

The Bilateral Relations Between Somalia and Turkey

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Abstract

The relationship between Somalia and Turkey holds significant importance for both countries. Following the collapse of the central government in Somalia, Turkey emerged as a crucial partner, providing unrestricted humanitarian and medical support. Additionally, Somalia and Turkey have established numerous bilateral agreements, encompassing commerce, oil, gas, and various other projects. Somalia and Turkey exemplify notable international collaboration, having achieved substantial development. Turkey has made substantial contributions to humanitarian assistance and rebuilding initiatives in Somalia, including the establishment of hospitals, the restoration of infrastructure, and the enhancement of Mogadishu's airport and port. Trade relations have seen substantial expansion, propelled by heightened commerce and the execution of large economic initiatives by Turkish enterprises. Turkey has provided significant military assistance by training Somali military forces in modern facilities and establishing cooperation that serves as an exemplary model for fostering stability and prosperity in emerging nations. Additionally, Turkish companies have profited from projects that the Somali government and Turkish companies have implemented.

Keywords: Somali–Turkey diplomatic relations, strategic partnership, economic collaborations.

1. Introduction

The Somalia-Turkey relations have been one of the most persistent relationships not only dominated by commerce and diplomacy but also culture transfer and political partnership (Hassan et al., 2023). This stretches back to the 16th century that came out of commercial, cultural and religious groups (Abdulle et al., 2024). The horn of Africa had earlier relations with the Ottoman Empire through interaction of Adal and Ifat Sultanate. Nevertheless, the modern period of this relationship started in early the twenty-first century, mainly after the worsening of the civil war in Somalia in early 1990s (Hassan et al., 2023).

They eased when Turkey began diplomatic restoration in 2011, making one of the first countries to reopen its embassy in Somalia following years of civil unrest (Hassan, 2022). This reintegration was done into humanitarianism and development partners, and military support which gave insight to Turkey's overall foreign policy with Africa. These include the historic visit of the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in August 2011; this was the first time a non-African head of state was to visit the country after the civil unrest. This visit highlighted intolerance of the Turkish government towards the Somalia plight during this humanitarian crisis.

Turkey's participations extend beyond humanitarian assistance, to training and education, infrastructure and development, protection and investment, security and safety (Eshete, 2024). Current Turkish government has taken part in every area, donating to the Somali relief effort and rebuilding some of its

crumbling institutions. However, there is another humanitarian side of Turkey, in its famine relief efforts in 2011 and interest in stabilizing the region. This participation has not only contributed to enhance bilateral relations, but also put Turkey into prominent role in Somalia's post conflict reconstruction process (Eshete, 2024).

Rugutt et al., (2023) established that, the role of Somalia in strategic thinking in Turkey is shaped by the geopolitical factors in the Horn of Africa. Because of the emerging existence of both oil and gas in Somali territories as well as the strategic position of this country on the main maritime routes, Somalia becomes one of the most important partners for Turkey as it tries to extend its presence as far as the African continent is concerned. It has also been influenced by the other regional players within and outside the horn of Africa, for a share of power in Somalia (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024). Turkey needs to take cognizance of the fact that some big powers like the United States and some of the member country of the Gulf Cooperation Council have vital strategic interests in the region.

Recent years have seen successive high-level visits by Somali and Turkish officials consolidate the relationship (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024). In addition, the ongoing military cooperation is a signal of how Turkey is not just supporting Somalia's stability but also regional security. Thus, even as both countries struggle with difficult regional issues (security and political instability), Turkey is committed to a secure and successful Somalia. The relationship is one of respect and cooperation for long-term development objectives. Both countries will also in the future likely keep growing relations with more cross-sector cooperation and addressing potential external pressures and internal political dynamics.

