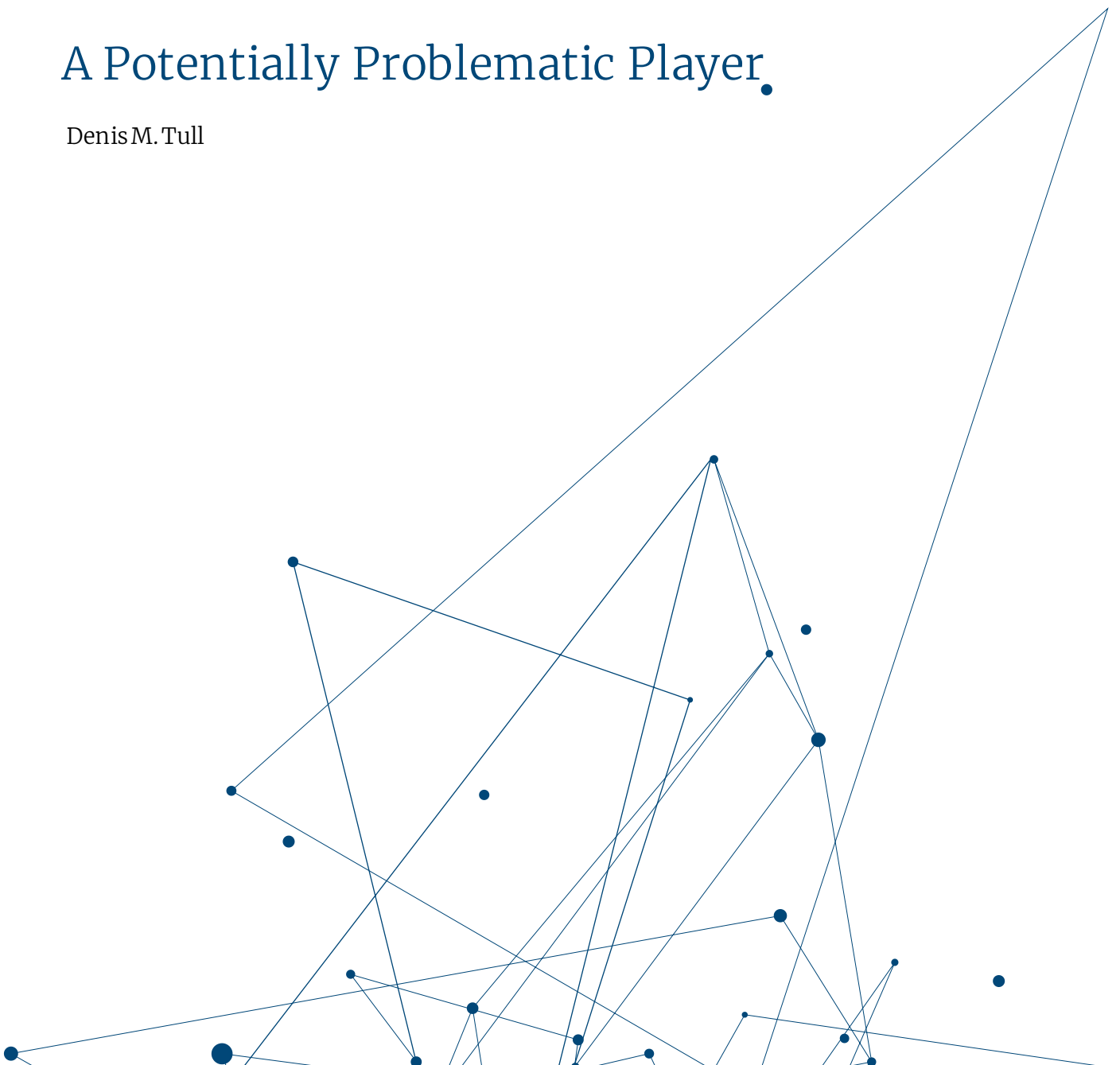


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# French Perceptions of Turkey in Africa

## A Potentially Problematic Player.

Denis M. Tull



There is a growing unease among policymakers in Paris that Turkey's increased involvement in Africa—the so-called French “backyard”—may lead to conflicts with France in the areas of defence, economy and development. However, for the time being direct conflicts between Paris and Ankara—such as in Libya—remain the exception.

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# 1. Introduction

Compared to other external powers in post-independence Africa, France undoubtedly had the largest and most consistent footprint on the continent, in its former colonies and beyond.

To this day, involvement in Africa remains an important marker of France's international status, alongside its nuclear weapons arsenal and its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. As a result of these significant national stakes Paris was and continues to be the single most important player shaping European policy-making toward Africa—both within and beyond the European Union.

However, French policy has come under significant pressure in recent years, both from political changes in Africa itself and due to the emerging power expansion of countries such as Turkey. Given French stakes in the region, one would expect French officials to pay significant attention to Turkey's dynamic policies and actions in Africa. This is against the backdrop of a difficult bilateral relationship between Ankara and Paris, particularly during the Erdoğan era.

2.

# A Snapshot View of France in Africa

In recent years, France's long and often complicated relationship with Africa has entered a period of accelerated change, with the potential to substantially undercut French pre-eminence and long-term influence on the continent.

Africa's relations with the rest of the world have changed over the past two decades. The arrival and expansion of numerous non-traditional partners like China, India, Turkey and others has turned the continent into a crowded and competitive geo-political space. For African countries, the arrival of non-European power brokers has heralded an age of choice in terms of rebalancing partnerships and traditional players like France have lost political influence and market shares. Additionally, long-simmering transformations have led to a gradual and slow-moving change in France's relations with African countries. These transformations have arrived largely as a result of domestic changes (political liberalisation, demographic and generational transformations, new information technologies and increasing urbanisation) in many African nations. Amplified by the availability of an ever-widening choice of foreign partners, African countries—some of whom are former colonies of France—have now developed a new kind of emancipatory politics toward France, which considers Paris as merely one partner among many. Increasingly, African activists and sometimes officials frame France as a former colonial power seeking to exert continued dominance in order to protect its interests at the expense of African states and societies.<sup>1</sup>

The ultimately unsuccessful decade-long intervention in the Sahel, culminating in the French fall-out with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger between 2022 and 2023, was a trigger that pushed these long-festering tensions into the open across the region. While both processes—internal developments in African nations and the presence of new non-European powers in Africa—are distinct, their combined impact has imparted to French officials a sense that France is embattled on many fronts, facing

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<sup>1</sup> Denis M. Tull, "Contesting France: Rumors, Intervention and the Politics of Truth in Mali", *Critique Internationale*, no. 90 (2021) 1: 151-171;

Alain Antil, Thierry Vircoulon, François Giovalucchi, *Thématiques acteurs et fonctions du discours anti-français en Afrique francophone*, Études de l'Ifri, (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales [Ifri], 14 June 2023)

growing challenges to its status and influence in Africa. Concerning China, for example, the French Foreign Minister has evoked the idea of, “a battle for influence.”<sup>2</sup> Officials have also sometimes blamed other competitors for their troubles, notably Russia which has actively engaged in disinformation campaigns<sup>3</sup> to damage Paris’ reputation in Africa. Some officials also concede that mistakes have been made and that France needs to rethink its approach to the region.

