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Turkey Discovers Africa: Implications and Prospects

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There has been a revival in Turkey's relation with Africa after 1998. Initially this revival came as a passive attempt, but after 2005 it became an offensive interest in developing relations with the continent. The recent Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit marks the latest stage in Turkey's keen interest in developing relations with Africa, and should be seen as a turning point if it is followed with concrete projects in political and economic fields. The key challenge, however, lies in the mutual lack of knowledge and familiarity between the two regions, coupled with general uncertainty regarding how to further relations.

Less than a decade ago it was unthinkable that, at a major conference, with all the Turkish ambassadors present and representatives from all over the world on hand, the Turkish foreign minister would declare that "we attach particular importance to Africa within the context of our new perspective policies," and further, that "in the next few years, we shall establish fifteen new embassies in the continent of Africa."[1] One month after this speech, Turkish President Abdullah Gül hosted the first ever Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit between 18–21 August 2008 in Istanbul with the participation of representatives from fifty African countries. Turkey currently has twelve embassies and twenty honorary consulates throughout Africa, while only thirteen African countries have resident embassies in Ankara, three of which have only recently been opened. What has changed that Turkey has decided to open new embassies in Africa? Is it a sign of a deep policy change

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[1] The Opening Statement of the Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan at the Ambassadors Conference, Bilkent Hotel and Conference Center, Ankara, 15 July 2008, "Global Trends and Turkish Foreign Policy", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-opening-statement-of-the-minister-of--foreign-affairs-ali-babacan--at-the-ambassadors-conference-bilkent-hotel-and-conference--center_15-july-2008_-_-_global-trends-and-turkish-foreign-policy__.en.mfa (accessed 18 July 2008).

toward Africa in Turkish foreign policy? Or only a temporary one?

Turkey-Africa Relations: Short History

Turkey's relations with Africa can be divided into three periods. The first period covers the Ottoman State's relations with Africa until the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, during which the Ottomans had considerable relations with Africa. From 1923 to 1998, Turkish-Africa relations were at their lowest level, if they could be said to exist at all. After 1998, with the acceptance of the World Bank's Africa Action plan, there has been a revival in Turkey's interest in Africa. Initially, this occurred passively; after 2005, however, it became an offensive interest in developing relations with Africa.

Historically, relations between Turks and Africa go back several centuries. Some African countries were totally or partially subject to Ottoman rule, such as Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, the Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia and even Niger and Chad. In the northern Sub-Sahara region, the Ottomans were part of the balance of powers system, enjoying friendship and alliance with the Kanem Burnu Empire that still prevails in today's Northern Nigeria, Niger and Chad.[2] With regard to Southern Africa, the Ottoman State sent an Imam, Abu Bakr Effendi, to the Muslims of the Cape of Good Hope in 1863 upon the request of the Muslim Community there. The Muslims of South Africa actively participated in the Hejaz railway construction campaigns, raising funds and collecting at least 366.55 pounds between 1900–1907.[3] After the donations, the Ottoman States distributed more than 200 medals in gold, silver and nickel to those who had contributed.[4] After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, however, Turkey-Africa relations quickly downgraded to their lowest level.

"What has changed that Turkey has decided to open new embassies in Africa? Is it a sign of a deep policy change toward Africa in Turkish foreign policy? Or only a temporary one?"

[2] For more on Ottoman-Africa relations see Ahmet Kavas, *Afrika Raporu,* Stratejik Rapor No: 4, Istanbul: TASAM Publications, February 2005, pp. 7-18; and *Osmanlı-Afrika Iliskileri*, Istanbul: TASAM Publications, 2006.

[3] Orhan Kologlu, *Hicaz Demiryolu, (1900-1908) Amaci, Finansmani, Sonucu, Cagini Yakalayan Osmanli*, Istanbul: IRCICA Publication, 1995, p. 220-222.

[4] On Abu Bakr Effendi, see Selim Argun, *The life and contribution of the Osmanli scholar, Abu Bakr Effendi : Towards Islamic Thought and Culture in South Africa*, Unpublished MA thesis, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, 2005.

