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Turkey's Faith-Based Diplomacy in Africa: Muslim Leadership and the Useful Western "Other"

Abstract

Since 2005, Turkey has expanded its presence in Africa through traditional diplomacy and religious outreach. This article explores the role of Turkey's Diyanet and other faith-based institutions in shaping its African policy. These actors contribute to a broader strategy of faith-based diplomacy involving religious and cultural engagement beyond official state channels. Turkey leverages its shared Islamic heritage with parts of Africa. It uses institutions like the Diyanet, the Maarif Foundation, and various NGOs to build influence through education, humanitarian aid, and cultural exchange. Under the AKP government, and especially after declaring 2005 the "Year of Africa," Ankara has increasingly positioned itself as a leader of a global Muslim community. Turkey contrasts its approach with Western powers by drawing on historical ties, particularly with North Africa, and highlighting its non-colonial past in sub-Saharan regions. While this has enhanced its visibility and soft power across the continent, it also poses challenges, such as the potential for deepening religious divides. Turkey's African engagement illustrates a hybrid foreign policy model, where state and non-state actors collaborate to advance national interests through religious and cultural diplomacy.

Keywords

faith-based diplomacy, Turkey, Africa, Islamic leadership, religious narratives

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Bringing Faith to Diplomacy

Traditionally, foreign policy is defined as a sovereign state's way of promoting national interests in its relationship with other countries (Ahmed 2020: 787), thus, the state plays a central role. However, in the context of globalisation non-state actors were brought back in the debate on foreign policy, due to an ever growing "transfer" of authority from state to non-state actors (Baumann and Stengel 2014). Foreign policy has increasingly started to be an attribute of international organisations, intergovernmental and transnational governance networks and other non-state actors. Besides acting independently in the international area, non-state actors have started to be included in "traditional" foreign policy structures, foreign offices and ministries, leading to a hybridisation of foreign policy. Non-state actors are not only involved in the implementation process of foreign policy, but are included more and more in all stages of policymaking, from problem assessment, agenda setting, decision making, planning to the evaluation of policy results (Baumann and Stengel 2017).

Diplomacy, as a method of political interaction and technique of carrying out foreign policy (Leguey-Feilleux 2009: 1), is also "suffering" transformations. Already in the 1980s William Davidson and Joseph Montville (1981: 155) coined the concept of "track two diplomacy", which refers to unofficial, unstructured interactions based on persuasion, in contrast with official, "track one diplomacy", which is conducted through official channels and can threaten with the use force as means to support its objectives. While "track one diplomacy" is carried out by government officials, "track two diplomacy" is led by non-governmental actors with access to decision makers, and it consists in off-the-record interactions, outside official negotiations (DiMaggio 2010: 206–8). The nature of "track two diplomacy" depends on the non-governmental actors involved and the issues discussed; it can range from scientific, cultural, environmental, to religious actors and problems.

Faith-based diplomacy is usually considered as a subdomain of "track two diplomacy", when is practiced by religious institutions, religiously affiliated NGOs and/or individual religious practitioners (Wellman 2016: 584). Track two religious diplomats have access to specific religious tools, such as prayer, fasting, quoting sacred texts (Johnston and Cox 2003: 15); and are often considered more trustworthy than traditional diplomats by members of their own faith-communities. By appealing to some of the universal values promoted by their faith, they can engage with different communities and be more efficient

in promoting dialogue, negotiation and peace (Wellman 2016: 584). However, when linked to a specific religious or ideological group, faith-based diplomacy can alienate other communities, heighten tensions, or even generate conflict. Such a dynamic can complicate diplomatic efforts, especially in situations where religious identity is closely linked to political or social power structures. Democracy requires equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, thus, by favouring specific religious groups, decision-making becomes biased, prioritising religious doctrines over rational and ethical considerations. This can lead to the dominance of one religious group, marginalising minorities and excluding diverse perspectives (Habib 2024).

