

Article

Religious and Economic Soft Power in Ghana-Turkey Relations

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Abstract: Turkey’s government seeks to apply both “religious soft power” and “economic soft power” to increase its influence in Ghana. Turkey’s religious soft power relationship with Ghana is exemplified by Turkey’s paying for construction of a new national mosque in the African country, at a cost of USD 10 million. Turkey’s economic soft power relationship with Ghana is exemplified by both considerable recent investments and in fast-growing bilateral trade. The overall aim of the government of Turkey is to increase the country’s influence in Ghana, part of a wider initiative to expand its regional influence in Africa. Ghana is important to Turkey as it is regarded as a strategically important African country, one of the region’s few democracies and an economic success. The paper assesses Turkey’s various forms of influence in Ghana and considers what Turkey hopes to achieve in foreign policy terms. The paper is in four sections. The first examines religious soft power and Turkey–Ghana relations, noting that recently they have become closer and more cordial, involving both religious and non-religious aspects. The second section examines Muslims’ traditionally marginal political position in Ghana and explains that over time Muslims have become more politically assertive, open to external religious influences, including from Turkey, a country well known to use religious soft power to try to expand its foreign policy influence. The third section assesses recent Ghana-Turkey relations, including the expansion of Turkey’s economic soft power, with three examples: the national mosque, encouraging Islamic education, and mutual desire to quell the activities of what the government of Turkey refers to as the “Fethullah Terrorist Organisation”. The section also considers the role of Turkey’s economic soft power in increasing the country’s presence in Ghana. The concluding section argues that the government of Turkey uses several techniques to increase its influence in Ghana, including both religious soft power and economic soft power. The government of Ghana broadly welcomes Turkey’s influence from both religious and economic perspectives: from a religious point of view, Turkey’s Sunni orthodoxy is seen as very unlikely to stimulate radicalization among Ghana’s Muslims, while Turkey’s economic presence is welcomed as an important means to help further build Ghana’s economy.

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1. Introduction: Religious Soft Power and Turkey–Ghana Relations

Religious actors express soft power through their ability to encourage decision makers to put into effect policies and programmes which incorporate their preferred religious values and beliefs (Haynes 2010). Religious actors can be either states, such as the government of Turkey or non-state entities, such as the Fethullah Gülen network. The influence of both in Ghana is assessed later in this article.

Joseph Nye (1990), an American international relations scholar, coined the term “soft power” in the early 1990s. Discussing soft power, Nye barely refers to religion, noting merely that “for centuries, organized religious movements have possessed soft power” (Nye 2004a, p. 98). Nye’s analyses chiefly focus on secular sources of soft power, especially that of the USA, and the effects on international relations. Before Nye introduced the term “soft power” into international relations, “power” was routinely understood as “hard” power, that is, it referred to a country’s measurable potential power attributes, including: gross national product, military capability, and natural resources. According to Nye,

The basic concept of power is the ability to influence others to get them to do what you want. There are three major ways to do that: one is to threaten them with sticks; the second is to pay them with carrots; the third is to attract them or co-opt them, so that they want what you want. If you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, it costs you much less in carrots and sticks. (Nye 2004b)

The concept of “soft power” involves the capability of an entity, usually a state or government, to influence what other states or governments do through encouragement or co-optation, not coercion or threat. Certain hard-to-quantify attributes—including, culture, values, beliefs, norms and ideas—are alternative sources of power compared to “hard” power.

Religious soft power extends the range of Nye’s term to include soft power attributes of religious actors. To what extent, if at all, can we understand Turkey’s increasing presence in Ghana as an expression of the former’s religious soft power? Turkey’s religious power is identifiable in two recent aspects of its relationship with Ghana. First, significant funding for Ghana’s education system, including specifically for Muslims, via Islamic schools run by the Turkish government-linked, Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation. The aim is to expand the “form” of Islam preferred by Turkey’s government—that is, Sunni Islam. In Ghana, on the other hand, there are various forms of Islam which deviate from the orthodoxy of Turkey’s Sunni Islam, including: Salafis (Dumbe 2019) and members of the Ahmadiyya movement, a significant minority in Ghana, c.16% of the population (Pellow 1985). Turkey’s religious soft power expresses the state’s preferred form of Islam—Sunni orthodoxy—in opposition to various forms of Islam, regarded by Turkey’s government as a threat to Sunni orthodoxy, including Salafis, Ahmadiyya, and alleged religious terrorists, such as the Fethullah Gülen network. Second, Turkey seeks to undermine the Fethullah Gülen network, an Islamic education institution, in Ghana. Turkey’s government claims that the Fethullah Gülen network is a transnational terrorist organisation, a claim inspired by a serious July 2016 coup attempt which Turkey’s government claimed centrally involved the Fethullah Gülen network (Öztürk 2021).

