

III. TÜRKİYE-AFRİKA ORTAKLIK ZİRVESİ
İSTANBUL, 16-18 ARALIK 2021

THIRD TÜRKİYE-AFRICA PARTNERSHIP
ISTANBUL, 16-18 DECEMBER 2021

III. CONFERENCE OF PARTNERSHIP TÜRKİYE-AFRIQUE
ISTANBUL, 16-18 DÉCEMBRE 2021

القمة الثالثة للشراكة التركية-الأفريقية
إسطنبول، 16-18 ديسمبر/كانون الأول 2021



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The Quest for Balance: Historical Background of Türkiye-Africa Relations

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ABSTRACT *The potential and problems in Africa have attracted the attention of several actors, including Türkiye, to the continent. This article aims to contribute to the debates surrounding this interest by analyzing common characteristics of Africa-oriented policies. In particular, this analysis focuses on the key parameters that shaped Türkiye's initiatives through a historical perspective. We argue that the Turkish policy toward Africa revolves around several concepts. Our analysis of Türkiye's Africa policy decision-making is structured around several guiding principles: a bipartisan approach, maintaining an autonomous policy, a rational and pragmatic approach, as well as mutual affirmation. To examine policy priorities across different periods, primary sources such as parliamentary minutes, election programs, and diplomats' memoirs were analyzed, alongside periodicals from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The consistent principles of Türkiye's Africa policy include bipartisan support across governments, autonomous decision-making, and a rational, pragmatic focus on economic diplomacy. Mutual recognition and respect for African sovereignty have also been essential, resulting in a positive reception and growing partnerships with African nations.*

Keywords: Türkiye, Africa, Turkish Foreign Policy, Türkiye's Africa Policy, Africa Opening Policy

Insight Turkey 2024

Vol. 26 / No. 3 / pp. 77-101

Received Date: 13/8/2024 • Accepted Date: 15/9/2024 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2024263.7

Introduction

The debate about the African continent is heating up in world politics, particularly regarding economic and human potential as well as political, humanitarian and environmental problems. Increasing population, comparatively high economic growth, and untapped natural resources have also attracted the attention of several players in the continent. Despite this positive outlook, current security problems, ongoing and accelerating humanitarian crises, and environmental challenges remain hurdles in the way of progress for the continent.

Turkish foreign policy toward the African continent has also been increasingly debated within academic and diplomatic circles in the last two decades. The reasons behind Türkiye's interest in the continent, the tools of Turkish foreign policy in Africa, the actors in this policy, advantages and shortcomings of Ankara are all debated in academic journals and policy papers.¹ This analysis aims to contribute to these debates by discussing characteristics of this policy that have been common over the many years of different governments in Ankara. Instead of focusing on the last two decades, the discussion starts with a historical background to understand the domestic and international dynamics affecting Turkish policy toward the continent. There are similarities but also certain differences between the Cold War years and later. Similarly, Ankara's active policy toward Africa in the 2000s has also added new perspectives along with traditional priorities.

Historical Background of Turkish Interest in Africa

In the early years of the Republic, nearly all of the countries in the African continent were under the control of European powers; thus, the analysis addresses relations with the countries of the continent after the Second World War. Given the challenges of state building after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, in these years African affairs were not a priority for Türkiye's foreign policy agenda.² Beginning with Ghana, the process of decolonization led to the independence of Sub-Saharan countries after the 1950s. Cold War mentality shaped attitudes of Turkish foreign policy in the early 1950s in general and this affected Turkish policy toward African countries as well. Türkiye's immediate security concerns about the Soviet threat shaped its policy in the early years of the Cold War, and this resulted in Türkiye's delay in responding to the decolonization movements in African countries.

The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Johnson Letter affected the perceptions of Turkish foreign policymakers about their relationship with the Western alliance. The Johnson Letter of 1964 was a turning point for Türkiye in terms of its

efforts for the diversification of foreign policy options. Having realized that the foreign policy priorities of Türkiye, such as Cyprus, are sometimes not in line with its Western allies, Türkiye tried to get the support of newly independent states, including African countries, for the causes of foreign policy within the limits of the bipolar international system.

To develop relations with the newly independent states of Africa, Türkiye has often pointed to the similarities between its War of Independence and the struggle of the African countries for their independence. The stress on independence is well received in some circles of the African Union, as was seen during the visit of then-President Cevdet Sunay to Ethiopia.³ This stress on independence was also in line with the arguments for the rights of the Turks in Cyprus. However, Türkiye's success in terms of getting the support of these newly independent states for the Cyprus case remained limited.

The de-colonization process gained pace in the 1960s, and several former colonies of European countries gained their independence. Most of these countries wanted to have independent foreign policies and rapid development programs. Negative memories of the former European colonial powers and attractive discourse of the socialist camp in terms of rapid development shaped the foreign policies of most of these newly independent African countries.

The general trend in foreign policymaking toward Africa picked up pace in the 1960s and 1970s in Türkiye. In the 1970s, parties on the right and left of the political spectrum took part in Turkish politics, and their priorities were also reflected in Turkish foreign policy when these parties joined several coalition governments. In 1978 within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an exclusive department for Africa was established to increase political and economic relations with the continent.⁴ For the success of this initiative, several political and economic contacts were established with the African countries. Within this context, Turkish officials declared their support for the independence of the remaining colonies and readiness to share economic experience to diversify Turkish economic relations.⁵ During this period, education and the provision of scholarships to African students were among the key demands from African leaders, and this issue was prominently featured in discussions of Türkiye's relations with African countries.⁶

Turkish policy toward African nations at the time developed not only on a bilateral basis but also within a multilateral framework. For instance, in the late

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Africa increased its share in Türkiye's humanitarian and development budget with continent-wide projects undertaken by state institutions and civil societies

be attributed to several factors, including a lack of interest in the continent, the prioritization of other issues, and insufficient human capital and financial resources to sustain these initiatives.

