

# An Overview of Türkiye's Africa Policy: Historical Background, Strategic Diplomacy, and Future Prospects

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## Turkey in Africa: A New Emerging Power?

*Edited by* Elem Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu and Ali Onur Tepeciklioğlu  
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## Turkey in Africa: Turkey's Strategic Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa

*By* Federico Donelli  
London: I.B.Tauris, 2021, 224 pages, \$28.66, ISBN: 9780755636976

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## Türkiye Afrika İlişkileri: Tarihi Süreç, Yaklaşımlar ve Beklentiler (Türkiye-Africa Relations: Historical Process, Approaches, and Expectations)

*By* Serhat Orakçı  
İstanbul: INSAMER, 2018, 276 pages, 60 TL, ISBN: 9786055260194

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## Introduction

**T**ürkiye's contemporary engagement with Africa comes from a long tradition of solidarity and mutual respect with Africa, quite different from the colonial legacies of the other global powers. The invasions of Africa by Spain and Portugal after the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the colonization policies of Western powers like France, Britain and Belgium after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were largely centered around exploiting natural and human sources. While Spain and Portugal concentrated on plundering gold and converting the local populations to Christianity, France, Britain, and Belgium focused on exploiting natural resources, using cheap labor, and establishing markets for their expanding industrial sectors. The Turkish presence in Africa diverged significantly from those colonial practices. The Ottoman Empire adopted a more flexible governance model that allowed for a degree of autonomy within the provinces. This approach meant that the Ottoman Empire respected the local political and social structures, intervening minimally in the internal dynamics of the regions under its control. Therefore, the Ottoman Empire supported African nations in their struggles against colonial powers after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Türkiye's War of Independence also inspired African liberation movements such as those in Ghana and Algeria. Türkiye's modern-day African policy is based on collaboration and partnership, not exploitation, because of this shared history.

As part of a multifaceted foreign policy, Türkiye has strengthened its relations with African countries by focusing on political, economic, humanitarian, and cultural cooperation. In 1998, the Turkish government introduced the African Initiative Policy, which laid the foundation for the country's growing influence, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Türkiye reached a significant milestone in 2005, known as the "Year of Africa," when it became an observer member of the African Union (AU). With the AU's recognition of Türkiye as a strategic partner by 2008, its influence and cooperation with Africa has substantially increased.

In August 2012, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Mogadishu, Somalia, as a symbol of this partnership. Türkiye demonstrated its commitment to the region and desire to strengthen diplomatic ties and cooperation. As of 2013, Türkiye transitioned from the African Initiative Policy to the African Partnership Policy, adopting a more unified strategy that included government, private sector, and non-governmental organizations. The policy has led to significant growth in trade, investment, and humanitarian aid, with Türkiye's trade volume with Africa rising from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to \$40.7 billion by 2022. Regarding diplomatic missions, Turkish embassies in Africa have also increased from 12 in 2002 to 44 by 2024, reflecting stronger diplomatic ties. Moreover, Turkish-African Partnership Summits have further strengthened Turkish-African relations, empowering

their collaborative efforts and long-term commitments.

The transformation of Türkiye's Africa policy can be explained in depth by three major works: *Turkey in Africa: A New Emerging Power?* edited by Elem Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu and Ali Onur Tepeciklioğlu, *Turkey in Africa: Turkey's Strategic Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa* by Federico Donelli, and *Türkiye Afrika İlişkileri: Tarihi Süreç, Yaklaşımlar ve Beklentiler (Türkiye-Africa Relations: Historical Process, Approaches, and Expectations)* by Serhat Orakçı. All of these books provide a comprehensive understanding of Türkiye's evolving role in Africa, they examine Türkiye's historical connections, diplomatic strategies, and use of soft power.

