

AFRICA IN TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY: FROM ABSENSE TO A NOTABLE PROGRESS

Serhat Orakçı



INSAMER

IHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Orakçı, Serhat. "Africa in Turkey's Foreign Policy: From Absence to a Notable Progress",
INSAMER, 25.09.2019.



Analysis

South Africa and Zambia were the last African destinations for Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who visited both countries in July 2018. Since then Erdoğan has not paid any official visit to the continent. Amongst world leaders, Erdoğan is definitely the most frequent non-African leader visiting Africa. During his prime ministry and presidency he visited 27 African states. This fact alone indicates the depth of Turkey-Africa relations having gained momentum since 2005.

When one considered Turkey's modern political history since 1923, it can be seen that Turkey's diplomatic relations in Africa has only developed recently. A special foreign policy program called "Opening up to Africa" launched in 1998 was a first in Turkey's foreign policy. The program aimed to escalate Turkey's diplomatic and commercial presence across the continent as well as improving cultural and academic ties

between Turkey and Africa. The program was engineered by the former Foreign Minister Ismail Cem and former Ambassador Numan Hazar. However lack of strong political support during that time made this ambitious program unrealistic.¹

After 2002 general elections Turkey's political atmosphere has improved for the first time after a long period of domination by unstable coalitions. AK Party's (Justice and Welfare Party) victory demarcated an important twist for Turkey's role in its region as well as its foreign policy. With the new government, Turkey's diplomatic opening was focused on a multi-dimensional foreign affairs approach, covering previously less prioritized areas such as Africa and the Latin world.

It is a widely accepted fact that Africa has taken a special page in Turkey's foreign policy since



INSAMER
IHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

AK Party came to power. Following a road map since 2005, Turkey has achieved so much in Africa and appeared an emerging partner to African states. As it can be remembered, Turkey announced the “Africa Year” in 2005 and escalated its efforts in the continent in various dimensions. In a short time Turkey became a strategic partner to the African Union (AU) in 2008 and member of the Africa Development Bank (AfDB) in 2013. During Abdullah Gul and Erdoğan’s presidency considerable number of African countries have been officially visited and in some cases firsts happened.

In the last 15 years a notable progress has been made in Africa. Nowadays Turkey has 42 embassies across the continent and Turkish Airlines flies to 54 destinations. Moreover, two Turkey-Africa summits were taken place in 2008 and 2014 and Turkey-Africa trade volume reached 20 billion dollars from scratch. Turkey has also become a development and humanitarian aid provider in African countries that need infrastructure, new schools and hospitals. It is also interesting enough that the largest embassy compound of Turkey is located in Somalia’s capital Mogadishu and Turkey’s military training compound was built and officially opened in the same city.

For academicians who are interested in Turkey’s presence in Africa, what drives Turkey’s Africa policy is the question that creates much debate nowadays. The answer to this question varies from the angle where one looks at the phenomenon. In related literatures one may find reasonable and absurd inferences altogether. For example according to Michael Rubin, Turkey’s presence in Africa is just related to supporting terrorism.² Besides biased and speculative comments, reasonable academicians suggest that neo-Ottomanism, to challenge the world order, economic expectations, search for new markets for Turkish products, balancing Europe, exploiting Africa’s raw materials might be the real drives for Turkey’s interest in Africa.

Frankly, it is quite difficult to explain Turkey’s motto in Africa with just one reason. One can

likely notice that Turkey’s approach to Africa has to be seen as multi-dimensional since diplomacy, trade, security, energy, aid and cultural affairs shape Turkey’s presence in the continent. As it is well known, Turkey runs regional hospitals in Sudan’s Darfur/Nyala and Somalia’s Mogadishu; and the Maarif Foundation established by the Turkish Parliament law in 2016 has involved extensively in education sector in the continent since the 15 July failed coup attempt. Moreover, the Turkish FDI is approaching 10 billion dollar of business target opportunities in the continent and as mentioned earlier Turkish Airlines’ operations cover a wide list of destinations in the continent. Turkey’s Africa policy has many dimensions and it seems appropriate to the new age modern political environment.

