

TURKEY IN AFRICA

CHASING MARKETS AND POWER WITH A NEO-OTTOMAN RHETORIC

Toni Alaranta



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- Turkey’s increasing activity in Africa is part of its new foreign policy doctrine within which Turkey is conceptualized as a global ‘order-producing’ country.
- The export-oriented companies supporting the AKP constantly seek new markets, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wants to export his brand of Islamic-conservative ideology to other Muslim-majority countries.
- Turkish government officials and NGOs emphasize the historical connections between the Ottoman state and the African target countries.
- Turkey currently plays a key role in the internal affairs of Libya and Somalia, upholding military bases and training programmes.
- Turkey’s emphasis on humanitarian aid and equality, and the use of government-affiliated NGOs, have produced positive results, but the tendency to see Africa as a terrain for hegemonic power struggles against Egypt and Saudi Arabia is likely to generate negative reactions.



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INTRODUCTION

Since 2002, the incumbent Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) has attempted to remake Turkey's foreign policy doctrine. This has increasingly brought Africa onto the country's agenda. Like all states targeting a specific region, Turkey has several interests in dealing with African countries. First, the Anatolian export-oriented companies owned by a conservative middle class that supports the AKP face increasing competition in many regions, and are constantly on the lookout for new markets. Second, the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan government wants to export its special brand of Islamic-conservative ideology to other Muslim-majority countries, and gain leverage in particular among the Muslim Brotherhood constituencies on the African continent. Third, other major external actors are seen to be increasingly active in Africa, and Turkey wants to secure its position in this competition.

In addition to analyzing the rhetoric and tools through which Turkey implements its Africa Strategy, this study explores its relations with four individual states: Libya, Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria. Turkey's decision-makers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emphasize that all of these countries once enjoyed a meaningful relationship with the Ottoman Empire, and that Turkey's connection to them consequently has a long history. Further, there is reason to claim that Turkey has been exceptionally active with these specific countries, duly becoming a significant actor in the internal affairs of these states, as well as in the eyes of other major external actors.

The Briefing Paper starts by accounting for Africa's place in Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine. This is followed by an analysis of the four case studies (Libya, Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria). It is argued that the humanitarian aid and emphasis on equality are likely to provide positive results for both Turkey and the target countries. However, the tendency to support particular, often ideologically chosen actors amid internal conflicts in the target countries, and the inclination to perceive Africa as a terrain for hegemonic power struggles with actors like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, is likely to generate a negative reaction among the African states.

In Somalia and Libya in particular, Turkey operates in a context of severe internal conflict, aiming to implement its own state-building policies. If successful, these operations will give Turkey very significant leverage in Africa.

EMPHASIZING MUTUAL RESPECT AND EQUALITY IN AFRICA

The characteristic aspects of Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP have been activism and a multi-vector approach. There has been a very determined attempt to undo the previous Republican doctrine. This is seen as unnecessarily cautious, passive and geographically limited. It has duly been replaced by a doctrine according to which Turkey should play the role of 'order-producing' country in global politics. One concrete example of this desire is the fact that only four countries – the USA, China, France, and Russia – have more embassies worldwide than Turkey.

In the context of this desire for a new global outreach, 2005 was declared the 'Year of Africa' by Turkey. However, the first diplomatic initiative for an 'opening to Africa' was launched as early as 1998, four years before the AKP came to power. This initiative had its roots in the Turkish political elite's search for a new role for Turkey in the post-Cold War world, as well as in the expectations of the new Anatolian conservative business class, which was explicitly export-oriented. During the AKP era, both of these factors have started to have an ever-increasing effect on Turkey's foreign policy, strengthened by an attempt to export the domestic Islamic-conservative outlook to other Muslim-majority countries.¹ Turkey's current leaders envision a hegemonic future role for Turkey, believing that the country 'has a duty to represent and exert influence over Sunni populations over its borders'.² In very concrete terms, the diplomatic opening to Africa has taken place since 2008 with the first Turkey-Africa

1 Gönül Tol, 'Turkey's Bid for a Religious Leadership', *Foreign Affairs*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-01-10/turkeys-bid-religious-leadership>.