There is a vast literature on the resurgence of religion in international relations (Fox and Sandler 2004; Haynes 2014), supported by empirical evidence. News about Pope Francis' prayer in a Turkish mosque and communion service with a senior bishop of the Orthodox Christian church,[1] or about the establishment of a religious leaders' network during the G8 and G20 summits with the aim to deliver political decision makers expectations, concerns and recommendations of the faith communities,[2] remind us that religion is not obsolete, but it is making an important comeback in the twenty-first-century's international political scene.

Turkey's African Opening

Globalisation and the transformation of the world economy, marked by an increased demand for mineral and energy sources made Africa the arena of geopolitical competition of major and emerging powers (Donelli 2018: 1), leading to what is called in the scientific literature the "new scramble for Africa" (Carmody 2016: 16). This new "scramble" alludes to the nineteenth-century "scramble for Africa", when Europeans started the systematic exploitation of West Africa, dividing the continent into protectorates, free-trade areas and colonies (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou 2011: 5–6).

Historically, Turkish-African relations have gone through three different periods. The first period refers to the Ottoman Empire's relations with Africa from the 16th century, when the Ottomans arrived in North Africa[3] until the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Between 1923 and 1998, the relations between Turkey and Africa were at a low level, almost inexistent. After 1998, with the launch of the World Bank's Africa Action plan, Turkey has become interested in establishing relations with the continent,[4] and, under the leadership of then foreign minister Ismail Cem, Ankara initiated the "Ope-

ning up to Africa policy". This was a component of Turkey's new multidimensional foreign policy vision, partly emerged as a reaction to the EU's refusal to recognise Turkey as a candidate EU member at its 1997 Summit. However, economic and political problems at home prevented Turkey from implementing its action plan in Africa (Özkan and Akgün 2010: 532).

In 2005, under the AKP lead, Turkey's relations with Africa were revived, with the declaration of the "Year of Africa". Investments and aid have started to flow from Turkey to Africa, economic exchanges increased, as well as the number of official visits and partnerships in several strategic areas (Dahir 2021: 29). Turkey's government agencies, TIKA (the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) and AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority), have provided substantial humanitarian aid and development assistance to many African countries. In this sense, in the course of only five years between 2017 and 2022 TIKA has completed 1884 projects in the field of education, health and agriculture in Africa.[5]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is personally involved in Ankara's African policy, being the non-African political leader with the highest number of visits in Africa: 52 official state visits to 31 countries. Turkey's official diplomatic presence in Africa also increased since 2002, from 12 Turkish embassies to 43 embassies in 2021, making Turkey the fourth most represented country after US, China and France. At the same time, there has been a growth in the number of African diplomatic missions in Turkey too, from ten in 2008 to 37 in 2021.[6] Furthermore, Turkish Airlines, a company co-owned by the government,[7] is the airline with the highest number of flight destinations in Africa (Dahir 2021: 28). According to Razia Khan, Africa economist at Standard Chartered bank, the main reason for Turkish Airlines' flights to new African destinations is not necessarily profit, since some of the routes are unlikely to generate earnings, but to promote Istanbul as a travel hub for Europe and the US.[8] In line with its African opening, Turkey has started to define itself as an "Afro-Eurasian state" instead of a "Eurasian country", as it previously did.[9]

While Turkey's capabilities should not be overestimated and are not comparable to those of the US or China,[10] Turkey's policy has a distinctive feature. Donelli (2021: 152) shows that Islam has become one of the most noticeable aspects of Turkey's policy in Africa, distinguishing it from other emerging and major actors who are mostly active in humanitarian and economic fields. Even the so-called track one, or official diplomacy has started to use and display religious symbols, such as organising celebrations for Eid al-Adha in Somalia[11]

or showcasing the word Allah in Arabic on embassy buildings.[12]

Turkey's Presidency for Religious Affairs, Diyanet, is one of the leading Turkish actors in Africa, together with its network organisations. Diyanet, is a state-controlled institution, which has started to internationalise its activities in Western Europe in the 1970s in order to respond to the religious needs of Turkish migrant communities and to counter unofficial Turkish-Islamic organisations banned in Turkey. After the AKP came to power, Diyanet's capabilities and international reach increased exponentially (Saleem 2017: 181–2). Moreover, the 2017 adoption of a presidential system in Turkey brought Diyanet under the direct control of the President (*Diyanet* İşleri *Başkanlığı*).

