

➤ Turkey's Religious and Socio-Political Depth in Africa

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Until recently, it was almost unimaginable that religious symbols would become increasingly visible in Turkish embassies, especially those in Africa. When an academic delegation visited the Embassy of Turkey in Dar-as-Salaam, Tanzania in January 2013, one object in particular stood out at the embassy's entrance: a glass decoration with the word *Allah* (God) written on it in Arabic. Its highly visible location made it impossible to miss. Similarly, when an unofficial observation mission visited Bamako, Mali, in July 2012, the Turkish ambassador extended the observers an invitation to his residence to celebrate the first day of *Ramadan*.

What do these stories say about Turkey's foreign policy in Africa? While these experiences are generally uncommon in the embassies of Turkey throughout the world, these particular occurrences demonstrate the unique side of Ankara's involvement in Africa. They indicate that Ankara's involvement in the continent has more dimensions than those related to economic relations and humanitarian aid. Africa features prominently and represents a novel dimension of Turkish foreign policy. In particular, Turkey's active involvement in Somalia has highlighted its position as a new player on the continent. However, contextualising Turkish involvement — both at the state and NGO level — requires a broader perspective in order to make understand and measure the possible influence of its involvement in Somalia and the continent. Humanitarian and development aid, along with a significant interest in trade development, have been the main pillars of this new policy. However, religion is another key — and to some extent a legitimising — element of this involvement. Aside from state institutions like the Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), Turkish NGOs like the Human Right and Freedoms Humanitarian Aid Foundation (IHH) and the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists of Turkey (TUSKON) also actively contribute to Turkey-Africa relations. Ankara's involvement in Somalia and other African countries indicates its interest in becoming a 'political' player in the continent (and not only in economic terms) in years to come. This interest stems from its engagement so far and from an increasing desire to influence structural issues.

AID AND TRADE: THE MOST ARTICULATED ELEMENTS

Aid and trade comprise the most visible elements of Turkey's relations with Africa. They are also the most articulated and most popularised element in the official discourse. The year 2005 marked a turning point in Turkey's relations with Africa as Turkey obtained observer status in the African Union (and later became a strategic partner in January 2008). In May 2008, Turkey joined the African Development Bank and strengthened its relations with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in East Africa and the Economic Community of West African States. The Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey has established business councils as part of Ankara's attempts to increase business activities with Africa. Indeed, Turkish opening to Africa is underwritten by soaring bilateral trade.

Turkey's trade volume with African countries has increased from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to \$16 billion in 2008 and, despite the economic crisis, to \$17 billion in 2012. Yet, the current trade volume with Africa countries is insignificant compared to Turkey's total trade volume with the rest of the world. Turkey aims to increase trade volume with Africa to around \$50 billion by 2015.¹

The socio-political and aid dimensions of Turkey-Africa relations have always supported each other. As a member of the OECD, Turkey is both a provider and recipient of international assistance. The OECD lists Turkey as a non-DAC (Development Assistance Committee) donor. Turkey closely follows the agenda set by the Paris Declaration and has adopted a programme-based approach to aid delivery. This is why Turkey participated in the 4th High Level Forum in Busan in 2011.

Numerous NGOs have played a crucial role in Turkey's presence and relations in Africa in a development and social dimension. Since 2002, the Justice and Development Party (known as the AK Party or AKP) has given the Opening Up to Africa Plan, first proposed in 1998, serious attention. Several NGOs such as TUSKON and the IHH have also helped implement the plan. In 2005, Turkey declared 'The Year of Africa' and made the according diplomatic, political and economic preparations.

Among the many Turkish NGOs operating in Africa, the most active are TUSKON and the IHH. Through the World Trade Bridge meetings and other means, TUSKON has pioneered in bringing African businessmen to Turkey and encouraging Turkish businesses to expand to Africa. These meetings have taken place without interruption since 2006 with increasing participation each year. TUSKON also sends delegations to Africa to examine investment opportunities.

The IHH is one of the leading humanitarian aid organisations in Turkey. Along with its developmental work in 43 African countries, it has helped thousands of people to gain eye-sight with its Cataract Project conducted in hospitals in Sudan and elsewhere. It also has well-drilling projects and supports technical and vocational education by setting up schools and hospitals.

