

Turkey in Africa:

A Decade of Turkish Aid and State-Building in Somalia

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Over the past decade, Turkish engagement in Somalia has served bilateral relations well. Somalia benefits from Turkish aid projects to help avert famines and fuel its post-conflict reconstruction process. The next Somali administration will likely continue the current trajectory and Turkey will remain popular among Somalis for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, Somalia has profoundly impacted Turkey's profile as a middle power eager to increase its engagement with Africa. Somalia has become Turkey's gateway to Sub-Saharan Africa, creating new opportunities for Ankara's foreign policy in the region, and enhancing its status as a global actor.

Turkey's engagement in Somalia symbolises the country's growing footprint in Africa motivated by a desire to find new economic opportunities and Ankara's ambition to establish itself as a global player driven by an ['enterprising and humanitarian'](#) foreign policy. It has been a decade since then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan led a [delegation](#) to Somalia's capital Mogadishu as part of Turkish efforts to stave off a famine that claimed around a quarter-million lives. Since then, the Turkish state, as well as non-state actors, have undertaken a wide range of initiatives ranging from humanitarian projects, development aid, and post-conflict state-building in the war-torn African country.

To what extent Ankara's decade of aid and state-building in Somalia has been effective? To tackle this question, this policy outlook assesses three dimensions of Turkish engagement in Somalia: the initial humanitarian intervention, a wider assessment of the Turkish state-building efforts in Somalia, and an examination of the agency of Somali authorities in negotiating and shaping Turkish involvement in the country.



(Sadak Mohamed - Anadolu Agency)

Averting a humanitarian crisis

Relations between Somalia and Turkey date back to the [16th century](#) at the height of the Ottoman Empire, however, the current incarnation of the relationship came into being in 2011 during the crippling famine that devastated Somalia. A high-level delegation led by then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that consisted of four ministers, business executives and members of his family visited Mogadishu, the first non-African leader to do so in [almost 20 years](#). Although the visit was mostly symbolic, a way to negate the perception that Somalia

was [irreversibly insecure](#) and thus a no-go area, it ultimately led to the close relationship that Somalia and Turkey enjoy today.

During the 2011 visit, Erdoğan [announced](#) that Turkey would set up an embassy in Somalia to help distribute aid. The embassy would later (2016) open as Turkey's [largest embassy](#) in the world. Because of the famine, Turkey's intervention was initially purely humanitarian. At the time, Somalia was grappling with the worst drought in generations with the United Nations [declaring famine](#) in parts of the country for the first time since 1991-1992. At its worst, approximately 30,000 excess people [died](#) per month, an estimated 4.6% of the total population and 10% of children under five [died](#) in southern and central Somalia.

[Turkey's immediate action](#) to tackle the famine and avert a humanitarian crisis comprised sending hundreds of tonnes of emergency food aid, as well as setting up peacekeeping and capacity building programmes to help circumvent the crisis and put in place the infrastructure needed to sustain such support. Institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent), and Turkish Airlines sprang into action to support the effort, with the latter becoming the first international airliner to establish weekly direct flights to Somalia in over two decades. The Turkish Red Crescent, or Kızılay, put together a relief fund for Somalia, which helped finance the construction of hundreds of [shelters](#) in Mogadishu for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Working under the auspices of the Turkish embassy, TIKA was the key implementing body for official assistance to Somalia. As well as establishing four field hospitals to treat the malnourished and cholera patients manned by 92 doctors and 326 health personnel, [TIKA](#) provided tens of thousands of tons in medical materials and food.

The scars of the 20-year-old conflict were overwhelmingly visible in 2011. With poor infrastructure and lacking a functional airport or seaport, Turkey's assistance was significantly hindered. To remedy this, Turkey undertook immediate [actions](#) to renovate the Mogadishu seaport, reconstruct the airport, and rebuild the thoroughfare connecting the presidential palace to the city centre and beyond.