Turkey does not use only religious soft power to try to expand its influence in Ghana. In addition, it seeks to use economic soft power to achieve greater influence. It is a moot point whether economic influence can be considered “soft” or “hard” power. Economic “hard” power is manifested, for example, when a rich country threatens to cut off or reduce financial assistance to a poor country, unless the latter accedes to the wishes of the former over a policy issue, despite not wishing to. Turkey’s economic presence in Ghana, which we see below is important and growing, is not that kind of power. Ghana is a middle-income country, not dependent on Turkey’s financial assistance to thrive economically. Turkey’s economic investments in Ghana are welcomed by the latter’s government, while Turkey identifies Ghana as a good place to do business, because of the good chances of generating profit from its activities there (Mohammed 2021).

Thus, the conception of religious soft power—that is, the government of Turkey using its religious values to try and influence Ghanaians—is only part of the story. Soft power is not just the role of culture and values in foreign policy, but also the ability of a state to get others to want what it wants. In the case of religious soft power this would be through religious outreach, as we see is the case in relation to Ghana’s Sunni Muslims. In the case economic soft power, Turkey’s aim is to help Ghana’s economy to grow, and make a profit at the same time. While this may help Ghanaians, including the country’s Muslims, this is not religious soft power in action.

The article hypothesizes that Turkey is seeking to expand its influence in Ghana by several means, including both religious soft power and economic soft power. The government of Ghana broadly welcomes Turkey’s influence: from a religious point of view, as Turkey’s Sunni orthodoxy is very unlikely to stimulate radicalization among Ghana’s Muslims, while Turkey’s economic investments are welcomed as an important means to help build Ghana’s economy.

Regarding methodology, this article draws on various resources, including articles in peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, newspaper articles, articles on Ghanaian and other news websites. Further information was gathered during several visits to Turkey (most recently in 2019)¹ and to Ghana in 2022.² These research visits involved, in both countries, interviews and conversations with public intellectuals, political scientists, current and former government members, and representatives of non-governmental organisations. Although the interviews and conversations are not quoted directly in the article, they do collectively inform and enrich the analysis of the article.

2. Muslims in Ghana: From Political Marginality to Political Significance

The most recent available government census in Ghana ([Ghana Statistical Service 2012](#)), indicates that more than two-thirds (71%) of Ghanaians are Christians, and 18% are Muslim. The remainder comprises people with “indigenous” or “animistic” religious beliefs (5%), while those adhering to “other religious groups” or with “no religious belief” is 6%. This indicates that Ghana does not have a high proportion of Muslims compared to Christians, unlike, for example, Senegal, Somalia, Mauritania, The Gambia, and Niger, countries that are 80% or more Muslim. Several African countries—including, Guinea, Mali, Chad, Nigeria and Sudan—are at least 50% Muslim, while others, such as: Côte d’Ivoire, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Burkina Faso have Muslim minorities of between 10 and 40 per cent.

Given substantial percentages of Muslims in several African countries, it might be expected that Islam’s universalism would be welcomed as a unifying ideology by political leaders in Africa as the universal message of Islam might be expected to be able to transcend ethnic exclusiveness and individualism. Islam is however rarely a national social and political cement, even when most citizens of an African country are Muslim. Muslims in Sub-Saharan Africa are typically divided—socially, politically, ethnically and religiously.

Perhaps the most divisive issue—ethnicity—is compounded by the fact that many Africans are members of competing Sufi brotherhoods. In addition, national boundaries in Africa, created by European colonialism and typically maintained by post-colonial governments, is another reason that the universalism of Islam is undermined. Finally, Africa’s political leaders are often Christian or secular, and tend to associate Islam with developmental backwardness and social conservatism ([Haynes 1996](#)). After independence, typically in the 1960s, Muslim ulama were often relatively satisfied with the postcolonial status quo and, distrusting new tendencies towards nationalism, frequently urged their followers to be politically quietest in the new era ([Trimingham 1980](#), p. 114). As a result of these factors, Islam did not generally unite Africans, nor develop into a potent political movement or unified ideology in sub-Saharan Africa, including in Ghana ([Haynes 1996, 2002](#)).

