

A Post-2014 Vision for Turkey-Africa Relations

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ABSTRACT *Turkey's foreign policy in Africa has achieved more than what initially has been planned as Opening to Africa in the last decade. A new post-2014 vision for Africa is necessity for variety of reasons including the tiredness among some segments of society and some state institutions. This article outlines the challenges for his vision and put forward some ideas for the future of Turkey-Africa relations. The underlying point is that time has come for partnership with other actor in Africa to deepen further the relations.*

The Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government's Africa policy represents hands down the most successful aspect of Turkish foreign policy over the past decade. The Africa initiative, whose origins date back to 1998 and was implemented as of 2002, promises to become a lasting element of the nation's foreign policy for its content and potential repercussions. In recent years, the Turkish government's interest toward the African continent expanded into the domain of humanitarian assistance and economic relations. The nation's active involvement in Somalia, in particular, received great attention from across the continent and contribut-

ed to the consolidation of Turkey's position in Africa. Thus far, closer economic cooperation, coupled with large amounts of development aid and humanitarian assistance, has formed the basis of this new approach. Various government agencies and non-governmental organizations have been actively contributing to the nation's relations with the African continent. Meanwhile, the Turkish authorities' take on Somalia and other nations indicates that Ankara will represent not only an economic power but a political ally. Still, the time has come to analyze Turkey's African policy between 2002 and 2014, and engage the question of future steps.

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The Past Decade's Achievements

The success that Turkey has found in the African continent represents an impressive achievement. At a time when Middle Eastern issues represent the top priority for the international community, the country has effectively nurtured its political, economic and socio-cultural ties with Africa and gradually established itself as a long-term stakeholder.

Over the past five years, Turkey has significantly expanded its diplomatic network in the continent by launching twenty-seven new embassies and increasing the total number of its embassies to thirty-nine along with four consulates. The number of African diplomatic missions in Ankara, in turn, rose from sixteen to thirty-two during the same period. High-level official visits continue to take place in an increasingly frequent manner.

Since 2004, the annual trade volume between Turkey and the African continent rose from \$5.5 billion to \$20 billion. By the end of 2015, the Turkish government aims to further increase the trade volume to \$50 billion. At this point, the total amount of Turkish investments in Africa has broken the six-billion-dollar mark

while several dozen international agreements have been signed in order to promote commercial and economic cooperation and to establish bilateral business councils. Meanwhile, Turkish Airlines continues to operate direct flights to 46 destinations in 28 African countries.

Turkish authorities, furthermore, remain aware of the importance of humanitarian assistance in its relations with the African continent.¹ In line with this policy, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has established representation offices in 11 countries to provide grants to the most disadvantaged nations. Meanwhile, the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities has covered, and continues to cover, the costs of education in Turkish universities for hundreds of African students. Such developments contribute to the African continent's perception as an important component of Turkish foreign policy among the nation's executives.

The Second Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit, which took place on 19-20 November 2014 in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, established that Turkey's Africa policy has entered a new era. The event not only showed that Turkish-African relations entered a natural process but also addressed the doubts of both sides regarding the seriousness and future of the ties. As such, it was an important development that the parties signed a joint action plan for 2014-2019 and decided to elevate the level of the relations to strategic partnership.

The African continent represents a geographic area where Turkey's new foreign policy was best implemented and proved to be effective. With the notable exceptions of the 2013 attack on the Turkish Embassy in Mogadishu, Somalia and the fatal shooting of a Turkish Airlines official, it would not be wrong to suggest that the Justice and Development Party government's foreign policy became extremely successful in Africa. Furthermore, Turkey's Africa policy made serious contributions to making the country more relevant and visible in the international area.

The African Initiative, whose official action plan dates back to 1998, could not launch until four years later due to political and economic factors, when the Justice and Development Party government replaced a three-party coalition.² The project's development since 2002 can be examined in five parts.