Diyanet opened its first Counselling Office in Mauritania in 2014, followed by bureaus in Ethiopia and Somalia in the same year, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda in 2015, Sudan, Cameroon, and Madagascar in 2018, Ghana in 2020 and South Africa and Chad in 2021.[13] The services provided by the Presidency include *Qurban* (sacrifice) organisation, Ramadan meal distribution, Iftar programs, water well drilling, building orphanages, mosque and health centres, organising Quran Courses. Religious education plays a key role in Diyanet's activities in Africa.[14] The institution runs scholarship programs for African students to attend Quran courses or to study at *Imam Hatip* high schools and Theology Faculties in Turkey.[15] In addition to these services, Türkiye Diyanet Foundation (TDV) publishes and distributes religious publications in Arabic, English, French and local languages, in Chewa and Shona, Swahili, Luganda and Somali.[16]

The prominence of the Diyanet as a state agency in Turkey's faith-based diplomacy is a distinctive feature of the Turkish approach, setting it apart from countries like Saudi Arabia — which advances its transnational Islamic agenda through organisations such as the Muslim World League (1962) or the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (1975) (Schulze 2022) — the UAE, or Qatar. The aforementioned countries rely on NGOs or semi-autonomous institutions in their religious outreach, which, although (partly) state-funded, are not under strict state control. Diyanet's direct connection to the President and its rising presence abroad enables a fully institutionalised faith-based diplomacy, aligned with Turkey's national interests.

Turkey's religious soft power in Africa is also aided by the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE), named after a thirteenth-century Sufi Islamic mystic, which runs ten offices in Africa. YEE aims to enhance cultural ties with countries based on Turkish language and common Muslimness (Kaya and Tecmen 2011:

8) through language courses and cultural exchange projects, such as Islamic art exhibitions, celebration of Muslim holidays or Muslim students' speaking clubs about Islamic traditions.[17] Another important soft-power tool is the Maarif Foundation (TMV), which carries out Turkey's hegemonic struggle against its former Islamic ally, the Gülen movement, globally. TMV aims to replace and counter the Gülen-linked schools, and runs 191 schools in 25 African countries.[18] In January 2023, TMV also launched the Maarif Centre for Turkish Studies at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, supported by the Turkish Embassy, with the aim to promote Turkish Studies in the continent and academic and policy interactions between Turkey and Africa.[19]

In addition to the official institutions and organisations under direct government control, Turkey's faith-based diplomacy in Africa is assisted by religious NGOs**.** The most active Islamic NGOs in Africa are the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation and Humanitarian Relief Foundation.[20] These organisations seem to be particularly successful in promoting Turkey's own brand of Islam, through their activities at a grassroots level, based on religiously motivated volunteers, who provide sustainable human-to-human contact between Turkey and Africa. Consequently, these types of activities, while supporting Turkey's current policy in Africa, are independently organised and will probably resist domestic political changes in Turkey.[21]

The Hüdayi Foundation runs centres in 17 sub-Saharan African countries, and it organises actions in more than forty countries on the continent (Donelli 2021: 153). The foundation focuses on issues related to family and education. It runs Imam-Hatip schools, modelled after their Turkish counterparts, adapted to the local specific. These religious schools and colleges provide education and employment opportunities to their graduates as teachers.[22] While it is not a state-controlled foundation, it openly supports President Erdoğan's policies at home and abroad. In a press release published on its website in May 2018, before the June 2018 elections, the Hüdayi Foundation expressed its support to the President and his administration, who, in their view should continue via the presidential system to defend the integrity of Turkey, raise young generations loyal to their nation and religion and reduce foreign dependency.[23]

