

## **Turkish Expansionism in Africa: From Ambition to Retreat amid an Unstable Geopolitical Landscape**

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**Abstract:** This study questions Turkey's expansionist ambition in Africa, with a particular focus on the rise and decline of Turkish influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. By questioning the efficiency of Ankara's foreign policy in Africa, the study investigates how Turkey's diplomatic tools shape opinions, influence political decisions, and foster empathy throughout the African continent. In terms of methodology, an ethnographic study design and a narrative research approach have been used, incorporating primary data from participant observation, ground research and in-depth interviews, and secondary data obtained from documentary analysis. In doing so, the current research scrutinizes the emergence and setback of Turkish foreign policy within the broader context of global politics to give a comprehensive picture of the shifting dynamics between Turkey and its African partners. From the critical thinking standpoint, the paper assesses the inadequacies of Turkey's anti-Western narrative employed in Africa, before discussing the failures of its 'apparent soft power' attempts.

**Keywords:** African affairs, Foreign policy, Power, Turkey, Sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Introduction**

In terms of appeal, the African continent continuously engages in more active participation in the international system and assumes a larger position on the global arena, which aids in attracting new foreign powers. The fast developing continent has attracted a lot of new nations in recent years because of its economic and commercial potential as well as its geopolitical significance. In the early 2000s, Turkey manifested a noticeable enthusiasm for African affairs. Hence, the country has expanded its bilateral engagement with 44 African nations during the past two decades. President Erdogan's recent commitment to be a mediator in the pacification of the crisis between Somalia and Ethiopia, and the diplomatic tensions between Sudan and the United Arab Emirates, as well as the conflict between Congo and Rwanda, testifies of the importance of the continent for Turkey.

In contrast to the former Western colonial powers like France, Belgium, England, and others, as well as some more recent rivals like China and Russia, Turkey, with a more modest profile, speaks to African nations in an appealing way that seems to prioritize a sort of "win-win partnership" with its African counterparts. Therefore, by asserting that Turkey has "no stain of imperialism" or colonialism, the Turkish president supposedly declares an "anti-imperialist" stance in Africa (DEIK, 2024). Accordingly, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is presented in Africa as a new, strong leader who has no colonial history and is a genuine threat to Western imperialist adversaries.

Because Turkey has no colonial past in Africa, Ankara is seen by some African politics as an ideal partner. As a result, Turkey enjoyed a favorable reputation across the continent, which made it easier to conquer the hearts and minds of number of African decision-makers. In 1998,

Turkey decided to start “a policy of openness to Africa,” which was then materialized in the 2000s. Despite having a strong military posture, Turkey developed a new anti-western discourse combined with a diplomatic approach to promote its soft power in Africa. Today, Ankara is still committed to strengthening and expanding its political, economic, commercial, and cultural ties with African countries in order to successfully implement its enthusiastic openness strategy. Yet, as I will discuss later, there are several internal and external factors that do not work in favor of Turkey’s expansionist ambitions.

In order to combat the Western information war, Turkish news agency, known as Anadolu Agency, established its first African representative office in Ethiopia in 2014. A group of Turkish businessmen later created Natural TV in 2017 with the goal of reaching over five million viewers in 22 African nations by airing in both French and English. Similarly, in 2017, Hausa, an African language spoken by 45 million people in West and Central Africa, was used by Turkish public global broadcasting Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). Three years later, in 2020, TRT began using the 145 million-speaker Swahili language in its broadcasts.

Additionally, TRT established “TRT Français”, a French-language news platform, in April 2022. The platform's target audience is specifically French-speaking African nations (Author, 2024). The “TRT Afrika” platform was also launched the following year, in March 2023 (Ibid, 2024). These two sites’ editorial policies are designed to provide their African audience with a different story to convey Turkish narrative across the continent. The primary goal is to purposefully compete with Western international broadcasting channels that operate in Africa.

Non-Western players’ involvement on the African continent has actually increased dramatically in recent years, leading observers to question whether this renewed interest from outside forces represents a “new scramble for Africa” and, if so, what that would entail for African nations (Davutoglu, 2018). In order to ascertain Africa’s position in world politics, it is imperative to assess the dynamics of the bilateral ties that African governments forge with newly emerging nations. This academic study looks at Turkey’s attempts to strengthen ties with African nations, but encounters certain challenges because of its unusual model and the quickly changing geopolitical environment.

As a matter of fact, the study explores the emergence and setback of Turkey’s interactions with African nations. This aids in evaluating how Turkish soft power affects diplomatic, economic, educational, and cultural ties as well as the other public diplomacy activities that Ankara carries out in Africa. The critical analysis concludes by questioning the efficiency of Turkey’s expansionist commitment in completion with Western countries on the African continent.

The following lines focus on the research background which gives a holistic comprehension of the study’s contours.

## **Research Background**

Turkey’s expansionist ambition in Africa is fueled by the apparent triumph of its soft power. Joseph S. Nye, one of the most eminent professors of international relations, introduced the concept of “soft power” in his book “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power”, published in 1990. He defined soft power as “the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without resorting to force or coercion” (Nye, 1990). Indeed, Nye created the concept of soft power in response to the argument that American influence had already begun to decline since the 1970s. The scholar argues that the soft power of the United States is the main source of its hegemonic force. Subsequently, a nation’s soft power, reinforced by public diplomacy, is essential in bilateral cooperation today. Seen under the prism of soft power, Turkey successfully conveys its anti-Western narrative across the African continent.

In 2018, Anadolu Agency published a book titled “Africa Rising,” which offers an in-depth analysis of Turkey’s new relations with Sub-Saharan African countries. The publication of such a book is strategic, as the book seeks to explain why, despite the presence of abundant natural resources such as uranium, oil, diamonds, and gold, African countries have failed to prosper. The

authors conclude that “colonial legacies, including political unrest due to Western influence, civil wars, distant governance, corruption, and lack of democracy” are the ills that are holding back Africa’s development (Anadolu Agency et al., 2018). This “anti-colonial” or “anti-Western” narrative is purposefully made to oust Western partners from Africa. To push this type of narrative, Turkey recently launched three transnational channels – namely Natural TV, TRT Français, and TRT Afrika, respectively in 2017, 2022 and 2023 – to compete with Western media on the continent (Author, 2024).

Thereto, Turkey has been enhancing its position and visibility on the international stage, notably in Africa, by using its apparent soft power launched in 1998. In fact, Turkey’s involvement with African countries can be linked to its efforts to broaden its international links and look for new business prospects to compete with Western powers. In recent years, Turkish companies have been actively engaged in infrastructure projects, construction, and industrialization across the continent as the Turkish government has focused on boosting trade and investment with African countries (Le Cam, 2021).

One of the most important aspects of the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) regime is the diversification of Turkish foreign policy (Sıradağ, 2022). In this context, Turkey has elevated its strategic connections at the highest level with the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, Russia, Iran, and China (Kalin, 2011). To regain Turkey's soft power in the international arena, the AKP-led government has reinforced the country's long-standing foreign policy institutions and created new ones. Turkey has now 239 diplomatic posts worldwide, up from only 163 in 2002 (Sıradağ, 2022).

One of the primary organizations bolstering Turkey's soft power since its establishment under the Office of Prime Minister in 2010 was the Office of Public Diplomacy. In 2018, this Office was renamed as the Directorate of Communications and established under the Republic of Turkey's Presidency. Coordinating links between public agencies, strengthening ties between state agencies and non-governmental organizations, and elucidating Turkey's evolving global position were the primary goals of the Department of Culture which is a section of the Office of Public Diplomacy (Kalin, 2011). The Department of Culture has arranged a variety of events, including conferences, public policy panels, workshops on foreign policy, youth programs, national gatherings, international business summits, programs for journalist delegations, cultural and promotional events, etc. (Sıradağ, 2022).

