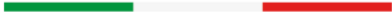


THE AFRO-MEDITERRANEAN
POSTURE OF TÜRKİYE
AND THE SYNERGIES WITH ITALY

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The opinions expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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Introduction

Italy and Türkiye's shared interest in the stability of Africa and the Middle East underscores the need for renewed approaches to building a stronger and safer Mediterranean partnership. To this end, a clearer understanding of Türkiye's role in regional crisis areas as well as in the broader regional landscape can help identify opportunities for cooperation with Italy in support of stability and peace. This paper is mainly the result of a series of closed-door roundtables focused on North Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and the Middle East.

These meetings brought together institutional representatives, senior scholars, and regional experts to examine Türkiye's role through country-based and sectoral analyses, while also exploring potential areas of cooperation with Italy in Africa and the broader Mediterranean. The events were organized online between November 2025 and June 2026 as part of the project "*Italy and Türkiye: new strategies of cooperation between Africa and the Middle East*" implemented by CeSPI and SETA with the support of the Unit for Analysis and Policy Planning of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation¹. This paper is structured in 2 sections: the first one focusing on Türkiye's stance and interest in the above-mentioned areas, while the second one aims at analyzing Italy-Türkiye convergences and drawing some policy proposals.

1. Türkiye's approach on Africa and the mediterranean: an overview

Africa is central to Türkiye's activism and to its ambition to the role of middle-power with global reach, capable of expanding autonomous ties and interests and cultivating alliances without an imposing footprint. Indeed, Türkiye's strategic engagement in Africa is based on pragmatism and often presented as aimed at mutual benefit rather than exploitation. The approach is to engage through an anti-colonial attitude within the Continent and to expand "South-South" solidarity narrative rooted in its geography -as a bridge between West and East-, and in its cultural connections. Ankara acknowledges Africa's complexity and approaches it by structural local consultations, while recognizing the importance of aligning with African Union initiatives. Türkiye's strategy includes security and defense, but also significant involvement in education and infrastructure, with many Turkish companies active in sectors like construction across different African States.

Türkiye is widely regarded as a reliable partner, serving as a major provider of security assistance across Somalia, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel, while simultaneously strengthening its presence in other African countries through multidimensional engagement encompassing economic cooperation, humanitarian assistance, diplomacy, development, and capacity-building initiatives. Trade diplomacy has indeed become one of Ankara's key foreign trade policy tools in strengthening economic ties with Africa since the early 2000s². It is worth noting that, Türkiye's exports to African countries rose 12% year-on-year to \$11 billion in January-June 2026, with Morocco topping the list of African destinations for Turkish exports with \$2.2 billion, followed by Egypt, Libya Algeria, and Tunisia³.

¹ In accordance with Article 23-bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967. The opinions expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

² For a broader analysis on Türkiye's role in Africa see E. Tepeciklioğlu, V. Giannotta et al. *TURKISH INFLUENCE IN AFRICA: DIPLOMACY, TRADE AND SECURITY IN RELATIONS BETWEEN ANKARA AND THE CONTINENT. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR ITALY?*, CeSPI-ASBU, September 2025. https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/allegati/cespi_-_linfluenza_turca_in_africa_-_maeci_uap_2024.pdf

³ S.Tolmac and E.Yildirim *Türkiye's exports to Africa surge in H1 as trade diplomacy, economic cooperation strengthen*, Anadolu Ajansı, July 2026. <https://mobile.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkiye-s-exports-to-africa-surge-in-h1-as-trade-diplomacy-economic-cooperation-strengthen/3990452>

In general terms, Türkiye's strategy in Africa includes supporting African solutions for African problems; fostering cooperation, shared growth, and equal partnership based on mutual respect and trust; improving connectivity through infrastructure, trade, digital, human, and cultural links; and engaging in mediation, facilitation. Türkiye is interested in new areas such as technology, health, artificial intelligence, and agriculture, as well as energy and mining, in an approach that emphasizes governance and dialogue. These priorities are basically set into the most recent AFRICA – TÜRKİYE JOINT ACTION PLAN, which encompasses different areas of cooperation including "Peace, Security and Governance", "Trade, Investment and Industry", "Education, Science-Technology Innovation skills, Youth and Women Development", "Infrastructure Development and Agriculture", "Promoting Resilient Health Systems" and "Joint Monitoring and Evaluation"⁴.

In this framework, Türkiye's investment in education is indeed significant, with the MAARIF Foundation and Yunus Emre Institute operating throughout Africa. Over 60,000 African students have graduated from Turkish universities⁵ so far, further making soft power a key tool for strengthening relations. In recent years, defence cooperation with Africa has also expanded, with many countries now procuring Turkish weapons or UAVs.