The IHH is another leading Muslim humanitarian actor, conducting developmental work in 43 African countries. In addition to building schools and providing technical and vocational education, it has also run well-drilling projects and the so-called Cataract Surgery Project helping tens of thousands of Africans to regain their eyesight.[24] IHH is also known for building mosques

and masjids in Africa, completing the construction of more than 100 religious buildings up to date: there are 26 IHH-built mosques and masjids in Somalia, 18 in Burkina Faso, 12 in Kenya, six in Sudan, six in Cameroon, six in Tanzania, five in Senegal, four in Chad, four in Uganda, four in Rwanda, three in Ethiopia, three in Guinea, two in Zimbabwe, two in Gambia and one in Mauritania.[25]

Building a Turkey-led, Gülen-Movement Free *Umma*

AKP's former ally, the Hizmet or Gülen movement — led by Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher and businessman, living in self-imposed exile in the US since 1999 — was used by the Turkish government as a tool to project its influence across Africa, through educational and social initiatives.[26] The Gülen-linked schools started to operate in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, opening more than 100 schools by 2013. While initially the movement was running only secular schools, in the 2000s it has begun to open Imam-Hatip schools — Turkey's signature schools that combine Islamic studies with modern sciences[27] — increasing Turkey's legitimacy and effort to raise pious generations.

The Gülen movement was excluded from Turkey's *umma*-building strategy after the failed coup attempt in 2016, the movement being accused of orchestrating the putsch. Ankara initiated a "witch hunt"[28] of the movement's affiliates home and abroad. If in the 1970s Diyanet staff and religious attachés were sent in Europe to counteract the influence of organisations such as Milli Görüş[29] — formerly deemed extremist, currently allied with the government — after 2016 the same strategy is applied to fight the Gülen community.[30] The movement was designated as a terrorist organisation under the name Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation/Parallel State Structure (FETÖ/PDY) and Turkey exported its war against it, pressuring other states to close the movement's schools and foundations,[31] and replacing them with TMV schools. This example clearly illustrates how the use of faith-based diplomacy can create tensions in international relations, by marginalising or even fighting against certain religious actors/communities.

The official Turkish narrative presents the Gülen movement as a threat to the unity of the *umma*. In a speech given in 2018 at a meeting with Muslim religious leaders in South Africa, Erdoğan declared that the Gülen movement killed 251 people in Turkey under the guise of Islam in the 15 July coup attempt, comparing it with Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and asking South

Africans to support him in his war against the movement. He added that the aim of all these terrorist organisations is to divide the *umma*. "In our view, there is no distinction between terrorist organisations, there cannot be. […] We should all be vigilant against the strife of these organizations whose main purpose is to make us hurt each other […] Keeping distance between you and the organization and its institutions, is frankly, of vital importance for the future of the true understanding of Islam and Muslims in this country".[32]

A similar rhetoric is promoted by Diyanet. The Presidency of Religious Affairs has organised the African Summit of Muslim Religious Leaders every five years since 2006, with increasing participation. While in 2006, 19 African countries were represented in the Summit, in 2019, Muslim leaders from 51 countries attended the event. The final declaration of the Summit emphasises Africa's prominent place in the Muslim *umma*, due to its historical, material and spiritual legacy within the Islamic civilisation, and the unity of African and Turkish Muslims.[33] Combating islamophobia and terrorism were also mentioned in the document as priorities. The Gülen movement was named alongside Boko Haram and ISIS, as an abuser of Islam that hides its real face behind the concepts of love, tolerance and brotherhood and threatens the very existence of Muslims. To counter its influence, cooperation with Turkey in the field of religious education was recommended. Moreover, according to the document, the solution to Africa's economic, social and political problems is the *umma*'s "acting together". The declaration makes Turkey's strategy to lead the African Muslim *umma* clear.[34]

"Turkey is a Muslim country, thus shares common spiritual legacy with African (Muslim) countries and it bases its relations with Africa on brotherhood, mutual development and not exploitation (compared to neo-colonial powers).