The end of the Cold War created a new international environment, which significantly influenced Türkiye's foreign policy. In this new era, Turkish foreign policy underwent both an ideological and a geopolitical shift. Opportunities and threats arose across various domains for different actors, including Türkiye, prompting Ankara to redefine its identity and role within this changing global context. While maintaining its position within Western institutions, Türkiye had the opportunity to expand its political, economic, military, and social relations with other global actors. Specific characteristics of the African continent further enabled Türkiye to assume a more prominent role in Africa's political and economic landscape.

Although the African continent did not feature prominently on the agenda of Turkish foreign policy in the immediate post-Cold War era of the 1990s, efforts to develop a comprehensive policy toward Africa emerged in the latter half of the decade. The year 1998, marked by the introduction of the Africa Action Plan, represents a significant milestone in Türkiye's relations with African countries. This plan included several measures aimed at strengthening ties with Africa, emphasizing the need for diversification of relations, particularly in the economic and cultural spheres.⁹ In addition to diplomatic, political, and economic initiatives, the plan also incorporated soft power measures, such as providing scholarships to African students and organizing academic activities focused on African issues, to ensure the sustainability of these efforts. However, the economic crisis of 2001 and subsequent political instability hindered the full implementation of the action plan, creating setbacks in achieving its objectives.

The declaration of 2005 as the year of Africa was another significant and determining milestone in Turkish-African relations, creating a renewed interest in the continent.¹⁰ Türkiye became a "strategic partner" of the continent in 2008 via the decision of the African Union. Türkiye increased its diplomatic presence in Africa significantly during the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) era by opening embassies, TİKA offices, Turkish Cultural Centers, and

1970s, Türkiye played an active role in Africa by contributing to Namibia's independence as a member of the Namibia Council at the UN.⁷ Despite these efforts and initial plans, it can be argued that Ankara missed the opportunity to establish lasting economic and political relations with Africa during that period.⁸ This failure may

Turkish Maarif schools. Africa increased its share in Türkiye's humanitarian and development budget with continent-wide projects undertaken by state institutions and civil societies. Social and cultural interactions experienced in this era were also a critical phase in Türkiye's Africa policy. The dramatic increase of African students in Türkiye with the support of the government scholarship programs built a human dimension into this relationship. Similar to other areas where Türkiye wanted to improve its ties, there were several high-level political visits and contacts with African countries. To develop and enhance ties with African countries in different areas such as economy and culture, political direction and support are crucial. Turkish politicians, particularly President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have led the efforts to improve relations with African countries. In that regard, Türkiye has defined itself as an African-Eurasian state and initially focused on soft power instruments, respecting the values and traditions of the continent while trying to contribute to political, economic, and social development.¹¹

Reasons behind the Turkish Activism in Africa

Several academics interpret Türkiye's increasing activism in Africa as a manifestation of its status-seeking in world politics.¹² Türkiye's relations with Africa are mostly driven by the recognition of its national interests and its desire for a new status as a political power with global reach.¹³ Renewed Turkish interest in Africa in the 2000s can also be understood as an expression of the country's desire to emerge as a global actor and the recalibration of its foreign policy agenda in the new era.¹⁴ The shift in the new millennium toward Africa is the result of several interrelated factors, including changes in the global environment, the country's economic interests, and the evolution of its foreign policy identity.¹⁵ In terms of this identity, beyond being a central power, it is also argued that current political leaders of Türkiye wanted to construct an altruistic persona for modern Türkiye.¹⁶ This approach aligns with Ankara's broader goal of expanding the country's global influence, and the African continent serves as a prominent example where this identity is reflected through policy implementation.

Along with the quest for a new status, some scholars also point to the closeness underpinned by historical and cultural ties and the search for new markets among the factors shaping Turkish interest in the continent.¹⁷ According to African observers, successive Turkish governments have been relying on the country's central geographical location and proximity to Africa, the lack of a colonialist past, and the Turkish people's kinship to fellow Muslims in Africa as the basis of their policy.¹⁸ Although Muslim identity plays a role in terms of providing assistance, religion serves as a tool rather than the driving force behind most of the Turkish initiatives.¹⁹



Turkish President Erdoğan met with the African leaders (clockwise from top left) President of the Democratic Republic of Congo Tshisekedi and African Union Commission Chairman Mahamat, President of Senegal Sall, President of Sierra Leone Bio, and President of Gine Embalo within the 3rd Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit in Istanbul, Türkiye in December 2021.

MURAT KULA / MURAT ÇETİNMÜHÜRÖDAR / AA

This new policy is very much in line with the fact that if a country wants to have a say in global politics, then it needs to develop policies and discourses addressing global challenges. This stance is also congruent with the rise of several new actors in international politics, which can be summarized as the “rise of the Global South.” This approach allows for sharing of the concerns of the Global South in international politics and also brings countries support for their national interests and foreign policy concerns. In line with these factors, humanitarian and development concerns have been an essential pillar of Turkish foreign policy toward Africa –and are likely to remain so. Likewise, the security and defense sector has gained momentum since 2020 with the increasing demand for Turkish defense products.²⁰

In this article, we focused on the key parameters that shaped Türkiye’s Africa opening initiatives. We argue that the analysis of Turkish policy toward Africa revolves around several concepts, described below, that are relevant across different time periods and serve various political purposes. These concepts help situate Africa within the broader framework of Turkish foreign policy. Our analysis of Türkiye’s Africa policy decision-making is structured around several guiding principles: a bipartisan approach, maintaining an autonomous policy, a rational and pragmatic approach, as well as mutual affirmation.

