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# ***Turkey and African agency: the role of Islam and commercialism in Turkey's Africa policy\****

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of ‘agency’ and its role in capturing the dynamics between Africa and external actors feature increasingly in the African IR scholarship. Over the past decade, Turkey has become an increasingly prominent actor in Africa, strengthening political, cultural and economic ties with African states and providing humanitarian aid and development assistance. In this paper, we examine Turkey’s relationship with Africa from the point of view of African agency and ask ‘How much and what kind of agency can we identify by examining the way in which Turkey approaches African states?’ The conventional understanding of the concept of African agency defines it in materialist terms and emphasises its

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transactional nature; it does not adequately explain incidents of enhanced outcomes for Africans in their relationship with Turkey. We argue that an under-examined aspect and a vital source of African agency lies within the discourses of Turkish policy which provide an enabling source of policy space for negotiation for Africans. We demonstrate that the notion of Muslim kinship in Turkish discourses not only distinguishes Turkey from most of the other external powers engaging with the continent but also enables African interlocutors to negotiate enhanced outcomes.

**Keywords** – Turkey, Africa, agency, emerging powers.

#### INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Turkey has become an increasingly prominent actor in Africa, strengthening political, cultural and economic ties with African states and providing humanitarian aid and development assistance to communities across the Horn of Africa as well as beyond. With a bevy of private business interests and state-sponsored development initiatives driving engagement, trade has jumped from US\$4.3 billion in 2002 to US\$25.3 billion in 2019. Turkey has expanded its diplomatic presence from 12 embassies in 2002 to 42 embassies as of the end of 2019 and opened up everything from community schools to commercial air links in over 38 African countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2020). Key investments, particularly in countries such as Ethiopia, have seen the establishment of manufacturing and services platforms employing thousands of local workers, while Turkish development assistance and religious charities have made their mark in conflict-ridden Sudan and Somalia. Unlike other external powers whose economic focus is largely on African resources, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's declaration that 'Africa belongs to Africans, we are not here for your gold' set the tone for the Turkey–Africa partnership (quoted in Anadolu Agency 2013).<sup>1</sup> Ankara's approach has led academics to characterise it as a 'new humanitarian power', distinctive in its rhetoric and substance from so-called traditional and other emerging powers involved in the continent (Abdirahman 2011).

Contemporary scholarship on Africa and emerging powers has made much of 'African agency' as a defining feature of how African governments and even civil society actors influence their role and conduct in asymmetrical power relations. However, the sources of African agency with respect to Turkey, while exhibiting some of the conventional elements associated with the materialist reading of this concept, are nonetheless largely elusive and unable to adequately explain incidents of enhanced outcomes for Africans in the relationship. Its 'hidden character' is, we argue, in fact revealed in shared discourses of Turco-African partnership which provide an ideational structure that serves as an enabling source of agency for Africans. Co-constituted approaches, rooted in a common heritage of brotherhood through Islam, allow African interlocutors to translate ideational proximity into stronger material gains that, in some respects, account for their exercise of agency as well as the durability of ties.

Therefore, the degree of agency exercised by Africans appears to be a function of the ability of one of the parties to instrumentalise co-constituted ideational structures in the service of their pursuit of foreign and economic policy objectives. In short, Turkish and African framing of the relationship either in commercial terms or through shared cultural heritage enables different varieties of African agency.

This paper examines Turkey's engagement with Africa from the perspective of African agency and how it is given expression through co-constituted narrative frameworks. In particular, it focuses on how the framing of the relationship in explicitly commercial or fraternal religious terms opens up a different negotiating space for African counterparts engaged with Turkey. Assumptions of agency presuppose a power asymmetry between Africa and external actors which might conventionally be expected to produce unfavourable outcomes for Africa but are in fact offset in the course of negotiations by Africans. Our research into Turkey–Africa relations suggests that there is a co-constitution of negotiation frameworks which impact upon the capacity of Africans to achieve preferred outcomes. Those frameworks that are co-constituted in commercial terms effectively limit the context of negotiations to a medium of transactional material exchange which restricts the ambit of negotiations for Africans; while a fraternal framing of the relationship creates an ideationally bounded moral universe which enhances opportunities for negotiation by Africans. Foreign policy discourses used in bilateral relationships between Turkey and four selected African countries, namely Tanzania, Ghana, Sudan and Djibouti, will be examined as a guide to understanding the dynamics of agency within a shared commercial and ideational agenda. Addressing the question of how much and what kind of agency we can identify in Turco–African relations has empirical and theoretical implications for the literature which will be outlined below.

#### LOCATING AGENCY IN THE FOREIGN POLICY PROCESS IN TURCO–AFRICAN RELATIONS

The concept of 'agency' and its role in capturing the dynamics between Africa and external actors feature increasingly in the International Relations (IR) scholarship concerned with the continent. Brown's formative article on African agency posed two key questions which defined the emerging research agenda on agency at the time, namely, 'how much agency are African political actors able to enact?' and 'what kind of agency is being enacted?' (Brown 2012: 1893; see also Harman & Brown 2013). His work and subsequent collaborative scholarship with Harman built upon this fundamental line of enquiry through an expanding set of empirical case studies aimed principally at delineating agency on the part of African governments in their negotiations with multilateral institutions and emerging powers such as China (Brown & Harman 2013; Harman & Brown 2013). Corkin (2013) characterises agency in unreflective elitist terms, utilising the Angolan government's bargaining with China on

commodity-backed loans for infrastructure as exemplary of the concept while Taylor (2015) recognises this as corrupted elite practices. Gadzala (2015) broadens the ambit of African agency to include civil society actors while Soule-Kondou (2017) introduces sub-state bureaucrats into the process. Beswick & Hammerstad (2013) focus on the implications and possibilities of African agency in the security environment, identifying a ‘levels of analysis’ problem as critical to understanding the parameters of what constitutes agency. Procopio’s (2017) contribution is to develop an interactive model of African agency involving state and non-state actors in a complex negotiating process.