Turkey is equipped with "sound religious knowledge", acquired from "the main sources of Islam", thus, it is a reliable partner in providing religious advice, support and education.

Presenting the Muslim world's fragmentation as the main cause for internal conflicts in places such as Yemen, Kashmir, Myanmar and East Turkistan, the document highlights the key role of Islam in fighting against "global challenges targeting Islam and Muslims all over the world". Consequently, collective work and the institutionalisation of religion under Turkish leadership are recommended. This idea was advanced in Erdoğan's opening speech as well: "As Muslims, we will always guard the consciousness of the *Umma*, the brotherhood's morality and rights. The artificial borders drawn between us cannot

determine our horizon. Our horizon should encompass Africa starting from our country, and the whole world, starting from Africa".[35]

These claims are highly problematic since they entail an essentialist approach towards religion, in which Turkey embodies the "true", "real" Islamic knowledge, dismissing other interpretations, including local Islamic traditions. Furthermore, the recommendation to institutionalise religion under Turkish leadership suggests a hierarchical model where Turkey is not an equal partner of African countries but it plays a rather paternalistic, dominant position. The document also uses a polarising language (i.e. global challenges targeting Islam and Muslims) creating an "us versus them" narrative, portraying Muslims as a compact group attacked by external forces.

Turkey's faith-based diplomacy goals in Africa are supported by Turkish citizens, who financially (through donations) and physically (through volunteering) back both the state's and non-state actors' actions in Africa. In this regard, Diyanet's official narrative about Africa at home aims to mobilise and persuade Turkish citizens to take responsibility in the larger *umma*, and thus, to ensure Turkey a leading role in the global Muslim community. Former President of Diyanet, Mehmet Görmez, in a speech delivered at a meeting of the Cihannüma Foundation[36] declared that the Islamic *umma* is going through difficult times, listing famine and water scarcity in Africa and conflicts in the Middle East, while stating: "The duty of our young brothers will be to save humanity once again […] Each of us must work to raise the Islamic civilization again. The entire humanity needs the compassion of Islam. The entire universe needs the peace and mercy of Islam. Every young brother is responsible. We must work as hard as we can for this".[37]

Humanitarian work in fields other than religion is also deemed highly relevant for promoting Islam and uniting the *umma*. Religious sentiments and the idea of Muslim brotherhood play an important role in mobilising volunteers and raising funds from citizens regardless of the type of humanitarian work. Generally humanitarian aid is regarded as aligned with Islamic values, emphasising compassion, charity, and support for others. The speech of IHH Chairman Bülent Yıldırım during a meeting about the organisation's Cataract Surgery Project shows the link between health humanitarianism and Muslim unity: "Previously in Africa, white men were opening the eyes [n. performing cataract surgery] of those who had never seen, but in return, they were taking away people's religion. When the Africans learned that the people who gave

them back their eyesight were Christians, they said, 'So, they own science and knowledge, we, Muslims cannot do this'. But now white men are opening eyes again, but there is a difference. Now people say: 'Muslims from Turkey opened our eyes through cataract surgeries, Muslims can do this'."[38]

Consequently, in his view, healthcare services provided by Muslims can lessen African Muslims' sense of inferiority, linked to their colonial past, can make Muslims feel proud of their religious identity and encourage them to act independently. However, the speech is speculative in linking healthcare to empowerment and it also ignores the presence of African Muslim doctors who have provided healthcare over time. The narrative is misleading aiming to create the sense of a greater Muslim unity under the guidance of Turkey.

