

Research Article

Southern Opening: Turkish Soft Power in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract:

This article discusses the Sub-Saharan relations of Türkiye from 2002 until 2016 from a political, economic and cultural point of view. The focus is on the performance of Turkish institutions on African ground, assessing not only governmental but humanitarian and public initiatives as well. The non-governmental factors are crucial in understanding Turkish African policy: the so-called Anatolian tigers and their associations connected with the Justice and Development Party and outside the scope of traditional state diplomacy exerted their influence on the political activity of Türkiye in general and in Africa, in particular. This new middle class formed the most important social and economic motivations behind Türkiye's opening to Africa, creating space for public diplomacy and thus contributing to the democratisation of Turkish foreign policy.

Keywords: Africa, humanitarian aid, soft power, Türkiye

Introduction¹

The following article examines the evolution of Türkiye's relations with Africa until 2016 starting in 2002 when the Justice and Development

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Party (AKP) government came to power. In what follows, Turkish-African relations are presented from a Turkish perspective, and they are placed in a theoretical and spatial context of Türkiye's overall foreign policy aspirations, while a historical account of the relations provides a temporal context. Although this study aims to provide a balanced synthesis of the Turkish political and economic approaches, at the same time, exploring the relations between the two sides is not without a normative intention: the analysis aims to take stock of what has happened so far and enhance the deepening of relations in the future.

The realist approach, which is only concerned with state-to-state relations, does not seem to provide a sufficient explanatory framework. Instead, the study is based on the pluralistic assumption that a multitude of non-state actors contribute to the complexity of relations. Including these actors in the analysis is essential to go beyond state-to-state relations.

This study has drawn on sources in Turkish for the analysis to see how the Turkish state sees its own situation in relation to Africa. Turkish development and foreign policy concepts formulated by Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkish Foreign Minister (2009–2014) and Prime Minister (2014–2016) with academic background (promoting a governmental perspective) and news reports (not necessarily a governmental perspective) serve as primary sources, while the secondary literature is represented by analyses of the region and Turkish foreign policy, mainly in English.

The geographical definition of North African countries used hereafter refers to the African members of the Arab League, including Western Sahara but excluding Djibouti, Somalia and Somaliland and the Comoros Islands in East Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa thus covers all other countries on the continent, including the exceptions mentioned above. This distinction is important because the North African countries and their people, which are geographically, culturally and historically much closer to Türkiye, have traditionally had much stronger Turkish links than those of Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, if we want to look at the changes in Turkish-African relations, the focus should be on the progress achieved in the non-traditional area of Turkish foreign policy over the last two decades.

Turkish-African relations can be divided into four periods based on intensity and international situation:²

² Mehmet Özkan and Birol Akgün, , "Turkey's Opening to Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 4 (2010): 530.

1. The Ottoman era, dating from the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517.
2. The Republican era maintained the lowest level of relations with Africa from its foundation (1923) to 1998.
3. From 1998, with the formulation of the so-called 'Africa Action Plan,' the opening to Africa began.
4. Since 2005, relations have been steadily expanding.

In what follows, this paper uses this classification to structure the discussion, focusing on the most important developments, which are examined from several perspectives (Turkish foreign policy, Turkish domestic policy, aid and prospects).

Historical Relations with Africa. The Republic of Türkiye until 2002

Analysing historical relations helps examine the possible antecedents of the "opening" of the Turkish foreign policy towards Africa. The establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 and the abolition of the Caliphate a year later brought a sharp change in the nature of relations with Africa. The Republic of Türkiye became a secular nation-state, thus the religious links with African territories ceased to exist. Ankara became the capital of the new republic, and Istanbul lost its previous international position as a leading Muslim religious authority after 1924.

In the early Republican Era Türkiye's foreign the foreign policy can be described as isolationist, Western oriented and pragmatically neutral. Türkiye recognised the creation of all African states that gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, although it did not support their independence movements due to Türkiye's close relations with Western states. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the first foreign mission (consulate) in the newly independent states was opened in Lagos in 1956. During the decolonisation period, Türkiye did not initiate new and meaningful relations with African countries. The Cyprus crisis of 1974 brought some change in this respect, as the country's relations with its traditional Western allies broke down, and the Turkish leadership embarked on a process of foreign policy diversification, which partly involved the intensification of relations with African countries, but these have remained dormant and limited to the political sphere.³

³ Isa Afacan, "The African Opening in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Ortadoğu Analiz* 52 (2013): 48.

For a long time, the Turkish public could only associate Africa with the negative images of famine, poverty and disease, and the potential investment and development of people-to-people cultural relations was not discussed. Moreover, the lack of credible knowledge and expertise hindered the development of public relations. The Turkish foreign policy leadership interpreted its own activity as 'Türkiye has traditionally had good relations with the African continent'. This statement can only be justified if we equate good relations with the lack of conflict due to minimal relations.⁴

A Planned Opening to Africa: The 'Africa Action Plan'

After these weak attempts, the Turkish government's first significant step in its relations with Africa was the adoption of the so-called 'Africa Action Plan' of 1998, during the tenure of Foreign Minister İsmail Cem. This development can be seen as a result of Türkiye's disappointment with the decision of the European Union, which did not accept Türkiye as a candidate country a year earlier.⁵

The 1998 Action Plan was developed in consultation with the existing African embassies of Türkiye, the critical actions being summarised in the following points:

- improving diplomatic relations: organising high-level visits (head of state, ministerial, parliamentary) between the parties, increasing the frequency of contacts, establishing permanent forums for contacts
- organisation of meetings with business people
- setting up joint trade councils
- participation of Türkiye in the African Development Bank and the African Eximbank
- access of Turkish banks to bank branches in African countries
- cultural agreements, university contacts, exchange of scholarship students and lecturers
- the establishment of the Institute of African Studies in Türkiye

⁴ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 532.

