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TÜRKIYE'S AFRICA OPENING: SOMALIA

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ABSTRACT: *This article analyses Türkiye's multidimensional engagement in Somalia through Barry Buzan's five-sector security model. It argues that Türkiye has positioned itself as a hybrid state-builder operating outside traditional Western and Gulf frameworks. The February 2024 Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement institutionalised Türkiye's role as both a security guarantor and economic partner amid growing instability in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. Relying on open-source data, policy documents, and strategic commentary, the study highlights Türkiye's emphasis on bilateralism, religious affinity, and infrastructure-led development. While this approach enables rapid and visible influence-building, it also raises concerns over elite-centric governance, economic dependency, and regional polarization. For NATO and EU members – such as Hungary, which contributes to EUTM-Somalia – Türkiye's model offers insights into non-Western security partnerships in fragile states. The Somali case illustrates how emerging powers use integrated, sectoral strategies to expand influence, with long-term outcomes shaped by inclusivity, transparency, and local ownership.*

KEYWORDS: *Türkiye, Somalia, Barry Buzan, Geopolitical Strategy, Soft Power*

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Türkiye's Africa policy has shifted from ad hoc aid to a coordinated, multidimensional strategy. This transformation is most visible in Somalia – a fragile yet strategically located state along key trade routes. This article explores how Türkiye employs a hybrid model – blending military assistance, economic investment, and cultural diplomacy – to reshape local governance.

These gains underpin Türkiye's hybrid state-building model in Somalia. This raises three questions: What tools does Türkiye use to project influence? How do they function across various sectors? What challenges do they face in a fragile federal state? Türkiye's model combines soft power – such as humanitarian aid, education, and religious diplomacy – with hard power, including military training and economic investment. It contrasts with Western donors focused on institutional reform and Gulf actors relying on financial patronage. Türkiye's use of bilateral agreements and direct investment enhances both its influence and Somalia's sovereignty, challenging conventional state-building paradigms.

Türkiye's Africa policy can be divided into three historical phases.[1] First, during the Ottoman era (16th–19th c.), when influence was mostly symbolic in North Africa. Second, under the Early Republic (1923–1998), Africa was largely sidelined. The third phase began

[1] Besenyő – Oláh 2012.

with the 1998 "Opening to Africa" Action Plan, which spurred a rapid expansion of embassies, trade, and defence exports.

Table 1 illustrates the dramatic growth in Türkiye–Africa ties from 2002 to 2022.

Table 1 *Türkiye's expanding presence in Africa, 2002–2022*
Source: *Özkan – Akgün 2010; MFA 2024, 2025.*

Aspect of Presence	Change Described	Start Year	End Year
Turkish embassies in Africa	Increased from 12 to 44	2002	2022
Bilateral trade volume	Increased eightfold	2003	2022
Defence industry exports	Raised by 653.53%	2015	2021
Turkish Airlines destinations	Grown by ~1140%	2005	Present day

This final phase brought a rapid expansion of diplomatic missions, economic ties, and security cooperation – most visibly in Somalia.[2] Since 2002, this has translated into more embassies, increased trade, and expanded defence partnerships. Ankara grew its diplomatic presence from 12 to over 44 embassies, boosted development aid, and fostered collaboration among state agencies, NGOs, and private firms.[3]

Somalia has become the flagship of Türkiye's Africa strategy. What began as humanitarian relief during the 2011 famine – marked by then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit – has evolved into a full-spectrum partnership encompassing military training, infrastructure development, and political alignment. Somalia thus serves as a test case for Türkiye's state-building doctrine.

Research Questions and Argument

Despite the growing interest in Türkiye's Africa policy, few studies offer a comprehensive analysis that integrates security, economic, and societal instruments through a multi-sectoral lens. This article fills that gap by using Buzan's framework to analyse how Türkiye's engagement in Somalia functions as a novel, hybrid model of middle-power state-building and strategic influence.[4] In bypassing multilateral frameworks in favour of bilateral agreements, Türkiye distinguishes itself from both Western and Gulf actors, positioning itself as a long-term strategic partner in one of Africa's most contested geopolitical theatres.[5]

To assess this hybrid model, the article addresses three questions:

1. *Coordination:* How does Türkiye integrate military, economic, and cultural instruments under a unified strategy?
2. *State Capacity:* To what extent has this engagement strengthened Somali state capacity in a fragile federal context?
3. *Broader Lessons:* What implications does the Somali case hold for middle-power diplomacy in fragile regions?

[2] Öztürk – Duman 2023.
[3] Özkan – Akgün 2010.
[4] Buzan 2007; TİKA 2022; Türkiye Diyanet Foundation 2022.
[5] Besenyő 2021.