At the same time, as a NATO member with the Alliance's second-largest army and a key security outpost on its southern flank, Ankara has long sought to act as a bridge among actors in the broader Mediterranean using its strategic and geographic position to support stability. The war in Iran and Gaza, as well as recent developments in the Middle East have accelerated a years-long redefinition of the regional security balance in which middle powers are called to actively engage, trying to face crises and overcome them. Turkish diplomacy has therefore placed strong emphasis on mediation, engaging simultaneously with Washington, Tehran, Gulf governments, through multilateral frameworks and negotiation channels. Ankara aims to preserve regional stability and limit further spillovers coming from crisis areas, such as Gaza, Syria and Iran, in line with Türkiye's ambition to position itself as a diplomatic pivot. In this context, it is worth noting its security, mediation and economic coordination with Qatar, including support for the 'ceasefire' in Gaza and the Pakistani efforts in mediating between US-Iran as well as its role in the quadrilateral framework involving Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, economic ties with other GCC countries remain strong and cooperation on security, infrastructural development and capacity-building continues in the Levant with the aim of stabilizing Syria and creating a corridor between the Gulf and Europe through infrastructural development.

1.1. Türkiye and North Africa

Türkiye has emerged as a central actor in the regional dynamics of North Africa, particularly in Libya. Following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, the country descended into a proxy civil war that pitted Türkiye and Qatar—supporters of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord—against Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, who backed General Khalifa Haftar. This rivalry fueled a series of tensions, particularly between Egypt and Türkiye, which were largely shaped by ideological polarization: Ankara's tolerance for the Muslim Brotherhood contrasted sharply with Cairo's hostility toward the movement. Nevertheless, while the ideological divide ran deep, it never undermined the economic relationship between the two countries. On the contrary, economic

⁴ See Africa- TÜRKİYE JOINT ACTION PLAN 2022-2026, <https://www.itkib.org.tr/files/downloads/Belgeler/2023/Afrika-T%C3%BCrkiye%20Eylem%20Plan%C4%B1.pdf>

⁵ See Daily Sabah, *African students shape their future through education in Türkiye*, March 2025. <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkiye/african-students-shape-their-future-through-education-in-turkiye/news>

interdependence served as a bridge that later facilitated a gradual normalization of relations between Ankara and Cairo.

Following the recent reconciliation and the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries, bilateral ties appear not only to have achieved lasting stability but also to have strengthened across several strategic sectors. Security and defense agreements, alongside significant economic development partnerships, suggest that the former ideological polarization has largely dissipated. This transformation has been driven primarily by shifting regional and international dynamics, as well as by the broader effects of the Russian war in Ukraine. These developments have not only consolidated relations between Ankara and Cairo but have also marked Türkiye's more organic inclusion within the international arena—particularly through its renewed engagement with several European countries, including Italy, with which it shares strategic dossiers such as Libya and broader African affairs.

In the current regional context, Türkiye has emerged as one of the main political players in Libya, primarily due to its decisive intervention in defense of the Government of National Unity (GNA) in 2019, following the military threat and attempted takeover by General Haftar. This involvement has enabled Erdoğan's government to consolidate an increasingly central role at both the political and economic levels. Although the situation on the ground in Libya remains largely unstable—mainly due to the presence of armed groups and non-state actors—Türkiye's continued engagement is widely perceived as a guarantor of political security for the Tripoli government as well as a stabilizing actor. Indeed, Türkiye is striving to act as a security partner supporting Libya's legitimate institutions and political stabilization. When Tripoli was on the brink of war due to the competition between major armed groups and the government, Türkiye refrained from sending troops and deployed intelligence agents instead, brokering an agreement.

This demonstrates that while hard power was prominent in 2020, five years later, soft power has become much more effective. The Turkish Navy has operated across both the Eastern and Western regions, and delegations from both governments and militaries have visited Ankara. This highlights not only Türkiye's diplomatic influence but also its structural power, unmatched by any other regional actor in Libya. Turkish foreign policy in Libya centers on ensuring Libya's integrity and facilitating a smooth political transition, which should be effective and establish a solution that goes beyond elite negotiations. More recently, Ankara has been acting as a balancing actor between the Tripoli government and Haftar aiming at creating the condition of a sustainable stabilization. This translated in some important meetings both on political and military sides by supporting joint training and promoting a unification process of the Libyan army on the base of the US initiative in Libya.

That said, North Africa remains a space of high potential but low integration. Most economies are dominated by extractive or low-value sectors, with state expenditure driving growth rather than private innovation. In Libya, decades under a rentier economy have left the country lacking basic services, infrastructure, and proper resource management. That led many young people to face unemployment by joining militias to earn wages. Economic fragility and social frustration, indeed, feed insecurity. Libya currently faces economic challenges and declining social services, with Libyans becoming poorer and inequalities rising significantly, including in terms of access to resources. What is needed is inclusive growth and fair governance as the best long-term security policies for ensuring stability in the country and the region.

For both Italy and Türkiye stability in Libya is crucial, but solutions must include Libyan perspectives and the reunification of state institutions and the army. Economic inclusion, strong institutions, and youth opportunities are also essential. In this sense, the US initiative seems to represent some steps forward despite the resistance of some social groups from Fezzan and Misurata. This initiative

consists in unifying the State institutions starting from economy and security by taking into account the power relations between East and West Libya⁶.