At the same time, the fact remains that African agency as portrayed in the existing scholarship is fundamentally grounded in a materialist reading which confers on such agency a one-dimensional character rooted in simple readings of power dynamics between Africans and external actors. The place of co-constituted agendas which frame all forms of diplomacy and negotiations is not well recognised in the literature on agency and emerging powers, beyond the insights found in Procopio’s (2017) work on arenas of negotiation in China–Kenya relations. However, co-constituted agendas are a crucial dimension of the process of enacting agency and, in fact, a source of material and ideational power that structures the negotiations and influences the ability of actors to define acceptable outcomes. To understand its sources and how African actors mobilise effectively around these we need to examine the discourses that form a co-constituted agenda and, together, define the parameters of the exercise of African agency.

Specifically, building on Brown’s seminal work and modifying it to account for the co-constitution of agency, we have identified two forms of agency in the course of our investigation of Turkey–Africa relations. First is *transactional* agency, which is closely linked to traditional materialist reading of the concept that emphasises the degree to which African actors are able to exert influence in their relationships with external actors. The parameters of this kind of agency are narrowly defined in commercial terms and bargaining is framed along these lines with a shared understanding that mutual benefit is the criterion upon which exchanges are assessed. From this perspective, African agency is transactional in nature and is expressed in materialist terms and the pursuit of it is measured in material outcomes (Table I).

The second type of agency that we have identified is *ideationally* co-constituted and uses identity markers to set the parameters of the relationship. It is as a result more expansive beyond merely commercial interests. Claimants can invoke social factors or identity as tools in pursuit of their aims. It is an extension of commercially co-constituted relations, not a replacement, and is pursued both by Turkish and African actors as a further means of influencing positive policy outcomes. Implicit in this understanding of agency is that the co-constitution of ties is underpinned by a shared identity, which defines the parameters of negotiation between actors and in so doing is an important element in

TABLE I.  
Two types of African agency in Turco–African relations

	Observable indicators	Outcome expected in terms of African agency
<b>Transactional agency</b>	Relationship defined in material terms involving a strong commercial aspect	Parameters of relationship limited to material exchange, negotiations shaped by relative bargaining power
<b>Ideationally co-constituted agency</b>	Relationship defined invoking identifiable identity markers in the form of cultural and historical cues involving a shared ideational agenda	Ideationally based exchanges offering a broader basis from which Turkey and African counterparts negotiate, enabling deeper internalisation of African agency, and opening up policy space for optimisation of outcomes for Africans

influencing the ability of African actors to optimise negotiations that favour their preferences. As this analysis will discuss, co-constituted agendas are an under-examined consideration in the literature and act as an enabling force for African actors to negotiate enhanced outcomes.

We utilise qualitative methodology towards our research, employing selective interviews with Turkish diplomats and Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) officials based in African countries as well as in Ankara. This was supplemented by content analysis of public statements by Turkish and African elites, public documents produced by foreign ministries and aid agencies, as well as press reports in the Turkish and African media. A comparative approach has been adopted focusing on Turkey's engagement with four African countries – Tanzania, Ghana, Sudan and Djibouti – which were selected on the basis of their representation of Turkey's outreach in Africa. Specifically, two (Tanzania and Ghana) are outside of Turkey's historically defined sphere of influence and are diverse religious societies while two (Sudan and Djibouti) were selected as representative of Turkey's engagement with its historically defined sphere of influence where Sunni Islam is formalised as the state religion. This enables us to make considered assessments of the degree to which the role of socially constructive narratives influence Turkey's foreign policy engagement in Africa and, in particular, the utilisation of these narratives by African governments to assert agency in those terms to secure more favourable outcomes.

To assess this process in the next section we will examine sources of Turkey's policies and how these shaped Ankara's approach towards engagement with the African continent. Situating the Turkish outreach in terms of, on the one hand, commercial opportunities and, on the other hand, historical or ideationally based legacies, this lays the foundation for policy engagements that framed ties with Africa in line with these formative discourses, and as result producing shared policy agendas.

## ANKARA'S 'OPENING TO AFRICA': POLICIES AND ACTORS

Over the past decade, the African continent has increasingly attracted non-western power engagement, leading commentators to question whether the renewed foreign power interest represents a 'new scramble for Africa' and if so what its implications might be for Africans (Carmody 2011; see also *The Economist* 2019). Examining the dynamics of bilateral relationships that African states build with emerging powers is thus important to assess the role of Africa in world politics.

Turkey presents an interesting case within this conversation. On one hand, Turks are in no way newcomers to the continent as northern and eastern parts of Africa were significant components of the transcontinental Ottoman Empire and were ruled from Istanbul for centuries. Most notably, the Ottoman Turks expanded their dominance to the Horn of Africa between the 16th and 19th centuries, creating the *eyalet*<sup>2</sup> of Habesh, which encompasses today's Eritrea, Djibouti and northern Somalia, and playing a vital role in the spread of Sunni Muslim culture across the region. On the other hand, in terms of the foreign policy agenda of modern Turkey, a coherent policy for Africa was explicitly formulated only in the late 1990s, with the declaration of Africa Action Plan of 1998 and subsequently in 2005 the 'Year of Africa in Turkey', which initiated Turkey's 'opening to Africa' aiming for increased economic and political engagement with the African continent.

