

Turkey's initiative toward North African countries between past and current developments



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Abstract:

This study examines the historical and geopolitical foundations shaping Turkey's relationship with North African countries. Rooted in the Ottoman legacy, these ties emerged during the 15th and 16th centuries, when most North African territories were fully or partially integrated into the Ottoman Empire, which played a decisive role in countering European—particularly Spanish—expansion in the region. The analysis highlights how shared religious affiliation further reinforced these connections and contributed to a lasting political and cultural affinity. North Africa's position as an extension of the broader Middle East and as Turkey's immediate geopolitical neighborhood also sustains strategic interaction across multiple dimensions. Drawing on a wide corpus of books and scholarly articles, this study evaluates the evolution of Turkish–North African relations, emphasizing the interplay between historical depth, regional dynamics, economic interests, and shifting international contexts that continue to shape contemporary political and economic cooperation.

Key words: Turkey; North Africa; economic interests; political stakes.

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Introduction:

Historical developments—most notably those rooted in the Ottoman era—have played a pivotal role in defining the nature of Turkey's relationship with the countries of North Africa. This legacy remains evident both in the foundations of traditional Turkish political thought and in the persistence of Turkish communities across various North African states. Compared to its relations with other African regions, Turkey has historically maintained relatively strong ties with North African countries, particularly given that the region was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to address the following central question: To what extent can Turkey's historical relations with the states of North Africa serve as a positive catalyst for strengthening politically and economically interest-driven partnerships amid current international challenges?

Within this framework, the study advances the following hypothesis:

There exists a significant correlation between the historical depth of Turkey's engagement with North African countries and the potential of this legacy to foster enhanced cooperation between the two sides.

To examine this hypothesis, the study offers a descriptive and analytical account of the distinctive relational fabric linking North African societies with Turkish society, grounded in several key factors:

The long-standing historical ties between Turkey and the countries of North Africa, especially the societal relationships shaped by Ottoman presence in Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria—territories that were wholly or partially under Ottoman rule. This presence played a crucial role in curbing Spanish expansion into the region.

The influence of shared religious affiliation, reflected in Muslim populations and their historical interactions with Turkish families who settled in North Africa, thereby reinforcing social bonds with local communities.

The geostrategic position of North Africa as an extension of the broader Middle East—an area regarded within Turkish strategic thinking as forming part of its proximate neighborhood across multiple geopolitical dimensions.

The expansion of political and economic relations with North African states as a key component of Turkey's foreign policy diversification since the 1970s, and the implications of this shift for present-day geopolitical dynamics.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine these factors by analyzing the composite framework that has evolved between Turkey and the countries of North Africa as a continuation of centuries-old historical relations. It further explores how this historical foundation has informed modern Turkish initiatives—particularly

since the late twentieth century—aimed at gradually re-energizing Turkish engagement with Africa in general, and North Africa in particular.

The analysis also highlights the shared interests that encourage the revitalization of relations between Turkey and North African states through a multidimensional and multisectoral approach designed to sustain cooperative political and economic ties. Such cooperation may serve the objectives of both parties by further developing bilateral relations and responding to the pressures generated by current international dynamics. In this context, historical ties may prove instrumental in narrowing differences, aligning perspectives, and promoting the necessity of joint cooperation in pursuit of common interests.

1.The Deep Historical Ties between North African Countries and Turkey:

The historical accumulations of societies cannot be overlooked when assessing the orientations and strategic stakes shaping interstate relations. Past interactions often exert both positive and negative effects on the configuration of new patterns of cooperation—as is the case with the relationship between Turkey and the countries of North Africa. In this context, historical accumulation constitutes a fundamental element that determines the position of a society along the temporal continuum. It can be reinterpreted through political will, which forms a key component of strategic reasoning and significantly influences the validity of future analyses regarding relations between the two sides (Iugan 2016).

The history of Turkey, beginning with the establishment of the Ottoman state under Osman Bey in 1299 and its expansion across three continents—Asia, Africa, and Europe—has profoundly shaped Turkish political culture. The empire's vast territorial reach and the roles it assumed across these regions left enduring imprints on its political references, while simultaneously laying the foundations for new frameworks that today govern its bilateral relations with states around the world. These factors can be highlighted as follows:

Turkey served as the center of a civilization that built a long-lasting political system and extended geographically over centuries through numerous conquests and victories. For example, the Ottomans took control of Tunisia between 982–1574 (Hijri–Gregorian equivalence implied), leading to the settlement of numerous Turkish families. Some historians even estimate that one-third of Tunisia's population is of Turkish descent. This reflects the shared ancestry of many families living in North Africa whose roots trace back to Ottoman settlers who arrived during the empire's golden age (Mercier 1888).

