

# **REPORT ON A DISCUSSION FORUM: TURKISH-AFRICAN RELATIONS**

Location: Istanbul, Turkey

Date: December 12, 2024

Participants: Academics, diplomats, and researchers from  
Turkey, African countries, and Arab countries

DECEMBER 25, 2024

GLOBAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH

Member of Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar

## INTRODUCTION

A discussion forum on Turkish-African relations was held in Istanbul on December 12, 2024. The event was co-organized by the African Center for Research and Policy Studies (**AfroPolicy**) and the Global Institute for Strategic Research (**GISR**) at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (**HBKU**).

The forum explored a wide range of key topics related to diplomatic relations between Turkey and the African continent, with a focus on geopolitical, geoeconomic, military, security, and cultural dimensions. It provided a valuable platform to assess the evolving dynamics of Turkish-African relations in light of both the challenges and opportunities emerging from the African continent.

The event brought together academics, experts, and researchers to discuss key developments in the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape, as well as security-related aspects of Turkey-Africa engagement. The discussions focused on four main dimensions and featured contributions from both in-person participants and remote speakers joining from Doha, including representatives from the Global Institute for Strategic Research (**GISR**) and the Qatari Ministry of Interior.

The forum opened with welcoming remarks by AfroPolicy President **Dr. Abdullah Al-Asmar** and GISR Executive Director **Dr. Mohamed Chihi** at HBKU. After extending a warm welcome to the forum participants, **Dr. Mohamed Chihi** introduced GISR's mission and highlighted its impact on local, regional, and global levels. He stated, "Today, we come together to discuss a topic of great significance, Turkish-African relations. Our goal is to explore avenues for strengthening cooperation between Turkey and African nations across various sectors, including economics, politics, and security."

In his opening remarks, Dr. Chihi touched on several key points, notably the growing importance of Turkey's role in Africa and its significant progress in recent years, particularly on the diplomatic and political fronts. He highlighted the pivotal role of Turkish companies in bolstering Turkey's presence as a regional actor in Africa, even amid growing international and regional competition. He also underscored the need for a thorough analysis of the challenges and obstacles Turkey faces in Africa.

Dr. Chihi stressed that economic and political relations between major global powers operating in Africa must be rooted in mutual respect for shared interests, for the sovereignty of African nations, and for the dignity of African peoples. He called for these relationships to be guided by a genuine win-win approach, in which all parties can benefit from the vast opportunities offered by the African continent.

He went on to highlight the institute's partnership with AfroPolicy as a testament to its commitment to fostering a platform for researchers and practitioners from the Arab World engaged in international and political affairs. This collaboration aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and the development of innovative solutions to Africa's development challenges, while also opening new pathways for deepening Turkish-African relations.

Dr. Chihi concluded by expressing his hope that the forum's discussions would yield practical, forward-looking strategies to enhance Turkish-African cooperation and contribute to a more prosperous future for the region and beyond.

AfroPolicy President Dr. Abdullah Al-Asmar followed with remarks in which he warmly welcomed the GISR delegation from HBKU led by Dr. Mohammed Chihi. He then outlined the center's key activities, strategic vision, and its collaborations with other research institutions.

He noted that Dr. Chihi's address had paved the way for a more in-depth exploration of the strategic relationship between Turkey and Africa. He underscored the significance of Turkey's growing role on the continent and reviewed the political, economic, cultural, and security gains it has achieved in recent years.

Dr. Al-Asmar also emphasized the critical value of dialogue and collaboration among researchers to better understand and analyze the region's complex challenges. Such engagement, he argued, is essential for producing practical solutions and informed recommendations that can serve as a roadmap for Turkish policymakers, helping to identify opportunities, address strategic weaknesses, and avoid potential pitfalls in the future.

In the first paper presented in the forum, AfroPolicy Director Dr. Mohamed Saleh offered a comprehensive analysis of the growing military, political, and security partnership between Turkey and African nations. He highlighted Turkey's transformation from a passive observer to a strategic partner on the continent in several areas, a shift formally recognized during the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa in 2008, where Turkey was declared a strategic partner.

The paper primarily examined Turkey's political engagement in Africa, emphasizing its active foreign policy and expansive diplomatic outreach. Dr. Omar noted that Turkey has adopted a cooperative and inclusive strategy, encapsulated in its slogan: "Winning Together, Succeeding Together, Moving Forward Together."

A key indicator of this shift is the expansion of Turkey's diplomatic footprint in Africa. In 2003, Turkey had formal diplomatic relations with just 12 African countries. By early 2024, that number had risen to 44, encompassing not only political ties but also expanding economic, security, and military partnerships.

Dr. Omar identified four core pillars of Turkey's Africa strategy in his paper. The first consists of reprioritization and strategic focus, which involves realigning Turkey's priorities to enhance its global influence. Its increasing engagement in Africa reflects a clear desire to assert itself as an influential regional actor committed to promoting comprehensive development and stability across the continent. This orientation is rooted in principles of mutual development and equal partnership, and it also serves Turkey's strategic objective of breaking out of international isolation. Strengthening ties with African states enables Turkey to secure broader diplomatic support while adapting to changes in the global political economy that demand the diversification of its trade and investment options.

The paper further examined Turkey's expanding role in security and military cooperation with African nations. This includes providing military training, technical assistance, and arms deals. Turkey currently maintains security agreements with over 30 African countries, operates more than 37 military offices across the continent, and maintains military bases in select locations. These efforts are complemented by cooperation in counter-terrorism and support for peacekeeping missions.

