Reconsidering Turkish Foreign Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa: Rationale and Mechanisms

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Abstract

In the last 15 years, Turkish engagements in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have increased, attracted wider international attention and become a phenomenon worthy of discussion. This report examines Turkish engagement in SSA with a focus on historical, political, trade and cultural perspectives. It argues that the end of the Cold War and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the way for Turkey to increase its outreach to different regions while still maintaining its traditional alliance with the West. Turkey’s recent intensive efforts in SSA, among others, are a result of its diversified foreign policy focus (i.e. re-orientation of its relations away from an almost exclusive focus on the West to greater engagement with the Global South), the more fluid geopolitical situation and shifting alliances in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and its wider desire to play a more active and visible role on the world stage. It is particularly an expression of Turkey’s determination to challenge the current global order, with particular reference to the UN Security Council reform. Finally, the report illustrates Turkey’s ‘win-win’ approach towards SSA. That is the provision of aid (both humanitarian and development), contribution to security (e.g. UN Peacekeeping operations) and state building efforts (e.g. Somalia) to balance SSA trade deficit with Turkey.
Africa’s foreign relations have recently been experiencing major transformations. Non-traditional (i.e. non-western) state actors including China, India and Turkey are revitalizing their relations with the continent and consequently affecting ties between African countries and the traditional actors (Kragelund, 2012).

Turkey’s relations with Africa have historical and cultural roots in the Ottoman period. However, it is only in the last two decades that the modern state of Turkey has sought to establish significant ties with the continent. Following its 1998 “opening to Africa policy” and the subsequent coming to power of the AK Party in 2002, Turkey has been increasingly active in Africa, even declaring 2005 as “the year of Africa”. In 2005, the African Union granted Turkey observer status in the organization’s headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and in 2008, the first-ever Turkish-Africa economic summit occurred in Istanbul where representatives from 50 African countries attended. Turkey’s then-Foreign Minister Ali Babacan declared that Africa has a significant place in Turkish foreign policy and for this reason, Turkey would increase its diplomatic presence on the continent by opening 15 more new embassies (MFA, 2008). Since then, Turkey has expanded its presence on the continent and its cooperation with African states has considerably increased. In 2011, the African Economic Outlook—co-produced by African Development Bank, UNDP, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)—described Turkey as one of the most important actors in Africa (OECD, 2011).

Furthermore, active humanitarian and development involvement in Somalia since 2011 has strengthened Turkey’s engagements in SSA in general and has changed the nature of Turkey’s presence on the continent (Donelli, 2018). Four main policies stand out as Turkey’s strategic engagement mechanisms in SSA, namely politics and diplomacy, economy, education/culture, and aid. First, while Turkey has had historical ties with North Africa, which was once an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, its relations with SSA developed during the course of the last half of the 20th century as the decolonization process was underway. Since 2002, Turkey has pursued a very robust and cohesive foreign policy to increase its ties with the SSA states. Successive AK Party-led governments have increased political and diplomatic involvements in SSA, primarily through augmenting foreign missions, regular high-level visits and establishing Turkey-Africa cooperation summits.

Second, Turkey is determined to increase its economic ties with various African states. One notable project that marked a turning point in SSA-Turkey economic relations was the launching of “The Strategy on the Development of Economic Relationships with Africa” in 2003. Consequently, Turkey’s total trade volume with Africa recorded a three-fold rise from 2003 to $18.9 billion (exports = $11.6 billion, imports = $71 billion) in 2017.

Third, Turkey has increased its investment in Africa in the realms of education and cultural diplomacy. This was achieved with the provision of scholarship opportunities to African students, opening up Turkish schools, the exportation of Yesilcam—the Turkish cinema industry—to SSA, and the establishment of Africa-focused research institutions. Furthermore, Ankara has boosted defence and security cooperation with SSA countries via the opening of military training camps, participating in counter-piracy operations and contributing to continent-wide anti-terrorism efforts. Finally, Turkey is seeking to increase its presence in SSA by extending humanitarian and development assistance to the people of the region. Turkey, an emerging middle power, has assumed a growing role in the humanitarian field for the last decade, introducing new methods of humanitarian activism and state building in SSA.
Recent Turkish involvement in Africa is directly connected with the re-orientation of Turkish foreign policy away from an almost exclusive focus on Europe and the United States to more engagement with Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood and beyond (Rudincova, 2014). Moreover, for the last decade, Turkey has considerably contributed to the development and humanitarian assistance in the world with a specific focus on targeting conflict-affected areas.

To understand Turkish involvement in Africa, it is vital to examine the historical and cultural ties that Turkey has enjoyed with the rest of Africa over the years. As previously mentioned, although Turkey is not a colonial power, its ties to the continent can be traced back to the Ottoman period. These Ottoman era ties still visibly influence Ankara’s foreign policy in Africa and the discussion and views relating to the continent (Özkan, 2010). Historically, ties with North Africa have been more established as the region formed an important part of the Ottoman Empire until the colonial period. In Sub-Saharan Africa, relations with Turkey and Turkish influences are considered to be relatively new, dating back to the latter half of the 20th century, when most of these nations gained independence from European colonial powers. With the exception of few countries along the Red Sea such as Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti, the Ottoman Empire did not have a foothold in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa nor did it establish viable relations with Sub-Saharan African people.