In this context, Italy and Türkiye are increasingly converging on a common vision for Libya that aligns with the strategic objectives pursued by the United States. By leveraging their longstanding presence and accumulated experience in the country, both actors seek to contribute to a comprehensive framework capable of supporting and operationalizing the evolving U.S. approach to Libya.

A prosperous region requires bold action, but challenges also exist beyond national developments in Libya. Notably, in the Eastern Mediterranean, competing interests among Greece, Türkiye, Israel, Turkish and Greek Cypriots remain core issues that must be addressed to avoid conflict and unlock new investment opportunities.

1.2. Türkiye and the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa stands out as a region of central interest for Türkiye. Its strategic location, serving as a gateway from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, is critical not only for regional security but also for the global economy, as it connects transportation routes among Europe, the Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. However, despite its positioning, the Horn is a region of untapped potential because of its instability, stemming from internal and interstate tensions, as well as challenges like piracy and terrorism.

Türkiye has progressively deepened its engagement in the Horn through a comprehensive strategy encompassing trade, investment, diplomatic outreach, development assistance, education, and capacity building. Beyond its mediation efforts -most notably between Somalia and Ethiopia- Ankara has expanded its involvement in security and energy cooperation, as well as in trade. In Somalia, Türkiye's role has been reinforced by the establishment of the TURKSOM military training facility in Mogadishu in 2017, the signing of the 2024 Defense and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, and its strategic expansion in key ports such as Mogadishu and Hobyo. Additionally, Türkiye has secured agreements for hydrocarbon exploration and production, further consolidating its position as a pivotal actor in the region and safeguarding its interests in critical trade routes. Ethiopia also represents a key partner for Türkiye, offering growing opportunities for political, economic, and military cooperation, alongside significant Turkish investments. Moreover, Türkiye has established security cooperation frameworks with Djibouti and Kenya.

Türkiye occupies a favorable position in the region, benefiting from its identity as a Muslim country, which fosters a sense of fraternity, while also maintaining robust ties with Western countries. The historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire further enhances Türkiye's strategic significance and presence in the Horn of Africa that translates into strong diplomatic and economic relations with different countries of the region sharing with Türkiye substantial and growing bilateral trade volumes.

In Ethiopia, for example, Türkiye is currently the second largest investor after China, with investments totaling \$2.5 billion. Also, approximately 250 Turkish companies operate in Ethiopia, providing employment to 20,000 Ethiopians⁷. Bilateral trade is expected to increase in the coming

⁶ S. Shamim, "Oil for unity: What is the US mediation plan in Libya?", al-Jazeera, July 2026. See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/7/8/oil-for-unity-what-is-the-us-mediation-plan-in-libya>

⁷ See E. Avdalani, *Turkey and Ethiopia's Growing Alignment*, Manara magazine, March 2026. https://manaramagazine.org/2026/03/turkey-and-ethiopias-growing-alignment/?elementor-preview=15905&ver=1772747692#_edn4

years. In February 2026, the two countries signed the Türkiye-Ethiopia Economic, Trade and Technical Cooperation Joint Economic Commission Protocol. Türkiye has also strengthened security ties with Ethiopia in recent years. Additionally, development cooperation plays a significant role in relations considering that TİKA, Türkiye's development agency, has been a significant actor in the country, with the first office opened in Addis Ababa in 2005.

Türkiye's involvement in Somalia is distinctive compared to other international actors. Its approach emphasizes consultation with local stakeholders to assess needs and jointly determine initiatives. Türkiye has contributed to safeguarding the fishing industry and marine environment from piracy. In addition, Ankara constructed the airport, facilitating connectivity through Turkish Airlines, which links Somalia to global destinations. In this framework, Somalia is also looking to deepen cooperation with Ankara both in the offshore oil and gas drilling operations and the mining sector⁸.

Türkiye is also engaged in mediation efforts between Ethiopia and Somalia, acknowledging that regional harmony would benefit the entire Horn of Africa. The Ankara Declaration in 2024 highlighted Türkiye's role as a mediator between the two countries, largely due to its perception as a neutral party.

Turkish engagement in Djibouti has led to a notable expansion in bilateral trade and Turkish investments and projects span the sectors of construction, logistics, and transportation. The cooperation between Türkiye and Djibouti encompasses diverse fields such as agriculture, tourism, environmental management, and fisheries. Türkiye actively supports rural development and promotes economic activities. For instance, Tiryaki Agro, a Turkish agribusiness exporter, has established partnerships with Djibouti. Additionally, Türkiye has launched health initiatives aimed at training local medical personnel. The relationship also extends to cultural and social collaboration; Ankara contributed to the construction of Abdulhamid Mosque, which is now the largest mosque in Djibouti. Strategic and security cooperation is another facet of this partnership, exemplified by the Military Cooperation Agreement reached between Türkiye and Djibouti in 2025.

Ankara is currently one of the most prominent external actors operating in Kenya, with its relationship primarily characterized by economic and logistical ties rather than security cooperation. Turkish Airlines maintains daily flights between Ankara and Nairobi, highlighting ongoing commercial connectivity. Evidence of Türkiye's presence can be observed throughout Nairobi, from household utensils and machinery to clothing. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) also play a significant role offering scholarships to vulnerable groups, distributing meals, and supporting disadvantaged communities.