The “Turkey-Africa Media Summit” was arranged by the Directorate of Communications and took place in Istanbul on May 25-26, 2022. This event was attended by media professionals and decision-makers from 45 African nations. The Organization Committee welcomed several African academics, non-governmental organization officials, ambassadors, and 80 journalists from both private and public media organizations. The summit's objectives were to enhance media collaboration between Turkish and African media professionals and improve Turkey's standing on the continent's media landscape. Through its soft power strategy in Africa, Turkey hopes to further solidify its geostrategic presence on the continent.

In fact, Africa's strategic importance to global and regional actors in the twenty-first century is largely attributed to its advantageous geopolitical position, youthful and active population, and the abundance of both surface and subsurface natural resources. This is what makes the continent attractive to foreign powers like Turkey, China, and Russia that are tirelessly implementing various initiatives in order to subjugate African nations. Thus, after the demise of most of Western allies in Africa, these non-Western actors are making their move to attract African policymakers. When the AKP took office in 2002, Turkish foreign policy underwent a dramatic transformation in order to fit African ideals. Since then, Turkey's foreign policy has given special consideration to the African continent. As a result, at the 2008 African Union Summit, Turkey was acknowledged as the continent's strategic partner.

Therefore, conducting a scientific research on the emergence and setback of Turkey's expansionist ambition in Africa is more than an academic necessity. Thus, the research methodology in the following paragraphs will help demystifying the hidden enigma.

### **Research Methodology**

This study's geographic focus is Turkey and Sub-Saharan Africa. As such, it is an exploratory study that blends narrative and ethnographic research methodologies. In other words, this investigative study is basically a case study that involves a thorough examination of the rise and decline of Turkey's foreign policy in Africa. Therefore, the qualitative research approach was employed to conduct the study. In fact, by gathering expert opinions and analysis on the research questions, the collected qualitative data enabled an exhaustive explanation of the occurrences.

According to Creswell (2009), phenomenology, ethnography, case studies, and narrative research all employ this kind of method. As a result, the qualitative research approach offers thorough and accurate data on how people feel about a problem or how a phenomenon operates. It aims to provide answers to the questions of how and why a phenomenon operates in a particular way or why individuals act in a particular way. Hence, in the current study it was important to move on with participant observation-based opinions, interviews, documentary analysis, and personal experiences as part of the data collection methods. As a matter of fact, the interviews were done with key political actors involved in Turkey-Africa bilateral cooperation process, including resource persons, political leaders, and geopolitical experts, as well as members of the target audience (Turkish and African businesspeople, decision makers and diplomats from both parties), political analysts, activists, and international relations critics.

Therefore, gathering critical information from participant observation and qualitative data from field research with the target public allowed conducting the analyses and interpretations of the findings in an objective manner. The research purposes elaborated below provide further information about this factual scenario. Thus, the current study which follows several objectives aims, among others, to:

- (i) show the pros and cons of Turkey's foreign policy and expansionist agenda in Africa;
- (ii) shed light on how Turkish narrative affects views, influences policy choices, and promotes a favorable perception of Turkey on the African continent;
- (iii) reveal the hidden agenda of Turkey's public diplomacy initiatives in Africa.

This will be accomplished by closely examining the numerous public diplomacy and soft power measures that Turkey has used in Africa, as well as the historical development of Turkish political engagement with African nations. The sub-purposes then include evaluating the influence of Turkish soft power on the fronts of diplomacy, the economy, and culture. In the end, the Turkish model's advantages and disadvantages will be carefully evaluated within a larger global framework.

As a reminder, this scholarly study adheres to a strict ethnographic and narrative research technique. Therefore, the qualitative research design has been applied to this work. Since the research encompasses participant observation data, Max Weber (1949) serves as a reminder of the importance of implementing "axiological neutrality" in scientific investigations. This suggests that in order to minimize biases, researchers should distance themselves from their own value judgments when conducting epistemological studies. The only way to achieve the "value-relevance" of scientific information, which is primarily dependent on "value-neutrality," is to address the problem through "axiological neutrality" principle (Weber, 1949). In fact, according to Weberian social action theory, all human actions are subjective to the extent that they are based on human behavior.

Formal and substantial rationality are the two categories of axiological rationalities that Weber identified. When interpreting data, this qualitative research employed substantial rationality, which takes social, religious, traditional, and cultural values into account. Actually, this

investigation adheres to the fundamentals of substantial rationality which greatly raised the research's level of scientific interest.

Before delving deeply into details of the research problematic, the notions of ideology and hegemonic domination must be critically examined in order to understand the ideological approach that the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) administration created within Turkish foreign policy to deal with African issues.

### **Ideology and Hegemonic Domination**

As John Fiske claimed in 1990, "communication is a social process and must therefore be ideological" (Fiske, 1990: P.176). For Marxist theorists, ideology is a straightforward concept. This supposes that the ideas of the dominant societies are considered by the inferior societies (the lower class) as normal and natural.

Regarding its new foreign policy, Turkey is engaged in vertical, not horizontal, bilateral relations with African countries. Thus, the subordinated societies cannot but accept the vertical domination as something normal and natural with a sort of "false consciousness" (Marx & Engels, 1848). Indeed, according to Carl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848), the ideology of the bourgeoisie (the ruling class) operated to keep the proletariat (the working class) in a state of "passive obedience, a false consciousness" (Ibid, 1848). The notion of 'false consciousness' was so crucial for understanding Marxist theory because it appeared to clarify why most people in capitalist societies put up with a social structure that was detrimental to them.

Arguing on the notion of hegemony elaborated by Antonio Gramsci in 1947, John Fiske (1990) claimed that ideology always works to maintain exploitation and class domination. In more elaborated terms, he put it as it follows:

Hegemony is necessary, and has to work so hard, because the social experience of subordinated groups (whether by class, gender, race, age, or other factor) constantly contradicts the picture that the dominant ideology paints for them of themselves and their social relations. In other words, the dominant ideology constantly meets resistances that it has to overcome in order to win people's consent to the social order that it is promoting. These resistances may be overcome, but they are never eliminated. So any hegemonic victory, any consent that it wins, is necessarily unstable; it can never be taken for granted, so it has to be constantly rewon and struggled over (Fiske, 1990: P.176).

Antonio Gramsci, one of the key authors of the notion of ideology, considered hegemony as a struggle and defined it as "the winning and (re)winning of the consent of the majority to a system that subordinates them" (Gramsci, 1947). This, argued Gramsci, entails "resistance and instability" in the class struggle (Ibid, 1947). According to John Fiske, however, one of the vital strategies of hegemony is "the construction of common sense", which consists in cultivating "false consciousness" (Fiske, 1990). In consequence, the fundamental element of hegemonic strategy becomes the construction of what Marx and Engels termed "the manufacture of the common sense" (Marx & Engels, 1848). This consists in making the dominated majority – the less-developed African nations in the context of the current study – cultivate the "common sense" (Ibid, 1848).

Furthermore, ideological theories emphasize that all forms of communication and their meanings are sociopolitical in nature and cannot be comprehended in isolation from this social framework. As a matter of fact, in the discussions about commodification in capitalist societies, Marxist theories put focus not only on mass production and distribution of goods and services, but also on the creation and dissemination of ideas and meanings. In this logic, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels – in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) – argued that ideology works in such a way that it makes it possible to maintain the class domination by creating the "false consciousness" and ultimately reaching what Antonio Gramsci called the "hegemonic victory" (Marx & Engels, 1848; Gramsci, 1947).