Turkey opened its first official mission in Lagos in 1956 and recognized all newly independent countries.[5]

In 1998, Turkey adopted a new policy document called the "Opening up to Africa Policy." Within its framework, Turkey hoped to further develop its political, economic and cultural ties with African countries in the forthcoming period. The so-called 'Africa Policy' comprises several areas, such as developing diplomatic relations, and fostering political, economic and cultural cooperation. However, Turkey's opening to Africa truly came into existence only in 2005 when Turkey announced "the year of Africa." Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Ethiopia and South Africa in March 2005, becoming the first Turkish prime minister to officially visit a country under the equator line. During this same year, Turkey enhanced its relations with Africa on an institutional level. Turkey obtained "observer status" in the African Union on 12 April 2005, and accredited its embassy in Addis Ababa to the African Union on 5 May 2005. The last African Union Summit held in Addis Ababa in January 2008 declared Turkey as a "strategic partner."

Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit: Why Now?

Turkey's push to open the door to Africa was recently crowned with a historical meeting in Istanbul, hosted under the auspices of Turkish President Abdullah Gul. The first Turkey-Africa Summit, under the theme of "Solidarity and Partnership for a Common Future," was held between 18–21 August 2008. In attendance were representatives from fifty countries, with the absence of Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique. Morocco was represented although it is not a member of the African Union due to the dispute over the recognition of Western Sahara.

Turkey under the AK Party administration has brought a new vision to Turkey's Africa initiative,[6] and certainly aims to fill the relations gap which emerged after nearly a century of negligence. To make up the loss in time and accelerate relations between Turkey and Africa, the summit provided a venue to increase bilateral contacts and search for new ways of developing relations;[7] the Turkish President in a press meeting said that he "had bilateral talks with the heads of delegations of 42 countries within the scope of the summit."[8] Similarly, the bilateral meetings of Prime Minister Erdogan seem likely to give an impetus to developing relations with Africa in the years to come. The magnitude of those bilateral meeting is

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[5] Salih Zeki Karaca, "Turkish Foreign Policy in the year 2000 and Beyond: Her Opening up Policy to Africa." *Dis Politika-Foreign Policy: A Quarterly of the Foreign Policy Institute* (Ankara), Vol 25, No: 3-4, 2000, p.116.

[6] Erdal Şafak, "Afrika ile Randevu," *Sabah*, 19 August 2008.

[7] Semih İdiz, "Afrika'nin Türkiye için artan önemi," *Milliyet*, 21 August 2008.

[8] "Turkey-Africa Partnership Declaration Issued." http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=26942 (20 August 2008).

important, given that the Turkish President and Prime Minister were meeting delegations from some of the African countries for the first time, and *vice versa*, and that no high-level meeting of such a nature had ever taken place before between Turkey and those countries. Given the fact that neither Turkey nor many African countries know each other well, these meetings and the summit itself is expected to help familiarize both sides to each other.

If one looks at the level of participation in the Summit, six African presidents, five vice-presidents, six prime ministers and a deputy-prime minister were present. The rest of the fifty countries were represented either by foreign ministers or senior-level representatives. The lack of high-level representation and interest in the Summit, for example from South Africa, which is quite influential in African affairs, is a clear indication that the benefits of Turkey's African opening to Africans themselves is not clear in Africans' minds. Turkey's over-emphasis on trade relations with Africa is perplexing at best, and what Africa really stands to gain from the offer of partnership is open to question – as least in the minds of many African people.[9] Turkey needs to explain and find new ways of bringing about a win-win situation in order to get the serious and influential African players to come to the relations table. Unless this is achieved, future Turkey-Africa Summits will only be an arena where Turkish and African leaders come together for purposes other than that of creating serious and long-term partnerships for the benefit of both sides.