2 Ashi Aydıntaşbaş, 'The Turkish *Sonderweg*: Erdoğan's New Turkey and its Role in the Global Order', Policy Brief, Istanbul Policy Center, February 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_turkish_sonderweg_the_new_turkeys_role_in_the_global_order.

Cooperation Summit. By the end of 2019, Turkey had embassies in 42 out of 54 African countries.

One core aspect of Turkey's approach in Africa has been rhetoric emphasizing that Turkey is on the side of the 'oppressed nations'. Further, the foreign policy rhetoric on Africa tends to highlight the Western nations' oppressive colonial policies regarding the continent, from which Turkey wants to differ by emphasizing mutual respect and equality. This is part of a wider foreign policy doctrine according to which the existing international order is dysfunctional and in need of a seachange. Accordingly, President Erdoğan often repeats his slogan 'the world is bigger than five' in reference to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. On the other hand, as Turkey under Erdoğan increasingly re-evaluates its existing alliances, Africa tends to become a kind of 'mental sanctuary' for Turkish foreign policy actors. In other words, it is seen as a non-hostile continent where Turkey can build new alliances and present itself as a benevolent state compared to other external actors.

In addition to opening embassies and organizing business gatherings between Turkish entrepreneurs and their African counterparts, Turkey's foreign policy in Africa utilizes NGOs, focusing on education, development and humanitarian aid. In this arena, the 2016 coup attempt by the religious Gülen movement, once an important ally of the AKP, has marked an important rupture. The Gülen network had a significant number of schools operating in various African countries, which have since 2016 become the main targets of government operations in order to wipe out the movement in Africa. The schools run by the Gülen movement have been subsequently replaced by the Maarif Vakfı, a government-affiliated foundation now building new schools in several African countries. The Maarif Vakfı's organic link to Turkey's official religious institutions was recently increased by synchronizing it with the Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı. The Diyanet Vakfı is the foundation governed by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, an official state apparatus with a huge budget. In addition to *Maarif Vakfı*, Turkey's 'soft power' in Africa is represented by the İHH, the Islamic-oriented humanitarian relief organization known for its close connections with government policies in Syria, for instance. Both the Maarif Vakfı and İHH are nominally non-governmental organizations but their work is closely synchronized with the AKP's foreign policy agenda.

Turkey's approach to Africa can be roughly divided on the basis of those countries that have historically been either directly part of or in close connection with the Ottoman State, and those sub-Saharan states with which no such historical connection exists. Accordingly, in sub-Saharan Africa, the diplomats, entrepreneurs and NGO personnel have no ready-made narrative, whereas in the previous Ottoman territories a neo-Ottoman³ rhetoric is by now a familiar tool at the disposal of various foreign policy actors.⁴

LIBYA: POWER POLITICS AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

The North African countries are afforded a very special status in Turkey's African strategy. From Algeria to Sudan, these are former Ottoman territories. Initially, Turkey objected to the NATO-led military intervention that led to the collapse of the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya. According to Turkey, an external intervention would only make things worse. It must be noted that by 2011, Turkey had established a well-functioning relationship with the Libyan government, having large-scale economic projects and investments in the country, for instance. Since the ousting of the Gaddafi regime and during the emerging civil war, Turkey has attempted to gain influence in the country by supporting the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). Its formal leader, Fayez al-Sarraj, comes from a conservative Tripoli landowner family with roots in Turkey. The Tripoli government is backed by the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood both politically and militarily. In this sense, al-Sarraj's internationally recognized government is an ideal partner for President Erdoğan.

By 2019, the stalemate in Libya between the Turkish-backed GNA and the forces under rebel commander Khalifa Haftar was interrupted by the latter's new operation, which seemed to threaten Tripoli itself. Turkey's regional rivals, most notably Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, have supported Haftar's forces. In this situation, Turkey significantly increased its involvement, signing two agreements with the GNA. The first was a defence treaty enabling Turkish military

3 Neo-Ottomanism highlights the tensions associated with the entangled histories of empire and nation-state in Turkey. Ottomanism echoes in incrementally louder tones in every corner of Turkish society's cultural, political, and social spaces. Hakan Yavuz, 'Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision', *Die Welt des Islams* 56 (2016): 438-465.