As the Hollywood star Denzel Washington put it in *The Great Debaters* (2007), this consists in “keeping the slaves physically strong, but mentally weak, dependent on the slave master; keeping the body but taking the mind”<sup>1</sup>. As a result, argued Herbert Marcuse, capitalism [i.e. human exploitation] will survive in almost all the world and we will witness a “one dimensional society” (Marcuse, 1969). The idea of false consciousness, vertical domination and hegemony worked so perfectly in most African colonized countries which still function under the roots of both post-colonial legacy and neocolonial principles.

Before discussing Turkey’s expansionist agenda in Africa, the following lines will elucidate the theoretical framework that served as the cornerstone of the current study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The emergence and decline of Turkish expansionism in Africa can be thoroughly examined using a variety of social theories. Thus, among other theories, the critical thinking theory has been applied to the current research.

The critical thinking theory was developed by some scholars – such as Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, etc. – of Frankfurt School in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These researchers focused especially on the criticism of the modern capitalist society, the definition of social emancipation and the critique of perceived social pathologies. In this regards, Marxist central notions such as commodification, reification, fetishism, and mass culture have been thoroughly discussed.

Thus, the ability to question, acknowledge, and test preconceived notions, recognize ambiguity, examine, interpret, evaluate, reason, and reflect, make informed decisions, and articulate, justify, and clarify positions are all considered aspects of critical thinking process (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947; Gramsci, 1947; Marcuse, 1969; Honneth, 1987). The process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information obtained from, or generated by, participant observation, personal experience, critical reflection and reasoning, etc. is precisely what is meant to be understood as critical thinking.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1947), critical thinking can be grounded in universally intellectual ideals that cut beyond subject matter boundaries. These values include clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, tangible evidence, good arguments, depth, breadth, and fairness. Examining the implicit mental structures or components that underlie all reasoning is necessary. These include the purpose, problem or question at hand, assumptions, concepts, and empirical foundation; reasoning that leads to conclusions, implications, and consequences; objections from opposing viewpoints; and frame of reference. A family of interconnected modes of thinking, including scientific, historical, anthropological, economic, moral, and philosophical thinking, comprises the theory of critical thinking because it is flexible in its approach to various subjects, problems, and goals.

Contextually speaking, the critical thinking theory helped to shed light on the hidden agenda and the hegemonic ambition of Turkey’s foreign policy in Africa. This stratagem is made up of Francophobe rhetoric, anti-colonial discourse, and anti-Western narrative, as well as the use of historical and religious identity, and a battery of public diplomacy to nurture superficial soft power mechanisms.

Yet, in this process it is worth taking into account the existence of other external factors. The following lines will give more clarifications on Turkey’s expansionist agenda in Africa amid tumultuous relations between France and African countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Denzel Washington (2007). *The Great Debaters*: Podcast & Transcript available online at: <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/17640535>.

## **Turkish Expansionism amid Tumultuous France-Africa Relations**

Most of West African francophone countries got their independence from France in the 1960s. As the perception of France among her former colonies in Africa is further damaged, numerous of French former colonies are attempting to broaden their alliances with other international players, including China, Russia, and Turkey. Yet, France does not seem to be jubilant about this new openness policy. President Emmanuel Macron has become irritated with the anti-French sentiment that is spreading throughout Africa. Hence, during the annual conference of French ambassadors held in early September 2022, he called on the French transnational media to be “more active” in combating hate speech against France in Africa. The French head of state portrays France in his address as the primary cause of the unrest that permeates several African nations.

As of 2020, among youth from various African nations, 58% of Togolese, 60% of Malians, 68% of Senegalese, and 71% of Gabonese had a negative opinion of France, according to a survey conducted by the *Ichikowitz Family Foundation*, a South Africa-based charity institution. This attitude of insubordination vis-à-vis France frequently takes the form of hate speech, parodies, and disparaging pictures that harshly condemn and denigrate the French presence on the continent.

As an illustration, during the protests held in a number of African countries, including the Central African Republic in 2013, Senegal in 2015, Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2021, and most recently Niger in 2023, demonstrators chanted phrases like “Down with France!”, “France, get out!”, “We need Russia,” and so on. These degenerate “anti-imperialist” protests in certain African nations have been known to cause great financial losses for French corporations, such as Auchan, Areva, Total, Bolloré, and many others, which are frequently charged as being neo-colonialist enterprises. According to these youthful demonstrators, France is the primary target to be blamed for their difficult circumstances, which are marked by chronic unemployment and unbearable underdevelopment.

Nonetheless, France’s long-standing political, economic, and military dominance is surely to blame for this anti-French sentiment. In fact, France is occasionally charged with building French military bases in sovereign states, frequently in an oppressive manner, and with aiding and abetting African dictators. For instance, in November 2022, demonstrators in Kaya, northern Burkina Faso, blocked a French military convoy that was traveling to Niger. They demanded to know what was inside the vehicle, claiming it included food and weapons that would be used to supply the terrorists in Sahel region.

Similar to this, French diplomatic and cultural representations were targeted during the protests that followed Burkina Faso's second putsch on September 30, 2022, both in Bobo-Dioulasso, the country's second-biggest city, and Ouagadougou, its capital. Numerous demonstrators set fire to the diplomatic enclave building and vandalized the two French cultural centers. Even more recently, demonstrators defaced the French embassy after the Nigerien army's coup in July 2023. The latter demanded that French forces withdraw from the Sahel immediately and that military cooperation with Russia and Turkey be strengthened by waving Turkish and Russian flags.

In such a context, it is necessary to reform France’s foreign policy in Africa.

### **The Necessity of Reframing France's Relationship with African Countries**

The conditions of France’s involvement in Africa need to be reviewed by French authorities. In the last three years, France’s bilateral relations with her former colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa appear to be faltering. Following the change in their cooperation policy, seven Sub-Saharan African countries including Mali, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Niger, Chad, Senegal, and Cote d’Ivoire recently demanded the withdrawal of French troops from their territories.

When confronted by African youth, President Emmanuelle Macron had previously declared his intention to form an equal partnership with African states. He claimed that he does not “belong to the generation of colonizers, and believes that the French are the ones who are having the

hardest time moving on” (Le Monde, 2023). For President Macron, French people and Africans “have to start building a shared future” altogether (Ibid, 2023).

As other former colonizing nations like Belgium, England, Italy or Portugal do, France might profit from being far more discrete on the African continent rather than always moaning about the anti-French narrative created and nurtured by foreign competitors like Turkey and Russia. It is quite unlikely that a nation like France, which was engaged in slavery, colonization, and a protracted process of decolonization, will receive special “adulation and praises” from the colonized peoples. Up to the tragic genocide in Rwanda, France used cooperation agreements or more or less constrained defense agreements to militarily interfere in numerous wars during the post-colonial era and the long-drawn-out Cold War.

Influencers and critics from all over the African continent, including Kemi Seba, Prof. Franklin Nyamsi, and Nathalie Yamb, etc. just to name a very few, are becoming more and more prevalent and critic about the relations between France and Francophone African countries. They express themselves through social media in particular, rebuking French foreign policy in Africa. This ideology is reminiscent of Ankara’s attempts to promote its geopolitical trajectories through Africa. In this logic, Turkey recently engaged in developing public diplomacy mechanisms on the continent.