Between 1948 and 1980 the percentage of Ghana’s population which classified itself as Muslim rose from four to approaching 20 percent. Most Muslims live in Ghana’s relatively impoverished northern and upper regions. Others reside primarily in the country’s three main population centres: Accra, the capital city, Kumasi, the country’s commercial centre, and Sekondi-Takoradi, a major port. The Muslim presence in Kumasi—divided between Hausa from Nigeria and immigrants from Mali and Burkina Faso, most of whom live in defined areas of the city (that is, the *zongo*)—is the longest established outside Ghana’s northern and upper regions. In Kumasi, numbers of Muslims grew consequent to the development of trade between the Ashanti state and Muslim areas to the north which pre-dated mid-19th century British intrusion. In Accra, the Muslim community is divided ethnically, as it is in Sekondi-Takoradi, where Hausa and Zabrama from Burkina Faso are the most numerous ([Pobee 1992](#), p. 107).

Prior to independence, the Gold Coast Muslim Association (GCMA) was founded in 1932 as a national voice for the colony’s Muslims. As independence loomed in the 1950s, Muslim activists, supporters of Kwame Nkrumah’s pro-independence Convention People’s Party (CPP), infiltrated the GCMA, seeking to transform it into a pro-CPP body. Failing in the attempt, CPP-affiliated Muslims formed a rival association, the Gold Coast Muslim

Council (GCMC). In 1954, the anti-CPP GCMA evolved into a political party, the Muslim Association Party (MAP), “based on sectarian and parochial interests which was a serious challenge to the efforts of Nkrumah to build a nation out of congeries of tribes” (Pobee 1992, p. 114). Nkrumah’s response was to create a pro-CPP rival, the Muslim Youth Council (MYC). According to Pobee (1992, p. 114), Nkrumah “adopted kid-glove methods in his dealings with” the MAP, although his government did deport or detain in prison some MAP activists. Nkrumah, whose political reputation in Ghana was built upon an espousal of the pan-Africanist cause and a reputed “ethnic blindness”, was however ruthless in extinguishing communal challenges to development of national unity. The crushing of dissent to CPP rule from Ghana’s Muslim opposition was made easier by the fact that no single important ethnic group was mainly Muslim.

Following Nkrumah’s overthrow in a military coup in 1966, until the early 1980s, successive governments—both military and civilian, unelected as well as elected—sought to downplay or ignore the underdeveloped political and developmental position of Muslims. This changed when the Provisional National Defence Committee (PNDC) government of Lt. Jerry Rawlings took power following a military coup. Rawlings expressed concern with the importance of improved social justice for the downtrodden and oppressed, including among Ghana’s Muslims. Many among the latter regarded Rawlings fondly, and he found political approval among Ghana’s Muslims, especially in the relatively impoverished northern and upper regions and in Muslim-majority parts of the country’s major cities: Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi (Haynes 2023).

According to Harold B. Martinson (2010, p. 198), Rawlings had friends among “Malams who helped him get through with the coup” (sic). After Rawlings’ 31 December 1981 military coup, his PNDC government fell out with the mainline Christian leadership in Ghana, largely because of the latter’s dislike of Rawlings’ undemocratic regime. As a result, “in the eyes of some Ghanaians, Rawlings seemed to have lurched towards Islam and Muslim countries as possible alternative allies” (Martinson 2010, p. 198). The issue of Muslims’ political position became a focus in October 1986 when the PNDC government met leaders of Accra’s Muslim community and announced plans to demolish the capital’s Central Mosque. Both government and Muslim leaders are said to have agreed that the poorly situated mosque should be demolished and replaced by a two-storey car park for the new Rawlings Park. Muslim leaders were given a choice of three sites within Accra for a new mosque (Republic of Turkiye 2022).

As well as promising a new national mosque, the PNDC government also sought to improve the educational position of Muslim children. According to Owusu-Ansah et al. (2013, p. 104) “the march toward modernization of Islamic schools as part of the national secular education was a process that charted its own history”. Ghana’s Muslims are said not generally to oppose secular education nor “modern” learning. On the other hand, there are sometimes tensions between “traditional Islamic religious learning and secular education”, which the PNDC government sought to resolve. The PNDC government established the Islamic Education Unit (IEU) in 1987. The IEU continued throughout both PNDC rule (1982–92) and the years of Rawlings’ subsequent elected NDC government (1993–2001), working towards greater inclusion of all Muslim groups in the national educational system (Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013, pp. xi, 131). According to Owusu-Ansah (2013), “This allowed for non-Muslims to teach in these English-Arabic schools in a bid to improve good Christian-Muslim relations”. In 1996, in addition, Rawlings’ government declared Id-ul-Fitr and Id-ul-adha as national holidays (Martinson 2010, p. 202).