Five Periods in Turkey's African Initiative

The period between the Justice and Development Party's rise to power in 2002 and the designation of 2005 as the Year of Africa represented a preliminary stage of Turkey's foreign policy towards Africa. It was during these years that initial assessments of Africa's potential were made and Turkish officials held lower-level meetings with their African counterparts. When, as a sign of the success of this process of deliberation, Turkey designated the year 2005 as the Year

of Africa, African governments were not taken by surprise. At the same time, the move represented an unmistakable sign of Turkey's commitment to building stronger relations with Africa.

The second chapter, which started in 2005 and ended with the First Turkey-Africa Summit three years later, marked a period of more diverse relations in a range of areas, including politics and the economy. During this period, Turkish-African relations made more progress than the Turkish authorities had initially predicted while both sides became more familiar with their counterparts.

The third chapter began with the 2008 summit and continued until then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's August 2011 visit to the Somali capital. This was when Turkish-African relations assumed a multi-dimensional nature. While the Turkish government launched embassies in various African countries, the nation's trade volume with Africa quadrupled from \$4 billion to approximately \$18 billion. As such, the years between 2005 and 2008 represent a key period of growing complexity in Turkey's Africa policy.

It was during the fourth chapter, which began with Erdogan's official visit to Somalia, that Turkish-African relations assumed a different nature – a political one. In 2011, the Turkish government's Somalia Initiative entailed the nation's focus on high politics, i.e. political matters and security issues, in addition to mere economic

SOMMET DE L'UNION AFRICAINE TURQUIE



Turkish President
Recep Tayyip
Erdogan speaks
during the Second
Turkey-Africa
Partnership
Summit at
Sipopo Congress
Center in Malabo,
Equatorial Guinea
on November 21,
2014.

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ties and humanitarian or development aid. As a matter of fact, Turkey's involvement in Somalia ushered in a second experience of state-building for Ankara after the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The relative restoration of public order and the world's renewed interest in the Somali conflict rendered Turkey a prominent stakeholder whose opinions were widely appreciated. As a result of this, the Turkish authorities met with representatives from the European Union, Great Britain, Spain, Norway and the United States, among others, on African issues.³

Time to Form New Partnerships

The end of 2014 marked the beginning of the fifth chapter in Turkish-African relations. The coming

years will have particular importance, as they hold the key to consolidate existing achievements and develop a more systematic approach. At this point, there are two pressing issues at hand: Primarily, the Malabo summit paved the way for the full normalization of the Turkish government's relations with the African countries; as the most African leaders, attending the 2008 meeting, had serious doubts about the sincerity of Turkey's interest in the continent and raised questions about the nation's agenda that time. However, the Malabo Summit focused on the possibility of more comprehensive cooperation and maximizing mutual benefits in future.

Furthermore, the time has come for the Turkish government to partner with various African nations – which, if executed with precision, could

deepen Ankara's influence in Africa. Thus far, government agencies including the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, the Presidency

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for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) have sought to independently explore the African continent and develop their own perspectives at the expense of partnerships with other governments. Keeping in mind that the nation has no colonial history in Africa, this approach represented a suitable course of action. At this point, however, Turkey has both developed a more effective and result-oriented style and managed to win over skeptics across the continent. Therefore, the time has come for the Turkish government to consciously trade its current position as a super nation with a lasting presence through local-level partnerships.

Two Challenges Ahead

There are two fundamental problems with the future direction of Turkey's

relations with the African continent. The first issue relates to the emerging Africa fatigue in the country, which has developed due to a lack of sophisticated vision. The vision of opening period since 2002 is now over, and it requires a much larger vision and planning. This problem, which presents itself inside certain government agencies today, could possibly reduce the African Initiative from an effort to reposition Turkey in the global economic and political system to an impermanent diversion in foreign policy.

Another key problem relates to the potential influence of domestic developments on Turkey's Africa policy. It is no secret that the Gülen Movement has thus far pioneered the nation's efforts in the African continent through a network of charter schools and the activities of the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON). Since the December 17 operations (2014), however, the Gülenists have sought to compensate for their losses at home by discrediting the Turkish government inside African countries and strengthen their ties to local communities. Considering that the power struggle in Turkey is unlikely to end over the short term, these developments could possibly contribute to closer cooperation between Ankara and African capitals since the Turkish authorities are increasingly likely to develop a more direct and comprehensive policy toward the continent. In this sense, various aspects of Turkish-African relations will continue to remain on the forefront of public attention in the foreseeable future.

