



Diplomacy beyond rhetoric: An incomparable ally for Somalia

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Abstract

This article, the first in a series of multi-perspective writings on Somalia–Turkey relations, examines the distinction between rhetorical diplomacy and substantive engagement in Somalia’s external relations. It argues that one bilateral relationship stands out as incomparable when evaluated through policy behavior.

Moving beyond symbolic narratives of friendship, the article adopts a policy-analysis approach that combines secondary sources, including international reports, academic literature, and official documents, with analytical interpretation. The article evaluates the relationship across key indicators, such as continuity of engagement, security cooperation, institutional capacity building, economics, infrastructure, education development, and diplomatic positioning during the crisis period. By situating this partnership within Somalia’s broader history of external interventions, the article demonstrates that its distinctiveness lies not in the volume of aid alone or the level of rhetoric, but in the consistent multi-dimensionalism of strategic commitment while acknowledging inherent power asymmetries and the risk of dependency. The analysis concludes that this partnership represents rare model in Somalia’s contemporary diplomatic history, one that transcends episodic participants and offers important policy lessons for sustainable state partner relations in fragile geographies.

Keywords.

Somalia, Türkiye, diplomacy, ally, rhetoric.

Introduction.

In international relations and diplomacy, relations between states are commonly framed in terms such as friendships, partnerships, allies and cooperative periodic actors. When the context is fragile, post-conflict, and an institutionally weak state, these designations often remain ad hoc or unilateral interest-based. In such an environment, there’s a heightened risk that external actors may exploit the fragility of the state to create dependencies that do not translate into a self-sustaining political order. Somalia is a salient example of this dynamic.

Following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, Somalia emerged as a focal point of intense international intervention. The case of U.S intervention in 1992 during the reign of George Bush Snr clearly marked the beginning of this pattern. By then, Bush authorised a US- led mission in Somalia dubbed “Operation Restore Hope”, but which, rather than restoring hope, created further despair.

Historical accounts indicate that within a single day, more than 500 people were killed and 2.5million displaced, while 18 American soldiers were killed, with the fiasco laying the foundation for subsequent entrenched crises in Somalia, notably the spread of Jihadists in Somalia and their consolidation in the south of the country. This particular historical episode underscored the limits of foreign interventions regardless of their stated intentions and revealed how high-sounding rhetoric can have opposite outcomes.

Since then, Somalia was portrayed as a “failed state” synonymous with lacking control of its affairs. However, this perception began to shift on 19 August 2011 when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Türkiye visited Mogadishu during the holy month of Ramadan. That visit, widely regarded as a turning point, signalled the beginning of a qualitatively different mode of external engagement that many observers have heralded as the true “Operation Restore Hope.’ In this context, the gap between rhetoric and practice leads to a central analytical question: how should engagements and partnerships be evaluated in a fragile-state context? In diplomatic terms, a fragile, institutionally weak, and externally dependent state requires a clear and systematic framework for external involvement. The significance of external actors cannot be reduced to their stated objectives or short-term interests. Rather, they must be judged by how impactful their policies are on the ground and how much they contribute to reviving the functioning institutions of that state, as well as fostering long-term stability. This is in contrast to the nature of engagements that reinforce fragmentation or dependency in practice.

This article argues that Turkey’s relationship with Somalia constitutes an analytically incomparable partnership when evaluated through the lens of Somalia's external engagements since the fall of the central state. Türkiye seems to stand out in political, institutional, economic, security, and social dimensions, with relations geared towards a long-term state-building.

Unlike many other partners whose involvement tends to be confined to specific sectors or short-term projects, Türkiye has committed to a comprehensive and sustained presence in Somalia without seeking to dominate or “own” the Somali state. Other partners often focus on narrow areas such as security, humanitarian assistance, or discrete infrastructure projects and do not necessarily build enduring institutional capacity. By contrast, Türkiye has invested in ministries, universities, hospitals, and security institutions, aiming to strengthen the Somali state from within and to foster locally owned development.