Turkey's renewed interest in Africa can be understood as an expression of Turkey's desire to emerge as a global actor and be analysed within a broader context of the recalibration of Turkish foreign policy agenda in the post-Cold War era. Former foreign minister İsmail Cem, who was the main figure in the development of the Africa Action Plan of 1998, declared that Turkish foreign policy lacked attention to Turkish 'historical geography' encompassing 'North Africa and go[ing] all the way to Sudan' among other regions where Turks have cultural and historical connections such as the Middle East, the Balkans and parts of Central Asia (quoted in Dündar 2008: 206). Consequently, Turkey had been 'alienated from its [historical] roots' and unable to use 'civilizational' assets available to it to exercise effective foreign policy (Cem 2001: 3). The solution was not to turn back on Turkey's traditional allies in the West but to realise Turkey's potential to play a bridge-building role as an inter-civilisational actor in a changing world order. Cem's attempt to 'broaden' the scope of Turkish foreign policy' (quoted in Kinzer 1998) included a diplomatic offensive on the African continent, a policy initiative which could not be actively pursued during his time as foreign minister due to domestic instability and the 2000–2001 economic crisis in Turkey, but which paved the way to what was later came to be known as Turkey's 'African opening' in the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era (Özkan 2010: 534; Özkan and Akgün 2010).

A quest for global influence was a central motive behind the 1998 Africa Action Plan. As described by the diplomat who was tasked by Ankara to draft

the Plan, Numan Hazar (2016: 10–12), it was born out of a desire to tell Turkey's story to the world and to mobilise international support in favour of the Turkish positions, for example on the Cyprus dispute. Writing as an academic before he became a key figure within the AKP, Ahmet Davutoğlu (2001: 206–8) took this point further describing the Ottoman Empire as an 'African state' and arguing that (re)establishing close relations with Africa was 'inevitable' in the context of the post-Cold War re-orientation of Turkish foreign policy because having friends in Africa could translate into greater political influence in international forums such as the UN General Assembly, where 'the presence of African states are felt' significantly.<sup>3</sup> In addition to political motives, Turkey's interest in Africa also had a dominant economic drive related to what Kirişçi (2009) described as Turkey's transformation into a 'trading state'. Specifically, changes in Turkish political economy starting in the 1980s with President Turgut Özal's liberal economic programme and a shift toward export-oriented growth eventually made Africa an attractive destination for Turkey's search of new markets abroad (İpek 2014: 415; see also Öniş & Kutlay 2013). Over time, trade became an essential aspect of Turkey's engagement with Africa leading scholars to question whether Turkey's increasing trade volume with African countries since the 2000s has built Turkey's 'civilian power' on the continent (Dal *et al.* 2018).

In the domestic arena, the AKP's rise to power as a party with roots that go back to Necmettin Erbakan's *Millî Görüş* (National Outlook) sparked debates on the role of religion in Turkish foreign policy agenda as the AKP elite emphasised identity and history as key components of Turkey's new and pragmatic foreign policy approach (B. Özkan 2014). Specifically, the AKP's vision of a 'new Turkey' attracted popular and academic attention as to whether the changes in Ankara's approach could be characterised as having 'neo-Ottoman' tendencies, essentially entailing a desire to portray Turkey as the natural leader of the peoples who share a common Ottoman cultural heritage (Sözen 2010; Usul & Özcan 2010; B. Özkan 2014; Yavuz 2016). Picking up on the argument that Turkey needed to use its 'civilizational assets' instrumentally and adapting it to their formulation of a 'new' Turkish foreign policy, policy makers within the AKP focused on expansion of soft power through the use of Turkish culture, identity and history (Dal 2012). Identity became a crucial foreign policy tool not only in the Middle East but also in other regions such as Central Asia where the AKP government utilised common heritage emphasising ideational factors, such as the notion of 'Turkic world', to guide Turkey's policy (Köstem 2017).

Within this broader context, Turkey's Africa policy took off with the AKP's announcement of the 'year of Africa in Turkey' in 2005 and the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's high-level visits to African states. The first Turkey–Africa Partnership Summit which was held in Istanbul in 2008 expressed a commitment to establish 'a long-term and stable partnership based on equality and mutual benefit' and outlined the Framework for Cooperation as consisting of

multiple cooperative domains from trade to agriculture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2008).

The existing literature on Turkish foreign policy in Africa has regarded a pursuit of soft power a defining feature of Turkey's policy objective on the continent and identified a multitude of state and non-state actors which collectively served this aim (Wheeler 2011; Özkan 2012; İpek & Biltekin 2013; Dal *et al.* 2018). In addition to diplomats who maintain formal diplomatic relations by the appointment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, state actors notably included the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), which have strengthened Turkey's presence in the continent in a variety of ways from forming relationships with local communities to providing development and humanitarian aid. Non-state actors typically included civil society and non-governmental organisations, such as the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), the Turkish Red Crescent, and Yunus Emre Institute, which aims to promote Turkish language and culture around the world. While the Turkish government deepened political ties, businesses advanced Turkey's economic interests with their investments and bids in multi-million-dollar projects, covering diverse sectors from infrastructure to energy. Gradually, Turkey's relationship with Africa became more intense with increased engagement in inter-related domains: diplomacy, cultural exchanges, trade, humanitarian aid, development assistance, and even military cooperation, especially after Turkey established military presence in the Gulf of Aden against Somali pirates.

