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Turkey's new focus on Africa: causes and challenges

By Ali Bilgic and
Daniela Nascimento

■ Executive summary

Although Turkey had no past colonial involvement with African countries, there has been an increasing revival of Turkey's relation with the continent since the end of the 1990s, which reached a peak after 2005. From then on, along with a focus on Central Asia, the Balkans and the Middle East, Turkish foreign policy started shifting its focus to Africa, and as a new donor country Turkey's political and economic relations with sub-Saharan African countries have intensified significantly. This policy brief analyses and discusses the main economic, political, and strategic motivations behind these shifts and priorities, as well as some of the perceptions and current challenges this change in policy faces.

Introduction

Although Turkey had no past colonial involvement with African countries, there has been an increasing revival in its relations with the continent since the end of the 1990s, reaching a peak after 2005, which can be fundamentally explained by the important cultural ties they share. From then on, along with a focus on Central Asia, the Balkans and the Middle East, Turkish foreign policy started shifting its emphasis towards Africa, and as a new donor country its political and economic relations with sub-Saharan African countries have intensified significantly. This policy brief will analyse and discuss the main economic, political and strategic motivations behind these shifts and priorities, as well as some of the main perceptions of these moves and the challenges faced by Turkish foreign policy in this regard.

The political dimensions of Turkey's focus on Africa

In 1998 the Turkish "Opening to Africa Action Plan" was officially announced, which was specifically aimed at improving the political, economic, development, and cultural relations between Turkey and African countries. Its goals included increasing the number of Turkish diplomatic missions in Africa and high-level diplomatic exchanges with the continent, increasing humanitarian and development aid (including Turkey's potential membership of the

Africa Ex-Im Bank), encouraging business trips, and becoming a donor to the African Development Bank. All these goals were more or less achieved in the following years, primarily reflected in the opening of new embassies in various African countries.¹

After 2002 the Justice and Development Party government continued and intensified the process launched by previous Turkish governments, and in 2003 the undersecretary of foreign trade prepared a "Strategy for Improving Economic Relations with African Countries". In 2005 Turkey obtained observer status at the African Union (AU), while the same year was declared as a "Year of Africa" in Turkey. In January 2008 Turkey became an AU "strategic partner", which paved the way for the Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit held in Istanbul with the participation of 49 African countries, and which was considered the beginning of a steady and sustainable cooperation process. In addition to this, in 2008 Turkey was also accepted as a non-regional member of the African Development Bank and as a member of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Partners Forum. In this context of increased political and diplomatic involvement, Turkey clearly assumed the role of a new actor in some relevant areas in the African continent, attaching particular importance to peace and stability in the continent, which was reflected in the country's contributions to the United Nations (UN) and AU missions deployed in the continent. Turkey is currently

¹ In 2009 in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire; in 2010 in Cameroon, Mali, Uganda, Angola and Madagascar; in 2011 in Zambia, Mauritania, Mozambique and Zimbabwe; in 2012 in Somalia; and in 2013 in Ghana.

providing personnel and contributing financially to five² of the existing UN missions in Africa. Turkey also used this political leverage and involvement to support its candidacy for a non-permanent UN Security Council seat for the 2009-10 period, gaining almost all of the African countries' votes.

The economic dimension: between trade and development aid

Turkey's political engagement with Africa has also been matched by an intensification of economic and commercial relations between it and some African countries. Economically, both sides benefit from increased trade and development cooperation because it creates employment and investment. This economic involvement can be divided into the categories of trade relations and development aid. In terms of trade, it is possible to observe progress, especially between 2000 and 2008. In 2000 Turkey's trade with sub-Saharan African countries was worth \$742 million; by 2008 it had increased to \$5.7 billion (MFA, 2013). However, fluctuations appeared after 2008. According to the 2012 figures, while steel and iron products have represented the highest share of Turkey's exports to sub-Saharan Africa (worth nearly \$1 billion), pearls, valuable stones and jewellery are the main imports from Africa (worth nearly \$813 million) (MoE, 2013). As a result of the booming economies in many African countries, Turkey has also invested in communications through Turkish Airlines, which currently flies to 38 destinations in 23 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (MFA, 2013).

In terms of development aid, the main institution through which official aid is channelled to Africa is the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). In 2011 only, while official development assistance (ODA) fell in 16 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) countries, Turkey's net ODA increased by over 38%. Turkey has undertaken several initiatives in the past few years in the development field, e.g. hosting the UN Istanbul Somalia Conference on May 21st-23rd 2010, designed to support the Djibouti Peace Process. Specifically, the Istanbul Declaration adopted during the conference is seen as constituting a road map for the settlement of the Somali issue. In Somalia, Turkey has become the largest donor among non-OECD-DAC countries. Also in 2010, Turkey co-chaired with Egypt the International Donors' Conference for the Reconstruction and Development of Darfur in Cairo. During the conference Turkey announced a pledge of around \$65-70 million of humanitarian assistance mainly in the health, agricultural and education sectors. Furthermore, through TİKA,³ Turkish international aid and development projects have steadily increased in Africa over the last

several years (*The Guardian*, 2013). TİKA has been carrying out development projects and activities in Sudan, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Gambia. Three main programmes that are specifically designed for Africa should be highlighted: "The Agricultural Development Programme for the Continent of Africa", "The African Health Programme" and "The Vocational Training Programme for Africa". In 2009 development aid to Africa by Turkish governmental organisations was worth nearly \$44 million; in 2012 ODA was increased to \$772 million (Kurban, 2013).