Contrary to the North African case, there are two reasons that have historically led Sub-Saharan Africa to receive less attention from Turkish academics and policymakers. First, this region is considered very far, conflict-ridden, and full of troubles. Due to its geographical remoteness, its history has not received due consideration from Turkish academic circles and institutions until recently. However, the prevalent negative image of the region has persisted. One notable example is the criticism and questions raised by prominent Turkish journalists and columnists when then-Prime Minister Erdogan paid a visit to South Africa and Ethiopia in March 2005 (Sanberk, 2007). However, that stance now seems to be subsiding as Turkey becomes more engaged in Africa politically, economically, and most importantly, on humanitarian grounds.

When African nations began to emerge from the colonial rubble in the mid-20th century, Turkey recognized almost all of the newly independent states, established diplomatic relations with them and opened embassies in countries such as Ghana, where Turkey established an embassy following the country’s independence from the British Empire in 1957. Although Turkish relations with North African countries considerably increased during the cold war era, Turkey was not generally involved in African affairs and therefore missed the chance to develop political, economic and commercial ties with SSA countries. One explanation for this was Turkey’s domestic pursuit of economic and political restructuring as well as its involvement in Cyprus conflict. The latter affected its international relations not only because of Turkish involvement in the dispute, but occupied a symbolic place on the agenda of Turkey’s foreign policy thus contributing to Ankara’s meagre ties with the SSA states (Maghdid, 2016).

The increased Turkish involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to change two narratives in Turkey. First, The dominant perception of Africa as a “problematic continent”. Second, North Africa will no longer have a privileged treatment in academic circles and debates. These and other developments may lead to the cessation of the negative image of the SSA region among the Turkish populace.

Historical Background
Rationale for Engagements in SSA

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the way for Turkey to increase its outreach to different regions. In his book "Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position", former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu singled out three geographical areas of influence surrounding Turkey. They are the near-land basin (Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus), the near-maritime basin (Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean Sea, the Gulf and the Caspian) and the near-continental basin (Europe, Northern Africa, Southern Asia, the Middle and Eastern Asia) (Davutoğlu, 2001). Davutoğlu contends that Turkey is both "a European and Asian, Balkan and Caucasus, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean country" and that Turkey’s geopolitical position should be regarded as a "means of gradually opening up to the world and transforming regional into global influence." (European Stability Institute, 2009). In this view, Turkey’s ability to use its geocentric location and cultural legacy (as a conjunction of Eurasia, Middle East and Africa) will give it the unique geopolitical advantage to become a global player. In this context, increased engagement with Africa is viewed not as an alternative to Turkey’s alliance with the west, but rather an enlargement of the traditional spheres of Turkish foreign policy (Kalin, 2011).

In light of this, Turkey developed a multidimensional foreign policy while still maintaining its historical association with the West. One of the prominent features of the AK Party governments in the last 15 years is that relations with neighboring regions, such as Russia, Balkans, and MENA, were improved. Ankara also diversified the nature of its relations with Sub-Saharan Africa through trade, aid, conflict mediation mechanisms and state building.

The prospect of Turkey’s membership to the European Union (EU) seems to be an increasingly elusive target. Additionally, dynamic political and security environments and shifting alliances in the Middle East have had an impact on the conduct of Turkish policy towards Africa. Turkey and Egypt – under the brief leadership of Mohammed Morsi - initially shared the same views on several issues in the Middle East, particularly the events of the Arab Spring. However, relations deteriorated following the 2013 military coup against Mohammed Morsi—Egypt's first and only democratically elected leader. Ankara subsequently refused to recognize the military regime led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The Syrian civil war, the Yemen conflict, the rise of the non-state actors in the region and the recent blockade on Qatar by a coalition of Arab countries have been among the signposts of the shifting geopolitical alliances in the MENA. All these factors compelled Turkey to increase its engagement in with SSA countries.

The 2008 global financial crisis crippled the institutional foundations of the international system, thus further paving the way for a trend towards unilateralism on the part of both established and emerging actors. These developments have compelled the international community to adjust to the dynamics of the changing global order. For example, there is a discussion of setting up a European army among EU officials following President Trump's criticism of NATO. Furthermore, China is visualizing filling the gap by offering a new concept of globalization based on interconnectivity, trade and communication projects, such as its Belt and Road Initiative. Turkey, as an emerging global power and respected member of the global community, is also envisioning playing a greater role by projecting its power beyond its traditional area of influence. In regards to this, Ankara is seeking alliances from SSA as it challenges the terms of the current global order, with particular reference to the UN Security Council reform (Anadolu Agency, 2018).

