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Turkish Foreign Policy and the Importance of Türkiye's Policy of Outreach to the African Continent

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Abstract

Türkiye attaches special importance to its relations with African countries due to historical, political, economic and cultural factors. Although some claim that Türkiye was late in pursuing a policy of opening up to African countries, it is worth noting that Türkiye opened its first resident Embassy in Africa at Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, in 1926, just three years after the proclamation of the Republic. In this article, Türkiye's policy and specific initiatives toward the African continent will be discussed, and the importance of these initiatives for Turkish foreign policy will be emphasized.

Keywords

Turkish foreign policy, Africa, Türkiye-Africa relations, Action Plan, TİKA

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Introduction

Türkiye attaches special importance to its relations with African countries. There are various reasons for this, nor is Africa a foreign continent to Turks. Before the Turks entered Anatolia in 1071, they established the Tulunid (Tolunoğulları) state (868–905) in Egypt over the Abbasid Empire. Later, the Ottomans prevented Spanish colonialism in North Africa and fought against Portuguese colonialism in East Africa by organizing naval expeditions.

It should be remembered that the Ottoman Empire was also an African state; from the West to the East, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan and the Habesh Eyalet (province) were all part of the Ottoman state. The Habesh Eyalet comprises modern-day Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea as well as the Harar region of today's Ethiopia. In addition, the Ottoman Empire enjoyed close and friendly relations with other African countries, particularly those neighboring its territories.

Both Muslim and Christian African countries were sympathetic to and interested in the Turkish War of Independence conducted under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk against imperialism, as well as the reforms carried out by Republican Türkiye. In turn, Atatürk often emphasized his desire for the liberation of Asian and African countries.¹

During my various contacts as a diplomat, I realized that there are certain foreign perceptions about Türkiye's policy toward Africa that are not in conformity with reality. According to these, Türkiye was 'late' in pursuing a policy of opening up to African countries. Undoubtedly, Türkiye had an intense agenda full of pressing economic, social and political problems in the period following its independence and in the following decades. Despite this state of affairs, Türkiye did not fail to show its interest in and support for Africa at every stage.

It should be underlined that at the beginning of the 20th century, there were only three independent states in Africa. All Africa had been under the yoke of colonial countries; only Ethiopia and Liberia, founded by black people from America, were truly independent at that time. South Africa had become nominally independent in 1910 under the name of the Union of South Africa. However, the head of state was the King of Great Britain, and there was a British Governor-General in the country. Not until 1961 did it gain full independence under the name

of the Republic of South Africa. Similarly, Egypt became independent on paper in 1922, but remained dependent on the UK in the fields of defense and foreign policy. Egypt gained its independence in real terms after the coup d'état in 1952 and became a fully independent state under the leadership of General Mohamed Naguib and later Colonel (General) Gamal Abdel Nasser. In this context, it is worth considering that Türkiye opened its first resident embassy in Africa at Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia in 1926, just three years after the proclamation of the Republic.

In this article, Türkiye's policy toward the African continent will be discussed within the scope of the historical process and information will be provided about the initiatives made by Turkish governments from the early Republican days to the present. The importance of these initiatives for Turkish foreign policy will also be emphasized.

African Independence Movements and Decolonization

In accordance with the Atlantic Charter, a joint declaration accepted and released by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1941, colonial peoples gained their freedom after the war and joined the international community as independent states. Thus, in the aftermath of the war, Arab states in Africa, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and the Sudan became independent: Türkiye immediately recognized these countries and opened resident embassies in their capitals.

In contrast, Algeria's struggle for independence was bloody and required a long process. Algeria had been occupied by France in 1830 when it was still a part of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the Washington Treaty which created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 confirmed Algeria's status as a French territory. Since Morocco and Tunisia had signed treaties of protectorate with France of their own will, they became independent earlier because their legal status was different.

After the Second World War, Türkiye faced a serious Soviet threat. The USSR's territorial claims against Türkiye, namely that it should annex Kars, Ardahan and Artvin provinces by making border corrections in Northeast Anatolia, and its demands for a base in (or joint defense

of) the Turkish Straits led Türkiye to seek a security guarantee; it urgently sought to become a member of NATO, which is primarily a defense organization. In this context, Türkiye, with the concern of not confronting France, an important member of the NATO alliance, voted against the inclusion of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria in the UN. Ultimately, Morocco and Tunisia gained their independence, a move that was supported by Türkiye.