Turkey's central and vital role in the *umma* is a theme frequently used in the narratives of Turkish religious NGOs involved in Africa. An example in this regard is the Hüdayi Foundation's press release from 18 May 2018, in which Turkey is presented as "the hope of the oppressed and sad hearts and the hope of the Islamic *Umma*". According to the Foundation, Ankara is rightfully exercising its leadership role in the Islamic geography under the AKP leadership.

Turkey's *umma*-building and leading policy seems to be particularly successful in some African leaders' view. Former Sudanese President, Abdurrahman Swar el-Zeheb, in an interview given to Anadolu Agency in 2016 declared that "President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a great chance for Turkey. With him, the Islamic *umma* is approaching its former power and strength again, as it did in the past". It should be mentioned, however, that El-Zeheb enjoyed close relations with Turkey, as proved by his receiving of the TDV's "International Benevolence Award" for his work within "Munazzama ad-Dawa al-Islamiyye", an Islamic NGO active in forty countries across Africa and Asia,[39] thus, there was a clear ideological compatibility between him and the conservative Turkish elite.

In a similar manner, Abdurrahman Şerif, the leader of Botswana's small Muslim community, during a visit to Turkey's former President of Diyanet, Görmez, in 2016, said that Botswanan Muslims appreciate Turkey's effort to unite the *umma*, expressing his hope that one day the entire Islamic world will come together.[40]

Further evidence about favouring Turkey's Islamic leadership in Africa can be found in an article about the Islamic Republic of Mauritania published in the journal of the Near East University's Theology Faculty (in Northern Cyprus). The author, Söylemez, an IHH member, tells the story of his travel to the North

Western African Muslim country. He shares how Mauritanian people were approaching him on the streets to express their gratitude for Turkey's support and called Turkey the leader of the *umma*, assigning Turkey and himself, as the representative of a Turkish NGO, great responsibility regarding the future of Mauritanians (Söylemez 2016: 152–3).

Turkey does indeed have a positive image in Africa, however, according to a study conducted by the French Investors Council in Africa (CIAN) it still lags behind countries like the US — with 37 per cent of Africans participating in the study naming the US as the non-African country they view most favourably— Canada (32 per cent), China (28 per cent), France (18 per cent), UAE (17 per cent), Russia (13 per cent), Turkey being only the tenth in the list (12 per cent) and registering a slight downgrade since 2021, when it ranked eighth (15 per cent) before Russia and the UAE. Turkey was also designated the eighth most beneficial partner outside Africa, another decline compared to a year before when it was ranked sixth.[41] According to this study, Turkey's leadership as a model of Muslim development seems to be challenged by UAE.

Anti-Colonialism and the Useful Western "Other"

Ankara's narrative in Africa has been carefully built on its lack of colonial history in sub-Saharan Africa and on the concept of *pax-Ottomana* in North Africa. Turkey's conservative elite claims that the Ottoman Empire has never followed a full-fledged colonial, exploitative policy comparable to Western colonialism, but it based its relations with peripheral regions on consent, religious and cultural affinities (Donelli 2021: 118). These narratives downplay practices resembling European colonialism in North and East Africa (Melis and Bertucelli 2019: 7) or the empire's participation in exploitative practices, including the slave trade. By focusing on benevolence and coexistence, Turkey crafts a simplified historical narrative that aligns with its strategic interests and bolsters its soft power.

Though historically flawed, this approach is particularly successful considering Africa's unhealed wounds of colonialism. Turkey's policymakers, NGO representatives and faith diplomats active in Africa do not shy away from openly criticising the West, blaming it of neo-colonialism, racism and discrimination. In Turkey's Africa policy the West becomes the undesirable "Other", due to its colonial past, a useful alterity referred to whenever Turkey needs to present itself in a positive light.