Beyond commercial expansion and development assistance, one of the priorities of the Turkish government in Africa in recent years has been to get the cooperation of African governments to tackle the influence of institutions and groups affiliated with the Gülenists, whom Ankara designated as a terrorist organisation (FETÖ) in 2016 for being responsible for the July 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> As a part of a wider Turkish policy objective of countering the Gülenists worldwide, the Turkish government has lobbied African actors and requested solidarity from its counterparts, as will be discussed further in the next section.<sup>5</sup>

The literature on Turco–African relations mainly looks at Turkey's policies towards the African continent in the context of the expansion of Turkey's foreign policy outreach under the AKP leadership. How Turkish policies are perceived, and are ultimately affected, by African actors themselves remains an under-examined area of research. There have been some attempts to integrate African reactions in analyses of Turkey–Africa relations: a notable example being Özkan's assessment that African actors are 'cautious but curious' with regard to Turkey's engagement with the continent as 'Turkey has no colonial background in Africa but has cultural and religious ties dating back to the Ottoman period' which 'created optimism about the future' (Özkan 2012: 125). However, the existing scholarship falls short of offering an in-depth account of African perspectives. Considering the extent to which



African actors have agency in their bilateral relations with Turkey is therefore an essential part of understanding the dynamics of Turco–African relations.

TURKEY AND AFRICA: A *TRANSACTIONAL* READING OF AFRICAN AGENCY

The transactional reading of African agency speaks to an understanding of agency as the ‘ability to exercise subjective freedom of action (agency as doing something)’ (Brown 2012: 1899) and defines the parameters of bilateral relationships in materialist terms. From this perspective, frameworks that are co-constituted in commercial terms limit the context to a medium of transactional material exchange and utilise the concept of mutual benefit as a reference point for assessing the achievement of preferred outcomes. Efforts to extend bargaining outside this domain, as we will see, can be challenged as a deviation from the co-constituted materialist framework for the relationship.

African agency in the Turco–African relationship can be seen from a transactional viewpoint especially when bilateral relationships are defined in terms of material exchanges mostly involving strong trade and investment elements. The Turkish government particularly underlines that these exchanges are mutually beneficial and reflect a commitment to ‘win-win’ outcomes (Turkish diplomats in Accra 2019 Int.; see also Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2020). Accordingly, creating ‘a favourable legal and stimulating business environment for economic cooperation’ was deemed a ‘central pillar of the Africa–Turkey Partnership’ as described in the Istanbul Declaration adopted on 19 August 2008 at the Turkey–Africa Cooperation Summit in Istanbul (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2008).

In line with Turkey’s foreign policy objectives since the ‘Opening to Africa’, the Turkish government has sought to increase trade and strengthen economic cooperation with African states (Erdağ 2018: 329). To this end, in order to increase its attractiveness, the Turkish government has typically offered incentives such as development and humanitarian aid with no political conditionality (Belder & Dipama 2018: 236), the provision of military support and institutional capacity-building assistance (Erdağ 2018: 323, 333). These incentives have sometimes been effective, especially when they created or increased asymmetrical interdependence in Turkey’s favour thereby giving the Turkish government leverage over the relationship. However, there are also instances in which the Turkish government has struggled to get its preferred outcome, in which case it has typically intensified its lobbying efforts and increased its engagement to boost its attractiveness as an economic partner.

Turkey’s relationship with Tanzania is a good case to see this dynamic at work. Mutual articulation of bilateral ties in commercial terms limits the parameters of African agency to a medium of material exchange. Mutual commitment to win-win is then reified through trade and investment and political objectives pursued in a materially defined domain. For example, shortly after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016, the Turkish government urged

Tanzania through diplomatic channels to take action against Gülenist establishments in the country (Shekighenda 2016). In response, the Tanzanian government first requested more details from Ankara saying that it needed to study the allegations, then later said it did not find evidence which supported Ankara's claims (Shekighenda 2016; Kimboy & Mwalimu 2017).

Intensifying efforts to get Tanzania's cooperation, President Erdoğan visited Tanzania in January 2017 to discuss these matters with President John Magufuli. Accompanied by a large delegation of businesspersons and government officials, the Turkish president expressed Turkey's commitment to increasing the trade volume between the countries and concluded nine bilateral agreements with the Tanzanian government, including an Agreement on Development Cooperation (23 January 2017) which defined the legal status of TIKA coordination office in Dar Es Salaam (Lamtey 2017; TIKA 2017: 23). In line with the objectives of his visits to east African states in January 2017, he reiterated the importance of cooperation not only in terms of trade and development but also counteracting the influence of the Gülenists and he urged Tanzanian business leaders to avoid all institutions or groups that have 'Turkey' in their names but are not recognised or registered by the Turkish Embassy in Dar es Salaam (NTV 2017). Tanzanian Foreign Minister Augustine Mahiga was reported as saying that they were 'in discussions with Turkey delegates with regard to their [Turkey's] request; they [Turkey] have come with a positional paper and some other evidence', adding that Tanzania would go through the evidence and allegations before making any decisions (quoted in Kimboy & Mwalimu 2017).

