

## MOROCCO'S AFRICAN UNION AND TURKEY RELATIONS

### FAS'IN AFRİKA BİRLİĞİ VE TÜRKİYE İLE İLİŞKİLERİ

**Dr. Canan TERCAN**

Istanbul Aydın University Department of International relations and Political Science,  
Türkiye

canantercan@aydin.edu.tr; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9922-9611>

**Wiam RHALLAB**

Istanbul Aydın university Department of International relations and Political Science, Türkiye

nadarh555@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6188-8069>

#### ABSTRACT

Morocco's growing ties with both the African Union and Turkey show how it's working to reshape its role on the regional and global stage. The country uses its location and its economic strengths to boost its influence across both continents. On one hand, institutional frameworks promote trade, development, and political cooperation. On the other, they become entangled in the competitive dynamics of regional diplomacy, where conflicting geopolitical interests shape outcomes. Hence, this research explores the trade relations, diplomacy, and regional integration of Morocco's African Union ties and links it with Turkey as part of revealing its overarching foreign policy and regional agenda.

**Keywords:** Morocco, Turkey, African Union, trade agreements, diplomacy, regional integration, geopolitical strategy, foreign policy, South-South, cooperation.

#### ÖZET

Fas'ın Afrika Birliği ve Türkiye ile artan ilişkileri, bölgesel ve küresel düzeydeki rolünü yeniden şekillendirme çabalarını ortaya koymaktadır. Ülke, coğrafi konumunu ve ekonomik gücünü her iki kıtada da etkisini artırmak için kullanmaktadır. Bir yandan, kurumsal çerçeveler ticaret, kalkınma ve siyasi iş birliğini teşvik ederken; diğer yandan, çelişen jeopolitik çıkarların sonuçları belirlediği bölgesel diplomasi rekabetinin içine çekilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu araştırma Fas'ın Afrika Birliği ile olan ticari ilişkilerini, diplomasisini ve bölgesel entegrasyonunu ele almakta ve bunu Türkiye ile olan bağlantılarıyla ilişkilendirerek ülkenin genel dış politika ve bölgesel gündemini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Fas, Türkiye, Afrika Birliği, ticaret anlaşmaları, diplomasi, bölgesel entegrasyon, jeopolitik strateji, dış politika, Güney-Güney, işbirliği.

## INTRODUCTION

Considered as a bridge between Europe and Africa, Morocco's geographical location uniquely positions it as a key player in fostering regional integration and global cooperation. It has managed to foster sound relations with Turkey, with which it shares deep-rooted historical and brotherly ties, and at the same time, recently reaffirmed its membership in the AU. That said, Morocco's strategic ambition to play a significant role in determining how the two regions develop is clearly demonstrated by the two exchanges in question.

The Moroccan-Turkish relations go back to the Ottoman Empire era. A lot of factors, such as a shared history, religion, and a cultural similarity, helped bring the two countries together especially that both sides were competing against the same outer powers, such as Spain and Portugal, who were trying to take control over the main trade routes. The same spirit of cooperation is still alive to this day; only now it's more structured and spanning politics, economics, and security. Morocco and Turkey have stepped up their military partnership in light of the changing nature of the global and regional diplomacy. A key example is Morocco's army that has tapped into Turkey's rapidly growing defense sector, acquiring some of its now-famous rotorcraft, and into a number of industrial and commercial fields. In the same context, Moroccan products attract a number of Turkish merchants, as Morocco is considered an attractive country for many investors. Morocco's relations with Africa were off to a bad start in a way that the country had pulled itself out of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1984 over the Western Sahara question. However, its re-involvement with the AU board meant a re-orientation of its new and strategic dynamic towards engendering South-South relations as well as assuming a fresh stance in addressing common concerns that affect the continent.

This paper aims at taking a glimpse into Morocco's foreign policy with distinctive references to trade and diplomacy with Turkey and the AU. It assesses the pros and cons of managing the relationships between these players. Both Morocco and Turkey share common interests in Africa, with Turkey's expanding presence in the continent complementing Morocco's South-South cooperation strategy and AU reintegration efforts. This paper also explores how Morocco leverages its partnerships with Turkey and African nations to solidify its influence and economic leadership in the region.

## Literature Review

Morocco's position on international diplomacy and South-South cooperation has been one of the main issues in the foreign policy domain since the country's return to the African Union in 2017. Exploring alternative alliances in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East is one strategic diversification pursued by the country to reduce its dependence on conventional Western allies. Boukhars (2021) explains that Morocco is using trade, defense partnerships, and cultural exchange not to promote ideology, but to boost its influence — a strategy shaped by practical geopolitics and economic interests.

