

Turkey expending to Africa: A case of strategic diversification

March 2016

Joe Hammoura

Turkey Office

Between the end of February and the beginning of March 2016, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has visited four West African countries with an expressed intent of deepening Turkey's "strategic partnership with Africa and developing relations with members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)". Covering Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Guinea, the president was accompanied by top ministers and over 150 businesspeople¹. This visit comes after the president's visit to Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti in January of last year.

Historically, Africa has been largely outside of the purview of Turkish foreign policy priorities, evidently shown in the low intensity contacts which go back to the days of the Ottoman Empire². By and large, the history of Turkey's relations with Africa has passed through three different phases. The first one covers the Ottoman Empire's relations with Africa until the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, during which the Ottomans had established direct and indirect relations with largely littoral states in North and East Africa. The second phase which extended from 1923 to 1998 can be best described as where Turkish – African relations reached rock bottom. The third phase was inaugurated with the issuance of the "Opening up to Africa Policy" document in 1998. This document signals a significant shift in Turkey's estimation of Africa as salient strategic partner and it also marks its intention to reach out to Sub-Saharan Africa; a region which Turkey had largely ignored in favor of the predominantly Muslim countries in North Africa³. The issuance of that policy paper was followed by an action plan designed to boost relations at multiple levels including, inter alia, upgrading diplomatic ties, striking trade agreements, and forging cultural and educational cooperation throughout Africa. However, the momentum ebbed for a while after Turkey was hard hit by twin disasters of a devastating earthquake which killed tens of thousands and a financial crunch in 1999.

The Turkish - African relationship was reinvigorated, significantly expanded and took on multiple dimensions after Ankara declared 2005 to be the 'Year of Africa', where Erdoğan, then prime minister, became Turkey's first head of government to visit Sub-Saharan African countries, with visits made to Ethiopia and South Africa in March of the same year. Concurrently, Turkey attempted to translate its relations to institutional levels. It obtained observer status with the African Union on the 12th of April 2005, moreover it had its embassy in

¹ Huriyyet Daily News (2016), Turkey's Erdoğan Embarks on Major Trip to Africa, retrieved from: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-erdogan-embarks-on-major-trip-to-africa-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=95783&NewsCatID=338>

² Mehmet Ozkan (2010), What drives Turkey's involvement in Africa?, Review of African Political Economy, Volume 37, Issue 126, pp. 533-540, retrieved from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03056244.2010.530952>

³ Ibid.

Ethiopia accredited with the African Union on the 5th May 2005⁴. The African Union reciprocated the gesture by adding Turkey to its list of strategic partners in its Summit held in Addis Ababa in January 2008. Since 2005, there followed a carefully organized and intensive program by the Turkish government and various humanitarian and civil society groups, some of which are affiliates of *Hizmet* -a group led by Erdoğan erstwhile friend turned foe Fethullah Gülen- to expand Turkish influence in the region. In 2008 President Abdullah Gül hosted the first Turkish – African Cooperation Summit and visited Kenya and Tanzania during 2009, and Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) during 2010. Thereafter, the intensity of the engagement reached its crescendo to such extent that between 2009 and 2011 there were 37 visits to Africa made by either the Turkish president, prime minister, parliamentary speaker or minister of foreign affairs. Over the same period, there were 76 visits to Turkey made by African leaders of similar rank⁵. This begs the question why is Turkey interested in Africa? And what are the primary drivers of its engagement?

One of the main reasons behind Turkey’s growing engagement in Africa is its desire to distribute its geopolitical eggs in as many baskets. The bedlam in Iraq, Turkey’s second largest export market, and Syria; the near deadlock relations with its traditional regional ally, Egypt, after the overthrow of the Muslim brotherhood; and the lukewarm love hate relationship with the European Union has compelled Ankara to diversify the geopolitical lay of the land under its radar. Therefore, its involvement in Africa is a function of its broad objective to position itself as a global player with multiple fall back options in addition to shaping the global affairs. In this light, it expects forming congenial relations with African countries to result in their support for its global policies and its competition with both Western and emerging powers. In fact, this has so far yielded some good results as exemplified in the total backing that Turkey got from African countries in its bid to be a non-permanent member of the United Nation Security Council in 2008⁶. Similarly, it looks forward to the extension of this support in its standing vis-à-vis the Cyprus issue, counterterrorism, sea piracy, and disputes at the World Trade Organization.

Turkish engagement with Africa has also a lot to do with security reasons. From among other causes of concern, the one related to the Gulf of Aden stands out as an outstanding case. This explains its keenness to and over-activity in Somalia. There are indications that Turkey seems to be eager to project its military prowess on the African screen. For example, in the first half of 2014 the Turkish navy conducted port visits to 28 African countries, which included the first rounding of the Cape of Good Hope by a Turkish vessel in 148 years. Another convoy of Turkish

⁴ David Shinn (2015), Turkey’s Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa: Shifting Alliances and Strategic Diversification, Chatham House, retrieved from: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150909TurkeySubSaharanAfricaShinn.pdf

⁵ Shinn, Op. cit.

