



## Turkey's Soft-Power Crisis in Africa

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*Since the 1990s, Turkey has been developing its soft power in Africa to support its economic and political expansion south of the Sahara. Schools and other institutions associated with the Fethullah Gülen movement (Hizmet) were instrumental in building Turkish-oriented local elites, raising interest in Turkish culture, and building Turkey's image as synonymous with success. However, the fallout from the 2016 coup attempt in Ankara marked the definitive end of the synergy between Hizmet and the Turkish state. This created a new context in which Turkey's pressures and direct interference in African governments' affairs accompany a revision of its soft-power instruments. In times of increasing competition for influence on the continent, disillusionment about the neutrality of Turkey and other authoritarian newcomers to Africa—Russia, United Arab Emirates—raises the appeal of the EU as a partner.*

Turkey's projection of soft power in Africa, primarily aimed at building a friendly environment for Turkish companies, became increasingly expansionist after the EU-accession oriented policies failed in the 1990s. The neo-Ottoman foreign policy saw northeast Africa as a subject of special relations and held the aspiration of leadership over Turkey's former periphery. As an aspiring regional power and competitor, Turkey expanded this neo-Ottoman approach throughout the continent, seeking recognition of its ambition and Africa's support in international forums.

### **Role of Hizmet in Turkish Foreign Policy**

By 2016, *Hizmet*, a global movement centred on ideas by the now U.S.-based Turkish Islamic-reformist and philanthropist Fethullah Gülen, controlled or influenced some 1,000 schools around the world. Their operations represent an important part of the Gülenists' effort in promoting the tolerant teachings of the movement's founder but also in expanding the economic power and influence of its semi-secretive organisation.<sup>1</sup> Africa became a significant focus for the movement in the early 1990s. A complementary relation was coined with Turkish diplomacy. The state benefited from the Gülenists' roles as "groundbreakers" in setting Turkish-African relations and in finding new markets for Anatolian companies.

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the genesis of the movement, the basis of Gülen's theological and political views, and his impact on modern Turkey and the world, see: A. Hudson, "Turkish Islamic preacher—threat or benefactor?" Reuters, 14 May 2008.

In return, the schools grew in numbers during periods of increased government interest in Africa. Gülen-oriented religious NGOs were offered possibilities for connecting with distant Muslim communities.<sup>2</sup>

Before 2016, *Hizmet* ran about 100 education facilities in Africa—primary and secondary schools and one university—with 80,000 pupils and students. The first schools opened in Algeria (1994), Senegal (1997), Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania (1998) where Turkey already had an official presence. In Rwanda, Togo, Benin, Liberia, Malawi, Central African Republic (CAR), and other countries, the schools served as unofficial “embassies” before diplomatic relations were formalised. They organised festivals, fairs, language courses, trips to Turkey and scholarships, effectively maintaining cultural diplomacy in line with the state’s interest. Turkey’s educational outreach to Africa, conducted in tandem with Gülenist institutions, followed the soft-power patterns tested on Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 1990s<sup>3</sup>: it facilitated entry for Turkish business people (in Africa, those mostly affiliated with the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists, TUSKON) and development workers (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, TİKA).

*Hizmet* built its strength in Africa by blending with the local elites. Many of its expatriated members acquired citizenship in their host country. Schools became locally regarded as the top educational facilities in the area, preferred by the business establishment and diplomats. Their Turkish-speaking graduates became partners to Turkish businesses. In its strategies, *Hizmet* mostly remained a discreet player on the ground. However, there are notable exceptions—the movement is credited with building the largest mosque complex south of the equator, the Nizamiye in South Africa, comprising a mosque, a clinic, and a high school for up to 800 students and teachers. A Gülenist NGO, Kimse Yok Mu (KYM), founded to help victims of the 1999 earthquakes in Turkey, entered Africa around 2006 and built a humanitarian assistance network reaching out to 43 countries. By 2011, it mobilised some \$20 million annually for projects in Africa. It donated *Iftar* meal packages to the poor during Ramadan as far as Liberia, built 2,000 wells, and its doctors claim to have restored vision to more than 30,000 patients. The organisation aimed at building a total of 1,000 school buildings by 2020. In recognition of those efforts, in 2015, the African Union’s (AU) Commissioner for Political Affairs and the KYM Secretary-General signed an MoU to further develop cooperation.