To frame policy priorities across different periods, we drew on primary sources. Parliamentary minutes from both committees and the general as-

sembly offered rich insights into the discussions shaping the policy. Additionally, we examined the election programs of major political parties for each period, and the memoirs of diplomats provided critical insights into the evolution of Turkish foreign policy toward Africa. We also went through periodicals published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since the 1960s. In addition to these sources, we also greatly benefitted from several Turkish and foreign academics written on this subject.

Türkiye's institutionalized and internationally recognized African policy was built during the 20-year rule of the AK Party governments

Principles Guiding Turkish Foreign Policy in Africa

Bipartisan Approach of Türkiye's Africa Policy

In Turkish political life, party-centered policies are dominant. Polarization fuels domestic partisan politics. The effects of political polarization are limited in foreign policy in comparison with domestic politics. Despite this, we can find examples of political polarization even in foreign policy issues such as relations with the U.S. and the Middle East. There are exceptions where bipartisan policies are seen, even if they are limited in scope. This bipartisan approach is also true for some issues in foreign policy. The Africa opening policies are among the topics that can be considered bipartisan in Turkish foreign policy.

Since the 1960s, with the waves of independence in Africa, Türkiye has included Africa's opening policies in its foreign policy agenda. Prior to the widely cited 1998 Africa Opening Policy, at least three initiatives had been undertaken to develop Africa policy. These earlier opening initiatives were not as documented and circulated as the one in 1998. The most recent has been continuing under the AK Party governments over the last two decades, marked by the proclamation of 2005 as the Year of Africa. During the AK Party governments, Türkiye's Africa policy expanded through cross-government institutions and Africa opening policy well established as a state policy.

Between 1962 and 1965, the coalition governments of the Prime Ministry of İsmet İnönü included the goal of developing relations with newly independent African countries among their foreign policy objectives. The program of the first coalition government, formed with the left-secular Republican People's Party (CHP) and the right-wing Republican Peasants Nation Party (CKMP) and *Yeni Türkiye Partisi*, expressed satisfaction with these newly independent African countries gaining their legitimate rights by joining the United Nations. At the time, interest in these countries was expressed, with initiatives made to establish economic and cultural relations. The same points were mentioned

It can be argued that the steady evolution of Türkiye's approach to the continent over half a century, despite opposing governing parties, points to a consistent interest in Africa

newly independent African countries. In the bipolar Cold War environment, Greek Cypriot leader Makarios had good ties with most of the newly independent African leaders. However, Türkiye faced difficulties in terms of explaining its position on the Cyprus issue because of its membership in Western institutions like NATO. To overcome these challenges and get the support of Sub-Saharan countries in international forums like the UN General Assembly, Türkiye increased its diplomatic representation in these countries and also sent missions to explain Turkish policy. In that regard, there are several anecdotes in the memoirs of ambassadors in terms of their efforts to explain the Turkish stance on the Cyprus issue to the African leaders, such as Ambassador Mahmut Dikerdem's contact with the Nkrumah of Ghana in 1964 and 1965.²²

Furthermore, the 1965 election programs of three major parties of that time highlighted the development of bilateral relations with African countries within their political vision. The CHP highlighted Türkiye's role against colonialism and sought closer ties with underdeveloped nations. The Justice Party aimed to build friendships with newly independent and Muslim countries. The CKMP focused on organizing relations with neighbors and Muslim countries based on historical and geopolitical principles and establishing institutions to study the cultural, economic, and political issues of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Muslim countries. These diverse approaches collectively shaped Türkiye's engagement with Africa during this period.²³ It should be kept in mind that the developments in the Cyprus issue right after the Johnson Letter very much influenced Türkiye's foreign policy priorities, and all political parties in Türkiye adopted a positive stance on increasing ties with Africa.

By 1968, the number of embassies in Africa had increased to 11.²⁴ In addition to increasing diplomatic representation in Africa, Türkiye also sent several missions to African capitals and hosted high-level dignitaries from African countries. In 1968, 18 African ambassadors joined a two-week visit to Türkiye organized by the Turkish Embassy in Cairo. They met with Turkish officials, as well as Fazıl Küçük of Cyprus in an unofficial setting.²⁵

The next wave of initiatives to develop African policies came in the 1970s, in particular in the second half of the decade. Two new embassies were opened

in the 10th İnönü government program.²¹ In this context, new embassies were opened in African countries, and goodwill missions were sent there.

As stated previously, the Cyprus issue was the main factor encouraging Türkiye to extend ties with the

in Somalia and Tanzania, and trade delegations were sent to Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Selçuk İncesu, who served as the head of the Africa Department from 1978 to 1980, noted that there were efforts to institutionalize Africa policy during this period, with a focus on prioritizing economic and political relations.²⁶

Türkiye's engagement in Africa continued after the coup of 1980 with a new economic outlook prioritizing exports. The concept of opening up to Africa can be found in the foreign policy programs of the Motherland Party (ANAP) governments in the second half of the 1980s. During this period, humanitarian and development aid began to play a more prominent role in foreign policy. Foreign Minister Mesut Yılmaz highlighted Türkiye's development assistance for Africa during the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 1989 Fiscal Year Budget Proposal presentation to the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) Plan and Budget Committee. Türkiye provided a technical assistance package worth \$10 million to 12 Sahel countries and contributed \$500,000 in project financing to the African Fund, established to support the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa.²⁷ In the following year's budget presentation, Foreign Minister Mesut Yılmaz emphasized that despite infrastructural deficiencies and financial challenges, African countries possess significant potential. He stated that Türkiye would continue to prioritize relations with Africa and announced that efforts would be made to join the African Development Bank.²⁸