Fernández-Molina and Khakee (2024) provide a critical view of Morocco's AU engagement at the regional level. Despite visible investments in Pan-African initiatives, their main argument is that unresolved regional issues such as the Western Sahara continue to limit the country's institutional influence. They highlight a clear contradiction: Morocco seeks deeper economic integration with the African Union but remains politically distant due to its stance on sovereignty disputes, particularly the Western Sahara issue. Mattheis, Deleglise, and Staeger (2023) also look at why political integration in Africa is so difficult. They show how national interests and disputed borders often get in the way of unity (as we can notice clearly applies in Morocco's situation too).

Literature often emphasizes Ankara's use of soft power and infrastructure diplomacy to expand its influence in Africa. Altunişik (2022) notes that Turkey's engagement is shaped by a pragmatic mix of economic outreach and security interests. Instead of working through North African countries, it often builds direct ties with sub-Saharan states. This dynamic suggests potential overlap-and at times friction-with Morocco's own African strategy.

The two main theories used to guide this analysis are regional integration (Haas, 1958; Mattheis et al., 2023) and economic interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977). It is important to note that these frameworks can lower the risk of conflict. Yet, they cannot erase deeper imbalances or strategic competition. The theories help explain why Morocco seeks partnerships but also why those partnerships do not always deliver what they promise.

These studies help us understand Morocco's role as a link between Turkey and Africa. However, not many researchers have looked closely into the trilateral dynamics among Rabat, Ankara, and the AU, leaving a gap that this research addresses.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Regional integration, economic interdependence, and geopolitical strategy are the three main theories this research is based on. The integration theory suggests that bringing countries together economically and politically can lead to greater stability and shared development (Colombo & Lecha, 2023). The economic interdependence theory adds another layer — it looks at how trade and investment can both come with risks and create mutual benefits.

Geopolitical strategy offers the methodology through which it can approach Morocco and its role as a mediator and a link between two continents. In the following section, this paper examines how Morocco uses geographical assets and economic policies together with its foreign relations in order to achieve its goals amidst the various challenges of the region and the international community.

## **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach and relies on thematic analysis of secondary sources. My goal was to provide insights into trade flows, military procurement, foreign direct investment, and diplomatic initiatives between Morocco, the African Union, and Turkey.

In this study, I chose the years 2000 to 2025 because they mark major changes in Morocco's foreign policy — its re-entry into the African Union in 2017, the implementation of its Free Trade Agreement with Turkey (signed in 2004), and recent developments in military cooperation and infrastructure diplomacy. To keep things clear, I sorted the data into three main areas: economic cooperation, defense collaboration, and regional integration efforts.

This method is closely related to the theoretical framework of the study. Particularly economic interdependence and regional integration theories, which aid in the explanation of how trade and diplomacy serve as instruments of geopolitical strategy. I used thematic analysis in order to better understand Morocco's foreign policy objectives, opportunities and the limitations it faces when it comes to managing its ties with both Turkey and the African Union.