Turkey's efforts to alleviate the suffering reached unprecedented heights in the history of Turkish foreign aid and included simultaneous efforts by both the public and the state. The Turkish people reportedly donated US \$57 million while the state's donations amounted to US \$94 million. In a span of just a few months, Somalia

became Turkey's [fourth-largest](#) aid recipient. By August of 2011, around 500 Turkish aid workers and volunteers were present in Somalia to deliver humanitarian aid to IDP camps in Mogadishu. Turkey's humanitarian aid continued even after the [United Nations declared the famine over](#) in February of 2012. By then, Somalia was the second-largest recipient of emergency aid and the fifth-largest recipient of overall official aid. By 2012, Turkey's aid to Somalia was so substantial that it accounted for 30.5% of TIKA's budget.

Turkey envisages itself as a benevolent power. Unlike the 'paycheck diplomacy' favoured by rival powers, Ankara has chosen a more nuanced engagement strategy. As it draws a stark contrast to perceptions of failed [Western interventions past](#), Turkey's engagement in Somalia, part of Ankara's '[Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy](#)' is lauded by Somalis for its tangibility and its, ostensibly, no strings attached approach. Erdoğan's 2011 article in [Foreign Policy](#) in which he scolded the world by writing that "The tears that are now running from Somalia's golden sands into the Indian Ocean must stop. They should be replaced by hopeful voices of a country where people do not lose their lives because of starvation and where they express their eagerness to develop and restore peace and stability" certainly tugged at Somalis' collective heartstrings.

The 'Ankara Consensus' and post-conflict state building in Somalia

Turkey is an emerging donor that has a revived development assistance and a middle-power eager to claim a sphere of influence for itself in global politics. According to the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Turkey is an emerging donor with a new or recently revived aid system. Although emerging donors have different characteristics, they share certain qualities in the development landscape. These countries have recently, and quickly, transformed from aid recipients to aid donors, have young populations and growing economies, and rising international relevance.

Turkey has been one of the largest 20 economies globally since 2004 and has witnessed steady economic growth for over a decade. This has led the Turkish government to

expand its development cooperation initiatives. Furthermore, Ankara has raised its profile as a significant global humanitarian actor in the last decade. According to the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020, Turkey is the [second-largest humanitarian donor](#) after the US with over US \$8 billion spent in international humanitarian assistance. Since 2012, Turkey has been among the top five public donors of global humanitarian assistance. As discussed, Somalia remains one of the largest recipients of Turkish humanitarian aid. Beyond the development and humanitarian assistance, Turkey has invested in state-building projects in several countries with which it shares historical and cultural relations. These projects include security cooperation, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and mediation initiatives.

In Sub-Saharan Africa—a periphery that Turkey has developed extensive relations in the last couple of decades—a new paradigm of sustainable development, commonly known as 'the [Ankara consensus](#)', has rendered Turkey a unique non-traditional actor. As such, the Ankara consensus "is both an alternative approach to African sustainability problems and a useful political discourse to foster Turkish ambitions as an emerging global power." Turkey's involvement in Somalia has been one of the most striking signposts of this. Since Erdoğan's Mogadishu visit in August 2011, Ankara has carried out a multi-dimensional engagement with Somalia: It has delivered emergency aid to famine survivors, established a strong diplomatic presence on the ground, increased bilateral trade ties, and invested in stability and state-building projects. These include hosting international and regional summits on Somalia, brokering between local actors, training and equipping Somali security forces, and increasing bilateral trade and economic links with Somalia. The following sub-section discusses Turkey's Somalia engagement policy.

Making sense of Turkey's Somalia policy

Turkey's engagement in Somalia has been undertaken through a multifaceted approach encompassing political, developmental, humanitarian, and economic assistance and with the strong presence of many Turkish state and non-state actors (i.e. government institutions and agencies, non-governmental organisations, private sector companies, security and military officials, and local municipalities). As a result, Ankara's development and



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diplomatic initiatives in the country have been met with a [positive reception](#) inside and outside Somalia. After successfully mitigating the impact of the devastating famine in 2010-12, the Turkish government realised that humanitarian assistance alone would not address the collapse of the Somali state nor would it bring about sustainable peace and stability. Consequently, Ankara expanded its operations in the country to include state-building and trade characterised by a strong deployment of staff despite security risks. Soon after Erdoğan's visit, the Turkish embassy and a TIKa office were opened in Mogadishu, followed by a general consulate in Hargeisa. The Turkish flag carrier, Turkish Airlines, began daily flights to Mogadishu, and trade activities commenced as well as mediation initiatives between the Somali government and the breakaway Somaliland.