By applying Buzan's five-sector framework to Somalia, this study offers the first integrated analysis of Türkiye's Africa policy that connects soft-power discourse with strategic state-building literature.

Ankara's approach exemplifies a novel middle-power intervention model – combining military cooperation with soft power instruments to reshape fragile-state governance. Unlike Western or Gulf actors, Türkiye bypasses multilateral aid structures in favour of bilateral military and economic agreements, positioning itself as a long-term strategic partner in the Horn of Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article builds on Barry Buzan's five-sector security framework, which conceptualises security as a multidimensional construct – encompassing military, political, economic, societal, and environmental domains.[6] Unlike traditional realist or development models, Buzan's approach recognises that state influence and insecurity are shaped by both hard and soft power instruments. This lens is especially useful for analysing Türkiye's hybrid engagement in fragile contexts like Somalia.

Türkiye's Africa Policy and Strategic Behaviour

Türkiye's engagement in Africa has been widely interpreted through the lens of soft power, humanitarian diplomacy, and religious affinity.[7] Scholars often frame their role as a culturally sensitive alternative to Western donors, emphasising Islamic solidarity and fast, visible infrastructure projects. While some scholars frame this as a normative, values-driven outreach, others contend that it reflects pragmatic statecraft, designed to counterbalance Western and Gulf influence on the continent. However, some critics argue that Türkiye's bilateral projects often prioritise Turkish commercial interests, such as securing construction contracts or access to natural resources, over genuine capacity-building in recipient states, running the risk of creating neo-patronage networks. Others highlight Türkiye's use of humanitarianism to build geopolitical influence, arguing that soft power is inseparable from strategic interests.[8]

Despite a growing body of research, there has been limited examination of how Türkiye integrates its aforementioned diverse tools into a cohesive strategic framework.[9] By applying this framework to Somalia, the article contributes to the still-fragmented literature on non-Western intervention strategies and demonstrates how Türkiye acts not merely as a donor or partner but as a hybrid state-builder pursuing long-term geopolitical leverage through bilateral mechanisms.

[6] Buzan et al. 1998.
[7] Özkan – Akgün 2010; Sucuoğlu – Stearns 2016; Altunışık – Martin, 2023.
[8] Besenyő 2021; Çubukçuoğlu 2023b.
[9] Rossiter – Cannon 2019.

Theoretical Framework: Buzan's Sectoral Security Model in the Somali Context

This study applies the five-sector security model adapted through János Besenyő's regional lenses to capture the multidimensional nature of Türkiye's engagement in Somalia. Drawing on Besenyő's adaptation for the African context, we argue that Türkiye's engagement is not a collection of discrete initiatives but a coordinated strategy across all sectors.

Türkiye's initiatives in Somalia can be categorised into five sectors, as outlined in Table 2 (below), summarising the key actors, instruments, and strategic effects in each sector.

Table 2 *Türkiye's sectoral engagement in Somalia (adapted from Buzan's five-sector model)*

Sector	Engagement Examples	Key Actors	Strategic Purpose
Military	Training SNA (TURKSOM), defence agreements	TURKSOM, MoD, 2024 Defence Pact	Build military capacity, extend regional reach
Political	Support to the federal govt., diplomatic alignment	MFA,10 Embassy, Presidential visits	Shape governance, enable bilateral alignment
Economic	Airport/port ops, infrastructure, energy deals	TİKA, Turkish firms, Exim Bank, Kızılay	Reconstruction, market access, influence
Societal	Education, cultural diplomacy, Islamic outreach	Maarif, Diyanet, Yunus Emre Foundations	Cultivate soft power, elite networks
Environmental	Water projects, health services, sanitation	TİKA, Turkish Red Crescent	Human security, rural visibility

Table 3 lists milestone events marking Türkiye's deepening footprint in Somalia over time.

Table 3 *Key milestones in Türkiye's engagement in Somalia*

Year	Initiative	Domain	Description
2011	Erdoğan's famine visit	Humanitarian aid	Initiated Türkiye's large-scale engagement with Somalia
2017	Opening of the TURKSOM base	Military training	Established training for Somali National Army personnel
2020	Port & airport rehabilitation	Infrastructure	Turkish firms rebuilt critical trade infrastructure in Mogadishu
2024	Offshore energy exploration agreement	Energy cooperation	Began seismic surveys for oil/gas in Somalia's EEZ
2025	Onshore hydrocarbon exploration deal	Energy cooperation	Türkiye secured rights to explore/develop onshore hydrocarbon blocks

[10] MFA stands for Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Milestones chart the evolution of Türkiye's influence, transitioning from a humanitarian entry point to a comprehensive partnership that encompasses military, economic, and governance domains. By framing Türkiye's engagement through Buzan's five-sector lens, we can appreciate the uniqueness of its bilateral, state-centric model. In contrast to Western multilateralism or Gulf patronage, Türkiye's strategy effectively combines security cooperation, infrastructure development, and cultural diplomacy to reshape governance in fragile states.