On the Tanzanian government's agenda, an important aim was to discuss Turkey's potential role in the modernisation of the Central Railway, one of the prominent railway lines in Tanzania connecting the east of the country to the north (Kamagi 2017). After the tête-à-tête meeting with the Turkish President, Magufuli confirmed Turkey's participation in the infrastructure project and revealed that he had asked the Turkish government for concessional loans; he said 'President Erdoğan has accepted my request, saying it's a small issue to him' (quoted in Kamagi 2017). One of the reasons why the Tanzanian government turned to Turkey (also to China, South Korea and India) for concessional loans is because getting funding from traditional Western powers had been difficult due to strict donor conditionality. In local media, the bilateral talks were described as 'give and take; we need money to help us revamp the Central Railway Line and they want us to help them in security' (Wetengere, quoted in Kimboy & Mwalimu 2017). Shortly afterwards, a joint venture between a Turkish and a Portuguese firm was awarded the railway contract worth over a billion dollars, which sparked a domestic debate on what implications Turkey's increasing engagement with the country would have for Dar's relations with Beijing, which had initially had its eyes on the railway project – in fact, Chinese firms initially had won 'the tender to build the railway before the process was cancelled over irregularities' (Barasa 2017; Kabendera 2017; Kamagi 2017).

Moreover, the Tanzanian government welcomed the Turkish interest in development cooperation. For example, with regard to agriculture, President Magufuli reportedly said, '[Turkey] is doing very well in the agriculture sector, holding the 7th position worldwide, therefore we have from them the right platform for learning' (quoted in Kamagi 2017). The emphasis on learning from Turkey was made by Erdoğan who said Turkey as a member of G-20 'could share its expertise and experience with Tanzania in different sectors' and cooperate in areas that are prioritised by the Tanzanian government such as energy, infrastructure, agriculture and tourism (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2017). He also argued 'Turkey is not only the voice of Africa' in multilateral platforms but also a partner who believes 'the best solutions to the problems of African countries are found in African lands, not elsewhere outside the continent' (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2017).

As for the outcome of these bilateral meetings, Turkey's trade volume with Tanzania and commercial links have steadily increased (Lamtey 2017). Turkey, however, received only mixed results from the president's visit. On one hand, Turkey has proved that it is a keen investor in Tanzania and shown its commitment to developing a mutually beneficial partnership, and likewise, the Tanzanians welcomed Turkey as an economic and political partner. On the other hand, the Tanzanian government did not act promptly against organisations affiliated with the Gülenists, telling Turkey that it would take action after careful deliberation. As of February 2019, Tanzania's ambassador in Turkey expressed her satisfaction about the development of trade relations between the two countries, underlined that Tanzania is becoming a commercial hub, and stressed the importance of mutual cooperation against terrorism; however, at the same time she said 'the Tanzanian government has received information from Ankara and is working on the allegations' regarding Gülenist groups (quoted in *Hürriyet* 2019).

Another case which demonstrates the transactional character of African agency is that of Ghana. Turkish diplomats stationed in Ghana described Turkey's relationship with the country as a 'win-win' and emphasised the importance of counter terrorism (Turkish diplomats in Accra 2019 Int). Most importantly, they explained that Turkey, as a matter of principle, avoided policies which may foreseeably be rejected by Ghana. To unpack this point, they stressed the importance of being mindful of Ghana's 'sensitivities' and not upsetting societal tensions. For example, they pointed out that when Turkey built the Central Accra Mosque, there was a national debate on why Accra did not have a National Cathedral. They said Turkey was mindful of such societal tensions, keeping an equal distance to all communities in Ghana and not favouring Muslim communities over others because 'Africa has many cultures, ethnicities, and religions so building a policy around Islam will not be very successful. Turkey needs to pursue a multi-faith policy.' Accordingly, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs considers requests (for example for funding for renovation projects) not only from Muslim organisations but also from Christian communities. They emphasised that Turkey built infrastructure, schools and

orphanages that are of benefit to all in Ghana irrespective of their faith. Moreover, they said that ‘the issue of security is sensitive in Ghana’ and Turkey is mindful of inter-ethnic violence, keeping an equal distance to all chieftains. Interestingly, this concern was also raised by the head of TIKA in Dar es Salaam, suggesting that Turkish policy in Tanzania followed much the same path of sensitivity to multi-faith societies and a desire to not be seen as favouring Muslim communities over any others (TIKA representative in Dar es Salaam 2020 Int.).

Diplomats in Accra also mentioned that Turkey is also cautious of its image when engaging with Ghana as it does not want to come across as an aggressive actor such as Turkey’s competitor, China. They said Turkey ‘should not push too hard with regard to competition here’, or try to dominate the market by acting hawkish in terms of economic and political engagement. The main reason, they said, is because it may ‘backfire’. They said ‘China is seen as if it has a “hidden agenda” whereas Turkey is a mild actor’ and Turkey does not want to change this perception. Also, they said Turkey does not have to push too hard as the relationship is developing naturally and exponentially. Moreover, when requesting the handing over of schools run by the Gülenists in the country, which they said was the only negative aspect of the Turkey–Ghana relationship, Turkey does not ask or expect the Ghanaian government to go outside of the law (Turkish diplomats in Accra 2019 Int.).

The two cases, Tanzania and Ghana, illustrate how transactional agency operates within a narrow set of parameters and delimits the boundaries of African agency accordingly. The case of Tanzania indicates how the scope for African agency is confined to bargaining over material gains represented as shared commercial and developmental interests. Efforts by Ankara to secure support outside of this co-constituted domain are categorically resisted by the Tanzanian government. Because of the transactional basis of ties, Ankara’s response to such resistance is therefore relegated to the domain of material exchanges, and results in an increase of material inducements. The example of Ghana illustrates how Turkey not only focuses on material ‘win-sets’ in its negotiations but actively seeks to portray its engagement in secular terms so as to avoid being pulled into polarising domestic debates. Ideational framing around notions of shared religious fraternity, seen in the cases elaborated in the next section, plays little to no part in Turkey’s ties with these two countries.

