

Turkey's Foreign Policy in Africa: A New Paradigm of Turkish Foreign Policy?

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Turkey's influence in Africa has become a major component of the current Turkish foreign policy, springing both from contextual and conjectural factors. Contextually, mainly the change of the international environment after the end of the Cold War and the will of Turkey to become a regional and global power. Conjecturally, mainly the domestic regime changes in Turkey and the emergence of the faith-based civil society organizations and their close collaboration with state agencies.

Within this dual frame, Ankara's policy in Africa, and specifically sub-Saharan Africa, emerges as an ambitious, though pragmatic, strategy that is the result of a wider and long-term consensus within the state bureaucracy, the current political leadership, the business world, and the faith-based organizations in Turkey.

The depth and the significance of this strategy are reflected in what some scholars have branded as the "Ankara consensus"², describing it as "a mix between democratic liberalism (Washington consensus) and authoritarian capitalism (Beijing consensus)"³.

However, important challenges could eventually put in jeopardy this ambitious policy, for at least two main reasons. The first is because its sustainability depends on the economic outlook of Turkey and of Ankara's relations with European and Gulf countries active in Africa. The second is because one of the major components of its implementation on the ground heavily depends on the maneuvering space that the Turkish state has, given the role of faith-based organizations and their capability to collaborate and coordinate with the state agencies.

The deep roots of Turkey's Africa policy

Ankara's policy in Africa, or "Opening to Africa", was materialized and has become very visible during the AKP's governments since 2005, when Turkey announced "the year of Africa" and Tayyip Erdogan visited Ethiopia and South Africa; the first official visit by a Turkish Prime Minister to a country south of the Equator. In fact, since 2003, Turkey has steadily spread its political, economic and even military presence across Africa and it has gone from just 12 embassies and US\$100 million in foreign direct investment in 2003 to 42 embassies and US\$6.5 billion in 2021. In addition, there is a five-fold increase in trade from 2003 to 2019 and Turkish Airlines now serves 51 African cities. Since 2003, Erdogan, either as Prime Minister or as President, Tayyip Erdogan has visited Africa 27 times. Turkey also obtained an observer status at the African Union (AU) in 2005 and in 2008 it became an AU "Strategic Partner", co-hosting the first Turkey-Africa summit in

² Donelli, Federico, The Ankara consensus: the significance of Turkey's engagement in sub-Saharan Africa, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, DOI: [10.1080/14781158.2018.1438384](https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2018.1438384); 2018. Date accessed: 2 April 2021

³ *idem*

Istanbul. The second Turkey-Africa summit was held in Malabo in 2014. The third, due to be held last year in Istanbul, was postponed because of COVID-19⁴.

While the materialization of Turkey's Africa policy is undoubtedly an AKP success story, its roots go back as far as the 70s, but was strengthened further in the 90s, when the political elites of the time and the Turkish Foreign Ministry aspired to give a new sphere of influence to Turkey within the wider frame of its relations with the EEC (and the EU later), as well as with the US. This need for a new sphere of influence was intensified after the end of the Cold War and the involvement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the policy of Africa emerged as a very significant factor of continuity of this policy. As Volkan Ipek notes:

The search for a new area of influence was mostly motivated by the fact that Turkey's foreign policy was facing constant challenges in all of its traditional spheres, from its relations with the US, where the Cyprus issue and the arms embargo had created a lot of frustrations, and its relations with the EEC to its efforts to expand its influence to the post-Soviet Central Asia, where Russia's presence was too important. Within this scope, the President Suleyman Demirel, the consecutive Prime Ministers Tansu Ciller, Mesut Yilmaz and Bulent Ecevit, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, saw that Africa would be a sphere where Turkey could exercise a "comfortable" foreign policy, free from challenges and problems⁵.

Thus, Turkey's Africa policy has its deeper roots in the pre-AKP and pre-Davutoglu period. Indeed, the first action plan of the Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry that included specific policy for Africa was coined just after the second visit to Turkey of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selasiye in November 1971 and within an atmosphere of growing anti-US feelings in Turkey mainly due to the Cyprus issue and Washington's negative stance towards Ankara's Cyprus policies at that time. Ipek argues that,

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepared an action plan to follow a multilateral foreign policy rather than being dependent on the USA. The action plan divided the Ministry's staff into working groups so that each group would be responsible for various regions including Sub-Saharan Africa. Accordingly, Turkey opened an embassy in Kinshasha, Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1976, sent medical assistance packages to Zimbabwe in 1978, and signed an economic and technical cooperation (TET) agreement with Sierra Leone in 1979 (TOG 1979). Nevertheless, due to the lack of managerial expertise in these regions,

⁴ Fabricius, Peter, Making Turkey great again, Institute for Security Studies, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/making-turkey-great-again>; First published: March 2021. Date accessed: 4 April 2021

⁵ Ipek, Volkan. Assistant Professor, Yeditepe University, Department of Political Science and International Relations. Personal interview, 20 April 2021

especially on Sub-Saharan Africa, the Ministry could not carry the plan to the next level.⁶

This first Africa policy plan was a significant novelty for the Turkish foreign policy since it came after decades of Turkey keeping its distance from the region. Before the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the Ottoman Empire had some interactions with Sub-Saharan Africa, specially after 1820, but they remained limited while relations with Northern Africa were extremely close. After the founding of the Turkish Republic, Ankara stayed away from Africa. Indeed, it had very limited relations with Sub-Saharan Africa, and in Northern Africa countries, while some relations existed, they were essentially without any significance for the Turkish foreign policy.