Turkey's spatial and temporal expansion across three continents produced points of intersection between its culture and other surrounding cultures. Consequently, Turkey evolved into a society with both European and Asian attributes. Africa, however, exerted a comparatively limited cultural influence, due to the relatively small size of the Turkish presence and the geographic distance

between North Africa and the Ottoman center. This, coupled with the nature of the protectorate-based relations linking the region to the empire and the limited demographic presence of Turks compared to other Arab regions in Asia, explains the absence of precise statistics on the number of Turks residing in North Africa during or after Ottoman rule, especially following European colonization.

Before assessing North Africa's place on Turkey's diplomatic agenda and the dynamics of influence between them, it is crucial to highlight that the degree of Ottoman impact varied significantly across North African states. Each country developed its own political and social specificity following the formation of its modern structures. Turkish influence was particularly strong in Egypt, unlike other North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and even Libya. The Ottoman presence in the region can be attributed to several considerations:

The tensions in the Mediterranean resulting from Spanish and French expansion and their control over maritime trade routes toward North Africa (Roux 2004).

The political fragmentation and weakness of North African entities at the beginning of the 16th century.

The growing Spanish expansion and its occupation of many coastal cities such as Béjaïa, Algiers, Oran, and Djerba, coupled with heavy taxation imposed on the population, as well as recurrent Portuguese and French incursions throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

The rise of the Ottoman Empire as a protector of Muslims against Christian powers in the Mediterranean. In response to appeals from North African regions, the Ottomans sent fighters from Anatolia to counter European colonial campaigns. The provinces of North Africa were considered Ottoman eyalets, with Egypt being the most important among them.

The fundamental difference between the Turkish and European presence in North Africa: while the Ottomans were present since approximately the 9th century CE, establishing order and administrative structures (as in Egypt), European colonial powers—particularly France—expropriated lands, dispossessed local inhabitants, and settled large numbers of Europeans in regions such as Tunisia (1881) and Algeria (1830). The Ottoman Empire, by contrast, eventually relinquished its rights over Tunisia through the Treaty of Sèvres (Masson 1903).

These historical factors explain why several North African polities sought assistance from Turkish mariners to counter repeated European attacks—especially Spanish and French ones. Among the regions that mobilized Ottoman support were Béjaïa and Algiers, which appealed to the brothers Aruj and Khayr al-Din Barbarossa. They responded to these calls, gradually assuming governance of coastal areas following pledges of allegiance from local populations. During the first

two decades of the 16th century, Spain continued to raid North African coasts, prompting the Barbarossa brothers to resist until Aruj was killed in 1518 during a Spanish assault on Tlemcen. Khayr al-Din then sought the protection of Sultan Selim I, who accepted the appeal, enabling Ottoman military intervention and eventual dominance across the Mediterranean, both at sea and on land, particularly in North African coastal cities (Mantran 1989).

Through direct governance or indirect supervision, the Ottoman administration established a strong and well-organized system that played a central role in stabilizing the region. In Algeria, leadership positions were generally assigned to Ottoman elites, unlike in Tripoli, where local leaders were granted greater autonomy. This reflected the dual practice of direct and indirect rule across the region.

The cumulative historical developments of the 16th, 17th, and even 18th centuries positioned North Africa as a strategic hinterland for the Ottoman Empire. The institution of the caliphate in certain Muslim lands strengthened Ottoman legitimacy as a protector of Islam amid conflicts with European imperial powers. Sultan Abdulhamid II believed that the survival of the Ottoman state depended on leveraging this protector role. Nevertheless, Ottoman involvement in wars across Europe and Asia weakened its ability to maintain internal stability in North African provinces, triggering local political transformations such as the shift from agha rule to the rule of the deys in Algeria during the 1670s (Oualdi 2023).

Despite administrative challenges and ongoing conflicts with European powers (French, Dutch, and Spanish), Ottoman governance in North Africa retained a flexible character resembling a form of self-rule—partly due to the vast geography under Ottoman protection and partly to the empire's emphasis on Turkish nationalism during the Committee of Union and Progress era. Pan-Islamism was employed tactically to counter European colonialism, reinforcing the Ottoman image as a guardian of Muslims and thus preserving ties with Islamic communities.

In this context, the social relations that emerged from Ottoman presence in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and even Egypt—whether through direct or partial rule—continue to have deep historical and cultural roots. These ties remain embedded in the collective memory and social traditions of North African societies, owing largely to the essential Ottoman role in halting Spanish expansion and shaping the region's historical trajectory (Anciaux 2016).

