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Research Article

Between Status Quo Actors and Challengers: Mapping Türkiye's Shifting Engagement in The North Africa

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Abstract: The primary objective of this study is to examine the scope and dimensions of Türkiye's growing interest in the North African region in recent years. In this context, the study advances the assumption that Türkiye possesses the potential to become integrated into, and possibly alter, the region's existing security and economic architecture. The analysis begins with an assessment of the presence and strategic interests of traditional Western powers—namely the European states and the United States—that have historically played a significant role in shaping the region's security landscape. This is followed by an evaluation of the current involvement and ambitions of emerging actors such as Russia and China, who have recently sought to expand their influence in North Africa. Subsequently, the study analyzes Türkiye's current presence in the region, arguing that Ankara is striving to advance its interests by competing with both status quo and revisionist external actors operating in the area.

Keywords: Turkish Foreign Policy, North Africa, China, The United States, Russia

1. Introduction

North Africa occupies a unique position, being considered part of the Middle East due to its historical and cultural ties, and part of Africa due to its geographical location. The region's unique geographical location has contributed to the development of a distinct regional political architecture. Because of its hybrid character, North Africa is a space where the security issues of both the Middle East and Africa are deeply felt. In addition to its geographical location, two other distinct factors play a significant role in the formation of this unique structure. Firstly, different from many other regions, there is no single actor powerful enough to exert dominant influence over the entire region. In this regard, it is reasonable to suggest that the distribution of power among regional actors is relatively balanced. The second factor shaping the region's traditional political structure is its colonial past. Following the decline of Ottoman influence in the area, North Africa became one of the primary arenas of intense colonial competition among European powers. The sustained presence of European powers—particularly France—up until the post–World War II decolonization period, and the notably violent struggle for independence in cases such as Algeria, contributed to the development of a deeply rooted anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiment within regional societies. Nevertheless, the political, economic, and cultural ties established with colonial powers could not be entirely severed after independence.

The region's political structure has undergone significant transformations in recent years due to a series of developments. Most notably, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the United States initiated a "war on terror" targeting radical organizations and called for the active involvement of regional actors. The presence and connections of such organizations within the region have introduced substantial security challenges for these actors. However, under the atmosphere created by the "war on terror" doctrine, regional countries have become increasingly authoritarian in an attempt to partially mitigate the aforementioned security challenges (Keenan, 2006, pp. 270-271). This trend toward increased authoritarianism, which was reinforced alongside the war on terror, continued until the Arab Uprisings, which fundamentally challenged the existing structure of the region. The Arab

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Uprisings, which began in Tunisia in 2011, rapidly spread across the Middle East and unsettled the political elites of nearly all regional actors. As is well known, the uprisings led to the overthrow of governments in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, and triggered military intervention against the Qaddafi regime in Libya.

These developments disrupted the region's long-standing political order, allowing new political elites to come to power. Moreover, the failure to establish political stability in post-Qaddafi Libya and the ensuing civil war significantly altered the regional balance of power. Similarly, in Egypt, the removal of the Mubarak regime was followed by a political transition during which the democratically elected Morsi government was overthrown in a coup, marking the beginning of a prolonged period of instability that weakened Egypt's influence and power. In addition, the Arab Uprisings weakened existing regimes, leading to the re-emergence of significant security challenges across the region. Radical terrorist groups regained strength throughout North Africa, and their involvement contributed to a substantial increase in transnational crime and irregular migration across the region (Ammour, 2012, pp. 2-4; Tawfik, 2018, p. 311). Collectively, these events, initiated by the Arab Uprisings, have brought about substantial shifts in the regional balance of power.

In addition to internal regional factors, the policies of influential external powers have also played a significant role in shaping and transforming regional politics. Although the region has long been under the influence of European powers and the United States, recent years have witnessed a growing presence of other external actors such as China, Russia, and Türkiye. While there is a substantial body of literature analyzing the regional presence of Russia and China—particularly in the context of their challenge to the existing regional order (Aidoo & Hess, 2015; Cherif, 2019; Falkon, 2017; Bamidele & Erameh, 2025; Ghanem, 2021; Issaev et al., 2023; Facon, 2017, pp. 5-7 2023; McGrath, 2025; Dzekashu & Anyu, 2021; Shinn & Eisenman, 2012; El Kadi, 2021; Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025; Zoubir, 2023; Ghafar & Jacobs, 2020), the literature concerning Türkiye's role remains relatively limited. In this context, the present study seeks to address Türkiye's influence in North Africa by focusing on its expanding multidimensional activities in the region. The central assumption of the study is that Türkiye, in addition to employing soft-power instruments, also utilizes hard-power tools to establish political, security, and economic relations in the region, thereby aiming to shape the existing regional structure in its favor. It is anticipated that the study will contribute to the limited body of literature on Türkiye's policy toward North Africa by providing an overview of its current regional engagement.

The study will first seek to uncover the nature and scope of external actors operating in North Africa. In this regard, it will begin by analyzing the interests of status quo-oriented Western powers that seek to maintain the current political order in the region. The following section will evaluate the regional policies of Russia and China, which are increasingly active in the region and are defined as revisionist powers. The final section will focus on analyzing Türkiye's presence and activities in North Africa.