In addition to the new national mosque, expanded educational opportunities and new Muslim holidays, Jerry Rawlings’ NDC government (1993–2001) sought more generally to improve the lowly societal, developmental and political position of Ghana’s Muslims. NDC efforts focused on the historically underdeveloped northern and upper regions of the country where most Muslims in Ghana live (Ghana Statistical Service 2021).

Developmental improvements were achieved in the northern and upper regions during NDC rule:

- A major rural electrification project enabling most parts of Ghana, including the country's peripheral north and upper regions, to access hydro-electricity from Ghana's Akosombo dam, which encouraged socio-economic development ([Abu et al. 2017](#); Author's Interviews with Professor Kwesi Aning Kwesi, Director, Faculty of Academic Affairs & Research, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Accra, Ghana, via Zoom and Associate Professor George Bob-Milliar, Department of History and Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, via Zoom, 25 July 2022).
- Travelling from southern Ghana to northern Ghana took days until the 1990s, due to the poor state of even major roads. During Rawlings' presidency, key roads were constructed to link most parts of the north to Ghana's more developed southern regions ([Andoh 2020](#); Author's interview with Associate Professor George Bob-Milliar, Department of History and Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, via Zoom, 25 July 2022).
- Helping build a sense of nationhood by bringing peripheral, resource-poor parts of Ghana—including, the northern and upper regions—into the country's political, economic and developmental system (Author's interviews with Professor Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi, co-founder and executive director of Afrobarometer (2008–2021), Accra, Ghana, 6 July 2022, George Sarpong, Executive Secretary, National Media Commission, Accra, Ghana, 6 July 2022, and Valerie Sackey, former Director of the Castle Information Bureau, Accra, 15 July 2022).

Developmental improvements during Rawlings' presidency helped establish new political opportunities for Muslims, including those living in Ghana's northern and upper regions, traditionally peripheral in central government's development plans. The late 1980s and 1990s was a period during which Ghana's government developed effectively decentralised administration, passing some responsibility to district councils, which brought governance somewhat closer to the people. During Rawlings' presidency (1993–2001), due to an improved political and developmental position, the NDC gained consistent electoral support from many poor, mainly Muslim, rural communities in the northern and upper regions. Today, two decades after Rawlings left office, most northerners remain strongly loyal to his party, the NDC, largely because the infrastructure projects that, as president, Rawlings initiated and implemented ([Haynes 2023](#)). Finally, Ghana's Muslims more generally were grateful to the Rawlings government for the new national mosque in Accra.

Initiated in 1995, Ghana's national mosque was a concrete demonstration of Rawlings' governments intention of improving the position of Ghana's Muslims, many of whom, as already noted, live in the underdeveloped northern regions of the country or in designated areas in Ghana's major cities, areas known as *zongos*. However, lacking the necessary funds, the national mosque project was not carried through by successive governments for several decades. The land for the mosque was handed over to the National Chief Imam, Sheikh Dr Nuhu Sharubutu, by the then President, Jerry Rawlings, to replace a mosque demolished for the construction of the Rawlings Park in Accra in the mid-1980s. Initially, construction was to be undertaken by Ghana's Muslim community, which could not however raise the necessary funds. Consequently, the project was abandoned for some years. Following an initiative by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), Muslim Youth of Ghana, who took over sourcing of funds, work on the mosque eventually restarted. Partners implementing the project were: National Chief Imam, Sheikh Dr Nuhu Sharubutu, two NGOs: Ghana Friendship and Solidarity Association (GANADER), whose members included Ghanaian Muslim philanthropists, and Human Development International (HUDAI). Their efforts were supported by Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Turkish: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, widely known the Diyanet) ([5 Important Things to Know about the Ghana National Mosque Complex 2021](#)).