4 Gökhan Bacık and İsa Afacan, 'Turkey Discovers Sub-Saharan Africa: The Critical Role of Agents in the Construction of Turkish Foreign-Policy Discourse', *Turkish Studies* (2013).



The Turkish humanitarian relief foundation İHH has reported their work in the Dadaab refugee camps in August 2011. Refugees living in Dadaab have been fleeing the civil war, drought and famine in Somalia. Source: Flickr/İHH (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

forces to be deployed in Tripoli; the other was a maritime deal allowing Turkey to advance its position vis-à-vis Cyprus and the East Mediterranean energy resources. In this increasingly geopolitical competition, Turkey is confronted by a block composed of Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, and Israel. Further, President Erdoğan started to send Turkey's Syrian proxy fighters, gathered under the label of the 'Syrian National Army', to Libya in order to use them as ground forces against the approaching Haftar's army. The number of Syrian fighters transferred to Libya was initially around 2,000, but in March 2020, it was reported that the figure had increased to well over 6,000, of whom 117 had already died.⁵ Turkish regular army units have also been deployed in Libya in small numbers.

Libya can be seen as the exemplary case of Turkey's new active role in Africa. As a regional economic heavyweight, Turkey is often perceived as a welcome partner, especially in Muslim-majority countries. On the other hand, the Erdoğan government's ideological attachment to the Muslim Brotherhood has induced Turkey to put all of its eggs in the same basket in Libya.

This policy will be successful in the event that the GNA ultimately emerges as the sole power centre but, failing that, Turkey will need to start from scratch again. With increasing involvement, the active foreign policy orientation also demonstrates the dangers of being stuck in foreign civil wars. As the Syrian case has already demonstrated, this can lead to a situation where one originally limited military operation leads to another, with no end in sight.

At least in the short term, Turkey's determination and willingness to engage militarily has made it one of the key power brokers in Libya – and duly recognized as such by other players, such as the EU and Russia. Most recently, this was demonstrated in the Berlin Conference on 19 January 2020. Among other things, Turkey pledged to work for a permanent ceasefire, but there are credible reports that it has continued to secretly ship new weapons to the country.⁶ However, it is important to keep in mind that in Libya, Turkey was not the initiator but has subsequently implemented an increasingly interventionist policy in its attempt to adjust to the post-Gaddafi circumstances.

5 'Turkey's mercenaries: 6,650 Syrian mercenaries volunteer to go to Libya, 117 mercenaries killed in Tripoli so far and 150 others cross to Europe', Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, 7 March 2020, <http://www.syriaohr.com/en/?p=156527>.

6 'Turkey sends secret arms shipments into Libya', *BBC News*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-52037533/turkey-sends-secret-arms-shipments-into-libya>.

SUDAN: BEFORE AND AFTER OMAR AL-BASHIR

Currently a country of 40 million inhabitants, Sudan is situated at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East, both culturally and geographically. Turkey has been active in Sudan for at least a decade. Turkey-Sudan relations started to gain increasing importance in 2006 when then Prime Minister Erdoğan visited the country. Erdoğan claimed that the Western nations were unfairly criticizing Omar al-Bashir's rule (1989–2019). The trade volume between the two countries was also rapidly growing, from 27 million dollars in 1990 to 300 million dollars by 2012. An ever larger number of Sudanese students also came to Turkey with the help of grants. Since 2000, the Turkish humanitarian relief foundation İHH has been active in the country. The close relationship between Presidents al-Bashir and Erdoğan could also be seen in how quickly Sudan started to root out the Gülen movement after the 2016 military coup attempt.

In 2009, there were demands for the Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir to be tried at the International Criminal Court for being directly responsible for the attacks by pro-government militia in Sudan's Darfur province. At that time, Turkey rejected the idea, arguing that this would only make Sudan more destabilized. Under Omar al-Bashir's three-decade-long rule, Sudan had become a platform not only for an authoritarian but also for an Islamist project. Bashir's version of Islamism was part of the international Muslim Brotherhood movement that President Erdoğan has tried to advance all over the Middle East. Since 2017, an internal power struggle has been ongoing, and there were rumours that President al-Bashir and his Islamist allies were on a collision course. This drew in the regional players, particularly Saudis and the United Arab Emirates on one side, and Turkey and Qatar on the other.

