

Türkiye-Africa Relations: A Case Study of Somalia, Nigeria, and Libya from Humanitarian and Security Perspectives

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores Türkiye's relations with Africa, focusing on Somalia, Nigeria and Libya from both humanitarian and security perspectives. To do so, the study employs the concept of soft power in relation to the security and humanitarian policies that Türkiye has adopted on the African continent. Though Türkiye has no significant colonial history on the continent like other European countries, its relations with Africa in recent decades are no secret and continue to strengthen against all odds. From a relationship that stems from historical links with the Ottoman Empire to more promising and positive impacts on the continent in recent years, it is important to understand these ties amidst the increasing distaste expressed by some African nations towards the West. Using examples of Türkiye's security and humanitarian deployment in Somalia, Nigeria and Libya, it is perhaps no surprise to perceive the relationship between Türkiye and African nations as a dichotomy between humanitarian and security.*

Keywords: Türkiye-Africa Relations, Türkiye-Somalia Relations, Türkiye-Nigeria Relations, Türkiye-Libya Relations, Humanitarian Aids

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Introduction

Türkiye's historical relations with Africa, especially North Africa, have a rich and enduring legacy that can be traced back to the era of the Ottoman Empire, which rarely ventured into countries South of the Sahara, to modern-day relations that span across the continent. Özkan splits the history of Turkish-African relations into three key periods: Ottoman Empire to 1923, 1923 to 1998, and 1998 to the present.¹ However, it is not the era in which the relations are divided, but the nature, impacts, and drivers of the relations. For instance, after the dismantlement of the Soviet Union and increasing adoption and conversion to free market economies, many countries in Africa embraced emerging powers such as China, Brazil, and Russia. These emerging powers had different approaches compared to historical colonial powers such as France and Britain, as well as the influence of the U.S. Yet, the emerging globalized economy and rising population made engagement with Africa fruitful, acting as an impetus for others.² Türkiye, being a supporter of processes leading to decolonization periods, then began diplomatic relations with many countries further South of the continent, including Ghana, Nigeria, and Sudan.³ As such, Türkiye has begun to increase its influence and collaboration with countries within Africa, beginning with the proclamation that 2005 was “the year of Africa” and being considered a strategic partner of Africa in 2008.⁴ Since then, Türkiye has had observer

status over numerous economic organizations, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), as well as sustained its engagement.⁵ Through this, Türkiye had established 20 new embassies in Africa and had increased the number to 43 by 2021.⁶ In order to lessen its dependency on Western nations, Türkiye is increasingly engaging with countries in Africa to strategically develop international and diplomatic relations that will continue to pay dividends. This is an exemplar of how soft power approaches can be adopted to enhance influence and power on the continent and continue to pave the way for Türkiye's security and humanitarian policies. Soft power is often synonymized with other key terms, such as “diplomacy,” as opposed to hard power, which is associated with military action. In the present day, Türkiye's use of soft power is characterized by its democratized and economically open nature, which is able to combine Islam and democracy and acts as an inspiration to many Arab countries.⁷ As a result, Türkiye continues to show promising and positive impacts on the continent, particularly through its security and humanitarian policies examined in subsequent sections of this paper.

Türkiye's Security Policies in Africa

Türkiye has become a more prominent actor within the African con-

continent, with Africa also solidifying a position in Türkiye's foreign policy in recent decades. The new concept of a "scramble for Africa" has gained prominence amongst academics. This scramble is often likened to the Cold War, with Western powers (U.S. and Europe) vying against Eastern powers (China, Russia, UAE, Qatar), similar to the U.S.-Soviet Union rivalry in the past.⁸ The meaning of Türkiye's policy in Africa stems from the paradoxical curse of the continent, which contains some of the poorest nations that are richest in resources. Resources such as oil, gas, diamonds, and other minerals in terms of economy as well as agriculturally through cacao, vanilla, and palm oil continue to attract all who are interested. All of these resources in abundance for Africa as a whole are essential materials for industrial production; thus, an increase in demand as well as supply for industrial productions by default increases the pressure on Africa's resources. One argument for Türkiye's adoption of security policies on the continent is the potential for conversions of economic structures and markets. One challenge of Türkiye's relations with Africa revolves around the economic and political stability of its own internal structures. If the politics and/or economics of Türkiye are damaged or voided, then it threatens the capabilities of developmental and humanitarian aid that it can provide to Africa, and this threatens their relations. Türkiye has recently begun a new phase of security-related implementations through the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Regardless of the position adopted to examine Türkiye's security policies, it is evident that such policies are interlinked with the humanitarian aid policies, as many African countries continue to experience conflict, instability, and humanitarian crises