⁵ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 532.

- humanitarian aid in Africa, Turkish contribution to UN economic and technical assistance programs
- military and security cooperation, inviting African partners to train in Türkiye.⁶

As the internal political crisis of the late 2000s and the economic crisis in Türkiye in 2000-2001 caused a severe loss of resources, the implementation of the Action Plan did not start, but it inspired the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s policy to Africa, . The Republic's minimalist foreign policy thus dominated Turkish-African relations for a long time, with more space for manoeuvre emerging after the end of the Cold War. Even before the AKP government, the number of contacts between African countries and Türkiye had already begun to increase, but the Türkiye's economic weaknesses in the 1990s had not yet provided the necessary stimulus for further deepening relations.

The Intensification of Relations after 2005

In the first years of the AKP, the war in Iraq, the reunification plan for Cyprus and the negotiations with the European Union dominated the foreign policy agenda of the new government, so the actual opening to Africa started only in 2005. When, in March 2005, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Ethiopia and then South Africa, the event marked a historic moment in the history of Turkish foreign policy. It was the first time in the history of the Republic that a Turkish head of government participated in an official diplomatic visit to the South of the Equator in Africa.⁷

In order to provide a permanent framework for relations with Africa, the institutionalisation of relations is essential. As part of this process, Türkiye was granted observer status in the African Union (AU) in 2005. Through this institutional connection, Türkiye could intensify its diplomatic relations with the member countries and become more receptive to the needs and opportunities provided by the local contexts. Subsequently, in 2008, the AU declared Türkiye a "strategic partner." Only Japan, India, Iran, South Korea, South America, the EU and China had such status then.⁸ In May 2008, Türkiye joined the African Development Bank as

⁶ Soyaloğlu Tamçelik, *Küresel Politikada Yükselen Afrika*, Gazi Kitabevi, 2014, 388-390.

⁷ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 533.

⁸ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 534.

the 25th non-regional member. It facilitated Turkish companies to join economic and investment projects on the continent.

The policy of confidence-building and foreign policy activism, in general, has been an essential cornerstone of Turkish policy in Africa and the Middle East since the Justice and Development Party (AKP). This has been achieved through the emergence of so-called soft power actors, which in practice has meant that, in addition to the diplomatic role of the state, the proactive elements of society have also been given a role in shaping foreign relations. As a result, public diplomacy complemented traditional state diplomacy, a change especially pertinent to this topic.⁹

On 23-24 November 2005, the first Turkish-African Summit was held in Istanbul, organised by the Turkish Centre for Strategic Studies in Asia (TASAM). The primary objective was to develop economic, social, cultural and political relations, explore the possibilities, and establish the necessary regulatory environment. The Turkish government expressed its willingness to cooperate in solving African problems. Referring to the Ottomans, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül said that Turks and Africans have deep-rooted relations. The event provided an excellent opportunity to establish contacts between the two sides, as neither Türkiye nor African countries had an extensive pool of experts with a thorough knowledge of each other.¹⁰

The Second Türkiye-Africa Summit, organised by the Turkish Businessmen and Industrialists Confederation (TUSKON) on 12-14 December 2006, was the next stage in the process of confidence building and knowledge acquisition. It was attended by 550 representatives (businessmen, ministers, officials) from some 30 African countries and some 1300 Turkish businessmen. As a result, trade agreements were signed between Turkish and African businessmen. The Third Türkiye-Africa Summit was held in Istanbul on 4 December 2007, again organised by TASAM. On this occasion, representatives from 40 African countries (more than 60 ministers, government officials, and 500 businessmen) were present and had the opportunity to meet with around 1500 Turkish businessmen. In the framework of the summit, an agreement was reached to open offices of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) in Addis

⁹ István Tarrósy, "The Relative Importance of the Various Forms of 'Unconventional Diplomacy' in a New Era of Summit Diplomacy," *TradeCraft Review Periodical of the Scientific Board of Military Security Office 2* (2014): 73.

¹⁰ Kieran E. Uchegara, "Continuity and Change in Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Africa," *Akademik Bakış 2* (2008): 53.