#### TURKEY AND AFRICA: AN *IDEATIONAL* READING OF AFRICAN AGENCY

By way of contrast, an ideational reading of African agency defines the parameters of bilateral relationships in terms of distinctive but recognisable identity markers for both parties. From this perspective, frameworks that are co-constituted in ideational terms offer a broader basis from which Turkey and African counterparts negotiate. Ideationally based exchanges typically invoke shared moral precepts and aspirational forms of social cooperation that impact upon the content and outcome of negotiations. The use of identity

markers in Turkish discourses translates shared narratives into mutual gains often in the form of economic benefits and carries in itself an explicit recognition of African agency. Specifically, the Turkish government purposefully deploys references to a shared identity so as to increase its attractiveness as a partner and devises policy around a preconception of agency. By extending beyond the materialist boundaries and reference points found in transactional agency, ideational frameworks offer more opportunities for both Turkey and African host countries to accrue tangible gains in bargaining the content of their relations.

A distinctive aspect of Turkey's relationship with Africa, which sets Turkey apart from most of the other emerging powers engaging with the continent, is the use of religious references, namely the notion of Muslim kinship, aimed to develop closer relations with communities following the same faith. The use of Islam in foreign policy strategies aimed at the African continent is not unique to Turkey as other regional powers engaged with the continent have also used religious diplomacy in their approaches, such as Morocco's religious outreach to West Africa (Wainscott 2018), Iran's attempts to promote Shia Islam across the continent (Keynoush 2021) or Saudi Arabia's investments in religious education in sub-Saharan Africa (Mandaville & Hamid 2018: 9–10). Specifically, in Muslim-majority states of East Africa, such as Somalia or Sudan, Turkey presents itself much more than a friend, often framing the relationship in a fraternal way, emphasising the notion of brotherhood which is rooted in the Qur'an, most notably in the Verse of Brotherhood (49: 10) which says that 'the believers are nothing else than brothers'. The chapter containing this verse notably declares universal brotherhood among Muslims irrespective of their race or tribe, thereby acknowledging them as equals belonging to the same community, *Ummah*, and instructs them to cooperate and support each other. The Turkish government uses this particular meaning of brotherhood in its discourses to argue that developing closer ties with African peoples is a moral imperative and that African counterparts are equals by the virtue of following the same faith. Turkish diplomacy makes efforts at persuasion: trying to 'win hearts and minds' of African states through non-coercive ways, using Muslim kinship to build trust and gain legitimacy, and to draw a clear line between the Turkish engagement with Africa and the intentions of Western colonisers of the past. As Özkan contends, Turkey has used 'religious diplomacy' in Africa since the 'Opening to Africa' policy was fundamentally based on 'a religious dimension, which is also directly linked to the Ottoman past in Africa', which many civil society and state actors used in order to legitimise their activities in the continent (M. Özkan 2014a: 229; 2014b: 81).

In addition to being used for legitimisation, shared religion can also act as a pull factor. Many African actors have requested Turkey to play a greater role in Islamic education in African communities (M. Özkan 2014a: 230). For example, the Second Summit of African Muslim Religious Leaders hosted by Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) in 2011 concluded that 'educational institutions similar to the Imam-Hatip schools in Turkey should be used

as an example for schools in Africa and backed with faculties providing higher religious education like [Turkey's] theology faculties' (quoted in *Hürriyet Daily News* 2011). African concerns about the spread of Islamic extremism and a desire to promote a religious sphere structured in line with moderate readings of Islam can potentially provide the conditions for the pull factor of shared religion (M. Özkan 2014a: 231; see also Wainscott 2018: 19).

Mutual framing of the relationship in fraternal terms offers a more expansive reading of African agency. By basing it on ideational grounds, the parameters of African agency are not limited to material exchanges but defined by inter-subjective beliefs about the relationship. Such mutual framing opens up possibilities for African counterparts to turn ideational proximity into material gains even if they may not have much bargaining power in material terms. A morally bound negotiating space allows Africans engaged with Turkey to present arguments about their expectations of the relationship and to pursue enhanced outcomes. In terms of observable foreign policy behaviour, such a reading of African agency would presume that an African state would use identity to seek greater gains, whether in terms of development aid or military training.

Turkey's relationship with Sudan is an example of mutual framing of bilateral ties in ideational terms and a case in which shared Ottoman narratives are used in bilateral relations. Erdoğan's visit to Sudan in 2017 marked a boost in the relationship as 13 agreements were signed, covering multiple areas including a free-trade zone in Port Sudan and the construction of a new airport for the capital Khartoum (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2017; *Hürriyet Daily News* 2018). What drew most international attention, however, was the deal signed with the Turkish government on the lease of the Suakin Island.<sup>6</sup> According to this agreement, Sudan would hand over the island to Turkey for a period of 99 years for reconstruction and renovation. Providing easy access to the Red Sea and beyond, the port of Suakin – which is the second biggest port in the country after Port Sudan – is historically important for geopolitical, military and economic reasons. After Selim I's conquest in 1517, the island became a key Ottoman hub in the Red Sea and remained a part of the empire until 1865. The Turkish government's framing of Turkey's relationship with Sudan from the point of view of a common Ottoman heritage when negotiating for the acquisition is important for this analysis.