### Other Means of Influence

While the Gülenists clearly led the Africa-oriented soft-power initiatives under the Turkish flag in the 1990s and the 2000s, other, state-controlled, means of influence gained prominence by the end of this period and challenged *Hizmet*’s quasi-monopolist position. First, a coherent vision of broadening Africa’s role in foreign policy came after Turkey’s disappointment with the EU peaked in 1997 and interest in other directions for political and economic expansion grew. The Turkish government adopted the “Africa Action Plan” in 1998, which had a mix of political, trade, development, and cultural approaches that planned to “introduce Turkey to Sub-Saharan Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa to Turkey”.<sup>4</sup> While the inertia for it weakened due to Turkey’s internal political situation, the Africa angle of Turkish foreign policy grew steadily throughout the 2000s, with a merger of investments and aid efforts. In 2003, the “Strategy for Developing Economic Relations with Africa” was introduced and 2005 was dubbed “Africa Year” in Turkey. Subsequently, the AU granted Turkey observer status in 2005 and named it a “strategic partner” in 2008.<sup>5</sup> Since 2008, Turkey-Africa summits have taken place every six years. In 2009, Turkey joined donors contributing to the AU’s budget and by 2013 it became a non-regional member of the African Development Bank (ADB). Parallel to the increase in Africa’s importance on the political agenda, the share of Africans within the international student community in Turkey grew from 2.2% from 25 countries in 2000/01 to 5.5% from 40 countries by 2011/2012. The total number of Africans studying in Turkey stood around 5,500 in 2017.

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<sup>2</sup> V. İpek, G. Biltekin, “Turkey’s foreign policy implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa: A post-international approach,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Vol. 49, September 2013, pp 128-129, 132.

<sup>3</sup> J. Harte, “Turkey Shocks Africa,” *World Policy*, 12 June 2012.

<sup>4</sup> V. İpek, “Turkey’s foreign policy towards sub-Saharan Africa,” [in:] P. G. Ercan (ed.), *Turkish Foreign Policy. International Relations, Legality and Global Outreach*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> B. Mesfin, “The Soft Power Role of Turkey in Somalia,” *Institute for Security Studies*, 22 May 2012.

TİKA, the state agency responsible for humanitarian and development assistance, started operating in Africa in 2005 from an office in Ethiopia. Aid assistance for Africa rose from \$11.8 million in 2005 (2% of Turkey's aid budget) to \$131.2 million in 2011 (22% of its global aid effort). TİKA operates 17 offices in Sub-Saharan Africa, which became the main region of all Turkish aid efforts. The Turkish Red Crescent became instrumental in expanding Turkish influence south of the Sahara when it built a model field hospital in the conflict-ridden Darfur region of Sudan in 2006 and a modern health facility in the Chadian capital in 2008. Turkish Doctors Worldwide helped popularise young doctors' movement from Turkey to Sub-Saharan Africa as a means of gaining professional experience and assisting people in need.

Islamic institutions became another significant channel of promoting Turkey in Africa. In 2005, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited six African member states of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Turkey started to use the Islamic Development Bank and Islamic Centre for Development of Trade to support local industry in Africa. In 2006, the Turkish directorate of religious affairs (Diyanet) organised a first Religious Leaders Meeting of African Continent Muslim Countries and Societies for participants from more than 20 states. Three years later, it launched a programme of training future African imams.