The final declaration of the African Summit of Muslim Religious Leaders

in 2019 organized by Diyanet adopted a strong anti-racist and anti-imperialist position, expressing participants' commitment to fight exploitation, discrimination and, interestingly, Christian missionaries, who were seen as agents of neo-colonial powers: "[missionary work] aims to alienate Muslims from their beliefs and values and make them susceptible for exploitation".[42] Erdoğan's speech during the opening of the Summit also had a significant anti-Western tone: "Western arms and oil companies are behind turmoil in the continent. Almost all of those who teach us a lesson in human rights, law and freedom today have a history of massacre, occupation or colonialism".[43]

In his view Western powers (without naming specific countries) continue to promote white supremacy and are responsible for Africa's current problems. In his attempt to counterbalance the West's "harmful" influence, he added that "Turkey does not seek to exploit, like the West, but to increase cooperation with African countries on the basis of mutual respect, equal partnership and justice".[44] Accordingly, the West plays the role of the useful "Other" in Ankara's narrative, as a model not to follow.

Anti-imperialist rhetoric is also present in Turkish state-controlled organisations' discourses, although not always in such an obvious manner as in the President's speeches. In an interview given by Yunus Emre Institute's President Şeref Ateş to Anadolu Agency, he declared: "Turkey's expansion to Africa is based entirely on trust. It is a relationship where we see each other as equals, eye-to-eye. We are building trust in Turkey. Through our activities, we bring Turkey's cultural heritage to African countries, establishing a bond with Turkey based on trust and preparing the ground for opportunities to increase cultural interaction and dialogue. In addition, our representative offices consider the cultural differences between different countries in Africa and carry out activities specific to the dynamics of the countries. We organise various activities such as vocational training courses. To summarise, as our Institute, we value human beings for being human, and we carry out our activities in line with this philosophy".[45] Trust, equality and respect for African diversity are underlined in his answer, and while not directly stated, these values are defined in opposition to distrust in Western neo-colonialism, exploitation and biased knowledge of Africa. The idea of "valuing human beings for being human" expressed by Ateş, hints at the West's history of racism, and aims to enhance Turkish-African relations by adopting an anti-racist stance.

NGOs connected to the Turkish government engage in anti-Western, anti-imperialist narratives too, at times even promoting conspiracy theories. Ac-

cording to an article published in the Hüdayi Foundation's *Altınoluk* journal in June 2021 to mark five years since the failed coup attempt in Turkey, the Gülen movement is named as the main perpetrator of the coup, but, in the author's view, American imperialists are also to blame for instigating and supporting the putsch. The article argues that the US has a long tradition of organising coups with the aim to reach its imperialist goals. It accuses American imperialism, supported by despotic states in the region, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia, of disrupting "the democratic process" of the Arab Spring and ousting of Egyptian Muhammad Morsi. The article explains that after the fall of the Soviet Union the "red threat" was replaced with the "green danger", respectively Islam, and US politicians have preferred submissive corrupt regimes to democratic Islamic countries. The author writes that Turkey is the only state in the region that resisted US hegemony in order to safeguard its national interests and those of the Islamic *umma*.[46] While this article is not about Africa, calling the US an imperialist power that wages a war against Islam, and on the other hand, naming Turkey as the sole Muslim country which managed to stand up against US hegemony in order to protect the Muslim *umma*, is in line with the anti-imperialist and Turkey-led *umma* narrative promoted by Ankara in the African continent.

INSAMER, the IHH's Humanitarian and Social Research Centre, similarly conducts research and publishes articles and reports in Turkish and English on different topics, including regional politics in Africa. In an article titled *France Should Be a Third-World Country* published in April 2023, the author claims that the core of France's ideology in Africa is (colonial) exploitation and without its African "usable, fruitful garden" France would be a third-world country.[47] A poster published on the website informs readers that Western colonialism continues in Africa with another face, providing data on current "dependency indicators", such as the amount of debt of African countries to the West and the extent of Western companies' presence across the continent.[48] Another INSAMER article on Turkish-African relations reads: "it is very crucial to underline that Turkey is not a country following its own agenda or imposing its own baggage to African countries".[49] Consequently the IHH's Research Centre too occasionally adopts the leading anti-colonial, pro-Turkish leadership narrative. However, the INSAMER publications seem to be a little bit more balanced in their content and tone compared to the Hüdayi Foundation's *Altınoluk* articles. Even so, their ideological pro-Islamic/Islamist and anti-Western orientation, is still salient in selected papers and reports.