However, several potential obstacles could pose challenges to Türkiye's actions in the Horn: the possibility of strengthened alliances between groups such as Al Shabaab and the Houthis, ongoing tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over Nile water rights, and the competing presence of other regional actors. The Horn landscape is indeed shaped by the growing involvement of Israel, which aims at expanding its influence as a systematic presence. This shifting dynamic is exemplified by Tel Aviv's recognition of Somaliland that needs to be closely monitored and dealt with to avoid escalation.

⁸ See F. Yuksel and H. Kazanci, *Somalia expects positive drilling results with Türkiye by year-end, eyes mining deals*, Anadolu Agency, May 2026. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/analysis/somalia-expects-positive-drilling-results-with-turkiye-by-year-end-eyes-mining-deals/57255>

1.3. *Türkiye and the Sahel*

The geopolitical landscape of the Sahel has undergone rapid transformation in recent years, driven by the military coups in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso as well as the broadening presence of terrorist groups. The coup d'états have indeed prompted the withdrawal of major Western powers from the region, creating space for Russia to reassert its role and for new alliances to emerge. Meanwhile, growing security threats continue to alarm both regional and international actors, as Jihadist groups expand their activities throughout the region.

Türkiye has engaged with the region's new administrations, trying to balance interests and avoid entanglement in ideological disputes. This approach has enabled Ankara to maintain and deepen relations in the region and contribute to stabilization efforts. Türkiye has prioritized practical cooperation through military training, defence cooperation, investments in strategic sectors, and defence industry partnerships, thereby deepening its engagement across the Sahel. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have acquired Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicles and armored vehicles from Türkiye, while Turkish defence products are expected to feature prominently at BAMEX 2026⁹.

Beyond security, Türkiye has invested in development, supporting education, healthcare, infrastructure, and energy sectors. The presence of embassies has led to a significant increase in Türkiye's trade, while Turkish Airlines has critically facilitated Türkiye's soft power. In Niger, Turkish companies are collaborating in the mining sector, contributing to both Niger's economic diversification and the advancement of its emerging nuclear energy industry. Economic engagement with Mali is also increasing as Turkish firms invest in infrastructure and energy projects, and Ankara has become a key military and diplomatic partner. Türkiye is present across several sectors, including education, military equipment, and defense.

In Burkina Faso Türkiye emerges as the principal partner, largely due to its pragmatic and non-ideological approach. Several cooperation agreements signed a decade ago are now bearing fruit in the areas of diplomacy, security, economy, and energy. Türkiye has indeed provided military equipment, including drones and armored vehicles, and supported civilian initiatives in the region, while also increasing trade and investment in infrastructure and construction. Bilateral relations with Ankara also carry a significant social impact, as evidenced by medical evacuations to Türkiye and the educational outreach of the Maarif Foundation.

A further significant element of Türkiye's involvement in the region is diplomatic relations; in Sudan, Ankara has consistently underscored the importance of maintaining Sudan's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Indeed, Sudan has a geopolitical significance and a crucial role in connecting multiple regional security complexes in Africa. Sudan is not merely a Sahelian country but a link connecting multiple regional conflicts. In this context, Sudan—owing both to its strategic position between Africa and North Africa and to its role as a major center of political instability—has, in recent years, witnessed the growing involvement of regional and international actors, most notably Russia, Libya, and the Gulf states. In this sense, Sudan has become a highly sensitive geopolitical arena, situated at the intersection of broader regional tensions extending from the Sahel to Iran. Türkiye is considered the most important partner for Sudan in terms of aid; it was also the first country to recognize Sudan's independence, and since then, diplomatic relations have grown rapidly. Türkiye has contributed significantly through diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian efforts in Sudan, including the establishment of the Nyala Turkish Sudanese Research Hospital and numerous cultural initiatives. Ankara upholds a set of principles shared with African countries, and it is characterized by a non-interventionist approach. Through Sudan, Türkiye also seeks to expand its regional

⁹ TRT Afrika, *Türkiye leads push to turn Sahel into Africa's defence hotspot at BAMEX 2026*, March 2026, <https://www.trtafrika.com/english/article/05f45a8c47b8>

influence, being aware of the country's pivotal role. Within this framework, Turkish investments are substantial, particularly in terms of exports and cultural outreach.

The objective is to contribute to the growth of the Sudanese economy, although the margins for improvement remain limited due to domestic constraints.

1.4. Türkiye and the Gulf, Levant

Türkiye is navigating the storms in the region, pursuing its balancing stance as a stable actor in a fragmented geopolitical context. As a key NATO member at the gate between West and East, Ankara is championing the fragile ceasefire in Iran and Gaza while advocating for Syria's territorial integrity and security. Instability in the entire region is indeed a risk factor for Ankara, not only in terms of energy prices but especially for border management and security. Türkiye's main goal is thus to keep dialogue and cooperation as the key drivers of its regional policy.