### **Somalia—a Game Changer**

A chance for Turkey to visibly manifest a role as a major player on the continent came with the 2011 famine in Somalia, affecting some 3.5 million people in the country. On 17 August 2011, Turkey hosted the OIC emergency summit where it pushed 40 Muslim states to pledge \$350 million in famine relief. During the meeting, Erdoğan spoke of the response to the famine as a “test for humanity”. He compared the Turkey-led initiative with the West's alleged unwillingness to help.<sup>6</sup> A month later, he repeated that claim during the General Debate of the 66<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly. In both speeches, he presented Turkey as a new custodian of the world's moral obligations towards people on the periphery. This self-imposed role served to justify greater engagement in other parts of Africa. Two days after the OIC summit, Erdoğan embarked on a visit to Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, as the first non-African leader to visit in two decades. The city, just recaptured by AU forces from the Al Qaeda-linked militia Al Shabaab, was considered a no-go area by Western officials. UN and international aid agencies dealing with Somalia mostly operated via Kenya. In this context, the trip represented a major soft-power exercise. With 200 people on board, including Erdoğan's wife and daughter, families of cabinet members, journalists and artists, the mission was twice the size of an average Turkish delegation to an African state. It presented Turkish engagement as more serious and partnership-oriented than any Western-led assistance.

The widely publicised aid effort for Somalia was followed with a further expanding pool of Turkish actors involved in Africa. NGOs, artists, and celebrities mobilised private donations on an unprecedented scale, donating some \$300 million in 2011, on top of \$94 million in government aid.<sup>7</sup> A social movement for support of Somalia built a sense of solidarity, sympathy and responsibility among thousands of Turks. Some 500 volunteers willing to work in camps and medical facilities for internally displaced persons (IDP) reached Somalia before the end of 2011 despite high security risks. Turkish medics turned a former ammunition depot into Mogadishu's most modern hospital within two months. Turks upgraded the capital's airport infrastructure, cleaned up streets, and installed street lamps. In return, the Somali government granted Erdoğan the title “Man of the Somali People”. Street names in the country and even newborns were reportedly named after the Turkish prime minister.<sup>8</sup> Turkish universities were instructed to quickly prepare scholarships for Somali students. The charity KYM helped to bring to Turkey more than 350 students within two months after Erdoğan left Mogadishu (some 2,000 Somalis study in Turkey now). For Turkey, Somalia offered a unique opportunity to “fill the vacuum” by being the first on the ground.<sup>9</sup>

### **Post-Mogadishu Effect**

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<sup>6</sup> “Islamic leaders respond to Turkish plea for Somalia famine aid,” Deutsche Welle, 17 August 2011.

<sup>7</sup> K. Achilles, O. Sazak, T. Wheeler, A. E. Woods, “Turkish aid agencies in Somalia. Risks and opportunities for building peace,” Safeworld and the Istanbul Policy Center, March 2015, p 23.

<sup>8</sup> J. Harte, “Turkey Shocks Africa,” *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> A similar model of making one conflict-ridden country, largely abandoned by the West, as an example of deep and wide involvement (that would look attractive to other states in Africa) was later used by Russia in the Central African Republic.

In November 2011 Turkey re-opened its embassy in Mogadishu, the first country from outside the region to do so,<sup>10</sup> and named humanitarian Cemalettin Torun its first ambassador (a new facility that became the largest Turkish embassy opened in 2016 and since 2017, Mogadishu has hosted a Turkish military base, notable as the first in Africa). Six more embassies (in Zimbabwe, Gambia, Mozambique, Mauritania, Zambia, Niger) opened the same year and dozens more in the following years. Turkey-Sub-Saharan Africa trade volumes rose by 72% between 2010 and 2011 to \$7.5 billion. The soft-power offensive was effective in building a sense of gratitude toward Turkey among African nations.