There are reports according to which Turkey and Qatar orchestrated the sacking of Bashir's Chief of Staff, who had advocated dumping the Muslim Brotherhood and approaching the Saudis instead. After this manoeuvre, Bashir allowed the Islamic Movement to resume its work and the Popular Defence Forces, an Islamist militia, resumed their regular activities, for instance by being allowed to organize their annual festivals, where jihadi songs are performed. Bashir then gained support from both the Islamic Movement and the Popular Defence Forces to run in the 2020

elections.⁷ However, the military ousted al-Bashir in April 2019 and by September, a new government and a power-sharing mechanism between the military, civilian representatives and protest groups had been created. This came as an unwelcome surprise to President Erdoğan, and since then Turkey has had to change its policy towards Sudan. On the eve of Bashir's ousting, Turkish companies had invested around 600 million dollars in Sudan, and the country was the fifth biggest receiver of funding by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). In addition, Bashir had donated Suakin Island to Turkey as a military base. Out of the other external actors, Russia also has a military base in Sudan (Port Sudan).

The April 2019 revolution that ousted the al-Bashir regime has come as a nasty surprise to Erdoğan's government. While al-Bashir ruled Sudan, Turkey could trust that the country would remain a platform on which Turkey could steadily increase its military and political presence, a part of which involved pressuring Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Turkish pro-government media has suggested that the ousting of al-Bashir was staged by the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and that these states used civilians weary of the economic situation in Sudan as their tool.⁸ It is still too early to say how Turkey-Sudan relations will materialize in the future, but the post-al-Bashir era definitely requires Turkey to rethink its policies.

SOMALIA: STATE-BUILDING AND A MILITARY BASE

Similar to Libya, Sudan, and Nigeria, Turkish foreign policy actors perceive Turkey and Somalia as sharing a long historical connection through the Ottoman Empire and the Adal Sultanate, a Muslim Somali Kingdom located in the Horn of Africa, which flourished around 1415 to 1577. The Adal Sultanate indeed maintained a robust commercial and political relationship with the Ottoman Empire. In modern times, Turkey had opened its embassy in Mogadishu back in 1979, but due to the ongoing civil war, this was closed in 1991. The embassy was reopened in 2011 when then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited the country. 2011 also marked

⁷ Munzul Assal, 'Bashir is in jail, but where are the Sudanese Islamists?', *Sudan blog*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.cmi.no/news/2255-bashir-is-in-jail-but-where-are-the-sudanese-islamists>.

⁸ Merve Şebnem Oruç, 'Who is disturbed by Turkey's presence on Sudan's Suakin island?', *Daily Sabah*, 10 May 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/merve-sebnem-oruc/2019/05/10/who-is-disturbed-by-turkeys-presence-on-sudans-suakin-island>.

the beginning of the ever-increasing Turkish-Somali cooperation, with Turkey implementing its largest foreign relief programme in Somalia, the total sum being over a billion dollars. Turkey has been a major actor in Somalia's reconstruction from the education sector to healthcare, from media to transportation. A Turkish company, for instance, runs the Mogadishu port.

According to the Somali Ambassador to Ankara, the Turkey-Somalia relationship can be compared to the relationship between Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.⁹ This is an interesting statement, knowing that the Turkish Cypriot community is very dependent on Turkey. This dependency is inevitable and the Turkish Cypriots definitely do not want to see Turkey abandoning them, but many also see the dependency as problematic and far from ideal. Considering this, one wonders whether the current public celebration of Turkey in Somalia will turn more negative as time goes on.

The history of Somalia since the nineteenth century has been characterized by European colonialism, as the area was ruled by British, French and Italian forces, each having their own Somaliland. The British and Italian Somalilands were united in 1960 and gained independence, while the territories occupied by the French became Djibouti. Current Turkish foreign policy actors emphasize the highly negative consequences of these colonial practices in their attempt to create an image of Turkey as a benevolent actor, starkly different from previous Western powers' imperial policies.