2. Historical Foundations of Somalia-Turkey Relations

The history of Somalia-Turkey relations has been a story of centuries of exchange, starting with the Ottoman invasion of the Horn of Africa (Benamor, 2024). That alliance has developed over time – trade, cultural exchanges and religious connections have shaped the dynamic between the two continents. The Ottoman presence in the Red Sea and along the east African coast formed early ties that would serve as an early model for diplomatic officialdom (Uğur, 2024).

The Turkey-Somalia relations dated to the 16th century when the Ottoman Empire wanted to expand its reach in the Indian Ocean (Telci & Yımer, 2024). This was when Turkish corsairs joined Somali coastal cities against Portuguese colonial ambitions. Particularly in the 1580s, Somali rulers allied with ottoman troops in joint raids against Portuguese positions in Southeast Africa, this alliance bolstered military connections but also cultural and religious relations that would last for centuries (Coates, 2024). When Somalia came under colonial control in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, geopolitics radically changed. It partitioned between Europeans, with Britain and Italy taking different parts of Somalia. Yet these colonial fragmentations did not erase their historic relationship with Turkey, for Somalis generally thought of the Ottomans as a kind of fellow Muslim, with whom they had cultural and religious affinities (Terranova, 2024).

Formal diplomatic relations in modern times began in 1979 with the opening of Turkey's embassy in Mogadishu (Heibach & Taş, 2024). This was historic because it was the first time that an East African country had diplomatic relations with Turkey. Such diplomatic avenues formed because of a shared ambition to cooperate in all areas of life, such as trade and culture. However, these relationships became complicated with the Somali civil war of 1991. The battle was violent and unstable, and Turkish embassy closed for security reasons (Korotayev & Voronina, 2024). Despite this failure, Turkey continued to interact with Somalia through non-resident diplomats in neighboring countries. Turkey monitored events

in Somalia during this time and spoke out about the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict and instability.

Somalia's turn toward Turkey after the civil war came in August 2011 with the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Somalia (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024). It was a historic visit as it was the first by a non-African president since the outbreak of war. Erdoğan's visit represented Turkey's redoubled efforts to aid Somalia's rehabilitation, and the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries (Karahana & Karahana, 2020). In the wake of this trip, Turkey initiated a massive humanitarian effort following the famine in Somalia in 2011. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) was responsible for supplying aid and implementing development projects in sectors like healthcare, education and infrastructure. This humanitarian intervention served both short-term needs and established long-term development projects to rehabilitate Somali institutions (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024).

The Istanbul Conferences in 2010 and 2012 brought international actors together to brainstorm how to stabilize Somalia after transition. Such conferences underlined Turkey's efforts to place Somalia on the international agenda and build partnerships among foreign players. Over time, Somalia and Turkey expanded bilateral trade since both sides realized that their relations yielded advantages (Hersi & Tekeoğlu, 2022). By 2018-2019, trade volumes exceeded the record levels proving strong economic connections thanks to Turkish investments in construction, telecom and agriculture. In addition, educational exchanges strengthened interpersonal relationships: thousands of Somali students have been awarded scholarships to study in Turkey (Tepecikliolu, 2021).

They also share a military relationship since 2015, when Turkey built a military training center in Mogadishu to help Somali security forces to better fight Al-Shabaab-related actors (Burak & Tutek, 2024). This war only reveals Turkey's strategic stake in contributing to regional stability and consolidating its status as a strategic partner to Somalia. Turkey's military assistance includes training for Somali troops and logistics for fights against terrorist organizations. This alliance has also helped strengthen Somalia's security posture in the face of adversity (Burak & Tutek, 2024). The background of Somalia-Turkey relations as outlined below grounded in centuries-old alliances that have evolved into a successful relationship of reciprocity in humanitarian assistance, development assistance, trade and military cooperation. While both sides are still operating on tangled geopolitical terrains as regions compete and the world cares, their shared past is a firm basis for future cooperation. The continuing engagement on both sides reflects an expectation of security and growth that will likely inform their relationship for many years to come.