Conceding his country’s problematic past and present relations with the continent, President Emmanuel Macron has doubled down on the commitment to remake French policy toward Africa and by extension its image on the continent.<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging past French crimes in Algeria and Rwanda, launching a process of restitution of looted cultural artefacts, dialoguing with Africa’s civil societies and emphasizing the hopefulness and vibrancy of African countries have all been part of a concerted public diplomacy effort by the Macron administration designed to write a new narrative about French – African relations.<sup>5</sup>

While rhetoric and symbols undeniably have pointed toward change, the actual implementation of reform has proven hesitant and inconsistent. The transformation of French policy toward Africa remains unfinished business and significant continuities with the past are regularly denounced by some critics as evidence that *Françafrique* “refuses to die.”<sup>6</sup>

French military involvement in the Sahel over the past decade has been a case in point. Inherited from the previous François Hollande government, it was continued and even deepened under Macron. Historically the realm of security has been a hallmark of French policy in Africa, namely defence cooperation agreements with mostly former colonies and vast numbers of military advisors deployed. Above all else, over 50 direct military interventions since the early 1960s have defined France’s Africa policy. Its largest military operation has also been its most recent one. With up to 5,100 soldiers,

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<sup>2</sup> Grégoire Sauvage “France Shifts Policy On Aid To Africa To Counter Rising Chinese Influence”, *France24* (online), 06 March 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210306-france-shifts-policy-on-aid-to-africa-to-counter-rising-chinese-influence> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Maxime Audinet, *Le Lion, l’Ours et les Hyènes : Acteurs, pratiques et récits de l’influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone*, Étude 83, (Paris: Institut de recherche stratégique de l’École militaire [IRSEM], July 2021), <https://www.irsem.fr/media/5-publications/etude-irsem-83-audinet-le-lion-ok.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2024)

<sup>4</sup> Denis M. Tull, *France’s Africa Policy under President Macron. Good Intentions, Partial Reform and the Fiasco in the Sahel*, SWP Comment 2023/C 51 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], 28 September 2023), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/frances-africa-policy-under-president-macron> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>5</sup> Corentin Cohen, *Will France’s Africa Policy Hold Up?*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 June 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/06/02/will-france-s-africa-policy-hold-up-pub-87228> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>6</sup> A typical example is Thomas Borrel, Amzat Boukari-Yabara, Benoît Collombat and Thomas Deltombe (eds.), *L’empire qui ne veut pas mourir. Une histoire de la Françafrique* (Paris: Seuil, 2021)

the counter-terrorism operation Barkhane in the Sahel (2013–2022) has reinforced perceptions about France's military-centric approach toward Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the Sahel aside, long-term trends before 2013 create a more nuanced picture and even suggest a steady decline in the French military footprint in Africa. As of late 2022—outside of the Sahel's 3,000 stationed troops—some 3,150 French troops remained permanently located across four military bases in Africa, down from 15,000 in 1980.<sup>8</sup> A similar trend is observable with regard to the presence of French military and civilian security advisors in various African partner countries, the number of which has been falling since the late 1990s.<sup>9</sup>

The long and costly intervention in Mali and the Sahel, reluctantly launched but then falling prey to mission creep, ended in a double failure. On the security level, it slowed, but did not contain the spread of jihadist movement across the region. Politically, its ramifications have severely damaged French credibility and legitimacy—both in the eyes of African officials and in African public opinion which has increasingly become hostile to French policy. While the full implications have yet to come to the fore, a diminishing French military and security presence in Africa seems likely.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in June 2023, the Macron administration announced the withdrawal of substantial troops from French military bases in Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon and Senegal.<sup>11</sup>

Broader economic trends likewise point to a French decline in Africa. Between 2011 and 2021, trade with the continent slumped by a hefty 18.5 per cent from \$65 to \$55 billion, while France's share of Africa's external trade dropped from 6.2 to 4.7 per cent. Over the same period, French exports to Africa declined from \$39 billion to \$27.5 billion.<sup>12</sup> Commerce weakened even with the mostly Francophone countries of the

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<sup>7</sup> "French Soldiers Quit Mali, Ending Nine-Year Military Mission", *RFI* (online), 16 August 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20220816-french-soldiers-quit-mali-ending-nine-year-military-mission> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>8</sup> Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces (CDEF), *Cahiers du Retex. 50 ans d'OPEX en Afrique (1964 - 2014)* (Paris, September 2015) : 19, [https://www.c-dec.terre.defense.gouv.fr/images/documents/retex/cahier/20160606\\_50-ans-d-OPEX-Afrique.pdf](https://www.c-dec.terre.defense.gouv.fr/images/documents/retex/cahier/20160606_50-ans-d-OPEX-Afrique.pdf) (accessed 08 November 2023); Ministère des Armées, *Opérations* (Paris, 2023), <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/operations> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>9</sup> There were 246 military and civilian advisors in Africa in 2022. See: Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, *Coopération de sécurité et de défense en Afrique* (Paris, January 2023), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/afrique/securete-et-lutte-contre-le-terrorisme/cooperation-de-securite-et-de-defense-en-afrique/> (accessed 08.11.2023)

<sup>10</sup> Laurent Bansept and Elie Tenenbaum, *Après Barkhane. Repenser la posture stratégique française en Afrique de l'Ouest*, Études de l'Ifri. Focus stratégique, no. 109 (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales [Ifri], 10 May 2022)

<sup>11</sup> Elise Vincent, "La France va encore réduire sa présence militaire en Afrique", *Le Monde* (online), 5 June 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/06/05/la-france-reduit-encore-sa-presence-militaire-en-afrique\\_6176297\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/06/05/la-france-reduit-encore-sa-presence-militaire-en-afrique_6176297_3212.html) (accessed 15 March 2024)

<sup>12</sup> Calculations based on United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/datacentre/> (accessed 15 March 2024)

West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), which represented 9.5 per cent of France's overall trade with Africa in 2021.

French economic interests have become more diversified over time as French companies and investors have sought to expand into dynamic non-Francophone economies such as Angola, Nigeria, South Africa and Ethiopia. Nonetheless, Francophone countries remain important to France's economy, especially in the Maghreb area of North Africa (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) and to some extent in West African countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Cameroon. In terms of Foreign Direct Investment, France remained the second largest holder of foreign assets (\$60 billion), just behind the UK (\$65 billion).<sup>13</sup> French companies like Orange and Bolloré still retain significant stakes in African markets.