Economic and Political Motives

Turkey's trade volume with African countries was only 5.4 billion USD in 2003; since then it has increased more than two-fold, exceeding 12 billion dollars in 2007. Yet, considering that Turkey's total global trade volume amounts to almost 300 billion dollars, its current trade volume with African countries is still not significant. Turkey's target is to reach a trade volume of 30 billion dollars with Africa by the end of 2010.[10]

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[9] Just before the Turkey-Africa Summit, TASAM organized a Turkish-African CSOs Forum between 14-16 August 2008 in Istanbul with the participation of 90 NGOs from 45 African countries. When the future of Turkey-Africa relations was discussed on the first day, three participants from diffent African countries asked the same question: what would Africa gain from this partnership? This concern should be taken as a serious one. Author's notes from the Forum, 14 August 2008, Istanbul.

[10] See the address by H.E. Ali Babacan, Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, to the group of African countries, New York, 24 July 2008, http://africa.mfa.gov.tr/speech-by-h_e_-babaca-to-the-group-of-african-countries-at-the-un_-24-july-2008.en.mfa (8 August 2008).

Currently, there are hundreds of Turkish firms operating in various African countries. The contracting services provided by Turkish firms in those countries alone have reached a total of 18 billion US dollars. In addition, the amount of Turkish direct investments in African countries now exceeds 500 million USD and is expected to increase in the future.[11]

Turkey became the 25th non-regional member of the African Development Bank in May 2008. This membership is expected to open new areas of cooperation. For example, Turkey's membership in the African Development Bank could assist contracting firms from Turkey in undertaking large infrastructure projects on the continent.

Along with developing economic relations, Turkey also has political expectations from the Turkey-Africa Summit in both the short and long term. In the short term, Turkey needs the support of African countries as it is one of three candidates for the non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council with election due to take place in October 2008. Apparently, Turkey reached its immediate goal, as Turkish President Gul confidently stated that African countries fully supported Turkey's candidacy.[12] In the long term, Turkey hopes to cooperate with African countries in international forums such as the UN and exchange views on regional and global issues. To lay the ground for the cooperation in the long run, the Turkey-Africa Summit is scheduled to be held every five years. An African country will host the second summit in 2013.[13] It has also been decided that the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB) and the Union of African Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Agriculture and Professions (UACCIAP) will cooperate to establish the Turkish-African Chamber for furthering commercial relations.[14]

What Africa Gains from This Partnership

Economically, both sides benefit from increasing trade between Turkey and Africa, as it creates employment and investment. Moreover, Africa has been the continent where Turkish international aid and development projects have steadily increased over the last several years. The Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA) expanded its area of operation after 2003; the most notable expansion of its activities has taken place in Africa.[15] TIKA currently has three offices in Africa,

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[11] Ibid.

[12] "Turkey-Africa Partnership Declaration Issued", http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=26942 (20 August 2008).

[13] Ibid.

[14] *Zaman*, 21 August 2008, p.11.

[15] Hakan Fidan and Rahman Nurdun, "Turkey's Role in the Global Development Assistance Cummunity: the Case of TIKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency)," *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol 10, No 1, April 2008, p.100.

namely in Ethiopia, Sudan and Senegal. TIKA offices support development projects in their respective regions and from these three offices it operates in 37 countries in Africa. With the opening of new Embassies all over the continent, one can expect that the number of TIKA offices in Africa will increase as well, thus increasing Turkish aid flow to the continent.

The projects and activities of TIKA in Africa are designed to serve such long term purposes as the development of social and economic infrastructure on the continent and, to a lesser extent, to provide support in urgent and humanitarian issues when needed in crisis times.[16] In August 2008, TIKA initiated an African Agricultural Development Program in order to help develop agriculture in Africa. According to TIKA President Musa Kulaklikaya, this project will last from 2008 to 2010 and be implemented in thirteen African countries, namely in Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Senegal, Comoros, Madagascar, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda.[17]

Turkey is also working in cooperation with international organizations for the development of Africa. It has allocated 50 million USD for the financing of development projects in African countries over the next five years. So far, Turkey has donated 7.5 million dollars to various African countries via international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the World Food Program (WFP) and the Red Crescent to assist them in coping with the negative effects of draught and other natural disasters. The latest donation amounts to 3.5 million USD in humanitarian aid through the WFP.[18]