The "benevolent partner" discourse and its implications

Politically, Turkish foreign policy discourse towards Africa has been built on two pillars. The first is the importance of historical ties. For example, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2012) explained the importance of Somalia for Turkish interests by underlining the Ottoman expeditions to that country during the 16th century. He stated that "We have inherited these [relations] from the Ottomans. They call us neo-Ottomans. Yes, we are neo-Ottomans" (Euroactive, 2009). In a press conference he praised the intensifying relations with Africa: "We are proud of this ... culturally, we see ourselves as African. We do not have a bad memory with Africa, but a good history to share" (Zaman, 2011). This leads to the second pillar of Turkey's political discourse towards Africa, which takes the form of a clear anti-colonial discourse. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has repeatedly highlighted that Turkey is not like "others" – referring specifically to Western states – that had a colonial past in Africa. Moreover, Turkish discourse towards Africa sees the Turks as "friends" who fought against colonialism with Africans. Similarly, in a speech Davutoğlu delivered at the Africa-Turkey Partnership Ministerial Review Conference (December 15th-16th 2011), he affirmed:

Stretching hundreds of years back, our history tells us that the well-being of Africa and Turkey cannot be separated from each other. Within a relationship based on equality, mutual respect, cooperation and common stance against adversaries, the rise of African and Turkish civilizations were always closely linked. At times when we were able to strengthen our interactions, cultural links, trade connections and political positions, we were triumphant and prosperous. However, when our ties and defenses were weakened due to many reasons including imperialism, colonialism, conflicts, or inner strife, we were both weakened and fell back behind other nations and groupings. Economically, we have everything to gain from ever closer interaction (Davutoğlu, 2011).

2 African Union/UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) and UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

3 TİKA currently has three offices in Africa, in Ethiopia, Sudan and Senegal. TİKA offices support development projects in their respective regions and from these three offices the organisation operates in 37 African countries.

This speech clearly reflects the underlying rationale of this anti-colonial, historical and political discourse, i.e. the possible economic and political gains offered by the Turkish presence in Africa. At the same conference Davutoğlu continued his speech as follows:

The most affluent nations in the world carry out most of their economic activities among themselves. We would not like to play the role of peripheral attachments to far-away economic centres. Rather, we prefer to grow as strong economic entities in our core regions and negotiate with other partners from positions of strength (Davutoğlu, 2011).

Clearly, this anti-colonial discourse helps to sustain Turkey's increasing involvement in sub-Saharan Africa while obtaining important political support for the country from African countries, as well as economic opportunities in the continent.

Challenges ahead

As has become clear, Turkey's increasing involvement in Africa can be understood in terms of its political, economic, and development aid ambitions and motivations, framed through close economic ties with sub-Saharan countries (in the form of diplomatic activity, trade and aid), which are not only aimed at exploiting the sub-Saharan market, but also at establishing a Turkish presence in Africa vis-à-vis other, mainly Western, but also Southern, donor countries. To some extent Turkey's renewed involvement with Africa can be seen as a consequence of the country's domestic transformation in the sense that it has moved away from its traditional economic partners, but is also a result of changes in the global political economy that require the diversification of Turkey's trade alternatives, in this case through development aid policies and discourses. Turkey's response to these shifts has been to define a multidimensional foreign policy based on the development of economic and political relations with new partners. In this sense, Turkey's opening to Africa is a major part of this new redefinition of the country's foreign policy (Özkan, 2010).

From the perspective of the targets of these policies and approaches, some suggest that African reactions to Turkey's initiative thus far have been a "mixture of mild expectation and confusion" (Özkan, 2010). Following China and India, the question of why Turkey has shown what some consider to be an unexpected interest in the continent still does not have a clear answer for Turkey's African partners. Nevertheless, Turkey's lack of a colonial history in the continent and its emphasis on an equal partnership with African countries has spread optimism about the future of the relationship among African leaders (Özkan, 2010).

It is still yet to be established to what extent these new approaches and discourses can actually help to build up a sustainable and mutually beneficial cooperation relationship that has a positive impact on the living conditions of African people, or whether Turkey's new orientation towards Africa simply ends up reflecting the old principle of "business as usual".

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■ THE AUTHORS

Ali Bilgic is an assistant professor in the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University, Turkey.

Daniela Nascimento is a researcher at the Centre for Social Studies and assistant professor of international relations at the University of Coimbra, Portugal.

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