and the soft, moderate Islam

that has supported its absolutist system, the UAE dispenses aid to key strategic allies throughout the region. The alignment of regional actors, either in support of the UAE or in support of Turkey, has led to an all-out influence proxy war with Turkey that includes both official and unofficial state entities. Key examples of such include the UAE's support for the El-Sisi government in Egypt, to its support for Somaliland, and Turkey's support for the MB in Egypt and the Islamist government in Mogadishu.

Regional instability, and the perpetual of Somalia's failed state, can therefore be reasonably explained through the lens of exogenous influence, namely the economic and military assistance provided by two rivals such as Turkey and the UAE to opposing, and often warring factions. The attentive observer will note that foreign intervention in the region is not a novel development, with much of the current instability stemming from the protracted regional competition of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Similarly to the Cold War, the activities of contemporary regional actors are profoundly informed by state identity; be it political Islam or secular absolutism.

However, unlike the regional rivalry of the Cold War superpowers, the Turkish-Emirati case highlights the growing regional clout of middle powers in the ever-relevant context of foreign aid policy. As this article has outlined, the theory of emerging donors is alive and well, and will only become more relevant in a world of increasing multipolarity. ✪

### **Fabio van Loon**

Mr. van Loon is an accredited journalist and researcher with a background in US space policy, European affairs, and international law. As a graduate student at Texas A&M's Bush School in Washington, DC, and a graduate of LUISS University in Rome, he has worked for several US and Italian organizations, including the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers, the Heritage Foundation, and the Rome-based foreign policy review *Atlantico Quotidiano*.

### **Notes**

1. Ahmet Erdi Ozturk, "Islam and Foreign Policy: Turkey's Ambivalent Religious Soft Power in the Authoritarian Turn," *Religions* 12, no. 1 (2021): 38, 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010038>.
2. Ozturk, "Islam and Foreign Policy," 38, 2.
3. Özge Zihnioglu, "Islamic Civil Society in Turkey," in *The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society*, ed. Richard Youngs (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), 42.
4. Ozturk, "Islam and Foreign Policy," 38, 2.
5. Ozturk, "Islam and Foreign Policy," 38, 2.
6. Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, "Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy," Brookings, Nov 2018, 24, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.
7. Ozturk, "Islam and Foreign Policy," 38, 5.
8. Ozturk, "Islam and Foreign Policy," 38, 6.



9. Zihnioglu, "Islamic Civil Society in Turkey," 42.
10. Yunus Turhan, "Turkey's Foreign Aid to Africa: An Analysis of the Post-July 15 Era," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no.5 (2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1935080>.
11. Mandaville and Hamid, "Islam as Statecraft," 24.
12. Turhan, "Turkey's Foreign Aid to Africa," 2.
13. Mandaville and Hamid, "Islam as Statecraft," 23.
14. Panos Kourgiotis, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates: Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Containment," *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020): 43, 8, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010043>.
15. Kerim Can Kavakli, "Domestic Politics and the Motives of Emerging Donors: Evidence from Turkish Foreign Aid," *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2018): 614–27, 615, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F1065912917750783>.
16. Kavakli, "Domestic Politics and the Motives of Emerging Donors," 620.
17. Kavakli, "Domestic Politics and the Motives of Emerging Donors," 616.
18. Kourgiotis, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates," 9.
19. Federico Donelli, and Giuseppe Dentice, "Fluctuating Saudi and Emirati Alignment Behaviours in the Horn of Africa," *International Spectator* 55, no. 1 (2020): 126–42, 129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1706389>.
20. Kourgiotis, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates," 5.
21. "Religious Inclusion," UAE Embassy in Washington, DC.
22. Kourgiotis, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates," 1.
23. Kourgiotis, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates," 1.
24. Kourgiotis, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates," 5.
25. Kourgiotis, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates," 3 [emphasis added]
26. International Crisis Group, "Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact," Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 206, 19 Sep 2019, 13.
27. International Crisis Group "Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact," 13.
28. International Crisis Group "Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact," 13.
29. James Langton and Haneen Dajani, "UAE Ambassador Explains What Secularism Means for Middle East Governance," *The National*, 8 Aug 2017, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/>, emphasis added.
30. International Crisis Group "Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact," 13.
31. Calculation based on Net ODA Disbursements (USD Million) from 2013–2019, included in *Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries 2021* (OECD Publishing, n.d), 164.
32. Ngaire Woods, "Whose Aid? Whose Influence? China, Emerging Donors and the Silent Revolution in Development Assistance," *International Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2008): 1205–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00765.x>.
33. Ismail N. Telci, "A Lost Love between the Horn of Africa and UAE," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 28 May 2018, 6, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/>.