Successive French governments have been aware of increasing economic competition in Africa as well as newly emerging opportunities beyond traditional markets. President Macron has emphasised on start-up economies and creative industries, though it remains to be seen if French companies will heed the call. Efforts to broaden and diversify France's status as an economic partner beyond Francophonienations have also been reflected in Macron's frequent visits to non-Francophone countries such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, the French government also positioned itself as an advocate for debt relief to multilateral institutions and donor countries.

A recent reform of development assistance aims to strengthen French aid delivery rendering it more effective and politically visible. After more than a decade of declining or stagnating aid, France has pledged to increase its Official Development Assistance (ODA) to 0.7 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while its share of bilateral assistance to overall aid is set to increase to 65 per cent. At the same time, a bigger share of aid will be going to low-income countries, especially in Africa, home to 18 out of 19 priority countries.<sup>14</sup> These changes will reverse a previous trend observed since 2010, which had benefited emerging and middle-income countries, often outside of Africa. By 2016, Africa as a whole had only received 41 per cent of total French ODA and Sub-Saharan Africa's share of total aid had fallen to a mere 29 per cent.<sup>15</sup>

French-African relations are undoubtedly etching toward significant change. While President Macron has made more efforts than his predecessors to build a new

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Investment flows to Africa reached a record \$83 billion in 2021* (Geneva, 09 June 2022), <https://unctad.org/news/investment-flows-africa-reached-record-83-billion-2021> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>14</sup> Jorge Moreira da Silva, *Examen à mi-parcours de la France (Paris, 1-2 décembre 2021)* (Paris: OCED, 14 February 2022): 2, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/peer-reviews/DAC-mid-term-France-2021.pdf> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>15</sup> Hervé Berville, *La modernisation de la politique partenariale de développement et de solidarité internationale*, (Paris, 24 August 2018): 30, [https://medias.vie-publique.fr/data\\_storage\\_s3/rapport/pdf/184000579.pdf](https://medias.vie-publique.fr/data_storage_s3/rapport/pdf/184000579.pdf) (accessed 08 November 2023)



narrative for France's Africa policy, the balance sheet remains decidedly mixed. Seeking to protect its still substantial economic and strategic interests, France faces stiff challenges both from international competitors as well from increasingly sceptical African partners. Many of France's former African allies have begun to veer toward political emancipation away from France and to seek new partners such as Turkey which portrays itself as part of the Global South. As such, changes in French-African relations are far more driven by evolving trends in Africa itself than by initiatives coming from Paris.

For France, facing up to its conflicted past and present in Africa remains difficult and domestically controversial. As a result, there is a tendency among some decision-makers to look at their country's current challenges in Africa as a consequence of international competitors intent on weakening France's place on the continent. For some observers, Turkey is one of these powers. While it is no match for Beijing, Ankara counts as an emerging player with a comprehensive approach toward Africa.

3.

# Perceptions in Context: French–Turkey Relations

Relations between France and Turkey have grown increasingly complex and conflicted over the past two decades, largely coinciding with the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in power since 2002.<sup>16</sup> French perceptions of Turkey's involvement in Africa are embedded in the larger context of Paris' and Ankara's tumultuous relationship. Put differently, sceptical and sometimes outright negative perceptions of Turkey in Africa reify a belief among French policymakers that Erdoğan is a problematic actor across all international politics.

Diametrically opposed views on key issues of national security and foreign policy have characterised France–Turkey relations in recent years. Most notable were diverging positions on the civil war in Libya, rights to the East Mediterranean oil and natural gas discoveries and support for different camps in the Syrian civil war. In Libya, Ankara deployed Turkish troops and Syrian mercenaries to support the internationally recognized government whereas Paris provided backing to the opposing forces of General Khalifa Haftar.<sup>17</sup> In Syria, Turkey opposed and frequently attacked the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) that were supported by the international coalition to combat the Islamic State in north Syria, which France had joined in 2014. In the Mediterranean, Turkey was at loggerheads with Greece and Cyprus, both backed by France, over oil and gas exploration along maritime borders. Against this backdrop, some observers have described “a geopolitical contest for influence” between both countries, itself the result of Turkey's rise as an emerging power and its growing foreign policy aspirations in areas that France has long considered to be its sphere of influence.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For background, see Aurélien Denizeau and Ozan Örmeci (eds.), *Turkish–French Relations. History, Present, and the Future* (Cham: Springer, 2022)

<sup>17</sup> Wolfram Lacher, “Macron as a Spoiler in Libya”, in *France's Foreign and Security Policy under President Macron*, ed. Ronja Kempin, SWP Research Paper 2021/RP 04, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], 28 May 2021): 15–20, doi:10.18449/2021RP04; Michel Duclos, *The Libyan Crisis: a Russia–Turkey–France Triangle*, (Paris: Institut Montaigne, 30 June 2020), <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/libyan-crisis-russia-turkey-france-triangle> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>18</sup> Jana Jabbour, *France vs. Turkey in the EastMed: A Geopolitical Rivalry between a 'Keeper' of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power*, Briefings de l'Ifri (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), 06 May 2021),

France's Ministry of Armed Forces' 2021 Strategic Review provides a succinct French perspective on Turkey:

“The American refocus on rivalry with China is also bolstering the confidence of countries such as Iran and Turkey, which are seeking to assert themselves as regional powers and are tempted to seize strategic opportunities to consolidate their status or advance their interests, at the price of growing adventurism. In so doing, these countries are participating in the contestation of the world order in the same way as Russia and China, or even in concert with them. Indeed, while these powers are often competitors, they have at the same time shown that they can overcome their divergences in order to squeeze out Western powers. This trend, of which the Astana format (Russia, Turkey, Iran) on Syria is the most significant illustration, can be seen in a large number of crises: Libya, Venezuela, Afghanistan, etc. It further weakens international and regional organisations by developing transactional models for resolving crises.”<sup>19</sup>

This unambiguous assessment was no doubt influenced by the hostility and outright conflict between Ankara and Paris, which reached its zenith in June 2020, when a French warship under NATO command was allegedly harassed by Turkish vessels.<sup>20</sup> From a French view, such actions justify “containing Turkey's expansionism and countering its ‘imperial fantasies’.”<sup>21</sup>

The acrimony between both governments has escalated into public spats. Following the assassination of the French history teacher Samuel Paty by an Islamist extremist in Paris in October 2020, Erdoğan seemingly condoned the murder, arguing that the French Republic's principle of *laïcité* or laicism/secularism and more generally an “anti-Islam agenda” had contributed to the murder. When Macron defended secularism and the freedom of expression, Erdoğan called for a boycott of French products.<sup>22</sup> It was only in late 2021 that tensions started to ease and both sides decided to resume regular political consultations. The rapprochement continued following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which encouraged military and diplomatic cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

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[https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/jabbour\\_france\\_vs\\_turkey\\_eastmed\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/jabbour_france_vs_turkey_eastmed_2021.pdf)  
(accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>19</sup> Ministère des Armées, *Strategic Update*, (Paris, 2021): 21-22, <https://s.rfi.fr/media/display/e19540ea-b16e-11eb-b464-005056bff430/210300%20France%20defense%20strategic-update%202021.pdf>  
(accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>20</sup> John Irish and Robin Emmott, “France-Turkey tensions mount after NATO naval incident”, *Reuters* (online), 7 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-france-turkey-analysis-idUSKBN2481K5> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>21</sup> French diplomat quoted in Jana Jabbour (2021): 2

