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BRIEFING

What drives Turkey's involvement in Africa?

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Until recently, it was inconceivable that Turkey might show a deep interest in Africa. Nor was it thinkable that a Turkish foreign minister would 'attach particular importance to Africa' within the context of new foreign policy, nor decide to open 15 new embassies in Africa in the next few years (Babacan 2008a). In 2008, Turkish President Abdullah Gul hosted the first ever Turkey–Africa Cooperation Summit from 18–21 August in Istanbul, with the participation of representatives from 50 African countries. Turkey currently has 20 embassies (eight of them opened in 2009) and 23 honorary consulates throughout Africa. On the other hand, only 13 African countries have resident embassies in Ankara, three of which have been opened recently. What has changed in less than a decade for Turkey to have decided to open new embassies in more countries than it already has over the whole continent? Is this a sign of a deep policy change toward Africa in Turkish foreign policy, or it is rather change in Africa that has influenced Turkey to take such an active stand in its relations with Africa? This brief article seeks to portray Turkey's involvement in Africa in economic and political terms. While Turkey has a relatively long history of relations with Africa, the new attempt

to develop relations with Africa is one that has borne fruit in a very short time, in terms of economic indicators. First, an historical background of the relations is outlined below. Second, underlying motives of Turkey's interest are explained, along with the benefits for Africa. Some remarks about how to further develop relations follow.

Historical background: past as future?

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 Turkish Republic in 1923, during which the Ottomans had considerable relations with Africa. The period from 1923 to 1998 can be seen as one where Turkish–Africa relations were at their lowest level, if they even existed. Since 1998, with the acceptance of the Africa Action plan, there has been a revival in Turkey's interest in Africa. Although initially this was a passive approach, after 2005 it turned into an active interest in developing relations with Africa.

Historically, Turkish relations with Africa go back several centuries. Some African countries, such as Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia and even Niger and Chad, were to a greater or lesser extent a part of the Ottoman state. During the wave of colonialism, the Ottoman Empire

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was in eastern Africa to check Portuguese colonialism. In North Africa, the Ottomans played an important role in preventing Spanish penetration. In the northern part of sub-Saharan Africa, the Ottomans were a part of the balance of power, with friendship and an alliance with the Kanem-Bornu Empire that prevailed in modern-day northern Nigeria, Niger and Chad. The Kanem-Bornu Empire even signed a defence pact with the Ottoman Empire in 1575, during the time of Murad III. The Ottoman Empire sent military equipment and trainers to Kanem-Bornu (Kavas 2005, 2006).

Regarding southern Africa, the Ottoman Empire sent an imam to the Muslims of the Cape of Good Hope (now in South Africa) in 1863 upon the request of the Muslim community through Britain, as the area was ruled by Britain. With the arrival of Abu Bakr Effendi, strong links were built between the Muslims of the Cape of Good Hope and Turkey as a result of his contribution to South Africa. The Muslims of South Africa had actively participated in the Hejaz railway construction campaigns, raised funds and collected at least £366,551 between 1900 and 1907 (Kologlu 1995, pp. 220–222). The Ottoman state distributed more than 200 medals in gold, silver and nickel to those who contributed to the funds (Argun 2005).

After the establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey–Africa relations became much less active. However, during the cold-war era, Turkey slowly started to attach importance to Africa. In 1956, Turkey opened its first official mission, the Turkish General Consulate in Lagos, and recognised all newly independent countries (Karaca 2000, p. 116). During the cold war, when decolonisation took place in Africa, Turkey missed the opportunity to develop relations with Africa, even though it had designed a plan in the 1970s as part of an attempt to diversify its foreign policy.

Until recently, modern Turkey paid little attention to African affairs, and this remained the general picture until about 1998. In 1998, Turkey adopted a new document entitled the ‘Opening up to Africa Policy’. In this framework, Turkey hoped to further develop its political, economic and cultural ties with African countries in the subsequent period. The Africa Policy was made up of several areas, such as developing diplomatic relations, and political, economic, and cultural co-operation. In the diplomatic area, it was suggested that the level of diplomatic representation in Africa be upgraded. Under economic measures, it was proposed that Turkey should conclude trade agreements with African countries and encourage exchange visits by businesspeople between Turkey and African countries. This was the accepted plan for relations with Africa. However, lack of logistics and domestic instability, followed by the severe economic crisis in Turkey in 2000 to 2001, prevented Turkey from implementing its Africa action plan until the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) assumed power in 2002.