Erdoğan's speech at the Khartoum University in December 2017 is a prime example of how the Turkish government uses identity markers and Ottoman history to construct a narrative of kinship. In his speech, he mentioned his visit to Port Sudan and the Suakin Island where TIKA was carrying out restoration works of Ottoman-era mosques and said: 'I said: hand us this island so that we can renovate the whole island and restore its historical dignity because seeing the Suakin Island in this shape made us sad' (Erdoğan 2017a). He continued his speech appealing to the anti-colonial sentiments in Sudan: 'They have completely destroyed the island. Who? The West. It is the characteristic of the West ... I have requested from my brother [Omar]

Bashir; if he gives the island and we start working immediately, we can rejuvenate and reconstruct the island so that it looks exactly like in the pictures and Sudan would be proud of it.' He also revealed that his plans included tourism too: 'Imagine Turkish people who want to go to Mecca for the *Hajj* pilgrimage. They will come to Suakin Island, visit the historical parts and take the ferry to Jeddah' (Erdoğan 2017a).

Speaking at the Turkey–Sudan Business Forum, Erdoğan said regarding the Suakin Island, 'My brother Omar Bashir said "OK" ... We will respond to those who destroyed this place, saying "You destroying this place is like us shaving our beards". We will rebuild and reconstruct it in such a way that, like a shaved beard, it will regrow much more abundant. I am not saying the rest' (Erdoğan 2017b). This is a historical beard analogy Erdoğan has used on multiple occasions and it refers to a phrase by Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha in response to the Ottoman defeat at the Battle of Lepanto (1571) by the European coalition called the Holy League. Following the defeat, the Ottoman navy rapidly rebuilt itself and forced Venice to cede Cyprus to the Ottoman Empire after which the Grand Vizier told Venetian Bailo Marcantonio Barbaro: 'There is a wide difference between your loss and ours. In capturing Cyprus from you, we have cut off one of your arms; in defeating our fleet, you have merely shaved off our beard; the lopped arm will not grow again, but the shorn beard will grow stronger than before' (quoted in Kinross 1977: 272). So, in a few sentences Erdoğan encapsulates the Turkish rhetoric: fraternal Islam, anti-Western sentiments, references to Ottoman history, and emphasis on Sudan's development. This dimension of African agency is based not only on material exchanges but also on shared ideational grounds. The framing of Turkey's request and the kinship narrative constructed with the help of history and identity signal internalisation on the part of Ankara as to what Sudan responds to. Accordingly, Turkey uses an anti-Western rhetoric, references to fraternal Islam, and shows consideration of Sudan's economic and developmental needs.

Djibouti is another example where mutual ideational framing of the relationship offered opportunities for the African government to improve negotiations in its favour. Djibouti is one of the countries that is of strategic importance to Turkey as its geographic position provides access to the Gulf and beyond. In recent years, the Turkish government has increased its investments in the country and strengthened political, cultural and economic ties. Turkish decision makers underlined that Turkish and Djiboutian nations are brothers and provided humanitarian aid and development assistance. They have used religious references strategically to boost the image of Turkey as a fellow Muslim state that understands the needs of the Djiboutian people. For example, in December 2017, President Erdoğan welcomed Djiboutian President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh in Ankara with an official state ceremony, referred to him as 'my brother' in a joint press conference, expressed solidarity with regard to the refugee problem that the Djiboutian government has been dealing with, and promised to provide support for Djibouti in various forms including

development aid and continuous investments (Erdoğan 2017c). Religious elements are observable in Turkish policy in Djibouti as well. In May 2019, the Turkish state provided Ramadan aid to the Djiboutians who are in need as well as to Yemeni refugees in the country and the banners Turkey prepared for the Ramadan aid quoted the Verse of Brotherhood (Directorate of Religious Affairs of Turkey 2019a). Later in the same year, the speaker of the Turkish parliament together with the director of religious affairs of Turkey attended the opening of the biggest mosque in Djibouti, the Abdulhamid Han II Mosque, named after the Ottoman sultan, designed in the Ottoman style and built by Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*). Turkey's director of religious affairs delivered the first sermon, emphasising 'unity, solidarity, and fraternity' and expressing hopes that the mosque will 'strengthen religious, cultural, historical and fraternal ties between the peoples of Africa and Anatolia' (Directorate of Religious Affairs of Turkey 2019b). Speaking at the 42nd African Parliamentary Union conference in Djibouti in the same trip, the speaker of the Turkish parliament made similar remarks, emphasising that African states are 'friends and brothers', underlining that Turkey has 'developed, revived and built' wherever it goes unlike imperialist powers (Şentop 2019).