<sup>22</sup> Güney Yildiz, *Turkish-French Culture War over Islamist Radicalism and Islamophobia May Unite Europe against Turkey*, SWP Point of View, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], 6 November 2020), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkish-french-culture-war-over-islamist-radicalism-and-islamophobia-may-unite-europe-against-turkey> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>23</sup> Louis Dugit-Gros, Pierre Morcos and Soner Cagaptay, *French-Turkish Relations: Foes to Friends?* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute, 20 April 2022),

While recent French-Turkish relations have been particularly conflicted, the fact remains that tensions have been an enduring feature of the bilateral relationship. Examples of this tension-ridden relationship are French legislation recognizing the Armenian genocide and the resistance of successive French governments to Turkey's accession to the EU. Both of these examples highlight the importance of domestic politics that partly drive public spats between Macron and Erdoğan. Animosity is reciprocal or—as a French official has put it—there is a tendency in both Paris and Ankara to consider the other side as “its best enemy.”<sup>24</sup>

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<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/french-turkish-relations-foes-friends>  
(accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with French diplomat, 20 January 2023

4.

# French Views on Turkey's Involvement in Africa

The following sections will sketch the French understanding of Turkey in Africa.<sup>25</sup> This approach has important limitations. While based on a diversity of sources from within the French administration and institutions (ministries, parliament, army, private sector) it is impossible to represent completely all French policymakers' views. The account may give French perceptions a certain degree of coherence yet it will likely gloss over nuances in views between various actors, including between government ministries and even within them. The following section is based on a dozen semi-structured interviews with French diplomats, defence officials, business representatives and analysts, most of whom are based in Paris. These interviews were conducted between September 2022 and January 2023.

4.1

## Political and Diplomatic Relations

French officials unanimously recognise that Turkey's diplomatic and political involvement in Africa has been rapidly expanding and deepening in recent years. The acceleration of Ankara's growing diplomatic network in Africa (44 embassies by 2022<sup>26</sup>), three Africa-Turkey summits and President Erdoğan's frequent visits to the continent are invariably invoked as indicators of Turkey's ambitions and political-diplomatic dynamism.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For a data-based survey on actual Turkish engagement with Africa across multiple dimensions, see Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, Salim Çevik and Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, *Visualizing Turkey's Activism in Africa*, (Berlin: Centre for Applied Turkey Studies [CATS], June 2022), <https://www.cats-network.eu/topics/visualizing-turkeys-activism-in-africa#c8238> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye (2022), *Türkiye-Africa Relations*, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-africa-relations.en.mfa> (accessed 15 March 2024)

<sup>27</sup> For a concise French depiction of Turkey's Africa policy, see Elisa Domingues Dos Santos, "La Turquie en Afrique. Un succès diplomatique de 20 ans d'AKP", in *RAMSES 2023. L'Europe dans la guerre*, eds. Thierry de Montbrial and Dominique David (Paris, Dunod: Ifri, September 2022): 190-193

The period since 2010 is acknowledged as a particularly active one, kicked off by Ankara's forays into war-torn Somalia, which is sometimes described as an early laboratory for Turkey's subsequent Africa policy. It was in Somalia that Ankara first put in place its various foreign policy tools that would later embody a comprehensive approach toward Africa. Indeed, French officials are well aware of the significant diversity of the Turkish engagement in terms of policies (economic, cultural, defence and political), actors (government and associated agencies, private and semi-private companies, foundations and NGOs) and instruments (diplomacy and soft power, bilateral cooperation, aid and exports of military hardware).

There is less certainty over the question of whether Turkey has a clearly defined strategic approach toward Africa. While most French interlocutors regard economic interests as the main driver of Ankara's involvement, a more comprehensive strategic approach is also sometimes depicted. Some French pundits attest that Ankara is strategically active in Africa in order to reinforce Turkey's international prestige and status. In this view bolstering ties with African countries matters for Ankara's ambitions to become more than just a regional power. As its activism is widening beyond the confines of its immediate regional neighbourhood, Turkey looks for diplomatic support on bilateral levels and in international organizations. Africa matters in this regard not only on account of the number of countries on the continent, but also its increasing international agency and assertiveness.

Some in Paris view Turkey's conquering foreign markets as the second (or, according to some, even the first priority) of Turkey's involvement in Africa. Ankara's rapid inroads on the continent in various sectors (construction, energy, mining, defence) and the entanglement between many of the leading Turkish companies with projects in Africa and the Erdoğan regime give this dimension particular importance. French onlookers also suspect that Erdoğan's intent to liquidate his biggest domestic rival—the Gülen movement—play into Ankara's strategic foreign policy with regards to Africa. As Anatolian co-religious who utilize Islamism in politics, the Gülenists were allied domestically with the Erdoğan-led state from 2002 until 2013. However, in 2013, the Erdoğan regime and the Gülen movement fell out as both sides sought to dominate Turkish politics following the Gezi Park protests. After the failed coup against Erdoğan in 2016, Gülenists were implicated in plotting the coup and the Erdoğan regime began mass arrests against Gülen movement members in Turkey.<sup>28</sup> Outside of Turkey, the Gülen movement has extensive educational institutions and businesses in many nations in Africa.<sup>29</sup> It is against these Gülenist businesses and schools in Africa that French policymakers posit the Turkish state has strategic plans

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<sup>28</sup> Sean David Hobbs, *The Turkish Olympics: Festival into the Gulen Movement* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo, Master's Thesis, September 2016), <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/583/> (accessed 15 March 2024)

<sup>29</sup> Sean David Hobbs "Gülen Refugees Feel Lucky in Egypt", *Al-Ahram Weekly* (online), 6 July 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170709141108/http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/20409.aspx> (accessed 15 March 2024)

to close or possess. By forging new relationships with African governments and brokering extradition agreements with several African countries, Ankara has been able to take control of significant portions of the Gülen Movement's educational and business network. Yet — despite successes in some countries — a number of African nations such as Nigeria and South Africa are said to be reluctant to cooperate in sending dissident Gülen Movement - supporting Turks back to Turkey for prosecution in Turkish courts by the Erdoğan regime.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, some French officials suspect that Ankara strategically plans to become a rival power, intent on engaging in competition, with some countries and at least in some areas. While this is not a unanimous view, some policymakers believe that France is a target of a Turkish power play, mostly in Libya.<sup>31</sup>

## 4.2

# The Strategies behind Turkey's Actions in Africa

Those in Paris who think of Turkey's Africa policy as strategic — that is planned — tend to point to Somalia, where Ankara has deployed a multi-faceted and expanding approach over time. Yet, French officials admit it is difficult to understand all of the motives behind Turkey's heavy involvement in the Horn of Africa nation.