Finally, liberal theories of international relations focus on the distribution of economic wealth as a primary characteristic that affects states’ foreign policies (Ryan et al., 2013). In other words, states find cooperation rather than conflict more in line with their interests. Trade agreements and cultural exchanges are examples of cooperation that can benefit states. In light of this, it can be argued that Turkey’s impressive economic performance for the last 15 years has contributed to Turkey’s increased engagement with SSA. Since 2004, Turkey has been one of the 20 largest growing economies in the world and has an ambition of ensuring a $2 trillion gross domestic product (GDP) and to achieve $500 billion in exports by the Republic’s centenary in 2023 (Daly Sabah, 2018). For this reason, Africa’s vast economic potential has attracted the attention of Turkish policymakers and business people alike.
Politics and Diplomacy

Turkish foreign policy in SSA gained momentum in 1998 upon declaring it as the ‘Africa opening year’ in its Africa Action Plan. Turkish policy-makers took this new opening policy very seriously. Ankara decided to significantly increase its diplomatic presence in Africa from 12 embassies to 39 diplomatic missions throughout the continent, which was achieved in 2011. What followed was the dispatching of businessmen and humanitarian organizations to Africa, recognition of Turkey as one of the most significant partners of Africa, and the subsequent guarantee for Ankara of an observer status seat in the African Union. Turkey currently ranks sixth amongst countries with the most diplomatic representation in the world, after the five permanent UNSC members with a total of 235 foreign missions. Currently, 41 of Turkey’s 137 embassies in the world are located in Africa, a continent of 54 nations, and Ankara is aiming to establish embassies in all African states. The number of Turkish Embassies in Sub-Saharan Africa has tripled since the Turkish government declared ‘The Year of Africa’ in 2005, from 12 to 41 embassies (Hurriyet, 2018). In addition to its existing embassies in DRC, South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, Senegal and Sudan, it has inaugurated new embassies in Tanzania and Ivory Coast in 2009. Additional embassies were established in 2010 (in Uganda, Mali, Madagascar, Angola, Cameroon and Ghana), 2011 (in Somalia, Mauritania, The Gambia, Mozambique, Zambia, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe), 2012 (in Niger, Gabon, Burkina Faso and Namibia), and 2013 (Djibouti, Eritrea, Guinea and Chad). When Turkey established its embassy in Eritrea, it became the first country to have ambassadorial representation in all the countries in the Horn of Africa (Orakci et al., 2015). Ankara's largest embassy in the world is located in Mogadishu, Somalia.

The number of African diplomatic missions in Turkey has also witnessed a steady increase during the last 15 years of AK Party rule. While South Africa was the only SSA country maintaining an embassy in Turkey in 1997, there are currently 32 African embassies in Ankara with others (e.g., Tanzania, Guinea-Bissau, Cameroon, and Mozambique) planning to establish embassies.

As part of the opening to Africa policy, Erdogan, as both Prime Minister and President, embarked on 48 trips to Africa and became the first Turkish leader to visit 27 African countries in the history of Republic of Turkey (see figure 1). In addition to this, Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia respectively rank the most visited nations in the North Africa region. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia, South Africa, Senegal and Somalia received the most official trips of President Erdogan.

In 2008, the first-ever Turkish-African cooperation summit was held in Turkey with more than 50 representatives from Africa. Even recently-deposed Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted on an arrest warrant of International Criminal Court (ICC), was invited to the summit, however, he eventually cancelled his trip. The second Turkish-African cooperation summit was held in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea in 2014 with the participation of President Erdogan, representatives and a large number of Turkish and African businessmen who attended (Anadolu Agency, 2014).

The diplomatic initiatives of the Turkish politicians in Africa have borne fruit. In addition to becoming an observer country in 2005 and a strategic partner in 2008 of the African Union, Turkey also became a non-regional member of the African Development Bank (ADB) in 2008 and then a full non-regional member in 2013 (MFA, n.d). Additionally, Ankara received the support of all African countries, except two, in its candidacy to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in the 2009-10 period. It again lobbied all the African countries to secure a seat, albeit unsuccessfully, in the 2015-16 term claiming that Turkey would become another ‘voice’ for Africa at the UN (Arinç, 2012). Furthermore, around 40 African countries supported the 2017 UN Jerusalem Resolution, which Turkey, as Chair of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), co-sponsored. Both Turkey and African countries vehemently call, and seem to be collaborating, on comprehensive UN Security Council reform. Echoing President Erdogan’s oft-repeated mantra regarding the UN Security Council (UNSC) that ‘the world is bigger than five’, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, following his country being elected to serve in the UNSC for the term 2019-2020 as a non-permanent member, called for the ‘expansion in the permanent and non-permanent category’ and for Africa to be fully represented at the Security Council (Isilow, 2018). The common Africa inclusion view—adopted at the Ezulwini Consensus and the Sirte Declaration on the continent’s inclusion on the Council—is for the allocation of two permanent seats and two additional non-permanent seats at the UNSC (United Nations, 2013).

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2 These two African countries were reportedly Mozambique and South Africa.
Turkey’s Africa engagement policy also contains elements of anti-colonial discourse. Turkish leaders repeatedly underline that Turkey is not like the “others”—referring particularly to Europeans who have a colonial history in Africa—but rather a “friend” who fought colonialism alongside Africans (Bilgic, 2014). In a speech at a Turkish-Tanzanian business forum held in Tanzania as part of a 3-country tour in south-eastern Africa in January 2017, President Erdogan affirmed: “Our ancestors, who established states that spread across three continents have never acted with imperialist purposes in other regions. Our ancestors have never had a colonial post in Africa in their millennial history.” (Tih, 2017).