3. Development of Ghana-Turkey Relations

Turkey's government seeks to develop relations with dozens of African countries, for economic, strategic and security reasons (Kaya 2021; Mohammed 2021; Balci and Boztaş 2021). Links between Ghana and Turkey have developed in recent years, due to expanding economic, technological and cultural links and more recently a shared concern with "Islamic terrorism" (Öztürk 2021). We saw in the previous section that Ghana's Muslims were for a long time relatively neglected as a community by successive governments. Things changed in this regard during the 1980s and 1990s when the country was led by Flt.-Lt. Rawlings' governments, which sought to improve the lot of the marginalized, including Ghana's Muslims. The poor economic conditions of the time in Ghana meant that sufficient money could not be found for building a new national mosque. The government of Turkey stepped in to provide necessary funding for the mosque's construction, and this is an early example of expanding Ghana-Turkey relations.

After independence from Britain in 1957, Ghana established diplomatic relations with Turkey in 1958. Turkey opened an embassy in Accra in 1964, which closed in 1981 as an economic stringency measure. The embassy reopened in 2010, and in 2012 Ghana opened an embassy in Ankara.

Ghana and Turkey generally have enjoyed good relations, except during two relatively brief periods in the mid-1960s and then for much of the 1980s. Relations soured, first, during the presidency of Kwame Nkrumah in the mid-1960s due to ideological differences and, second, during Rawlings' PNDC government in the 1980s, because of the latter's closeness to the Libyan government of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi. Rawlings' himself had a close personal relationship with Qadhafi (Haynes 1990). Soon after coming to power at the end of 1981, the PNDC government restored diplomatic relations with Libya and as a result received much-needed financial aid and diplomatic support. Later, in 1988, the PNDC government supported Qadhafi's position, after two Libyan nationals were accused of bombing a Pan American flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, that they should be tried in a neutral country, excluding the USA or the United Kingdom. The government of Turkey did not approve of Ghana's actions in relation to Libya.

Relations between the governments of Ghana and Turkey improved in the 2000s. Turkey's then President Abdullah Gül visited Ghana on 23–24 March 2011. Ghana's then president, John Dramani Mahama, paid a visit to Turkey between 21–24 January 2013. Three years later, between 29 February and 1 March, 2016, Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Ghana, "creating a new milestone in the bilateral relations". Erdoğan's visit coincided with a major business forum, attended by over 150 Turkish and dozens of Ghanaian businesspeople. In recent years, Ghana and Turkey have agreed memoranda of understanding in several areas, including information technology, promotion and protecting mutual investments, and sports and youth. Erdoğan stated during his 2016 visit that "Turkey wishes to strengthen its political, military, economic, cultural and commercial ties with Ghana". In the 2020s, Turkey and Ghana continue to enjoy burgeoning economic relations. In Ghana, Turkish companies operate mainly in the energy and construction sectors, while Ghana exports mainly raw materials to Turkey, including cocoa and gold. Bilateral trade between Turkey and Ghana amounted to USD 399.5 million in 2015, USD 478.9 million in 2016, and USD 570 million in 2020 (Republic of Türkiye 2022). Following Erdoğan's visit, the Ghana government "inaugurated the Republic of Turkey Street in Accra as well as the Ummah Mosque", that is, Ghana's national mosque. Finally, "the Turkish Red Crescent ha[s] sent humanitarian aid to the country in order to consolidate Turkish influence" (Mikhail 2021).

Turkey's financing and building of Ghana's new national mosque, support for increased educational opportunities for Ghana's Muslims and the government of Turkey's aim that African governments, including that of Ghana, should work to undermine the influence of what it refers to as the Fethullah Gülen "terrorist" network, suggest that there are several components comprising Ghana-Turkey relations. On the one hand, there is Turkey's religious soft power, seeking to improve the lot of Ghana's Sunni majority (Öztürk

2021). On the other hand, Turkey's economic "soft" power does not discriminate in favour of Ghana's Muslims at the expense of non-Muslim Ghanaians. This indicates that Turkey uses both religious soft power and economic soft power to build relations with the government of Ghana and the country's Muslims, in pursuit of both religious and non-religious goals. The previous paragraph outlined some of economic tools that the government of Turkey has used to expand its influence in Ghana, a move welcomed by the government of Ghana which sees burgeoning economic relations with Turkey as a source of economic strength. The next section examines Turkey's use of religious soft power to strengthen ties with successive governments in Ghana and the country's Muslim minority.