34. "UAE Opens Two Hospitals in Somaliland," ReliefWeb, 21 Jan 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/>.
35. Jamal Macrouh, "The Strategic Extension of the United Arab Emirates: Determinants, Objectives and Some Implications for the Horn of Africa," Policy Center for the New South, 6 Jan 2020, 1, <https://www.africaportal.org/>.
36. Zach Vertin, "Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn, and the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea," Brookings, June 2019, 3, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.
37. Vertin, "Red Sea Rivalries," 3.
38. Vertin, "Red Sea Rivalries," 3.
39. Vertin, "Red Sea Rivalries," 4.
40. Vertin, "Red Sea Rivalries," 4.
41. Abdiqani Hassan, "Somalia's Puntland Region Asks UAE to Stay as Gulf Split Deepens," Reuters, 17 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/>.
42. Zach Vertin, "Toward a Red Sea Forum: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa, & Architecture for a New Regional Order," Brookings, Nov 2019, 5, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.
43. Mohammed Dhaysane, "Somali Accuses UAE of Encouraging Unrest," Anadolu Ajansı, 21 Feb 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/>.
44. Jamal Macrouh, "The Strategic Extension of the United Arab Emirates," 2.
45. Neil Quilliam, "Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey: The Political Drivers of 'Stabilisation,'" in *Stabilising the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Victor Gervais and Saskia van Genugten (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 139–61, 149.
46. "The UAE's Aid to Foreign Countries," the official portal of the UAE government, <https://uae/>, quoted in Quilliam, 149.
47. *Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries 2021* (OECD Publishing, n.d.), 164.
48. Viktor Marsai and Máté Szalai, "The 'Borderlandization' of the Horn of Africa in Relation to the Gulf Region, and the Effects on Somalia," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2021): 1–20, 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2021.1884118>.
49. Adam Dempsey, "Why the UAE Wants Somalia in the Yemen Conflict," *Fair Observer*, 17 Aug 2020, <https://www.fairobserver.com/>.
50. Marsai and Szalai, "The 'Borderlandization' of the Horn of Africa," 15.
51. Marsai and Szalai, "The 'Borderlandization' of the Horn of Africa," 15.
52. Marsai and Szalai, "The 'Borderlandization' of the Horn of Africa," 15.
53. Kathryn Achilles, Onur Sazak, Thomas Wheeler, and Auveen Elizabeth Woods, "Turkish Aid Agencies in Somalia: Risks and Opportunities for Building Peace," Saferworld and Istanbul Policy Center, March 2015, 5, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/>.
54. Gizem Sucuoglu and Jason Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia: Shifting Paradigms of Aid," South African Institute of International Affairs, Nov 2016, 23, <http://cic.nyu.edu/>.
55. Bayram Balci, "A New Turkish Foreign Policy?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 Aug 2014, quoted in Sucuoglu and Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia," 9.
56. Sucuoglu and Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia," 24.
57. Interview, IHH, Istanbul, April 2016, quoted in Sucuoglu and Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia," 24.
58. Sucuoglu and Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia," 45.
59. Sucuoglu and Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia," 45.
60. Sucuoglu and Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia," 45.

61. Ahmet Davutoğlu <<AU: Please provide the speaker's full name.>>, "Opening remarks," Somali Civil Society Gathering, Istanbul, 27 May 2012.
62. David Shinn, "Turkey's Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa: Shifting Alliances and Strategic Diversification," Chatham House, Africa Programme Research Paper, Sep 2015, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>, quoted in Sucuoglu and Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia," 44.
63. Willem van den Berg and Jos Meester, "Turkey in the Horn of Africa: Between the Ankara Consensus and the Gulf Crisis," Clingendael Institute, May 2019, 10.
64. van den Berg and Meester, "Turkey in the Horn of Africa: Between the Ankara Consensus and the Gulf Crisis," 10.
65. van den Berg and Meester, "Turkey in the Horn of Africa: Between the Ankara Consensus and the Gulf Crisis," 10.
66. Brendon J. Cannon, "Turkey in Africa: Lessons in Political Economy," *Florya Chronicles of Political Economy* 3, no. 1 (2017): 93–110, 24.
67. Mehmet Ozkan, "The Turkish Way of Doing Development AID? An Analysis from the Somali Laboratory," in *South-South Cooperation Beyond the Myths: Rising Donors New Aid Practices?*, ed. Isaline Bergamaschi, Phoebe Moore, and Arlene B. Tickne (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 59–78, 64.
68. Sucuoglu and Stearns, "Turkey in Somalia, 44.
69. Ozkan, "The Turkish Way of Doing Development Aid?," 75.
70. Mehmet Ozkan and Serhat Orakci, "Viewpoint: Turkey as a 'Political' Actor in Africa – An Assessment of Turkish Involvement in Somalia," *Journal of East African Studies* 9, no. 2 (June 2015): 343–52, 349, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2015.1042629>.
71. Ozkan and Orakci, "Viewpoint: Turkey as a 'Political' Actor in Africa," 349.
72. Ozkan and Orakci, "Viewpoint: Turkey as a 'Political' Actor in Africa," 348.
73. Ozkan and Orakci, "Viewpoint: Turkey as a 'Political' Actor in Africa," 348.
74. van den Berg and Meester, "Turkey in the Horn of Africa: Between the Ankara Consensus and the Gulf Crisis."

#### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.