As indicated before, since Algeria was mentioned by name in the 1949 Washington Treaty that founded NATO, the alliance was required to guarantee France's territorial integrity, which included Algeria as a part of mainland France beyond the sea. This provision in the NATO Treaty was later abolished after Algeria's independence, but at the time, it tied Türkiye's hands. Despite this situation, Türkiye risked annoying France and abstained from all subsequent voting regarding Algeria at the UN. In addition, Türkiye secretly sent arms and military communications equipment to the Algerian freedom fighters via Libya and Tunisia. As a result, French warships started to closely follow Turkish vessels in the Mediterranean. In the end, Türkiye voted for the independence of Algeria

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in 1962 in the UN, recognized Algeria and immediately opened a resident embassy in its capital, Algiers.²

An important development regarding the independence of African states was the “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples” adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 14, 1960, with Draft

Resolution No. 1514. Supporting this Declaration, Türkiye recognized the independent Sub-Saharan African countries in 1961, opened embassies in the capitals of some and established diplomatic relations with other countries through the accreditation method.

Another important development was the independence of the former Portuguese colonies of Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau,

Mozambique and Sao Tome-Principe in 1975 after the end of the fascist regime in Portugal. Türkiye also recognized these countries.

Türkiye played a particular role in the independence of Namibia, being a member of the Namibia Council created at the UN for the preparation of South West Africa as an independent state. South West Africa, a former German colony, was designated as a mandate of South Africa after the First World War. Following the Second World War, however, it was placed under the direct responsibility of the UN. The Namibia Council was created by the UN in 1968. South West Africa became an independent state in 1990 under the name of Namibia.

Türkiye's Outreach to Africa

In terms of Türkiye's relations with the African continent, it is necessary to evaluate the Arab countries in North Africa and the Sudan separately. Türkiye, historically, has always had special relations with Ethiopia, which are at present developed in every field. However, Türkiye's relations with Sub-Saharan African countries have not developed enough, although Ankara has recognized the newly independent countries and opened embassies in some of them. The necessity of contacting these countries emerged in 1964 when the need for support from many countries gained importance during the debate of the Cyprus issue at the UN General Assembly. Many independent states in Africa (54 today) were members of the UN at that time.³

Goodwill delegations were thus sent to African countries from time to time, especially starting from 1965, in order to explain Türkiye's Cyprus policy. These delegations consisted of politicians, diplomats, journalists and academics, and they traveled to Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Malawi, Madagascar, Sudan, Libya and Tunisia. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Hasan Esat Işık, made the following statement at Türkiye's Grand National Assembly: "The duty of goodwill delegations is not limited to the Cyprus issue alone; the activities of these delegations have a positive effect on giving new momentum to the close and sincere relations we are working to establish between us and the young countries of Africa." Indeed, at

that time, contacts, especially with Sub-Saharan African countries, were aimed at seeking support in the UN General Assembly regarding the Cyprus issue.

The initiatives that were deliberately made to improve Türkiye's relations with African countries in every field began during the government of Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit in 1978–79. In 1978, the task of managing all relations with Sub-Saharan African countries was given to a separate department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an "Africa Department" was established. The policy that emerged at this time has been dubbed the "African Initiative". In the previous periods, Türkiye's relations with Sub-Saharan Africa were at a low level and were

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limited to contacts on specific issues within the scope of duty of a section within the jurisdiction of the General Directorate of the Middle East. In 1978, a Turkish delegation headed by State Minister Orhan Eyüboğlu went to Nairobi for the funeral of Kenya's founding president Jomo Kenyatta, and had contacts with

the leaders of Kenya and Zimbabwe there. Then, with the awareness that the success of opening up to Sub-Saharan African countries depended on the development of economic relations, it was decided that delegations consisting of representatives of the private and public sectors would visit Sub-Saharan African countries.

In this context, delegations visited Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Ethiopia. The issues that African countries focused mostly were the procurement of financial and technical assistance and increasing the number of higher education scholarships. Their requests were met by Türkiye to the fullest extent possible. In this context, medicine, blankets and similar aid was sent to Zimbabwe by ship.⁴

When I visited Zimbabwe's capital Harare with a delegation as part of the African Initiative in 1999, various African Ministers informed me as the head of the delegation that they remembered Türkiye's assistance in 1978 with gratitude. I conveyed their feelings to Ecevit, who was once

again Prime Minister at that time. Ecevit also expressed his satisfaction to me at the progress of Türkiye's relations with Africa.

During Prime Minister Ecevit's government, resident embassies were established in Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania, and Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. After 1980, however, the first of these embassies was closed due to economic reasons and the second due to security problems. The Turkish Embassy in Accra, the capital of Ghana, was also closed due to austerity measures. Since the coalition governments that came to power in Türkiye at that time did not last long, the African Initiative was interrupted.