2. The Role of External Powers

2.1. Status-quo powers

Western powers stand out as the most prominent external actors. European powers with a colonial legacy in the region—most notably France—along with the United States, which seeks to project its hegemony globally, have pursued active and influential policies in North Africa. The primary objective of these countries in the region is to maintain the political, security, and economic relations they have historically established. Therefore, they can be characterized as status quo powers aiming to preserve the existing security structure. Firstly, it is appropriate to evaluate the approaches of the European powers toward Africa in general and North Africa in particular at two distinct levels. As mentioned before, the colonial legacy shared by leading European powers and countries in the region continues to persist. Specifically, in North Africa, France remains a significant actor in both the domestic and foreign policies of these countries, and France is actively seeking to maintain this position. On the

other hand, European powers' approach to the region must also be considered at the level of the European Union (EU). In this context, the EU's relations with the region can be seen to follow three main lines. First, in terms of economic relations, the EU is the region's most important trading partner. With the exception of Libya, European countries such as France, Spain, and Italy dominate the import profiles of all North African states. Historical colonial ties have played a role in shaping the foundation of this economic relationship (Holden, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, the region's abundant energy resources are of considerable importance to the EU's energy needs. Another area where relations between the two regions have intensified is security. In this regard, North African countries constitute the primary transit zone for migration flows moving from the African continent towards Europe.

Secondly, there is the issue of the presence of extremist Islamist terrorist groups operating within the countries of the region, which pose a security threat to Europe (Holden, 2009, p. 14). Another dimension of the relations between the two regions is the EU's claim to be a "normative power." In this context, the EU asserts a leadership role in promoting and advancing values such as democracy and human rights in the region. However, this normative power claim contradicts the continuation of colonial legacies by European powers, the EU's prioritization of economic relations with the region, and the existence of security concerns such as migration and terrorism. The dissemination of values such as democracy and human rights in the region entails the weakening and disintegration of traditional political institutions, which carries the risk of generating instability. Conversely, the aforementioned factors require strong, stable structures in the region. For this reason, similar to the United States, the EU appears to support traditional authoritarian structures in the region, contrary to its normative power claim (Ghafar & Jacobs, 2020, pp. 5–6).

Another significant external actor shaping the regional structure of North Africa is the United States. In general, the African continent has not been considered a priority region in U.S. foreign policy. Nevertheless, within Africa, the United States has primarily concentrated its attention on North Africa (Chin & Bartos, 2024, p. 124) The focus of the United States' interest in the region does not stem directly from the region itself but rather from its proximity to areas of strategic importance for U.S. foreign policy, namely Europe and the Middle East (Hemmer, 2007, p. 56; Holden, 2009, p. 14). Thus, from the United States' perspective, protecting the interests of its close European allies in the region, as well as maintaining the existing regional order they support, is a primary concern. Nevertheless, as a reflection of its claim to global hegemony, the dominant themes in global power competition also shape U.S. relations with North African countries. This dynamic was clearly evident during the Cold War, in the dichotomy between the Western and Eastern blocs, and later during the global "war on terror," in which countries were often categorized based on whether they aligned with the U.S. or supported radical groups. In this framework, Morocco—strongly aligning with the United States during both the Cold War and the war on terror—has been classified as a "moderate" actor by successive American administrations and has been supported in regional politics. On the other hand, during the Cold War, the United States regarded Algeria—which was part of the Non-Aligned Movement and had developed relatively close relations with the Soviet Union—as a problematic actor within the region (Hemmer, 2007, pp. 60–61). Similarly, Libya was also classified as a troublesome regional player by successive U.S. administrations, particularly due to accusations of its support for radical movements. In this context, given that current U.S. foreign policy is primarily focused on the rise of China, it would not be inaccurate to anticipate that this strategic orientation will also shape its relations with countries in the region.

Therefore, when the interests of European powers and the United States in the region are considered together, it becomes evident that these actors have played a significant role in shaping and evolving the regional security and economic structure. Western powers have consistently sought to maintain the continuity of this structure, which they have shaped in line with their own strategic interests. European powers have sought to preserve and reinforce this structure in North Africa through

mechanisms such as the 5+5 Dialogue (Busquets, 2014, pp. 88-89), while the United States has pursued similar objectives through initiatives like the North African Economic Program and, later, the Greater Middle East Partnership Initiative (Ammour, 2012, pp. 2-4; Tawfik, 2018, p. 311). However, as was evident during the Arab uprisings, when internal factors trigger change within this structure, these powers tend to support a controlled transformation—provided it remains within the bounds of their influence. During the Arab uprisings, both the United States and European powers initially adopted a favorable stance toward the protests, framing their responses within the normative principles of democracy and human rights that traditionally underpin their foreign policy discourse. However, as clearly demonstrated in the case of Egypt, once these uprisings began to pose a threat to the security architecture established by these actors, they abandoned their normative commitments and reverted to traditional policies centered on cooperation with authoritarian regimes.

2.2. Emerging challengers

As can be observed, while Western powers are primarily concerned with preserving the North African regional structure they have shaped in accordance with their own strategic interests, revisionist actors—such as Russia, China, and more recently Türkiye—are actively seeking to influence this security architecture in ways that reflect their own geopolitical ambitions and normative frameworks.