Ababa, Sudan and Senegal. Several agreements concluded by businessmen have also contributed to developing relations on the sub-state level.¹¹

The 4th International Türkiye-Africa Summit 2008 saw a further increase in the number of participants, with more than 3,500 African and Turkish participants from 45 African countries. Türkiye's "friendly" approach and its vision of mutually beneficial relations strengthened confidence between the parties. The conditions for Turkish SMEs to expand abroad were particularly favourable, and these fora provided the perfect opportunity to take the further steps towards Africa. In the same year, a new forum was established: the 1st Africa-Türkiye Cooperation Summit, held in Istanbul from 18 to 24 August 2008. The summit brought together six presidents, five vice presidents, seven prime ministers, one deputy prime minister, fourteen foreign ministers and twelve senior ministers from 49 African countries.¹² At the summit, a document entitled "The Istanbul Declaration on Türkiye-Africa Partnership: Solidarity and Partnership for a Common Future" was adopted, detailing the cooperation potential for businesses in many sectors. Continuing this event, a second convention took place in Malabo, the capital of Equatorial Guinea, on 19-21 November 2014. The delegates of the summit adopted the joint implementation plan of Türkiye-Africa cooperation for the 2015-2019 period.¹³

The shift in Turkish diplomacy is illustrated by the increasing use of unconventional tools in diplomacy. The listed events fall under the umbrella of summit diplomacy, which provides a multilateral platform for deepening relations and simplifying the engagement process.¹⁴

In 2008, Türkiye was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2009-2010 term, largely thanks to the votes of African countries. In the following years, Türkiye promoted itself as the global voice of Africa, both in the UN and in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).¹⁵ 27 of the 57 OIC member states are African, thus, the organisation also provides a forum for Turkish foreign policy makers to engage with Muslim African countries. Thanks to Türkiye's active

¹¹ Uchegara, "Continuity and Change in Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Africa," 54.

¹² Tamçelik, *Küresel Politikada Yükselen Afrika*, 395.

¹³ "Türkiye and The African Union." Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-and-the-african-union.en.mfa>

¹⁴ Tarrósy, "The Relative Importance of the Various Forms of 'Unconventional Diplomacy,'" 85.

¹⁵ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 544.

engagement, African members of the OIC have a positive attitude towards Turks.¹⁶

If we take stock of the post-2005 phase of trade relations between Africa and Türkiye, we can see a steady increase over the last decade and a half. Turkish trade volume (exports and imports) with Africa has tripled from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to almost \$17 billion in 2008. At the same time, it is easier to go from an initial low to a higher level than to deepen already well-established relations and increase trade flows between two parties that have long been partners. Moreover, if we consider that the total volume of Türkiye's foreign trade in 2008 was estimated at \$300 billion, Africa's role in this was still relatively small. The Turkish share in the African trade volume also seems negligible. According to Donelli, Türkiye's trade with sub-Saharan African countries was worth \$5.7 billion in 2008;¹⁷ whereas trade with China, for example, accounts for \$100 billion and India for \$46 billion.¹⁸ In the first years of African opening the already existing and established relations were strengthened, so South Africa and Nigeria became the largest trading partners of Türkiye in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹ The following table shows Türkiye's overall trade value with the African countries from 1998 to 2017.

| Year | Foreign Trade Volume with Africa (thousand dollar) |
|------|--|
| 1998 | 3570800 |
| 1999 | 3343100 |
| 2000 | 4086700 |
| 2001 | 4339200 |
| 2002 | 4327300 |
| 2003 | 5150600 |
| 2004 | 7727900 |
| 2005 | 6847718 |

¹⁶ A parallel to this policy can be found in one of the most important objectives of China's initial Africa policy. Beijing aimed to replace Taiwan as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The support of the independent African countries played a significant role in achieving this goal, so the Chinese lobby in Africa had succeeded by 1971.

¹⁷ Federico Donelli, *Turkey in Africa: Turkey's Strategic Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa*, I.B. Tauris, 2021, 68.

¹⁸ Özkan, "Does 'rising Power' Mean 'rising Donor'?" 142.

¹⁹ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 534.

| | |
|------|----------|
| 2006 | 8475872 |
| 2007 | 11082880 |
| 2008 | 14659079 |
| 2009 | 14092532 |
| 2010 | 14107073 |
| 2011 | 17100534 |
| 2012 | 19278641 |
| 2013 | 20176653 |
| 2014 | 19692359 |
| 2015 | 18456471 |
| 2016 | 17307944 |
| 2017 | 19419390 |

Table 1. Türkiye's overall trade value with African countries.²⁰

Oil and gas from Libya and Algeria feature prominently among Türkiye's imports from Africa. The total value is around \$1.3 billion, The export commodities are mostly iron and steel, electrical equipment, construction materials, food and textiles. In Africa, Turkish businesses have investment opportunities in the following sectors: construction (hospitals, schools, roads), agricultural equipment, food, fisheries, textiles, leather, energy, and automotive (tractors and trucks).²¹

In the context of Turkish-African relations, it is also worth mentioning the African diaspora/community in Türkiye. Africans currently residing in the country can be divided into three groups based on their origin:

- A small number of Afro-descendants arrived and settled in the country from Africa during the Ottoman Empire. They live mainly in the western and southern coastal provinces.²²
- Africans who came to Türkiye for educational purposes. In 2005, their number was only 366, but by 2015 it had reached 9,124. Of these, the number of scholarship holders was 333 in 2010 and 1,091 in 2015.²³

²⁰ Based on Şükrü Cicioğlu and Ryan Hafiz Ahmed İbrahim, "Analysis of Foreign Trade Between Türkiye and Africa," *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 10 (2023): 81-82.

²¹ Tamçelik, *Küresel Politikada Yükselen Afrika*, 405-406.

²² Hasan Öztürk and Hatice Eke, "Gelecek Vadeden Kıta: Afrika." *Bilgesam Rapor* 70, 2015, 36.

²³ Öztürk and Eke, "Gelecek Vadeden Kıta: Afrika," 36-37.