The widely cited 1998 Africa Opening Action Plan was announced during the coalition government of the ANAP, the Democratic Left Party (DSP), and the Democratic Türkiye Party (DTP). İsmail Cem, foreign minister of two center-right and one center-left parties' coalition government, prepared the action plan with contributions from the public sector, private sector, and civil society. This plan became a reference point as it was the first time such a comprehensive action plan was presented as a written document. The rationale noted that the level of relations with Africa was insufficient for a country of Türkiye's size. The goal was to establish a solid foundation for political relations to enhance economic, commercial, and cultural ties.²⁹

Türkiye's institutionalized and internationally recognized African policy was built during the 20-year rule of the AK Party governments. In this era, African policy went beyond political rhetoric to a well-established front in Turkish foreign policy. In their 2002 election manifesto, the AK Party declared their intention to open up to new markets, including Africa, to reduce regional dependency.³⁰ In their 2007 election manifesto, the AK Party announced that they had implemented the Africa Opening Action Plan as part of programs initiated in 2005 to expand Türkiye's global influence.³¹ The policy was included in development plans prepared by the government and ratified by the

parliament. Notably, the conservative AK Party government acknowledged that they were implementing the Africa Opening program initially prepared by a coalition government from a different political spectrum in 1998. During this period, Türkiye achieved broad diplomatic representation, significantly increased trade relations, and institutionalized these relationships through bilateral, regional, and continental platforms. After two decades of efforts, there is now a more stable relationship with the continent based on solid ground and covering different areas.

Contrary to our evaluations summarized above, some scholars argue that Türkiye's recent policy is driven by regime insecurity and that its engagement in Africa has been increasingly shaped by its politics and antagonism toward Middle East and North Africa (MENA) competitors.³² According to these critics, Türkiye is increasingly using militarized non-inclusive methods and its involvement is usually partisan and divisive.³³ In contrast to these explanations, other foreign observers point to the consistency of leaders' focus on expanding Türkiye's role in the global domain.³⁴ Both the political elite and citizens of Türkiye support efforts to establish a strong international influence.³⁵ As a result, the African opening is positively received by different actors.

It can be argued that the steady evolution of Türkiye's approach to the continent over half a century, despite opposing governing parties, points to a consistent interest in Africa. Bipartisan foreign policy is critically important to indicate the reliability of the policies. Parties in different spectrums of political life in Türkiye supported increasing relations with the African countries for different reasons such as economic benefits, ideological stance, or pure realpolitik. The common point, however, was the bipartisan support for better ties.

Maintaining an Autonomous Policy toward Africa

The pursuit of autonomy in Turkish foreign policy is evident in its Africa policy. When evaluating the development process, it becomes clear that autonomous policy initiatives have been decisive since the initial stage. From the 1950s to the first half of the 1960s, Türkiye's approach to Africa was cautious but later evolved into proactive engagements. In the 1950s, Türkiye kept a distance from North African independence movements to avoid conflicting positions with European countries.³⁶ Independence of Sub-Saharan countries came later and was not on the agenda of Türkiye. However, after the 1960s, the U.S., the biggest actor in the NATO alliance where Türkiye is also a member, supported the independence of colonies, encouraging Türkiye to positively view independence movements.³⁷ With the 1964 Johnson Letter, the search for autonomy in foreign policy became a significant agenda item. Subsequently, Türkiye's Africa policy can be seen as an outcome of its quest for balance in foreign policy and international relations, defined by its own priorities rather than as part of an alliance.

Early initiatives focused on developing political, cultural, and economic relations. In 1964, Foreign Minister Feridun Cemal Erkin stated in a joint budget committee meeting that solidarity with Western countries does not hinder relations with African nations.³⁸ Similarly, Justice Party Foreign Minister İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil, in a 1966 interview with *Anadolu Agency*, expressed a desire for political, commercial, and economic relations with African countries. This consistency in goals across different political lines suggests a unified purpose in developing African policies.³⁹ At a much later time, similar to previous statements, in 1999, Foreign Minister İsmail Cem stated that developing political relations would lay the groundwork for economic steps.⁴⁰ The literature and official statements suggest that Türkiye's pursuit of balance with the Western world in economic and trade relations has influenced its policies on Africa.

Significant progress has been made in Türkiye's diplomatic representation in Africa, especially during the last two decades of AK Party governments, with the number of embassies increasing to 44. TİKA offices expanded throughout the continent, and Turkish cultural centers and International Turkish Maarif Schools flourished in the continent. Frequent high-level visits and three Türkiye-Africa summits indicate Türkiye's dynamic and direct engagement with Africa. The AK Party initiated the Türkiye-Africa summit and became one of a dozen countries and blocks organizing bilateral summits with the continent. President Erdoğan became the leader with the most visits to the continent. Erdoğan reiterated that Türkiye sees African countries as brothers with the same destiny, on the same ship.⁴¹ Comparing these summits and their interlocutors with those of other regions and institutions highlights the autonomous aspect of Türkiye's Africa policy.

Analyzing Türkiye's Africa policy in the context of autonomous and independent foreign policy, factors reveal that the development is linked to the pursuit of autonomy in foreign affairs. Both internal and external factors have necessitated the formation of an autonomous approach. The search for a new identity in foreign policy helped the pursuit of autonomy. The need for new partners in diplomatic and economic relations and the pursuit of balance have been major driving forces. Türkiye's engagement in Africa has followed an independent path, unconstrained by its Western, NATO alliance membership.