In recent times, Turkey has tried to design a comprehensive Somalia policy. In the self-understanding of the Turkish foreign policy actors, Turkey implements a balanced policy in Somalia, distinct from both the US and the EU's highly security-oriented policy and the purely economic approach espoused by actors like China and India. In Somalia, Turkey has duly engaged in an all-encompassing state-building enterprise. Indeed, Somalia is where Turkey's declared 'Opening to Africa' has been most vigorously implemented, with very noteworthy results. The TURKSOM military base and training academy located in Mogadishu is the most concrete example of Turkish activism in Africa. It is estimated that over 10,000 Somali soldiers are to be trained at the base in the coming years.

NIGERIA: COOPERATION THROUGH THE D-8 GROUP

Although never under Ottoman rule, Turkey's foreign policy actors tend to underscore that the areas forming the current Nigeria and the Ottoman State had meaningful connections during the Ottoman era. Present-day Chad and Nigeria were once part of the so-called Kanem-Bornu Empire, which lasted from 1400 to 1893. During the republican period, Turkey-Nigeria relations have taken the most explicit form of cooperation in the so-called D-8 group. The D-8 (Developing 8) consists of Nigeria, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. It was established in Istanbul in 1997. The brainchild of Turkey's Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, the D-8 is an organization of eight Muslim-majority countries, with a total population of over one billion. Its main function is to strengthen the economic exchange and increase the cooperation between member states. By 2019, the Turkey-Nigeria total trade volume had reached 2.4 billion dollars, of which 600 million consisted of Turkey's exports to Nigeria and 1.8 billion Nigeria's exports to Turkey. With its over 200 million inhabitants, Nigeria is of course a huge market.

As with other African countries, the Turkish approach to Nigeria includes not only economic activity and official representation, but also NGOs. The Yunus Emre Foundation, Maarif Vakfı and İHH are all active in Nigeria. In addition, Turkish grants have been given to a small number of Nigerian students, who have been able to study in Turkey as a consequence. As around half of Nigeria's population is Muslim, Turkish actors tend to cite Islam as one of the 'soft power' tools available for Turkey in Nigeria.

However, a lack of experience on the ground is seen as being highly disadvantageous for Turkey compared to other major external powers operating in Nigeria. In addition to being a country with vast potential, Turkish foreign policy actors acknowledge that Nigeria also poses some considerable risks. This became very concrete in July 2019 with an attack on a cargo ship off the coast of Nigeria, during which 10 Turkish sailors were kidnapped. A week later, four Turkish citizens were abducted from a bar in the western part of the country. Similar to other countries, Turkey constantly needs to evaluate the economic gains and influence acquired through the activity of government-affiliated NGOs in Nigeria against the very real security risks in the country. At the time of writing, Turkey was preparing

⁹ 'Türkiye-Somali ilişkileri Türkiye-KKTC ilişkileri gibidir', *Timeturk*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.timeturk.com/turkiye-somali-iliskileri-turkiye-kkte-iliskileri-gibidir/haber-1343658>.

to sign an economic and trade cooperation agreement with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in which Nigeria is an important actor.

CONCLUSIONS

Turkey has become increasingly active in Africa. In 2019 Turkey's exports to North Africa rose yearly by 10%, and 12% to other African countries. There were plans to organize two Turkey-Africa summits in 2020, but during the Covid-19 pandemic, these are very unlikely to materialize. Turkey has played a key role in the state-building processes in Somalia and Libya.

The NGOs focusing on humanitarian aid and education, most prominently Maarif Vakfı, TİKA, and İHH, are to a large extent the foreign policy extensions of

President Erdoğan's authoritarian, Islamic-conservative state project. Turkey guards these NGOs very closely, and usually has little inducement to seek a cooperation mechanism between its own initiatives and those of other external actors operating in Africa, unless this is carried out on Turkey's terms.

As Africa increasingly experiences a power struggle between various actors, Turkey's more active and even aggressive approach in countries like Syria, Libya, and Sudan tends to increase as much as decrease regional instability and conflicts. On the other hand, in this competitive environment, other external actors may also find Turkey to be the least bad option for joint diplomatic efforts and cooperation in specific policy areas, particularly in those countries where Turkey has already managed to build up networks, infrastructure and expertise.