- The third and most significant component comprises African refugees, whose numbers are difficult to estimate accurately. They are mostly Africans who are temporarily forced to stay in Türkiye on their way to Europe. Some estimates put the number of Africans in Istanbul alone at 70,000. Most of them are in Türkiye legally but find it challenging to meet Türkiye's harsh conditions for employment and are forced to work illegally. Exceptions in this respect are sportsmen of African origin employed in Türkiye.²⁴

From Domestic Policy to Foreign Policy: The Impact of Soft Power Elements

With the end of the Cold War, Türkiye's previously unambiguous Western orientation in foreign policy and the bipolar international order began to be replaced by an increasingly open foreign policy and multipolarity? This new orientation has also been reflected in increased activity in various non-Atlantic-initiated organisations: Türkiye has become a member or observer of several Muslim, Arab and African international organisations. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, several geopolitical spaces have been 'opened up' in the country's neighbourhood, where previously, due to the dominance of the Soviet Union, external influence was somewhat limited. In addition to this positive external development, internal processes have also played a role in Türkiye's ability to play an active role on the international stage. Namely, by the 1990s, a religious and nationalist elite had emerged alongside the traditional and Western-oriented Turkish elite, which defined foreign policy on a Muslim or Turkish basis and pushed for greater engagement beyond the West. Interestingly, in the run-up to EU accession, which was accompanied by a certain degree of democratisation, both in the 1990s and in the 2000s, the Turkish political space became increasingly receptive to new inputs, meaning that public opinion and civil society became more prominent, and the introduction of alternative approaches, orientations in foreign policy provided an opportunity to reassess the traditional Kemalist foreign policy.²⁵ The AKP represented this new momentum at the time of its rise to power in 2002.

During the AKP period until recently, foreign policy was influenced by a combination of traditional Kemalist and new conservative religious elites. The former had maintained control over the army, the main element of hard power, but mainly refused to use it in foreign policy. The Kemalist

²⁴ Öztürk and Eke, "Gelecek Vadeden Kıta: Afrika," 37–38.

²⁵ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 528.

elite believed in Western military relations (NATO) and a minimalist foreign policy (passivity, non-interference), which they believed would best serve the country's interests. In contrast, the new conservative and religious elite, drawing on its newfound economic and political power, has adopted the idea of foreign policy activism and is pursuing a multidimensional foreign policy worldwide. However, its activism could not rely on hard power – as it did not possess the means for that and would not have been appropriate for its goals – and could only start Türkiye's international expansion with the soft power instruments at its disposal. Soft power is understood as a term in international relations, by which an actor can influence another actor by its cultural and ideological appeal.²⁶ The foreign policy paradigm of the new elite was established by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a former university professor, foreign minister (2009-2014) and later prime minister (2014-2016), in his influential book, *Strategic Depth*.²⁷ Davutoğlu believes that the new foreign policy guidelines that Türkiye needs to develop should complement traditional relations, not replace them. On Africa, he argues that as the continent is one of the most neglected regions by the Turkish foreign policy, immediate action is needed to enable Türkiye to seize opportunities.

Türkiye's opening to Africa can be understood in the context of globalisation and changing world order, where relations between middle powers and third-world countries are becoming increasingly intense; the breadth and depth of diplomatic relations play an essential role in international fora and the image-building contest between countries. As we have seen, Türkiye's motivations in the region have historical antecedents, and its more active foreign policy can also be reasoned by its geopolitical position. The increase in the number of Turkish diplomatic missions abroad, especially in Africa, and the international community's increased diplomatic relations with Türkiye in response to Ankara's extensive foreign policy activities and economic success in the 2000s illustrate the very active Turkish diplomacy. However, the booming Turkish economy in the 2000s is only one side of the coin, and the country's geopolitical position makes it a natural bridge not only between Europe and Asia but also between Eurasia and Africa. It is precisely in this direction that Davutoğlu saw the development potential of Turkish foreign policy.²⁸ The change in foreign policy ideology was a result of the development of the Turkish internal market and the interest in expanding the country's economic potential – as

²⁶ Joseph S. Jr. Nye, *Soft Power. The Means To Success In World Politics*, PublicAffairs, 2005, 11.

²⁷ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, Küre Yayınları, 2001.

²⁸ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "The Restoration of Turkey: Strong Democracy, Dynamic Economy, and Active Diplomacy," *SAM Vision Papers* 7, 2014, 17.

opposed to the previous policy of isolationism. This evolution has required and continues to require the development of new foreign economic relations. As this is essentially a matter of commercial interests, foreign policy should aim at a peaceful and tension-free policy with neighbours and the world at large in order to ensure the smooth flow of business (Davutođlu formulated this as the principle of ‘zero problems with neighbours’ in his book mentioned above).

Concerning the depth of relations, it is worth noting that the significant increase in the number of Turkish embassies in Africa cannot be a reliable reference point for measuring the effectiveness of Turkish-African relations. Although they certainly provide a reasonable basis for broadening relations, they are mostly limited in capacity, with 2-3 people. However, it must be noted that the number of Turkish embassies in Africa was only 12 in 2002, and it increased to 39²⁹ by 2014 and 44 as of 2022.³⁰ Those who exaggerate the role of new directions of Turkish foreign policy often interpret this more diversified Turkish foreign policy activity as a sign of abandoning relations with the West.³¹ This new direction is only a shift of emphasis, as the Western relationship remains the priority in Türkiye’s foreign policy security and economic dimension.