Historically, the African continent has never been a priority region for Russian authorities as a whole. However, in recent years, a significant shift has been observed in Russia's interest in Africa, particularly North Africa (Issaev et al., 2023, p. 325). This change is driven by two main factors: One systemic and the other regional, which is related to the systemic factor. From a systemic perspective, Russia's relations with the region are rooted in its broader grand strategy towards the international system. Russia continues its competition with the United States and China within the international order, extending this rivalry to North Africa as well (Facon, 2017, pp. 5-7; Milosevich, 2019, p. 31; Ghanem, 2021, p. 117). The particular importance Russia attaches to the North African region in this great power competition stems from its strategic significance. Moscow views North African countries as having a special position due to their membership in the African Union, which aligns with Russia's interests in Africa, and their close cultural and political ties to the Middle East, which correspond with Russia's interests in that region (Němčková et al., 2021, pp. 371–372). Owing to this special status, the region is indispensable to Moscow for protecting its interests in the Southern Mediterranean, an area historically significant to Russia and increasingly important economically due to newly discovered natural resources. Nonetheless, rather than developing a comprehensive regional policy, Russia prefers to manage its bilateral relations with regional actors in accordance with evolving current policies (Schumacher & Nitoiu, 2015, pp. 97–98).

Within this general context, Russia's foreign policy toward the region acquired a new dimension following two significant developments after 2010. First, the Arab uprisings disrupted Russia's traditional political and economic networks within the region. Simultaneously, the rise of radical Islamism in the region heightened Moscow's concerns that its own Muslim population might be influenced by this trend, potentially leading to a conflict similar to the Chechen wars (Milosevich, 2019, pp. 35–36). Additionally, developments in Syria and Libya compelled Russia to seek allies in the region and to establish alternatives to Libya's previous status (Němčková et al., 2021, p. 372; Kalika, 2019, p. 6). While the Arab Uprisings prompted Russia to reconsider its relations with the region, the principal event that accelerated Russia's engagement with regional countries was the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Following this annexation, Russia's exclusion by Western powers and the imposition of sanctions severely weakened its economy and created new challenges in its search for markets and raw materials. In this context, the African continent in general, and North Africa in particular, emerged as a viable alternative for Russia. Furthermore, the escalation of tensions between Russia and the West following the war in Ukraine has heightened Russia's reliance on North African countries. In response

to the embargoes imposed on it, Russia has sought to leverage natural gas restrictions against Europe and has aimed to attract North African countries—which constitute an alternative supplier of Europe's gas needs—into its sphere of influence.

From the perspective of African countries, Russia has become an important alternative in response to China's growing influence during a period when U.S. interest in Africa has waned (Paczyńska, 2020, p. 1). Nevertheless, Russia competes in the region not only with various European countries and the United States, which still maintain strong ties, but also with China, whose presence is increasingly expanding. Relying on the close relationships established with regional states during the Soviet era, Russia offers a framework of relations based on respect for the sovereignty of authoritarian regimes in the region, in contrast to Western powers' conditional engagement tied to democracy and human rights (Paczyńska, 2020, p. 1). Unlike the U.S. and other Western actors, Russia adopts a non-ideological approach toward regional actors and maintains communication with all parties, including those that are ethnically or religiously at odds. Additionally, Russia is not an explicit supporter of Israel in the Palestine issue, which holds particular significance for regional actors (Milosevich, 2019, p. 40). Within this competitive context, Russia builds its relations with African countries primarily through sectors where it holds strength, such as defense, mineral resources, and energy (Ghanem, 2021, p. 117). In this context, SIPRI data indicate that, between 2000 and 2024, Russia was the leading arms exporter to countries in the region. In this domain, Russia has carried out arms transfers to all regional actors. Algeria stands out as Russia's most important client in North Africa. (Paczyńska, 2020, p. 3; Němčková et al., 2021, p. 373). Considering that Russia's export relations with regional countries in other sectors remain weak—and have failed to develop despite its growing interest in the region—it becomes evident that Russia seeks to strengthen its ties with these countries primarily through the defense sector. Russian companies are often more acceptable to African countries than Western firms, as they do not impose preconditions, such as anti-corruption measures (Paczyńska, 2020, p. 2).

Although Russia has made limited efforts to increase its engagement with the region, the most significant challenge to the Western-backed structure in North Africa comes from China. In recent years, China has been the most influential actor in regional politics. Moreover, considering the declining influence of the United States and other Western powers in the region, alongside Russia's inability to achieve the anticipated impact with its policies, it can be argued that China is currently the external power that has increased its influence the most in the region. This phenomenon is not unique to North Africa but rather reflects China's broader policy toward the African continent as a whole. There are three fundamental reasons underlying China's growing influence in the region. First, China places significant importance on Africa in its foreign policy due to the continent's developmental potential, as Africa remains underdeveloped relative to many other parts of the world, presenting economic opportunities for China. Second, a substantial portion of the valuable raw materials essential to China's economy is abundantly available in Africa. Third, China's policy of expanding its economic and political sphere of influence intensifies its engagement with the continent (Dzekashu & Anyu, 2021, p. 46).

China's policy toward Africa is generally based on "pragmatism." This policy, which is not based on any political or ideological foundation, centers on the strategy of strengthening economic relations with African countries. In this context, China develops similar relationships with all regimes in Africa, regardless of their identities, and swiftly establishes ties with new regimes following any political transitions, resuming its engagement seamlessly (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012, p. 7). Fundamentally, China's overall policy toward Africa is grounded in principles such as mutual respect for territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and cooperation based on mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Dzekashu & Anyu, 2021, p. 46; El Kadi, 2021, p. 110). These principles attract the attention of governments across Africa, as they do worldwide, and significantly facilitate the acceptance of Chinese capital and projects (Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025, pp. 2–3).