3. Turkey's Renewed Engagement in Somalia (2011–Present)

Turkey's new cooperation with Somalia, started in 2011, is the next phase in bilateral ties, and has involved extensive cooperation on a multi-sectorial basis (Hersi & Tekeolu, 2022) and this action has been complemented by long-term socio-economic development strategies to stabilize Somalia. The defining moment in this friendship was a humanitarian disaster, the famine that displaced millions of Somalis that brought then President Recep Tayyip to historic visit Mogadishu in August 2011. The visit represented both Turkey's solidarity in the provision of humanitarian aid and the foundations for a multi-billion-dollar military, economic and cultural partnership (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024).

Among the Turkish contributions to Somalia is its massive humanitarian aid program, launched during the 2011 famine (Altunisik, 2023). It was not just that Turkey supported humanitarian causes but actively participated in Somalia's peacebuilding process (Tepecikliolu, 2021). Turkish government, aided by the

Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), responded with emergency supplies: food, medicine and displaced people. Turkey's aid, it is reported, increased by more than \$1 billion in subsequent years, both in ongoing relief operations and for infrastructure investments to rebuild infrastructure like hospitals and schools. The humanitarian action of Turkey was not a quick solution to the famine; it was an investment in the long-term development of Somalia. Many health clinics, schools and educational centres have helped to deliver basic services to people who have suffered a lifetime of war and insecurity. Furthermore, Turkey's attention to sustainable development resulted in projects that are targeting agriculture productivity and food security, two key priorities for Somalia's reconstruction (Altunisik, 2023).

Alongside short-term relief, Turkey has been engaged in long-term development plans to strengthen Somali institutions of governance (Gök, 2021). Such measures include capacity-building programs that bolster state institutions through training for state administrators and law enforcement personnel (Ibrahim Shire, 2022). These are measures that not only increase security, but also help in the fight against terrorism on Somalia soil. Turkey's first military base in Africa, has not only trained Somali National Army soldiers but also contributed to the local economy through the creation of jobs and contract services with the local enterprises.

The diplomatic strategy of Turkey has been high-level contacts with Somali authorities in an attempt to maintain political stability through dialogue and government cooperation (Gök, 2021). There have been regular meetings between the officials of the two countries to cement political contacts; these meetings produced a number of treaties on defense cooperation and economic cooperation. Among the many agreements signed in recent years were landmark deals in maritime security and oil discovery – sign of a developing relationship that has moved beyond the framework of aid towards increasingly strategic economic partnerships (Ibrahim Shire, 2022).

Furthermore, Turkey has financed some major infrastructure projects in Somalia since re-entering the region in 2011. Such projects have helped Somalia heal from decades of war and instability (Ibrahim Shire, 2022). Perhaps the best example is the development of a new terminal at Aden Abdulle International Airport in Mogadishu, which was opened during the January 2015 visit of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It is a modern terminal, which makes the airport larger and better connected for domestic and international flight making it convenient for Somalis to trade and travel (Ibrahim Shire, 2022).

Not only airport infrastructure, but also Turkish investments in Somalia have largely gone towards health centers. Turkish institutions have set up dozens of hospitals and clinics, offering medical services to groups that had long been ignored (Ibrahim Shire, 2022). These healthcare programs are part of a bigger agenda for health promotion and national healthcare recovery. Besides, road construction has been another essential part of Turkish infrastructure project. Turkish funding and operation of many road schemes to enhance transportation infrastructure in Somalia. They serve as a critical link between remote regions and cities, trading and access to basic services like education and healthcare (Gök, 2021).

In terms of culture, Turkey has attempted to build person-to-person ties through cultural exchanges to foster reciprocal recognition between the citizens' talents of the two nations (Abdi & Galal, 2024). Heritage celebrations are now regular forms of civic solidarity, which is particularly important given the centuries-long links between both cultures. Somali peoples in Turkey are much more numerous, and there are festivals and events dedicated to this special relationship.

Interregional conflict between other nations competing for control over Somali affairs could be the roadblocks, along with lingering security threats from border-based militants (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024).