The concept of incomparability employed here is neither normative nor emotive. Neither does it imply moral superiority, unconditional alignment, or the absence of self-interest. Instead, incomparability is understood as relative distinctiveness, measured against situating the role of Turkey within the broader landscape of Somalia’s foreign relations. The article demonstrates how its policy behaviour structurally differs from past patterns of fragmented, sector-specific crisis-driven involvement.

Building on this narrative of partnership and partnership, the article seeks to address broader questions in diplomacy and state-building. The relationship between Türkiye and Somalia offers a distinctive case study of sustained presence, institution-building, and deepening trust. Political engagement, understanding this convergence, is important not only for analyzing Somalia’s foreign policy but also for rethinking how meaningful state-building can be constructed in contexts of prolonged fragility.

Breaking pattern of distance: Türkiye's 2011 entry into Somalia

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Somalia in August 2011 marked a decisive turning point for both Somalia's post-conflict trajectory and Türkiye's role in Africa. At this time, Somalia was experiencing its worst drought in 60 years, and civil war all over the country, which led to catastrophic famine that threatened 12 million civilians across the Horn of Africa. Mogadishu was widely perceived as one of the worst and most dangerous cities on earth, left to decades of civil war, warlordism, piracy, and Al-Qaeda. Most international actors avoided direct engagement on the ground and operated remotely from Nairobi and Addis Ababa.

Against this backdrop, Erdoğan became the first non-African head of state to visit Somalia since the collapse of its central government in 1991. His visit was carefully planned rather than symbolic; he arrived with a large delegation that included ministers, parliamentarians, businessmen, aid workers, journalists, public figures and even his family members. It signalled Turkey's intention to pursue a strategic engagement beyond humanitarianism.

The visit took place shortly after al-Shabaab was routed from Mogadishu by the Somali National Army and the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and during the holy month of Ramadan, all amplifying an emotional tempo in Somali society. By physically entering Mogadishu at such a delicate moment, Erdoğan challenged the prevailing international narrative that Somalia was a "No-go zone" and demonstrated that direct engagement was possible in an environment that demands excessive caution by such high-profile actors.

Türkiye's humanitarian involvement had already begun before the visit. Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay) workers were restoring water supplies, clearing waste, building schools and health clinics, and establishing relatively decent settlements for internally displaced persons in the country. According to UN officials, Türkiye achieved in a few months what others had failed to accomplish over two decades. This seems to stem from good intentions and commitment. Additionally, Erdoğan's visit accelerated institutionalised engagement.

In 2011 alone, Türkiye's private sectors donated over \$365 million, while the Turkish government contribute \$49 million, making Türkiye one of Somalia's largest donors. The visit also launched an unprecedented scholarship program through which more than 1,200 Somali students were brought to Türkiye on a full scholarship program, representing an investment of nearly 70USD million. This initiative aimed not only at humanitarian relief but at shaping Somalia's future leadership by educating a new generation of Somali elites with strong personal and institutional ties to Türkiye.

The Somali public and political elite responded with extraordinary goodwill. Erdoğan was hailed as a saviour figure, awarded the title "Man of the Somali people, leader of the Muslim ummah," etc. And honoured through important places and even children named after him and Türkiye, this popular legitimacy distinguished Türkiye from previous foreign actors and shows Türkiye as an incomparable friend to Somalia.

On the other hand, the 2011 visit as practical launch of Türkiye's "virtuous power" doctrine, a foreign policy approach that combines humanitarianism, moral symbolism, on-the-ground engagement, and long-term strategic interests. Somalia became the testing ground for diplomatic influence, trade expansion, and political partnership across sub-Saharan Africa.

In the sense that Erdoğan's 2011 visit was not only a humanitarian gesture but a strategic inflexion point, it repositioned Türkiye as a credible and influential actor in Africa, reshaped international perceptions of Somalia, and initiated a sustained Turkish presence that blended compassion with calculated statecraft. The visit demonstrated that humanitarian diplomacy could function as a gateway to enduring political, economic, and geopolitical influence

Türkiye and Somalia: Security cooperation and institutional support

Since 2011, Türkiye has emerged as one of Somalia's most consequential security partners, positioning itself at the centre of military, police, and maritime capacity-building efforts aimed at countering Al-Shabaab and rebuilding Somalia's coercive institutions. Moving beyond conventional donor frameworks, Türkiye has adopted a holistic and state-centric model that integrates military training, police professionalisation, defence industry cooperation, logistical assistance, financial support, and maritime security engagement.