By framing Türkiye's engagement through this multidimensional lens, the article reveals how Ankara leverages sectoral synergies to recalibrate state-building and power projection in Somalia. The following section outlines the qualitative methods used to trace these dynamics empirically.

METHODOLOGY

Somalia is selected as a critical case because Türkiye's engagement there – spanning humanitarian aid, military cooperation, and economic investment – represents the most sustained application of its multidimensional Africa strategy in a fragile state. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, analysing Türkiye's engagement in Somalia from 2011 to early 2025. The analysis follows Barry Buzan's five-sector security model. Data come from primary sources (Turkish ministries, Somali parliamentary records) and secondary sources (academic literature, UN reports, media analyses). To ensure reliability, these were triangulated with Somali press coverage and independent NGO assessments. Due to security and logistical challenges, field interviews were not conducted. As a result, Somali perspectives are inferred from secondary sources, which may not fully reflect on-the-ground sentiments.[11] To mitigate this, the research draws on a wide array of sources, including Somali media and independent NGO reports, to approximate local viewpoints.

To contextualise Türkiye's engagement, Somalia's socio-political landscape must be understood. Its post-independence history is marked by clan divisions, regionalism, and fragmented governance.[12] The 1960 unification of British and Italian Somaliland quickly encountered challenges, as clan loyalties outweighed national cohesion. Siad Barre's regime (1969–1991) promised unity but deepened divisions through military repression and clan favouritism. Following the collapse of Barre's regime, state fragmentation accelerated – Somaliland declared independence, and Puntland became semi-autonomous.[13] Despite repeated international state-building efforts, Somalia remains divided by clan, religion, and region.

Buzan's five-sector model captures both hard and soft power dynamics.[14] The study is further informed by Professor János Besenyő's adaptation for African contexts, positioning Türkiye's engagement as a hybrid model blending development and strategy. Comparative insights from hybrid state-building literature[15] frame Türkiye's approach alongside broader trends of non-Western influence in fragile states. Recent analyses of Türkiye's foreign policy[16] support this integrated perspective.

[11] George – Bennett 2005.
[12] Sinkó 2022.
[13] Ingiriis 2016.
[14] Buzan et al. 1998; Besenyő 2021.
[15] Duffield 2007; De Waal 2015.
[16] Fidan 2023.

Data were collected from a mix of primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include official statements from Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, TIKA (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı – Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), and the Diyanet (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı – Presidency of Religious Affairs). Somali parliamentary records and press releases were also reviewed. Secondary sources comprise academic articles, international organization reports (UN, AU), and regional media analyses in English and Turkish.

By structuring the investigation around the three research questions, the study provides a systematic assessment of Türkiye's role in Somalia.

INSTRUMENTS OF TÜRKIYE'S SECTORAL ENGAGEMENT IN SOMALIA

Türkiye's growing presence in Somalia reflects a multifaceted strategy blending military cooperation, economic investment, societal outreach, and environmental governance – aimed at reinforcing Somali state capacity while advancing Ankara's geopolitical objectives. This engagement intensified following the February 2024 Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, signed amid rising Red Sea tensions and the controversial Ethiopia–Somaliland maritime pact, which Somalia condemned as a breach of sovereignty.[17]

Framed as a strategic counterweight, the ten-year Türkiye–Somalia accord authorizes joint air, land, and naval operations, maritime infrastructure development, and protection of Somalia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).[18] Since its ratification, Somalia's alignment with Türkiye – especially in maritime sovereignty and regional security – has embedded the country more deeply in Ankara's regional calculus, raising concerns about entanglement in Red Sea and Gulf of Aden rivalries.

However, the agreement has also triggered domestic pushback. A Somali parliamentary committee opposed the deal, citing its lack of transparency, while civil society actors criticised the absence of regional consultation and warned that preferential hydrocarbon clauses and long-term naval access could weaken Somali sovereignty and future fiscal independence.[19]

Türkiye's expanding footprint has also triggered external reactions. EU and NATO members – including Hungary[20] – are increasingly confronted with the need to adapt to middle-power actors operating outside traditional Western security norms. Meanwhile, Somalia's Western partners have expressed concerns that Türkiye's preference for bilateral arrangements risks fragmenting multilateral frameworks such as the New Deal by duplicating efforts in sectors like health and education. Simultaneously, Türkiye's domestic opposition has ques-

[17] Abdurrazık 2024; Aguiar 2024.

