

Erdogan's Africa Tour under the Shadow of Libya

After a devastating earthquake in Turkey's eastern part, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with a crowded delegation conducted a 2-day Africa tour in West Africa covering Algeria, Gambia and Senegal. Needless to say, Turkey's presidential tours to Africa have become a useful tool in order to develop Turkey's relations with African countries in different dimensions since 2005. President Erdogan, so far, has visited 28 different African countries during his AK Party's 17-year rule. Interestingly, Erdogan did not pay attention to Africa in 2019; he only visited Tunisia just before Turkey's military intervention to Libya.

Turkey emerged as a new actor in Africa since it opened a new page for the continent in its foreign policy in 2005. Prior to his tour Erdogan once more emphasized Turkey's nature of relation with African countries as "brotherhood", "mutual respect", "solidarity", "cooperation on win-win base" and "common destiny". Economic cooperation, trade, investment, FETÖ and Libya crisis served as the main headlines of Erdogan's agenda.

It can be expected that 2020 might yet be another "year of Africa" for Turkey since Turkey's military intervention into Libya and 3rd Turkey-Africa Summit that will be held in Istanbul this year. As known, after being a strategic partner to the African Union in 2008 Turkey has conducted two Turkey-Africa summits in 2008 in Istanbul and in 2014 in Malabo to shape its road map in Africa. Moreover, 3rd Turkey-Africa summit is scheduled for 2020. Erdogan said that in collaboration with the African Union, Turkey is going to hold the event in April.

It was Erdogan's first visit after former Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika stepped down following an uprising similar to the Arab Spring. Since Erdogan's first official visit to Algeria in 2006, Turkey-Algeria relations are developing in a good way. Moreover, Turkey sees Algeria one of the important cooperation partners for the solution of the Libya crisis. As it can be remembered, Algeria's newly elected President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and Erdogan met recently in the Berlin Conference held by Germany for starting a new peace process in Libya.

Erdogan's second stop was a tiny African country Gambia. It was the first presidential visit for that a turning point in order to develop Turkey-Gambia relations. Turkey is aiming to develop its relation with Gambia in trade and tourism. Turkey-Gambia trade relations are lower than its expected level as Erdogan mentioned in his statement. However, Turkey praises Gambia in every opportunity for its support against FETO (Fethullah Terrorist Organization) since it was the first African country to close down FETO affiliated schools. Besides, Turkey has military training cooperations with Gambia. Moreover, Turkey offers scholarships for Gambian university students in order to study in Turkey. Turkey is also a development and humanitarian aid provider for Gambia.^[i]

Senegal was the last stop of Erdogan's Africa tour. Senegal is one of the countries Turkey is developing its relation with within different areas and recently Turkey-Senegal relations are gaining momentum. The two countries have annual 300-400 million dollar trade volume and the number is expected to reach 1 billion dollar shortly. Turkish construction companies are very active in Senegal as well.

Other dimension of the two countries' relation is that Turkey accommodates too many Senegalese immigrants. According to a field study more than half of Sub-Saharan African immigrants in Turkey come from Senegal.^[ii]

Turkish Maarif Foundation runs 13 schools in Senegal after FETO affiliated schools were handed over to Turkey by Senegal. Turkey now also aims to open Yunus Emre Cultural Institute and Turkish Red Crescent regional office in Dakar. Besides, Turkey is going to increase its flight from Istanbul to Dakar, construct a 50.000 capacity-stadium and invest in Faleme mining worth 2 billion dollars. By signing 7 bilateral treaties with Senegal, Turkey shows a great intention to develop its relation with Senegal and for that reason Erdogan declared the appointment of Prof. Ahmet Kavas, an expert on Ottoman Africa and Francophone Africa, as Turkey's new ambassador to Senegal.

Shadow of Libya Hovering over Africa

Erdogan's luggage was not only packed with FETO, trade and investment. During his Africa tour, Erdogan often expressed Turkey's good wishes over Libya where conflict has become a daily routine of Libyans since the Gadhafi era ended following a series of popular unrest and a NATO-led military intervention in 2011. Turkey, considering Libya as part of its Ottoman history and a cooperation partner in the fields of energy, construction and security, has expressed more open support for Fayeze al-Sarraj government recognized by UN Security Council instead of Khalifa Haftar. Erdogan often mentioned Haftar as a mercenary backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) via Russian private para-military company Wagner. Turkey sees Haftar as nothing but a warlord and an untrustworthy person for Libya's peace process.

Erdogan's Africa tour was a good opportunity to express and defend Turkey's official thesis over Libya because Turkey needs to be careful to preserve its positive image in the continent. Although there is military deployment by Turkey into Libya's UN recognized Government controlled areas, African leaders are now more willingly to call the African Union to take part as leading roles in the Libyan crisis. For instance, during the press conference with Erdogan President of Senegal Macky Sall invited the African Union to be more involved in Libya. [iii] Similarly, Uganda President Yoweri Museveni in an interview with BBC had indicated that Libya as an African territory was under attack by Western powers and Africa should have intervened. [iv] Moreover, the African Union High Level Committee conducted its 8th meeting in Congo Brazzaville on the Libyan crisis. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chadian Chairman of the AU Commission, signaled solution at the coming 33rd AU Summit to be held in February under the theme "Silencing the Guns Across the Continent". [v]

It seems that African leaders have realized that there is an ongoing crisis in Libya after Turkey showed its intention to play a leading role in the crisis. The situation in Libya today resembles that Congo in the 60s: unstable, divided and had too much foreign influence. After NATO-led intervention into Libya in 2011, the African Union showed little interest for Libya except for the sad stories of immigrants and captives who were turned into slaves. Obviously pan-African feelings over Libya are on the rise now. However, the approach of African leaders towards Libya varies when it comes to their national and regional interests. Chad, Sudan, Egypt, Algeria, Niger and Tunisia, as countries bordering Libya, are already victimized by the negative effects of the Libyan crisis. For that 33rd AU Summit and 3rd Turkey-Africa Summit would carry huge importance for the Libya crisis.

[i] Sorwar Alam, "Turkey support Gambia in every sector",

AA , 11 April 2019,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/News/1513811/museveni-blasts-western-powers-libya-attacks>

[ii] Mahir Şaul, "A Different "Kargo": Sub-Saharan Migrants in Istanbul and African Commerce", *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 43/1-2-3, p. 149

[iii] "Senegal Pushes for AU Role in Tackling Libya Conflict", *Eyewitness News* , 28 January 2020, <https://ewn.co.za/2020/01/28/senegal-pushes-for-au-role-in-tackling-libya-conflict>

[iv] John Tugume, "Museveni blasts Western powers over Libya attacks", *New Vision*, 22 January 2020, https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1513811/museveni-blasts-western-powers-libya-attacks

[v] "AU seeks "curative solution" to Libya crisis",

APA News , 30 January 2020,

<http://apanews.com/2020/01/30/au-seeks-curative-solution-to-libya-crisis/>