### **Empirical Findings**

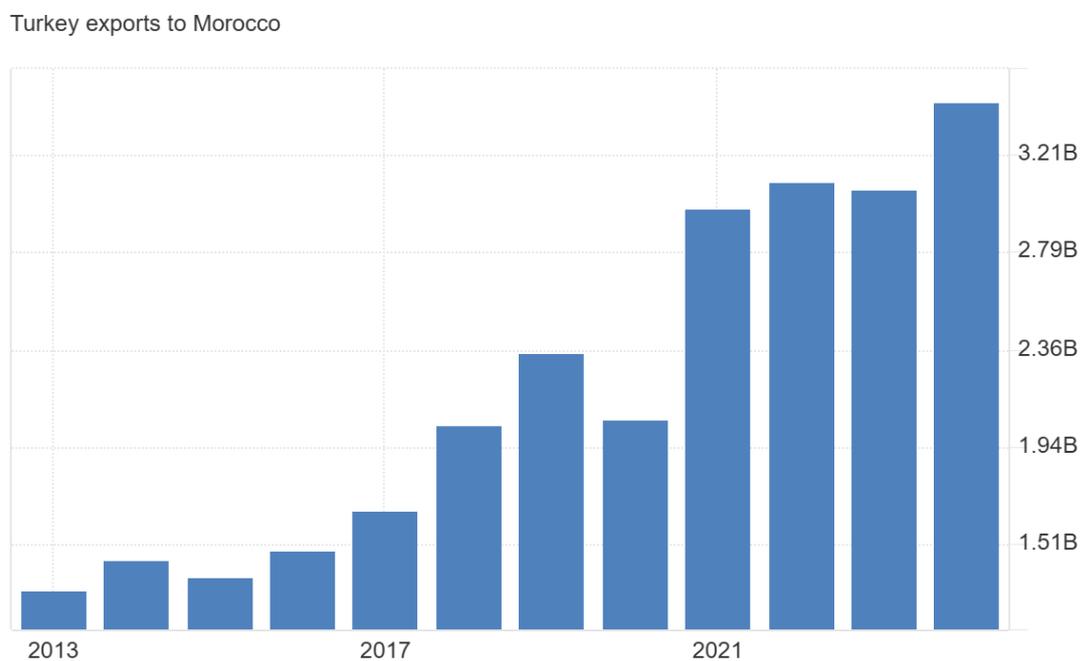
In order to highlight Morocco's expanding bilateral relations with Turkey and its reasserted role within the African Union (AU), I based this study's findings on a range of secondary sources-including data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, Invest Morocco, SIPRI, Middle East Eye, and the African Union Commission. Trade volume between Morocco and Turkey has grown steadily since the 2004 Free Trade Agreement. By 2022, it had passed \$3.3 billion. Turkey mainly exports textiles, machinery, and metals, while Morocco sells fertilizers and farm goods in return (TUIK, 2023). Turkish companies, notably BİM in the retail sector and several construction firms, have established a strong commercial presence across Moroccan cities. They've taken on major retail and infrastructure projects (Invest Morocco, 2023). In 2021, Morocco bought Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones in a deal worth around \$70 million. Regional media and SIPRI reported on the purchase, which also included training and logistics support (Middle East Eye, 2021). On a regional level, Morocco has supported infrastructure and integration initiatives such as the Nigeria–Morocco gas pipeline and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) since its reentry into AU in 2017. Major developments were recorded in joint declarations and policy reports of the African Union (African Union Commission, 2022). Nonetheless, the Western Sahara issue continues to cause political conflicts inside the AU. as stated in official AU summit communiqués and diplomatic briefings, amid opposition from nations such as South Africa and Algeria (AU Assembly Reports, 2021).

### **Discussion**

This study examines Morocco's efforts to boost its influence in both Africa and the Mediterranean. The country is continuously trying to build stronger ties with Turkey and the African Union Following a strategy that reflects its broader foreign policy of economic diversification, South–South cooperation, and regional leadership. A very crucial element in this regard is the economic relationship between Morocco and Turkey that has kept growing since the 2006 Free Trade Agreement and was supported by a trade volume of over \$3.4

billion in 2024 (Trading Economics, 2025). Nevertheless, Moroccan exports, such as fertilizers and agri-food items, are greatly outweighed by Turkish exports, which are primarily textiles, machinery, and metals, making the trade 's connection structurally unbalanced. Morocco made a significant effort to address such disparity by reviewing the FTA and imposing a few safeguards. The main one to note was raising up the taxes up to 90% on Turkish textiles (Reuters, 2025). Meanwhile, Turkish FDI has played a big role in promoting infrastructure development and job creation through businesses like BIM and large construction corporations (Atalayar, 2023). This shared dynamic reflects the theory of economic interdependence: The Moroccan government is aware of the dangers of dependency and asymmetry caused by trade and investment, even as they foster collaboration and mutual gain, and is working actively to take control over them by adjusting its policies.

*Figure 1: Turkey exports to Morocco*



Source: tradingeconomics.com | Comtrade

As noticed seen in Figure 1, Turkish exports have been on a consistent path of growth, from less than a \$500 million in 2004 to more than \$3.4 billion by 2024. The introduction of the FTA in 2006 and the waves of infrastructure and retail investment in the 2010s saw significant jumps. Even though the growth rate shows strengthened ties, the trade remains imbalanced due to the lack of proportionate development in Moroccan exports. The trendline supports arguments for an updated trade framework by showing Morocco's growing economic exposure to Turkish markets.

In recent years, Morocco has switched its defense partnership from Western vendors to Turkish ones. Cutting-edge military equipment coming from the Turkish land, particularly the Bayraktar TB2 attack drones, have helped elevate the quality of the country 's defense tools. Rabat has agreed to spend \$70 million on a deal it signed with Ankara in 2021 to get 13

TB2 units, along with training materials, simulators, and ground control stations (Middle East Eye, 2021).