Kicked off by Erdoğan's high-profile visit in 2012, French onlookers record that Turkish engagement in Somalia first built on a sustained humanitarian push, framed in the guise of solidarity from one friendly and generous Islamic nation to a fellow Islamic nation torn by civil war. High visibility projects such as the construction of schools and hospitals followed suit, which generated significant local goodwill. In the next phase, Turkish engagement expanded into the realm of economic and business affairs, drawing in Turkish companies in search of markets and investment opportunities. The final step of Turkey's involvement was the emergence of a comprehensive security and defence partnership. This has included military training programs and financial support for the Somali army and the construction of a Turkish military base, Camp Turksom, in Mogadishu. According to this narrative, Somalia stands as a striking example of Turkey's evolving international ambitions in Africa and beyond, implemented by many Turkish actors (aka Team Turkey) in the pursuit of strategic aims.

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<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with French defence official, October 2022

<sup>31</sup> Sümübül Kaya, *La stratégie multisectorielle en Libye. Porte d'entrée en Méditerranée orientale et en Afrique* (Paris: Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire [IRSEM], November 2022), [étude-irsem-100-kaya-turquie.pdf](#) (accessed 08 November 2023)

However, another reading of Turkish policy by Paris -based observers doubts whether Ankara's sub-regional outreach follows a set of predetermined strategic interests. This organic view of Turkish foreign policy states that while such interests may not be secondary, planned interests co-exist with an opportunity-driven rationale. That is, Turkey naturally seeks to use its comparative advantages over the weaknesses of its competitors in certain countries and areas. The claim is that there is a disproportionate Turkish engagement in four areas: i) fragile and conflict-affected countries, ii) internationally contested countries or regimes, iii) mineral rich countries and iv) countries with heavy public sector investments where building projects offer Turkey and its companies significant opportunities. Underpinning this mapping is the argument that Turkey may have advantages compared to Western countries that struggle to have a coherent policy in places like Somalia and Libya. While the examples of Somalia and Libya may correspond to Ankara's strategic planning, the typology is less persuasive in accounting for Turkey's wide-ranging engagement in other African countries. What is more, a fair number of African countries may exhibit one of these four characteristics.

A widely recognized aspect of Turkish diplomacy toward Africa is its underlying narrative, which seeks to carve out a distinct place for Turkey as a partner of African nations. In the most basic terms, this story conveys the message that Turkey's defining features set it apart from both the old colonial European powers and the other major actors, notably China or Russia. While the former are represented as declining and discredited powers, Africa's relationships with the latter may be partial and asymmetrical. Ankara's message is that it embodies a Third Way. The view is that the promise of a more credible win-win partnership, especially a more balanced relationship in the economic realm bolsters Turkey's attractiveness as a partner different from overbearing China or the compromised former colonisers. An element that adds credibility to Turkey's Third Way narrative is its emphasis on the common cultural ties it shares with large segments of societies in West, North and East Africa. Depicting itself as an Islamic, non-Arab country, Ankara seeks to mobilise soft power in the guise of common cultural traits that no other outside power has at its disposal.

From the French perspective, the Turkish narrative in Africa is problematic insofar as it is often not restricted to self-promotional discourse. Instead, some French observers accuse Ankara of concerted and hostile efforts to denigrate France's image in Africa. Implicitly, this is most evident in Ankara's efforts to sell itself to African nations as a country without a colonial past in Africa as opposed to France. Explicitly, Turkish officials allude to France's colonial or neo-colonial approach, even inviting France to follow the Turkish soft-power approach to Africa, as Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu advised his French counterpart, Catherine Colonna, during a joint press conference in September 2022.<sup>32</sup> French officials are further irked when Turkish

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<sup>32</sup> "la France devrait prendre l'approche de la Turquie envers l'Afrique comme exemple", *TVNET* (online), 10 September 2022, <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-&q=la+France+devrait+prendre+l%E2%80%99approche+de+la+Turquie+envers+l%E2%80%99Afri>



government representatives describe France as Islamophobic.<sup>33</sup> This is perceived as an interference in France's domestic affairs and as the utilization of French domestic conflict for domestic and geo-political purposes inside and outside of Turkey. Against the backdrop of the assassination of Samuel Paty, French diplomats have expressed concern that Turkish accusations of French Islamophobia encourage violent extremists to carry out attacks against French citizens, in France and Africa.

While provocations of France may be part of the Turkish diplomatic toolbox in Africa, some French officials claim that Ankara goes further than simple provocations. They accuse Turkey of disinformation campaigns that specifically target France's presence in Africa. These policymakers allege that since 2018, bots controlled by Erdoğan's party—the Justice and Development Party or AKP have spread false information about France in Algeria and the Sahel. During his state visit to Algeria in 2022, President Macron voiced these allegations publicly, denouncing disinformation efforts by foreign powers to denigrate France's image in Africa, singling out China, Russia and Turkey.<sup>34</sup>

However, most officials tend to minimize Turkey's role in disinformation campaigns, arguing that such efforts have subsided since the height of the bilateral French-Turkish crisis in 2020. What is more, Turkish disinformation activities pale in comparison to Russia's information warfare, especially in the Central African Republic and the Sahel. Turkish discourses about France in Africa may represent manipulative influence operations rather than disinformation, at least for the time being.

Finally, a widely recognized feature of the Turkish presence in Africa is its relatively high visibility. This is attributed to infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance, development aid as well as public diplomacy and communication efforts. While the pervasive presence of the proverbial Turkish flag may be anecdotal, it is an often acknowledged marker of Turkey's Africa policy, notably concerning Somalia. In equal measure, French observers express admiration and frustration at Turkish advances in Africa. They admire Turkey because Turkish visibility in Africa speaks to the performative aspect of effective Turkish diplomacy which succeeds in generating significant prominence with often modest actual engagement. French government members complain that France, the EU and its member states perform comparatively poorly in this regard. As one diplomat explained, despite frequently mobilizing more support than Turkey in favour of African partners, the Europeans do so without

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[que+comme+exemple+TVNET#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:61810762,vid:4qFz6L-koi0,st:0](#) (accessed 27 February 2024)

<sup>33</sup> "Erdogan blasts Macron and 'Islamophobia' in Europe", *Deutsche Welle* (online), 24 October 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-says-macron-needs-mental-treatment-blasts-europes-islamophobia/a-55385180> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>34</sup> Adlène Meddi, "Ankara juge « inacceptables » les propos de Macron à Alger", *Le Point* (online), 28 August 2022, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/ankara-juge-inacceptables-les-propos-de-macron-a-alger-28-08-2022-2487587\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/ankara-juge-inacceptables-les-propos-de-macron-a-alger-28-08-2022-2487587_3826.php) (accessed 08 November 2023)

attaining a similar degree of visibility, much less translating their assistance into political gains.