Given stalled Turkish membership prospects with the European Union, we can also talk about the lack of engagement between Türkiye and some members of

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the EU in the foreign policy domain. This lack of engagement is evident in the African continent as well. Especially with the increasing distancing from France, some African countries have developed their contact with Türkiye on security issues. Thus, Türkiye and most of the EU countries have different perspectives on the emerging multipolarity in the continent. This environment in the continent provides Türkiye an opportunity to position itself as a strategic and long-term partner with a relationship based on mutual interest and trust.⁴²

Türkiye's aim of pursuing an autonomous policy and in-between position, between the West and the East, is positively perceived in the eyes of most of the African state officials, businessmen, and African students in Türkiye.⁴³ Divergences between Türkiye and the U.S. in some policy areas, such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003, are also interpreted as the desire for a new and autonomous path in international relations in its region and beyond, such as Africa.⁴⁴

To sum up, Türkiye's approach to Africa can be viewed as part of its broader pursuit of autonomy in foreign policy. The post-Cold War international environment enabled countries like Türkiye to pursue autonomous policies. Turkish political figures from the right and left spectrum of politics were more eager to improve ties with alternative areas like Africa along with traditional ties with the Western world. The boundaries of the autonomous policy were limited during the Cold War years, whereas the current international atmosphere is more conducive for such a strategy. The current government benefitted from this atmosphere and aimed to build a stable relationship with the continent. Historical, cultural, and economic factors have played crucial roles in the development of an autonomous foreign policy toward Africa.

Rational and Pragmatic Approach

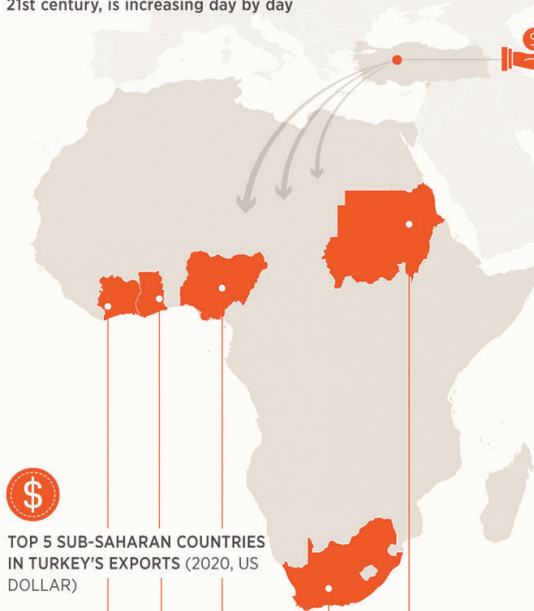
The evolution of Türkiye's Africa policy has been influenced by the dual objectives of expanding its diplomatic reach and achieving regional and global influence, as well as internal dynamics and actors' choices. In Turkish foreign policy, enhancing relations with Asia, Latin America, and Africa has been crucial for balancing its ties with Western countries. While Türkiye had limited maneuverability during the Cold War, post-1990 initiatives have been more impactful. Türkiye's domestic transformation and changes in the international trade parameters contributed to the increasing contact with Africa. This transformation led Türkiye to diversify partners for relations not only with immediate neighbors but also with other regions and continents.⁴⁵ Türkiye's opening to Africa can be analyzed within this pragmatic perspective. Recognizing the

Turkey-Africa trade volume expands nearly 5-fold

Turkey's trade potential with African countries, which are expected to play a more active role in the international system from the second half of the 21st century, is increasing day by day



TURKEY'S DIRECT INVESTMENT IN AFRICA
\$6 BILLION



TOP 5 SUB-SAHARAN COUNTRIES IN TURKEY'S EXPORTS (2020, US DOLLAR)

Ivory Coast	Ghana	Nigeria	South Africa	Sudan
\$630 MILLION	\$772.3 MILLION	\$1.98 BILLION	\$1.46 BILLION	\$480.7 MILLION

TURKEY-AFRICA FOREIGN TRADE VOLUME



TRADE WITH SUB-SAHARAN COUNTRIES



1,150 PROJECT + TURKISH CONTRACTORS' INVESTMENTS
\$71.1 BILLION

- 45** Business councils with **46 African** countries (with 40 of them sub-Saharan countries)
- 48** Trade and economic cooperation with **48 countries**
- 32** Mutual promotion and protection of investments agreements with **32 countries**
- 15** Prevention of double taxation agreement with **15 countries**

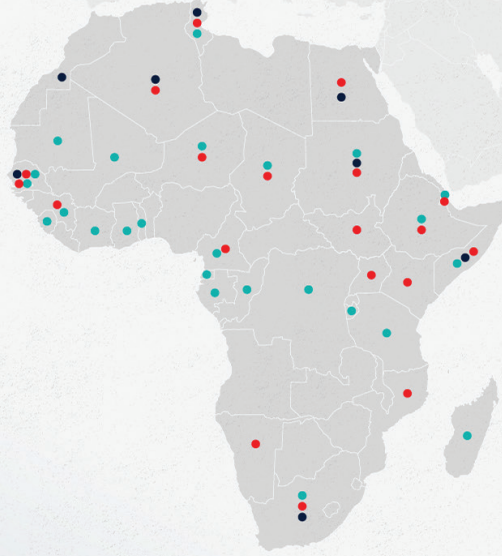
Türkiye-Africa trade volume expands nearly 5-fold.

MUHAMMED ALİ YİĞİT / AA

Turkish-African friendship gaining strength with cooperation in education, development, and culture

Amid the recent rise in Turkey-Africa relations, Turkish institutions and civil society organizations have attracted attention with their activities leading education and development on the continent

- TIKA
- Yunus Emre Institute (YEE)
- Turkish Maarif Foundation



Has carried out **7,000 projects** in 22 countries in Africa
Opened its first office in Ethiopia in 2005



Contributes to increasing cultural exchange and improving relationships with its activities on the Turkish language



Produces thousands of qualified and Turkish-speaking graduates across 25 countries every year
Makes significant contributions to Turkey-Africa relations
Besides its educational activities, it also fights against the FETO terror group on the continent
Took over 216 FETO-linked schools in 19 countries

AFRICAN COUNTRIES WHERE THEY HAVE OFFICES

TIKA

Algeria, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gambia, South Africa, Guinea, South Sudan, Cameroon, Kenya, Mozambique, Egypt, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda, Chad

Turkish Maarif Foundation

Burundi, Djibouti, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, South Africa, Cameroon, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Togo

Yunus Emre Institute (YEE)

Algeria, Morocco, South Africa, Egypt, Senegal, Sudan, Somalia, Tunisia

Turkish-African friendship gaining strength with cooperation in education, development, and culture.