Turkey's state-level humanitarian involvement and leadership in Africa gained much visibility when drought and famine began to have dire consequences in east Africa. On 19 August 2011, Prime Minister Erdogan visited Somalia, arguably the worst affected country, to draw international attention to its dismal situation. The first leader from outside Africa to visit Somalia in nearly two decades, Erdogan brought his wife, daughter and an entourage consisting of cabinet members and their families, and visited refugee camps and hospitals to witness the devastation caused by the severe drought. Erdogan brought the issue to the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2011 and called on the international community to undertake a continued approach to finding a long-lasting solution. Turkey has also opened an embassy in Mogadishu and taken several measures to help Somalia improve its infrastructure, such as building wells, a major hospital and six field hospitals, a highway from Mogadishu Airport to the city centre and facilities for waste management. Additionally, as a result of the 2001 visit, the Housing Development Administration of Turkey has pledged to build houses and schools in the near future. Time will tell whether Turkish involvement in Somalia will bring any peace and stability remains, but it has already elevated Turkey to 'a new humanitarian aid power' in Africa.² Turkey's role in Somalia also points to a rising involvement in Africa more generally and to a shift in its focus toward the political aspects of the continent's problems.

1 'Turkish PM Erdogan Sees \$50 Billion in African Trade,' *Hurriyet Daily*, 7 January, 2013.

2 Ali Abdurahman, 'Turkey's Foray into Africa: A New Humanitarian Power?' *Insight Turkey*, 13 (2011): 65-73.

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) until recently maintained three offices in Africa, in Addis Ababa, Khartoum and Dakar. In 2011, it opened offices in Mogadishu and Tripoli, and in 2012 in Nairobi, Cairo and Tunisia. These offices function mostly as regional bureaus for supervising projects in surrounding countries. TIKA currently has projects in over 37 African countries, and they are mostly related to educational, health and agricultural areas. Turkey's total overseas development aid reached around \$102 million in 2010, and it grew by more than 50 percent in the following year to \$156.4 million.³

DIPLOMACY: INSTITUTIONALISATION OF DEEPENING RELATIONS

The political dimension of Turkey-Africa relations has generated less of an interest thus far. However, as the case of Somalia demonstrates, interest in 'political' issues is rising. A brief categorisation may help to better contextualise the political dimension.

Turkey's active foreign policy towards Africa falls into three main periods. The first period spans from the adoption of the Africa Plan in Turkey in 1998 to the announcement of 'The Year of Africa' in 2005. During this time, Turkey spent most of its energy on developing the diplomatic infrastructure and preparing for better structured Turkey-Africa relations. Throughout the second period, from 2005 to 2011, Turkey aimed to deepen relations with Africa at every level. Turkey's role as an observer and strategic partner with the African Union, and in the Turkey-Africa Summit in 2008, has helped deepen institutional relations. Trade volume between Turkey and Africa has increased. Furthermore, the involvement of Turkish civil society has helped establish a better framework where both Turkey and Africa benefit from these relations. Turkey's involvement in Somalia and its leading role in shedding light on the plight of Somalis marked the beginning of the third period of relations in 2011. In this current period, activities of Ankara will prove crucial not only as a 'litmus test'⁴ as to whether or not Turkey will manage to use its accumulated power for the benefit of Africa and for problem-solving, but also as an indication of Turkey's real influence — in the political dimension — on the continent.

Very much in line with its interest to become a 'political' actor, Ankara has shown an eagerness to find solutions to Africa's persistent problems. Turkey hosted the 2nd Somalia conference, entitled 'Preparing Somalia's Future: Goals for 2015', in cooperation with the UN between 21 May and 1 June 2012 in Istanbul. Fifty-seven countries and 11 regional and international organisations attended the conference. Partnership forums met to discuss issues such as water, energy, roads and secessionism. The conference demarcated the pathway to Somalia's rebirth and put forth a comprehensive five point plan for rebuilding the failed state. The five points included constructing national unity, establishing a new political system, comprehensively restructuring the economy, rebuilding Somali national forces and lifting the country from isolation.⁵ Turkey's Somalia involvement continues and its deputy prime minister and various ministers frequently make visits to follow up on projects. Somalia has to some extent become somewhat of a 'domestic' issue for Turkish government and society.

Turkey's political interest in Africa has also prompted a diplomatic expansion. Turkey has increased its number of embassies on the continent from 12 in 2002 to 34 in 2012. African countries have also proved responsive to Turkey's interest in developing political relations. After Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo opened new embassies in Ankara in 2011, Angola, Kenya, Djibouti, Niger, South Sudan and Ghana followed suit in 2012. Currently, 21 African embassies operate in Ankara, and the embassies of Benin and Republic of the Congo are in the process of opening. Twelve more African countries have indicated their willingness to open embassies in Ankara in the next years. If this is realised, Africa will have 35 embassies in Turkey.