### 4.3

## Defence and Security Policy

French military and defence officials tend to express more critical views of Turkey than is the case among diplomats. This is no doubt the result of significant military tensions between the two countries in the Mediterranean Sea, which in one instance almost led to a direct armed confrontation. Another reason is the frequently invoked fact that Turkey is a NATO member state and therefore nominally a military ally. However, as one advisor stated, “Turkey does not have the attitudes of an ally.”<sup>35</sup> As such, Turkey is often viewed as a bad-faith actor in NATO. French defence staff gives evidence of Turkey’s oppositional stance in NATO, namely Ankara’s obstruction of Sweden’s entry into the organization.

Since 2020, defence and security cooperation has become an additional layer of Turkey’s growing footprint in Africa.<sup>36</sup> This is a relevant development given France’s own long-standing and intense military involvement in Africa. Although its military presence is declining, France maintains four military bases on the African continent (in Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon and Senegal) with a total of 3,100 soldiers.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, although the number of military advisors in Africa has dropped over the past two decades, France maintains a substantial defence cooperation network across the continent that is unrivalled (with some 200 official military advisors in 2016).<sup>38</sup> France provides a dense network of long-term advisers deployed to and embedded in a range of military and security institutions in Africa such as defence ministries, military headquarters and defence academies.

From the French perspective, Turkey remains for the time being a modest, but emerging defence cooperation player with significant potential. This is particularly true in the realm of exports of Turkish-made military hardware such as Unmanned

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<sup>35</sup> Author’s interview, 21 October 2022

<sup>36</sup> Federico Donelli, *UAVs and Beyond: Security and Defence Sector at the Core of Turkey’s Strategy in Africa*, Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 02 (Berlin: Megatrends Afrika, March 2022), [https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA\\_PB02\\_2022\\_Donelli\\_UAVs\\_and\\_beyond.pdf](https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA_PB02_2022_Donelli_UAVs_and_beyond.pdf) (accessed 08 November 2023); Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, *Unpacking Turkey’s Security Footprint in Africa*, SWP Comment 2022/C 42 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], 30 June 2022), doi:10.18449/2022C42

<sup>37</sup> Ministère des Armées, *Forces prépositionnées* (Paris, 2023), <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/forces-prepositionnees> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>38</sup> Aline Leboeuf, *Coopérer avec les armées africaines*, Études de l’Ifri. Focus stratégique, no. 76 (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales [Ifri], 23 October 2017): 27, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/etudes-de-lifri/focus-strategique/cooperer-armees-africaines> (accessed 08 November 2023)

Aerial Vehicles (UAVs or drones), helicopters, armoured vehicles and weapons. These exports have become not only the most important vector of its defence cooperation, but increasingly present a potent tool of political and diplomatic influence.<sup>39</sup> The sale of armed drones to Francophone countries such as Mali, Niger, Togo and Tunisia has not gone unnoticed by French military officials. These officials acknowledged that such moderately priced weapons systems are useful for states that struggle to deal with a variety of security challenges, notably jihadist insurgencies. Selling such defence systems makes Turkey an increasingly attractive partner. One potential source of concern for French onlookers is the increasing stakes of Turkish companies in the management of airports and airspace, which may have repercussions for the French military regarding access to infrastructure and flight authorizations.

A second area of defence cooperation between Turkey and African countries is military formation and education. While the scale of this cooperation remains unknown, it is generally perceived to be modest for the time being. However, this cooperation may accelerate in tandem with the procurement of military hardware. In the long run, a sustained and expanding cooperation involving military schools and academies may provide Turkey with a significant network of connected and Turkish-trained African senior officers and defence officials which may rival France's network of French-trained African defence officials. Paris has recently announced its intention to double the number of places reserved for African officers in French military academies, recognizing that this is an important tool of influence.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, and reinforcing the general observation about Somalia's exceptional status with regards to Turkey, many French military officials discussed with detached interest the building of Camp Turksom in 2017 and the contingent of 400 Turkish soldiers deployed there to train and advise the nascent and struggling Somali army's fight against the Al Shahaab insurgency. Despite being intrigued by Turkish advances in the Horn of Africa country, most French observers argue that large-scale French military involvement in Somalia is unlikely.

Ultimately, Turkey's emerging role in security and defence in Africa does not seem to be a major concern among most officials in Paris. This may be surprising given the depth of French military and defence interests in Africa, as well as recent troubles in West Africa. Yet, many argue that Turkey's defence policies in Africa remain relatively limited. Shows of force like the much-publicised Africa tour of the Barbaros Turkish Naval Task Group, which visited 24 African countries in 2014, have not been

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<sup>39</sup> Federico Donelli, *UAVs and Beyond: Security and Defence Sector at the Core of Turkey's Strategy in Africa*, Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 02 (Berlin: Megatrends Afrika, March 2022): 127-143; Brendan J. Cannon, "Turkey's Military Strategy in Africa", in *Turkey in Africa. A New Emerging Power?*, eds. Elem Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu and Ali Onur Tepeciklioğlu (London, 2021); Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, 2022

<sup>40</sup> Laurent Lagneau, "Influence : Les écoles militaires françaises vont doubler leurs capacités d'accueil d'élèves africains", *zone militaire opex360.com*, 22 April 2023, <https://www.opex360.com/2023/04/22/influence-les-ecoles-militaires-francaises-vont-doubler-leurs-capacites-daccueil-deleves-africains/> (accessed 08 November 2023)

repeated.<sup>41</sup> More importantly, onlookers argue that France and Turkey have few conflicts of interest and are not in direct competition with one another — with the notable exception of Libya. Regarding military industries and arms exports to African leaders, French officials observe that Paris has few stakes in these kinds of arms sales.

French companies simply lack products that are competitive in African markets due to the French corporations' higher costs. For instance, Paris has no French-built drones to pitch against Turkey's drones in a price war. In fact, there is little military hardware French makers could offer as an alternative to Turkish defence products.<sup>42</sup> Limited industrial capacities and stocks are another constraint. As a result, Turkey's evolving cooperation with African countries has no "crowding out effect" on France. Things would be perceived quite differently if Turkey were to build a military base in a Francophone West African country. Rumours in 2021 that Turkey could establish such a base in northern Niger raised alarm bells in Paris.

Except for Russia, French officials presently claim that the diversification of external partners by African states is legitimate and understandable and does not necessarily result in a conflict-ridden zero-sum game. What is more, a lesser degree of visibility and exposure is also convenient for Paris at a time when it seeks to embrace a more discreet profile in the region. Rightly or wrongly, French officials remain confident that there is still a strong demand for military cooperation with Paris from many states in the region.