During Erdoğan's second and third visit to Somalia in 2015 and 2016 respectively, several bilateral agreements were signed and new projects were inaugurated, such as Turkey's largest diplomatic premises in Mogadishu as well as a large research and training hospital. Turkish companies secured contracts for the management and maintenance of the Somali government's largest sources of revenue: the Mogadishu airport and seaport. In 2017, Turkey opened its largest overseas base, a US \$50 military facility to support the rebuilding of the Somali security forces, in the Somali capital.

Additionally, Turkey became a popular destination for Somalis seeking education, health tourism, and business opportunities. There are currently an estimated 80,000-100,000 Somalis in Turkey with the majority of the students studying at different Turkish institutions, businessmen as well as Somali diaspora families relocating from the West, Middle East, and some parts of Africa. The following table summarises Turkey's multifaceted engagement in Somalia.

Agency and effectiveness in the engagement: NeST indicators

Turkey has differentiated itself from traditional actors in Somalia in its deference to the Somali government and a push for national ownership. This section is a brief assessment of how Turkey has delivered its aid and state-building efforts in Somalia based on the NeST indicators (Network of Southern Think Tanks), an analytical criterion developed by a group of research institutions from the developing world dedicated to generating knowledge about South-South Cooperation. First, Turkish engagement in Somalia features respect for national ownership and alignment with Somalia's own development plans as well as empowerment of national and local leadership. As the majority of Turkish projects in Somalia are demand-driven, meaning they were initiated by the recipient country's actors, the Turkish state, as well as non-state actors, usually work with the Somali authorities in project ideation, design and implementation. Unlike traditional donors, Turkey does not attach conditions to its development programmes in Somalia. The non-conditionality dimension has helped Turkey win hearts and minds while presenting itself as a reliable actor.

Another indicator is the deployment of an 'equal partnership' discourse by officials from the two countries when emphasising bilateral ties. This discourse helps boost national ownership by stressing the role of national and local authorities of the aid recipient through deciding on the type of assistance and managing its flow. On the donor side (i.e. Turkey), equal partnership indicates a horizontal relationship with the recipient country and carrying out aid projects only after local authorities greenlight them. The horizontal dimension benefits both sides: Somali authorities believe they have a partner who understands their national priorities. Turkish actors, including NGOs and businesses, have also benefited from this framework. Unlike some emerging donors whose engagements in Africa have been subject to criticism because of the prioritisation of their economic interests, the horizontality indicator also shields Turkey from strong criticisms regarding its involvement in Somalia.

Self-reliance and sustainability are important indicators in South-South Cooperation initiatives. Capacity building and knowledge transfer to prevent dependency remain

Turkey in Somalia: A snapshot of a decade of aid and state-building

Active Diplomacy

High-level visits	Ties with Somalia have been one of the defining features of the Turkish foreign policy towards Africa. In 2011, then Prime Minister Erdoğan became the first non-African leader to visit Somalia in almost two decades. Since then, he has visited the country twice and hosted his Somali counterparts in Turkey on several occasions. Most of these regular contacts took place during Erdoğan's second term as prime minister. Since 2011, successive Turkish foreign ministers have also embarked on tours to Somalia. These visits by high-level Turkish officials have resulted in numerous contracts awarded to Turkish firms operating in Somalia.
Summits on Somalia	Turkey has demonstrated its willingness to be active and visible in multilateral forums by hosting international conferences on Somalia since 2010. Notably, in 2011, Turkey hosted a meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, where 40 countries pledged \$350 million in aid to Somalia and also the High-Level Partnership Forum on Somalia in Istanbul in February 2016.
Diplomatic presence	In 2011, the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu was re-opened, followed by a consulate in Hargeisa. In 2016, Turkey inaugurated its largest embassy in Mogadishu.