Moreover, Turkish involvement in SSA has a feature of ‘equal partnership’. Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, former Somali President, emphasized the ‘equal partnership’ in Turkish assistance to his country: “From the outset, Turkey has treated Somalia as an equal partner, respected our requests and insisted on our input. Turkey’s perception of Somalia as a future trading partner enabled us to approach our relationship from an equal footing, leading to mutual respect and enthusiastic cooperation.” (Mohamud, 2015). Since Turkey’s 2011 humanitarian intervention in Somalia, the Turkish assistance, unlike many traditional actors, was described as unconditional, impartial and treated Somalia as an equal partner by respecting the country’s territorial integrity and accepting the Somali leaders’ input (Gizem & Stearns, 2016). This partnership approach has aroused interest in Turkish projects among many African countries (Dahir, 2018) thus effectively boosting the enthusiasm on the future of the ties between Ankara and SSA.

The Turkish model attaches strong importance to “ethics” in providing humanitarian and development assistance. According to Murphy and Woods (2014), the emphasis on “ethics” makes Turkey ‘exceptional’ and ‘unique … in its explicit use of language – particularly around the meaning of ‘ethics’ and its emphasis on working from an ethical paradigm’. Unlike China and the traditional actors, which create new relations of dependence, the Turkish model focuses on win-win policy in SSA, such as political equality, mutual economic growth, peacebuilding, and long-term social partnership. Hence, Turkey wills to share with SSA countries its development model that has shown successfully in its very own speedy economic growth (Bank and Karadag, 2013).

Figure 1: The official trips of Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Africa since 2004. 
Source: TRT World

3 The 2017 Jerusalem Resolution was a UN General Assembly resolution asking nations not to establish or move their diplomatic missions to Jerusalem. It was overwhelmingly adopted by a recorded vote of 128 in favour to 9 against and 35 abstentions. For the full text of the resolution see: https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/ga11995.doc.htm
One distinguishing feature of Africa in the eyes of Turkish policy-makers and business people is that it has huge economic potential. The continent has increased its trade volume with the rest of the world by 200 per cent since 2000 and it houses 6 out of 10 fastest growing economies in the world. Between 2018 and 2035, the United Nations estimates the 10 fastest growing cities in the world will be all in Africa. The African population, with a median age of 19, is predicted to reach 2 billion by 2050 and double again by the end of the century. According to the World Bank, six of the world’s top 10 fastest growing economies this year are in Sub-Saharan African, and it is projected that SSA’s growth will strengthen to 3.1 per cent in 2018 and to 3.5 per cent in 2019 (World Bank, 2018). Additionally, economic forecasts mention that Africa’s economy in 2050 will hit $29 trillion. The United Nations predicts 35 per cent of the population in Europe—Turkey’s largest trade partner—will be aged 60 years or over in 2050, which means Europe’s population will undergo significant fall in the second half of the century. In 2017, the 28 EU states account for more than 1/3 (imports from EU=36 per cent, exports to EU=47 per cent) of Turkey’s trade relations with the rest of the world. The decrease of the EU population would result in a decrease in Turkish business relations. For this reason, Turkish businessmen have put a great deal of attention to the economic growth of some African countries and view them as potential alternatives for the decreases in traditional markets such as the EU, Russia and Iraq, among others. African consumers are viewed as a good market of commodities and by 2017, Turkish exports to Sub-Saharan Africa reached 4.1 billion USD—compared to $1.9 billion in 2007 (Financial Times, 2016).

Turkish trade and investments in the African continent have seen a dramatic rise in the last decade, thanks to Africa’s potential business and economic opportunities as well as the AK Party’s foreign policy priority towards Africa. In a letter he pinned before he left on a tour of Africa in 2016, President Erdogan emphasized that Turkey is “Africa’s friend, compatriot, and partner”, and that Africa is unique and important for three reasons: A young and vibrant population, vast natural resources, and an entrepreneurial spirit that could make Africa an economic hub (Erdoğan, 2016).

### Table 1: Turkey’s Trade with Africa (USD Million)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th></th>
<th>2017</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exports</td>
<td>Imports</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Exports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>1,946</td>
<td>2,821</td>
<td>4,767</td>
<td>4,149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>107,271</td>
<td>170,062</td>
<td>277,333</td>
<td>156,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA (%)</td>
<td>1,8</td>
<td>1,7</td>
<td>1,7</td>
<td>2,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>4,029</td>
<td>2,285</td>
<td>6,314</td>
<td>7,525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa (%)</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>1,3</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>4,8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Turkish Statistical Institute
Turkey is seeking to double its efforts to increase business relations with Africa. Foreign trade, especially exports, has been one of the primary factors in the development of Turkish-African relations. Ankara’s total trade volume with Africa has recorded a three-fold increase since 2007 and reached $18.9 billion in 2017 as exports totalled $11.6 billion and imports $7.1 billion (see table 1). Out of this amount, Turkey and Sub-Sahara Africa have reached a total trade volume of $7 billion in 2015 (MFA, ibid). The main Turkish exports to SSA are coal bitumen and petroleum products, transportation machinery, cereal products, textiles, fertilizers, machinery, steel, rubber, furniture, mechanical and electrical devices and their spare parts, voice recording devices, food, tobacco products, visual equipment, musical instruments, clocks, measurement devices, and plastic products. Turkey’s key imports from Sub-Sahara Africa include, but are not limited to, oilseed and fruits, sesame, sugar and sugar products, unfinished leather, lac, Arabic gum, resin, volatile oils, cotton, tea, coffee, spices, cocoa, textile fibres, fish, raw materials for dye and paints.