Although the war in Gaza and Israel's ambitions in the Levant and the Horn have frozen Ankara's rapprochement with Tel Aviv, Türkiye's ties with the Gulf have continued to grow, far beyond the long-established relationship with Qatar. Indeed, Ankara has strengthened cooperation with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE since 2021. Neither the new assets in post-Assad Syria nor the war between Iran, the US, and Israel has affected normalization between Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, despite the underlying rifts between the two Gulf powers.

The Al-Ula agreements paved the way for Türkiye normalization with the Gulf, and further steps have recalibrated the posture of Ankara towards a more coordinated response to regional crisis and developments: after October 7, Türkiye has been championing 'peace' efforts together with the Gulf countries, mainly through the support for the United States-led Board of Peace initiative; after the fall of Bashar al-Assad regime increased coordination between Gulf-Türkiye for reconstruction have been reported. Meanwhile, economic connectivity projects in the region have enlarged cooperation beyond defense.

With Saudi Arabia, there is a wide political alignment -from Syria to Gaza-that has been growing, opening the door to a potential quadrilateral security alliance with Pakistan and Egypt. With the UAE, relations are more compartmentalized. Differences in foreign policy do not affect economic-oriented and transactional relations. Indeed, the economic partnership with the UAE was cemented in 2023 through the CEPA and has grown since then, with Türkiye becoming the UAE's 5th-largest non-oil trading partner in May 2026. With Kuwait, despite its internal political instability, Türkiye has maintained stable relations. Long-standing strategic dialogue and cooperation with Ankara have continued, alongside joint military exercises. Although Kuwait has already purchased Bayraktar drones, it remains under the US security umbrella and has shown little interest in changing its current security structure. However, this could shift in the aftermath of the war between Iran and the United States. Kuwait has been among the countries most affected by Iran and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. This may create a need to reassess and diversify the country's security alignments.

Türkiye has also played a key role in facilitating dialogue between the GCC and NATO; notably, NATO opened its regional center in Kuwait in 2017. Ankara and Gulf countries need stability for their investments so strategic partnerships have been put in place, at all levels, but many challenges remain in the Levant as a whole.

Türkiye's interest in al-Sharaa's New Syria is closely linked to the integration process in the country's northeast, while also seeking for the country to remain outside regional conflicts. Although Türkiye's

relations with Syria continue to strengthen as both countries explore deeper cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, transportation, and security -including Syria's recent participation in the EFES 2026 military exercise¹⁰- the new Syrian government faces a heavy burden, particularly in economic and security terms. The economy remains in deep crisis, with only crude oil arriving from Iraq and little external investment so far. Living standards are extremely poor. Although the overall security situation is relatively stable, there are still tensions within the army, especially among foreign fighters, while ISIS continues to carry out attacks, though on a smaller scale than in the past.

The economy remains Syria's main challenge, with little or no external support. Tensions with Israel also remain unresolved. Israel continues to advance, while the Syrian government is trying to avoid direct confrontation, largely because the army lacks the capacity to face Tel Aviv militarily and because Israeli support for Suwayda could further destabilize the government. About the other regional actors, Türkiye maintains troops in northern Syria and has strong relations with the government officials, which need capacity-building. Connectivity projects, including the planned resumption of the Hijazi railway linking Türkiye and the Gulf through Syria and Jordan as well as the New Development Projects linking the Gulf to Türkiye through Iraq, could strengthen regional partnerships. For that to come, stability in the region is essential.

Without a real end to the US-Iran conflict, Iraq especially is likely to face continued instability, however. The new leadership of Ali al-Zaidi -a businessman with no prior political experience, nominated Prime Minister by the Shiaa majority- faces different challenges: the economy, weakened by corruption and by the war that halted oil exports; the militias; and the deep social divisions among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. Al-Zaidi seeks to position Iraq as a neutral state between Iran and the United States; however, militias complicate this aim. Notably, many of the drones directed toward the Gulf were reportedly launched from southern Iraq.

At the regional level, Shiite actors are especially concerned about developments in Syria and Lebanon, such as the collapse of the so-called 'Shiite crescent' after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, and the assassination of Nasrallah. As a result, Al-Zaidi faces a heavy burden: the country's infrastructure is in poor condition, the economy remains fragile, and Iraq still depends significantly on Iran.

In this framework, however, Palestine remains the central issue shaping the regional landscape. Without addressing the Palestinian issue, there can be no real stability in the Middle East. The peace process is stalled, and the United Nations has been increasingly marginalized. At the same time, developments within Hamas and the broader crises in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria continue to affect the regional balance. Rhetorical tensions between Türkiye and Israel remain high, and no scenario can be ruled out. While Türkiye has no clear interest in escalation, Israel has a strong incentive to preserve its current military posture, mainly for domestic electoral calculations. This keeps the overall situation persistently fragile. Türkiye could still come under pressure, even if not necessarily through direct military means. In the Eastern Mediterranean, Israel is increasingly looking to Greece with cooperation strengthening both in terms of defence and energy. In this context, also the IMEC corridor could represent an additional challenge for Turkish interests.