At a later stage, Türkiye contributed 10 million dollars to a fund created in 1984 within the framework of a program of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to help the Sahel countries suffering from drought. Türkiye's aid program started with medicine and food aid to Somalia. Visits were organized to various countries (Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal, the Gambia, Burkina Faso, Mali, the Sudan, Niger and Chad). As a result of the contacts with these countries, a foundry was established in Gambia, an irrigation facility was installed in Senegal and a hospital was built in the Sudan. The State Planning Organization, which carried out this program, organized various training programs for African countries within the scope of providing technical assistance, and experts were sent to some countries.

After the Ecevit period, the second important step was initiated by Prime Minister Turgut Özal. Özal had previously served at the World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD) in Washington and as the Undersecretary of the State Planning Organization and Deputy Prime Minister responsible for the economy. Based on this background, he had a global vision of the international economy and trade.

One day in 1988, Prime Minister Özal called Ambassador Tanşuğ Bleda, Director General of Economic Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and said:

For Türkiye to increase its exports, it is necessary to enter new markets. Africa seems like a virgin market to me. Before directing our exporters and businessmen to this market, I want you to set up a delegation and go to West African countries and evaluate the situation on the spot. I will send another

delegation to East Africa. When you return, we will do what is necessary according to your impressions.⁵

The delegation headed by Ambassador Bleda visited Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria, Cameroon and Gabon. The delegation determined that there were opportunities to sell goods to these countries and that these countries were ready to carry out joint projects with Turkish companies. During his contacts in Gambia, upon the request of the authorities of this country, it was decided that Türkiye would conduct gendarmerie training and provide equipment. President of the Republic Kenan Evren and the Gendarmerie General Commander gave the necessary instructions. It has been observed that the friendly relations established with Gambia have been reflected in the votes of this country in the UN. In Nigeria, President Ibrahim Babangida stated that he was a fan of Atatürk and his reforms, and that if he could do in Nigeria half of what Atatürk had done in Türkiye, the face of his country would change. The Turkish delegation also made positive impressions in terms of developing economic relations in Gabon and Cameroon. Prime Minister Özal was impressed by the positive results of the delegation's visits and said that he would convey these impressions to the Turkish business community. Ambassador Bleda added that he had not heard that Turkish businessmen, at least while he was on duty in Ankara, were freeing themselves from the lure of the domestic market and heading toward the African market.⁶

Türkiye's Action Plan for Outreach to Africa

After the Opening to Africa initiative in 1988, no significant progress was made in terms of developing relations with African countries. Türkiye's first attempt to realize its relations with Africa as a whole, comprehensively in all areas and within the framework of a written Action Plan, was launched in 1998.

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The developments regarding the preparation of the Action Plan, in which I was personally involved, took place as follows.

After serving for four years (1991–1995) as Minister-Counselor at our Embassy in Bonn, the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany at that time, after a period of serious and unpleasant problems between Germany and Türkiye, I was promoted to Ambassador and appointed to Lagos, the capital of Nigeria at that time. Since I was also accredited to eight more countries where we did not have resident embassies, my mandate included a large region in West Africa. I worked in Nigeria for about three years. During this period, I emphasized in the detailed reports I submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that there was a great potential for Türkiye to develop its relations with Africa in every field, including economic, political and cultural spheres, and that the sympathy for Türkiye in Africa was an advantage. The information contained in these reports constituted the backbone of the Action Plan for Outreach to Africa, which was given to me to prepare upon my return to Ankara.

On my return from Lagos to Ankara in 1998, I was assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the responsibility for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the entire African continent. At that time, the Undersecretary of the Ministry, Ambassador Korkmaz Haktanır, called me and said that it would be beneficial if I were to visit various African countries at the head of a delegation. I emphasized that if the political, economic, commercial and cultural relations with the African continent as a whole were developed, Africans would understand our foreign policy problems in the long run. Upon Haktanır's suggestion, I gave an African briefing to the senior executives of the Ministry. Informing Minister İsmail Cem about this briefing, Haktanır said that the Minister wanted me to prepare an African Initiative Action Plan.

At the end of a series of three-day meetings with the participation of the representatives of the Chief of General Staff and all relevant Ministries, the State Planning Organization and the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA), Türkiye's twelve Ambassadors in Africa, honorary consuls of African countries in Türkiye and private sector umbrella organizations, the Action Plan was prepared, taking into account all of the opinions expressed during these meetings. At the political level, the full support of both President Süleyman Demirel and Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit was provided.⁷

The comprehensive Action Plan included measures to improve Türkiye's relations with Africa in every field. It included measures such as increasing political contacts through high-level mutual visits and inter-parliamentary visits; increasing the number of Turkish Embassies in Africa; signing economic, commercial and cultural agreements; providing technical assistance; improving air and sea transportation; and increasing the number of higher education scholarships.⁸

In this context, many delegation visits were organized to African countries. Some state ministers presided over the delegations. The delegations that I led included representatives of the Office of the Chief of the General Staff, various Ministries, TİKA and State Planning Organization, private sector umbrella organizations and an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Also, head of state and ministerial visits were made from African countries to Türkiye.