In terms of physical security (i.e., military), Türkiye already provides armored vehicles, infantry weapons, and naval equipment to African countries in order to increase their national and international security and defense.⁹ Türkiye adopted the use of UAVs during the Libyan civil war between 2014 and 2020, which proved to be efficient and performed well. The civil war erupted due to political conflicts stemming from the assassination of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.¹⁰ Türkiye, along with Qatar, Italy, and support from the United Nations (UN), backed the Government National Accord (GNA), which was the internationally recognized leading party of Libya. With a lack of support from Western nations, the GNA relied on Türkiye to aid in their side of the conflict. In 2019, Türkiye signed a military deal, meaning that at the GNA's request, Türkiye would deploy troops in Libya as well as sign a maritime deal to delimit maritime borders.¹¹ With Türkiye's support, a

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permanent ceasefire of conflict was signed in 2020 to end the war, with the GNA ruling Libya in coalition with the Second al-Thani Cabinet to form the Government of National Unity (GNU).¹² This is arguably one of Türkiye's greatest feats in African security and defense, but one that is by no means soft power, which the country wants to be known for. One positive aspect of Türkiye's relationship with African countries is its affiliation with religion. 98 percent of the Turkish population is Muslim, as well as the ruling party (AK Party) has an Islamic identity.¹³ This enables stronger relationships to form in countries in Africa that also have populations that are predominantly Muslim, such as Sudan and Somalia. This also allows for security policies to be readily adopted by such countries from Türkiye. Regardless of the position adopted to examine Türkiye's security policies, it is evident that such policies are interlinked with the humanitarian aid policies, as many African countries continue to experience conflict, instability, and humanitarian crises.

Nature of Türkiye's Humanitarian Aid in Africa

Türkiye has a reputation as a global leader in humanitarian aid and is perceived to have a deliberate strategy to frame itself as compassionate and powerful. It aids in Türkiye's goal to have greater influence in Africa, as it showcases the country as one that is a large international actor and increases direct engagement with different local and national authorities.¹⁴ Although much of Türkiye's humanitarian aid has been redirected towards the Middle East since 2021, Türkiye sent \$99.1 million worth of aid to Africa in 2021.¹⁵ Africa was also the main recipient of earmarked contributions from Türkiye, which still demonstrates the importance of the continent to Türkiye. Türkiye has attempted to act as a mediator for many countries across Asia and Africa in order to help alleviate humanitarian-related issues in the respective regions. Whilst these mediation efforts have arguably failed in the Middle East due to escalating tensions and deteriorating relationships with Türkiye, such as with Syria and Israel, the efforts made in Somalia have proven to be more successful.¹⁶ Türkiye's interest in humanitarian aid issues in Africa has a variety of reasons.

First, by helping nations in Africa to deal with or alleviate humanitarian-related issues, Türkiye can establish key diplomatic relations that will enable them to have allies in the event of Türkiye needing assistance themselves.¹⁷ It also increases trade opportunities for valuable resources



that many African countries have in abundance. Furthermore, having these relations with African countries helps Türkiye emerge as a key power on the global stage, and breaks the international isolation that Türkiye has endured over the years.¹⁸ Establishing these relations will enable Türkiye to have a greater say in international politics, but equally important for Africa is that Türkiye, through its humanitarian policies, is helping to meet increasing humanitarian needs, especially in addressing health crises.