¹⁰ M. S. Youssef, *Libya and Syria join Turkey's EFES 2026 military drills*, The new Arab, May 2026. <https://www.newarab.com/news/libya-and-syria-join-turkeys-efes-2026-military-drills>

2. Italy-Türkiye cooperation within evolving regional dynamics

The Italy-Türkiye partnership is founded on a shared responsibility to promote stability and security across the broader Mediterranean region while safeguarding each other's respective national interests. While this responsibility reflects a longstanding historical vocation, it has also evolved into a strategic convergence across a wide range of sectors in which Rome and Ankara already enjoy significant synergies, especially in addressing crisis areas across regions of strategic importance, from the Sahel and the Horn of Africa to Libya and Syria. From this perspective, enhanced cooperation between Italy and Türkiye—which has long maintained a significant presence in and with Africa and has aimed for the stability of the broader Mediterranean—can strengthen the prospects for development and prosperity across the region.

In recent years, Italy's foreign policy has consistently prioritized Africa, with the Mattei Plan aiming to build partnerships on an equal footing and generate mutual benefits beyond the traditional donor-recipient framework. This strategy is further informed by other initiatives, including the Three-Year Programming and Policy Document of the Italian cooperation, which includes many African countries as priority countries, and the Rome Process, which aim to address the root causes of migration and tackle migrant exploitation. Collectively, these efforts define Italy's engagement with the Continent. Similarly, Africa represents a strategic priority for Türkiye, becoming central to Ankara's evolving intelligence and security doctrine amid increased competition from the Sahel to the Red Sea. Türkiye seeks to expand strategic depth via trade corridors, enhance maritime security, and pursue a robust, multipolar diplomatic approach that reinforces its position across Africa through a combination of public diplomacy, humanitarian initiatives, and military deployments. These efforts have allowed Türkiye to build value-driven legitimacy from the ground up, utilizing both soft power and its role as a security provider.

Italy and Türkiye pursue their interests in Africa, yet both are committed to non-predatory cooperation that aims at respecting the Continent's sovereignty. Türkiye promotes humanitarian initiatives, development, diplomacy, and security collaboration, while Italy's Mattei Plan aims to establish a new partnership built on mutual benefit and sustainable long-term goals, leveraging Italian expertise and seeking to showcase Italian industrial and technological strength in strategic fields such as agriculture, water, health, infrastructure, education, energy transition, and energy supply diversification. These are areas where Italy and Türkiye can collaborate effectively.

Türkiye and Italy are both committed to Libya's stability and are exploring a trilateral cooperation network, as exemplified by the August 2025 meeting among Dbeibah, Erdogan, and Meloni, followed by the most recent start of the pilot phase of the Joint Operations Center in Tripoli, including also liaison officers from Qatar.¹¹ This initiative aims to strengthen logistical and technological support for Tripoli, improve information sharing, and coordinate operations against migrant smuggling networks operating along the routes between the Sahel, Libya, and the Mediterranean.

They are also engaged in high-level diplomatic efforts in the Horn of Africa, evidenced by numerous official visits and a shared commitment to regional stability. Italy has also established security cooperation in the Horn, particularly through the national military base in Djibouti, the participation in the EU's EUTM mission and contributes to peacebuilding efforts.

Meanwhile, Türkiye's security engagement in Somalia is primarily aimed at supporting the Federal Government's counterterrorism efforts and strengthening the country's sovereign security capacity.

¹¹ See Sala Operativa Congiunta a Tripoli, soddisfazione del Governo per l'avvio della fase pilota, June 2026, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/32126>

In this context, the support provided by air assets such as F-16 fighter aircraft, Bayraktar TB2 armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and ATAK attack helicopters should be understood as part of the broader bilateral defence and security cooperation aimed at reinforcing Somalia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and counterterrorism capabilities.

Italy has initiated numerous collaborations across the political, economic, social, cultural, and development sectors and has supported regional integration efforts. Notably, Kenya and Ethiopia have been selected among the pilot countries for the Mattei Plan, highlighting the great importance Italy pays to the region, with relations further enhanced during 2026 with the second Italy-Africa Summit convened in Addis Ababa and the adoption of the ITALY–KENYA ACTION PLAN 2026–2029¹². Kenya presents indeed additional opportunities for collaboration. Italy has a significant presence in Kenya, particularly in Malindi, where many Italians work in hospitality. Both Italy and Türkiye can partner on infrastructure development, housing projects, and security since Türkiye is investing in the construction of schools, hospitals, and universities across Africa, contributing to community development.

Within this framework, the Sahel is a key priority for Rome as well. Italy's engagement in the region places particular emphasis on migration management, counterterrorism, and the fight against transnational organized crime, while humanitarian and development cooperation also plays a central role. The "Italy for Sudan" initiative is a major example, aimed at providing a concrete and coordinated response to the country's humanitarian crisis. Italy's commitment to the stabilization of the region is also reflected in Rome's diplomatic efforts and continued engagement in capacity building, training, and support for local security forces, both at the multilateral and bilateral levels (e.g., the MISIN mission in Niger). Here, Türkiye has a long-standing presence in many sectors, including economic, diplomatic, humanitarian, and security cooperation, while Italy's approach focuses mainly on security and migration control. Türkiye has established a deep, multidimensional presence across the Sahel spanning defense, education, economy, energy, and humanitarian aid. Its approach is pragmatic, non-ideological, and increasingly societal rather than purely state-level, giving Ankara a systemic influence. Italy is valued for its expertise in institutional development, security, and business, but its engagement remains uneven across countries, compared to that of Türkiye, even though the target countries of the Mattei Plan are gradually growing.