With the implementation of the Action Plan, intense contacts between Türkiye and Africa started. This development is also reflected in the trade figures between the two countries. However, the economic crisis that started in Türkiye in 2001 caused pauses in the implementation of the Action Plan. The general elections held in Türkiye in 2002 and the establishment of a new government also prolonged this process.

The Turkish Government Declares 2005 the “Year of Africa”

In 2005, the new government headed by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initiated an important Policy of Outreach to the African Continent. In this regard, 2005 was declared the “Year of Africa” in Türkiye, and many breakthroughs were made, while political contacts increased.

In 2005, the new government headed by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initiated an important Policy of Outreach to the African Continent. In this regard, 2005 was declared the “Year of Africa” in Türkiye, and many breakthroughs were made, while political contacts increased. From this date until now, President Erdoğan has visited 31 African countries, including the period when he served as prime minister. New embassies were

opened in Africa and Türkiye became a non-regional donor member of the African Development Bank. Türkiye also participated in various African organizations as an observer. For example, it became an observer member of the African Union in 2005 and was later accepted as a strategic partner of the African countries in 2008.

In 2008, the Summit Meeting of Türkiye and African countries with participation of Heads of State and Government was held in Istanbul. As of today, there have been three successful Summits jointly organized by Türkiye and the African Union. The Second Summit was held in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea on November 19–21, 2014, and the Third Summit was hosted by Türkiye in İstanbul on December 16–19, 2021. Thus, the relationship between Türkiye and the Continent has evolved into an institutionalized and mutually reinforcing partnership.

TIKA has established 22 program coordination offices in Africa for foreign aid purposes, including humanitarian aid and technical assistance. The number of African students in Türkiye has significantly increased, and Turkish Airlines (THY) has started to fly to 62 destinations in 41 African countries. The number of Turkish embassies in Africa has increased from 12 in 1998 to 44 today. The number of African embassies in Ankara has increased from 10 in 2008 to 38 today. There have also been significant increases in the figures regarding Türkiye's trade with the continent.⁹ Total trade with Africa rose from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to \$ 40.7 billion in 2022. While Türkiye's trade with Sub-Saharan African countries was 1.3 billion dollars in 2003, it increased to 15.5 billion dollars in 2022.

It is estimated that the total value of Türkiye's direct investments in Africa today exceeds six billion dollars. Turkish contractors have undertaken 1,796 projects in Africa with a total value of \$82.6 billion. In Sub-Saharan African countries alone, 445 projects with a total value of 26.7 billion dollars have been undertaken. At the present time, Türkiye has Business Councils with 45 African countries, 40 of which are Sub-Saharan.

In order to strengthen Türkiye's contractual infrastructure with African countries, Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreements have been concluded with 48 countries, Mutual Promotion and Protection of Investments Agreements have been signed with 32 countries and

Prevention of Double Taxation Agreements have been established with 17 countries.

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This amount corresponds to 1.15% of Türkiye's GNP.

More than 15,000 African students have benefited from Turkish scholarships since 1992. Currently, 60,954 African students continue their higher education in our country. In addition, the Turkish Maarif

Foundation (TMV) provides education to 20,600 students through its schools in 25 African countries.

At the Third Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit held on December 16–18, 2021 in Istanbul, President Erdoğan gave instructions to donate 15 million vaccines to African countries; 1,730,000 doses of vaccine were sent to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 500,000 were delivered to Benin and 200,000 to Niger in March 2022. Again in March 2022, 290,000 doses of vaccine were delivered to Somalia and one million doses were delivered to Tanzania. In April, 2022, 500,000 doses of vaccine were presented to the Malian authorities. Thus, the TURKOVAC vaccine, which Türkiye produced with local resources, has begun to be delivered to our African friends.

In Africa, almost 24.5 million people are in the crisis category and more than 6.4 million people are in the emergency category in a geography that faces three serious drought crises each year. At least 670,000 people in Somalia and at least 170,000 people in Ethiopia have been displaced due to drought. As of Spring 2022, 12 to 14 million people, including approximately 5.7 million children, confront high levels of food insecurity and severe water scarcity across the region. As of June 2022, the number of people experiencing high levels of food insecurity reached 18.4 million in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. It is estimated

that more than 1.5 million animals have already perished in Ethiopia and around 1.5 million in Kenya. In order to reduce the loss of life in the coming period, international aid organizations have requested more than 4.4 billion dollars for this year.