3.1. *The National Mosque*

With the support of Turkey's government, the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation³ financed the construction of Accra's "ultra-modern" national mosque at a reported cost of USD 10 million. The 15,000-seater-capacity mosque complex, constructed on a 40-acre land at Kanda in Accra, has impressive facilities. They include: a library complex, an office and residence for Ghana's Chief Imam, research and senior high school complexes, a clinic, an administration block, an auditorium, and a conference centre. The national mosque is the largest new mosque in West Africa, modelled on the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. Inaugurated in July 2021, the mosque is said to exemplify "the close bond between the Islam of this part of Africa and that of Turkey" (Obeng 2021).

3.2. *Islamic Education*

According to a report on a Turkish website Ahval (<https://ahvalnews.com/>, accessed on 24 October 2022), "Erdogan's government is seeking to gain a foothold in Ghana through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, which provided teaching and educational equipment to a primary school in the Ghanaian capital of Accra". The newspaper Emirati Al-Ain reports that the Hudayi Foundation—affiliated with Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party—constructs schools and mosques not only in Ghana, but also in other African countries. Commenting on the Turkish role in Ghana, Mona Amr, former assistant to Egypt's foreign minister for African affairs said, "Turkey clearly wields an economic influence in Ghana. Ankara takes advantage of its economic influence to play a political role in Ghana" (Mikhail 2021).

The Nordic Research and Monitoring Network⁴ (2020) reports that Turkey's government finances and supports schools and other institutions founded by the government-linked Hudayi Foundation in several African countries, including Ghana. The aim is said to be to promote President Erdoğan's "unique brand of Islamic leadership and the Turkish government's political agenda". Erdoğan urges leaders of African countries, including Nana Akuffo-Addo, Ghana's president, "to back Hudayi Foundation projects on the continent in accordance with his Islamist policies".

Mikhail (2021) observes that Turkey's educational and economic links with Ghana compete with those of Egypt. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government seeks to extend its influence on the continent of Africa, including in Ghana. Al-Sisi confirmed his country's eagerness to strengthen relations and cooperation with Ghana, including trade and investment, during a 5 January 2021 meeting with Annan Kato, special envoy of Ghana's president.

Like the government of Turkey, that of Egypt is "working on strengthening its economic and political ties with Ghana to block the influence of any state that is exploiting its presence in Africa to undermine economic interests, such as Turkey". As with Turkey, Ghana has growing economic and trade relations with Egypt. The volume of trade between the two countries grew to USD 108.3 million in 2018, up from USD 70.1 million in 2017, a 54.5% increase. This is a significant amount, but it is dwarfed by the volume and value of Ghana-Turkey trade which is five times larger: USD 570 million in 2020 (Mikhail 2021).

Tarek Fahmi, a professor of political science at Cairo University, told Al-Monitor, that "Generally, Egypt is pursuing a strategy to gain a foothold in Africa, especially since it was the head of the African Union (from February 2019 to February 2020)". Fahmi claims

that “Egypt seeks to have a presence in African countries, especially in those where Qatar and Turkey are present. This is why Cairo has been intensifying its moves in Ghana in a bid to thwart Turkey in its attempts to extend its influence to Accra”. Furthermore, like the government of Turkey, that of Egypt “possesses economic and social tools to be present in Ghana through economic agreements. It has also sent Egyptian experts to the country”. Turning to the role of religion, the “Al-Azhar Foundation and the Orthodox Church are Egypt’s strong cards to extend [Egypt’s] influence in Ghana’, including religious missions and provision of humanitarian assistance (Mikhail 2021). Egypt’s rivalry with Turkey for influence in Africa may include competitive use of religious soft power: while Turkey uses both its financial power and a claim that Africa’s Islam draws on similar ideas and aspirations to its own, Egypt appears to be keen to use the influence of the Al-Azhar Mosque and the Al-Azhar Foundation to identify the country with African Islam. It is not clear however the likelihood of Egypt’s Orthodox Christianity finding much favour in Ghana: Nearly all Christians are mainline Protestants, Evangelicals and Roman Catholics; there are few Orthodox Christians, probably numbering in the low thousands.⁵

Vying with Egypt, Turkey’s government aims to build its presence in Ghana, in various ways, including humanitarian aid and the building of mosques and schools. Recently, an additional area of religious soft power has emerged: the aim of undermining and eventually removing the Sufi-inspired Fethullah Gülen network from Ghana.