From the point of view of the Djiboutian government, the use of religious (Islamic) elements in Turkish foreign policy is empowering. Just as Turkey has used religious references while requesting privileges from Djibouti, such as the creation of a 'Turkish Economic Zone' (Anadolu Agency 2017), Djibouti has used the same discourses to make requests from the Turkish government. For instance, drought has been a consistent problem in Djibouti and the government has sought funding for its dam projects from external actors, including Turkey.<sup>7</sup> Speaking to Turkish national TV in 2013, Djiboutian Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Youssouf said they saw Turkey as a role model which successfully blends both Islamic and democratic values and that they aimed to attract big investments from Turkey (TRT 2013). In December 2016, at the Djibouti–Turkey Business Forum, Djiboutian Prime Minister Abdoukader Kamil Mohamed welcomed the strengthening of economic relations and expressed his country's expectations from Turkey regarding the funding of a dam project,<sup>8</sup> adding that he was hoping Turkey would finance further development projects (Baysal 2016). In the same meeting, the president of the Djibouti Chamber of Commerce emphasised the historical ties between the two countries and the need to strengthen economic cooperation, while the Djiboutian minister in charge of investments said trade volume between the two countries could reach its full potential with further bilateral trade agreements (DEİK 2016; Chambre de Commerce de Djibouti 2017). When President Guelleh visited Ankara in 2017, he too referred to his counterpart as *cher frère* (my dear brother), congratulated him for his leadership in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and with regard to the issue of Jerusalem, said that the relationship between Djibouti and Turkey is 'fraternal', and expressed satisfaction for the deals concluded between the two



countries (Guelleh 2017). In 2019, the Djiboutian ambassador in Ankara said their ‘vision [was] providing room for Turkey in the region’ and welcomed greater Turkish engagement to strengthen bilateral ties, referring to Turkey’s construction of a hospital, a dam, and the Ottoman-style mosque as well as some 500 Djiboutian students being educated in Turkey (Kırıkçıoğlu 2019). What is important to highlight here is that the Djiboutian government was able to invoke social factors and use ideational proximity as a tool in pursuit of greater gains.

As the two cases of Sudan and Djibouti demonstrate, foreign policy discourses based on Islam and co-constituted as frameworks provide an additional layer or ideational resource in negotiating the specific terms of ties. Accordingly, when engaging with countries that had once been part of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey employs shared historical narratives and identity markers in its foreign policy discourse. Similarly, when engaging with Muslim-majority populations, Turkish policymakers tend to frame Turkey’s relationship with the host country in fraternal religious terms. These different stances towards African states and societies are effectively an invitation by Ankara to them to exercise African agency to varying degrees commensurate with Turkey’s perception of their proximity to a shared Muslim identity. Astutely managed, African actors are able to use this additional reference point to appeal to Ankara for improved terms in bargaining while, concurrently, Turkey is more readily successful in securing gains in areas outside of commercial domains such as the swift banning of Gülenist-linked institutions.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This article has sought to make three contributions, namely a broadening of our understanding of Turkey–Africa relations, the role of African agency within that relationship and the actor-specific sources of agency in Africa–emerging powers ties.

First, this article has aimed to fill a gap in the literature on Turkey–Africa relations, which predominantly seeks to explain Turkish motivations on the continent through the lens of simple power equations. African agency, be it expressed as negotiating capabilities or predatory elite culpabilities, is defined by relative bargaining power in this interpretation of Turco–African engagement. Shifting the focus from Turkish actions to African agency allows us to analyse the relationship from the point of view of African actors who are on the receiving end of Turkish policies. This not only allows for an assessment of Turkey’s involvement in the continent but also underscores how the framing of relations influences Turkey’s ability to shape outcomes in line with its preferences.

Second, building on the existing literature on African agency, this article finds that the concept is interpreted too narrowly and cannot explain the kind of varied outcomes experienced in negotiations between Turkey and African governments. Understanding expressions of African agency that go beyond the conventions of material readings of power relations is important

to recognising the complexity and depth of the concept. In countries that share cultural and religious ties with Turkey, the Turkish government uses discourses magnifying these elements thus constructing an ideational world in which fraternal ties offer greater opportunities for material and non-material gains. African interlocutors demonstrate that they are able to instrumentalise such ideational discourses to secure improved outcomes in bargaining while their Turkish counterparts are selectively more successful in inducing policy changes outside of commercial domains.

Third, most of the scholarship has examined African agency as a component of Africa's relationship with bigger emerging powers, namely China. Going beyond the case of China–Africa relations allows us to see the sources of African agency in different contexts and to recognise that distinctive features hold with particular external actors, producing different dynamics and even unexpected outcomes. The opportunities provided by relations co-constituted around ideational frameworks extend the possibilities – without determining the outcomes – for African governments to negotiate with Turkey. Recognising this dimension of actor-specific forms of agency helps explain variation in bargaining strategies as well as differing results.

Underlying structural conditions of power distribution and asymmetries between Africa and external actors, of course, continue to prevail. However, the scope for African agency is extended through ideational framing of relations, offering another avenue for bargaining that raises possibilities for improved outcomes. In this respect the focus on leadership which recognises inherent possibilities and operationalises these in the service of negotiating better policy outcomes should feature as the next research agenda.

#### NOTES

1. It should be noted that Turkey's imports from the sub-Saharan African region do include raw materials and natural resources such as oil and gas.
2. An *eyalet* (province or governorate) was the largest administrative unit in the Ottoman political system until the 19th century.
3. Turkey achieved its goal of securing a non-permanent seat in UN Security Council in 2008 after rigorous lobbying of African states in UN General Assembly. See Özkan (2010: 536).
4. The Gülenists, the AKP's previous allies until a series of ruptures which date back to the early 2010s, have been particularly active in the African continent through educational establishments and commercial groups.
5. See for example Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's (2020) op-ed urging the international community to 'take concrete steps' against FETÖ. Also see Erdağ (2018: 316).
6. For instance, there were concerns in Egypt about Turkish expansionism. See for example Mikhail (2018).
7. For example, Djibouti received \$13m World Bank emergency funding in 2011. See Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (2015).
8. The Ambouli Friendship Dam.

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## Interviews

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