Turkey has been one of Somalia's security partners in recent years, and in recent times, it has deployed forces to support the Somali National Army (SNA) against Al-Shabaab (Ibrahim Shire, 2022). In 2022, Turkey along with the US had been among the major sponsors of a new attack on Al-Shabaab. This partnership has resulted in the ratification of a 10-year defense agreement in February 2024, which includes maritime security, an important field as Somalia sits on one of the most important shipping lanes. The deal signals the commitment of Turkey not only to Somalia's security, but also to regional stability in the Horn of Africa (Ibrahim Shire, 2022).

For the most part, Turkey's renewed cooperation with Somalia since 2011 represents a bold plan to achieve multi-faceted cooperation in humanitarian assistance, development projects, military training exercises and educational cooperation (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024). However, there are still issues to address such as political uncertainty and intraregional conflict, the pattern points to some promising opportunities if both countries continue to draw on their history in pursuit of common goals – stability, prosperity and mutual respect. While negotiating through all of this together, the Turkish-Somali partnership will likely be a key force in the future of the Horn of Africa as both sides pursue a safer and more prosperous future together.

4. Achievements and Challenges in Somalia-Turkey Relations

4.1 Achievements

Somalia and Turkey have had significant successes since their reunification in 2011 through massive humanitarian assistance, military cooperation and development. The Turkish contribution to Somalia has been characterized by the efforts to reconstruct the devastated country (Abdullahi, 2022). This reconstruction covered health, education and infrastructure, which proved that Turkey is a strategic partner in Somalia's rehabilitation.

Perhaps the most important outcome of this cooperation is the opening in 2017 of Turkey's military camp in Mogadishu, Camp TURKSOM (Eyrice-Tepecikliolu, 2023). The camp has equipped thousands of Somali soldiers to improve the Somali National Army (SNA) to defeat terrorism and keep the nation safe. Turkey has also conducted attacks on Al-Shabaab, launching drone strikes and arming Somalian forces with high-tech weapons. Such military collaboration has made Turkey a valuable partner in the battle against extremism in Somalia (Eyrice-Tepecikliolu, 2023). Turkish aid program was especially active during the 2011 famine crisis, when the Turkish government used resources from the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and NGOs to offer emergency food, medical supplies and support for displaced peoples. Turkish aid is reported to have totaled more than \$1 billion in subsequent years as part of a continuation of humanitarian action and investment in infrastructure to rebuild services such as hospitals and schools. Such holistic approach not only filled needs in the short term but also shaped the basis for long-term development programs to reconstitute Somali institutions. In addition, Turkey's soft power strategy has worked (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024). In the case of Turkish state investment in roads, hospitals and schools, it has greatly improved conditions for many Somalis (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024). Since it renovated many major infrastructures, such as the Aden Adde International Airport and major roads in Mogadishu, Somalia and Turkey have been better connected and trade with each other (Abdullahi & Abdirahman, 2023). Turkish Airlines return to Mogadishu in April was the first international airline to operate in Somalia after two decades of seclusion.

It has also transformed education sector, whereby thousands of Somali students were awarded scholarships by Turkish universities, an educational diplomacy that not only improves cultural connections but also gives the future leaders the skills they need (Abdi & Galal, 2024). Some 15,000 Somali students were sent

to Turkey for higher education alone between 2011 and 2014. The student influx has created a new cadre of experts who will be ready to contribute to Somalia's transformation. Moreover, Turkish investments have expanded in various areas such as telecommunications and construction; they are key for employment and local economy. Big Turkish companies have signed important construction contracts in Mogadishu and other towns not only for infrastructure projects, but for the development of trade links between the two countries as well (Abdi & Galal, 2024).

The military action also highlights Turkey's strategic interest in maintaining regional stability and proving itself to be a strategic partner to Somalia (Şenyurt & Taşkın, 2024). Turkey's army has gone beyond training programs to direct combat against Al-Shabaab fighters. The supply of modern weapons and information-sharing facilities have also helped the SNA fight against terrorists more effectively. More recently, new agreements between the two sides cement this cooperation in defense cooperation and maritime security.