Though these anti-imperialist narratives might resonate with many Africans, they appear to contradict some of Turkey's actions in Africa, which seem to mirror exactly the type of behaviour they condemn: Turkey became the fourth-largest arms supplier to sub-Saharan Africa; signed an agreement with Somalia which allows Ankara to explore oil and gas on the Somali coast[50] and registers imbalance in its trade with African countries — i.e. in 2020, Turkish traders imported goods to Somalia at a scale nearly fifty times greater than what Somali traders exported to Turkey[51]. Thus, while Turkey's narratives promote equality and mutual respect in its relations with Africa, presenting itself as an alternative to Western dominance, its actions reflect the pursuit of power and strategic interest.

Conclusions

Linking religion to politics hints towards Turkey's increasingly (pan-)Islamist orientation. However, as Başkan and Taşpinar (2021: 3–4) show, Islamism is a "thin" ideology in the Turkish context, having broad, interpretable objectives but no clear cut strategy, allowing policy makers to have multiple action plans and to choose pragmatism, mercantilism and opportunism, while referring to Islamic values and traditions. Turkey, just like other emerging and great powers, aims to gain influence in Africa, enjoying the benefits of its religious identity and Ottoman legacy. In this setting faith-based diplomacy does acquire a key role, enhancing the country's attraction/soft power capacities.

Ankara balances the narrative of partnership and mutual respect with practices driven by strategic and economic ambitions. While in sub-Saharan Africa Turkey underlines its lack of a colonial past, in Northern Africa it points to common religious and historical ties. Consequently, Ankara's ambitions to form a Turkey-led *umma* in Africa are aided by the narrative of anti-colonialism and anti-racism, in opposition with the West's history of colonialism; and the concept of *pax-Ottomana*, or a revised history of the Ottoman Empire, in which the relations between the Istanbul and the Ottoman dominions are showcased in a positive light. While its narrative of equality and anti-colonialism projected through faith-based diplomacy appeals to African nations seeking alternatives to Western dominance, its actions, such as arms sales and resource extraction, align with traditional power dynamics.

Turkey's faith-based diplomacy is not confined to the usual (non-state) actors, or to the conventional tools that characterise the so-called "track two diplomacy". Diplomats and government officials often use the language and tools of

faith in order to "win the hearts and minds" of the faithful; on the other hand, non-state actors, engaged in religious diplomacy, frequently use the language of politics, even in a divisive manner, through open anti-Westernism and even by resorting to conspiracy theories. Furthermore, the state-driven nature of the Diyanet, Turkey's leading religious body and its main tool of faith-based diplomacy, ensures consistency and centralised control that differentiates it from the more decentralised or NGO-reliant strategies of the Gulf states. While Diyanet, sets the tone of the content and reach of faith-based diplomacy, embassy staff, state officials and agencies, NGOs close to the government and their volunteers support Turkey's Muslim leadership ambitions in Africa, by employing the narratives of common Islamic ties, Ottoman heritage while also engaging in anti-Western narratives.

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Notes

1 - See: *When Foreign Policy was closer to Heaven, and Hell*, "The Economist", 3 December 2014, www.economist.com/erasmus/2014/12/03/when-foreign-policy-was-closer-to-heaven-and-hell (last accessed 10 April 2025).

2 - See: *Soft Power of Religious Diplomacy and Tourism*, "Easy Diplomacy", 29 March 2022, easydiplomacy.com/en/soft-power-of-religious-diplomacy-and-tourism/ (last accessed 10 April 2025).

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