Within this general African policy framework, the North African region is also identified as a significant area for China. As is the case across Africa, China has long been an important commercial actor in this region. Over the past 20 years, the share of European powers —traditionally the main trading partners of the three countries under study —has steadily declined in their import figures, while China's share has steadily increased. This trend clearly indicates that China has replaced European powers in North African countries' import markets. Moreover, China maintains its interest in the region not only because it constitutes a vital dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative but also due to the area's rich underground resources (Zoubir, 2023, p. 738; Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025, p. 3). However, the primary factor that distinguishes North Africa for China, as it does for other powers, is its geographical location. China strategically values North African countries for their proximity to the Middle Eastern, European, and African markets (Ghafar & Jacobs, 2020, p. 6). The strategic position of these countries renders the region a natural logistical hub for China, facilitating access to these large markets. From this perspective, China views North Africa as a crucial center for distributing its manufactured goods to major markets (Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025, p. 3). Accordingly, China strives to establish relationships that enhance trade and tourism revenues in these countries.

The rapid increase of China's economic presence in the region fundamentally stems from its approach of employing economic instruments persuasively rather than coercively in its relations with regional countries (Ghafar & Jacobs, 2020, pp. 5-6; Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025, p. 3). North African countries regard China as an economic model that successfully combines political independence with economic development. Additionally, China's approach, which prioritizes the political sovereignty of states and respects the unique characteristics of each society, creates significant opportunities for these countries, many of which face challenges related to economic development (Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025, p. 6). From the perspective of regional states, China's capital, which comes without any preconditions, offers a favorable alternative to Western-centered capital that requires stringent conditions aligned with the Washington Consensus (El Kadi, p. 111). Furthermore, North African countries perceive China as an important alternative due to its non-colonial nature and its historical stance against colonial Western powers that once dominated and oppressed the region. China's presence also assists North African countries in their efforts to balance external influences within their territories (Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025, pp. 3-6). However, China remains determined to sustain this relationship primarily through economic means, consciously avoiding involvement in the region's core security issues. In this regard, China prefers that European powers continue to play the leading role in addressing regional security challenges (Zoubir, 2023, p. 738).

As observed, both Russia and China are striving to increase their influence in the region for various reasons. At a time when the United States' power appears to be weakening across the region and anti-Western sentiments are on the rise, the growing engagement of these actors could significantly reshape the regional security architecture. However, both Russia and China seem to be primarily expanding their presence through economic instruments, indicating a current preference to avoid direct involvement in the region's existing political and security dynamics. Nevertheless, particularly in China's case, the increasing economic presence may, over time, evolve into a more pronounced political influence.

3. Türkiye in North Africa: A Nascent Regional Player in *The Competition*

Considering the competing agendas of revisionist and status quo global powers in the region, Türkiye's recent activism appears to reflect a strategic balancing act, shaped by its own limited capabilities yet aimed at reinforcing its agential role in regional politics. Within this context, Türkiye has not categorically rejected cooperation with either bloc—working at times with status quo actors seeking to preserve elements of the colonial legacy, while also engaging with alternative global powers aiming to expand their leverage over regional affairs. For instance, Türkiye collaborated with Western actors

to address certain crises, such as in Libya, while simultaneously aligning with revisionist forces to challenge the remnants of colonial structures in countries like Algeria. As such, Türkiye's regional activism is best understood as a complex balancing effort between the divergent ambitions of influential global actors, through which it seeks to expand its own regional agency.

In this regard, as the literature frequently emphasizes, the 21st century has marked a significant transformation in Türkiye's regional engagement, characterized by an expansion of influence beyond its traditionally close neighbors—Iraq, Syria, and Iran—deep into the broader Middle East. This expansion gradually spread into the Middle East's sub-regions, such as the Levant and the Gulf, and eventually reached North Africa. However, this development should not be viewed as an isolated or exceptional situation. Rather, it represents a deliberate and integral component of Türkiye's long-standing strategy of multidimensional, multilateral regional engagement, spanning various continents and regions across the globe. Within this broader strategic framework, Türkiye has aimed to build a regional security structure centered around itself. Initially, this was pursued through soft power tools—including economic investment, cultural diplomacy, and political cooperation. Over time, especially in response to shifting regional dynamics in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, these efforts were complemented by the deployment of hard power capabilities. As Türkiye advanced its military, political, economic, and cultural capacities, it actively sought new regional partnerships and redefined its foreign policy vision to encompass wider geographies (Altunışık & Martin, 2023; Parlar Dal, 2013; Kızılkaya & Salman, 2023; Yönten & Denemark, 2023)

This evolving approach also reconfigured Türkiye's perception of the Middle East. No longer limited to bilateral ties with specific states, Türkiye has come to engage with the entire set of sub-regions comprising the Middle East and North Africa. Entering the new century with a soft-power-driven foreign policy, Türkiye's response to the Arab Uprisings marked a turning point, prompting it to adopt a more assertive and hard-power-oriented posture to preserve and expand its regional influence. Positioning itself as a constructive and stabilizing actor, Türkiye increasingly assumed the role of a regional axis power by establishing alliance-based relationships with several states in the Middle East's sub-regions. This, in turn, reflects Türkiye's intention to form a regional security structure in which it plays a central and indispensable role in maintaining order and balancing local, regional, and global challenges. In this new strategic regional configuration, North Africa has become a pivotal area of Turkish foreign policy, owing to its historical and cultural proximity and its growing geopolitical relevance. Maritime disputes, legal disagreements under international law, energy-related rivalries, and evolving patterns of regional competition—particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean—have shown that this area cannot be decoupled from Türkiye's core strategic outlook. Accordingly, Türkiye has increasingly stepped up its efforts to play a more assertive role in the region (Kızılkaya et al., 2023; Yönten & Denemark, 2023; Güney & Mandacı, 2013).