In 2012, in a follow up to those developments, Turkish Airlines established a regular connection with Mogadishu, the first among the major international players in the industry to commit to such a route. The next year, the Turkish company Favori LLC took over the management of Somalia's main airport.<sup>11</sup> In the following years, a symbiosis between Turkish Airlines and the NGO/expat community in and around the Horn of Africa developed. Its most visible soft-power payoff came in 2017 when French entrepreneur and humanitarian activist Jérôme Jarre launched an online campaign under the hashtag #TurkishAirlinesHelpSomalia,<sup>12</sup> supported by artists and celebrities around the world and promoted by Turkish media. The campaign renewed the perception that the world sees the Istanbul-Mogadishu link as a lifeline for Somalia and a necessary ingredient in bringing positive change to the region. It helped to expand the Turkish Airlines' African network of connections into the world's second-largest, currently serving 48 African states.<sup>13</sup> The Somali experience gave the impetus to expanding language-teaching infrastructure in other parts of the continent: the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) now runs 15 language-teaching and cultural centres in Africa, including in South Africa, Sudan, and Ethiopia.

With trade, educational and linguistic exchange ongoing, Istanbul is becoming a notable centre for African diasporas. In June 2019, for the second time, it hosted the Global Somali Diaspora International Conference. By extending its patronage to the Somali diaspora, the Turkish authorities may attempt to partially channel the flow of remittances towards specific Turkey-friendly initiatives in Somalia. That would win additional influence without investing further funds.

Positive media coverage of the increased Turkish presence became critical to maintaining the pace of extending the Turkish presence in Africa. For this purpose, the state-run Anadolu Agency opened its Sub-Saharan regional centre in Addis Ababa, an office in Abuja, and plans to expand to Johannesburg, Mogadishu, and Khartoum. In its coverage for African audiences, official Turkish media promote the vision of a continuation of the "honest" legacy of the Ottoman history in Africa as compared to a Western colonial mindset. In 2012, the *Daily Sabah* described the UN as allocating only a small portion of its aid budget for actual aid while consuming some 80%, or even directly "stealing" aid funds.<sup>14</sup>

### **Fallout of the Coup Attempt**

The rift between Erdoğan and Gülen was deepening even before the 2016 coup attempt. In November 2014, during the Turkish-African summit in Malabo (Equatorial Guinea), the Turkish president warned African partners against falling into the "double game" played by *Hizmet* supporters. In early 2015, the first attempts to exert pressure to close Gülenist schools were noted in Somalia, Gabon, Senegal, and the Republic of Congo. But it was only after the July 2016 events in Ankara that a fully-fledged state-run campaign was undertaken to eradicate all Gülen supporters—now referred to by the Turkish government as the "Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation" (FETÖ)—from any state and non-state institution. The *Hizmet* networks in Africa were now targeted as enemy entities. Shortly after the coup attempt, the Gülenist KYM charity was forced to close.

Turkey made the push to reclaim schools from the Gülenist networks a central theme in relations with the country's partners throughout the world. African governments, due to their increasingly clientelist position

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<sup>10</sup> "Press Release No: 248 Regarding the Re-opening of the Turkish Embassy in Mogadishu," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, 1 November 2011.

<sup>11</sup> A. Ali, "Turkish aid in Somalia: the irresistible appeal of boots on the ground," *The Guardian*, 20 September 2013.

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/jeromejarre/status/842086732686360578>.

<sup>13</sup> "Turkey emphasizes cooperation, solidarity with African countries," *Daily Sabah*, 27 May 2019.

<sup>14</sup> M. Rubin, "Turkey's Africa Strategy Threatens to Breed Islamist Extremism," *National Review*, 26 June 2019.

in relation to Turkey, were generally more cooperative in closing *Hizmet* schools than others. However, this came at a cost: some countries perceived the Turkish intervention stripping them of their best educational facilities as harmful. Also, this direct involvement in domestic affairs contradicted the long-built narrative of an honest partnership. With the denial of the Gülenist legacy, the very foundation of the Turkish soft-power projection to Africa seemed to be put into question. But the government clearly calculated that there was no more need to rely on the synergy with *Hizmet* on the continent. Other means of soft influence that grew in the last years before this change, and the variety of actors involved, were to make up for any lost support.