The development of trade links with Africa was a natural consequence of the prosperity of the Turkish economy and the international openness of Turkish businessmen over several decades. Türkiye, described in the literature as a ‘trading state,’³² has increasingly found opportunities for economic cooperation with ‘culturally related’ areas since the 1990s. In this space of activity, we find religiously, culturally and historically similar nations located in the former territory of the Ottoman Empire. Central Asian areas with Turkic peoples can also be linked to this cultural sphere of influence. The booming economic diplomacy was motivated by the rise of a new, religious capitalist business class, the so-called ‘Anatolian Tigers’ (*Anadolu kaplanları*), who developed their capacity for surplus production in the 1980s and thus opened up to these regions with their export-oriented

²⁹ Öztürk and Eke, “Gelecek Vadeden Kıta: Afrika,” 44–45.

³⁰ “Türkiye-Africa Relations,” Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-africa-relations.en.mfa>

³¹ Mustafa Kutlay, Ziya Öniş, “Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?” *International Affairs* 97 (2021): 1085–1104. and Sözen, Ahmet, “A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges,” *Turkish Studies* 11 (2010): 103–123.

³² Kemal Kirişçi, “The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 40 (2009): 43.

policies. The activity of this entrepreneurial class in Africa was aided by the fact that they are religiously and culturally close to certain African actors.

The rise of 'Anatolian Tigers' has led to an increasing expression of commercial and business interests in Turkish foreign policy and to the growing role of public diplomacy in shaping foreign relations. The new Anatolian middle class has become the main base of the AKP regime, and it represents, among other things, the main socio-economic driving force behind the opening to Africa.³³ As a result of their activities, Turkish diplomacy is not only an instrument that primarily works for the security of the country but increasingly became receptive and facilitator of the business interests of economic actors. It is a matter of common motivation, of harmonious action between actors and levels; the interests of NGOs, the government and businessmen in Africa are aligned. These aspirations were complementary and mutually reinforcing.³⁴

Over the years, Africa has not lost its value as an investment and trade destination for the Turks. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis and the protracted integration process with the European Union, the Middle East and Africa have also offered favourable investment opportunities beyond the developed world. As Turkish companies will certainly not have access to the favourable conditions offered by the European common market in the foreseeable future, they have shifted part of their activities towards the growing potential of emerging markets. Africa is also important for Türkiye to become a global player beyond its regional role, i.e., to have its 'voice' heard internationally.³⁵ Therefore, the 'opening to Africa' and the new foreign policy activism are certainly not short-term phenomena but steps to adapt to the new global context, both at the state and civilian levels. Türkiye has successfully adopted the role of 'defender of the oppressed,'³⁶ which has gained the sympathy of African countries and helped it gain recognition on the international political stage.³⁷

³³ Mehmet Şahin, "'Anadolu kaplanları' Türkiye'yi Ortadoğu ve Afrika'da etkili kılıyor," *Ortadoğu Analiz* 2 (2010): 95.

³⁴ Uchehara, "Continuity and Change in Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Africa," 56.

³⁵ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 529.

³⁶ Moustapha Abdelkerim Idriss, "Analysis - Turkey-Africa partnership: A development-oriented approach," *Anadolu Ajansı*. 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/analysis-turkey-africa-partnership-a-development-oriented-approach/1696640>.

³⁷ However, recent research suggests that even if African countries supported Turkey's bid for non-permanent membership of Turkey, there has been no significant increase in the voting cohesion of Turkey and African countries since 1998. Elem Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu and Ali Onur Tepeciklioğlu, "Turkey-Africa Voting Cohesion in the UN General Assembly," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2024: 1-22.

The domestic political dimension of the African opening thus plays an important role in dynamically shaping Türkiye's domestic relations in line with international developments. The formation and consolidation of a new, conservative Muslim investor base and power elite, and the replacement of the old secular leadership, started in the 2000s, in parallel with the opening to Africa. As the African opening strengthens the power positions of the new elite, Africa has become part of the competition between the old and the new establishment.

The domestic political struggle between the AKP and its former political ally, the so-called Gülen movement (Hizmet), affected Türkiye's activities in Africa.³⁸ Since around the beginning of 2014, Erdoğan's visits and political contacts with African leaders have increasingly focused on implementing a joint action against the Gülen movement in Africa.³⁹ In countries that have responded to this request, the closure of Gülen-linked schools and, thus, aligning with Ankara's interests can be interpreted as a restriction of sovereignty, and the closure of these educational institutions caused some economic and cultural damage. Indeed, these schools represented the highest quality in these countries, competing with their Western counterparts, but in many cases, representing the only modern version of secondary and university education available to the locals. Since there was no clear and visible propaganda activity by the members of the movement, and they were generally loosely associated with the movement, there was no official administrative oversight over the 110 or so educational institutions associated with the Gülen movement. Identification is also made more difficult by the fact that the educational profile of the institutions is adapted to the national curriculum of the country concerned. In general, members of the Gülen movement and their donations have typically played a greater role at the time of the foundation of these institutions, and some of the teaching staff were Turkish. The dismantling of such a school network was also highly questionable for Türkiye's image: the schools, which have developed a Turkish connection with Africa for about a decade, were educating African intelligentsia who, once in the administration, could promote a positive image of Türkiye, an important factor for its soft power capacities in Africa.