3.1. From passive to participatory period

Despite Türkiye's historically unproblematic and culturally rich ties with North Africa, its engagement in the region was significantly curtailed following the First World War, and it adopted a more passive, ineffective stance until the end of the Cold War and the mid-1990s. The newly established Republic consequently redirected its focus toward domestic restructuring and prioritized relations with its immediate neighbors. As a result, North Africa—like other distant regions—was largely perceived as peripheral, and Türkiye generally aligned itself with Western positions until the end of the Cold War. More critically, Türkiye remained hesitant during the decolonization process in North Africa throughout the 1950s and generally adopted a pro-Western stance at the United Nations regarding the independence movements against the French mandate system. In that sense, oscillating between hesitancy and a pro-Western stance, Ankara failed to provide strong support for regional independence movements against Western imperialism. Following the Second World War, as

independence movements in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco gained momentum within the broader decolonization wave, Türkiye adopted a largely passive stance. Rather than engaging with these movements, Ankara treated them as France's internal affairs. This position was particularly controversial given the scale of violence during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), which included well-documented French-led massacres (Tepeciklioğlu, 2016, pp. 3-12, Özkan, 2012; Cannon & Donelli, 2024).

During this period, the Algerian people, in particular, endured immense hardships and made significant sacrifices in their protracted struggle to dismantle French imperial rule. Against this backdrop, Türkiye's silence or any perceived engagement with French policies in the region further complicated its standing in the Global South. Such a posture not only weakened Türkiye's moral authority in the eyes of newly independent or decolonizing states but also undermined its ability to garner broader international support, particularly with regard to then emerging Cyprus issue. Türkiye's reluctance to raise these issues at international platforms such as the United Nations significantly undermined its image in the region. Notably, Türkiye even voted in favor of postponing Morocco's bid for independence at the UN General Assembly. This pattern extended beyond North Africa to the broader continent, where Türkiye consistently aligned with Western powers and refrained from supporting anti-colonial resistance against British, French, or other imperial actors. By distancing itself from African struggles and adopting an ambiguous position on rising nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments, Türkiye was increasingly perceived not as an autonomous actor but as a firm supporter of Western-oriented policies. This approach created a certain distance between Türkiye and African countries, including those in North Africa, and contributed to Türkiye's international isolation during the Cyprus issue (Tepeciklioğlu, 2012, pp. 65-89; Özkan, 2012).

However, the collapse of the bipolar international system in the post-Cold War era created new opportunities for regionalism and inter-regional engagement, and Türkiye adopted a more participatory orientation towards this region. Since then, Türkiye has pursued a more participatory foreign policy orientation, seeking to enhance its relations with these countries and to provide substantial support for addressing their regional challenges and bringing them to the international platforms. In that regard, having been launched in 1995 with the Barcelona Declaration, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), which later evolved into the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008, significantly influenced Türkiye's perception of North Africa, especially during its intensified efforts to become a full member of the European Union. Türkiye viewed the EU's active engagement in the region as an opportunity to strengthen its own strategic position within the Union. In addition to these global/regional dynamics, Turkish foreign policy was also shaped domestically by İsmail Cem, who served as Foreign Minister between 1997 and 2002. Cem played a key role in formulating successive policy documents and resetting ties with North African countries. In this sense, he was a leading figure in shaping Türkiye's renewed orientation not only towards the EU but also towards other regions, involving North Africa (Cannon & Donelli, 2024; Özkan, 2012; Özkan, 2010).

These multi-level dynamics prompted Türkiye to reconsider its foreign policy priorities and explore regions that had long been considered peripheral or strategically secondary. In this context, strategic documents were drafted to redefine Türkiye's foreign policy vision, resulting in a more comprehensive and multidimensional regional strategy. The first major strategic move came with the adoption of the "Opening to Africa" policy in 1998, which laid the foundation for successive foreign policy initiatives. By the late 1990s, Türkiye began cultivating a multi-regional foreign policy aimed at enhancing its economic capacity, diversifying its power centers, expanding its influence, and, more importantly, creating an integrated security framework. These efforts were further solidified by the "Zero Problems with Neighbors" policy, developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was an advisor at the time and later served as Türkiye's Foreign Minister and Prime Minister during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments. The "Opening to Africa" policy, alongside the "Zero Problems" strategy,

encouraged Türkiye's political and trade circles to seek alternative destinations for their interactions. These two dimensions were complemented by humanitarian, cultural, and civil society initiatives (Tepeciklioğlu, 2012, pp. 65-89; Özkan, 2012; Özkan 2010).