## 4.4 Economic Dimensions

Economic interests are a major driver of Turkish involvement in Africa, some even consider it to be the predominant objective. Turkey's economic engagement with African countries is often seen as dynamic and comprehensive. This is evident from the enormous publicity that Ankara's export of drones and other arms have produced in Africa and across the world, which is likely to translate into political influence. However, Turkey's business acumen is also discernible in numerous high-profile infrastructure projects. In Senegal's capital Dakar, the Turkish company Summa completed the construction of the new airport. Then Summa went on to build an

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<sup>41</sup> Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar (2022): 2

<sup>42</sup> The first French-built (unarmed) drone was built in 2023. See Anne Bauer, "La DGA certifie enfin le drone tactique Patroller", *Les Echos*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/air-defense/la-dga-certifie-enfin-le-drone-tactique-patroller-1908058> (accessed 08 November 2023)

international conference centre, hotels and most recently, a football stadium, all in record time.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, the extent of Turkish inroads is relative as the example of trade suggests. Turkey's trade with Africa has grown from \$4.3 billion in 2000 to \$27.7 billion in 2021. While this reflects dynamic growth, it means that Turkey's share in Africa's external trade is just 2.4 per cent (in 2000 it was 1.6 per cent).<sup>44</sup> Likewise, and similar to France, Turkey's commercial exchanges with North Africa far exceed those with Sub-Saharan Africa, the former presenting 68 per cent of the total. There is a common perception among French observers that Ankara's emphasis is squarely placed on North Africa, followed by the Horn of Africa. The countries of the Gulf of Guinea come a distant third, followed by the Sahel. To an extent, this Turkish sub-regional focus on North Africa reflects historical ties as well as economic interests.

According to French business representatives, Turkish transactions with Africa show a number of characteristics. Turkish companies are often involved in large operations, meaning a turnover of \$100 to \$150 million. This is often the case with public works such as infrastructure construction like conference centres, stadiums and airports. Turkish businesses have acquired a reputation for delivering excellent value for money. French observers concede that Turkish businesses deliver higher quality than Chinese companies, but are less expensive than French companies, many of which have long lost their stakes in the market.

So far Turkish companies focus on the acquisition and execution of projects, rather than seeking a durable implementation through the creation of local subsidiaries. They derive a distinctive advantage from being able to mobilize Turkish finance (Eximbank, Islamic banks) to set up these projects. This is somewhat similar to Chinese companies that draw on national banks and institutions to provide funding and insurance. The competitiveness of Turkish companies is not based on cutthroat prices, but instead on speed, quality and ease of access to finance. Thus, they are much faster and more efficient than French and other European companies. European companies have to consider corporate social responsibility as well as compliance standards required by banks, funding organizations such as Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and scrutiny from NGOs. Taken together these factors increase perceptions of risks, particularly among companies newly interested in African markets.

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<sup>43</sup>Théo du Couëdic, "Senegal: Turkish multinational Summa is building a reputation", *The Africa Report*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.theafricareport.com/210836/senegal-turkish-multinational-summa-is-building-a-reputation/> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>44</sup>Calculations based on United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/datacentre/> (accessed 15.03.2024), which show half of France's trade with Africa (2021: \$54.9 billion) though this has been declining in recent years.

Finally, a defining feature of Turkish business transactions in Africa is businesses “relational advantages.” This connotes political and diplomatic backing from their national government that French companies claim not to have in equal measure, despite the economic diplomacy initiative launched by Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius in 2015. Indeed, many of the most important Turkish companies have close ties to the Erdoğan government, sometimes even family bonds such as Bayraktar. These companies constitute a business network that is tied into a mutually beneficial relationship with President Erdoğan. Political backing abroad opens doors, facilitates market entry and allows Turkish companies to win public tenders.

Overall, Turkish business and commercial interests are not perceived as a particular challenge in their own right or even as a cause of diminishing French shares in Africa’s markets. Yet, French economic stakes—particularly south of the Sahara—have followed a downward trend for some time. The declining interests of French companies and investors on the continent create spaces for other competitors, such as those that come from Turkey.

## 4.5 Development Policy

Development aid and humanitarian assistance provide perhaps the most compelling example of Turkey’s savvy public diplomacy and its ability to convert modest investments into sizable impacts in terms of geo-political visibility. French policymakers acknowledge these Turkish humanitarian achievements sometimes with envy and compare them to French or European efforts, which, in many instances, failed to translate substantial aid into corresponding degrees of visibility and political influence.

French perceptions about Turkey’s relatively modest aid footprint are borne out by numbers.<sup>45</sup> While it is true that Turkey is a significant donor of aid and humanitarian assistance globally, it provides the vast bulk of its aid to the Middle East (\$7.5 billion or 93 per cent of its bilateral aid), in particular to Syria. Only two African countries—Somalia and Tunisia—are among its Top-10 recipients.<sup>46</sup> In 2020, only \$74.9 million or 0.9 per cent of Turkey’s bilateral ODA went to Africa.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, in 2021, total Turkish aid to the world dropped to \$7.6 billion. This was a decrease of 23.7 per cent in real terms and was possibly caused by the crisis in Turkey’s domestic economy.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, Salim Çevik and Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, 2022

<sup>46</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Development Assistance Committee (DAC), "Türkiye", in *Development Co-operation Profiles* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023): 8, [Türkiye \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org) (accessed 15 March 2024)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid: 7

<sup>48</sup> Ibid: 1

If Turkey nonetheless achieves a significant impact in visibility, this may be due to its overwhelming bilateral approach to ODA, which equalled 98.9 per cent of total ODA in 2020.<sup>49</sup> This enables Ankara to maximize the visibility of its assistance by giving direct bilateral aid to governments and projects in countries instead of spreading ODA through multilateral international aid organisations. This performative effect of relatively meagre amounts of aid may be bolstered by the fact that Turkish assistance—regardless of its multiple providers such as NGOs, foundations or state agencies—have a reputation for being closely synchronized.<sup>50</sup> This role is played by the Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), an autonomous agency under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. TIKA plays a key coordination role for all Turkish stakeholders involved in development cooperation, including government departments, public institutions, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. Whereas French NGOs, for example, are anxious to demonstrate their political independence despite public funding, Turkish equivalents are said to wave the national flag, thereby increasing national visibility. Turkish diplomats in African nations have access to a range of microcredits which ambassadors use to further goodwill in host nations. Moreover, Ankara's aid is consistently wrapped in a language emphasizing cultural and religious proximity and solidarity and thus a discourse that insists on Turkey's distinctive identity as a partner of African states and societies.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid: 3

<sup>50</sup> Yunus Turhan, "Turkey as an Emerging Donor in the Development Community: The Turkish-Type Development Assistance Model (TDAM)", *Development Policy Review*, no. 40 (2021): 9

5.

## No Common Ground?

With respect to Turkish foreign policy, French perceptions oscillate between a heavy dose of distrustful scepticism and an overtly critical outlook. The latter, more prevalent among defence officials than diplomats, assumes that Ankara is a force for bad in international politics and is often harmful to French interests.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding African policy, on the one hand, there are those who regard Turkey as a rival and competitor. However, proponents of this view are often careful to point out that Turkey is not a strategic competitor across the board in Africa, but only in certain countries and certain areas. Even then, there seems to be a discrepancy between negative perceptions and actually existing conflicts. Opposing views on Libya are central to negative perceptions, and the same is true for Ankara's hostile disinformation narrative about French neo-colonialism in Africa. However, beyond these cases, there seem to be relatively few, if any substantive conflicts with Turkey in Africa for the time being.