In terms of investment in SSA, the Turkish Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has reached approximately $6.2 billion (MFA, ibid). The Horn of Africa region attracts the largest Turkish FDI in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ethiopia—a landlocked country of 105 million people with vast agricultural land—has been a top priority for Turkish investors. As of the end of 2017, the total amount of investments by Turkish firms in Ethiopia was around $2.5 billion, followed by Sudan, South Africa, and Nigeria. The number of Turkish companies operating in Ethiopia is estimated to be around 150 and the number of jobs created by these firms has reached approximately 30,000—the largest number of people employed by a foreign country. Currently, Turkish firms employ the highest number of workers in Ethiopia’s private sector.

Leading sectors of the Turkish FDI investment are agriculture, construction, textiles, and manufacturing. While larger Turkish companies consider the Africa market as too small for their business operations, Small and Medium-sized enterprise (SME) Turkish firms have invested in Africa and are developing niche markets in the technology, construction, and farming sectors. Turkish investments created the largest number of jobs in Africa (16,593 in 2014) when compared to other FDI investments on the continent (Hammoura, 2016). Currently, African countries account for 21 per cent (19 per cent North Africa and percent SSA) of the total business volume of Turkish contractors.

There are currently Turkish Trade Counsellor Offices in 26 African countries, a six-fold increase since 2003. The Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEik) has established Business Councils with its African counterparts in 43 countries and has significantly contributed to the development of bilateral relations with African countries.
To avoid double taxation on investment, Ankara has signed trade agreements with some of leading African trade partners such as Sudan, Algeria, South Africa, Morocco, Egypt, and Ethiopia. While seeking to foster trade relations with the African economic communities (ECOWAS, COMESA, ECCAS, EAC), the Union of African Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Agriculture and Commodity Exchanges and the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey have jointly laid the foundation of the Turkish-African Chamber, which aspires to increase the Turkey-Africa economic cooperation (Uacciap, 2015). The Turkish Eximbank has been working with SSA public institutions and the private sector to boost trade between the two sides and Turkey’s willingness to join the Africa Exim Bank signal the level of multilateral cooperation between SSA countries and Turkey.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)—which entered into Force on May 30, 2019, with an estimated market of $3 trillion and population of 1.2 billion people—is set to become the largest free trade zone in the world and a significant milestone for African integration. According to Turkish business leaders, this pan-African trade deal is expected to attract large Turkish investments in Africa and would pave the way for Turkish businesses to get a bigger slice of the AfCFTA market (Sahin, 2019).

Turkish Airlines (THY) has extensively increased its operations to and from the African continent. The number of destinations has risen from 13 destinations in 2009 to 52 in 2018. Turkish Airlines is now the largest carrier operating in Africa on a daily basis covering 35 countries. Also providing air cargo service, THY covers 34 destinations in 30 countries in Sub Saharan Africa. The daily flight service of Turkish Airlines has also boosted the Turkish tourism industry. According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, the number of African tourists to Turkey “increased almost fourfold during the last eight years (2006:210 thousand; 2015:885 thousand).”

Figure 3: Turkish Airlines Destinations in Africa. Source: TRT World
Turkey shares historical, cultural and social links with the African continent. Most of the significant political and humanitarian actors in Africa, such as the UK, France, Italy, and Germany among others, have colonial histories. One notable distinction that sets Turkey apart from these actors is the fact that Turkey’s past with Africa in the Ottoman era was more state-building than colonization. Furthermore, neither Africans consider Turkey an imperial power nor is Turkey inclined towards taking an imperial stance.

The Turkish presence in Africa has been felt through its culture, primarily the Turkish Language. It has marked the revival of Turkish culture in some of the former territories of the Ottoman Empire on the African continent. The Yunus Emre Foundation (YEF) could be considered as the leading Turkish cultural foundation that promotes the Turkish culture and art overseas. Founded in 2009 and having more than 50 cultural centres throughout the world, the Yunus Emre foundation aspires to promote Turkey, the Turkish language, its history and culture and art and to improve the friendship between Turkey and other countries and increase the cultural exchange. Since its creation, YEF has managed to teach the Turkish language and culture to over 99,000 people outside of Turkey. The foundation has also increased interest in the Turkish language by sending teachers to more than 80 universities globally. YEA currently operates cultural centres in eight African countries including Sudan, Algeria, Somalia, South Africa, and Egypt.

Turkish Maarif Foundation—a public foundation that has been created by the Turkish Parliament following the 2016 failed coup attempt—currently runs 17 schools across Africa with over 9,000 students. Created to overtake schools run by the FETO (Fethullah Terror Organisation), which Turkey has accused of having been behind the July 15 Coup attempt, Maarif is the sole entity authorized to provide educational services abroad. FETO is believed to have penetrated Africa in the early 1990s and built an extensive network of schools and businesses on the continent. Following the failed 2016 coup attempt, some African countries clamped down FETO-linked organizations (Maruf, 2016) and others have extradited FETO operatives to Turkey, including three high-ranking executives who were detained and brought from Gabon (Orakç, 2018). As of September 2017, Maarif has taken over FETO-linked schools in five SSA countries, managed to sign memorandums of understanding with 14 SSA governments and has been negotiating with 7 more countries in SSA (Anadolu Agency, 2017).