[18] Oruç 2024; Şimşek 2024.

[19] Garowe Online 2025; Bojang 2025.

[20] Hungary has contributed to Somalia's stabilization via its participation in the EU Training Mission (EUTM) Somalia, which supports the Somali National Army through military training and strategic advisory roles under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). See: European Union External Action Service (EEAS), CSDP Annual Report 2022–2023. 57–59. https://www.eutmsomalia.eu/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/2023/10/CSDP_Annual_Report_2022_2023_EN_v5-1.pdf

tioned the strategic logic and economic sustainability of this engagement – especially in light of the mounting inflation and the projected $2.3 billion cost.[21]

Ankara's multidimensional model – rooted in pragmatic bilateralism and Islamic solidarity – distinguishes it from both Western and Gulf approaches. While Western strategies emphasise donor conditionality and multilateral coordination, Türkiye's state-to-state diplomacy enables swifter implementation by bypassing NGOs and cumbersome oversight structures. In contrast to Gulf states like the UAE and Qatar, which rely more heavily on financial patronage and ideological alignment, Türkiye presents itself as a partner committed to sovereignty-building through physical and institutional reconstruction.

Although this model delivers speed and coherence, it faces growing criticism for reinforcing governance imbalances, marginalizing federal member states, such as Puntland and Jubaland, and creating structural dependency on Turkish firms and aid infrastructure. The Somali case, therefore, underscores both the strengths and the vulnerabilities of Türkiye's assertive engagement in fragile environments.

To explore these dynamics systematically, the following subsections provide a sector-by-sector analysis of Türkiye's influence in the five sectors defined by Buzan. This framework illustrates not only the strategic cohesion of Türkiye's approach but also the fragilities that emerge when state-building is pursued through highly centralised, bilateral channels.

Military Sector: Security Cooperation and Strategic Positioning

At the heart of Türkiye's security engagement in Somalia is Camp TURKSOM, established in 2017 and gaining heightened strategic significance under the 2024 Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. Nonetheless, critics argue that Türkiye's coastal-centric model has limited reach in inland areas dominated by Al-Shabaab that retains control of 20–25% of Somali territory,[22] exploiting governance gaps in rural areas. While joint Turkish–Somali naval patrols have reduced piracy incidents by 63% since 2017, Türkiye's coastal-focused strategy struggles to counter inland insurgent control, revealing the limitations of a base-centric model in a fragmented state.

Türkiye's embedded military advisors now play direct roles in operational planning against Al-Shabaab, a transnational insurgent group that functions as a quasi-state – taxing citizens, delivering basic services, and maintaining a paramilitary force. Somalia's security landscape remains fractured, shaped not only by Al-Shabaab but also by regional and global intelligence services vying for influence.[23] In this context, Türkiye's military role is not just counterterrorism – it is a bid for broader influence and security governance in the Horn of Africa.

Beyond military training, Ankara oversees strategic civilian infrastructure, like Mogadishu's airport and seaport. This dual-use strategy supports economic resilience and logistics for defence operations, embodying Türkiye's hybrid model: security assistance paired with state-building.

Since 2009, Turkish warships have participated in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. The 2024 agreement expands this role to full-spectrum cooperation, including joint patrols and naval infrastructure, yet inland gains remain modest. Despite SNA advances,

[21] Abdulkadir 2025; Marangio 2025.
[22] Military Africa 2022.
[23] Besenyő 2023.

Al-Shabaab still controls parts of southern Somalia, underlining the coastal limits of Türkiye's engagement. Türkiye's growing presence also raises concerns in Cairo and Abu Dhabi, where Ankara is viewed as a strategic rival competing over ports and maritime influence.[24]

Economic Sector: Energy Investments and Asymmetric Partnerships

Türkiye's economic engagement in Somalia centres on strategic infrastructure and untapped energy resources. Hydrocarbon reserves – onshore and offshore – have remained largely unexplored since the 1980s due to conflict, weak regulation, and institutional collapse post-1991. Türkiye's entry marks a renewed bid to integrate energy ambitions with geopolitical strategy.