⁶ Ibid.

warships docked at Port Sudan in April 2015 for joint exercises with the Sudanese navy. Turkey has since 2009 contributed frigates to the US-led, multinational Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden. Turkey has the seventh highest number of naval vessels in the world, and these are becoming more frequent visitors to many African ports⁷.

Trade and investment are among the most important drivers of Turkey's recent emphasis on Africa. Even though much of this involvement is concentrated in North Africa, which remains far more important than sub-Saharan Africa to the Turkish economy, but it is paying increasing attention to Sub-Saharan Africa countries, given their growing economic importance, and in particular to key powers such as South Africa and Nigeria.

According to Turkey's foreign ministry official website, Turkey's bilateral trade volume with Africa has reached 17.5 billion USD in 2015⁸. This is a three-fold increase in volume compared to the records of 2003. Trade volume with Sub-Saharan Africa has reached a 6 billion USD level in 2015. This indicates a drop in Turkey's trade with the continent, in line with the decrease in global trade. Despite this fact, Turkey's share in Africa's total trade has remained almost the same. Turkey's major exports to Africa are manufactured goods, iron and steel products, food and consumer products, textiles, cement, plastics and a range of industrial products. The country also aims to secure weapons contracts with many African countries. Imports from Africa consist mostly of primary products such as cotton, minerals, precious stones, coal, leather, oilseeds, timber and foods⁹. Little of Turkey's crude oil is sourced in Africa (7 per cent in 2012), but the country is becoming increasingly active in Africa's expanding energy sector. In recent years, Turkey has signed energy cooperation agreements with countries such as Cameroon, Kenya, Niger and Sudan, and in August 2014 the energy and natural resources ministry stated that Angola was among the Turkish Petroleum Corporation's (TPAO) priorities for investment in crude oil extraction¹⁰.

To date, Turkey has signed bilateral investment treaties with 12 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. It also signed a free trade agreement (FTA) with Mauritius in 2011, and is currently in negotiations with Cameroon, the DRC and Seychelles, although some of these negotiations have proceeded slowly. Furthermore, Turkey aims to sign an FTA with the East African Community (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania) by 2019. South Africa has hitherto resisted Turkish advances to sign an FTA, on the grounds that competition under such an arrangement risked undermining its industrial and employment objectives. None the less,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Official Website, retrieved from: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-africa-relations.en.mfa>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Shinn, Op. cit.

there have been some indications that South Africa may accelerate talks on the matter after 2016¹¹.

There are ever growing direct Turkish investments in a number of African countries. In this regard, total Turkish investment in Africa is estimated to be around 6.2 billion USD. According to a report published in October 2015 in the Financial Times, Turkish investment in Africa creates the largest number of jobs in the continent (16.593 in 2014) compared to other foreign direct investments in Africa¹². Turkish contractors are amongst the major undertakers in the continent. Share of African countries in the overall international business volume of Turkish contractors is around 21 percent. Turkish contractors so far have undertaken in Africa over 1,150 projects worth 55 billion USD.¹³

Turkey's involvement in Africa is also the function of its apparent desire to extend its cultural and religious influence in the predominantly Muslim African countries. This cultural front is led by an assortment of NGO's and humanitarian agencies, which are involved in helping refugees, building mosques, schools, health facilities, and distributing aid. For example, on July 12, 2015, the Turkish newspaper, Daily Sabah, reported that the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the *Hayrat* Humanitarian Aid Association had announced a plan of distributing one million copies of the Quran to many African countries¹⁴.

With the ruling *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) adamantly trying to turn Turkey into a powerful regional power, the volatile situation in the Middle east constantly disturbing alliances and balance of power, and a fledgling economy marked by depreciating currency and decreasing ability to attract direct foreign investment, Turkey's interest in Africa seems likely to stay and grow. This connection is definitely giving Turkey a stronger economy and better financial stability, waiting to be translated into political maneuvering power.

¹¹ Republic Of Turkey, Ministry of foreign Affairs, Op. cit.

¹² Financial Times (2015), The Africa Investment Report 2015, retrieved from : http://forms.fdiintelligence.com/africainvestmentreport/files/The-Africa-Investment-Report%202015_download.pdf

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Daily Sabah (2015), TIKA to Distribute 1 Million Copies of the Quran in Africa, retrieved from: <http://www.dailysabah.com/religion/2015/07/12/tika-to-distribute-1-million-copies-of-the-quran-in-africa>