3 Ahmet Davutoglu, *2013 Yılına Girerken Dış Politikamız* (Ankara: Disisleri Bakanlığı, 2012), 95-96.

4 Erdogan argued that the case of Somalia is a 'litmus test' for the international community. See 'BM'ye Somali albümü,' *Sabah*, 23 August, 2011.

5 'United Somalia a Must: Davutoglu,' *Al Shahid*, 10 December, 2012.

Ankara's involvement in Africa has also caught the attention of international actors that have expressed an interest in cooperating with Turkey. The international dimension of Turkey's Africa opening has steadily developed as Turkey makes inroads into the continent. In 2012, Turkish leaders held political consultations with the leaders of the US, Spain, the UK, Sweden, Norway, Italy and the EU. Some countries like France have even suggested that Turkey and the EU should team up for joint trade missions to Africa in order to counter China's growing power in winning African contracts.⁶

ISLAMIC SOLIDARITY: ENGINE BEHIND THE SCENE

Religion and history comprise subtle but highly important elements of Turkey-Africa relations, and religion may even have a legitimising role. This is valid both at state and societal level. The Directorate for Religious Affairs in Turkey until recently did not have a role in foreign policy and focused solely on the domestic religious needs of Muslims. With the change toward a multidimensional approach to foreign policy, religion has become one of Turkey's soft power elements, and especially so in Africa.

Diyamet now brings together African religious leaders in Istanbul. The first Religious Leaders Meeting of African Continent Muslim Countries and Societies took place in November 2006 and brought together representatives from 21 countries.⁷ Turkey, a constitutionally secular state, had until recent times refrained from participating in Islamic or religious meetings, let alone from organising such meetings domestically. This began to change after the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP) assumed power in 2002. Turkey has since then actively participated in the activities of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Turkish citizen Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu has held the post of secretary-general since 2004). Turkey's hosting of African religious leaders in Istanbul relates directly to two paradigmatic shifts in Turkish foreign policy. First, Turkey softened its approach toward religious-based organisations and meetings, seeing these as opportunities to further Turkish national interests through soft power instruments. Secondly, Turkey understood that completing and sustaining its opening to Africa required a religious dimension. This also relates to Africa's Ottoman past, as evidenced by the fact that almost all religious leaders at the meeting positively emphasised their countries' Ottoman legacy and affirmed their wishes to restore it.⁸

Diyamet organised a second meeting in Istanbul and Ankara in November 2011. At this meeting, Muslim religious authorities from Africa called on Turkey to take on a greater role in Islamic education in African communities. They urged in a joint declaration that 'educational institutions similar to the Imam-Hatip schools in Turkey should be used as an example for schools in Africa and backed with faculties providing higher religious education like [Turkey's] theology faculties'.⁹

On a broader level, *Diyamet* also hopes to contribute to the development of religious education and to a quality environment for praying in Africa, and has established mosques to this end. Religion has thus become a most distinctive aspect of Turkey's involvement in Africa. It has made Turkey unique in comparison to other emerging actors, as its policy extends beyond the humanitarian and economic fields.

Many Turkish civil society organisations operating in Africa also employ religion to legitimise and motivate their activities. Traditional religious groups such as the Hüdayi Foundation, the Gülen Movement and *Suleymançılar* actively promote projects in Africa. They generally focus on the educational field, most commonly religious schools, high schools and vocational schools that emphasise education.

6 'France Seeks Turkey as Trade Ally in Africa,' *EU Business*, 8 February, 2011, <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/france-turkey-china.6v4/>.

7 Deniz Faik and Serhat Orakci, 'Afrika Kitasi Musluman Ulke ve Topluluklari Dini Liderler Toplantisi,' *BSV Bulten* 62 (2006).

8 *Final Communiqué*, 1-3 November 2006, <http://www.diyamet.gov.tr/turkish/bildiri.asp?id=123>.

9 'Africa seeks Turkish Islamic Education,' *Hurriyet Daily*, 24 November, 2011.