### **The Impact of Public Diplomacy in Turkey-Africa Relations**

The key element of the idea of soft power is public diplomacy. The definition of public diplomacy is a strategy for building enduring and trustful connections with foreign nations. Through public diplomacy, international actors seek to establish a favourable framework for implementing their foreign policy goals with other strategically significant nations (Nye, 2004). Thus, establishing international seminars, forums, and conferences, offering scholarships to students from other nations, and coordinating academic exchange programs are all essential to building a nation's soft power. Turkey went through all this process to conquer Africans’ minds and hearts (Siradag, 2022). Apart of its military actions in Libya, Turkey does not employ coercion to fortify its strategic alliances with African nations; but it uses its cultural, economic, and political might to influence African businesspeople and decision-makers.

In the current information society, the hegemonic battle in international relations affects the media landscape. To further disseminate their foreign policy goals and ideals, Turkey has also developed a media strategy after building its own news agencies, TV channels, cultural and educational institutions in a dozen of African countries. The fact that TRT Afrika, TRT Francais, Natural TV, and Anadolu Agency, have made African news and developments more widely featured in Turkish media, together with other factors, has played a major role in changing Turkish perceptions of Africa. This is not to mention the influence of Turkish soap opera which are being watched in more than 20 African countries.

In addition, collaborating with businesses and non-governmental organizations is essential to enhancing a nation's soft power (Nye, 2004). Through TIKA and Yunus Emre Cultural Centers, Turkey played a significant role in promoting its culture in Africa (Author, 2024). Turkey's emergence as a prominent soft power player in Africa can be attributed to its similar cultural and religious values with number of African nations, as well as its absence of historical occupation (i.e. colonization) on the continent, as mentioned earlier.

Turkey's cultural depths, both geographically and historically, shape the country's new foreign policy identity. Eight of the 58 nations where Yunus Emre Institute (YEI) has established its cultural centers are in Africa. In the near future, YEI intends to open new cultural centers in five more Sub-Saharan African countries including Mozambique, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria (Siradag, 2022). Since 2018, three Ethiopian universities have offered Turkish language instruction as an elective course. Additionally, YEI has been offering Turkish courses at Senegal's Cheikh Anta Diop University since 2016. Also, YEI and the Department of Chief of

Staff inked a protocol in 2018 for the establishment of a Turkish Language Teaching Center within the Senegalese Army (Ibid, 2022).

Moreover, in the sector of transportation, Turkish Airlines (THY) is a highly esteemed organization that enhances Turkey's global reputation. The majority of countries in the world are served by THY. Africa has become a key destination for THY, which flies to most cities on the continent, since the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) materialized the establishment of the Africa Action Plan in 2005. Prior to 2005, Turkish investors and businesspeople had trouble finding direct flights from Turkey to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Today, THY operates flights to 58 locations across 37 African countries. The new THY initiative in Africa made things easier by allowing Turkish businessmen to connect with their African counterparts directly and conveniently; enabling them to take on additional contracting projects in the region. As a result, the entire value of commercial exchange between Turkey and Africa has climbed significantly from 4.3 billion US dollars in 2002 to 41 billion US dollars in 2024 (DEIK, 2024).

But what do stakeholders think about the recent development of the bilateral relations between Turkey and Sub-Saharan African countries? The following chapter of this investigative study is devoted to the critical analysis of the research data.

### **Critical Analysis of Research Data**

During the investigations, qualitative interviews have been realized between January 2024 and January 2025 with both African and Turkish businessmen and investors involved in the Turkey-Africa bilateral cooperation. Beside, data was also collected from participant observation, as I worked from June 2022 to December 2024 as a Communication Coordinator and International Relations Specialist at African Investors Council (AIC), an organization based in Ankara and registered under Turkish legislation. The vast majority of interviewed stakeholders operate in five key sectors: manufacture, agriculture, mining, commercial trade, and construction. They all appreciate the recent significant development of the Turkey-Africa bilateral relations but they also made some criticisms by mentioning the major obstacles that thwart these partnerships. Eventually, some suggestions have been made in order to overcome the obstacles.

### **The Main Assets in the Turkey-Africa Cooperation**

According the interviewees, the principal assets of the Turkey-Africa partnership include a shared commitment to economic growth, a focus on sustainable development, and complementary expertise in various sectors. Turkey's advanced agricultural technologies, combined with Africa's vast arable land and growing demand for food security solutions, create a solid foundation for collaborative projects. Additionally, Turkey's experience in infrastructure development greatly benefits Africa's agricultural sector.

In terms of appreciation, it is worth mentioning that Turkish investors bring a wealth of expertise in technology and infrastructure, which are critical components for the successful implementation of vertical farming systems; said one of the interviewees involved in the business of vertical farming in Eastern, Central and West African countries. For them, "Turkey's advancements in agricultural technology, coupled with its strategic location bridging Europe and Asia, provide a unique advantage for fostering innovation and facilitating the exchange of best practices" (comments made by an interviewee in June 2024). Additionally, Turkish investors have shown a keen interest in sustainable projects and have a strong track record in supporting international collaborations. Their investment can help accelerate the deployment of vertical farming projects in Africa by providing the necessary capital, technical know-how, and market access; thus creating a mutually beneficial partnership that drives growth and sustainability.

Furthermore, the stakeholders (especially African businesspeople) recognized that Turkey has developed considerable expertise in agriculture and agri-food technologies. Therefore, partnerships can benefit from the transfer of these advanced technologies to Africa, thereby improving the productivity and efficiency of local agricultural practices. Also, trade relations

between Turkey and Africa are booming, with numerous bilateral agreements promoting economic exchanges and investments. These strengthened relationships provide a solid foundation for mutually beneficial partnerships.

In terms of investments and financing, Turkish investors are showing increasing interest in opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Their investments bring not only capital but also experiences and effective management practices, thereby stimulating the development of African agricultural sector. Finally, cultural and historical proximity seems to be advantageous since Turkey and Africa share a long history of cultural and diplomatic relations. This proximity facilitates mutual understanding and cooperation. However, there are also several obstacles to consider.

### **The Main Obstacles in the Turkey-Africa Cooperation**

The main obstacles in the Turkey-Africa bilateral relations include traditional and linguistic differences, regulatory challenges, and lack of infrastructure and technological readiness across African countries. Navigating these complexities requires a deep understanding of local contexts and a flexible approach to partnership building.

In terms of regulatory and legal differences, some interviewees noted that disparities in regulatory and legal frameworks complicate bilateral partnerships between Turkey and Sub-Saharan African countries. As a matter of fact, companies have to navigate diverse and sometimes complex legal environments, which slow down the implementation of their projects.

Additionally, in some regions of Africa, transport, energy and communications infrastructure is still insufficient. Hence, some people think that this poses logistical challenges and increases costs for Turkish companies operating on the continent. There are also some political and economic risks linked to Turkey-Africa bilateral relations, as the vast majority of African countries follow, or depend on, western standards regarding some political and economic matters. In fact, political instability and economic fluctuations in parts of Africa deter investors. Therefore, managing these risks is essential to ensure lasting partnerships between the two regions.

Another obstacle is related to traditional and linguistic differences. Despite cultural proximity, differences remain in terms of business and linguistic practices. These differences may require additional effort to ensure effective communication and smooth collaboration.

### **Criticisms about the Turkey-Africa Relations**

While the relations between Africa and Turkey have seen many positive development, there are some crucial concerns and criticisms (raised by the surveyed stakeholders) that could be considered in order to improve the bilateral cooperation. These concerns are somehow related to the fear of economic exploitation, lack of transparency, unclear political agenda, human rights concerns and geopolitical competitions with other powers.

To begin with the economic exploitation, some critics argued that Turkey's increased engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa is driven primarily by its economic interests (looking for market of distribution of their immense industrial products), leading to central concerns about the exploitation of African resources and labor. In fact, there have been reports of Turkish companies' involvement in controversial projects, such as large scale land acquisition in Somalia, Sudan, and Congo, and mining operation in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, which have raised questions about their social and environmental impacts.