Economic Ties

Bilateral trade and investment	Turkey-Somalia bilateral trade has been rising since 2012. While trade volume with Somalia was a reported \$187.3 million in 2018, the figure rose to \$250.8 million in 2019. The total value of Turkish FDI in Somalia has reached \$100 million.
Infrastructure development	Turkish companies have secured major infrastructure contracts in Somalia, including contracts to manage and provide maintenance to Mogadishu International Airport and Mogadishu Sea Port. Several Turkish construction companies already participate in several large-scale projects in the country, including the construction of two key highways connecting the capital Mogadishu to neighbouring Lower and Middle Shabelle regions.

State-building

Development cooperation	With an office in Mogadishu, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) provides capacity building services in various fields, including health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure development. Turkey is also active in Somalia through a number of other organisations, such as the Turkish Red Crescent, Maarif Foundation, and İHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation among others. By 2018, Turkey had spent a total of \$1 billion in assistance to Somalia.
Humanitarian aid	Since the devastating 2011 famine, Turkey has been providing emergency and humanitarian assistance to Somalia. Most recently, Somalia was among several African countries that received humanitarian aid and medical supplies to address the Covid-19 pandemic.
Education	The education sector remains a significant element of Turkish engagement in Somalia. Turkey offers generous scholarships to graduate and undergraduate students from Somalia to study in Turkish schools and universities. Turkey has also opened universities, schools, vocational training, and language centres in Somalia.
Mediation	Between 2012 and 2015, Turkey was the driving force of Somalia-Somaliland talks, hosting several rounds of talks between Somalia and Somaliland in Istanbul. In April 2013 Turkey brought the presidents of Somalia and Somaliland together in Ankara, which resulted in the signing of the Ankara Declaration.
Security	Turkey has prioritised security assistance in its Somalia policy, highlighting that Turkish officials believe security is essential to the post-conflict Somali state-building process. Since 2011, Turkey has been training Somali security forces both in Turkey and in Somalia. In 2017, Ankara opened its largest overseas military facility that trains thousands of Somali soldiers annually.

key features of the Turkish engagement in Somalia. As discussed in the previous section, Turkey provides education to thousands of Somali students at different levels of education and trains and equips the Somali security forces to help restore peace and stability to the country. As the Somali proverb goes 'Biyo sacabadaada looga oonbaxaa' (only your hands can sustainably quench your thirst). Turkey's focus on long-term development projects bears the hallmarks of self-sustainability and eventual equal diplomatic and economic partnership.

Another essential feature of Turkish assistance to Somalia is that the majority of the projects remain inclusive. At the national level, Turkish actors engage and consult with Somalia's national authorities while seeking the support of locals (e.g. regional governments, traditional elders, the private sector and local NGOs) during the implementation phase of projects. This inclusivity helps to increase local participation and ensures that certain communities are not excluded. Turkey's involvement in Somalia has been also praised for its development effectiveness in terms of the ability to adapt to local dynamics, complementarity with local priorities and plans, cost and time efficiency and policy coherence. All these factors have contributed to Turkey's Somalia engagement policy becoming a unique paradigm of state-building and have increased the agency of Somali actors.

However, the Turkish approach is not immune to challenges. In fact, Turkish activities in Somalia have been targeted by the Somalia-based Al Shabab terror group. The latter has previously called the Turkish government an enemy of Somalia because the NATO member allegedly supported the Western alliance's operations. Over the past decade, Al Shabab has targeted Turkish projects and killed several Turkish nationals.

In 2015, for instance, Al Shabab attacked a hotel where the Turkish delegation stayed in Mogadishu a day before a visit by President Erdogan to the Somali capital. Although Al Shabab opposes the international community support for the Somali government, this group seems particularly irritated by the Turkish projects. By providing multiple services to the population, these projects affect Al Shabab's conspiratorial worldview and the group's ability to recruit the most disaffected fringes of society. For these reasons, Al Shabab would continue to pose a principal security challenge to the Turkish involvement in Somalia in the foreseeable future.