2. The Role of Shared Religious Affiliation in Strengthening Societal Relations between Turkey and the North African States:

Following Turkey's withdrawal from its former imperial territories, the republic consolidated its independence and embarked on a project to construct the "new Turkish citizen," as envisioned by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This project emphasized a Turkish national identity regardless of ethnic background, given that

ethnic divisions—particularly Armenian and Kurdish nationalist aspirations—were perceived as threats to the cohesion of Anatolia. Religion, in turn, was relegated from the public sphere to private life, in line with Atatürk's principle that "a mind open to science is creative and productive, whereas a mind constrained by religion is limited and backward" (Collectif 2002).

This approach contrasts markedly with perspectives prevalent in North African countries, especially Algeria and Libya, and to a lesser extent Morocco. Tunisia represents an exception within the region, historically placing greater emphasis on secularism in its governance model—though the 2019 election of Kais Saïed may signal shifts in this trajectory in the coming years (Oualdi 2023).

Nevertheless, when examining Turkish–North African relations, the role of religion and tradition cannot be overlooked. North African countries share a common history, religion, and set of cultural traditions with the Ottoman Empire and later the Republic of Turkey. This shared heritage is reflected in Ottoman architectural legacies—most notably in religious buildings such as mosques—and has long contributed to cultural affinity between the two sides.

However, the situation evolved considerably during the 19th and 20th centuries. As Ottoman power declined and European alliances pressed against it, the empire was compelled to withdraw from North Africa. Subsequently, all North African states were subjected to European colonization. After their independence in the mid-20th century, their political trajectories diverged significantly from Turkey's, particularly due to the lasting impacts of European rule. Despite Islam's role in fostering a sense of shared identity and common destiny between North African polities and Turkey, several negative episodes during the 20th century strained these ties:

Turkey's recognition of Israel in 1949—one year after its establishment—contradicted the broader Arab position, including that of North African states supportive of Palestine and opposed to Israeli statehood.

Turkey's resistance to Arab nationalism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and North African leaders (notably in Algeria and Libya), despite their emphasis on Arab unity in confronting Israel and building political and economic independence in the Arab world.

Turkey's opposition to Algerian independence in the United Nations.

These developments reveal that the religious bond between Turkey and North Africa was weakened by Turkey's alignment with the Western bloc after the establishment of the Republic in 1923. Although relations with the Arab world—including North Africa—later improved, it was only with the rise of Necmettin Erbakan, leading a coalition government with the Motherland Party that Turkey reoriented itself more clearly toward the Arab and Islamic worlds. During this

period, Turkey became a full member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and advocated the creation of the Developing Eight (D-8), bringing together major Muslim countries from Africa and Asia based on demographic and economic potential. After Erbakan's departure from power, the group's name was changed to the "Developing Eight," yet Turkey continued expanding cooperation with Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Iran across military, economic, and cultural domains (Mercier1888).

With the ascendancy of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in November 2002, a new political elite sought to revive cooperation with the Islamic world and deepen Turkey's engagement with Africa, including North Africa. This shift reflected historical, cultural, and strategic linkages that tie Turkey to its Arab-Islamic environment. However, these relations were not free from tensions. Turkey's participation—after initial hesitation—in NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya, and its later support for the Government of National Accord against Khalifa Haftar, introduced new layers of complexity. These choices were driven by geostrategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Libya constitutes a critical component of Turkey's strategic calculus.

The rise of a globalized economy after the Cold War, coupled with Africa's growing population, has rendered the continent attractive to emerging powers. Transnational challenges—such as terrorism, organized crime, migration driven by political or environmental factors, and other cross-border issues—have simultaneously created new areas of cooperation between African countries and the global community, including North Africa.

In this evolving context, relations between Turkey and the North African states illustrate the interaction between an emerging power seeking to diversify its partnerships and advance its strategic interests, and North African countries striving to forge equitable, non-exploitative alliances that differ from their colonial past.

3.The Development of Political and Economic Relations between Turkey and the North African States

The strengthening of political and economic relations between Turkey and North Africa constitutes a central component of Turkey's post-1970s strategy to diversify its foreign partnerships. Both sides have sought new trade partners beyond their traditional interlocutors—North African states traditionally oriented toward the northern Mediterranean, and Turkey toward Europe. These shifts have been heavily influenced by contemporary geopolitical and economic challenges.

Turkey's remarkable economic and commercial rise in recent decades is largely attributed to strategic rationality supported by pragmatic, phased tactics. Earlier failures—such as those associated with the Committee of Union and Progress—stemmed from the absence of such strategic thinking, as well as

ideological divergences between Islamic, secular, socialist (in North Africa), and European capitalist orientations (André Julien 1931).

Historically, Kemalist ideology contributed significantly to the political marginalization of Turkish–Arab relations, including those with North Africa. Atatürk's priority was national consolidation, which shaped Turkish diplomacy from the 1920s onward and contributed to Turkey's isolationism. Economically, Turkey maintained a tightly controlled, self-sufficient system consistent with its inward-looking strategy. Simultaneously, Turkey's turn toward Europe and its lukewarm relations with the Middle East reinforced its Western alignment, driven by several factors:

Arab perceptions of Turkey as backward—a view that generated deep resentment, particularly among Arab countries in Asia (though less applicable to North Africa).