On March 7, 2024, Türkiye and Somalia formalised a significant strategic partnership by signing two landmark agreements. These included the foundational Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework, which encompasses various economic aspects such as port development, as well as a specialized Energy and Strategic Cooperation Agreement. This latter agreement granted TPAO (Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı – Turkish Petroleum Corporation) exploration licenses for three expansive offshore blocks (each spanning 5,000 km²) and an additional 16,000 km² onshore.[25] Demonstrating prompt operational intent, the Turkish research vessel MTA (Maden Tetkik ve Arama Genel Müdürlüğü – General Directorate of Mineral Research and Exploration) Oruç Reis promptly began 3D seismic surveys in Somali waters, reportedly completing over 75% of the initial survey work by early 2025.[26] These agreements, bolstered by Somalia's Petroleum Law (2020), underline Ankara's confidence in revitalizing Somalia's hydrocarbon sector and incorporating potential maritime resource revenues into the economic strategies of both nations. This dedication aligns with Türkiye's broader policy of forging resilient bilateral alliances in volatile regions, an approach emphasised in recent strategic analyses.

Under the 2024 hydrocarbon agreement, Türkiye secured significant privileges through the TPAO. The agreement allows TPAO to recover up to 90% of petroleum as 'cost petroleum', while Somalia's share is capped at 5%, well below international standards, which typically range between 10–25% for host countries. This asymmetry highlights the strategic leverage Türkiye exercises in Somalia's nascent energy sector.[27]

Highlighting the strategic significance of these initiatives, Türkiye's Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar has explicitly connected energy projects in Somalia to Türkiye's broader vision for energy security and regional influence. In public statements, he has underscored that Somalia's energy development aligns with Türkiye's overarching Africa strategy, as well as its "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan), a geopolitical doctrine that asserts Türkiye's maritime rights in surrounding seas and extends its strategic reach across key sea lanes from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, investments in oil, gas, and potentially electricity and mining are not merely commercial pursuits; they are strategically crafted to enhance bilateral relations, project Turkish influence, and solidify Türkiye's role as a key player in the evolving energy corridors across the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden.[28] This *'resources-for-security'* dynamic binds energy exploration to Türkiye's naval presence, creating

[24] Pirinççi – Demirtaş 2020.
[25] BBC News 2024.
[26] Demirtaş 2024.
[27] Kenez 2025.
[28] Demirtaş – Öncel 2024.

a self-reinforcing cycle: naval patrols protect Turkish energy assets, while energy revenues justify continued security investments.

Beyond hydrocarbons, Türkiye's economic presence is significantly rooted in strategic infrastructure. The Albayrak Group's 20-year concession to oversee Mogadishu's port – Somalia's primary source of revenue – is projected to double the current income of $5 million per month through modernization efforts, the addition of new berths, and enhanced customs collection.[29] While this improvement boosts efficiency and fiscal capacity, it also raises concerns about economic sovereignty and reliance on Turkish firms. The framework agreement, established in February 2024, explicitly links the development of the port and shipyard to broader defence-industrial integration, emphasising Türkiye's role not merely as a donor or contractor but as a long-term economic stakeholder in Somalia's post-conflict recovery.

In addition to direct investments in infrastructure and energy, Türkiye has also played a significant role in providing crucial financial assistance for Somalia's macroeconomic stability. In November 2020, Türkiye contributed to Somalia's debt relief efforts by settling a portion of its debt to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a gesture that facilitated Somalia's eligibility for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. This payment, reported as approximately $2.4 million by some sources,[30] while others indicated a slightly higher figure of $3.5 million,[31] was part of broader international initiatives to clear Somalia's outstanding financial obligations. This gesture underscores Türkiye's commitment not only to project-based aid but also to supporting Somalia's fiscal health and its integration into the global financial system.

Maritime Security, Environmental Sector, and the Blue Homeland Doctrine

Turkey's expanding naval presence in Somalia and the Horn of Africa underscores its ambition to exert influence across the Indian Ocean, in line with the Blue Homeland doctrine. This strategic approach positions Turkey as a maritime power, impacting crucial sea routes from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea. Somalia's pivotal location at the crossroads of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean serves as a geostrategic anchor for this vision, significantly extending Turkey's naval reach well beyond its immediate vicinity. The Defence Agreement, established in February 2024, formalises this partnership, granting Türkiye access to the potential development of Somali port facilities, thereby reinforcing its role in the region.

The deployment of Turkish naval vessels such as TCG[32] Anadolu and TCG Kınalıada may access Somali ports, while Ankara funds Somali coast-guard training and port modernization, though concerns persist about the long-term sustainability and whether these projects sufficiently involve Somali contractors or build local capacity. These actions showcase Türkiye's shipbuilding capabilities and blue-water reach, enhancing Somalia's capacity to govern its waters – an effort that connects both security and environmental imperatives.[33]

[29] Hagmann – Stepputat 2023.
[30] Biçer 2020; The New Arab 2020.
[31] Turkish Minute 2020.
[32] TCG stands for Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Gemisi (English: Turkish Republic Ship).
[33] Çubukçuoğlu 2023a.