As Türkiye increased its diplomatic presence in the region through the establishment of more embassies and consulates, trade relations and bilateral investments followed suit, creating intensified interaction and mutual understanding between Türkiye and African countries. This positive and dynamic atmosphere first led Türkiye to unveil its 'Strategy for Enhancing Economic Relations with African Countries' in 2003, marking a significant step in improving economic ties between Ankara and regional countries. This was soon followed by cultural, diplomatic, and humanitarian initiatives, indicating a broader shift in Türkiye's approach to its relations with Africa in the early 21st century. Türkiye then declared 2005 as the "Year of Africa" and became an 'observer country' in the African Union. In 2008, Türkiye was officially recognized as a strategic partner by the African Union. In the same year, the First Türkiye-Africa Cooperation Summit was held, during which significant messages were exchanged regarding the Türkiye-Africa partnership, and critical decisions were made by both parties. At this summit, held 20 years later following "Opening to Africa" policy, key strategic documents were adopted, including The Istanbul Declaration on Türkiye-Africa Partnership: Solidarity and Partnership for a Common Future and the Framework for Cooperation for the Türkiye-Africa Partnership, both of which outline the foundations of relations between Türkiye and African countries (Cannon & Donelli, 2024; Orakçı, 2022).

The deepening of relations extended beyond the economic and diplomatic spheres, encompassing a wide range of areas from expanded flight routes and student exchanges to various civil society initiatives. In that sense, Türkiye's leading airline, Turkish Airlines (THY), expanded its African destinations, further cementing Türkiye's ties with the continent. Other airlines, such as Pegasus, also began offering flights to the region. As a strong indicator of growing relations, Turkish civil society organizations like Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), Turkish Red Crescent (KIZILAY), and Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), alongside governmental institutions like Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) and Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMF), rushed to address the long-term vacuum left by Türkiye in the region through various initiatives. Thus, Türkiye's engagement with the region intensified across all fields, primarily using soft power methods and diplomatic initiatives, ahead of the Arab Uprisings (Tepeciklioğlu, 2012, pp. 65-89; Emin, 2024).

3.2. Assertive period

While the 1990s can be viewed as a preparatory period for Türkiye's more participatory involvement in Africa, the years leading up to the Arab Uprisings should be seen as a period of assertive efforts across various domains, excluding hard-power involvement in the region. North Africa, while not unique in this regard, became a significant focal point within Türkiye's broader global outreach, which also included Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, and the broader Middle East. Among these regions, however, North Africa witnessed more dynamic and cooperative engagements, as Türkiye's image and growing activism were generally well received across the African continent. Amidst the legacy of colonialism, terrorism, and regional fragmentation, African countries increasingly sought alternative partnerships after the Cold War, leading to a diversification of external actors, including China, Russia, Iran, the UAE, India, and others. While skepticism toward external involvement persisted due to historical experiences with Western powers, Türkiye's engagement was often viewed more favorably, thanks to shared historical and cultural ties, as well as early soft-power initiatives (Köse, 2014; Özkan, 2012, pp. 121-126; Tepeciklioğlu, 2012, pp. 60-65; Orakçı, 2022).

Despite a history of long-standing neglect, strained relations, and negative Turkish perceptions before the post-Cold War era, Türkiye's active, multi-level engagement in the region has fundamentally

transformed these views and laid a solid foundation for comprehensive mutual cooperation, as evidenced by the growing ties following the 1998 'Opening to Africa' policy. As a relatively late entrant into the North African geopolitical landscape, Türkiye gradually established itself as a proactive actor. From the late 20th century onward, Ankara began pursuing a more assertive and multi-faceted strategy, initially grounded in soft power. These efforts intensified in the early 21st century, with Türkiye expanding its diplomatic presence through the establishment of new embassies and consulates, conducting high-level official visits, and joining regional political organizations. On the economic front, Türkiye signed Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), increased trade volumes, and enhanced bilateral cooperation. Simultaneously, Ankara's humanitarian diplomacy gained prominence, particularly through initiatives to address regional challenges such as famine, water scarcity, food insecurity, and poverty. Türkiye's engagement was further facilitated by its positive Ottoman legacy in North Africa, which provided a historical and cultural foundation for deeper involvement and was largely a neglected aspect prior to the Cold War (Nazlı, 2005; Özkoç, 2017, pp. 80-86; Tepeciklioğlu, 2012, pp. 76-89).

The process following the Arab Uprisings, therefore, served as a critical environment for Türkiye to begin incorporating more robust, even hard-power elements into its regional strategy. In other words, despite previous efforts to boost relations with North African countries predated the Arab Uprisings, these events significantly upgraded and radically altered Türkiye's regional engagement, as exemplified in its maritime strategies as well. Since the early 2010s, Ankara has increasingly viewed its national interests—and those of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus—as closely intertwined with the dynamics of North Africa. This perspective has been reinforced by attempts to isolate Türkiye through regional alignments, such as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum and various strategic initiatives led by France, Greece, and the Republic of Cyprus. Furthermore, the deterioration of Türkiye's relations with certain regional actors, notably Egypt and Israel, has heightened concerns about the potential spillover of geopolitical polarization into North Africa. As a result, Türkiye has pursued deeper, more structured partnerships with North African countries, many of which have demonstrated a favorable, constructive stance toward Ankara's active role in the region (Yönten & Denemark, 2023; Vrey & Blaine, 2024).