The institutional basis of this partnership was established with the military training cooperation agreement (13 April 2012), followed by the defense industrial cooperation agreement (25 January 2015). A major milestone was reached on 8 February 2024, when two states signed a ten-year defense and economic cooperation agreement in Ankara, emphasizing maritime security, naval modernization, and joint land, air, and sea operation. This agreement reflects Somalia's Strategic objective of regaining full control over its territorial waters and integrating maritime resources into its national economy.

At the operational core of Türkiye's engagement stands Camp TURKSOM, inaugurated in Mogadishu in 2017 as Türkiye's largest overseas military training facility. Functioning primarily as a capacity-building hub rather than a conventional power-project base, Turksom trains approximately three Somali battalions annually and can host more than 1,500 personnel simultaneously. Türkiye's program aligned with NATO standards and informed by its peace-building *and counterterrorism experience focus on particularly* Elite Gorogr commando brigades and Haram' ad special police units by 2024, Türkiye had reported trained police officers contributing significantly to the professionalization of the Somali national army (SNA) and internal security forces.

Türkiye's support extends beyond training to equipment provision and operational assistance. Addressing the SNAs chronic logistical and technological deficiencies, Türkiye has supplied light arms, armoured personnel carriers, mine-resistant ambush-protect (MRAP) vehicles, fuel tankers, and off-road vehicles under a structured financial cooperation mechanism. Since late 2022, the deployment of Bayraktar TB2 drones has enhanced Somalia's surveillance and precision-strike capacity against Al-Shabaab.

Maritime security constitutes an increasingly central pillar of bilateral cooperation, since 2009, Türkiye has actively supported international counter-piracy operations in the gulf of Aden, the Arabian sea and adjacent region under the convention for the suppression of unlawful acts against the safety of maritime navigation and the UN security council resolution of 16 December 2008, Türkiye repeatedly commanded combined task force-151 (ctf-151) and is scheduled to assume command for the seventh time in July under latest mandate. On 28 July 2024, the Turkish Grand National Assembly approved a presidential motion authorising the deployment of Turkish military forces to Somalia for two years under Turkish- Somalian defence cooperation frameworks. The mandate was further extended on 17 January for an additional year.

The motion emphasized Türkiye's decade-long advisory, training, and assistance role while acknowledging that Somali forces, despite adequate manpower, continue to face economic and structural constraints.

Operationally Turkish-trained Gorgor units alongside US-trained Danab, which numerically few but played decisive roles in the 2022-2023 offensives and reclaimed over 200 locations from Al-Shabaab. However, structural challenges, including irregular salaries, weak logistics, a lack of technological advances, fragmented command structures, government deficit, and clan-based political divisions continues to limit the sustainability of military gains.

The broader strategic objective aligns with the Somalia security sector development plan adopted at the Somalia security conference co-hosted by Türkiye in the network on 12 December 2023, which envisions Somalia assuming full responsibility for its national security. In this context, Türkiye has positioned itself not merely as a training partner but as a comprehensive security architect contributing to Somalia's Military reform, police empowerment, and maritime sovereignty. While Türkiye's multidimensional engagement has substantially enhanced Somalia's Operational capabilities long-term stabilisation remains dependent on governance reform, institutional cohesion, and sustainable economic integration of security structures.

Türkiye's humanitarian and civil sector engagement in Somalia (2011-present).

Since the former Turkish prime minister and current president, Erdogan's visit to Mogadishu in 2011, Türkiye's engagement in Somalia has evolved into a long-term institutionalised development partnership that goes well beyond typical short-term relief provided by many international donors.

Türkiye support, coordinated largely through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Turkish Diyanet Vakfi (TDV), and other state and private institutions, emphasizes capacity building, infrastructure development, education, health care, and sustainable economic and civil empowerment, distinguishing it from temporary aid models.