By integrating naval deployments with capacity-building measures, Türkiye supports coast guard training, port modernization, and maritime law harmonization, reinforcing Somalia's capacity to govern its maritime space and defend against piracy, smuggling, and illegal fishing.

From a Somali perspective, the maritime partnership promises security, investment, and capacity-building in a region often overlooked by traditional powers. For Türkiye, it offers a foothold in a strategic transit corridor, enhancing its presence in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and the broader Indo-Pacific security environment. While this approach bolsters Türkiye's identity as an independent actor in global geopolitics, it also increases its exposure to regional rivalries and volatile maritime disputes.

Together, these three dimensions – security cooperation, energy diplomacy, and maritime strategy – demonstrate how Türkiye's engagement in Somalia is not a fragmented set of activities, but rather an integrated approach to influence-building, resource access, and strategic depth in one of Africa's most geopolitically critical states.

Soft Power and Governance Tools

Türkiye's soft power strategy in Somalia integrates educational, religious, cultural, and humanitarian elements to foster long-term societal and political influence. Institutions such as the Maarif Foundation and the Yunus Emre Institute establish schools and cultural centres that promote the Turkish language, heritage, and values. Additionally, Diyanet funds the construction of mosques and supports Islamic education programs, thereby reinforcing a shared religious identity and enhancing Turkey's image as a fraternal and moral partner.[34]

More than 3,500 Somali students have been awarded scholarships by the Turkish government to pursue higher education in Türkiye, resulting in the establishment of a network of culturally aligned elites with strong institutional connections to Ankara. These graduates often assume prominent positions in public administration, civil society, and academia, thereby integrating Turkish soft power into Somalia's post-conflict leadership framework. Turkish aid is generally viewed as being more responsive and culturally attuned compared to Western donor assistance, which frequently faces challenges related to conditionality and slow implementation.[35]

Türkiye's support for Somali governance is visible not only in education but also in core state functions. Turkish advisors assist ministries in public administration, police training, and sectoral coordination. The Maarif Foundation has been instrumental in formalising Somali education by standardising curricula in Turkish-funded schools, while TIKA contributes to civil service and vocational training programs. This bilateral "delivery-first" model contrasts with the procedural benchmarks emphasised by Western donors, enabling faster execution but also concentrating influence within Mogadishu. Critics warn that such centralization risks excluding federal states from strategic planning and undermining broader governance legitimacy.

Türkiye has strategically positioned itself as the primary guarantor of sovereignty for Mogadishu. Its prompt response to the 2024 maritime agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland – under which Ethiopia was granted commercial and military port access in Somaliland

[34] Özuygun 2024, 32–40.

[35] Sucuoğlu – Stearns 2016.

in exchange for possible recognition of its independence – highlights this alignment. This agreement poses a direct threat to Somalia's territorial integrity by legitimising Somaliland's de facto autonomy and setting a precedent that allows external actors to circumvent Mogadishu in regional negotiations.[36] Economically, it risks diverting maritime trade from Somali ports to Ethiopian-controlled facilities in Somaliland, potentially costing Mogadishu 12–15% of projected port revenues by 2030.[37] Türkiye countered by fast-tracking its Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, reinforcing its role as Somalia's strategic counterweight.

Türkiye's governance strategies extend beyond soft power, providing direct support to Somali institutions. Turkish advisors are engaged in law enforcement, public administration, and education initiatives, while the Maarif Foundation works to standardise curricula in Turkish-sponsored schools. Additionally, Türkiye co-chaired the security pillar of the *New Deal* for Somalia (2013–2016), collaborating with the U.S. and EU to reform Somalia's armed forces and address issues such as displacement, food insecurity, and public health.[38] In contrast to multilateral initiatives that prioritise broad stakeholder consensus, Türkiye's approach focuses on achieving tangible results, deeply embedding itself within Somalia's political and societal framework.

This assertive strategy, however, faces its own set of challenges. Public rallies in Mogadishu celebrating Turkish–Somali cooperation reflect significant support within the capital; nonetheless, the absence of federal inclusion and transparent oversight mechanisms may threaten long-term sustainability. Critics argue that soft power cannot sufficiently substitute for the necessity of democratic legitimacy and inclusive governance. For Türkiye's involvement to retain its credibility and resilience, it must evolve from a centralised approach to one that acknowledges Somalia's internal diversity while promoting federal cohesion.