In a real sense, Turkey’s opening up to Africa took effect only in 2005, when Turkey announced its ‘year of Africa’, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Ethiopia and South Africa in March 2005 as the first Turkish prime minister officially visiting a country south of the equator. At the same time, Turkey enhanced its relations at the institutional level with Africa. Turkey obtained observer status with the African Union on 12 April 2005, and had its embassy in Ethiopia accredited with the African Union on 5 May 2005. The African Union Summit held in Addis Ababa in January 2008 declared Turkey a ‘strategic partner’. Currently the African Union has strategic partnerships with Japan, India, Iran, South Korea, South America, the European Union (EU) and China. Requests from

Canada and the United States are still under discussion.

Turkey's interest in Africa: why now?

The basic reason for Turkey's interest in Africa lies in the reorientation of Turkish foreign policy within global politics. The main architect behind such a reorientation is the current foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu (Aras 2009). Since his participation in foreign-policy formulation, first as chief advisor to the prime minister (2002–2009) and then as foreign minister (since May 2009), Turkey has diversified its foreign relations by developing economic and political ties with the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Africa as well as pushing for entry to the EU. According to Davutoglu, one of the basic principles of the new Turkish foreign policy is to have 'compatible global relations' in foreign policy (Davutoglu 2009, p. 12). As the international system is no longer bipolar, Davutoglu considers that good relations with any other region as distinct from the EU are beneficial. Rather than Turkey changing its direction away from the Western world, this is where Turkey's opening up to Africa finds its place in the new foreign-policy formulation. From this perspective, Turkey sees its relations with Africa not as a short-term move, but rather as a part of its reorientation in the changing global political economy.

As mentioned above, Turkey's opening to Africa dates back to 1998. However its push to open the door to Africa was 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 organised between 18 and 21 August 2008 and attended by representatives from 50 countries. Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique were absent, but Morocco was also

represented, although not a member of the African Union due to a dispute on the recognition of Western Sahara.

Turkey under the AKP administration brought a new vision to its Africa initiative (Safak 2008), and certainly aims to fill the gap which emerged after nearly a century of neglect. To make up for lost time and accelerate relations between Turkey and Africa, the summit provided the venue to increase bilateral contacts and search for new ways of developing relations (Idiz 2008). In that sense, the Turkish president said in a press conference that he 'had bilateral talks with heads of delegations of 42 countries within the scope of the summit' (Worldbulletin.net, 20 August 2008). Similarly, the bilateral meetings of Prime Minister Erdogan would give an impetus in developing relations with Africa in the years to come. The importance of those bilateral meeting cannot be overestimated, in the sense that a Turkish president and prime minister had met delegations from some African countries perhaps for the first time, and no high-level meeting of such a nature had previously taken place 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 were expected to help both sides to get acquainted and improve problems such as visa requirements for Turkish citizens when visiting many African countries.

In terms of high-level participation at the Summit, among those present were six African presidents, some from small African countries such as Comoros and Equatorial Guinea, and the controversial Sudanese leader Omer Al-Bashir, five vice-presidents, six prime ministers and a deputy prime minister. The other countries were represented either by their foreign ministers or by senior-level representatives. The lack of high-level representation and interest from South Africa, influential as it is in African affairs, is a clear indication that Turkey's African opening is not clear

in Africans' minds in terms of its benefits to Africa. Turkey's overemphasis on trade in relations with Africa is an issue, but what Africa really gets from this partnership is open to question, at least in the minds of many African people.¹ Turkey needs to explain and find new ways of achieving a 'win-win' situation to get serious and influential African players to develop relations with it. Unless this is achieved, the future Turkey–Africa Summits might only be an arena where Turkish and African leaders come together for different purposes rather than creating a serious, long-term partnership benefiting both parties.

Driving motives: more economy and less politics

Turkey's trade volume with African countries was only US\$5.4 billion in 2003, and it increased more than twofold, exceeding US\$16 billion in 2008 (see Table 1). Yet, considering that Turkey's total trade volume with the world is almost US\$300 billion, the current trade volume with Africa is not significant. Turkey's target is to reach a trade volume of US\$30 billion with Africa by the end of 2010 (Babacan 2008b).

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 US\$18 billion. In addition, the amount of Turkish direct investments in African countries exceeded US\$500 million and is expected to increase in future (Babacan 2008b). Turkey became the twenty-fifth non-regional member of the African Development Bank in May 2008. This membership is expected to open new areas of co-operation. Turkey's membership of the African Development Bank could enable contracting firms from Turkey to undertake large infrastructure projects in the continent.