The second major criticism made by the interviewees is the lack of transparency in some Turkish investment and development projects in Africa. This opacity, according to some African stakeholders, can lead to suspicions about the motives behind certain initiatives and raises concerns about accountability and governance. To illustrate this, it is appropriate to remind that the Burkinabe government made the decision in March 2024 to revoke the industrial operation licenses for the Tambao manganese mine previously held by the Turkish company *Afro Turc*

*Tambao SA*<sup>2</sup> and the large Inata gold mine controlled by *Afro Turc Inata SA*. By direct agreement, the government sold the Tambao manganese mine and the Inata gold mine for US\$50 million at the end of April 2023.

Despite being summoned and granted 90 days, the Turkish mining corporation is accused by the Burkinabe authorities of “failing to pay any of the amounts it owes” to the nation (Ministerial Decree, 2024). Ouagadougou claimed that these businesses have not performed up to par. As a matter of fact, the Turkish mining corporation was urged to create bases for defense and security forces as part of the deal when it was signed, in an effort to help fight terrorism. The Burkinabe government claimed that these mines were integrated initiatives and development vectors for the Sahel.

Moreover, some observers suggested that Turkey’s growing presence in Africa is motivated by its desire to gain political influence on the continent as well as globally. As a reminder, 53 African states voted in favor of Turkey’s non-permanent membership at the UN Security Council for the 2009-2010 term, demonstrating urgent and strong African support for Turkey’s efforts. In fact, Turkey was given additional chances in the international arena and the UN by virtue of its non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council which is still the most important multilateral platform for guaranteeing and maintaining international peace and security. Critics also argued that Turkey may use its economic investment and development assistance as leverage to advance its geopolitical interests in Africa, potentially undermining local sovereignty and autonomy.

In addition, Turkish domestic human rights record has raised concerned among some African observers, and there are fears that Turkey’s influence in Africa, especially in Sub-Saharan African region, could contribute to the spread of authoritarian practices or the suppression of dissent in some countries where Turkish interests are considerable. Evidently, some racist and discriminatory attitudes will certainly develop an anti-Turkish sentiment in the near future. Also, Turkey’s increasing involvement in Africa has raised concerns amongst traditional powers and regional actors, leading to potential competition and geopolitical tensions. This competition could exacerbate existing conflicts or rivalries in some African countries where Western powers are very well appreciated.

Most importantly, stereotypes and misconceptions about black African people living in Turkey, perpetuated through social media platforms and other discussion forums, should be avoided. These stereotypes can contribute to negative, condescending, attitudes and discrimination. The intoxication campaign about a so-called “Karabük Scandal”<sup>3</sup>, which happened at the University of Karabük in March 2024, can illustrate this state of fact. With some 12,000 international students, the most of whom are from Sub-Saharan African nations, the university’s large international student body has previously drawn criticism, particularly in the wake of the March 25, 2023, discovery of a 17-year-old Gabonese student’s body (Hurriyet, 2023). The Gabonese girl’s death was allegedly the result of a prostitution network, although the matter was never resolved.

Actually xenophobia, combined with ultra-nationalism and white supremacy can fuel discrimination against foreigners or more specifically black communities who might be

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<sup>2</sup> Afro Turk SA is a government-affiliated business. Since 1938, it has been involved in the mining industry, operating mostly in Sub-Saharan African countries.

<sup>3</sup> Following their purported sexual encounters with African students at Karabük University, certain posts on an Instagram “confession pages” went viral on social media, asserting that Turkish students had STIs as a result of their interactions with them. In response to the critics, several others called them racists. There have been past reports of scabies, malaria, and tuberculosis outbreaks linked to the university. Messages talked of students who suspected they had HIV or HPV and went to the hospital. Social media posts claimed that although African students at Karabük University may be carriers of these diseases, they may not show any symptoms. More details on Hurriyet Daily News: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/health-bureau-denies-std-allegations-amid-debates-on-northern-university-191896>.

perceived as outsiders. It requires efforts in promoting awareness, education, and cultural exchange initiatives to overcome this. As a matter of fact, some interviewed people suggested encouraging empathy, mutual understanding and respect for diversity in order to challenge stereotypes and foster inclusivity within Turkish society.

Also, Turkish decision-makers should implement policies that protect the rights of all individuals, regardless of race or ethnicity. This is crucial in combatting all forms of racism. Talking about discrimination in the context of Turkey-Africa relations, one of the interviewees put it in the following terms:

In terms of development, Africans have played a lot in the world; so from the economical point of view, they should not be restricted when it comes to value exchanges. Starting from the immigration, Africans should not be getting the “daily bullying” or “daily segregation”. This can be considered as a “colonial master syndrome”. Turkey is doing well but we need more (...) we need freedom to exercise our rights. The two parties (Turkey and Africa) should find a way to perfect their bilateral relations. We need to remove all kind of segregations and formulas that are condescending and dehumanizing; so that the other community will not feel devalued (Commented a Sub-Saharan African decision-maker during the interview in April 2024).

Finally, considering the ongoing economic crisis and inflation, some people might view black African expats and immigrants as a threat not only to their cultural identity but also to the economic stability; fueling, *de facto and de jure*, hatred and resentment within the Turkish society. Consequently, African counterparts are likely to develop a sort of anti-Turkish sentiment; things that do not work in favor of friendly bilateralism between Turkey and Sub-Saharan African countries. These hatred speeches inundate digital media platforms, leading to potential diplomatic tensions.

### **The New Challenges of Digital Diplomacy and Public Opinion in Africa**

The rise of the so-called “anti-French sentiment” via social media platforms in francophone African countries has shown us that the subject of critical public opinions was rarely present in the analysis of French media outlets. This creates a sort of “hostile media effect” (Vallone et al., 1985) among the audiences. With the advent of social networks which appeared and took tremendous proportions almost twenty years ago, these public opinions now carry real weight, including in matters of international relations and diplomacy.

The challenge for public diplomacy today – as well as for both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy – consists of building a media communication strategy and developing digital tools to address and dialogue with the diverse, and sometimes contrasting, public opinions; since it is all about building a “trustful and reliable relationship” over time and not simply being in a defensive reaction to these contradicting public opinions (Author, 2020). In this age of social networks which give considerable power to public opinions, it would be wiser to take them into account in the strategy for disseminating public information.

In this social media era, information consumers want to be active. The challenge for historic international media like RFI, France 24, TV5 Monde, BBC, VOA, CNN, etc. is to significantly develop interactions with their fragmented audiences. This consists in developing strategies to embark the audiences on their various social media platforms. The principle of Western global media, broadcasting information from London, Paris, Berlin or Washington, no longer really works. It is also their close proximity to the African region that allows global media today to achieve good audience scores in African countries. Because what interests a young Dakar resident, a young Bamako resident, or a young Abidjan resident today is to debate, to dialogue, to interact, to give their opinion on matters related to their social, economic and political realities and on subjects that concern their daily lives.

To be effective, a soft power policy must be based on a real media strategy focused on digital diplomacy. Also, in terms of traditional media strategy, it is important to adapt it to the realities prevailing in the countries or zones of dissemination. For instance, it is not recommendable to talk about Islam in the same way when one addresses the population of East Africa, which has a Muslim majority, as those of South, Central and West Africa, which is more secular. The credibility, honesty, impartiality and reliability of information disseminated by both traditional and social media must be impeccable to win the battle of social interaction and public opinion.