Türkiye has supported education at multiple levels, and taking examples of these levels can emphasise how Türkiye is incomparable in this sector, as in other sectors.

- Sheikh-Sufi Imam Hatip (TDV9) provides a blended curriculum combining religious education and modern science and social studies, serving hundreds of Somali students from 2016 up to now, producing new graduates and taking new high school and middle school classes every year.
- Zamzam University grew from an agricultural school established in 2012 into a full university whose graduates play key roles in Somalia's sectors
- TIKA established Turkish language classes and education centres for orphans, including support through the Yunus Emre institutes
- Maarif schools (TMV) also contribute to long-term capital development in Somalia. Maarif operates more than 4 branches in Somalia from 2016 up to now, which produce more than 200 students per year
- Schools and orphans' education centres were equipped and opened in partnership with Turkish foundations and Imam Hatip schools, serving hundreds of vulnerable children

- Support of public and private universities by capacity building, empowerment, equipment, and technical support.

Health care and medical support.

Türkiye refurbished and continuously supports the Somali Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan training and research hospital in Mogadishu, providing training and high-quality services with a growing medical staff.

- TIKA supplied advanced intensive care units to the community hospitals, raising local health standards and training Somali staff.
- Turkish volunteer teams conducted surgical and clinical missions, examining hundreds and performing dozens of operations while training local health workers
- Multi-branch allied health professionals training programs were implemented to elevate clinical capacity.

Türkiye's futuristic support to Somalia engaged almost every important sector for long-term development in the country. After decades of collapse, Somalia's communication was in harsh conditions, especially on main roads in and out of the capital city. But Türkiye also played a major role in their reconstruction.

TIKA has executed over 500 projects in Somalia since 2011, including.

- paving many roads in Mogadishu, and money for other important roads in the city
- Bringing in an up-to-date engineering expertise to build roads that connect the capital city to the periphery cities such as AFGOYE, BALCAD, ETC
- TIKA assisted the Somali government in rebuilding the SABIIB and AANOOLE Bridge, which were pivotal to business, communication, and security of the Lower Shabelle and the whole region.
- Expanding educational and communal infrastructure in schools and universities.
- Supporting vocational centres for disabled youth with income-generating skills and reconstructing centres.

Overall, since 2011, Turkish humanitarian and technical development assistance has exceeded \$1 billion, covering health, education, municipal services, and infrastructure and reflecting a sustained multi-sectoral strategy rather than fragmented short-term projects common among traditional donors. In contrast to other aid actors who often focus on narrow emergency relief, Türkiye's model is distinguished by institution empowering, local capacity development, and long-term planning, positioning it as a key Reconstruction and self-sufficiency partner in Somalia.

Reinforcing sovereignty under fragile statehood: Türkiye's role in Somalia's territorial consolidation

Following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, Somalia did not merely experience institutional weakness but interred prolonged phase of territorial uncertainty and contested sovereignty. The absence of a functioning central authority created conditions in which the very idea of Somalia as a unified state was increasingly questioned, both internally and externally.

Secessionist dynamics, particularly in the northern regions, gained momentum over time, while international actors, rather than consistently reinforcing the unity of the country, often engaged Somalia through fragmented, sector-specific approaches that did little to consolidate national cohesion.

By the late 2000s to 2015, Somalia's territorial integrity faced one of its most critical diplomatic tests. Discussions around the potential recognition of Somaliland began to surface more openly on international stages, reflecting a shift from informal tolerance of de facto separation toward possible formal legitimisation. At this stage, Somalia's capacity to resist such development diplomatically remained extremely limited, as its institutional recovery was still fragile and its presence in global decision-making arenas relatively weak.

It's precisely at this critical juncture that Turkey's position becomes analytically decisive. Unlike actors that remained ambiguous or selectively engaged, Türkiye adopted a clear principled and openly articulated stance in Favor of Somalia's unity, rejecting any initiative that could lead to the institutionalisation of fragmentation. This position was not expressed abstractly but defended directly within high-level diplomatic environments where alternative outcomes were actively being discussed.