Having elevated its regional engagement to a new level, marking a shift from long-sought soft power elements to the integration of hard power, Türkiye initially played a pivotal role in reshaping the realities on the ground during Libya's internal conflict by supporting the UN-recognized Government of National Unity (GNU). With increased Turkish involvement, the military balance between the GNU and the forces of Khalifa Haftar, who led the Tobruk-based administration, shifted dramatically in favor of the Tripoli-based GNU. This active hard power engagement was made possible by two landmark agreements: the Türkiye–Libya Maritime Boundary Delimitation Agreement and the Türkiye–Libya Security and Military Cooperation Agreement, both signed in 2019. These agreements not only underscored Türkiye's rising hard power presence in North Africa but also demonstrated its capacity to shape the region's socio-political dynamics, extending beyond traditional soft power diplomacy. Turkish drones and other military assets played a crucial role in this transformation. These successes also empowered Türkiye's drone diplomacy, allowing it to broaden its defense and security partnerships with regional actors grappling with various security concerns (Badi & al-Jabassini, 2025; Kurç, 2024).

Through these bold moves, Türkiye influenced regional maritime boundary strategies, reshaped the energy calculus of Eastern Mediterranean actors, and effectively neutralized its isolation stemming from the invalid East-Med pipeline project. Following these developments, Ankara invested heavily in Libya's state-building process while simultaneously normalizing relations with rival Libyan factions and their regional backers, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. What ensued was a multi-dimensional Turkish engagement across North Africa, marked not only by intensified cooperation with

Libya but also by expanding defense and security partnerships with other regional actors. Libya became a strategic ally in Türkiye's broader North Africa policy, enabling it to project influence without directly confronting regional powers. By balancing regional actors such as Egypt, Israel, and Greece, and even challenging France's long-standing colonial influence, Türkiye swiftly compensated for past strategic shortcomings. It consolidated its hard power presence, with significant implications—both for the Cyprus issue in particular and for the broader Mashreq-Maghreb geopolitical dynamics. Encapsulated in the "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan) doctrine, Türkiye no longer viewed the Mediterranean as peripheral or detached but as a central axis of its territorial and maritime security strategy, thus investing in a comprehensive array of instruments, including military assets, to assert its interests (Badi & al-Jabassini, 2025; Vrey & Blaine, 2024, pp. 349-352).

Besides its strategic repositioning in Libya, Türkiye has significantly deepened its defense and security partnership with Algeria, which positions itself as the central actor in North African affairs and seeks a more autonomous stance against French influence over its own territory and broader Africa. Consequently, their economic, historical, and social ties have improved over time, culminating in defense and security cooperation. In addition to Algeria, Morocco has also welcomed Turkish activism in North Africa, evidenced by growing economic ties and increased interest in Turkish defense products, notably Turkish drones. Despite the ongoing conflict between Morocco and Algeria over the Western Sahara issue, Türkiye seeks to maintain a balanced stance between the two countries by advocating United Nations-led diplomatic solutions as the only viable path to lasting, stable peace. Regarding another key regional actor, Türkiye's relations with Egypt have been somewhat ambivalent, particularly in the early stages of the Arab Uprisings. While Türkiye initially supported the Egyptian revolution that ended Hosni Mubarak's long-standing rule, it experienced strained relations with the military-led government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi following the 2013 coup. However, through mediation efforts by regional actors such as Qatar and shifting regional dynamics in the aftermath of the Gaza conflict, the two countries have gradually moved closer. The ongoing thaw in relations, particularly over the Libyan issue, has facilitated the restoration and intensification of economic, cultural, and military ties. Consequently, Türkiye and Egypt have initiated negotiations on potential defense and security cooperation (TRT World, 2025).

Table 1

Import Volume Between Türkiye and North African Countries (Million USD), 2015–2024[1]

	2015	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**
Algeria	744	470	797	1.159	719	567	1.195	1.368	1.452	1.472
Morocco	728	921	931	753	713	642	923	1.018	1.360	1.406
Libya	230	195	232	372	484	1.675	821	767	538	556
Egypt	1.313	1.445	2.013	2.169	1904	1.723	2.212	2.551	3.648	4.411
Tunisia	158	221	230	234	190	151	267	396	293	309

Following initial polarization over Türkiye's new hard-power-oriented repositioning in the region, North African countries gradually recognized—and, in some cases, welcomed—Türkiye's distinct, more assertive involvement in regional affairs. This increased Turkish engagement significantly affected trade relations with North Africa.

While the total trade volume between Türkiye and the North African region amounted to approximately 13 billion USD in 2015, Turkish proactive activism led to a steady increase, reaching

[1]All foreign trade data presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 were obtained from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). For more detailed information, please visit the TURKSTAT website: https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=dis-ticaret-104&dil=1

nearly 22.5 billion USD—almost doubling the previous figure. Notably, within this trade volume, exports consistently accounted for nearly twice the value of imports in each year under consideration.