Arguably, this is why the majority of French observers tend to consider Turkey not (yet) as a strategic competitor, but rather as a difficult and *potentially* problematic actor in Africa. Put differently, while these officials recognise the emergence of Turkey as a relevant and problematic actor in Africa, the country is hardly a major preoccupation of French policymakers. This is contrary to Russia, which is waging a campaign against France in the Central African Republic, in Mali and across the wider Sahel region.

If divergences are few and far between, this begs the question whether there is space for French-Turkish cooperation in some countries and in some areas across Africa. After all, Africa is an item on the agenda of political consultations between the foreign ministries of the two countries.<sup>52</sup> If bilateral relations are strained, then it could be worthwhile to explore a more cooperative relationship on a continent where divergences are less pervasive.

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<sup>51</sup> However, most interlocutors acknowledge that these views are reciprocal, thus reflecting a troubled and distrustful bilateral relationship or even rivalry. From interviews between the author and French policy makers from 2023 until January 2024.

<sup>52</sup> "Paris et Ankara vont reprendre leur dialogue stratégique sur l'Afrique", *Africa Intelligence*, 07 September 2022, <https://www.africaintelligence.fr/afrique-ouest/2022/09/07/paris-et-ankara-vont-reprendre-leur-dialogue-strategique-sur-l-afrique.109809238-bre> (accessed 08 November 2023)



In principle, some French officials note that cooperation with Turkey in Africa should be possible and would hold more promise than with China, not to mention Russia. Issues of common concern could touch regional security in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. The fight against terrorism is an important priority for both countries, at home and abroad, and it could be a common concern in Africa. Economic and business cooperation may be another area in which joint projects could be carried out by consortia of French and Turkish companies.

However, little cooperation presently exists and the prospects appear to be dim for joint work between the two nations to increase any time soon. To begin with, there seems to be little interaction between French and Turkish officials in African countries. What is more, many in Paris see no basis of working together as long as Ankara maintains its hostile narrative about France. More fundamentally, French officials express doubts that Turkey is interested in cooperation, be it with France or with others. The prevailing view is that Ankara has no incentive toward international cooperation because Turkish officials think of themselves in the ascent and as they believe Turkey's profile in Africa will only go up in the near future, they do not see a reason in the present to work with French policymakers. The French view of Turkish diplomatic attitudes is that if Turkey has been successful in sharpening its profile and establishing itself as a solid actor in Africa, it has done so largely on account of its strictly bilateral posture, which thrives on comparative advantages that set it apart from others. Therefore, French officials assume that working with third parties would deprive Turkey of its strengths and visibility.

Recent events seem to bear this out. There is little evidence of Turkish willingness to work with third parties on bilateral, trilateral or multilateral levels in Africa. Somalia and the Sahel region illustrate this point. In both cases, large-scale international assistance efforts have produced a variety of fora and formats for multilateral cooperation (UN, Groups of Friends and coalitions of donors to name a few) from which Turkey is largely absent. According to French officials, Turkey has shown no willingness to harmonise, let alone coordinate or cooperate within such frameworks. Instances of Turkish contributions to international efforts are rare such as Ankara's continuous and committed participation in the anti-piracy Combined Task Force 151 in the Gulf of Aden, off the coast of Somalia. Two further examples come from the Sahel, but they suggest the limited and even cosmetic nature of Turkish participation in multilateral crisis management. Ankara's minor financial pledge of \$5 million to the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel states<sup>53</sup> and its insignificant troop contribution to the

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<sup>53</sup> "Turkey announces \$5m for Sahel anti-jihadist force", *France24* (online), 01 March 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180301-turkey-announces-5m-sahel-anti-jihadist-force> (accessed 08 November 2023)

UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) with 2 uniformed personnel as of November 2023 underscores the point.<sup>54</sup>

In summary, one interpretation sees Turkey's absence from multilateral frameworks as a deliberate policy, whereby Turkey seeks to go it alone, hoping to put into sharper relief its profile and visibility. To put it more provocatively: opportunity-driven Turkey will only act multilaterally if and where it has no levers of its own. Add to this significant mutual distrust and there is little prospect for French-Turkish cooperation in Africa. As a consequence, the idea that cooperation with Turkey could help bring balance against Russia or China is perceived as unrealistic or even naïve. Finally, any effort of Paris and Ankara to inch toward cooperation may also be constrained by African partners, which have little interest in such cooperation. In the age of multipolarity and choice, these African state officials would rather draw advantage from the fact that external rivals compete with each other.

However, even if cooperation between Turkey and France or the EU is unlikely for the time being, it does not mean that it will be impossible in the future. Turkey's economic crisis or changes in domestic politics will likely have a considerable impact on Ankara's foreign policy, possibly rendering occasional cooperation in business, aid or diplomacy in the Sahel or the Horn more attractive. This of course requires that both Ankara and Paris (and other Europeans) show a willingness to rid themselves of sometimes confrontational and provocative rhetoric. The French and other Europeans would also be well advised to leave the moral or political high ground they sometimes claim to occupy.<sup>55</sup> The problem is not only that this is shaky ground, it is also the case that such claims are unconvincing to African interlocutors who are increasingly willing to denounce European double standards and look toward Ankara, Moscow, New Delhi, Abu Dhabi and Beijing.

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<sup>54</sup> Altogether 129 personnel served in nine UN missions in Africa by November 2023, the majority of whom served in the UN Mission to South Sudan (18). Some 111 personnel served with the UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

United Nations Peacekeeping, *Troop and Police Contributors*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors> (accessed 08 November 2023)

<sup>55</sup> European Parliament, *P9\_TA(2022)0345. The EU's strategic relationship and partnership with the Horn of Africa*, (Strasbourg, 2022), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0345\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0345_EN.pdf) (accessed 08 November 2023)

As an example, the European parliament recently called upon Turkey "to align with EU policies and to better coordinate efforts with EU initiatives, most notably the EU Training Mission in Somalia, in order to be more effective and achieve better outcomes in terms of security and stability."

See European Parliament, *European Parliament recommendation of 5 October 2022 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the EU's strategic relationship and partnership with the Horn of Africa*

(2021/2206(INI)) (Strasbourg, 05 October 2022),

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0345\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0345_EN.html) (accessed 08 November 2023)

# Abbreviations

AFD	<i>Agence Française de Développement</i>
AKP	<i>Justice and Development Party</i>
GDP	<i>Gross Domestic Product</i>
MINUSMA	<i>UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali</i>
ODA	<i>Official Development Assistance</i>
TIKA	<i>Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency</i>
UAV	<i>Unmanned Aerial Vehicle</i>
UEMOA	<i>West African Economic and Monetary Union</i>
YPG	<i>Kurdish People's Defense Units</i>

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