The Hüdayi Foundation has a particular focus on family, society and education issues. It has offices in nine African countries, mostly located in central and west Africa, from where it manages operations in over 40 countries in the continent. Education comprises its main activity. It runs Imam-Hatip schools, religious schools and colleges where graduates can work as teachers. The schools in Africa are modelled after their Turkish counterparts with minor differences, such as the language of instruction (French) and some other local elements.¹⁰

Suleymancılar, a religious group composed of students and followers of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1959), also engages in Africa. Its activities have increased since the late 1990s and centre on students' Islamic education. Still, the details and the scope of its activities remain almost unknown as it tends to stay out of the public eye.

Another very active religious group in Africa is the Gülen network or *Cemaat*. This worldwide movement is inspired by the moderate Islamic teachings of Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen, whose writings read like a virtuous power doctrine as they emphasise altruism, tolerance and education. The Gülen movement has links with more than 1,000 schools around the world. Schools operated by adherents of Gülen's teachings began to spring up across sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1990s. Africa has become a priority area for the Gülen movement in the past decade as it aims to expand its network. While the movement at first opened only secular schools, it has begun to open Imam-Hatip schools in the past several years.

With the maturation of democracy at home, Turkey's rise in Africa has predominantly focused on economic and political dimensions. Turkey is now moving to a new direction for making its presence felt in other fields, such as education, as part of its active foreign policy. Educational systems close to those of France or the UK had been considered the best in Africa since the colonial period. While these systems worked well in Christianity-dominated societies, they did not work as well in Muslim-dominated countries that required alternative educational facilities for children to learn about Islam. This process led to competing parallel educational systems. In this regard, Imam-Hatip schools have proven successful in bridging the gap between religious and scientific teachings.¹¹

It is important to clarify why almost all Islamic groups seek to open Imam-Hatip schools in Africa and elsewhere. First, it is a Turkish educational system that teaches students Islamic studies and modern sciences. This makes it unique because it does not operate like *madradas*, which only teach Islamic studies. Second, the system is widely accepted as the best available educational system in the Islamic world for creating a new generation that remains pious but that is more tolerant, interactive and moderate in its readings of the world.

Additionally, Imam-Hatip schools have helped export a modern educational system from a non-western country. While time will test their impact, it is safe to say that Turkey's social and religious role in Africa in part depends on the success of these educational institutions.

10 This is based on the author's personal observation in several countries and on limited information on the website. For example, see the travel notes of the chairman on Africa, <http://www.hudayivakfi.org/ayin-makalesi/183-afrika-seyahat-notlari.html>.

11 For more on Imam-Hatip Schools see İren Özgür, *Islamic Schools in Modern Turkey: Faith, Politics, and Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

CONCLUSION: WHAT MAKES TURKEY UNIQUE?

Turkey has proven unique in comparison to other actors in Africa for several reasons. First, it has a distinctive way of providing aid, as it has aimed to create long term and developmental projects ranging from infrastructure to education. Second, religion has played an important legitimising element and is an area in which westerners and others may not have the chance to enter. Religion also generates a certain 'trust' in Turks and Turkey's activities.¹² Third, Turkish schools have mushroomed as educating future generations has become critical for the continent's ability to stand on its own. In this sense, one can compare Turkish schools to the missionary educational institutions of the late 19th and 20th centuries, which produced many activists, intellectuals, presidents and leaders. Educational activities in particular will likely generate change and even shape the social dynamics of the continent in coming years.

Domestically, Turkey's opening to Africa has served as the best expression of domestic peace. It is an area of Turkish foreign policy that has produced virtually no disagreement between the state, civil society and the business sector. Moreover, it has not produced much divergence or demands for justification from the general public.

Aside from this unique aspect, in the long run Turkey's social-political depth and persistence depends not only on its increasing trade with the continent but also on its ability to contribute to finding solutions to Africa's problems, as it did in Somalia. If Turkey's close attention to Somalia transforms into a clear attempt to bring peace and success to Somalia, it would certainly leave the category shared by India, China and Brazil, which sees Africa solely from an economic point of view, and join the category shared by the US, France and the UK, which sees Africa from an economic and political point of view. Turkey's experience in Somalia is not only an important test of Turkey-Somalia relations, but also of its opening strategy across Africa. Success or failure will shape and affect Turkey's overall Africa initiative, and how Africans and others will view Turkey in coming years. ■

¹² The best expression of this is Ankara's involvement in Somalia. See Besir El-Bekri, 'Türkiye'nin Somali ile ilgili bilmesi gerekenler,' *DunyaBulteni*, 9 March, 2013, <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/?aType=yazarHaber&ArticleID=18936>.