Türkiye has long provided medical aid to African countries to address different health crises and meet the needs of the health sector. In 1985, Türkiye provided an aid package worth \$10 million to Sahel countries, namely Sudan, Somalia, Niger, Guinea, Gambia, and Mali.¹⁹ The package was designed to enable insti-

tutional capacity building to be established in the aforementioned countries to support their populations. However, this failed, as by 1993 only one Turkish-built hospital was structured in Africa, as a result of inefficient resources and too large a scope of the project.²⁰ Despite these setbacks and learning from its failures in the past, Türkiye's aid in healthcare has shown stark improvements in health and education services across Africa in recent years. In 2016, Türkiye helped with medical developments in Benin, Sudan, Niger, and Chad. The support provided in these four countries led to the establishment of five new hospitals and twenty hospital renovations and accounted for 1.3 million people directly benefiting from these activities.²¹ In 2019, Türkiye's aid directly to the healthcare sector amounted to over \$39 million, which enabled a further five

Turkish President Erdoğan and Somali President Mohamud attend a signing ceremony for security and humanitarian aid agreements between the two countries in Ankara, Türkiye on July 6, 2022.
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new hospitals and equipped twenty-two hospitals with facilities to conduct surgical operations across Niger, Guinea, and several other countries in Africa.²² It could be inferred that success achieved in these countries or regions was due to the relatively stable conditions in the countries, which cannot be said for Somalia, where the humanitarian policy and approach differ slightly.

Somalia has a history of humanitarian-related issues that are exacerbated by conflicts within the country.²³ Somalia's most recent civil war started in 2009, with the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops allowing for al-Shabaab, an Islamist insurgent group that branched from al-Qaeda, to expand. The civil war has increased sexual violence, displacement, both internal and external and Islamist insurgency attacks and abuses against children.²⁴ International actors such as the UN, EU, and U.S. have limited their interventions in Somalia since 1993, and as a result, their efforts have been inconsistent and sporadic and show limited successes.²⁵ However, in 2011, Türkiye established strong economic and diplomatic relations and was able to increase awareness of the conflict and bring it to global platforms. In countries that are predominantly Muslim, such as Somalia, it is easier for Türkiye to provide humanitarian aid as there is no religious or ethical discrimination due to a shared characteristic between the aid providers and receivers.²⁶ With Türkiye's status as a predominantly Muslim country, it has greater credibility and legitimacy within Somalia to enable ef-

forts to be more successful. Türkiye capitalized on the Ottoman Empire's historical influence in Somalia when it aided the country during a time of Portuguese and Ethiopian expansionism, which further strengthened diplomatic ties between both countries.²⁷ Since their re-involvement in 2011, Türkiye has aided Somalia in building more mosques, rehabilitating other mosques, and providing imams with the opportunity to hold religious seminars as a way to strengthen religion and culture in Somalia. Such an approach makes it difficult to divorce Türkiye's security and humanitarian policies from religious acts.

Beyond religious rehabilitations and constructions, Türkiye's involvement with Somalia has increased growth in healthcare, transportation, and education, as well as improving peace and security. This has made Somalia a more stable country than it was several years ago in terms of political and social respect.²⁸ However, the bilateral trade agreements established between Türkiye and Somalia, highlight the potential ulterior motives for Türkiye's presence and involvement from the onset. There have been greater exports of valuable resources from Somalia to Türkiye, with limited resources provided to Somalia.²⁹ Such an imbalance portrays Türkiye in no different light from other emerging powers like China, except for the underlying soft power approach adopted by Türkiye. Other sympathizers of Türkiye's humanitarian policy and development aid advocates may argue that no foreign relations with African countries have

historically been balanced, as countries in Africa have mostly been recipients of aid rather than trade partners. However, with the conflict in Somalia still ongoing, it raises questions as to whether Türkiye is or isn't an effective mediator and provider of humanitarian assistance in Somalia. Human Rights Watch reported that there was an estimated number of 2.6 million internally displaced people in Somalia, many of whom live unassisted and therefore vulnerable to other impacts of the civil war, such as gender-based violence, the usage of child soldiers, and radicalization into the prominent al-Shabaab group.³⁰ It is, however, important to note that despite the dichotomy between security and humanitarian activities in Africa, Türkiye's influence and priorities across the continent may have been affected in recent months. This deduction is made based on the devastating impacts of the 7.8-magnitude earthquakes on Türkiye (and Syria) in February 2023, followed by a 7.5-magnitude quake hours later.³¹ However, Somalia has provided over \$4.8 million in aid to victims of the Türkiye earthquakes, which highlights the strength of the Türkiye-Somalia relationship.³² Such a gesture and outcome for Türkiye could defend Türkiye-Somalia relations and humanitarian policies as mutually beneficial.