There is a wide range of approaches represented in these works. Tepeciklioğlu's edited book implements a multidisciplinary perspective to examine Turkish influence in Africa, especially soft power. This book also provides a comprehensive overview of Türkiye's economic aid projects, infrastructure projects, and educational programs. Donelli, on the other hand, focuses on the multitrack diplomacy and security partnership of Türkiye, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa, from a geopolitical and strategic perspective. His framework emphasizes how Turkish diplomatic engagement has been shaped by its strategic priorities. Alongside these works, Orakçı's historical analysis explains how Türkiye's long history with Africa has shaped its contemporary policies. By emphasizing the Ot-

toman Empire's non-colonial political attitude towards Africa, he shows how Türkiye successfully sustained and continued its engagement in the continent.

## A Historical Perspective on Turkish-African Relations

Türkiye's relationship with Africa has deep historical roots, dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Taking into account the historical connections between Türkiye and Africa, Orakçı stresses the non-colonial character of these relations in *Türkiye-Africa Relations*. In North and East Africa, in particular, African interactions with the Ottoman Empire were marked by mutual respect, religious solidarity, and strategic partnership. According to *Türkiye-Africa Relations*, the Ottoman Empire interacted with African nations through trade, diplomacy, and military cooperation, but it never engaged in colonial exploitation like European nations.

As part of this study, Orakçı examines the Ottoman Empire's impact on regions like Egypt, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa, where Ottoman's support played a crucial role in local governance and defense against European invasions after the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, Ottoman officials and traders helped to improve political and cultural ties throughout the region. As a result of these historical roots, Türkiye's contemporary policy focuses on partnership rather than dominance, emphasizing equality and mutual benefit.

While Orakçı's historical context provides the necessary historical background, Donelli and Tepeciklioğlu describe how these historical ties are reflected in Türkiye's current policies. According to Donelli in *Turkey in Africa: Turkey's Strategic Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Turkish diplomatic strategies often reference this historical relationship to frame the country as a non-colonial power. It has proven to be a significant advantage in distinguishing Türkiye from other global actors in Africa, particularly in regions that suffered from long periods of colonial rule. As Tepeciklioğlu points out in *Turkey in Africa: A New Emerging Power?*, Türkiye's use of soft power –especially in humanitarian and educational partnerships– follows its historical approach of offering support without the exploitative overtones associated with colonialism.

*Türkiye-Africa Relations'* historical narrative is not simply a recounting of the past; it is a vital part of Türkiye's current diplomacy. Today, while Türkiye acknowledges the historical context of its relations with Africa, its foreign policy extends far beyond this framework. Türkiye has forged strong and diverse partnerships with countries not only in North and East Africa but also in South and West Africa reflecting its ability to adapt to Africa's dynamic landscape. As a result, Türkiye has not only become a reliable actor but also a crucial contributor to mutual growth. Additionally, Türkiye consistently demonstrates solidarity with African countries on global platforms like the

UN. In this sense, Türkiye remains responsive to Africa's contemporary challenges, actively supporting localized solutions on various platforms.

## The Turkish Diplomatic Strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa

As Türkiye's strategic engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa has evolved over the past few years, it has developed a carefully orchestrated approach that blends political, economic, and security ties. The book *Turkey in Africa: Turkey's Strategic Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa* by Frederico Donelli provides a detailed evaluation of Türkiye's geopolitical ambitions in the region, emphasizing multitrack diplomacy as one of its key strategies. According to Donelli, Türkiye's approach uniquely combines state-led efforts, spearheaded by institutions such as TİKA and the Turkish Maarif Foundation, with contributions from non-state actors, including businesses, NGOs, and educational organizations. With its multilevel approach, Türkiye builds comprehensive relations that address both governmental and societal concerns, differing from the more traditional, state-centered foreign policy.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, Türkiye's diplomacy offers reciprocally beneficial partnerships, including cooperation in infrastructure development, healthcare, and security. A notable example is Türkiye's involvement in Somalia, where it has contributed significantly to rebuilding critical infrastructure and providing humanitar-

ian assistance following years of civil strife. According to Donelli, Türkiye's strategy toward Somalia represents a broader strategy for supporting fragile states in ways that build long-run partnerships rather than short-term relations. Turkish diplomacy also reaches out to stronger states like Nigeria, South Africa, or Ethiopia in the continent, fostering economic partnerships and trade deals that benefit both nations.