Meanwhile, both countries are committed to the stability of the MENA region. There is a general alignment toward de-escalation in Gaza and Iran, stabilization of Syria, and economic partnership with the Gulf. These shared priorities could enable joint actions to promote regional stability and foster sustainable peace.

In this context, however, three main issues need to be taken into consideration for successful synergies in the broader Mediterranean cooperation: 1) despite declared intentions, Italian and Turkish engagement in Africa could be perceived as also self-serving, particularly regarding irregular migration. Although consultations are at the core of both countries' agendas toward the Continent, business with ethics needs to be ensured as essential for sustainable, mutually beneficial development. Indeed, the question of consolidating democratic processes within African states remains a critical open issue as well as the impact of negotiations with the country elites and of economic partnership over the grassroot dimension of society; 2) every potential development in cooperation needs to consider major international powers' moves in the region. The UN Security Council Resolution on Western Sahara, the Gaza 'deal', and the war on Iran signal America's renewed influence in MENA affairs. The volatility in the approach of the current American leadership, from the recent NATO summit to developments with Teheran, could call into question the sustainability of both decisions

¹² See ITALY–KENYA ACTION PLAN 2026–2029, April 2026, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/ITALY-KENYA_ACTIONPLAN_2026-2029.pdf

and actions of middle powers in the region. Meanwhile, Russia and China also maintain significant involvement in Africa and the Middle East. Chinese contractors dominate projects in Morocco and Algeria, demonstrating China's increasing regional footprint. Furthermore, technology is no longer exclusively European; it is becoming increasingly Asian European, signaling a shift in the balance of power; 3) core questions concern which projects to implement, how Italy and Türkiye could further engage in Africa and the Middle East, and, above all, how to coordinate effectively.

2.1. Context understanding, business with ethics, social trust

A comprehensive understanding of Africa could help avoid further escalation and instability. This requires considering the region's diverse demographics, religious beliefs, cultures, and political orientations rather than seeing Africa as a monolithic entity. African countries seek mutually beneficial partnerships and expect to be treated as equal stakeholders in trade. While increased investment remains essential, the core approach needs to be consulting Africans about their specific needs, beyond elite negotiations. In Libya, Tunisia, and, to varying degrees, Egypt, social contracts built on distribution rather than participation have eroded. Ignoring the causes of the revolutions in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt leads to persistent instability driven by injustice, unequal wealth distribution, corruption, and criminal control.

For a decade, Libya has experienced a surplus of intervention and a deficit of vision. Each external actor sought short-term influence, but few invested in long-term institutional rebuilding. Stability will not emerge from military balance alone; it will come from institutional coherence, accountable management of resources, and regional economic interdependence. It is worth noting that new generations, connected digitally, regionally mobile, and culturally assertive, are also demanding participation, transparency, and opportunity. The social demand is no longer for more subsidies but for dignity, inclusion, and a fair share in decision-making. To stabilize North Africa, there is a need to rebuild social trust through governance that listens, represents, and delivers, starting at the local level. Social capital, not just fiscal capital, must become the foundation of stability.

2.2. Economic and institutional capacity building in Libya

Libya must prevent a return to dictatorship and focus on building strong institutions. State protection and subsidies, without inclusion in governance or productivity, have produced a rentier social mindset that measures legitimacy by allocation, not performance. Trade, investment, and development are essential. Before discussing cooperation, it is essential to help Libya transition from a rentier economy to one focused on production and wealth generation, where citizens become the primary source of prosperity. Restructuring the Libyan economy is necessary for meaningful partnership. Some steps could include expanding agriculture in Libya, boosting technological and industrial productivity, and reforming the education sector, areas in which both Italy and Türkiye have significant expertise.

Achieving this transformation will require political, financial, and administrative reforms, as well as a model that positions Libya as a free economic zone and a hub for skilled migrants. Converting resource wealth into investments in human capital, infrastructure, and technology is crucial for progress. Libya's reconstruction requires trained civil servants, infrastructure, and governance. Collaborative training and exercises with Italy and Türkiye could build capability and trust, ensuring practical partnership on the ground and beyond meetings. A joint platform of cooperation involving Italy and Türkiye, along with other regional countries such as Egypt can strengthen resilience beyond conflict prevention and bolster security through joint border monitoring, information sharing,

maritime coordination, and realistic counter-terrorism efforts, as well as advancing projects in energy, housing, education, and local governance through coordinated actions.

2.3. Promoting regional integration and a fair approach to migration

The Mediterranean region must function as an interconnected economic zone, not as isolated markets. In this context, both the Mattei Plan and the Türkiye's Agenda for Africa can serve as bridges for energy connectivity, green infrastructure, and supply-chain diversification. Italy, through the Mattei Plan, can invest in sustainable energy and infrastructure that link North Africa to the Mediterranean. Türkiye, through its Africa Partnership, can transfer know-how in industry, logistics, and local governance. The diplomatic environment could be an asset as Türkiye and Egypt are rebuilding ties.