³⁸ David Shinn, "Turkey's Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa: Shifting Alliances and Strategic Diversification," *Chatham House Research Paper*, 2015.

³⁹ Cagri Ozdemir, "Analysis: Turkey strengthens ties in Africa," *Middle East Eye*, 2015. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/turkeys-africa-opening-keeps-its-pace-286868208>.

The Yunus Emre Institute has significantly enhanced Türkiye's cultural and educational presence in Africa, serving as a pivotal instrument of soft power. Established in 2007, the institute promotes Turkish language and culture through cultural centres. These centers offer Turkish language courses and cultural programs, fostering mutual understanding and strengthening bilateral relations.⁴⁰

Humanitarian Aid and Development Policy

Institutional and political obstacles to development in Sub-Saharan Africa poses challenges for Turkish activism. There are a series of failed states in the Sahel region and south of it, and the events of the Arab Spring also created a failed state in Libya. This northward move of the problems of the Sahel poses an increasing security challenge in the Mediterranean and calls for a coordination of EU and Turkish policies in crisis management.⁴¹

On the Turkish side, humanitarian assistance (think of the infrastructure investments in Somalia) is an important step in stabilising the situation in Africa and can be an excellent point for Turkish diplomacy in strengthening relations. In a region in transition as it is Africa, the critical question is which state or political organisation can effectively assist local actors by providing a model to follow in transforming the economy, society and political culture. The crises in Africa cannot be solved by traditional military and diplomatic means but require complete reconstruction projects for some local societies, and Türkiye's soft power projection can play a prominent role in this process.

The aid provided by the Turkish government and the expectations attached to it point to the perennial dilemma in development policy that the practical implementation of 'top-down' development projects can be met with local resistance and even be counterproductive. There are also local, traditional ways of solving problems, but external support for such solutions may be politically questionable. In addition, the international community's tendency to build and 'transfer' institutional capacity as quickly as possible when dealing with crisis zones is a risk factor, is often applied to humanitarian aid policy as well, which seeks to produce quantifiable results in the shortest possible time.

⁴⁰ Abdurrahim Siradağ, "The Rise of Turkey's Soft Power in Africa: Reasons, Dynamics, and Constraints," *International Journal of Political Studies* 8 (2022): 6.

⁴¹ Can Kasapoğlu, "Future MENA Threat Landscape and Turkey's Defense Posture," *Ortadoğu Analiz* 5 (2013): 35-44.

As economic investment and aid increase, politics also enters the areas concerned and spreads its values. At the level of moral politics, Islamic values facilitated by the AKP government as well as the role of Diyanet and Turkish religious foundations can serve as bridges of relations with African Muslims. By strengthening their relations with Türkiye, African countries can gain the necessary experience and resources to implement economic and political transformation effectively without sacrificing their local traditions. Indeed, Türkiye does not condition aid to democratic values and the rule of law as the EU or the US does. The combination of economic sustainability, cultural diplomacy (soft power) and non-conditional assistance in its African relations create the so-called 'Ankara Consensus.'⁴²

Regarding concrete steps of assistance, Türkiye started its activities in this field as early as 1985, which began to take a more unified form with the establishment of TİKA in 1992. TİKA's first coordination office was opened in Addis Ababa in 2005, followed by an office in Khartoum in 2006 and in Dakar in 2007.⁴³

In 2012, Türkiye spent over one billion dollars on humanitarian aid. The most significant contributions were allocated to Syria, Pakistan and Somalia. This active humanitarian engagement is an integral part of Türkiye's international image-building effort, and it has thus taken on the role of a global peace broker.⁴⁴ Türkiye's considerable contribution to international aid is evident: for example, according to Global Humanitarian Assistance, it was the third largest aid donor in the world in 2013 and 2014. At the same time, if we calculate the amount of aid as a proportion of economic performance, we find Türkiye to be the most active aid donor in the world.⁴⁵

For example, the Africa Cataract Project, launched in 2007 by the Turkish organisation İHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation), provided doctors and nurses to treat people suffering from cataracts. The number of people in Africa who have become blind or visually impaired due to cataracts is estimated at around ten million. It is estimated that in half of these cases, the eyes could be cured by simple surgery.⁴⁶ Between 2007 and 2011, 52,531 patients were treated free of charge, and some 169,615 patients

⁴² Federico Donelli, "The Ankara Consensus: The Significance of Turkey's Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 30 (1) 2018: 57-76.

⁴³ Özkan, "Does 'rising Power' Mean 'rising Donor'?" 142.

⁴⁴ Pinar Tank, "Turkey's New Humanitarian Approach in Somalia," NOREF Policy Brief, 2013, 1.

⁴⁵ Öztürk and Eke, "Gelecek Vadeden Kıta: Afrika," 40.