Table 2

Export Volume Between Türkiye and North African Countries (Million USD), 2015–2024

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Algeria	1.930	1.830	1.820	2.120	2.010	1.449	1.698	2.068	2.756	2.880
Morocco	1.370	1.480	1.680	2.010	2.340	2.057	2.976	3.094	3.060	3.440
Libya	1.510	979	915	1.580	2.060	1.653	2.771	2.840	3.257	2.799
Egypt	3.240	2.830	2.510	3.210	3.500	3.136	4.513	4.556	3.352	4.175
Tunisia	850	937	940	959	886	928	1.376	1.550	1.247	1.113

An examination of Table 1 and Table 2 reveals that despite periods of political tension, economic relations between Türkiye and Egypt were not fundamentally disrupted and subsequently demonstrated a robust recovery, culminating in Egypt attaining the highest trade volume within the North African region in recent years. Another notable observation is the near doubling of export volumes between Türkiye and Morocco over the ten-year period, reaching approximately 3.5 billion USD. Particularly over the last four years, Morocco has become Türkiye's second-largest trading partner in North Africa. The data further indicate that Türkiye's expanding involvement in Libya is associated with a significant increase in exports to the country, illustrating the dynamic interplay between Türkiye's soft power initiatives and hard power engagements. As discussed above, the intensification of bilateral defense and security cooperation appears to have positively influenced export-driven trade growth between Türkiye and Libya. Although Algerian-Turkish trade volumes have fluctuated slightly, a gradual upward trend has persisted over the past four years. However, unlike in Libya and Morocco, the increase in trade volume between Algeria and Türkiye from 2015 to 2024 does not reflect a similarly pronounced growth trajectory.

Table 3

Foreign Trade Volume Between Türkiye and North African Countries (Billion USD), 2014–2024

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Export	8.9	8.1	7.9	9.9	10.9	9.2	13.4	14.1	13.7	14.4
Import	3.2	3.3	4.2	4.7	4.1	4.8	5.4	6.1	7.3	8.2

As evidenced across multiple dimensions of Turkish activism in the region, North African states have largely responded positively to Türkiye's regional engagement, increasingly viewing Ankara as an active and credible actor in addressing regional challenges. This is reflected in the expanding, multidimensional cooperation frameworks established between Türkiye and various North African countries. Consequently, Türkiye's efforts to incorporate North Africa into its broader regional vision appear to have yielded substantial results in the recent period. Nevertheless, the region continues to face a series of entrenched and intertwined structural challenges that may constrain Türkiye's future influence. These include potential regional polarizations, the enduring political and economic influence of former colonial powers such as France, protracted inter-state conflicts—most notably the Western Sahara dispute—persistent state fragility in Libya, and escalating competition over Mediterranean energy resources and maritime boundary delimitation. In sum, Türkiye's relatively late but assertive regional engagement has thus far contributed to its elevation as a central actor within North Africa. However, the region's complex and unresolved dynamics pose critical uncertainties and limitations that must be carefully navigated to shape Türkiye's long-term strategic posture in the area.

4. Conclusion: Does Türkiye Have a Chance in North Africa?

As seen, North Africa — with its distinct security architecture — is undergoing a transformation following the changes brought about by the Arab uprisings. The ongoing civil war in Libya poses a major challenge to the balance of power, which is a key component of this security structure. On the one hand, strong anti-colonial sentiments persist among societies in the region; on the other hand, the fact that many regional regimes still maintain close ties with Western colonial powers creates significant tension. During this period of transformation and tension, the region's security and economic structure are being shaped by external actors with substantial interests in the region. In this process, European powers and the United States have adopted a stance favoring the continuity of their established relations in the region, and — as was evident during the Arab uprisings — allow potential regional changes to unfold within the boundaries of their control.

On the other hand, other actors described as revisionist in this study — such as Russia and China— are striving to reshape the region's structure in their own favor. The fact that the region is already undergoing a transformation, combined with the United States' broader policy of minimizing its presence across much of the world, creates a fertile environment for these revisionist states' efforts. Although Russia had, at one point, attempted to increase its influence in the region, the war in Ukraine and the subsequent fall of the Assad regime in Syria have significantly weakened its position. Also, China's strong capital and low-cost production capacity have made it a significant actor in this region, as it has across the globe. On one hand, regional countries are weakening their commercial ties with European powers and turning toward inexpensive Chinese goods, thereby transforming their trade relations. On the other hand, they are striving to attract Chinese capital to finance major domestic projects. In this context, as mentioned above, China's unconditional capital offers a favorable alternative to Western powers for many regional actors. However, China's consistent avoidance of taking an active role in addressing the region's political and security issues has positioned it primarily as an economic actor that pursues its own interests rather than engaging comprehensively with the region.

In this context, Türkiye's role as another prominent yet new player in the region is particularly noteworthy. Unlike China, Türkiye does not shy away from engaging with the region's political and security issues, making it a stronger alternative. However, it cannot be said that Türkiye has the capacity to improve its economic relations with regional countries to the same extent as China. Nevertheless, Türkiye's developing economy, its growing military strength, and its increasing interest in the region have contributed to its emergence as a powerful actor within the region's security and economic structure. Despite this, Türkiye's activism in the region remains relatively limited for the time being, primarily due to the long-standing ties between status quo powers and regional actors, as well as the significant material capacities of emerging revisionist forces such as Russia's military penetration and China's expansive economic initiatives. In response, Türkiye has adopted a more balanced position between revisionist and status quo external actors. This calibrated stance aligns with its principled regional approach, which entails engaging with all influential global actors to resolve regional issues and deepen its role as an actor in the region, while firmly rejecting both the continuation of colonial legacies and their replacement by new forms of imperialism. This approach reflects Türkiye's increasingly assertive engagement with the region.

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