3.3. “Fethullah Terrorist Organisation (FETO)”

In 2018, President Erdoğan claimed that “What [my] African brothers have longed for for years are true friends who respect their history, culture, traditions, languages”. Erdoğan claimed that Turkey wants “to be true friends of Africa”. (Presidency of the [Republic of Türkiye 2018](#)). Erdoğan, who is said to view Turkey as a global power with a global reach, pursues a foreign policy agenda to reflect this view, including in regions, including Africa and Latin America, previously rather overlooked by Turkish governments ([Öztürk 2021](#)). Under Erdoğan’s leadership, Turkey is said to pursue a “Neo-Ottoman” foreign policy, seeking to emulate the Ottoman Empire as a global power, until it collapsed after World War I. To this end, Turkey targets Africa in its foreign policy. By 2019, Turkey had 41 embassies in Africa, increasing from 12 in 2003. African Union leaders claim that Erdoğan has “won hearts and minds” through his humanitarian assistance and support for Muslim communities, including in Ghana ([Kaya 2021](#), p. 1).

There is another side to Turkey’s increased attention to Africa. Since 2016, Turkey’s government has been involved in a conflict with the Fethullah Gülen network. Until then, Fethullah Gülen and Erdoğan were allies. The July 2016 coup in Turkey ended this cosy relationship and set the two against each other as enemies ([Öztürk 2021](#)).

The Fethullah Gülen network has long been involved in Islamic education in Africa, including in Ghana. It started its activities in the field of education in Africa in 1994, and the network ran 110 educational institutions at the primary and secondary school levels, as well as one university, in Africa. Teaching in the local language, the schools were successful in recruiting students and in its efforts to spread its brand of Sufi Islam. Fethullah Gülen schools in Africa include the Galaxy International School in Ghana, as well as the Light Academy in Kenya and the Nile University in Nigeria ([Turkish National Police Academy 2nd International Security Symposium Report 2019](#)).

President Erdoğan contends that winning Muslim hearts and minds in Africa is dependent on removing what he calls the terrorist scourge of the Fethullah Terrorist Organisation (FETO). According to Erdoğan, Gülen schools and educational establishments are a source of anti-Turkey propaganda, and their existence is a significant impediment to advancing Turkey-Africa partnerships. Erdoğan blames Gülen for orchestrating a serious 15 July 2016, coup attempt against his government, during which an estimated 250 or more people were killed. Since then, Turkey’s government has made concerted efforts to encourage governments in Africa to close Gülen institutions. This includes making

economic, cultural, and security deals with African governments contingent on the closure of Gülen institutions (Cagaptay 2019, p. 232).

To encourage Africa's governments to close Gülen institutions, Erdoğan's government embarked on major infrastructure projects across the region, including construction of roads and railways. Adding to its financial muscle, Turkey's soft power efforts include trying to influence positively African perceptions of Turkey. For example, Turkish television dramas are popular in several African countries, including Ghana, Kenya and Sudan. Such programmes introduce Africans to Turkish tourist destinations, food, and Turkey's perceived "modern and progressive society", as one Sudanese viewer reflected (Mikhail 2021).

Three elements of Turkey's influence in Africa—religious soft power, cultural soft power, and financial "hard" power—combine in pursuit of Erdoğan's aim of persuading Africa's leaders to accept his aims and objectives. This includes seeking to close Gülen schools, open more Turkish embassies, watch more Turkish television programmes, increase trade, and undermine and remove "FETO terrorism". By 2019, Erdoğan had persuaded 29 African countries to close Gülen-affiliated schools, with several more countries, including Ghana and Zambia, working with the Turkish government on future closures. Erdoğan pledged to open new Turkish schools to replace former Gülen-affiliated African institutions, run by the state-affiliated Maarif Foundation, founded in 2016 specifically as part of this effort (Activities of the Turkish Maarif Foundation and Achievements of Educational Institutions 2019).

In Ghana, in addition, Turkey uses the state-owed media, including the country's two largest circulation daily newspapers, *The Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times*, to publish scare stories about the alleged serious security threat to Ghana posed by what Turkey's government refers to as the "FETO terrorist" network (Turkish Parliament Warns of Terror Threat in Ghana 2018; Ghana: Terrorism Has No Nationality, Ethnicity Nor Religion ... FETO Threatens Humanity As a Whole 2022). No hard evidence is provided in these stories which might justify Turkey's security concern with the "terrorist" Fethullah Gülen network. Instead, many would agree that Ghana's most serious security threat emanates not from the "terrorist" Fethullah Gülen network but from extremist Islamist movements, such as al Qaeda or Islamic State: in 2022, Ghana is the only West African country so far not affected by jihadi violence (Prah 2021).