MAHMUT RESUL KARACA / AA

19.10.2021



growing importance of newly independent African countries in the international arena, Prime Minister Demirel emphasized in 1965 the significance of developing relations with these nations, noting that the number of Turkish embassies in Africa had reached 10.⁴⁶ The Cyprus issue's transfer to the United Nations led Türkiye to seek support from the UN member states, including African countries. In 1967, 22 African ambassadors from Cairo were invited to Türkiye for discussions on bilateral and regional relations, and briefings on the Cyprus issue.⁴⁷ As we see from these examples, pragmatism is evident in the African policy from the early on.

The evolution of Türkiye's Africa policy has been influenced by the dual objectives of expanding its diplomatic reach and achieving regional and global influence, as well as internal dynamics and actors' choices

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the bipolar system, coupled with the European Union accession process not meeting Türkiye's expectations, further fueled Türkiye's quest for balance in its foreign policy. In 1998, the Africa Opening Action Plan highlighted steps to secure support for Türkiye's candidacy for the UN Security Council.⁴⁸ This plan underscored the strategic importance of Africa in Türkiye's international ambitions.

A key aspect of Türkiye's rational approach to its Africa opening policies has been the development of economic and trade relations. In the second half of the 1980s, Prime Minister Turgut Özal's pragmatic approach initiated delegations composed of members from MFA and the Undersecretariat for Foreign Trade for business opportunities in the continent.⁴⁹ The Africa Opening Action Plan and the resolutions of the Africa summits emphasized economic development, increased trade, and mutual growth.⁵⁰ By the end of 2022, trade with Africa had surged to \$40 billion, an eightfold increase over the past 20 years.⁵¹ The Foreign Economic Relations Committee expanded throughout Africa, establishing joint economic committees in 45 African countries. In addition to the trade relations, Turkish construction firms increasingly played an important role in the infrastructural projects of the continent. Between 1972 and 2023, Turkish companies undertook 1,871 projects in 44 African countries, amounting to \$85 billion.⁵² Despite the arguments that Türkiye's economic outreach in Africa has primarily targeted former French colonies, exploiting simmering discontent with France and more recent dissatisfaction with Chinese goods and services,⁵³ we can say that Turkish interest in the continent is not concentrated in one particular region, given the investments in Ethiopia and other East African countries.

Türkiye's Africa policy is marked by a rational and balanced approach, driven by the need to diversify foreign relations, enhance economic and trade partnerships, and leverage historical and cultural ties

Along with China, India, Brazil, and South Korea, Türkiye can be named as one of the emerging partners of Africa. To compete with these states, Ankara has to intensify its official ties with the countries in Africa, and the efforts of the private sector and nongovernmental organizations toward Africa should complement state initiatives. We can argue that, despite certain prob-

lems, cooperation between official and non-official actors contributes to the success of Turkish economic and trade policies in the continent.

Some scholars argue that Türkiye's success in its dealings with Africa depends heavily on the prosperity of African economies so that they will have good opportunities for Turkish export products. For Africa to prosper, a flourishing trade with China is indispensable, and booming trade between Africa and China may hold the key to Türkiye's own successes in its African engagement.⁵⁴ Given the difference in size and capacity, a pragmatic policy in Africa may lead Türkiye to cooperate with China on some projects, which could be difficult, however, considering the Chinese approach.

In addition to economic priorities, Türkiye's rational approach to its Africa policy also involves leveraging historical and cultural ties. With over half of Africa's population being Muslim, the historical memory of İstanbul's significance, and the centuries-old political and social unity in North and East Africa, Türkiye has naturally received positive responses. Particularly in East Africa, the Ottoman Empire's military and political support against the Portuguese assault in the 16th century remains vivid in collective memory. Furthermore, South-South solidarity across Africa has provided a favorable foundation for Türkiye's policy. Türkiye's progress in Africa, citing historical, religious, and socio-cultural dimensions, exemplifies rational and strategic behavior. Yet, there is some criticism targeting Türkiye for not doing enough for low-income African countries despite significant rhetoric about this.⁵⁵ According to these evaluations, Ankara's own economic and security challenges prevent it from representing the expectations of the least developed countries of the continent. Given the economic capacity of Türkiye, state and non-state actors are doing their best in terms of contributing to alleviate the challenges of the continent.

As can be seen from the examples above, Türkiye's Africa policy is marked by a rational and balanced approach, driven by the need to diversify foreign relations, enhance economic and trade partnerships, and leverage historical

and cultural ties. This multifaceted strategy has enabled Türkiye to achieve significant progress and establish a robust presence in Africa, aligning with its broader foreign policy objectives.

Mutual Affirmation and Positive Reception

It cannot be said that African countries have left Türkiye's Africa opening policy unanswered. The similarities between Türkiye and several African countries in terms of questioning existing parameters of the international order and eliminating global inequalities contributed to the positive reception of Türkiye in the continent. The country was able to portray its policies in the continent as a partnership of equals with African countries.⁵⁶ Different from other actors like China and India, its presence in Africa is seen by many countries as an effort to involve African states in Türkiye's pursuit of material gains by convincing those states of their shared values and goals.⁵⁷

Türkiye's population, economic capacity, military capacity, and history are different from countries like China and India, and Türkiye's size in these factors and rhetoric makes it more acceptable to African countries. Most African governments are willing to entertain the entrance of a new economic partner that can potentially compete with partners like China, the U.S., the UK, and France.⁵⁸ In addition to this, most African countries view Türkiye as a rising donor and partner in trade that cares about African needs and pursues a balanced strategy between both sides' interests.⁵⁹

Türkiye's opening to Africa got various responses from the capitals on the continent. Despite the general appeal of Türkiye to several countries, their priorities for developing cooperation with Ankara differ in many fields. According to the analysis of official declarations from several African governments, some of them have an interest in governance capacity building, some others expressed interest in attracting Turkish investment in agriculture and rural development, and small and least developed countries prioritized financial and development aid.⁶⁰ Cooperation in addressing the effects of climate change is also a new theme between Türkiye and African countries.