⁴⁶ Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa," 542.

received eye examination services. Under the project, TİKA provided the hospital specialists and paid their expenses.⁴⁷ The spectacular assistance was accompanied by a catchy slogan: “Türkiye opens up 100,000 African eyes.”⁴⁸

The year 2011 marked an important milestone in Turkish-African relations: during the expanding humanitarian crisis in Somalia, Türkiye became Somalia’s most active partner. This engagement was marked by intense political and social action: Erdoğan personally visited the country during the worst days of the crisis to assure them of his support, and their plight received international publicity, . On 25 January 2015, Erdoğan repeated his 2011 visit to Mogadishu, where he inaugurated a hospital built with Turkish involvement.⁴⁹ Erdoğan’s trips can be regarded as non-traditional forms of diplomacy, i.e. development diplomacy.⁵⁰

Türkiye has not remained idle after the imminent humanitarian crisis was “resolved”: after 2011, development aid replaced humanitarian aid in Somalia. These have been coordinated by around 500 Turkish volunteers, government officials, humanitarian aid workers on the ground. In Somalia, they have concluded the following projects:

- reconstruction of Mogadishu airport
- constructing a road between the airport and Mogadishu city centre
- construction of schools
- construction of a 200-bed hospital
- construction of a 100-bed children’s hospital (by Yardımeli)
- drilling of wells
- renovation of the parliament building (by TİKA)
- donation of garbage trucks

⁴⁷ Fulya Apaydin, “Overseas Development Aid Across the Global South: Lessons from the Turkish Experience in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia,” *European Journal of Development Research* 24 (2012): 270.

⁴⁸ Özkan and Akgün, “Turkey’s Opening to Africa,” 542.

⁴⁹ Mehmet Ozkan and Serhat Orakci, “Viewpoint: Turkey as a ‘political’ Actor in Africa – an Assessment of Turkish Involvement in Somalia,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (2015): 1.

⁵⁰ Tarrósy, “The Relative Importance of the Various Forms of ‘Unconventional Diplomacy,’” 84.

- supplying 15,000 people in a refugee camp (by Turkish Crescent)
- providing scholarships for 1,600 Somali students to study in Türkiye
- Qur'an donations, sending imams, reconstruction of mosques (by Diyanet)
- training Somali doctors by their Turkish colleagues
- building an orphanage (by İHH)
- providing pieces of irrigation equipment (by İHH)⁵¹

An essential characteristic of Turkish aid is that it delivers donations directly to the beneficiaries without conditions. Turkish organisations work on the ground without intermediaries, bypassing national-level institutions and involving local organisations, providing them with valuable experience by increasing efficiency and reducing the resources taken away from projects through intermediaries. This greater flexibility allows Turkish aid agencies to be active in generally hard-to-reach areas, which lack Western assistance.⁵²

There is a difference between Western actors, referred to in the literature as 'traditional donors', and the 'emerging donors.' Traditional donor countries utilise a more strategic approach, working in well-defined, 'safe' areas where the impact of their activities can be well assessed, and unnecessary complications with local powers can be avoided. In contrast, new aid donors have adopted a more structuralist-functionalist approach. They tend to rely on cultural links, shared experiences and identities with locals to achieve their goals based on universal norms and principles. To this end, new types of donors often take risks both in the choice of target area and in the lower degree of embeddedness in the local contexts

⁵¹ Ozkan and Orakci, "Viewpoint: Turkey as a 'political' Actor in Africa," 6.

⁵² Amid the 'second scramble' for Africa, it is interesting to compare the foundations of Turkish and Chinese Africa policy. While China, unlike the EU, does not condition its investments and aid but approaches them in a purely pragmatic way, Türkiye focuses mainly on Muslim countries and builds on more direct, personal relations, and thus - unlike China - presents itself as an equal partner in Africa. While China exports a large amount of human resources to Africa, Türkiye seeks to avoid this kind of 'imposition' and colonialism and thus seeks to respond to local problems through the use of local resources and local staff during the implementation of its aid and investment policies.

(Akpınar, 2015).⁵³ As the ‘emerging donors’ are increasingly present in African aid policy-making, they are also trying to prioritise their existing state relationships and centrally coordinated strategic aid, operating along the same (political, economic or moral) principles.

Beyond providing aid, Turkish organisations also link humanitarian action to peace-building objectives. In conflict areas, a lasting basis for peace depends on the existence of structural and social factors. The former category includes good governance, strong institutions and the rule of law. Türkiye can contribute to this through infrastructure building, technical assistance and capacity-building programmes for state institutions. In building the social foundations for peace-building, the emphasis is on education programmes, cultural and religious activities, and the implementation of various economic partnerships. In all of these programmes, it is vital to engage all actors in society and the economy, to approach local characteristics in a culturally sensitive way, and to pursue pan-national goals. Therefore, the realisation of effective relations between Türkiye and African countries lies in the depth of partnership rather than in implementing aid from a purely Turkish perspective.

Türkiye’s relations with Africa benefit from the fact that its humanitarian aid and development initiatives are perceived by Africans as far less of a threat than those of the traditional Western actors. With its relatively clean slate and Muslim affiliations, Türkiye is seen as an exceptionally reliable partner in the eyes of African Muslims. Although governmental aid is officially provided on a non-religious basis, in most cases, there is a strong suspicion that recipients are targeted mainly in Muslim-majority countries and areas.⁵⁴ In general, Türkiye’s Africa policy has the advantage of implementing Western-style services and techniques with a non-Western historical background.⁵⁵

However, Turkish aid agencies are not free from unilateral and centralised aid distribution. In Somalia, for example, the bulk of Turkish contributions are concentrated in and around Mogadishu, in areas under the control of the Somali government. Of course, there is also evidence that the material and financial assets they provide have not been in the right hands and may even have served the interests of warring parties, such as

⁵³ Pinar Akpınar, “Turkey’s Engagement in Africa’s Development,” Workshop Report, Istanbul Policy Center, 2015.