"TIKA offices support development projects in their respective regions and from these three offices it operates in 37 countries in Africa"

Politically, Africa expects Turkey's support through its membership in several international organizations. For example, Turkey promised that if it gets elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the period of 2009-2010, it will pay special attention to African issues. Given that the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the UNDP have been headed by Turkish citizens, African countries also expect these forums to pay special attention to African issues and see its budding relations with Turkey in this light as an advantage for them.[19]

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[16] Mustafa Sahin, "Development Aid in African countries and TIKA" in *Common Strategic Vision Development Project Diplomatic Representatives of Turkey and African Countries, 3rd Workshop Final Report "Development Aid in African Countries and Turkish Civil Society Organizations",* Oguzhan Kose (ed), Istanbul, TASAM Yayinlari, Strategic Report No:22, December 2007, p.27.

[17] http://www.tika.gov.tr/TR/Icerik_Detay.ASP?Icerik=1034 (20 August 2008)

[18] "Turkey donates $3.5 Million for Africa, Africa-Turkey Summit to be held next week," http://allafrica.com/stories/200808130809.html (17 August 2008).

[19] See comments of the African Union Commission Chairperson Alfa Omer Konare, *Zaman*, 23 November 2005.

Policy Recommendations

Turkey has no colonial background in Africa, but does have cultural and religious ties dating back to the Ottoman period. This is an advantage for Turkey. However, a coherent and serious Turkish opening-up-to-Africa strategy should also consider following points:

1. Turkey should have different ways of considering and dealing with Africa and African issues. Africa is not one or united. A divisive and regional approach is necessary for success. In addition to North Africa, one can see four regions: south, central, west and east Africa. Each has different characteristics, mostly due to varying ethnic-religious compositions and colonial backgrounds.
2. A gateway country-based approach is also needed. In each region, there are some key countries; if possible, Turkey should pay special attention in developing bilateral relations with them without sidelining others. Tentatively, South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Senegal can be named. The more Turkey strengthens its relations with these key countries, the more it can feel secure in Africa.
3. The different colonial backgrounds of the countries in Africa play quite decisive roles in African politics. British, Francophone, Portuguese and Spanish Africa are all different in their ways of thinking and their approach to issues. This fact should be taken seriously while developing relations with each country.
4. There exist two types of leadership in Africa. One is represented by the older generation, those who led the processes of decolonization and independence for their countries. The other is the second generation: leaders after the independence. While the former are more or less inward-looking and suspicious of foreign help, the latter are for the most part forward-looking and willing to work with outside powers. Intensifying relations with the latter group could make Turkey's relations with Africa more meaningful and long-lasting.
5. Turkey has recently developed its relations with Africa at the institutional level, involving itself in such bodies as the African Union and Africa Development Bank. Ankara should continue to strengthen ties with the existing institutions in Africa (NEPAD, IGAD, SADC, ECOWAS, etc.) as part of its long-term policy. Turkey should envision and implement the Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit as a venue for forging a common, institutionalized form of Turkish-African relations.
6. Turkey's Africa policy should have global dynamics. Following on, and if possible participating in, such inter-continental groupings as the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA Dialogue Forum) is the best way to link relations with Africa and the world. This linkage could expand the

boundaries of relations between Turkey and Africa by adding an international dimension.

7. The most persistent issue looming between Turkey and Africa is the lack of information about the other on both sides. Three strategies could be implemented:

(a) Promote support for sending exchange students to studying in each other's countries and learn about each other. This will bridge the societal and informational gap.

(b) Exchange academics between universities. Especially in southern Africa, there is a lack of experts on the Middle East and Turkey, and the same is true for Turkey about Africa. Creating an African chair for African professors in one (or more) of the Turkish universities that offer education in English would be a good start. This might lead to an institute in the long run.

(c) Support cooperation between African and Turkish think-thanks. Organizing joint conferences and publications about both sides on Turkish and African issues would create awareness, equally important on both sides.