African countries' positive reactions to Türkiye's aspirations for the continent, including a plethora of stated areas of potential cooperation, reveal Türkiye's increasing appeal as a regional power in Africa.⁶¹ Türkiye shares goals and norms with several African countries on global issues and cooperation with these countries contributes to the ascent of the Turkish role in the continent. For African governments, contact and cooperation with Türkiye can also increase the visibility of African problems in the international community.⁶² Türkiye's support for the UN Least Developed Countries and the İstanbul Declaration in May 2011 on that issue represents an example of this reality.

Especially in the last couple of years, the implementation of opening policies through political, economic, cultural, and development programs has shown that these policies are not merely rhetorical. The number of Türkiye's diplomatic missions in Africa has reached 44, while the number of African embassies in Ankara has reached 35. Additionally, the organization of three Türkiye-Africa summits, starting with the first in 2008, and the materialization of the Türkiye-Africa Business and Economic Forum, held for the fourth time in 2023, are indications of the reciprocation of these efforts.

Türkiye's humanitarian intervention in Somalia in 2011 with the visit of a Turkish delegation headed by then-Prime Minister Erdoğan and subsequent state-building initiatives have made significant contributions to Türkiye's perception in Africa. These efforts have opened a new chapter for the country, altering the world's view of Somalia as a failed state.⁶³ Because of the support provided to Somalia, nearly every part of Somali society welcomes Turkish involvement.⁶⁴ High-level visits during the peak of the humanitarian crisis in Darfur and the implementation of humanitarian and development programs have also left a lasting impression in this context. The direct execution of humanitarian and development programs has accelerated the impact.

The preference of African students to choose Türkiye as a leading destination for international education is another sign of acceptance. The Türkiye Scholarships program, initiated in 2012, has provided higher education scholarships to approximately 1,000 African youths annually, contributing to the influx of self-sponsored students to Türkiye. The number of African students has exceeded 50,000, with students from almost every African country studying in Turkish schools. The responses from different parts of the African continent can allow us to talk about the mutual affirmation of Turkish interest in Africa and positive responses from the countries of the continent.

Challenges for Turkish Policy in Africa

There are challenges and limitations for Türkiye in its African policy arising from internal and external factors. Here, we will discuss the challenges and difficulties in Türkiye's Africa policy. There might be some risks with the future direction of Türkiye's relations with the African continent. The lack of a sophisticated, long-term vision and lack of interest in academia and bureaucratic circles can have negative implications. Ownership of the opening to Africa by different segments of the society is crucial for the success of this policy.

Although there were direct and indirect relations with Africa up to the Equator Line during the Ottoman period, the colonial division after the 1884 Berlin Conference and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire led to a prolonged

interruption in relations with Africa. Despite different underlying reasons, the interruption ultimately led to the loss of social, cultural, economic, and political awareness and knowledge about the region among broader segments of the population in Türkiye. The African continent was depicted in basic education curricula and textbooks from a Eurocentric perspective, neglecting its place in the history of humanity and civilization. Additionally, Africa's presence within the Ottoman political system and social structure was also ignored. The colonial period and post-colonial Africa were included in the curriculum only in a limited manner.⁶⁵ Although recent additions have been made to textbooks concerning Africa, they still present an eclectic structure when considered as a whole. Given the role of textbooks in shaping general societal behavior,⁶⁶ the importance of public interest and knowledge about Africa, and thereby the significance of policies' societal ownership and sustainability, becomes clearer. This lack of knowledge and stereotypes about the continent remain challenges to expanding knowledge about the continent in Türkiye.

Türkiye's policies, aligned with the concepts of South-South cooperation, joint development, and humanitarian diplomacy, have significantly contributed to its image across the continent

This gap in basic education also manifests itself in tertiary education. In a 2022 study targeting students from 118 international relations departments, responses from 1,086 students revealed that only 19 percent were taking or considering taking a course on Africa. This data becomes more significant when compared to a 23 percent interest in courses related to Latin America. After graduation, 80 percent of these students aspire to pursue careers in the public sector, international organizations, and academia.⁶⁷ The need to expand and deepen the limited Africa-related education offered at a few universities at both undergraduate and graduate levels from a multidisciplinary perspective is evident. This limitation is also reflected in theses. A study that searched for Africa and 44 African countries in the High Education Council (YÖK) thesis database found that around 1,700 master's and doctoral theses have been conducted, with the majority of them written by African students who have reached significant numbers in Türkiye in the last decade.⁶⁸ On the other hand, when examining the interest areas of international relations researchers in Turkish academia, it is found that only 1.3 percent focus on Sub-Saharan Africa as their primary interest.⁶⁹ The low interest among academics can be considered as a factor contributing to the inadequacy of research and theses. Steps need to be taken to ensure that the knowledge and expert resources required for Türkiye's Africa outreach policies reach an adequate level. Moreover, qualified graduates who have studied in Türkiye, which is one of the important outcomes of Africa outreach, will make significant contributions to addressing this gap. Proactive

While challenges remain, particularly in terms of public awareness and competition with other global actors, Türkiye's pragmatic, autonomous, and cooperative approach has established it as a key partner for African nations

specialized human resources with in-depth and up-to-date knowledge. This gap has led to problems centered around planning and coordination deficiencies. Türkiye, which aims to scale up its foreign policy and deepen its presence in Africa, can only implement its political vision effectively through close cooperation with the public sector, civil society, the private sector, and academia. In this context, ensuring the continuity of knowledge and experience at the individual level and transferring it to institutional memory is of great importance. The criticisms regarding planning and coordination point to existing shortcomings in achieving alignment between vision, policy, and capacity.