Policy Rationale vis-à-vis Challenges

Undoubtedly, Türkiye has achieved success in gaining traction and build-

Türkiye does not have a colonial past in Africa as opposed to many European countries and therefore has a greater potential to form key relations with many African countries based on a somewhat neutral narrative

ing a positive reputation in Africa. However, some critics question the country's motives and call Türkiye's increasing influence as a veiled form of "neo-Ottomanism" in countries such as Somalia and Sudan.³³ Such critique is exemplified through Türkiye's engagement with Somalia following the devastating famine in 2011. After providing ample humanitarian aid, Türkiye moved its focus to security cooperation programs, such as building a large military base in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital city.³⁴ Additionally, Türkiye agreed with the President of Sudan to restore the Ottoman ruins on Suakin Island to revitalize the historical splendor. Historical restoration efforts by Türkiye are consistently met with allegations of Neo-Ottomanism by the Western media. Moreover, in the case of Africa, Türkiye's selfless motives behind its open declaration to support development and security are often overshadowed by such unfounded claims.

Türkiye has succeeded in strengthening relations with specific African

Relations between Türkiye and Africa are mostly established through a series of soft power policies, marking a deviation from other countries that have maintained their relations with Africa through their colonial past

countries where others have failed. The most prominent example is Nigeria. Although it may not be due to Türkiye's own security or humanitarian aid work, social characteristics have encouraged such relationships. In the Nigerian economy, Türkiye's greatest rivals are China, India, and Norway.³⁵ Out of Nigeria's 36 states, 18 are dominated by Muslim populations, most of whom feel more comfortable knowing that Türkiye is a major economic partner as opposed to its competitors. Whilst Nigeria is indeed a secular country that consists of various religions other than Islam, such as Christianity, the prominence of Islam makes Türkiye's influence more doable and influential when compared to China, India, or Norway.³⁶ Furthermore, Nigeria has not had a predominantly Muslim country attempt to create such a network in its history, which gives Türkiye an upper hand and a more welcoming path to influence and relations. Despite this, the Türkiye-Nigeria relationship has been tested by the 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye,

by the Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) to oust a democratically elected government.³⁷ From that time on, the terrorist organization influenced the Nigerian economy and, as a result, prevented Nigeria from taking drastic action to support President Erdoğan and the democratically elected government in Türkiye. This lack of support resulted in Nigerian deportations from Türkiye based on the security policy and the damaged relationship. However, this did not completely destroy the relationship and still proves Türkiye to be successful in achieving a great diplomatic and economic relationship with an African country based on social characteristics. For instance, President Erdoğan visited Nigeria on October 19-20, 2021, and during the visit, seven agreements and memoranda of understanding were signed between the two countries. Nigeria was represented at the presidential level during the Türkiye-Africa Summit. Thanks to these mutual visits, tête-à-tête meetings were held at the level of heads of state. In addition, meetings between delegations were conducted. Moreover, after the devastating earthquake that occurred in Türkiye in February 2023, a delegation headed by the Minister of the Federal Capital Region, acting as the special representative of the President of Nigeria, paid a condolence visit on February 22-24, 2023. Today, Nigeria is one of the leading trading partners of Türkiye in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2022, bilateral trade volume between Türkiye and Nigeria reached \$2.5 billion. In other words, cooperation between Türkiye and

Nigeria is rapidly developing across a wide range of fields, including trade, economy, energy, education, security, science and technology, defense industry, and cultural projects.³⁸