Historical grievances related to Ottoman rule, which left lingering mistrust, especially among non-African Arab states.

Suspicion among Arab Islamic states toward Turkish secularism, a sentiment also present in parts of North Africa such as Algeria.

Profound European influence in North Africa, due to intense colonization and its lasting linguistic, cultural, and political legacies.

These factors widened the divide between Turkey and North African states. Turkey later sought to overcome this gap by re-engaging the region as part of an outward-looking foreign policy inspired by the republican principle of "peace at home, peace in the world." Yet the evolution of Turkish foreign policy has also been shaped by contemporary global conditions, its historical legacy, and its ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean—particularly regarding Libya and Syria, where competing interests among various regional and international actors have intensified.

Economically, Turkey has become an increasingly significant player in North Africa. Since the 1970s, Turkish construction and infrastructure companies have been deeply involved in projects across Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco. The cumulative value of Turkish construction projects by 115 companies reached:

- \$20.5 billion in Libya,
- \$5 billion in Algeria,
- \$1.4 billion in Morocco by 2016.

Libya alone accounted for 36.3% of all Turkish overseas construction activities. Turkish exports of construction equipment to Africa surged from \$8

million in 2000 to \$264 million in 2011, with more than half destined for North Africa.

Turkey has also expanded its institutional ties with the region. It signed free trade agreements with Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco; established 23 joint economic committees, 17 business councils; and concluded eight agreements to prevent double taxation with African states. According to a UN report, Turkey is now among the seven most active emerging economies in Africa—alongside Brazil, Russia, South Korea, China, Malaysia, and India—participating in 239 infrastructure projects between 2000 and 2010 (Courtinat 2003).

President Erdoğan has actively sought to deepen relations with African states, particularly those in North Africa, amid the shifting dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean, including developments in Libya, Syria, and the broader North African neighborhood—especially Algeria and Tunisia, which are geographically and strategically close to Libya.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean Basin, cradle of civilizations, has long been one of the main arenas of interaction, influence, and exchange among continents at the cultural, economic, and political levels. North African states have been shaped by successive waves of transformation that swept through the region, including the influence of the Ottoman Empire. However, this influence was significantly altered by the European colonial powers that dominated the region from the decline of the Ottoman state—particularly from the 19th century until the mid-20th century. The effects of this colonial legacy persist to this day, as European states on the northern shore of the Mediterranean continue to view the southern shore as their vital strategic neighborhood, even after its independence.

This enduring European presence has complicated Turkey's ability to regain a strategic role as a partner or influential actor in North Africa and the wider Mediterranean, despite Turkey's long coastline on the eastern Mediterranean and its efforts to open up to Arab states in general, and to North African and African states in particular, within a strategy aimed at building bridges of cooperation and trust. In light of this context, several conclusions can be drawn:

The historical Turkish presence in North Africa is generally perceived positively by the peoples of the region, as it is associated with Ottoman protection and the role of the empire as the dominant Islamic authority at the time—thus seen as an extension of Islamic governance rather than foreign occupation.

The legacy of Ottoman rule differs markedly from that of French colonialism, since the Ottomans contributed to state-building in North Africa rather than exploiting its resources.

Strong historical ties remain between the peoples of North Africa and Turkey, grounded in a shared religion and cultural heritage. These foundations may open the door to renewed cooperation between Turkey and North Africa.

Turkish relations with North African states have improved, and the region has become increasingly important for Turkey's bilateral trade with Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and—prior to 2011—Libya.

Turkey represents a potentially important strategic partner for North African states, especially amid ongoing transformations in the region. While complete alignment on all issues may be difficult today, Turkey nevertheless offers a meaningful alternative in a context where post-colonial dependency still shapes many North African relations with their former European colonizers.

Ultimately, shared history—along with cultural and geographic proximity—creates favorable psychological conditions for cooperation. Relations between North Africa and Turkey have generally been free of deep structural hostility, and the religious factor has played a crucial role in overcoming numerous challenges. However, historical heritage alone is insufficient to build a solid intellectual and institutional framework capable of reinforcing trust and encouraging cooperation in all fields.

The responsibility to develop strong and distinctive relations thus falls jointly on Turkey and the North African states. Societies in North Africa continue to value Turkey's historical role in protecting the region from Western incursions and enduring geopolitical ambitions. Yet, contemporary dynamics are increasingly driven by geo-economic interests, as is typical for rising powers such as Turkey. What is happening today in Libya clearly reflects the interplay of international, regional, and even local competition over the future of the region.

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