Since 1991, Turkey has been providing scholarship opportunities to African students willing to pursue higher education in Turkey. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey offered scholarships to 4,380 African students between 1991 and 2014 and that number has risen substantially in the following years. In the 2015-2016 academic year alone, a total number of 1,239 scholarships were provided to students from Africa. The African Institute of the Turkish Asian Centre for Strategic Studies (TASAM) has been organizing an annual Africa-Turkey congress since 2005. The aim of the Congress is to promote a better understanding of Africa in Turkey and help the spread of the Turkish culture in Africa and has become an important platform for academics, policymakers and businesspeople. Founded in 2015, the Africa Foundation (Afrika Vakfi) focuses on Africa-related research and seeks to advance the partnership between Turkey and the Africa Continent and to carry out activities in relation to social, economic, political, educational, and cultural knowledge. The Africa Foundation also provides scholarships to Turkish and African students writing their postgraduate projects and/or doing research on the African continent. The Association of Researchers on Africa (AFAM) has been doing policy analysis and publications for over 10 years.

There is an increasing number of institutes and centres in Turkish academic institutions specializing in Africa. A number of universities in Turkey (Ankara University, Gazi University, Kadir Has University, Izmir Economy University, Ibn Haldun University and Istanbul Ticaret University) provide courses on African studies or host research centres focusing Africa. The Centre for Strategic Research, the IHH Humanitarian and Social Research Centre, the International Strategic Research Institution and the Istanbul Policy Centre at Sabanci University are gradually developing expertise on SSA. Additionally, Yesilcam—the Turkish film industry—has established a foothold in Africa. Turkish drama series, mostly translated in local languages, have become popular and attract a large audience in many SSA countries, thus increasing the footprint of Turkish culture across the continent (Mohamed, 2018). Founded under the leadership of the Turkish First-Lady Emine Erdogan in 2016, the African Handicrafts Market and Culture House in Ankara serves as a market where handmade products by African women are sold and revenue generated for women in Africa (Aydoğan, 2016).
Defence and Security

Although Turkey has avoided directly interfering in Africa and has relied much on soft power policy, robust defence and security cooperation between Turkey and African nations has been pursued. According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Turkey provides personnel and contributes to seven peacekeeping missions in Africa, namely: MONUSCO (DRC), MINUSMA (Mali), MINUSCA (CAR), UNAMID (Darfur), UNMISS (South Sudan), UNOCI (Côte d'Ivoire) and UNMIL (Liberia). Turkey also contributed forces to the United Nations Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM) between the years 1992-1995. The US-led multinational operation was launched to facilitate humanitarian aid to people affected by the conflict and famine and help stop the civil war. However, the UNOSOM operation ultimately ended in failure as it crossed the line of consent, known as the ‘Mogadishu Line’, by engaging in combat operations in the name of peace enforcement force (Slim, 1995).

Additionally, SSA countries maintain security cooperation with Turkey. In 1991, Turkish intelligence agencies captured and arrested Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the PKK. In 1992, Turkey established its first overseas military facility in Port Sudan in 2015 for allied training and exercise with the Sudanese navy. Since 2009, Turkey has participated in the US-led, multinational Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) anti-piracy and counter-terrorism operations in the Gulf of Aden.

In 2017, Turkey opened its first overseas military facility in Somalia with the aim of training the Somali army in their fight against extremist groups and contribute to regional stability (TRT World, 2017). The military facility has the capacity to train more than 1,500 troops at any one time. In December 2017, Sudan agreed to lease Suakin Island—a ruined Ottoman port city on Sudan’s Red Sea coast—to Turkey who will in turn construct a naval dock to maintain civilian and military vessels. The Suakin agreement, made during a visit to the ancient port by President Erdogan, would see Turkey develop the island as a tourist site and a transit point for pilgrims crossing the Red Sea to Mecca and could ‘result in any kind of military cooperation’, according to former Sudanese Foreign Minister (Abdelaziz et al., 2017). In November 2018, a Turkish delegation led by the Minister of National Defence, Hulusi Akar, paid a four-day tour to Libya, Somalia and Sudan for defence and security talks, including Turkey’s plan to open a military training centre in Sudan (Ozer, 2018). The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared nothing has changed regarding the Suakin agreement following al-Bashir’s deposal in April 2019 (Demirci, 2019). However, many have commented on the fact that the project will very likely be cancelled altogether. This indicates that in the context of the ongoing issues in Sudan, the future of the project may be in doubt.

There has been a growing interest for Turkish weapons as the Turkish defence industry grows and the country transitions from arms procurer to manufacturer and seller. The country is home to Aselsan and TUSAS, two of the world’s hundred largest defence firms. In 2011, Aselsan acquired a local engineering firm in South Africa and established Aselsan South Africa, which manufactures electro-optical systems for the South African military aerospace and maritime markets (DefenseWeb, 2015). In 2014, Turkey’s then Minister of National Defence İsmet Yılmaz reportedly told the Turkish Parliament that the Turkish defence industry wanted to secure weapons deals in markets including the SSA region (Young, 2014). In early 2018, Turkey exported weapons to Somalia and equipped 400 soldiers that graduated from the Turkish training facility in Mogadishu with MPT-76s, a Turkish-made rifle (Maruf, 2018). Other weapons exports to SSA include 4x4 armoured vehicles, known as Ejder Yalcin and Ejder TOMA, which have been already deployed in several parts of the continent (Awel, 2018).