To that end, however, three strategic files need to be addressed: stabilizing Libya through coordinated actions within the UN peace process; fostering economic and energy cooperation across the Mediterranean and avoiding escalation in the Eastern part; and managing migration through joint development rather than reactive containment. In this sense, given the shared stakes in migration management, Italy and Türkiye should coordinate on-the-ground efforts to understand local drivers of migration and co-design solutions that address root causes rather than merely managing flows. Irregular migration remains a key issue, particularly regarding border security between Libya and Egypt. Libya serves as a transit state, with Italy receiving most migrants, while human trafficking networks persist. Libya's internal security gaps drive the problem, so strengthening unity and political stability in Libya is key to addressing migration challenges.

2.4. Addressing the root causes of instability

Poverty, food insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, and economic challenges are the main issues facing Africa as well as regional crisis areas. Hence, increasing investment in infrastructure, enhancing trade and transportation networks, promoting private sector growth, and encouraging foreign direct investment are essential. Emphasis should be placed on advancing structural projects, including roads, clean water systems, and agricultural initiatives. Joint ventures with African countries can foster shared development and mutual benefit, including in the defense sector. Improvements in healthcare, human capital exchange, and access to basic services must be prioritized, with efforts directed toward ensuring these services are both affordable and technically sound. Africa requires robust transportation systems, such as roads and railways, as well as employment opportunities and competitive interest rates for major infrastructure. Additionally, housing projects remain critical, with shelter provision constituting a significant challenge that must be addressed.

2.5. Anchoring Bilateral Cooperation to the European Framework

Italy should act as a bridge to embed Italy-Türkiye cooperation in Africa within the broader EU strategic framework, in a time when Europe is seeking to revitalize its approach to the southern neighborhood through initiatives as the Global Gateway and the New Pact for the Mediterranean.

Also, Türkiye's mediation and normalization efforts could serve the interests of both the EU and Italy in the Middle East. There is a general alignment toward de-escalation in Gaza and Iran, stabilization of Syria, and partnership with the Gulf. These shared priorities could enable joint actions aimed at promoting regional stability and fostering sustainable peace. Europe's response has often been insufficiently proactive, largely accepting positions imposed by the United States. Yet Europe has

major interests in the region and should play a more active role. A coordinated European approach would multiply impact, reduce duplication, and lend greater legitimacy to joint initiatives. In this sense, Türkiye, Italy, and the EU should also support Syria's reconstruction and Iraq's stability, promote proactive engagement with the Palestinian issue and the right to self-determination of Palestinians, and support the development of infrastructure, energy, and transport initiatives linking Türkiye, Europe, the Gulf, and the Levant, while identifying further opportunities for cooperation involving also GCC countries. This can also reduce the strategic risks linked to the Strait of Hormuz by promoting alternative routes and infrastructure.

2.6. Security cooperation

Promote joint projects and policy dialogue focused on the role of Türkiye, Italy, and the EU in supporting regional stability and a more resilient security architecture, especially given that bilateral relations between Rome and Ankara are dramatically improving, also thanks to industrial and strategic partnerships such as the Baykar-Leonardo partnership. Defense models are evolving, new partnerships are emerging, and opportunities should be further explored for NATO, the EU, and Türkiye to engage more actively with the Gulf and possibly expand to some African countries. NATO – particularly in the wake of the Ankara summit – has seen renewed attention to the alliance's southern flank, with Italian and Turkish priorities converging around greater integration and strategic coordination. This convergence is especially pronounced in the domain of maritime security, where both countries share direct interests in the stability of the Eastern Mediterranean, freedom of navigation, and the protection of energy infrastructure and undersea cables. Joint task forces and enhanced naval coordination, building on existing frameworks such as NATO's Standing Maritime Groups and bilateral Italy-Türkiye defense cooperation, offer a concrete mechanism for translating this strategic alignment into operational capacity, including coordinated patrols, information-sharing on hybrid threats, and joint responses to irregular migration flows across the Mediterranean that protect human rights of migrants.

2.7. Launching Joint Education and Scholarship Programmes

For Italy-Türkiye cooperation in Africa, a further layer of engagement can be built through knowledge and human capital in terms of public and education diplomacy. While defense and maritime coordination address the continent's immediate stability needs, lasting influence and genuine partnership require investment in education, research, and institutional capacity — areas where both countries bring complementary strengths to the table.

In this respect, a further avenue lies in expanding joint research projects between Italian and Turkish think tanks and academic institutions, aimed at better understanding African expectations and needs. Leveraging Türkiye's established strength in African scholarship programs alongside Italy's expertise in institutional development could support the design of joint educational initiatives — enhancing soft power for both countries while delivering tangible social impact on the ground. Universities, think tanks, and private enterprises alike should be encouraged to drive applied research, entrepreneurship, and cross-border learning, embedding this cooperation within a broader framework of shared engagement with the African continent.