Türkiye does not have a colonial past in Africa as opposed to many European countries and therefore has a greater potential to form key relations with many African countries based on a somewhat neutral narrative.³⁹ Furthermore, a major success of Türkiye within Africa is the way in which assistance, particularly humanitarian, is delivered. Many countries' governments, such as Russia, China, and India, do not have direct involvement with their NGOs that operate in African countries. This means that there is a greater sense of distance through multilateral channels.⁴⁰ As such, the advancements that these nations have made in establishing key relations with countries that need assistance are much slower than those of Türkiye, whose governments are directly engaged through bilateral channels. Aid from BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) usually has a deal attached, whereby they can also benefit from the aid they provide by receiving goods and services in return. An example is China's "loans-for-oil" policy, whereby oil is returned to China as a form of payment for financial assistance.⁴¹ Türkiye, however, does not have these deals attached to the aid they provide.⁴² This makes Türkiye more successful in establishing key relations in Africa, but it still does not deter African countries from engaging with China and others.

The imposition of hard power techniques allowed countries like France, Britain, and Italy to propel their development by utilizing the resources they gathered from the countries they directly influenced.⁴³ Many trade deals from this relate to colonial pasts, and although there is distaste between the colonist and colonized countries, it can be argued that the colonist countries had a head start in their relations with Africa when compared to Türkiye. Furthermore, with France's history of colonialism in Africa, the French influence and presence remain in order to block the progression of communist ideas on the continent.⁴⁴ This has allowed France to continue to exert political influence and thus maintain trade deals and relations in Africa. Furthermore, the French political influences allowed any potential recalcitrant leaders to be inhibited from gaining leadership positions, thus expelling French influences.⁴⁵ However, such influence seems to be challenged and appears less effective as the momentum that France gained through such implementations has begun to become nullified with the recent coups of Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). While Türkiye does not have the power of ex-colonial influence, it also does not have to deal with excessive coups to void its influence. Rather, Türkiye's presence as a "clean sheet" is more welcomed and could therefore be argued as a success rather than a failure.

Türkiye has established multiple key relations with various African countries, yet some still face instability,

conflicts, and socio-economic problems. A key example that has already been evoked is the case of Somalia. Somalia still faces a civil war, which has caused innumerable socio-economic and security issues.⁴⁶ These issues revolve around gender-based violence, child violence, Islamist insurgency groups, and internally displaced people, which could encourage migration. Similarly, Libya still faces conflict that derives from the assassination of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, despite Türkiye's efforts to reduce disputes.⁴⁷ The introduction of UAVs, combined with the readily available military resources in Libya, could be argued as a way to fuel the conflict as opposed to ending it.⁴⁸ Regardless, Türkiye's advancements in Africa lose momentum due to the socio-economic status of Türkiye itself as well as the ongoing security and conflict issues across Africa as a whole.⁴⁹ Türkiye's humanitarian vis-à-vis security campaign is one without its challenges and one that may need to explore ways to navigate such challenges without compromising its soft power approach. The more challenging being the latter rather than the former.

Conclusion

Evidence shows that relations between Türkiye and Africa are mostly established through a series of soft power policies, marking a deviation from other countries that have maintained their relations with Africa through their colonial past. As Türkiye aims to become a stronger in-

ternational power, it is arguable that they are on the right track by establishing key relations with countries in Africa. Techniques of soft power and promising aid interventions have the potential to prove most beneficial in gaining a positive name and association on the continent. However, due to its lack of a colonial past, Türkiye has additional work to undertake in order to establish the effective bilateral channels that its European counterparts once had. Nonetheless, implementing a soft power nature as opposed to hard power will enable Türkiye to gain a greater reputation and potentially secure its place on the global stage as a key influencer of African politics and socio-economics in the future. Achieving this goal may be challenging due to internal factors, such as Türkiye's own humanitarian issues following the 2023 earthquakes, as well as external challenges, including the Ukraine-Russia war, instabilities in the Africa region, and the aftermath of pandemic-induced economic crises. Ultimately, these challenges raise the following question: as the next century is about to start for Türkiye, on what parameters is Ankara planning to construct its foreign policy in the next century? ■

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