Turkey’s military engagement with Africa, particularly Somalia, marks a significant departure from conventional peacekeeping to a more security-centred holistic approach and long-term modus operandi to peacebuilding (Sazak & Özkan, 2016). Additionally, it shows that Turkey is more willing to assert its smart power capacity gradually beyond its traditional sphere of influence and that the missions in Somalia (and potentially in Sudan) could be extended to include foreign internal defence if the need arises (Kasapoglu, 2017).
Besides political and economic relations, one notable soft power element that recently gained special importance in Turkey’s Africa engagements is the deployment of humanitarian diplomacy in the form of aid and development assistance. Turkey provides aid to SSA countries as a means of balancing SSA’s trade deficit with Turkey. Turkish aid contributes to security (e.g. UN Peacekeeping operations, anti-terrorism and counter-piracy) and state-building efforts (e.g. Somalia) among other things.

Sub-Saharan Africa was the first region to receive Turkish aid in 1985 (10 million USD was provided by the State Planning Organization to Mauritania, The Gambia, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Sudan, Guinea and Somalia). After short discontinuation, following the 1999 earthquakes and 2001 economic crisis, aid to Africa was resumed in 2004. Ankara has been providing annual support of $1 million to the African Union since 2009. In 2013, it contributed $1 million to the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). The Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), which is the official development agency of Turkey, operates almost continental-wide and has 21 program coordination offices in Africa, 17 of which in SSA. Established in 1992 to coordinate aid to newly born Turkic states in Central Asia and Caucasus, the agency has expanded its initial areas of operations and currently carries its activities to a global level in accordance with Turkish foreign policy goals (Celenk & Akilli, 2018).

Turkish aid to Africa increased from $31 million in 2006 to $183.4 million in 2015. In 2013, Africa became the largest beneficiary of Turkish aid, receiving 33.7 per cent of TİKA’s total disbursement (Daily Sabah, 2014). Figures have shown that in 2015 alone, Africa received $395.77 million in humanitarian and development aid.

Figure 4: Official Development Assistance of Turkey  
Source: TİKA’s Turkish Development Assistance Report, 2016
assistance out of Turkey’s 3.9 billion USD of Official Development Assistance (MFA, ibid). The Turkish development assistance has recorded a massive increase since 2002 (see figure 3) and two SSA countries, namely Somalia and Niger, are among the top 10 receiving countries of bilateral development aid (see figure 4). Turkey also funds multi-lateral organizations, for example, WHO and WFP, in conducting developmental projects across SSA. Furthermore, Ankara joined the African Development Bank in 2013 and supports its operations (Afdb, 2013).

Turkey’s emphasis on humanitarian principles has been recently shaping its global role. Cited in TIKA, Turkish Development (2011), preamble, President Erdogan noted: “Wherever there is fire, wherever there is pain, Turkey has mobilised all means to extinguish that fire and has travelled great distances to heal those wounds ... We will reach out to every corner of the world.” Turkey hosted the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul In 2016. The same year, the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report ranked Turkey the world’s most generous nation compared to its gross national income. In 2014 and 2013, the Development Initiatives ranked Turkey as the third and fourth most generous country globally respectively (Daily Sabah, 2016). In 2016, Turkey was ranked the second largest contributor to humanitarian relief after the US and became the most generous country in the world through earmarking 0.69 per cent of its Gross National Product (GNP) to humanitarian initiatives. In 2017, it became the largest humanitarian assistance contributor while retaining its position of the most generous country around the world.

One of the SSA countries that has hugely benefited from Turkey’s generosity is Somalia. In 2011, the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan along with his cabinet members, family, humanitarian organizations and business representatives embarked on a visit to Mogadishu, Somalia’s capital, to highlight the greater need for famine relief and show solidarity with the Somali people. Erdogan, for his part, was the first non-African head of state to visit the Somali capital in the last two decades (Aljazeera, 2011). His visit was credited with changing the perception of the
international community regarding Somalia and drawing the world’s attention to the country’s unfortunate situation (ibid). Erdogan was the first non-African head of state to visit war-torn Mogadishu in almost 20 years. Since then, Turkey has implemented large humanitarian and development projects in the country including, but not limited to, the building of hospitals with up-to-date equipment, TİKA’s initiation of well drilling in the drought-stricken regions, and building of economic infrastructure (e.g. airports and roads).

On the one hand, the Turkish projects have helped Somalia to realise its potential and has led many Somalis to consider Turkey a determined, brotherly nation. In this regard, Somalia's former president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud noted the historical nature of Somalia-Turkey ties: “There is a tremendous difference between the Somalia of three years ago and the Somalia of today- Turkey’s contribution is indispensable for Somalia’s reconstruction.” (Ozdemir, 2015). On the other hand, the Turkish presence in Somalia has contributed to Ankara’s foreign policy toward Africa. President Erdogan pointed out that “Somalia has become a symbol of how we view Africa and of the brotherly relations we wish to establish with Africa,” (TCCB, 2016). According to Mehmet Özkan (2014) “Turkey’s involvement in Somalia has changed Turkey’s overall African policy from a trade and aid-centered one to one that is geared to becoming a problem-solver for the continent,” (Özkan, 2014).