A concrete illustration of this can be found in the 2012 London conference on Somalia. As recalled in lecture by Türkiye's former foreign minister and prime minister Ahmed Davutoglu, Türkiye encountered a situation in which the recognition of Somaliland was being informally promoted among international actors; *"when we arrived at the dinner the main topic being discussed was the recognition of Somaliland I said: 'While we are trying to bring stability in Somalia to Somalia, why you are attempting to divide it? Do you not see the risk that such a step would create?'"*

This intervention must be understood within its broader context. At a time when Somalia lacked the diplomatic weight to challenge such proposals effectively, Türkiye assumed the role of a normative defender of Somali unity, directly confronting a narrative that could reshape the country's territorial future.

When the argument for Somaliland's recognition was justified based on its internal stability, Türkiye did not just reject the claim but exposed its logical and legal inconsistencies:

"If this is the logic, then I assume tomorrow you will recognise the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, why it is not recognised, while Somaliland is being considered?"

Davutoglu said in the meeting. This response reflects a deeper diplomatic strategy, shifting the debate from a technical discussion of governance to a broader critique of selective legitimacy in international politics. By doing so, Türkiye not only resisted the specific case of Somaliland recognition but also challenged the underlying logic that could justify similar fragmentation elsewhere. Crucially, Türkiye's stance extended beyond rhetorical opposition into decisive diplomatic action. As Davutoglu further states: *"We brought the parties together in Ankara between 11-13 April 2013 and initiated a dialogue process centred on Somalia's territorial unity at the time we were able to halt this recognition initiative."*

This transition from opposition to mediation demonstrates the depth of Türkiye's commitment. Rather than allowing external actors to define Somalia's territorial future as they did before, Türkiye facilitated a process in which Somali stakeholders themselves could engage in a dialogue, thereby reinforcing the principle that sovereignty must be negotiated internally, not imposed externally.

This mature mutual respect is not familiar for the whole of the continent where foreign powers mostly decide the fate of who they help. Still, Türkiye allows people to decide on their territorial integrity internally, without third-party intervention.

Conclusion

The analysis in this article demonstrates that the relationship between Türkiye and Somalia represent qualitatively distinct model of external engagement in a fragile state context that moves beyond the limitations of rhetorical diplomacy toward sustained multidimensional state-building practice. By systemically evaluating policy behaviour across security, institutional development, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic positioning, the article argues that this partnership is defined not by symbolic gesture or episodic intervention but by continuity, depth, and strategic coherence.

What ultimately sets this partnership apart is not the absence of national interest or power, both of which are inherent in international relations, but the way engagement has been operationalized. Türkiye’s approach reflects a rare convergence between humanitarian responsiveness and long-term institutional investment, where immediate relief efforts have been consistently linked to broader objectives of governance reconstruction, capacity-building, and sovereignty reinforcement. This integration has allowed Somalia not only to recover critical state functions but also to gradually reassert agency within its own political and territorial framework.

At the same time, a critical perspective remains essential for the durability of this partnership, and its classifications as “incomparable” depend on its ability to avoid the structural pitfalls that have historically characterized external involvement in fragile states, particularly the risk of dependency, imbalance, and over-centralization of external influence. Sustainable success will ultimately hinge on whether Somali institutions can internalize these gains, transform external support into autonomous capacity, and navigate internal political fragmentation.

In a broader theoretical sense, this case invites a reconsideration of how partnerships are conceptualized in a context of fragility. It suggests that meaningful partnerships cannot be measured solely through financial aid, military assistance, or diplomatic discourse but must instead be assessed through their tangible contributions to state resilience, institutional functionality, and societal trust. Within this framework, the Turkey-Somalia relationship offers not a perfect model, but a compelling empirical reference point that challenges prevailing patterns of fragmented engagement and provides valuable insights for future policy design in a similarly complex environment.

Ultimately, the significance of this partnership lies in its demonstration that diplomacy, when grounded in consistent action rather than rhetoric, can play a transformative role in reconstructing states that have existed at the margins of effective governance.

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