Finally, the *Nordic Monitor* (2021) reported in June 2021 that "14 Erdoğan critics [were] spied on by Turkish diplomats in Ghana". The *Nordic Monitor* report claims that in Ghana, the Turkish diplomatic mission has "engaged in a campaign of intelligence gathering" to gather "information on the activities of critics of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan". The report does not mention this, but it is likely that such critics would have included people connected to the Gülen network, which is still present in Ghana, despite Erdoğan's efforts to close it down. In sum, the Turkish government has sought to destroy the so-called "FETO terrorist network", on security grounds, implying that the Islam of the Gülen network is not compatible with "African Islam", unlike the official Sunni Islam of Turkey's Justice and Development government.

4. Conclusions

Turkey's growing influence in Ghana is not limited to its ability to project religious soft power. Turkey's efforts additionally include the use of economic soft power, which in Ghana includes both significant economic investments and growing bilateral trade, which amounted to USD 570 million in 2020. Turkey's use of both religious and economic soft power is unrecognized in the relevant literature. According to American diplomat and scholar, Chester A. Crocker, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs between 1981 and 1989 in the Reagan administration in the USA, a combination of soft and hard power is identifiable as "smart" power. Smart power is "the strategic use of diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building, and the projection of power and influence in ways that are cost-effective and have political and social legitimacy—essentially the engagement of both military force and all forms of diplomacy" (Crocker et al. 2007, p. 13). In relation to Ghana,

however, it would not be accurate to describe Turkey as wielding such “smart” power in its attempts to gain influence. Instead, this is an unusual example of the use of both religious and non-religious—that is, economic—soft power, a situation overlooked in the existing relevant literature.

In Turkey, President Erdoğan has successfully used “smart” power to appeal consistently to a large portion of the Turkish electorate. Erdoğan has been in power, first as prime minister and more recently as president since 2002. He has devised a consistently electorally successful way of “engineering consent through his rhetoric and actions, successfully combining them within a smart power methodology of coercion and attraction” (Botel-Azzinnaro 2018).

Erdoğan’s smart power methods may be employed in relation to Turkey’s efforts to influence some governments in Africa to adopt policies and programmes which find favour with Erdoğan’s government, especially poorer countries heavily reliant on various forms of external economic assistance. On the other hand, Erdoğan’s efforts to develop Turkey’s global foreign policy by a combination of religious and non-religious soft power is demonstrated in relation to Ghana, a relatively prosperous country. Erdoğan’s aim is that Turkey’s ambitions are achieved via increased bilateral trade (to Turkey’s advantage), improvement of the position of Ghana’s Sunni Muslims, funding construction of the national mosque, enhanced educational opportunities to Muslims to increase their life chances in a Christian-majority country, and enlisting Ghana’s government Turkey’s conflict with Fethullah Gülen “terrorist” network.

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- ¹ The author was a participant at the ‘Secularisation, Secularism, Laïcité’ conference, held at Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey, 20–21 May 2019, during which many interviews and conversations took place with well-informed Turkish scholars.
- ² The author spent much of July 2022 in Ghana, undertaking many interviews and conversations with well-informed Ghanaians about, among other things, Turkey’s influence in Ghana.
- ³ *Aziz Mahmud Hudayi* (1541–1628) is amongst the most famous Sufi Muslim saints of the Ottoman Empire Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation is a non-governmental organization established in 1985 and has been continuing to provide charitable services in the fields of education, social and humanitarian services, printing-publishing. It represents a four-hundred year-long tradition of charitable foundations. It serves in these fields with the NGO status of “public benefit” and “tax exemption” <https://www.hudayivakfi.org/en/about-us.html> accessed on 24 October 2022.
- ⁴ ‘The Nordic Research Monitoring Network (NRMN) is a non-profit organization that aims to raise awareness of radical and violent extremist trends in Europe and beyond, with a specific focus on patterns that disrupt peace and harmony among community groups, with an emphasis on Turkey. It hopes to contribute to the debate on how nations should prevent and combat radicalization with close cooperation and collaboration between all relevant stakeholders at all levels of governance with the involvement of the NGO community and civil society.’ <https://www.nordicrmn.org/> accessed on 24 October 2022.
- ⁵ “Thousands of Orthodox Christians from among the local population are served by 23 priests. In the future, it is planned to open an Orthodox seminary in Ghana” <https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/11863743> accessed on 24 October 2022.

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