In addition, Turkish Presidential Spokesman Ibrahim Kalin characterised Turkey’s Africa initiative not as interventionist but, rather, as a reflection of Ankara’s wider foreign policy vision. Kalin continued to explain that “in the era of neo-colonial tendencies in Africa, Turkey wants to deliver the ‘African solutions to African problems’ perspective to the continent.” (Kalin, 2015).

Turkish humanitarian diplomacy in Somalia has been praised and positively reported as “focused, efficient, effective and timely.” Turkish humanitarian organizations on the ground have contributed to this effectiveness by directly reaching out to different sections of the society and crossing limits to reach those most in need (Küçük, 2015). Mohamud Tarsan, Mogadishu’s former mayor, has assessed the effective and timely provision of the humanitarian assistance: “If I request computers from the UN, they will take months and require a number of assessments. They will spend $50,000 to give me $7,000 of equipment. If I request computers from Turkey, they will show up next week” he noted when he was asked about Turkish aid to Somalia (Westaway, 2013).

Turkey's Involvement in Somalia

Turkish Humanitarian and development assistance else-
where in Africa is also abundant. TİKA has significantly contributed to the efforts to fight the Ebola outbreak virus that ravaged West African countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Republic of Guinea (TİKA, 2015). Moreover, six of the top ten LCD (Least Developed Countries) recipients of the Turkish aid are SSA nations.

In addition to governmental agencies, such as TİKA, AFAD, Turkish Red Crescent and Diyanet, Turkey's aid operations in Africa are widely contributed to by its civil society and NGOs, including humanitarian organizations, that are viewed by as part of Ankara's soft power elements. Founded in 1992, the Turkish aid organization, İHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, has a growing influence in Africa. İHH has been active in SSA since 1996, undertaking humanitarian operations in a number of countries including Somalia and Ethiopia. Since then, İHH has launched development projects in different SSA countries such as the drilling of wells to provide clean water, and opening health centres (Ozkan & Akgun, 2010). Other Turkish NGOs have extensively engaged in development initiatives on the continent ranging from building schools, hospitals as well as establishing mosques and religious centres. In terms of education as development, Ankara has been proving scholarships and educational opportunities to undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students from Africa since 1992. The total number of African students who received Turkish scholarships in the academic year 2015-2016 is 1239, a significant rise in contrast with 4380 in total between years 1991-2014 (MFA, ibid). The number of African students in Turkey currently is 5437 with 116 visiting professors and research assistants.

Figure 7: Top Least Developed Recipients of Turkish Aid
Source: Turkish Development Assistance Report 2016
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Conclusion

Turkish engagement in Africa involves trade, development and state-building with a humanitarian aspect and a focus on human development. The foray into Sub-Saharan Africa can also be seen as an expression of Turkey’s wider desire to play a more active role on the world stage. Other factors guiding Turkey’s increasing engagement in Africa include Ankara’s increasingly elusive EU membership, shifting alliances in the MENA region, as well as the continent’s vast trade and economic potential. Turkey as an emerging power can serve as a model of economic and political development for Africa. Turkey’s lack of colonial history in SSA, its emphasis on equal partnership and its disinclination to create dependency relations will go a long way in generating enthusiasm among African leaders in embracing the Turkish model. Furthermore, some large political actors in Africa, such as China and the European powers, have recognized the growing Turkish influence in the continent. For example, in 2010, France proposed a collaboration with Turkey to create European trade missions in Africa that could act as a counterbalance to Chinese economic activity on the continent (Ozkan, 2010).

However, Ankara faces considerable challenges in establishing a viable presence in SSA. There is a gap of understanding on both sides. The first issue, as Ankara University’s Journal of African Studies explains plainly, is: “To the Turkish public, and particularly to Turkish intellectuals, Africa remains a great enigma, a dark continent full of obscurities. The current state of knowledge and of perspectives on Africa is very limited, poor and prejudiced.” Although Turkish involvement in SSA has increased during the past 15 years and Ankara is making efforts to address this gap, there is still room to improve such an endeavour. However, to continue expanding into SSA and consolidate its gains in the foreseeable future, Turkey has to strengthen the political and commercial links with Africa. Turkish policy-makers, as well as NGOs, should get an adequate understanding of the political and historical culture of Africa.

Furthermore, the FETO organization presents another challenge, which could hinder Turkey-Africa relations. The organisation pursues an anti-state agenda in many parts of the world where it still operates and many Africans unknowingly believe it represents Turkey’s official position. The group is affiliated with hundreds of schools and businesses across Africa. Although the Turkish government made recent efforts to curb FETO’s presence and influence in Africa, the group still operates schools and could negatively influence Turkish-Africa relations.

Another challenge relates to the sustainability and continuation of Turkey’s Africa policy. Following almost two decades of diplomatic activism in Africa, many analysts and observers argue that Turkey currently lacks a clear-cut strategy for the next stage of engagement with African states. Finally, Turkey’s domestic politics, particularly its current economic standing, pose an obstacle. After almost a decade of impressive growth, the Turkish economy experienced a downturn last year. In 2018, Turkish currency has slumped downward and inflation has increased. Without substantial economic improvement, budget cuts that could impact the conduct of foreign policy in Africa may be in the works.
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