Despite the engagement with the continent in the last two decades, Türkiye still does not have enough trained experts on African matters.⁷⁰ The inability to achieve desired results from the previous openings to Africa in different periods of the Republic's history is explained by resource limitations and this might be the case in the future again.⁷¹ It is also argued by some academics that the lack of strong relations with countries like South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya may create hurdles for Türkiye to reach every part of the continent.⁷² These challenges need to be taken into account in the implementation of foreign policy but increasing contacts with several actors may help to overcome some of these hurdles.

On the other hand, economic capacity also influences the momentum of Türkiye's Africa policy. The level of engagement Türkiye seeks to establish with the continent, both at the continental level and with the eight regional economic communities, as well as with 54 countries bilaterally, requires significant economic capacity. When considering countries conducting summit diplomacy with Africa, the closest country to Türkiye in terms of GDP is South Korea, with a difference of approximately \$500 billion. In terms of diplomatic missions, South Korea has less than half of Türkiye's presence, with 21 missions in Africa. The economic capacities of the countries recognized as competitors in Africa pose risks to Türkiye's goals. The momentum of Turkish activism in Africa requires continued economic development in Türkiye.

actions should be taken to utilize this human resource in universities and other needed areas.

The expansions in foreign policy and the broadening of vision have created challenges in academia's ability to keep pace, leading to difficulties in achieving the necessary institutional capacity. Expanding vision and growing, diversifying institutional structures require spe-

Additionally, Türkiye's increasing visibility in Africa in recent years, particularly in the construction and defense industries, has attracted the attention of global actors. Securing significant projects in the contracting sector has led to competition with China. France, meanwhile, has not concealed its discomfort with Türkiye's presence in Africa and has criticized the rhetoric used by Türkiye toward France.⁷³ Germany has also expressed concern about Türkiye's growing presence in Africa, although it does not yet view Türkiye as a direct threat, but rather as a source of concern.⁷⁴ Turkish policymakers also have to consider envy from other players in the continent.

Türkiye's policies, aligned with the concepts of South-South cooperation, joint development, and humanitarian diplomacy, have significantly contributed to its image across the continent. Notably, its humanitarian intervention in Somalia elevated Türkiye's respect and standing. However, in recent years, the increasing hate speech and violent behaviors toward Black, Arab, and Muslim communities, which have also been reflected in the international public sphere, have started to tarnish Türkiye's positive image. An example of this discrimination can be seen in the negative attitudes toward Somali entrepreneurs operating businesses in Kızılay, which has been highlighted in African and international media as evidence of rising racism against Africans in Türkiye.⁷⁵ It is also a fact that conscious or unconscious racist behaviors are among the experiences faced by African students in their daily lives at universities.⁷⁶

Conclusion

This article has explored the principles of Türkiye's foreign policy toward Africa, tracing its evolution through five distinct eras of opening initiatives developed by successive Turkish governments. The first phase began in the 1960s with Türkiye's recognition of newly independent African states, and the establishment of embassies and diplomatic missions, marking its initial steps in engaging the continent. The second period occurred in the late 1970s when Türkiye, in response to strained relations with Western allies after the Cyprus war, sought to diversify its foreign relations by expanding its reach in Africa. This period was disrupted by political instability and a coup d'état, but the shift towards Africa resumed in the 1980s when a civilian government came to power in 1983. This period engaged Africa with humanitarian and development programs alongside political, economic, and cultural initiatives.

The 1998 Africa Action Plan marked the fourth era of formalizing Türkiye's Africa policy and laying the groundwork for stronger diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties. However, it was under the AK Party government that the most comprehensive and tangible developments occurred. The proclamation of 2005 as the "Year of Africa" marked the beginning of the fifth and final

period, where Türkiye's Africa policy became institutionalized, and its engagement with the continent intensified through increased diplomatic presence on both sides, establishing continental-level platforms and people-to-people diplomacy.

Across these five periods, the core principles guiding Türkiye's Africa policy have remained consistent. Bipartisanship has ensured continuity across different governments, while autonomy in foreign policy has allowed Türkiye to pursue its interests in Africa independently. Türkiye's rational and pragmatic approach, particularly its focus on economic diplomacy and trade, has underpinned its efforts to build mutually beneficial relationships with African nations. Finally, the principle of mutual recognition and affirmation has been crucial, with Türkiye emphasizing respect for African sovereignty and cultural values, which has resulted in a positive reception and growing partnerships across the continent.

Despite these successes, several challenges remain. The lack of adequate public awareness and academic expertise on Africa within Türkiye, coupled with limited economic capacity, poses risks to the sustainability of this policy. Furthermore, growing global competition from countries like China and India, as well as concerns from established powers like France and Germany, present external challenges that Türkiye must navigate carefully. Domestically, societal stereotypes and insufficient institutional capacity could hinder long-term engagement.

In conclusion, Türkiye's Africa policy has been shaped by a combination of historical, geopolitical, and economic factors, all of which have contributed to a sustained and evolving engagement with the continent. While challenges remain, particularly in terms of public awareness and competition with other global actors, Türkiye's pragmatic, autonomous, and cooperative approach has established it as a key partner for African nations. As Türkiye continues to expand its global influence, its relationship with Africa will likely remain a critical pillar of its foreign policy, offering opportunities for further growth, cooperation, and mutual development. ■

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