

Turkey-Africa Cooperation In The 21st Century

The face and fate of Africa are changing fast in the 21st century. African demography is expanding and so are the size of the African market and middle class, parallel to the continent's demographic rise. In this regard, the global pejorative perception towards Africa has been changing in a more positive way in the recent period. As a neighboring country, Turkey now definitely demands to strengthen its influence in the continent. Expecting to play a more active role on the global stage, Turkey sees important cooperation potential and opportunities in Africa.

Surely nowadays we are witnessing quite dynamic and intense interaction between Turkey and Africa. Turkey is more visible in Africa and Africa takes a unique place in Turkey's multi-dimensional proactive foreign policy. Turkey is seeking to increase its influence in the continent by using the channels of diplomacy, trade, investment, education, health, security-military cooperation along with culture and history.[i] On the other hand, Africa is now more visible in Turkey, especially in Istanbul where African business people, students, tourists, and immigrants from African countries storm Turkey.

Turkey's Presence in Africa

It is very crucial to underline that Turkey is not a country following its own agenda or imposing its own baggage to African countries. As a *strategic partner* to the African Union since 2008, Turkey's approach to Africa is framed by mutual declarations accepted in two Turkey-Africa Summits. Therefore, Turkey is advancing in Africa according to Joint Implementation Plans accepted and signed by parties during the summits.

Officially, Turkey's Africa policy can be divided into two stages: in the first stage starting in 2005 Turkey implemented the *Africa Initiative Policies* to introduce itself to the continent. In the second stage, which is after 2014, Turkey aimed to strengthen its institutions and partnership in Africa through the *Africa Partnership Policies*.[\[ii\]](#)

If we put the Ottoman period away, Turkey's modern engagement with Africa basically started in 2005. Turkey declared 2005 as "the year of Africa". Since that date, we have been witnessing Turkey's diplomatic venture in the continent because according to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, relations with Africa constitute one of the key FP objectives hence the ministry has been opening new diplomatic missions to enhance Turkey's relations with the continent. Today, Turkey is represented by 42 active embassies across Africa when it only had 12 two decades ago.

Turkey was accorded observer member to the African Union in 2005 and later it became a strategic partner to Africa. In 2008 Turkey for the first time organized the Turkey-Africa Summit in Istanbul. Later the second summit was held in Equatorial Guinea's capital Malabo in 2014. Moreover, Turkish President Erdogan visited more than 30 different African countries during his term, including war-torn Somalia a couple of times. This is obviously a record for a non-African leader.[\[iii\]](#) Today, Turkish Airlines is flying 60 destinations across the continent.

Development and humanitarian affairs are essential pillars of Turkey's presence in the continent because there is a big development gap between Africa and the rest of the world. For example, acquiring clean water and electricity is still a big matter for millions of African people. In this regard, Turkey pays special attention to development projects in the continent. Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has coordination offices in 22 African countries. And Turkish non-governmental civil society organizations are very active as development and humanitarian aid providers.

Turkey's support for African development can be well traced by the Somalia case. Turkey's largest military training center and largest embassy compound are located in Somalia's capital Mogadishu. And Turkish companies manage Mogadishu's main sea and airport, generating 80% of Somalia's government revenue.[\[iv\]](#) Turkish Armed Forces train Somali National Army in Mogadishu and Turkey. Together, the Turkey and Somalia Ministries of Health run the biggest hospital complex in the Horn of Africa, named Erdogan Training and Research Hospital.

Similarly, Turkey and Sudan Ministries of Health run together a regional hospital complex in Sudan's Darfur region which was also constructed by TİKA. Mitiga Military Hospital in Libya's capital Tripoli run by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) is also another example showing Turkey's health diplomacy in the continent.^[v]

Economic cooperation is also taking high priority for Turkey. Turkey has 45 Business Councils in the African continent in order to promote bilateral trades and mutual investment. Total trade volume with the African continent has expanded from 3 billion dollars in 2003 to 26 billion dollars in 2020. And Turkey's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa is closing to 10 billion dollars.

Student affairs have become a considerable component of Turkey's support to African youth development. Through the state-run Maarif Foundation, Turkey runs many Turkish schools in the continent on top of granting scholarships to African students for higher education, masters, and PhDs. According to open sources, approximately 15.000 African students have obtained scholarships from Turkey since 1992.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey continues to support Africa by sending fleets of planes carrying medical items to various countries in the continent such as South Africa, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia, Rwanda, Eswatini, Zambia, Angola, and South Sudan among others.^[vi]

At the end of the day, Turkey's presence in Africa seems to be winning hearts and minds because Turkey-Africa interaction is developing reciprocally. Therefore, we cannot think it in one direction. Although Turkey's presence in Africa is becoming more visible, the African presence in Turkey is also drawing attention nowadays. For instance, approximately 40 African states have embassies in Ankara and thousands of African students study in Turkey. Africans now prefer Turkey as a new destination for work, education, trade, and investment or tourism. Somalian, Sudanese, Egyptian, Tunisian, Senegalese, and even Nigerian communities grow day by day within Turkey.

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[i] Burak Unveren, "Turkey seeks to strengthen Africa relations with 'benevolence'", *DW*, 04.02.2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-seeks-to-strengthen-africa-relations-with-benevolence/a-56452857>

[ii] MFA, "Turkey-Africa Relations", <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-africa-relations.en.mfa>

[iii] Asya Akca, "Neo-Ottomanism: Turkey's foreign policy approach to Africa", *CSIS*, <https://www.csis.org/neo-ottomanism-turkeys-foreign-policy-approach-africa>

[iv] Mahad Wasuge, *Turkey's Assistance Model in Somalia: Achieving Much With Little*, The Heritage Institute, 2016, p. 18

[v] Mucahit Aydemir, "Turkish Hospital in Libya serves security forces 7/24", *AA*, 26.12.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkish-hospital-in-libya-serves-security-forces-24-7/2089589>

[vi] Hassan Isilow, "Turkey's help combating COVID-19 in Africa", *AA*, 30.12.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkey-s-help-combating-covid-19-in-africa/2092981>