Türkiye's cultural influence is further enhanced through the media. Turkish state-backed outlets broadcasting in Somali bolster Ankara's narrative, reinforcing its role as a partner rooted in religious and post-colonial solidarity. Public perception of this partnership remains robust, as evidenced by mass pro-Türkiye demonstrations in Mogadishu in 2024. However, this growing closeness with the federal government has raised concerns among federal member states such as Puntland and Jubaland, which cite their exclusion from decision-making on security and resource management. For Türkiye's soft power model to remain sustainable, it must expand its inclusivity to embrace Somalia's internal political diversity and avoid reinforcing centralising tendencies.

Ultimately, Türkiye's societal and governance initiatives enhance its broader hybrid model – a combination of humanitarian efforts, religious affiliations, elite education, and institutional reforms designed to project influence and foster long-term alignment. This combination of collective workload positions Somalia not merely as a recipient of aid but as a crucial player in Türkiye's redefined geopolitical framework throughout the western Indian Ocean corridor.

[36] International Crisis Group 2024.
[37] Qadri 2024.
[38] Hall 2015.

CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS

Table 4 *Key risks in Türkiye's Somalia engagement*
Sources: *Fahron-Hussey 2018; Military Africa 2022; Çubukçuoğlu 2024; SAFETY4SEA 2024; World Bank 2024.*

Challenge	Example/Metric
Overextension Risk	1,200+ Turkish advisors in Mogadishu; 45 % of infrastructure projects delayed by security concerns
Regional Rivalries	IGAD[39] warns of "mission creep" from unilateral Turkish naval drills under Mavi Vatan.
Elite-Centric Governance	Puntland excluded from 73% of bilateral talks, boycotted 2024 port-revenue negotiations.
Piracy & Maritime Security	Pirate attacks off Somalia fell from 236 in 2011 to only 2 in 2014, thanks to NATO's Operation Ocean Shield and international counter-piracy efforts.
Insurgency & Al-Shabaab	Al-Shabaab controls ~20–25% of the territory, despite intensified Turkish training.

Türkiye's expansive engagement in Somalia – while praised for its scope and speed – faces growing scrutiny on multiple fronts. These critiques centre around four key challenges: federal imbalances, strategic overreach, securitization, and regional backlash.

Elite-Centric Governance and Federal Exclusion

Türkiye's close alignment with the central government in Mogadishu has strengthened state capacity, but it has also raised concerns about elite consolidation at the expense of federal pluralism. By reinforcing the political centre, Türkiye risks inadvertently undermining Somalia's fragile federal architecture and sowing internal discord.

Transparency and Economic Dependency

Türkiye's long-term energy and infrastructure agreements, while essential for economic revitalization, have drawn criticism for lacking transparency and favoring Turkish firms disproportionately. Leaked details of the 2024 hydrocarbon deal suggest asymmetrical revenue-sharing provisions that limit Somalia's fiscal autonomy.[40] Critics argue that the growing presence of Turkish companies in key sectors, such as port and airport operations, may restrict local capacity development and embed structural dependencies.

[39] IGAD stands for Intergovernmental Authority on Development.
[40] Kenez 2025.

Security-First Approach and the Risk of Securitization

Türkiye's defence cooperation, symbolised by Camp TURKSOM and maritime patrols, has improved operational readiness against threats like piracy and Al-Shabaab. Yet this security-heavy model raises the risk of over-securitization, where military priorities overshadow broader civilian governance and development goals. Critics warn that this may lead to an unbalanced state-building process that favours coercive institutions over participatory or inclusive mechanisms.

Regional Rivalries and Strategic Blowback

Türkiye's growing maritime and military footprint has triggered anxiety among regional powers, such as Egypt, the UAE, and Ethiopia. These actors view Ankara's presence as part of a broader ideological and strategic contest for influence across the Red Sea corridor and the wider Horn of Africa. In particular, the 2024 Ethiopia–Somaliland memorandum and Türkiye's subsequent deepening of bilateral ties with Mogadishu have intensified concerns about geopolitical polarization. Some AMISOM (African Union Mission to Somalia) officials have also raised concerns about coordination gaps, mandate overlap, and the bypassing of multilateral peacekeeping frameworks.

Domestic and Multilateral Concerns

Domestically, segments of Türkiye's political opposition and civil society have questioned the sustainability and accountability of the Somalia strategy, arguing that strategic assertiveness abroad must not come at the expense of democratic oversight or domestic welfare. Meanwhile, Somalia's partners – including Western donors and regional blocs – have expressed reservations about Türkiye's preference for bilateral channels over multilateral mechanisms, warning that this may fragment broader coordination efforts.