Participating virtually in the High-Level Round Table Meeting on Drought in the Horn of Africa, held in hybrid format in Geneva on April 26, 2022 and led by the UN Humanitarian Aid and Coordination Office (OCHA), Türkiye pledged \$500,000 in aid. In total, approximately \$1.4 billion was pledged at the meeting by 21 donors.

The highest level of participation in the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (ADF) held on March 11–13, 2022, was from African countries; Five Heads of State and Government from 25 African countries, 27 Ministers, including 20 Ministers of Foreign Affairs, 2 Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs and 2 International Organization Representatives participated. Four bilateral meetings at the Presidential level and 17 bilateral meetings at the Ministerial level were held with African countries at the ADF margin.

As can be seen, Türkiye's relations with Africa have made great progress in every field. In this context, it is useful to mention some evaluations circulating abroad regarding Türkiye's relations with Africa. Thomas Wheeler, who served as South Africa's Ambassador to Ankara, said that Türkiye uses its soft power to expand its influence in Africa and develop mutually beneficial trade relations. It is effective in ways similar to those of other countries, yet does not attract the negative reactions faced by other countries. Wheeler emphasizes that the targeted countries responded positively to the initiative.¹⁰

In a report titled, "The New Formation of Turkish Foreign Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa-Public Diplomacy and Private Actors" published by the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), the developments of Türkiye's African Initiative in terms of political, economic and other relations are noted. The report claims that, despite everything, modest results were achieved in the economic field; for example, Türkiye's political, economic and humanitarian activities in Somalia gained great visibility.¹¹

Kamal Bayramzadeh argues that Türkiye's African Policy was successful, as the country increased its trade volume with Sub-Saharan Africa and

took important steps in the construction sector. Türkiye's relations with Africa have evolved rapidly across political, diplomatic, cultural and commercial dimensions, as Türkiye's institutional involvement in these relations was given a framework.¹²

Julia Harte states that Türkiye has a better reputation than the other active countries on the continent, and that it will gain economic and political advantages if it can maintain this reputation based on good-willed interaction.¹³

It has also been stated that Türkiye's 'new' strategic orientation stemmed "partially" from the decision to reject Türkiye's candidacy for full membership to the European Union at the European Union Council meeting held in Luxembourg in December 1997.¹⁴ However, it should be clear that Türkiye's involvement with the continent predates this decision by at least three decades.

Conclusion

It should be considered natural that Türkiye, which has made serious strides in the economic field since the 1980s and has become a member of G-20—one of the 20 largest economies in the world— makes international expansions in proportion to its strategic importance, economic size and political clout. Nonetheless, it is certainly not possible given today's international conditions for Türkiye's economic orientations, including those toward Africa, to be connected with the goal of establishing a hegemony. Even if it were possible, Türkiye has never had such a goal. It should be kept in mind that Türkiye was never a colonialist power. This is among the many reasons behind the sympathy for Türkiye in Africa. Türkiye's basic approach is to develop economic

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and commercial relations with all countries on the basis of mutual benefit and win-win partnerships. In the African context, Türkiye has advantages over China and some other countries in terms of historical affinity and human contacts. As indicated before, Türkiye, which never had a

colonial past and set an example in the struggle against imperialism with its national liberation war, is welcomed in Africa along with its economic and political investments in this continent.

There are some countries that are uncomfortable with Türkiye's position in Africa—especially France. The dissatisfaction of France, which does not want to lose its advantages in Africa, due to Türkiye's achievements, stems from the fact that it considers Türkiye's influence as contrary to its national interests. France's discomfort has been expressed many times by President Emmanuel Macron himself. He even alleged that Türkiye and Russia were pursuing anti-French propaganda in Africa and exploiting post-colonial resentment.¹⁵ In response, a statement made by the spokesperson of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Ambassador Tanju Bilgiç, on August 27, 2022 announced that Macron's statement was unacceptable. Regardless of what France or Türkiye may say about this issue, it is a fact that the French-speaking countries in Africa want to reduce their dependence on France and diversify their relations.

In conclusion, it would be correct to evaluate Türkiye's African Initiative as a strategic success in terms of Turkish foreign policy. Particularly since the implementation of the Action Plan adopted in 1998, Türkiye has achieved relatively serious and important results in terms of the economic, political, commercial and cultural aspects of its relations with African countries as a whole.

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