Turkey's Post-2014 Vision for Africa

At present, there are no serious problems with Turkish-African relations. The Turkish government's efforts are highly appreciated across the continent. It is possible, nonetheless, to identify certain shortcomings –if not full-blown problems. The most important point right now relates to the challenging task of making the country's efforts matter on a regional and global scale.

Up until 2011, key African countries including South Africa believed Turkey's sudden interest in the African continent's affairs to be a primarily economic adventure – which is why they concentrated on short-term benefits at the expense of the Turkish government's long-term contributions. Ankara's courageous policy toward Somalia, however, helped transform the nation's perception by both key nations and regional organizations.⁴ Furthermore, official visits by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to South Africa made major contributions to Turkey's image in the continent. The next few years, though, will put Turkey's position alongside other critical players such as France, Great Britain, and the United States to the test.

Similarly, the Turkish government must overcome the challenge building stronger bilateral ties with African nations and exploit these connections to attain greater influence at the global level. Pursuing closer

partnership and global cooperation with African members of the G-20, in particular, could amplify the nation's own power and consolidate its aforementioned position in the continent. An ongoing problem, however, remains the shortage of trained Turkish experts on African affairs.

Although various Turkish institutions have launched Africa Research Centers in previous years, these organizations remain both ill-equipped and prone to reproducing extremely orientalist approaches that remain on the verge of becoming obsolete in the West. The fact that Turkish institutions falsely present former Western arguments, as new and original findings does not live up to the country's ever-prominent position in Africa. In this sense, the Turkish government must take necessary steps to encourage graduate students and doctoral candidates to specialize on African countries in an effort to follow continental developments more closely. Furthermore, Turkish universities should establish Africa Research Centers to host lectures by prominent African academics in order to familiarize the continent's leading minds with Turkey.

Moreover, at least four points must be emphasized here: First and foremost, the Turkish government must make its eagerness to become a key political actor and contribute to the resolution of pressing problems in the African continent clearer. In the aftermath of the Somalia crisis, in particular, Western observers found themselves visibly confused about

Turkey's game plan in Africa. To clarify, the idea of becoming a prominent actor in the continent does not necessarily correspond to the notion that Turkey already has a solution for all existing problems. Instead, such a claim would inherently mean that the country could possibly make a valuable contribution to addressing continental problems. Where Turkey cannot play such a role alone, the country's ability to form partnerships could be more important. At this point, Russia represents the best potential partner for Turkey in the African continent considering that the country wants to restore its status in Africa and already has existing networks dating back to the Cold War years. Although the Russians experienced setbacks in certain areas, Turkey's more active stance and stronger legitimacy could seriously benefit from Russia's know-how and experience. Meanwhile, countries such as France, Great Britain, Italy, and the United States remain plagued by fatigue and have turned to their former colonies for economic gain. Others, including China, India and Brazil, in turn, follow policies of commercial opportunism and therefore remain uninterested in making a lasting, political contribution to the continent. Currently, Turkey carefully positions itself between the two camps.

However, Turkey evokes the sense that it is recently grasping the regional state of affairs. Addressing the situation in Somalia, for instance, requires more than a new government inside the country as well as the assistance of third parties for recon-

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struction. Instead, Somalia's stability depends on the restructuring of the regional balance of power around the Horn of Africa. In this context, a number of factors including the ongoing conflict over the Nile River, the West's open support to Kenya, and the disintegration of Sudan play a crucial role within the context of the Somalian conflict. Complementing its existing efforts with an emphasis on the regional balance of power would strengthen Turkey's position and make the country's contribution to lasting peace in Africa possible. The lack of a comprehensive approach and shortcomings of existing policies represent major problems for the country.