To technically facilitate the transfer of school ownership and fill the ideological vacuum left in its wake, the government tasked its newly created Maarif Foundation, with a board of trustees appointed directly by Erdoğan and a number of ministers, to ensure the continuity of “Turkish schooling”, but now in line with government policies. Official media reported triumphantly on the decisions of subsequent African states to transfer the schools to the Maarif Foundation, reported as assisting the African countries in the war on terrorism. The hasty process, though, made it impossible to develop alternative, quality curricula. In early 2018, the Anadolu Agency noted that the Maarif Foundation had taken control of 108 foreign schools, many of them in Africa, including in Somalia, Guinea, Mauritania, Sudan, Senegal, Chad, Republic of Congo, Mali, and Tunisia<sup>15</sup> and the MFA’s Director General for Africa Ahmet Riza Demirer claimed that it was in Africa where the “fight against FETÖ” had moved the “most forward”.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, African leaders openly applauded the transfers: Chadian President Idriss Deby was quoted as stating that the “schools are now in the hands of authentic people, not terrorists”.<sup>17</sup> Somali authorities were present during the graduation of the first students of the Maarif-run schools in mid-2019. A similar stance prevailed in Niger and Sudan under Omar al-Bashir. However, a double game is often played by African governments. Despite its claim that Tanzania had taken over “FETÖ-run schools” in 2017<sup>18</sup>, later, the Gülenist Feza International School network in the country had showed no sign of scaling down, and in 2019, Tanzania was still “in talks” with Turkey on its perception of terrorism.<sup>19</sup> As the head of the institution is a Tanzanian citizen, it was difficult to label it as foreign, thus making it more resistant to external interference. In Mozambique, despite Turkish pressure dating back to 2015, the country’s president, Filipe Nyusi, vocally supported the *Hizmet*-run schools (of which his son was a graduate) in Maputo.<sup>20</sup> During his 2017 trip to Mozambique, Erdoğan was again unsuccessful in urging the closure of the schools as part of the negotiations to open a Turkish embassy and allowing TİKA operations in the country. In the CAR, the prime minister’s wife’s involvement in the management of the Bangui-based Galaxy school, considered the best in the country, and the political consensus in rejecting Turkey’s pressure, helped it to survive. A particularly strong sense of resistance prevailed in Nigeria. A scandal erupted in 2019 after the Turkish embassy in Abuja was exposed as spying on the country’s best school network (including 16 facilities of the Nigerian Tulip International Colleges, and the Nile University of Nigeria) and the capital’s top Nizamiye hospital. Both President Buhari and the regional governments rejected any notion of external pressure as a threat to sovereignty.

Attempts to fill the Maarif-run foreign schools with a coherent syllabus and connect them internationally is a work in progress and its soft-power effects are to be seen. In Zanzibar, a memorial to the “victims of the July 15 coup” was erected to promote anti-Gülenist sentiment. Fears arise from the prospect of using the Maarif Foundation for proselytism (as was the case with Turkish Red Crescent activities and scholarship programmes) in contrast to the minimal involvement of religious curricula in *Hizmet* schooling. This concern relates to questions over the nature and quality of the Turkish religious agenda abroad, as envisaged by the 2013 tweet by Turkey’s ambassador to Chad that Al Qaeda was not a terrorist group.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Turkish foundation takes over 108 FETO schools abroad,” Anadolu Agency, 24 April 2018.

<sup>16</sup> S. Alam, “Turkish-Africa ties at highest point,” Anadolu Agency, 26 May 2018.

<sup>17</sup> B. Augé, “Comment l’Etat turc a asséché les réseaux gülenistes en Afrique,” Le Monde, 29 February 2019.

