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TURKEY'S STRATEGY IN AFRICA

Background

On May 24, 2021, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's article appeared in a Rwandan Newspaper, *The New Times*. The [piece](#) commemorated Africa day and noted that Turkey's approach to Africa "is built on a holistic, inclusive, equal partnership on the basis of mutual respect and win-win strategy." The tone of the article does not differ fundamentally from the rhetoric of many of Africa's external partners, yet a holistic Africa strategy does no longer inform Turkish policymaking in the continent. Instead, Turkey pursues diverging and somewhat contending strategies across the continent while its African outreach mainly focuses on a limited number of African countries. Turkey's deep engagement in the Libyan crisis, the establishment of a large military training facility in Somalia and the signing of a deal with Sudan on the renovation of the strategically-located [Suakin Island](#)¹ can be perceived as signs of its military ambitions or the militarization of its Africa policy. However, military engagement had a rather marginal role in Turkey's Africa policy until very recently.

Is Turkey a hard power in Africa?

Turkey's military cooperation with Africa started in 1991 when military experts became involved in the [training of the Gambian armed forces](#). It started upon the request of the Gambian government following the creation of the Gambian military in 1985. In 1993 a Turkish general assumed the command of [UNOSOM II](#) (United Nations Operation in Somalia II) while Turkey also contributed to UN Peacekeeping missions in African countries, but its contribution to such missions have been smaller than that of UNOSOM II.

Despite Turkey's non-intervention policy, Libya has recently become one of the scenes for Turkey's securitized foreign policy. Libya shows that Turkey would not hesitate to use [hard power](#) assets when it perceives a direct threat to its vital national interests in the [Eastern Mediterranean](#). Turkey supports the UN-backed Government of National Unity (GNU) against Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). Through this this affiliation Turkey finds itself at odds with several regional and external players such

¹ The deal allows Turkey to build a naval dock for both civilian and military vessels. It alarmed Turkey's regional rivals, most notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

as Egypt and France. In 2019, it has [signed two separate deals](#) with Libya's GNU on security and military cooperation in support for the delimitation of maritime jurisdictions.

Libya is in Turkey's broader neighborhood and Turkish companies suffered huge financial losses after the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. It is therefore no surprise that Turkey's desire to maintain its military presence in the country is closely linked to its economic calculations and strategic maritime interests in the Mediterranean.

Turkey assumed a leadership role in Somalia's post-conflict reconstruction process following the visit of Turkish President Erdoğan to Mogadishu in 2011 under his tenure as prime minister. Turkey's peacebuilding efforts in the country started in the humanitarian domain and then expanded into other areas including education, military cooperation, state-building, mediation, investment, and trade-related activities. Several Turkish companies are active in the country while two of them signed contracts to manage Mogadishu's [airport and seaport operations](#). Turkey also established a military training base, [TURKSOM in Mogadishu in 2017](#). [As Rossiter and Cannon noted](#), it is not a base in the very classical sense but aims at training and modernizing the Somali Armed Forces (SAF) as well as strengthening it against the terrorist group, Al-Shabaab. Turkey will [reportedly train one-third of Somali military forces](#) while the fourth batch of Somalian soldiers graduated in 2020.

Turkey's engagement with Somalia sparked much debate. [Reuters](#) recently revealed that Somalia's opposition requested Turkey to cancel the shipment of weapons to a police unit as they could be used by the incumbent President Mohamed to delay the presidential elections that was initially scheduled to take place in early 2021. Some [commentators also note](#) that Turkish trained Somalian soldiers can be used as a "tool for political pressure", which in return could well tarnish Turkey's image and reputation in the country.

Relations with Sudan appears to be more ambiguous following al-Bashir's removal from power in a [military coup d'état](#) in 2019. President Erdoğan and al-Bashir had close ties which is perhaps best evidenced in the deal on the Suakin Island in the Red Sea on the restoration of historic Ottoman-era buildings during Erdoğan's 2017-visit to the country. The ouster of al-Bashir further complicated Turkish foreign policy towards the region, which is further complicated by the larger regional rivalry between the Saudi Arabia-Egypt-United Arab Emirates on the one hand and Turkey-Qatar on the other.

Turkey has also been increasing its defense capabilities in the last decade while Turkish defense companies [export small arms and armoured vehicles](#) to several African countries including Burkina Faso, Chad, Ghana, Mauritania, and Senegal. On the other hand, Turkey's military intervention in Libya has been pivotal in the withdrawal of Haftar forces threatening Libya's capital, Tripoli. Turkish-made drones allegedly have ["hunted down and remotely engaged"](#) retreating Haftar forces. Yet, it would be oversimplistic to argue that Turkish policy towards Africa is guided solely by military ambitions.