Besides developing economic relations, Turkey has also political expectations from the Turkey–Africa Summit in the short and long run. In the short run, Turkey needed the support of African countries, as it was one of the three candidates for the non-permanent seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council in October 2008. Apparently, Turkey appears to have obtained its immediate goal, as Turkish President Gul confidently spoke that African countries fully supported Turkey's candidacy, and the result of the election in September 2008 held by the UN General Assembly indicated that Turkey received 151 votes (Kirecci 2009). In the long run, Turkey hopes to co-operate with African countries in international forums such as at the UN and exchange views on regional and global issues. To lay the ground for the co-operation in the long run, it was decided that a Turkey–Africa Summit should be organised every five years and that an African country would host the second Turkey–Africa Summit in 2013 (worldbulletin.net, 20 August 2008). 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 co-operate to establish the Turkish–African Chamber for furthering commercial relations (*Zaman*, 21 August 2008).

What benefit for Africa?

Apart from increasing trade between Turkey and Africa as both sides benefit, 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) has been transformed into a more global aid agency and expanded its area of operations since 2003. The most notable aspect has been the expansion of its activities in Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (Fidan

Table 1. Turkey's overall trade with Africa (1997–2008) (in US\$ millions).

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Exports												
North Africa	980	1.502	1.344	1.087	1.150	1.267	1.577	2.203	2.544	3.097	4.030	5.850
Sub-Saharan Africa	253	316	311	285	371	430	554	765	1.087	1.469	1.947	3.212
Total	1.234	1.818	1.655	1.373	1.521	1.697	2.131	2.968	3.631	4.566	5.976	9.062
Imports												
North Africa	1.813	1.493	1.404	2.257	2.115	2.138	2.519	3.231	4.212	4.878	3.616	5.267
Sub-Saharan Africa	385	265	283	457	704	558	820	1.589	1.835	2.526	3.168	2.503
Total	2.197	1.758	1.687	2.714	2.819	2.696	3.338	4.820	6.047	7.405	6.784	7.770

Source: Turkish PM, website of the Undersecretary of Foreign Trade: <http://www.dtm.gov.tr> (Accessed 20 January 2009).

and Nurdun 2008, p. 100). TIKA currently has three offices in Africa, namely in Ethiopia, Sudan and Senegal. TIKA supports development projects, and from these three offices is operating in 37 countries in Africa.

In 2005, TIKA had 45 development projects or other activities in the Middle East and Africa. However, in 2006 this increased to 150, an increase of 333% (Sahin 2007, p. 27).² More specifically TIKA implemented 24 projects and activities in Africa in 2006. Of these projects, 19 were in Ethiopia, four in Sudan, and one in Nigeria (TIKA 2008). TIKA's projects and activities in Africa are designed to serve long-term objectives, such as the development of social infrastructure, cultural co-operation and communication, production sectors, economic infrastructure, and to a lesser extent provide support in urgent and humanitarian situations (Sahin 2007, p. 27). As part of this long-term policy orientation, in 2008 TIKE initiated an African Agricultural Development Programme in order to help develop agriculture in Africa. According to TIKA's president, Musa Kulaklikaya, this project was for the period 2008–10, and for implementation in 13 African countries: Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal, Comoros, Madagascar, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda (TIKA 2008).

In general, TIKA's development strategy in Africa is based on technical assistance, sharing experience in areas such as agriculture and technology transfer in order to bridge the gap between the developed and underdeveloped countries. Such efforts are also supported by health, education and infrastructure projects.³ In the long run, with the opening of new Turkish embassies all over the continent, an increase can be expected in the number of TIKA offices and activities in Africa. There are signs that African nations are interested especially in Turkey's agricultural expertise. For example, during the Istanbul summit of the Union of African Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Agriculture and Professions (UACCIAP), President Mohamed El Masry noted that the causes of Africa's current food crisis were not well understood in many Western nations; but as Turkey's agriculture sector had experience in raising food under adverse conditions, co-operation utilising Turkish agricultural expertise could prove invaluable (quoted in Daly 2008).

Turkey has allocated US\$50 million to development projects in African countries over the next five years. It has also donated US\$7.5 million to various African countries via international organisations such as the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Red Crescent to assist them in coping with the negative effects of

drought and other natural disasters. In 2008, Turkey donated US\$3.5 million in humanitarian aid through the WFP (allafri-ca.com 2008), while in 2009 it made a modest donation of US\$0.5 million to the African Union budget (AUC News 2009). In a similar vein, in 2007 Turkey for the first time hosted a summit of the least-developed countries (LDCs) in Istanbul, 33 of which are in Africa, out of the total 49. In this summit, Turkey committed US\$20 million in development aid for their use. Turkey will also host the fourth conference on LDCs in the first half of 2011 (worldbulletin.net 2010).