⁵⁴ Sema Kalaycıoğlu, “Between Mission and Business: Turkey’s New Approach to Africa,” *Journal of US-China Public Administration* 8 (2011): 1295.

⁵⁵ Paul R. Camacho et al., “Soft Power: The Turkish Effort in Somalia,” *The GLOBAL. A Journal of Policy and Strategy* 1 (2015): 83.

al-Shabaab.⁵⁶ In this way, Turkish governmental and non-governmental organisations could not remain outside the conflicts of local political forces: on 27 July 2013, the influential local terrorist organisation al-Sabab attacked the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu, killing one and wounding three. Moreover, just before Erdoğan's visit in 2015, the hotel where the Turkish delegation was staying was attacked.⁵⁷

Outlook and Proposals

In this paper, Turkish-African relations was examined as a fundamentally positive development of Türkiye's international relations. The main objective of the partners is to build long-term and lasting relations, and to this end, there is a need to go beyond high-level state-to-state relations and to develop links between economic, cultural and social actors. Inter-state relations are essential, but they cannot be the only dimension of relations between the parties, and only the activity of sub-state actors towards the other party can make the relations organic and meaningful. At the inter-state level, however, greater emphasis should be placed on joint parliamentary working committees between the two sides and on developing friendship associations, which could serve as channels for the business community and those culturally committed to Turkish-African relations.

In many ways, Africa is the continent of the future: the massive population explosion represents both an opportunity (high proportion of young people) and a challenge for both the continent's countries and the international community. International actors such as Türkiye play a crucial role in deciding which of these directions the continent's countries will be able to take. If Africa remains a cluster of problems, it will become a problem for the world in the 21st century. Thus, for Türkiye as an active participant in African affairs, pursuing strategic goals concerning Africa is already at this point of particular importance: Türkiye can benefit even more from the potential of Africa in the future if it further institutionalises its relations and its commitment to Africa.

For Türkiye, it is imperative to emphasise that 'opening to Africa' should benefit Türkiye and its African partners. In 2016, for example, Turkish exports to Africa amounted to \$11.9 billion, while imports from

⁵⁶ Achilles, Kathryn et al., "Turkish Aid Agencies in Somalia. Risks and Opportunities for Building Peace," Saferworld and Istanbul Policy Center, 2015, ii. and 21.

⁵⁷ Ozkan and Orakci, "Viewpoint: Turkey as a 'political' Actor in Africa," 2.

Africa were only USD 5.4 billion.⁵⁸ Promoting the expansion of Free Trade Agreements can help to create a trade balance.

In order to ease or remove financial and investment barriers, Türkiye should open Turkish bank branches or representative offices of the local state banks in Africa. In the same way, various joint professional and working organisations can facilitate the implementation of business, cultural and aid initiatives towards the other side. It would be worthwhile to set up a joint African-Turkish trade organisation with a representative office in one of the African cities. This organisation could serve as an interface between the different regulatory environments in Africa and Türkiye, as well as for implementing joint investment and trade projects.⁵⁹

In addition to inter-state student exchange programs, it is crucial to develop more cooperation between universities, educational institutions and research centres in Türkiye and Africa, i.e. to establish day-to-day links at the sub-state level, independent of political guidelines. These can facilitate joint scientific and technological research, which could be carried out through various research centres in Africa and Türkiye, with the joint participation of the parties. This scientific exchange should be a two-way process: it should not only be about educating African students in Türkiye but also providing more mobility of Turks to African universities. Joint activities are essential to deepen, broaden and disseminate mutual knowledge and to increase the quantity and quality of scientific research. This is not only of particular importance for the country's image but is also essential for the long-term maintenance of relations: deeper interaction between Turks and Africans is currently less than a generation old.

The basis of any economic and cultural cooperation is to overcome language barriers, which, in the case of Turkish activities in Africa, even if not the local language, means knowledge of English, French or Arabic. Likewise, there is a need to promote Turkish among Africans, for which Turkish television series and Maarif schools that replaced the Gülen schools are excellent tools. In international relations, cultural relations are the level at which the results and products can be most widely disseminated within the host population. In this way, the rich cultural heritage of each other can be disseminated through various cultural promotion programmes (festivals, exhibitions, educational publications). Developing town-

⁵⁸ Cicioğlu and İbrahim, "Analysis of Foreign Trade Between Türkiye and Africa," 82.

⁵⁹ Öztürk and Eke, "Gelecek Vadeden Kıta: Afrika," 43.

twinning networks can also play an important role in bringing together local actors to develop and maintain relations.

When establishing new contacts or bringing new actors into the existing network of contacts, it would be helpful to rely on a database based on shared experiences, which would include an evaluation of the previous experiences of Turkish Africa and serve as an information basis for new initiatives. The problem is, however, that in many cases, there are no regular reports made on the activities of individual Turkish organisations and businesses in Africa, or they are not published, so new actors sometimes have to start from scratch to establish their activities in the new area. Sharing information would make it possible to coordinate the activities of NGOs in a more effective and targeted way, preventing inconsistencies arising from overlapping areas of activity.

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