4.2 Challenges

Despite the mentioned success, issues remain that jeopardize the sustainability of Somalia-Turkey relations. One major challenge is Somalia's unstable political system. The region is still divided, and there are always power battles between various groups, making it even harder for Turkey to implement its agreements. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has been accused of concentrating authority in a divided political community (Korotayev & Voronina, 2024). Recent Al-Shabaab successes on the battlefield have prompted doubts about the safety and credibility of Turkey's military presence in Somalia. Moreover, regional competition and foreign influences make Turkey's role in Somalia even harder. Explicit from regional actors the Turkey's role as an agent of influence in Somalia. Geopolitics is changing in the Horn of Africa at a very fast pace: as tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia escalate, new regional and extra-regional coalitions have emerged (Srada, 2023).

This race for power between major powers such as the US, China and the Gulf makes the position of Turkey in the struggle to maintain control very tough. Third, questions of sovereignty and local perceptions of a foreign military presence are risks to the long-term relationship. Turkey's stance to cooperate with the Somali central government instead of clan leaders is a calculated effort to build Somalia together, but it can create tensions with local players who feel they are overlooked or excluded.

In general, although the successes of Somalia-Turkey relations, from humanitarian cooperation to military alliance, have been enormous, there remains a problem in that internal political fragility and external competition needs to be addressed if this alliance is to survive. Their resiliency and cooperation show that both nations share the same vision for stability and prosperity that they can be counted on for the next few decades. While they navigate these waters together, the two countries will have to use both countries' historical connections to push forward on shared agendas of development, security and sovereignty.

5. The Future of Somalia-Turkey Relations

In the long-term, Somalia-Turkey relations look promising, but faced with obstacles that will require elaborate solutions. Recent trends reflect the increasing commitment from both sides to strengthen cooperation with strategic deals to support security and economic ties. These new contracts signal an upcoming move towards stronger economic cooperation that will help both countries.

The maritime security agreement is particularly interesting since it promises to fight illegal fishing – a problem in Somalia that generates \$500 million annually for the economy – and to improve the Somali Navy's capability (Křval & Ilgn, 2023). Somalia aspires to have more control over its territorial waters

while benefiting from Turkish expertise and capacity by collaborating with Turkey in the area of maritime security. This deal could also attract more foreign investments in Somalia's energy sector with companies looking to develop underexplored oil and gas resources. The cooperation involves Turkey training, supplying equipment and supporting the Somali Navy, which is necessary for the protection of Somalia's waterways from illegal fishing and piracy. The possibility of Turkish naval vessels presiding over Somalia's waters is a crucial change to the security conditions of the area, which promotes sovereignty on Somalia's seacoast. This relationship also might create potential joint ventures in oil exploration so that both sides could tap Somalia's vast natural resources (Ibrahim Shire, 2022).

Not to mention the agreement signed between the two countries in March 2024 for oil and gas cooperation further underlines the strategic importance of Somalia-Turkey relations (Oxford Analytica, 2024). In Somalia, which has as much as 30 billion barrels of untapped oil, the deal would be beneficial for growth and development. Turkish firms would be instrumental in exploring these resources and might create jobs and more revenue for the Somali government but these arrangements will not be easily enforced. Somalia is a still fragile state; the president Mohamud has been accused of centralizing authority in a dysfunctional government. Somali politics could hamper the successful implementation of such arrangements, as some groups might not be happy about foreign ownership of national resources (Oxford Analytica, 2024).