The key to the success of soft power, or '*diplomacy of attraction*', lies in credibility, honesty and trustworthiness. In this digital information era, when everyone is overwhelmed with social mediated information, the scarce resource is attention, and this is a function of credibility. The major asset of quality that Western media pose today in Sub-Saharan Africa is their credibility. Consequently, other countries trying to join the competition must establish their credibility. But many aspirants – like Turkey, Russia, and China – want to use their state-backed media for propaganda purposes, thereby undermining their credibility. This often results in further fragmenting the audiences' perceptions regarding some critical issues.

When it comes to credibility, what we call the mainstream media – media like the BBC, RFI, France 24, CNN, VOA, etc. – still play a crucial role as validation bodies. But, in terms of propagators and amplifiers, social networks have become royal channels today. Thus, a savvy implementation of digital media diplomacy highly contributes in the image building and the promotion of a country's perception at the global stage.

Given the inadequacies of Turkish model in several vital areas of application, one is wondering whether or not the whirlwind Turkey-Africa cooperation is doomed to fail.

### **Emergence and Setback of Turkish Expansionism: Is the Turkey-Africa Cooperation doomed to fail?**

Turkey's geopolitical strategy for the enlargement of bilateral relations with Africa was initiated in 1979<sup>4</sup>, concretized and reinforced in 1998, and started being concretely implemented since 2005. One of the main driving forces for the Turkey's 1998 Africa Action Plan was the desire for worldwide influence. Since taking office, the leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has travelled to Africa on more than 40 occasions; surpassing any other Western leader (DEIK, 2024).

In this logic, the number of Turkish embassies on the African continent increased from 12 in 2008 to 44 embassies today and, in the meantime, the number of African embassies in Ankara moved from 10 to 39 today. With the growth of its diplomatic missions, Turkey started to take center stage on the African continent, making it simpler for her to form multilateral relations with the African Union and other regional bodies like the ECOWAS in order to promote its business diplomacy. According to the African Investing Barometer, the volume of commercial trade between Turkey and African countries increased from 5.3 billion dollars in 2008 to 41 billion USD in 2024.

However, if the Turkish strategy towards Sub-Saharan African partners has met with real success, it is not without weaknesses. The first gap appears to be financial. For several years, Turkey has been facing an accentuated economic crisis. Worse still, in the light of the last presidential elections' results, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) started losing its popularity. This might undermine their new foreign policy measures. Just as the increase in social inequalities fuels tensions internally.

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<sup>4</sup> Turkey began to take a number of significant actions to diversify its foreign policy and build strategic relationships with non-Western entities following the 1974 Cyprus Intervention in an effort to lessen its reliance on the West. The African continent has emerged as one of Turkey's primary strategic areas of focus in this regard. In this regard, the first Africa Action Plan (AAP) was started under the direction of the then-foreign affairs minister Ahmet Gündüz Ökçün, and in February 1979, a delegation of Turkish businesspeople and officials was sent to Africa with the goal of developing multifarious relations with the African continent.

It will therefore be difficult for the AKP administration to justify spending abroad, namely in Africa, in the face of such internal pressures. The most important thing is not to increase the number of embassies on the African continent; it will still be necessary to provide them with equipment, financial means, and adequate personnel to conduct their public diplomacy mission in the short, medium, and long term. From a geopolitical point of view, the expansion of a sphere of interest has a significant cost and above all limits. In this context it is worth wondering whether Ankara will have the material means to achieve its new foreign policy's ambitions.

Turkey, which gives priority to the Sub-Saharan African market in order to sell its immense production, concentrates its diplomatic efforts on economic and commercial issues. We have been able to witness on various occasions the insufficiency of critically intellectual, artistic, cultural, social and academic works in line with Ankara's ambitions to cooperate bilaterally with African countries. Ankara must accept criticisms of all types for sincere relationships. Turkey and Africa can, in fact, design a new type of profitable partnership, mutually advantageous, and not dependent on the after-effects of colonial history or religious identity.

The Turkish authorities stand out from competitors by projecting in Africa an image of simplicity, propinquity, and proximity, with an attractive and subjugating discourse. This closeness was evidenced during the Turkish president's visit to Gabon in March 2011; wearing "shirt sleeves, rolled-up pants, barefoot in the sand and leaning on a canoe, he improvised a discussion with a Gabonese fisherman" (Mbabilia, 2011: P.107-119). But discourse is far different from practice. Successful soft power requires enough financial means. The 1998 Africa Action Plan was temporarily suspended because of economic and political crisis in Turkey between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. As an illustration, Turkish embassies in Ghana, Somalia and Tanzania had to temporarily close their doors due to economic difficulties (TR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

Another factor likely to negatively affect Turkey's commitment in Africa is a propensity to act in the direction of religious solidarity, in the sense of a moral obligation and above all a community of mutual interests. As I have elaborated earlier, beyond the official discourse, Ankara has for a long time mobilized the religious dimension as an instrument of its new foreign policy. However, besides their traditional animist beliefs, most Sub-Saharan African countries have a Christian tradition. Therefore, focusing too much on religious identity would, in the vast majority of Sub-Saharan African countries, give the impression of partial treatment or a double standard.

As for the limits of the humanitarian activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency TIKA in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is the difficulty linked to competition and the height of the budgets of Western heavy donor countries<sup>5</sup>, the increase in demands by other countries in the Middle East like Syria, Yemen, and Palestine, as well as political, economic and social instabilities in some countries receiving humanitarian aid and the tremendous changes in the exchange rate due to the ongoing inflation.

All things considered, through its expansionist ambition in Africa, Ankara wishes to shine at little cost. However, Turkey is playing a dangerous game. By being present on too many subjects and in too many geographical areas, it risks no longer being effective or audible anywhere. This is possibly the reason why Ankara's role in handling the crisis in Gaza was compromised. Turkey's international policy seems to gradually give in to the temptation of becoming a nuisance power. Without excluding the risk of a particularly condescending attitude towards sub-Saharan Africans due to their responsibilities not assumed in relation to the treatment of Africans living in Turkey.

If the Sub-Saharan African countries need to renew or expand their alliances for the benefit of their sovereignty, they cannot do so with partners whose fragilities would be added to their own.

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<sup>5</sup> In terms of humanitarian services in Sub-Saharan Africa, countries like Sweden, Norway, Denmark and other United Nations' institutions are considered to be heavy donors.

The deterioration of the social and security situation in Sub-Saharan Africa can attest to this. The recurrence of the military coups in Sub-Saharan Africa (i.e. Guinea, Gabon, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso) is partially due to the lack of solid collaboration with Western powers, accused of nurturing terrorism in the Sahel region. Hence, these military regimes decided to cooperate with Russia which provides them with military equipment and training. In these countries, development aid has been replaced by Wagner, the Russian paramilitary groups. On a different spectrum, Turkey's presence on the continent benefits the country's commercial trade balance and the influence of its apparent soft power on the international scene, but not the African countries and the effects of the "win-win policy" praised by President Erdogan are long overdue.

Furthermore, the misunderstanding between African immigrants and Turkish police officers can also create fear and hatred between the two societies. In February 2024 for example, several Africans, deported from Turkey, were blocked in Addis-Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. They were more than hundred Sub-Saharan African immigrants who were deemed illegal to live in Turkey, and therefore, deported to their home lands. However, according to a video released by some of the deported migrants, they have got their passports blocked once arrived in Addis-Ababa, which, for them, is a stratagem set by Turkish authorities to abandon them out there and leave. "Each one of us want to go back home, but we are all blocked here by Turkish officials", claimed one of the immigrants, recording the scene with his smartphone. Another demonstrator furiously commented in a voice message as it follows:

There are several nationalities amongst the immigrants – such as Cameroonian, Nigerian, Nigerien, Senegalese, Central African, Ivorian, Ugandan, and Congolese – both men and women, who departed from Istanbul, Turkey, at 8:13 am and arrived in Addis-Ababa around 14:00, [he said furiously]. Turkish people want to abandon us now. Everyone is blocked here, [he added in a protest tone] (Cf. Interview data collected in March 2024).