Thirdly, the element of religion plays an important role in Turkish-African relations.⁵ Although the Turkish government does not formally recognize faith as a factor in the country's foreign policy, religion has come, and continues, to represent one of the main elements of Turkish foreign policy. At present, the country's policy toward the African continent only indirectly relies on the element of faith. Keeping international and continental developments in mind, however, Turkey could potentially benefit from

religious ties. For instance, a brief visit to an annual meeting of the Sufi orders in Niger and elsewhere would go a long way for religious communities in West Africa. Although such acts could possibly put strains on Turkish-French relations, they would allow the Turkish authorities to play a more direct role in regional conflicts.

Turkey's African initiative, with its emphasis on cooperation and solidarity, represents a crucial effort

The predominantly Muslim population of West African nations could also turn away from France and develop closer relations with Turkey – which, some observers suggest, has already begun.

The fourth and final point relates to the harmony between African expectations and Turkish policies. At this point, African nations demand technology-sharing, experience-sharing, and guidance to make sustainable development possible. Pointing out that Turkey's technological advancements and African resources and manpower could lead to a fruitful cooperation, they welcome closer relations with the country on the basis of equality, mutual trust, and respect. At a time when various countries have decided to suspend their diplomatic missions in African capitals, Turkey's commitment to launching new embassies received positive feedback from the continent. Surely enough, African

nations control vast natural resources and fertile agricultural land – in whose use and management Turkey could contribute to serve African interests.

Although the Turkish authorities have thus far shown due sensitivity, it would be suitable to avoid associating the African continent with poverty, disempowerment, and aid. Helping challenge constructed stereotypes about the continent could seriously contribute to nurturing the self-confidence of African communities. Instead, Turkey should mention Africa with reference to development and progress; strive to the promotion of the continent's cultural heritage and economic resources in order to help transform the conceptual framework wherein the debate on African affairs takes place. Furthermore, it is important for development programs to emphasize production and sustainability. Similarly, education campaigns must carefully consider the host country's culture, language, religion and sectarian identity.

Turkey's efforts will yield better results if and when the country engages in various activities with an eye on aforementioned elements. In this regard, it is particularly important to concentrate on historical relations rather than conflict resolution theories as part of a broader perspective based on solidarity, historical knowledge, and experience sharing. At a time when all forms of colonialism, old and new, threaten to strike back around the continent, Turkey's African initiative, with its emphasis

on cooperation and solidarity, represents a crucial effort. ■

Conclusion

Provided that no major political transformations or economic crises take place in Turkey, the country's relations with the African continent will presumably continue to develop in the foreseeable future. Keeping in mind the heavy involvement of civil society in Turkish-African relations, it is safe to claim that the existing ties could stand the test of time.

The long-term stability of Turkey's presence in Africa rests not only on commercial relations but also the nation's commitment to developing lasting solutions to the continent's pressing problems – as the Somali crisis has established. If the Turkish authorities can transform their interest in Somalia into an explicit effort to establish peace and promote the nation's success, Turkey will leave the group of countries with sheer economic interest in the continent –i.e. India, China and Brazil—and be-

come one of few nations, such as the United States, France, and Great Britain, with both economic and political interests. Such a development would, in turn, seriously contribute to Turkish-African relations and ensure that the African continent will remain a priority item on Turkey's foreign policy agenda over the next years.

Endnotes

1. See Cemalettin Haşimi, "Turkey's Humanitarian Diplomacy and Development Cooperation", *Insight Turkey*, Vol 16, No 1, 2014, p. 127-145; Mehmet Ozkan, "Does "Rising Power" Mean "Rising Donor"? Turkey's Development Aid in Africa", *Africa Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2013, pp.139-147.
2. For a detailed account of Turkey's Africa opening see Mehmet Ozkan and Birol Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2010, pp. 525-546; Mehmet Özkan, "A New Actor or Passer-by? The Political Economy of Turkey's Engagement with Africa", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2012, p. 113-133.
3. Ahmet Davutoğlu, *2013 Yılına Girerken Dış Politikamız*, (Ankara: Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2012).
4. Mary Harper, "The Unlikely Love Affair Between Two Countries", *BBCNews*, December 15, 2014.
5. See Mehmet Ozkan, "Turkey's Religious and Socio-Political Depth in Africa", in Chris Alden (Ed), *Emerging Powers in Africa*, LSE IDEAS Special Report, 16, 2013, pp. 45-50.