Active participation in the fight against poverty, and increasing development and humanitarian aid are both part of Turkey's new foreign policy and international image. The more actively Turkey engages in regional and global affairs, the more often Turkey's involvement can be seen in deep-seated problems such as poverty alleviation. TIKA and Turkish civil society organisations have been active for a long time in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Balkans. Turkish aid to Africa is an extension of such activities. However, it should be noted here that some Turkish NGOs already have a long history of involvement in Africa. One example is Istanbul-based IHH (the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief) through its projects and activities since 1996.⁴ What we see today is an official state involvement in terms of sending developmental aid to Africa as part of Turkey's developing relations with the continent.

Politically, Africa may expect Turkey's support through several international organisations. For example, Turkey is interested in bringing Africa to international attention and indicated its help for this purpose.⁵ When Turkish President Gul visited Kenya and Tanzania in February 2009, he pointed out that all but two African countries⁶ had supported Turkey's candidacy in 2008 for a two-year, non-

permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Thus 'the Turkish Republic will be the spokesman for Africa at the UN. It will support Africa on all of its issues' (*Today's Zaman*, 24 February 2009). This type of expression of solidarity has been frequent since the 2008 Turkey–Africa Summit in the speeches of Turkish leaders. For example, in a recent statement President Gul once again made clear that 'everyone should show an undivided interest in Africa without losing time. [In that sense] Turkey indicates its responsibility towards Africa' (Gul 2009). As the Organisation of the Islamic Conference is headed by a Turkish citizen, African countries may also expect this forum to pay special attention to African issues and see this as an advantage for them.⁷

Challenges for the future

Turkey has no colonial background in Africa, but has cultural and religious ties dating back to the Ottoman period. This is an advantage for Turkey. However, a coherent and serious Turkish opening-up of strategy and a receptive African response should consider following points, which may define the nature and speed of future relations between the two. First of all, the most persistent issue between Turkey and Africa is the lack of information on both sides about each other. Three strategies could be implemented: (1) promoting student exchanges for study in and about each other's countries to bridge the societal and informational gap; (2) exchanging academics between universities as especially in southern Africa there is a lack of expertise on the Middle East and Turkey, while same is true for Turkey about Africa. Creating an African chair for African professors in one (or more) of the Turkish universities that teach in English might be a good start, and might in the long run lead to an institute; (3) co-operation between African and Turkish think tanks to organise joint conferences and publications on Turkish and

African issues, to create the awareness that is needed on both sides.

It is well known that until recently, modern Turkey paid no attention to African affairs (Kavas 2005, p. 17), and Africa is known in Turkey through televised images of hunger, poverty, AIDS and other negative elements. Partly because of this, there is little credible information about Africa not only in academia but also in government circles. As an academic subject, African issues have long been taught only within the larger context of world political history, and it was almost impossible to find an expert on the continent or a basic textbook or article. However, over the past decade and a half, Turkish policy makers have carefully shaped an African dimension to Turkey's foreign policy that is increasingly involved in a dizzying range of sectors from trade to transport, health to humanitarian aid.

Turkey's opening to Africa is a result of both Turkey's domestic transformation, and of the change in the global political economy. Turkey's domestic transformation has challenged the traditional Turkish partners in the economy and aimed at diversifying its trade alternatives in line with change in the global political-economy power configuration. Change in the international system has led countries to define their own interest in a newly emerging system. Turkey's response to such changes has been to define a multidimensional foreign policy and developing economic and political relations, with not only immediate neighbours but also other regions and continents: Turkey's Africa opening is part and parcel of this new redefinition of Turkish foreign policy.

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Notes

1. Just before the Turkey–Africa Summit, TASAM, the Turkish Asian Center for Strategic Studies, organised a Turkish–Africa civil society organisation (CSO) forum from 14 to 16 August 2008 in Istanbul, attended by 90 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from 45 African countries. When the future of Turkey–Africa relations was discussed on the first day, three participants from different African countries asked the same question: what Africa would gain from this partnership? This question should be taken seriously. (Author's notes from the Forum, 14 August 2008, Istanbul.)
2. In the original text, the increase was calculated and written as 233%. This is certainly a miscalculation.
3. For details of the projects in Africa, see *TIKA Faaliyet Raporu 2008*, Ankara: TIKa, 2009.
4. Personal communication with Durmus Aydin, IHH Head of Foreign Relations, 15 April 2010. For its activities in Africa see its official website, www.ihh.org.tr/154/en/
5. In this context, a francophone perspective on the issue is worth noting: 'Old Ottoman friends, new Voice of Africâ?', 16 April 2009. Available from: <http://www.lesafriques.net/international/old-ottoman-friend-new-voice-of-africa.html?Itemid=35?articleid=0240> (Accessed 6 January 2009).
6. Reportedly South Africa and Mozambique.
7. See comments of the African Union Commission Chairperson Alfa Omer Konare, *Zaman*, 23 November 2005.

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