In addition to Donelli's book, Orakçı provides historical context for Türkiye's modern strategy. According to him, Türkiye's contemporary diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa is built upon the Ottoman Empire's influence in North and East Africa, where religious and political alliances played a key role. As a non-colonial partner in Africa, Türkiye emphasizes its role, especially in post-colonial nation-states, by referring to this historical connection. In other words, Türkiye's strategic reliance on historical ties has helped foster trust among African nations, enabling it to be seen as a partner in the continent's development rather than a purely pragmatic power.

Donelli's analysis also explores Türkiye's security partnerships in Africa, including its involvement in peacekeeping missions and military training programs. In this regard, Türkiye is particularly a crucial player in regional security in the Horn of Africa. Türkiye has provided military aid and trained local forces in Somalia as part of its broader efforts to stabilize the region. For example, Camp TURK-SOM highlights Türkiye's military

training efforts in the region, where 200 Turkish soldiers are currently training 1,500 Somali soldiers, with an eventual goal of reaching 10,000 troops. Turkish security strategy goes beyond military support, aiming to strengthen local military institutions' capacity to address security challenges independently. It is possible to say that Türkiye's strategic use of security partnerships is part of its broader foreign policy objectives of enhancing regional stability where it has economic and diplomatic ties. Regarding Türkiye's Sub-Saharan Africa policy, Tepeciklioğlu emphasizes the importance of soft power. For example, Türkiye's educational exchange with Sub-Saharan Africa, which institutions like the Turkish Maarif Foundation support, has strengthened its relations with African nations.

Together, the works of Donelli, Orakçı, and Tepeciklioğlu provide a comprehensive and nuanced examination of Türkiye's strategic diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa, outlining the multifaceted nature of its engagements in the region. Consequently, by combining economic, political, and cultural engagements, Türkiye has developed a diplomatic strategy characterized by flexibility and adaptability, allowing it to address the evolving needs of Sub-Saharan African states effectively.

### **Türkiye's Strategic Use of Soft Power in Africa**

Soft power plays an important role in Türkiye's foreign policy in Africa,

a strategy that emphasizes humanitarian aid, education, cultural diplomacy, and economic cooperation. In *Turkey in Africa: A New Emerging Power?*, Tepeciklioğlu stresses Türkiye's soft power approach as critical to its engagement with the continent. This book indicates Türkiye's humanitarian aid programs play a key role in its image as a trustworthy ally in Africa. During the 2011 Somalia famine, Türkiye responded immediately with food aid and later rebuilt critical infrastructure, which is considered a groundbreaking moment in Türkiye-Africa relations. By building hospitals, schools, and roads, Türkiye proved its ability to provide rapid assistance and demonstrated its commitment to the long-term development of African countries. Türkiye's approach to humanitarian aid aligns with the African Union's principle of "African solutions for African problems," which prioritizes local ownership and leadership in responding to development challenges across the continent.

Education is another pillar of the Turkish soft power in Africa. In institutions like the Turkish Maarif Foundation or programs like Türkiye Scholarships, thousands of African students have the opportunity to engage with the Turkish education system. Tepeciklioğlu highlights the role of educational initiatives in deepening bilateral relations and building a strong foundation for long-term cooperation. Türkiye's strategic investment in education across Africa is a critical mechanism for fostering goodwill and establishing enduring

partnerships that extend beyond the traditional political and economic spheres, further enhancing its diplomatic influence and engagement within the continent.