What lies ahead?

Over the past decade, Turkish engagement in Somalia has served bilateral relations well. On one hand, Somalia benefits from Turkish aid projects to help avert famines and fuel its post-conflict reconstruction process. Although initial ties were developed during the transitional federal government of Somalia, the last two Somali administrations of Presidents Hassan Sheikh and Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo have each sought to deepen ties with Turkey. Likewise, the upcoming Somali administration will likely continue the current trajectory and Turkey will remain popular among Somalis in and outside of the country for the foreseeable future.

Somalia has become Turkey's gateway to Sub-Saharan Africa, with which Ankara seeks to develop closer ties as part of its foreign policy push to achieve the status of global actor. It also fits into the Turkish international development approach of channelling aid to conflict-ridden zones and state-building in fragile contexts. Unlike other parts of Africa where Turkey faces challenges from extra-regional actors, such as France in West Africa, Turkey would be able to continue to cultivate ties with Somalia and the rest of Horn/East African countries without challenging traditional actors. For example, Turkey [contributes forces](#) to the Combined Task Force to Combat Piracy, an international anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden off the eastern coast of Somalia. Ankara's training of Somali security forces as well as its [support](#) for African Union peacekeeping mission in Somalia also aligns with the agenda of other major global actors (e.g. the U.S., UK and the UN) of addressing the security threat posed by the Al-Shabaab insurgency and Daesh/ISIS terrorism.

However, a significant area to watch in the next few years vis-a-vis Turkish engagement in Somalia is the domestic situation in Turkey. An impressive economic growth between 2000 and 2010 has underpinned Turkey's Africa policy to date, and its Somalia forays in particular. However, since 2013 several developments hindered Turkey's ambitious foreign policy. These include the instability and the rise of non-state actors in neighbouring Syria, the 2016 failed coup attempt as well as the ongoing currency and debt crisis, characterised by a weak lira, rising inflation, and rising debt. The Coronavirus pandemic has further exacerbated these vulnerabilities by affecting the tourism sector and slowing economic growth. Although not posing an immediate challenge to Turkish foreign policy towards Africa, these domestic political and economic realities stand to potentially limit Turkish activities in Somalia.



Conclusion

In 2011, Turkey undertook the largest humanitarian operation in the history of the Turkish Republic. Following the initial humanitarian intervention to alleviate the impacts of the devastating 2011 famine, Turkey channelled its aid programmes into development and state-building projects. It has established a strong diplomatic presence on the ground, increased bilateral trade ties, mediated between the Somali government and the breakaway Somaliland, and trained and equipped Somali security forces. Turkish engagement in Somalia has been multi-faceted, encompassing Turkish state institutions, NGOs and the private sector.

At the other end of the spectrum, Somalis found a willing middle-income partner that is democratic and, as a NATO member, has strong institutional ties to the West. In its engagement with Somalia, Ankara has distinguished itself from other global and regional actors by deploying staff to the field regardless of the security challenges, the non-conditionality of its assistance and support for national ownership and local leadership, as well as its presence in both the business and security sectors.

Turkey's visibility in Somalia is in fact part of President Erdoğan's desire to enhance [Turkey's influence](#) around the globe. Without dismissing the humanitarian elements in Turkey's engagement, it is important to understand that Turkey also sees Somalia as part of a "strategy for enhancing the economic and commercial relations with Africa" that was first [adopted](#) right after the AK Party came to power in 2003 and later took shape in 2005's 'Open to Africa Policy' initiative. The AK Party's first two decades in power saw the trade volume between Turkey and Africa significantly increase from US \$5.4 billion in 2003 to US \$25.3 billion by 2020. For these reasons, it could be asserted that Turkey's involvement in Somalia has expended through time from a humanitarian act to a holistic and multifaceted political, economic, and diplomatic endeavour that has ultimately enhanced Ankara's capital at the world stage.