In addition, Al-Shabaab's resurgence is a direct threat to stability and could destabilize public support for foreign militaries (Debisa, 2021). Thus, Turkey will have to balance its military actions with diplomatic initiatives for inclusive Somalia government. Turkey's ongoing struggle with Al-Shabaab makes its military presence more difficult: it might be deployed to enhance security but it will also be condemned by parts of the population that see foreign soldiers as a violation of sovereignty. Turkey has engaged in military cooperation, training Somali soldiers at Camp TURKSOM and logistic support to Al-Shabaab (Eyryce-Tepecikliolu, 2023). These measures will determine the public view of Turkey's intervention in Somalia if they work. If Turkey is able to show the real benefits of security and stability, then it might gain local confidence in its policies.

In addition, a second key feature of the future relationship will be the way in which both sides deal with external factors fighting for position in the Horn of Africa. With other countries such as China and the Gulf states also having their sights set on it, Turkey would have to play a dual role of stable allies while balancing Somalis' anxieties about sovereignty (Kabandula & Shaw 2020). Community engagement and local collaboration will be crucial in making sure Turkish activities reach Somali people positively. The Horn of Africa is also changing rapidly: as tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia mount, there have been new alliances formed among players in the region. Ethiopia's memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, for example, begs the question of territorial integrity, and might influence Turkey's diplomatic support for Somalia unity. It will be a test of whether Turkey can manage these relationships in a way that remains strong enough to exert power long term in the region (Kabandula & Shaw, 2020).

Moreover, building the people-to-people relationships via cultural cooperation and education initiatives will also be key to reestablishing bilateral relations (Eyryce-Tepecikliolu, 2023). The more Somalis that study in Turkey and interact with Turkish culture, the more mutual appreciation for continuing cooperation. Establishment of cultural centers and programs of Turkish language and culture can become the means of closer interaction between both citizens. Turkey has already put a lot of money into education projects, sponsoring thousands of Somali students to attend Turkish universities. Such academic diplomacy is not just for the sake of cultural affinities, but to provide the skills of the next generation of leaders to help bring Somalia forward.

Although there are great prospects for Somalia-Turkey relations in the form of long-term strategic peace agreements that focus on security and economic growth, issues of political instability and competition from outside should be tackled early. These are complicated challenges that both nations are at a point where a good partnership can yield a huge dividend if they do the right thing. Both Turkey and Somalia will need to keep communication channels open and build trust between their peoples in order to advance on their own. Focusing on local interaction in addition to long-term partnerships, they can strive for common goals of stability, prosperity and mutual respect – which should provide a good start for their relationship in the future.

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, bilateral Somalia-Turkey relations have transformed from a complex partnership with significant achievements in humanitarian assistance, military cooperation and infrastructure development since 2011. Turkey's ability to assist Somalia as it emerges from decades of war has made it an all-round partner, from counterterrorism and infrastructure.

Nevertheless, even with all these successes, there are still issues that undermine the sustainability of this partnership. During Somalia's internal political unrest, agreements cannot effectively be implemented because Somalia is still in a state of power struggles and governance instability. The recent Al-Shabaab comeback creates another risk, indicting public support for foreign armed forces and security concerns. As Turkey continues to fight and negotiate in Somalia, it will have to find its way out of all of this if it is to remain an honest partner.

What will happen to Somalia-Turkey relations in the future will depend on whether the two countries can handle these obstacles and retain a spirit of mutual respect and empathy. Top-level meetings between Somalia's leadership and their counterparts will be necessary to deal with issues of sovereignty and governance in Somalia. Localization and collaboration will work to bring stability and prosperity to the two sides by partnering closely. Second, strengthening person-to-person exchanges through cultural and educational exchanges will also contribute to bilateral ties. The more Somalis who study in Turkey and learn Turkish culture, the better the foundations for continued cooperation will be. This history offers the two countries a sound platform from which to establish a robust infrastructure for cooperation in the future. In summary, the Somalia-Turkey partnership has been achieved, but there are a number of issues to be addressed in the coming months regarding both internal political realities and external forces that can hamper the cooperation. Somalia and Turkey can, with careful navigation and the persistence of common interests, maintain their alliance, eventually helping to stabilize and prosper the Horn of Africa.

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