While focusing on mostly strategic diplomacy, Federico Donelli acknowledges that Turkish soft power initiatives are interconnected with the country's broader geopolitical goals. He argues that Türkiye's strategic investments in Africa are reinforced by its humanitarian and educational efforts, which strengthen its influence and enhance its diplomatic reach. Donelli asserts that Türkiye's soft power serves to complement its political and economic objectives, particularly in fragile states, where it is strategically utilized to promote stability and strengthen trust. Türkiye's humanitarian and educational programs have proven invaluable in establishing diplomatic and economic partnerships in countries like Somalia and Sudan. Thus, Turkish soft power goes beyond moral concern to strengthen its positive influence and develop constructive partnerships throughout Africa.

Tepeciklioğlu and Donelli emphasize the close connection between Türkiye's soft power and its economic cooperation with African nations, illustrating how these two elements reinforce one another in developing bilateral relations. Through institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Türkiye has actively engaged in a range of development projects to enhance local capacity, generate em-

ployment opportunities, and improve infrastructure across Africa. By participating in these projects, Türkiye strengthens its presence in the region and contributes to local economies. In addition to state-led institutions, the Turkish private sector is heavily involved in numerous infrastructure projects, including roads, hospitals, airports, and schools, all of which are beneficial to local communities and will strengthen Türkiye's economic ties with African countries.

Donelli's and Tepeciklioğlu's analysis together demonstrates that Türkiye's engagement in Africa is multifaceted, integrating strategic initiatives with soft power to strengthen its presence and influence throughout the continent. Soft power, therefore, is a critical component of Türkiye's broader diplomatic and strategic efforts in Africa, ensuring its influence in various sectors. The Turkish government has successfully managed to create mutual respect and shared development goals through humanitarian aid, education, and economic cooperation.

## Conclusion

These three books provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Turkish influence in Africa. Each work offers a unique perspective, offering insight into the historical foundations, strategic diplomacy, and soft power initiatives that define Türkiye's approach to the continent. Serhat Orakçı's historical perspective in *Türkiye-Africa Relations: Historical*

*Process, Approaches, and Expectations* traces the deep-rooted connections between Türkiye and Africa from the Ottoman Empire to the present day. Beyond Türkiye's viewpoint, he also explores the emergence of African nation-states during the post-1960s, focusing on their struggles against colonialism. While later chapters address Türkiye's current relations with Africa, the core of his analysis centers on enduring historical ties. This approach is particularly valuable in understanding the foundation elements of Türkiye's current strategic policies toward African nations, highlighting the continuity of mutual influence shaped by centuries of interaction.

In addition to addressing Türkiye's role in Africa and its diplomatic strategies toward African nations, *Turkey in Africa: A New Emerging Power?* delves into various themes, such as economic relations, military strategies, and theoretical foundations. These diverse perspectives offer a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis of Türkiye's approach to the continent. In this edited volume, Elem Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu and Ali Tepeciklioğlu particularly focus on Türkiye's evolving Africa policy by referring to the significance of its soft power tools in shaping the relations with African countries.

Donelli's work provides a focused examination of Türkiye's modern political engagement with African nations, particularly emphasizing its proactive foreign policy. After a brief historical introduction, the book highlights Türkiye's growing ties with

Sub-Saharan African countries, linking this engagement to a dynamic and assertive foreign policy. In chapters 4 and 5, Donelli thoroughly explains this policy, using the Somalia crisis as a key example of Türkiye's strategic actions in the region. He argues that the success of Türkiye's Africa policy is primarily rooted in its humanitarian efforts and multitrack diplomacy, which combine development assistance, crisis response, and diplomatic relations.

In conclusion, these books collectively reveal how Türkiye has developed a multifaceted approach to the

continent. The historical connections between Türkiye and Africa, alongside its increasing use of soft power and proactive humanitarian efforts, highlight a blend of tradition and modernity in its foreign policy. This comprehensive strategy not only strengthens Türkiye's diplomatic and economic ties with African nations but also positions it as a crucial actor addressing regional challenges. The complementary insights in these books offer a better understanding of Türkiye's long-term objectives in Africa, reflecting both strategic ambition and a commitment to mutual growth. ■