Proven to be very effective in war zones such as Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, these drones came as a great substitute for American or European systems with their affordable price and high technological capability (Times Aerospace, 2022). The decision to purchase Turkish drones and collaborate on local maintenance and logistical infrastructure has shown Morocco's bigger plan to attain strategic autonomy in its military planning while diversifying its sources of armament (Army Recognition, 2021). On top of that, it goes hand in hand with Morocco's regional strategy when it comes to establishing air dominance over the Western Sahara where instability and transnational threats are still present. Notably, this move toward Turkish defense technology sends a strong message of the country's multi-vector foreign policy and increasing assertiveness in security matters.

Morocco has maintained a proactive AU strategy since rejoining the African Union in 2017, as it aimed for the goal of becoming a continental leader in integration, infrastructure, and trade. The heart of this initiative is the strong support for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). As it came in tune with the theory of regional integration, which contends that trade liberalization strengthens political linkages, fosters economic cohesion, and increases dependency (World Bank, 2020). As Secretary-General Wamkele Mene stated at a 2024 Casablanca forum, "Morocco is privileged to leverage the AfCFTA, thereby driving economic transformation and boosting export competitiveness". With a high focus on the goal of becoming the economic center of West Africa, Morocco has also been backing large-scale initiatives like the upcoming Atlantic Gas Pipeline, whose role is creating a link between international markets and Sahelian countries through Moroccan ports. However, political barriers like the Western Sahara dispute limit such goals. Moroccan-led initiatives kept being delayed because of Algeria's withdrawal from AU votes and regular support for the Polisario Front (ECFR, 2024). Yet, the country's consistent determination to make an impact on Africa's future despite enduring regional opposition based on geopolitical rivalries demonstrates its very high determination.

Morocco is considered a crucial bridge connecting Ankara's objectives in the African continent with the regional frameworks of the region. This triangulation includes institutional, economic, and geographic factors. Turkish companies looking to enter the Francophone and West African markets often see Morocco as an attractive destination due to its stable political climate, numerous free trade agreements, particularly those with the EU and AfCFTA, and strong logistical infrastructure. According to reports from Invest Morocco, Tangier Med Port and Casablanca's financial center "Finance City" have drawn Turkish interest as launching pads for regional activities (Invest Morocco, 2023).

A number of conflicts highlight Morocco's limitations to serve as a linking point between Turkey and AU. The expanding trade deficit that I addressed previously is one of the most urgent challenges the country faces, which is why it went on instantly to review its Free Trade Agreement with Turkey and introduce protective tariffs. Such moves serve as underlines of the hazards laid out by economic interdependence theory. At the same time, the Moroccan influence inside AU institutions has been facing some limitations as some member

states, mainly Algeria and South Africa, still recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Implementing this issue, Turkey may no longer go through Morocco to expand its future plans given its growing independent presence in sub-Saharan Africa, which includes its embassies growth from 12 to 44 throughout the continent as well as its involvement in direct infrastructure and defense agreements. As President Erdoğan 's military drone agreements with nations such as Ethiopia and Somalia keep increasing, we can say that this independent African approach is more and more coming to life (Financial Times, 2023). Eventually, the combination of these economic disparities, unsolved territorial issues, and conflicting strategic goals comes as limitations of Morocco 's bridge narrative. That said, both economic interdependence theory and regional integration theory help us understand Morocco's foreign policy, especially the tension between opportunities and structural limits. Morocco's imposition of protection measures on Turkish goods reflects the negative consequences of open trade when not complemented by equal beneficial advantages. On a more local level, Morocco 's active backing of programs like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) reflects its alignment with the Regional Integration Theory. Yet, the ongoing Western Sahara dispute keeps on making the Pan-African goals more difficult, serving as an example of how national sovereignty concerns can impede supranational cohesiveness (Fernández-Molina & Khakee, 2024). Although theories of integration and interdependence provide useful frameworks for comprehending state behavior, Morocco continues to negotiate in order to preserve its bridging role even when faced with the intricate realities of power, identity, and geopolitics.

## CONCLUSION

Morocco 's continued attempts to increase its regional effect are illustrated by the number of strategies it follows to establish a balance between its relations with the African Union and Turkey. Even though the areas of commerce, investment, and military technology have noticeably benefited from the economic and defense cooperation with Turkey, Morocco's domestic industry and bargaining leverage have been put at risk alongside increasing asymmetries. However, Morocco 's ambition to influence continental agendas continues to be limited due to unsolved political disputes, particularly those pertaining to Western Sahara. Morocco is doing a big job at navigating a complex landscape of overlapping spheres of influence, where alignment with one partner can strain relations with others, rather than merely acting as a geopolitical bridge. Although adaptable, Morocco's foreign policy must always contend with structural challenges that rhetoric alone cannot overcome. This case demonstrates the boundaries of integration and dependency when political objectives disagree.

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