Turkish security officers who accompanied the deported immigrants got some troubles to maintain security amid the growing anger of the folk. "Turkish policemen are running away. They are treating us like animals and running away", said some demonstrators in a videotape which shows the police officers jumping over the passageway fences. The video tapes became viral on social media in early February 2024. Demonstrating against what is according to them an unfair decision on the behalf of Turkish authorities, the crowds of immigrants were chanting "Africa! Africa! Africa!" Waving their hands with rage, some protesters were filming and walking behind the police officers.

The following day, the General Manager of the Addis-Ababa Airport had to undertake a lobbying with the ambassador of Turkey to Ethiopia in order to solve the issue. In the meantime, the cohort of immigrants had to "pass the night at the airport without food or anything else", commented one of the repatriated immigrants who requested to be anonymous. This anonymous interviewee strongly believes that this kind of attitudes will "impact the relations between Turkish society and African communities in the long-run". For him, there is "a manner to repatriate [humanly] without humiliating" the immigrants; because they were "treated like animals, or prisoners, without respect or consideration".

Actually, immigration is an extremely delicate topic because if handled improperly, it can have immediate negative impacts and damage a nation's reputation, weakening efforts to deploy its soft power adequately. Dehumanizing sentiments about Sub-Saharan African immigrants living in Turkey and ill-timed remarks, frequently made by left-wing political personalities for internal political agenda purposes, might harm Turkey's reputation across the entire African continent. In this regard, it seems necessary to have a close look at the Turkey-Africa bilateral cooperation from a critical viewpoint.

## Discussion: Bilateralism Seen from the Critical Thinking Standpoint

As for this current research related to Turkish expansionism in Africa, a wise way to apply critical thinking approach is to question the implication of ideology in the social exchange process. As mentioned earlier in the theoretical framework, this implies the introduction of the notion of *ideology* which, for Marxist thinkers, is a straightforward concept.

Contextually arguing, it is crucial for Africa's new partners to avoid the errors previously committed by former colonizers and adopt a sincere and franc posture without any hidden agenda because other partners like Saudi Arabia, India, Iran, Qatar, etc. are still impatient in the waiting room. Apart from Turkey, China and Russia have already occupied a comfortable seat at the dining table with their African counterparts. Therefore, in order to continue to gain the confidence of the African communities, Turkey should "not act like those who have been vomited by African people", suggested a participant during the Turkey-Africa Media Summit held in Istanbul in May 2022. As a matter of fact, Turkey must pay attention not to create a sort of *Turkophobia*<sup>6</sup> or an "anti-Turkism sentiment" – similar to what is perceived nowadays as "anti-French sentiment" in African Francophone countries.

Obviously, there are actions that create more hatred sentiments than solutions when it comes to discussing Turkish expansionism from the critical thinking standpoint. The sensible questions like immigration, racism, and different forms of *negrophobia* constitute the 'segregationist volcano' around which political actors should not play. To illustrate it, after the reelection of the Justice and Development Party in May 2023, Turkey proceeds, for the first time in the history of the country, to the mass arrests, detentions, and repatriation of thousands of African immigrants. The vast majority amongst them are obviously Sub-Saharan African immigrants who were doing commercial businesses between their countries and Turkey. This will certainly undermine Turkish soft power initiatives and tarnish the image of the country in the near future.

Based on the interview data and participant observation notes, some Sub-Saharan African people vehemently rebuke Turkish supremacy and xenophobic attitude; especially after the buzz following the assassination of the Gabonese student in Karabük (as mentioned earlier) and the repatriation of African immigrants who were blocked at Addis-Ababa Airport, Ethiopia, in February 2023, for lack of appropriate coordination.

Investigating alongside, the Secretariat of the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)<sup>7</sup> has denounced in a report the forcible repatriation and collective arbitrary detention of over 205 Africans in Istanbul, Turkey. Throughout their incarceration and deportation, the immigrants were denied access to food, drink, and medical care (OMCT, 2024)<sup>8</sup>. Thus, in the absence of legitimate legal charges, the OMCT orders the immediate release of those who are still in detention, or in the event that legal charges are present, it brings them before an unbiased and competent tribunal and ensures their physical and psychological integrity at all times. The OMCT's 2022 report states that there has been a consistent, widespread rise in the use of disproportionate force by police globally in recent years; and in Turkey, it has noted an increase

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<sup>6</sup> Hostility, intolerance, or racism directed towards Turkish or Turkic people, Turkish culture, Turkic countries, or Turkey itself is known as *Turkophobia*, also referred to as anti-Turkism or anti-Turkish sentiment. The word is used to describe intolerance directed not just against Turks in all areas but also against groups whose development was somewhat influenced by Turkish customs and culture. Racism towards Turkish individuals residing outside of Turkey as a result of the Turkish diaspora can also be considered as a sort of "Turkophobia".

<sup>7</sup> The largest international non-governmental organization (NGO) actively against torture and defending human rights advocates across the globe is the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT). There are more than 200 members throughout 90 nations. Geneva, Switzerland, serves as the home location for its global secretariat.

<sup>8</sup> OMCT (2024). Turkey: Arbitrary Detention And Forced Deportation of More Than 205 Africans. Available online at the following link: <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/turkey-arbitrary-detention-and-forced-deportation-of-more-than-205-africans>.

in the use of excessive force by the police during peaceful demonstrations, with the obvious goal of preventing or lowering participation in social protests<sup>9</sup>.

According to OMCT's annual report (2022), Turkish police have been known to target a variety of groups, including journalists, attorneys, politicians, LGBTIQ+ individuals, students, Kurdish activists, protestors against the Emergency Decrees, and environmentalists. In addition to being hindered from pursuing justice, victims of this violence must contend with countercharges that further criminalize their peaceful social protest (See OMCT's recent study on this matter)<sup>10</sup>. Fundamental human rights, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of association, and freedom of expression are crucial in preventing violence. Nonetheless, according to the OMCT's annual report, Turkey is employing harsh tactics to discourage people from demonstrating, such as the excessive use of force during crowd gatherings and protests.

All in all, these actions contribute to the deterioration of Turkey's image worldwide and its good reputation in Africa specifically. Thus, this is opposed to the ideals of soft power and will, if nothing is done, undermine Ankara's effort of openness and attractiveness in the eyes of its African partners.

### **Palliative Solutions to Cleanse the Counteractions**

The African continent is negatively affected by the restrictions on visas, the hostile opposition to legal migration for business purposes, the hate speech against immigrants uttered by populist leaders, etc. Turkey's reputation in Africa, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, may suffer as a result of dehumanizing sentiments toward Sub-Saharan African migrants and foreigners residing in Turkey as well as ill-timed remarks frequently made for domestic political purposes. The majority of African nations are unwilling to work with a nation that has condescending views because they have dreadfully encountered such arrogant behaviors from former colonizers.

The majority of foreign students in Turkey, who numbered 60 thousand in 2024, experience xenophobia on multiple occasions (Kavak, 2024). Turkish scholar Gokhan Kavak claims that African students studying in Turkey share this xenophobic mentality. Accordingly, in an article published in May 2024, the researcher described it as follows:

This situation poses a risk of rapidly losing the gains achieved over many years in relations with African countries (...). When the political and economic turmoil in Turkey turns into xenophobia, it leads to the emergence of negative views among African students against Turkey, jeopardizing Turkey's Africa policy (Kavak, 2024)<sup>11</sup>.