Turkey's soft power push in Africa

"Similar to Africa's other external partners, Turkey employs a mixture of soft power instruments and trade relations in order to support its strategic interests in the region."² To this end, Turkish companies have been investing in different sectors in several African countries. While most of them

² Elem Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu and Ali Onur Tepeciklioğlu, "Introduction: Contextualizing Turkey's Africa policy", *Turkey in Africa: A New Emerging Power?* Elem Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu and Ali Onur Tepeciklioğlu (eds.), London and New York: Routledge, 2021, p. 9.

have initially involved construction projects in North African countries, Turkish investments have recently started to diversify. For example, Turkish energy companies including Karpowership, Aksa Energy and Hakan Mining and Electricity Generation Inc. signed contracts with African countries such as Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Sudan, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, Rwanda and [South Africa](#).

On the other hand, Turkey’s trade with Africa stood at [\\$21,4 billion](#) in 2020. Although Turkey-Africa trade and investment relations are dwarfed by Africa’s traditional partners, Turkey’s trade volume with Africa is higher than that of some rising powers. Much has been written on Turkey’s soft power in Africa and Table 1 summarizes some soft power tools and strategies employed by multiple Turkish actors.

Table 1: Turkey’s Soft Power in Africa

Categories	Tools and Strategies	Channels
Aid diplomacy	Humanitarian aid, development assistance, emergency relief, training programs	TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency), Turkish Red Crescent, Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs), Turkish NGOs, business groups
Cultural Diplomacy	Turkish schools, scholarship opportunities, language teaching	Maarif Foundation, YTB (Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities), Yunus Emre Institute, NGOs, Diyanet
Religious diplomacy	Aid activities, mosque building, renovation of religious buildings, scholarships, religious summits	Diyanet; TIKA: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency and Turkish NGOs
Trade/business diplomacy	Trade links, business investment, infrastructure, energy	Turkish government, ministries, public institutions, private sector
Media diplomacy	International broadcasting, news management	Anadolu Agency, TRT World, TRT Swahili
Aviation/flight diplomacy	Flight network, travel opportunities	Turkish Airlines

Turkey’s activism towards the continent is often attributed to the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which assumed power in 2002 while there is barely any reference to Turkey’s earlier rapprochement efforts. Turkey now has [43 embassies across the continent](#), and plans to open an embassy in Guinea-Bissau this year. In addition to this diplomatic activism, one salient feature of Turkey’s Africa policy is the bilateral nature of its aid activities and the increasing use of religion. Starting from the 2000s, Turkey pursued a more assertive foreign policy and assumed a proactive role as a humanitarian actor. This has also been reflected in Turkey’s humanitarian efforts in Africa through TIKA, Turkey’s international aid agency; however, Turkey’s humanitarian engagement involves players other than the state and public institutions.

Activities of non-state actors generally play a complementary role in advancing Turkey’s Africa policy. The cooperation between non-state actors and the state is increasingly visible in Turkey’s aid activities. While aid provided is unconditional (free from any moral/political conditions), it mostly comes through bilateral channels, rather than through global aid organizations. This, in return, increases Turkey’s image and popularity in aid-receiving countries. Despite struggling to manage its own share of the outbreak, Turkey is also involved in coronavirus diplomacy and sent medical aid to several African

countries. The list includes Libya, the first African country that has received Turkish [medical assistance](#) in early April 2020.

Until very recently, Turkey's religious diplomacy initiatives in Africa have received less attention. Turkey's Diyanet, along with religiously motivated Turkish NGOs and TIKA are involved in religious activities especially in Muslim-majority African countries. This resonates with the increasing role of religion in Turkey's foreign relations under JDP-led governments. One of the most visible projects of Diyanet is the construction of (mega) mosques and the renovation of religious buildings in coordination with TIKA. Turkey built East Africa's largest mosque in the small African country, Djibouti, promoted as "[Turkey's gift to people of Djibouti](#)." As part of Diyanet's sister-city project, aiming at furthering cooperation with Muslim communities, Turkish cities have sister-city relations with African cities. Diyanet also provides scholarships to African students and organizes summits with religious leaders from African countries. The [Third African Summit of Muslim Religious Leaders](#) took place in 2019 in İstanbul with the participation of 112 Muslim leaders from 51 countries.

Summary

As Turkey asserts itself in the continent, the official discourse highlights Turkey's commitment to deeper relations with Africa. However, the focus on more imminent foreign policy issues including Turkey's deep involvement in the Syrian crisis and economic consequences to control the pandemic at home could adversely affect Turkey's Africa strategy and limit its humanitarian involvement.

Still, Turkey can exploit the advantages of being a relatively new-comer in a China-fatigue continent. The Third Turkey-Africa Partnership summit scheduled to take place in September 2021 is expected to pursue new areas of cooperation with African countries. Trade and investment opportunities are most likely to top the summit agenda while the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic will be another important focus.

Recommended Reading

Tepeciklioğlu, E.E. & A.O. Tepeciklioğlu (eds.), *Turkey in Africa: A New Emerging Power?* London and New York: Routledge, 2021.

Donelli, F. *Turkey in Africa: Turkey's Strategic Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021.

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