In conclusion, Dr. Omar identified key challenges that could hinder Turkey's ambitions in Africa. Chief among these is the intensifying competition from other global and regional powers, including the United

States, the European Union, China, and India. Moreover, Turkey's prolonged absence from the African arena has hindered the development of a deep and nuanced understanding of the continent's complex dynamics.

Dr. Al-Hafiz Ibrahim Ahmed, a research fellow at the Global Institute for Strategic Research (GISR), provided a remote commentary on the paper. He acknowledged Turkey's efforts to align its foreign policy priorities with Africa's aspirations, secure diplomatic alliances, and respond to transformations in the global political economy. The subsequent discussions emphasized the importance of overcoming Turkey's international isolation while advancing mutual benefits in the areas of political cooperation and security.

Dr. Mohamed Zakaria, research fellow at AfroPolicy, delivered the second presentation, which focused on the dynamics of economic relations between Turkey and the African continent. His analysis emphasized the pivotal role that Turkish foreign policy has played in fostering stronger economic linkages, framing Africa not merely as a trade destination but as a strategic economic partner.

The paper traced the evolution of Turkish-African economic engagement, highlighting Turkey's deliberate strategy to enhance trade and investment ties across the continent. Dr. Zakaria noted a remarkable transformation over the past two decades: bilateral trade volume, which stood at only \$5.4 billion in 2003, surged to over \$45 billion by 2023. Turkey now seeks to expand this figure further, with a target of \$50 billion in trade volume by the year 2025. In parallel, Turkish direct investment in Africa has exceeded \$10 billion.

Dr. Zakaria explained that Turkish-African economic cooperation is guided by structured planning and effective institutional frameworks, aiming to institutionalize various areas of collaboration in order to maximize mutual benefits. In addition to the Turkey-Africa Summit, the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey (DEİK), under the auspices of the Turkish Ministry of Trade and in coordination with the African Union, organizes the Turkey-Africa Business Forum, whose fourth edition was held in Istanbul in October 2023. Furthermore, Turkey has established permanent joint business councils with 45 African countries.

In concluding his presentation, Dr. Zakaria reviewed the key challenges and future prospects of Turkish-African economic relations. He emphasized that over the past two decades, economic relations between Turkey and Africa have evolved into a strategic partnership, and highlighted the importance of investing in infrastructure development and enhancing intra-African economic integration.

The final paper was presented by Mr. Ihab Al-Ashiq, a research fellow at AfroPolicy, and focused on cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies, illustrating how Turkey employs cultural and educational tools to strengthen its influence across the African continent.

He emphasized that Turkey's engagement goes beyond official diplomatic channels, actively operating through educational and cultural institutions such as the Maarif Foundation, a semi-governmental, non-profit organization designated as the sole authority to provide Turkish educational services abroad. The foundation has taken over many Turkish schools in Africa that were previously affiliated with the Gülen movement.

Turkey has also been highly active in humanitarian and development initiatives, led by organizations such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). These institutions carry out educational, cultural, and humanitarian programs designed to deepen Turkish-African ties.

The researcher further noted Turkey's concerted efforts to promote Islam internationally through institutions under the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Among the most prominent is the Diyanet Foundation, which supports the establishment of Imam Hatip religious schools in Africa, constructs mosques, and distributes copies of the Qur'an.

Turkey has also leveraged the power of media and entertainment, broadcasting Turkish dramas and films dubbed into local African languages to extend its cultural reach. Mr. Al-Ashiq highlighted the role of Turkish media outlets, particularly news channels such as TRT, in presenting a positive image of Turkey and fostering mutual understanding between Turkish and African communities.

He concluded by underscoring how Turkey's strategic use of soft power has broadened its footprint across the continent, enabling it to attract a growing number of African partners.

The forum also featured discussions on Turkey's relations with Somalia and Sudan. Dr. Faisal Mohamed, an advisor at AfroPolicy, presented a paper on Turkish-Sudanese relations, covering several key topics. He explored the deep historical ties between Turkey and Sudan, dating back to the Ottoman era, as well as Turkey's current role in the Sudanese crisis from both humanitarian and political perspectives. The presentation also shed light on Turkey's initiatives aimed at ending the ongoing conflict.

Another paper was presented by Dr. Mohamed Al-Tahir, also an advisor at AfroPolicy, focusing on Turkish-Somali relations. His presentation covered key developments and addressed several important aspects, particularly the military agreements between the two countries, most notably the recent defense and economic cooperation agreement approved by both the Somali Cabinet and Parliament. The ten-year agreement grants the Turkish navy the responsibility of securing Somalia's coastline from threats such as terrorism, piracy, illegal fishing, and marine pollution. Dr. Al-Tahir also discussed Turkey's efforts to mediate reconciliation between Somalia and Ethiopia.

These discussions and contributions provided a deeper understanding of the geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian dimensions of Turkey's unique involvement in infrastructure development and crisis response across the African continent.

The forum concluded with a strong emphasis on the importance of deepening cooperation between Turkey and African countries across a range of sectors, particularly in the geopolitical, economic, and security spheres. It also underscored the growing role of cultural diplomacy in fostering stronger, more meaningful ties between the two sides.

Participants highlighted the need to develop joint strategies to confront regional and global challenges, while reinforcing bilateral and multilateral partnerships as part of the ongoing engagement between Turkey and the African continent. The forum served as a valuable platform for intellectual exchange, paving the way for a broader and more profound understanding of Turkish-African relations.

The collaborative and dynamic environment between AfroPolicy and GISR at HBKU reflected a mutual commitment to shared interests, addressing common challenges and expanding avenues for dialogue and cooperation across multiple fields.