Overextension and Strategic Tension

Despite its extensive scope, Türkiye's strategy in Somalia is at risk of overextension and strategic imbalance. The heavy reliance on Turkish trainers, contractors, and aid agencies could hinder the development of Somali self-sufficiency and expose Turkish personnel to ongoing threats from Al-Shabaab and clan-based conflict. Sustained deployments necessitate considerable financial and logistical commitments, which may divert resources from domestic priorities.

Moreover, while the integration of humanitarian assistance with strategic objectives is often lauded for its cultural sensitivity, it has raised concerns that projects might prioritise Turkish commercial or military interests over authentic local empowerment. In the absence of inclusive governance structures and transparent oversight, well-intentioned initiatives could be viewed as neo-imperial or self-serving.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure the long-term sustainability, legitimacy, and effectiveness of its Somalia engagement, Türkiye should consider the following policy measures:

Table 5 *Policy recommendations for Türkiye*

Challenge Addressed	Policy Recommendation
Federal Exclusion & Elite Capture	Establish joint security and development committees with Puntland, Jubaland, and other federal member states to share decision-making.
Lack of Multilateral Coordination	Work more closely with the AU, IGAD, and Combined Maritime Forces to align mandates, avoid duplication, and enhance diplomatic legitimacy.
Transparency Deficits	Publish clear, accessible summaries of major defence, energy, and infrastructure agreements to build Somali public trust and ensure accountability.
Economic Dependency & Local Capacity Gaps	Pair every Turkish project with structured training and clear handover plans for Somali personnel; consider mandating local subcontracting quotas.

Implementing these policy shifts can help Türkiye safeguard its long-term strategic interests while reinforcing its image as a cooperative and development-oriented partner in fragile state environments.

CONCLUSION

Türkiye's engagement in Somalia represents a distinctive model of middle-power statecraft in a fragile context. Through a coordinated deployment of military assistance, infrastructure investment, and cultural diplomacy, Türkiye has positioned itself as a key factor in Somalia's reconstruction, distinct from traditional Western or Gulf approaches. By prioritising bilateral partnerships, Ankara has achieved notable agility, enhanced its visibility, and cultivated ideological resonance, particularly through Islamic solidarity and shared post-colonial narratives to cultivate trust. This approach diverges sharply from Western donors' procedural conditionality and Gulf states' transactional patronage, positioning Türkiye as a hybrid actor blending developmental pragmatism with strategic ambition.

This article applies Barry Buzan's five-sector security framework to demonstrate how Türkiye's multidimensional presence spans military, economic, societal, political, and environmental domains. The central argument is that Türkiye's Somalia engagement is not merely a series of ad hoc interventions but rather a coherent, integrated strategy. This strategy aims not only to deliver development aid or bolster security but also to actively recalibrate regional power dynamics in the strategically vital Horn of Africa, thereby presenting an evolving model of assertive middle-power foreign policy. The landmark February 2024 Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement serves as a watershed in this endeavour, clearly signalling Türkiye's ambition to institutionalise its long-term role as both a comprehensive development partner and a pivotal security guarantor for Somalia. This bilateral pact not only counters Ethiopia's Somaliland port deal but also embeds Türkiye in the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor, aligning with its "Blue Homeland" doctrine.

Yet this model faces significant challenges. Persistent state fragility, elite-driven governance, and unresolved federal tensions risk undermining the inclusivity of Turkish initiatives. The centralization of partnerships in Mogadishu has alienated federal states like Puntland and Jubaland, while asymmetric energy agreements – granting Türkiye 90% cost of petroleum recovery – echo critiques of neocolonial resource extraction.[41] Moreover, Türkiye's growing footprint has triggered strategic anxieties among regional rivals, raising the risk of entanglement in Red Sea geopolitical rivalries. Pressing concerns regarding the potential for Somali dependency, a lack of full transparency in key bilateral agreements, and the undeniable securitization of aspects of its aid further complicate Türkiye's portrayal and acceptance purely as a benevolent international actor.

To maintain credibility and ensure sustainable progress, Türkiye must balance its assertive bilateral approach with inclusive engagement across Somalia's federal states, establish transparent governance mechanisms, and enhance coordination with multilateral actors. The establishment of joint committees with federal states, clearer public communication regarding the terms of agreements, and structured capacity-building initiatives could strengthen Somali ownership while gradually reducing external dependencies and reliance on Turkish personnel. Additionally, selective multilateral coordination – such as aligning port security efforts with AU mandates – would mitigate perceptions of unilateralism and address Western concerns about fragmented aid.

Ultimately, Türkiye's engagement offers lessons for middle powers in fragile environments. It exemplifies "strategic humanitarianism," blending soft and hard power. Replicability depends on context, but Somalia offers a critical case for future interventions.

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[41] Kenez 2025.

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