<sup>18</sup> “Tanzania takes over FETÖ-run schools in the country,” Daily Sabah, 20 January 2017.

<sup>19</sup> O. Sevinc, “Tanzania in talks with Turkey over fight against FETÖ,” Daily Sabah, 23 February 2019.

<sup>20</sup> T. Terzi, “Mozambican president: I will continue to support Turkish schools,” Hizmet Movement news archive, 5 June 2015.

<sup>21</sup> C. Gaffey, “Turkey Offers Support to West Africa in Fighting ‘Terrorism’,” Newsweek, 3 February 2016.

In the area of humanitarian assistance, TİKA, now purged of Gülen supporters, and the Türkiye Diyanet Foundation emerged as monopolists. New, conservative, pro-government, and anti-Gülenist business organisations were set up to replace TUSKON, whose leaders were arrested. The Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD) opened its first liaison offices in Sudan and South Africa and claims to have extended its networks in Africa.

The Turkish soft-power approach focusing on aid, education, and religion differs from models developed by other major players in Africa. In terms of range and visibility, it can be compared to that of China if its iconic constructions (stadiums, airports) are excluded. The Asian giant set up 59 Confucius Institutes in 44 countries in the last decade, mostly for language promotion, and currently promotes its new China Aid flag with a programme of connecting 10,000 villages to digital TV. In terms of visibility, it may challenge USAID, a multi-task U.S. agency rooted in Africa for decades but scaled down under the Trump administration. EU states focus on quality, not quantity: French centres maintain a reputation as top culture hubs offering space to local performers and German political foundation offices are renowned for engaging local expert communities. Russia's focus on military cooperation leaves little space for soft-power initiatives, mostly limited to medical assistance.

## Conclusions

Turkey's rapid ascent to the club of major foreign players in Africa proved a soft-power success. However, its global drive against Gülen-related entities not only reveals internal Turkish struggles but also the limitations of its policies in Africa. Turkey faces a major test of credibility and quality in its offer to the continent. It is uncertain whether the replacement to *Hizmet*-run "Turkish schools" in Africa will play an equally important soft-power role. Setting up alternative frameworks is just a first step in replacing *Hizmet*'s structures on the continent. These activities will succeed only if the new personnel are able to gather grassroots networks of support around them.

Turkey's pressure on African governments is increasingly becoming a hard-power exercise, contradicting its long-built soft-power legacy. Nigeria and Mozambique may set a new standard in drawing the line where Turkish interference is not acceptable. The strength of anti-interventionist (*quasi*-anti-colonial) sentiment within the AU will indicate how the Turkey-Africa partnership format evolves after the 2020 summit.<sup>22</sup> The wider reconsideration of the negative consequences of lending too much trust to authoritarian newcomers on the continent (including Russia, UAE) is possible. With fatigue setting in with the Turkish "ways of doing things" in Africa, a window of opportunity opens for the EU to counter the anti-Western narrative and win back support for closer cooperation. A chronology of summits in which the tri-annual AU-EU high-level conference scheduled for 2020 comes after the Russia-Africa, Saudi Arabia-Africa, and Turkey-Africa summits, gives European diplomacy a chance to exploit controversies that may arise. Supporting African governments in opposing authoritarian states' interference would be helpful in preparing the groundwork for a renewal of the Africa-EU Partnership framework based on agreed values and standards in economic and political relations. The *Hizmet* controversy will not significantly change the perception of China in Africa, which—although about a decade ago Hu Jintao persuaded most of China's partner governments to withdraw recognition of Taiwan—is seen as politically less demanding than the West. If Turkey is to lose leverage over local elites due to a decline in trust in its new soft-power proposals, closer cooperation with Qatar on mutual goals, such as religious schooling, can be anticipated.

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<sup>22</sup>"Press Release No: 150 Regarding Africa Day," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, 25 May 2019.