In summary, xenophobia toward international students in Turkey is a relatively new issue. The conclusions of the survey conducted by Kavak (2024) emphasize that xenophobic incidents affect foreign students, refugees, businesses, merchants, visitors, and even ambassadors<sup>12</sup>. Consequently, any country that desires to establish cordial, long-lasting bilateral ties with African nations must refrain from condoning xenophobic sentiments. These are non-negotiable issues in the minds of the African youth.

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<sup>9</sup>OMCT (2024). Turkey: Stifling Civic Space Through The Excessive Use of Force. <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/reports/turkey-excessive-use-of-force-of-law-enforcement-against-peaceful-assemblies-and-demonstrations-is-stifling-the-civic-space>.

<sup>10</sup> OMCT (2022). Annual Report. <https://www.omct.org/en/annual-report-2022/police-violence>.

<sup>11</sup> Gökhan Kavak's (2024) research article is entitled "Reflection of Xenophobia in Turkey towards African Students: An Analysis of Social Media Posts"; Presented at the International Africa Symposium, at Inonu University, Malatya, Turkey.

<sup>12</sup> Investigating alongside, Faruk Tasci (2023) wrote an article entitled "*International Students' Pillar Against Xenophobia*"; Published by SETA – *Education and Social Policies*; September 09, 2023. For more information, refer to the following link: <https://www.setav.org/egitim-ve-sosyal-politikalar/yabanci-dusmanliginda-uluslararasi-ogrenciler-ayagi>.

Indeed, a number of youth movements in Sub-Saharan Africa, including the “Yen a Marre” and “Frapp France Dégage” movements in Senegal, the “Balai Citoyen” movement in Burkina Faso, the “Filimbi Movement” in Congo, the “Lyna Movement” in Chad, and many others, have stated that they are fighting against all forms of domination and negrophobia. Hence, they regularly denounce what they perceive to be mental corruption and human rights violations, but most importantly, they are opposing the idea of neocolonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Therefore, if these African youth movements discover that the new partners are actually new settlers in disguise, they will not hesitate to condemn their behavior. The African elites were compelled to reevaluate their ‘unfair connections’ with France as a result of the struggle of these young revolutionary activists. The fact that thousands of individuals from various African nations who share similar pan-Africanist views are behind this struggle is commendable. Pan-African activists “simply want things to change for the benefit of African communities; they are not hotheads or individuals who want to ruin everything. They are mindful” (Commented a Pan-African activist in September 2024).

In the light of all what has been elaborated above, it is necessary for Western countries to take into account certain suggestions in order perfect and consolidate their historic relations with African countries.

### **Limitations of Western Approach**

To combat the influence of China, Russia, and Turkey on the African continent, Western countries present themselves as defenders of democracy and human rights movements. Additionally, they keep stepping up the work of their cultural organizations, such as the Goethe-Institute, Institut Français, and the British Council, to name a few. By supporting democratic institutions in the region and upholding its long-standing relationship, the West may be able to successfully counter Turkey's anti-colonial rhetoric and anti-Western narrative. This appears to be an important step in disproving the Ankara narrative throughout Africa.

The West's role on the continent requires it to remain fair, open and honest about the horrors that are still occurring in Africa, which may lead some countries to seek cooperation from other parties. Several African governments have recently emphasized this on several occasions. For instance, Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla, former prime minister of Burkina Faso, described it as follows:

We expect each of our partners to be loyal to us. We, therefore, hope for sincere and frank cooperation. We believe, perhaps wrongly, that certain partners have not always been loyal (...) Where do they [the terrorists] find the weapons, the ammunition, the fuel, the money that they have in abundance? How can countries that have the control of space, with modern means of detection, not, if they are our true friends, give us the necessary information on the actions and movements of these terrorists? (RTB, 2022).

The prime minister of Burkina Faso came to the conclusion that they would make every effort to broaden their bilateral collaborations until they discover the best formula for Burkina Faso's objectives. He maintained that there would be no consideration of allowing oneself to be controlled by a partner, regardless of who that ally could be. Interestingly, this political stance is shared by many Sub-Saharan African nations, in quest of genuine independence.

Thus, it makes sense to balance the forces. For example, adding the African Union to the G20 – currently exclusively represented by South Africa – will provide additional African voices a role in global affairs. One method to balance the forces would be to expand the G5 and grant at least two African nations with the veto right. In addition to that, the bilateral relations between Western countries and their African peers should be based on a “win-win partnership” mindset, prioritizing equity, equal respect, and transparency. That being said, it is ultimately the duty of African governments, media professionals, civil society, and corporate actors to defend African interests against new external exploiters in disguise.

## Conclusion

The African continent is becoming more and more significant in today's world politics as foreign players see it as a vital arena of competition. Turkey's new geopolitical perspective merits closer investigation because it is an emerging player in the formation of a new global order, aggressively operating in Africa alongside new competitors such as China and Russia. The Africa Action Plan initiated in 1998 and the subsequent "Year of Africa" in 2005 marked the beginning of Turkey's "opening to Africa", which aimed to increase political and economic engagement with the continent (Sıradağ, 2022). This marked the early 2000 as the period when a coherent foreign policy agenda for Africa was explicitly formulated by Turkey. In short, Turkey's rekindled interest in Africa can be interpreted as a manifestation of its aspirations to become a major player in the world stage and should be examined in the larger framework of the country's post-Cold War foreign policy agenda recalibration.

However, some counteractions might jeopardize Turkey's reputation in Africa and even worldwide, taking into consideration the extremely aggressive declarations of Turkish leaders towards countries which are supposedly partners or NATO allies. As witnessed recently, the war in Gaza pushed Turkey to quarrel with almost all the Muslim World, as it failed to play efficiently the role of mediator. Worst still, the new whirlwind political unrest in Syria will certainly complicate things for Ankara in the near future, as serious security matters are looming on the horizon. In this context, in view of the threats (both security and economic) weighing on the country, Turkey will have to continue to consume a significant part of its resources on safekeeping issues; and this will limit the means allocated to its new foreign policy.

As a reminder, since 1979, just after the country's military intervention in Cyprus, Turkey has a track record of making strategic mistakes and failing in its attempts to implement the Africa Action Plan. Examples include the military takeover in 1980, intermittent political and economic crises, withdrawal of important key figures following political reforms (i.e. former minister of foreign affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu), and disputes over identity between secularism and Islam, just to mention a few. The development of Turkey's soft power was hampered by these mistakes.

In order to deploy its soft power adequately, Turkey must envisage implementing some palliative solutions, because Ankara's capacity to use its soft power will depend on how it makes use of its internal dynamics. After all, a nation's capacity to develop a successful soft power mechanism and attract attention to itself depends on its political system's adherence to fundamental human rights, diversity, equity, and freedom of opinion. Subsequently, the values of justice, equality, transparency, trustworthiness, and democratic principles must prevail in the current globalized world for long-lasting bilateral cooperation.

## Data Availability Statement

The article and its supplemental materials contain the data that support the study's conclusions. Various platforms, such as RTB (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRi49SBSnsk>), the African Investing for Impact Barometer (<http://DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.14100.17282>), the International Journal of Political Studies (<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/icps/issue/72403/1117810>), Foreign Affairs ([https://www.guillaumenicaise.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/huntington\\_clash-of-civilizations.pdf](https://www.guillaumenicaise.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/huntington_clash-of-civilizations.pdf)), etc. provide access to some raw data. Upon reasonable request, the data can also be obtained from the corresponding authors listed in the reference list below. Sensitive participant data is not publicly available due to privacy concerns, though it may be shared under the right circumstances.

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