For me, Turkey’s Africa policy can be evaluated in three separate fields: political, economic and socio-cultural. Some aspects of Turkey’s activities in Africa such as trade and direct investment are all related to economic expectations. Turkey as a regional power with a population of 80 million has a considerable amount of industrial production and Turkish producers seek new markets and investment opportunities not only in Africa but also in various regions. Africa with a population of 1.3 billion people presents new investment opportunities and it has a market value although the middle class of the continent is still weak and so is its purchasing power when compared to the world’s average.

On the political field Turkey needs trustworthy allies and friends for cooperation in various fields that requires international cooperation such as migration, terrorism and security. African countries have a considerable amount of vote potential in the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). For Turkey, it is a very rational approach that it seeks strong diplomatic presence in the continent. Nowadays, Turkey’s diplomatic missions in Africa cover more than two-thirds of the continent. As well recognized by the Turkish state, Turkey’s need for cooperation

with African nations escalated especially after the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016.

On the socio-cultural field, Turkey is seeking to develop its cultural relations with Africa by using its historical past and commonness with the African culture that suffered under colonialism similar to the Islamic culture. For the first time in modern Turkish history, Turkey just recently re-discovered that the Ottomans has historical depth in the continent lasting from 16th to 20th Century. Long-time neglected historical ties between Turkey and Africa had captured some attention and TİKA implemented projects aims in refreshing the Ottoman historical past in North and East Africa. Moreover, research centers and universities have started paying more attention to topics related to Africa.

I believe that the essence of Turkey-Africa connection lies around the communalities between both parties. That connection is highly related to common past experiences and resembling destiny. At the end of the day both Turkey and African nations are part of a global system dominated by unequal economic development and power sharing. Turkey and Africa have been suffering from similar wounds opened by colonial-imperial practices of the Western world for the last two centuries. For that reason “solidarity” becomes the key concept explaining the newly established modern ties between Turkey and African nations, as it can be seen from Turkey’s involvement in Somalia since 2011. Shortly, both parties are at the same pan of scale. For this reason, I think it is very meaningful that Turkey’s new policy for Africa started in 1998 just after the turbulence in Turkey-European Union (EU) during the mid-90s.

It is possible to reflect this fact in the statements of Turkey’s officials, such as the language that Erdoğan used during his Africa tours where he put extra emphasis on the colonial scars and

exploitations occurred by the West in Africa. Obviously, in the imagination of Turkey’s officials, Africa is the victim of a colonial past and it is just a sleeping giant possessing enormous potential in terms of its demography, resources and cultural richness. It is also believed that for the rest of the century Africa may play a leading role in many fields if exploitation on the continent ends. This approach is definitely contradictory to how Africa has been seen by the West who is stubborn in changing its attitude towards Africa.

*Nowadays
Turkey has
42 embassies
across the
continent
and Turkish
Airlines
flies to 54
destinations.*

So far, by touching the continent in a positive way and adopting a visionary approach resulted in Africa’s much appreciation for Turkey. While African students started preferring Turkey for their higher education under Turkey’s scholarship programs, the number of the African diplomatic missions in Ankara is also on the rise. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 32 out of 54 African nations are being represented in Ankara and 4 more countries (Guinea-Bissau, Cameroon, Tanzania and

Mozambique) are also planning to open their embassies.³ Furthermore, African airlines such as the Ethiopian Airlines and Bedr Airlines have regular flights to Istanbul. However, Turkey’s Africa policy faces serious challenges as well. I always think that Turkey’s economic and political stability is vital for Turkey’s long-term achievement in Africa. Investment, political vision, and even aids are all related to Turkey’s political and economic power and capacity. Unstable political atmosphere and weak economic indicators would bring negative effect on Turkey-Africa relations. For now, Turkey-Africa relations look like it stands at the level of short-lived stagnation due to Turkey’s involvement in the Syria crisis, FETÖ and poor economic performance; hence adjustments in its road map is needed to strengthen Turkey’s bigger presence in Africa after 2020.

Sonnotlar

- ¹ Tom Wheeler, “Ankara to Africa: Turkey’s outreach since 2005”, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 18:1, 2011, s. 46.
- ² Michael Rubin, “Turkey’s Africa Strategy Threatens to Breed Islamist Extremism”, *National Review*, 26.07.2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/06/turkey-africa-strategy-threatens-to-breed-islamist-extremism/> (Giriş: 17.09.2019)
- ³ “Turkey-Africa Relations”, *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-africa-relations.en.mfa> (21.09.2019)