Even though after the military coup in 1980, Africa was again relayed to the bottom of Ankara's foreign policy agenda, the President of Sudan, Mohammed Nimeyri visited Turkey in 1982, and afterwards, Gazi University opened Turkey's first graduate program on African Studies. The same year, Turkey signed a technical cooperation agreement with Somalia⁷.

Turkey's relations with Africa entered a new phase after 1983 and during the Turgut Ozal years when Ankara, guided by a new spirit of market liberalism and the pursuit of a more multilateral foreign policy. Until the early 90s, the Turkish State Planning Organisation (SPO) sent more than US\$10 million as part of its economic package to Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal, Somalia, and Sudan, while Turkey signed cooperation agreements with Uganda, Nigeria, Chad, Djibouti, Gambia, Zambia and Botswana.

The end of the Cold War changed the global environment in which the Turkish foreign policy evolved, and Ankara had to once again try to explore different regions.

As V. Ipek highlights,

The end of the Cold War allowed Turkish foreign policymakers to pursue alternative policies. Accordingly, they suggested that the country's relations with the West would be stronger and more sustainable if Turkey developed relations with distant world locations. To this end, the Özal administration signed more international agreements with distant countries than any other in Turkish history⁸.

⁶ Ipek, Volkan, Turkey's foreign policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa; P. Gözen Ercan (ed.), Turkish Foreign Policy, ^[1]_[SEP] DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-50451-3_11; 2017

⁷ *idem*

⁸ *idem*

Within this new context, Turkey signed cooperation agreements with more Sub-Saharan countries, supplemented by numerous official visits, such as Cameroon's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jacques Roger Booh's visit in 1991 to Turkey, followed by Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi's visit in 1993 and the 1996 Turgut Özal's visit to Senegal.

The groundbreaking development came in 1998 when Ankara prepared the "African Action Plan" that was initiated by then foreign minister Ismail Cem, partly in response to the EU's failure to recognize Turkey as a candidate state for EU membership at its 1997 summit⁹. This plan was multidimensional, and it aimed at an overall upgrading of Turkey's relations and presence in Africa and more specifically Sub-Saharan Africa through the development of political, economic and cultural ties between Turkey and African countries. According to the Plan¹⁰, Ankara would organize high level visits to and from African countries, would promote contributions to UN technical and humanitarian assistance programs to Africa, would promote economic ties both through business and institutions and would endorse cultural cooperation mainly in the field of education.

However, due to a lack of strong political commitment and mainly because of lack of resources and political stability, the plan was never really activated. Even so, it did show the way forward for the governments of AKP after 2002.

The role of faith-based NGOs

Africa became an integral part of the Turkish foreign policy after AKP came to power and under the wider influence of Ahmet Davutoglu's "strategic depth" theory and his pan-Islamism¹¹ view of Turkey and its global role. Within the wider scope of Davutoglu's perception and strategy, the civilizational discourse – that considers Turkey as a "central country" and imagines a wider territorial base than the nation-state and a transnational identity that revolves around Turkey - became one of the main pillars of the dominant perception of foreign policy that has "won the domestic power struggle and redefined the state, its identity and interests"¹².

Incremental to this civilizational perception "is the legitimization of Islamic solidarity politics (i.e. safeguarding the ummah's interests from Somalia and

⁹ Özkan, M., & Akgün, B. (2010). *Turkey's opening to Africa*. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 48(04), 525-546. doi:10.1017/s0022278x10000595

¹⁰ *idem*

¹¹ Ozkan, Behlül, Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan- Islamism, Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56:4, 119-140, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2014.941570; First published: July 2014. Date accessed: 10 December 2021

¹² Nihat Çelik & Emre İleri (2016) Islamically oriented humanitarian NGOs in Turkey: AKP foreign policy parallelism, *Turkish Studies*, 17:3, 429-448, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2016.1204917

Rakhine to Syria) as part of Turkey’s civilizational duty”.¹³ This radical approach of Turkey’s legitimization in foreign policy not only opened new spheres of potential influence for Ankara around the world, but at the same time, it also opened new horizons for Turkish Islamic faith-based NGOs that have become an integral part of state policies and strategies in Africa.

Özkan and Akgün¹⁴ argue that,

“Generally speaking, the role of civil society in Turkish foreign policy has been quite limited, and it has usually played a complementary role to state policy. However, in the 2000s, probably for the first time in the republican era, civil society organisations have not only contributed to Turkish foreign policy but, most importantly, have actively promoted a policy backed by the state. This is more true of Turkey–Africa relations than of any other field in Turkish foreign policy”.

Given this dynamic, and much before 2002, the pioneer in Turkey-Africa relations was the Gulen network that first started its activities back in 1994. Soon after that, the network has been known to operate in 54 African countries, becoming the backbone of Turkish public diplomacy on the continent¹⁵. Donelli argues that,

Indeed, Turkey’s activity in Africa, most notably in Sub Saharan Africa, has largely depended on Gülenist organizations working in four main fields: humanitarian aid, business, media, and education. Gülenist engagement in Africa was driven, at least initially, by genuine concern, but after 2016, it became clear that its activities were a front for the advancement of the movement’s long-term strategic interests in the region and to expand its own network.

Until 2014, when the first tensions between the Gulen network and the Turkish government erupted and especially after the failed coup attempt of July 15th 2016, the Gulen network and its organizations were playing a leading role in Turkey’s Africa engagement. Three main actors operated as umbrella organizations in Africa for the different activities of the network: The Gulen-inspired schools, the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON) and the network’s global welfare/humanitarian arm known as Kimse Yok Mu Solidarity and Aid Association.

The Gulen network was replaced by other faith-based Turkish NGOs during a shift from TUSKON to DEIK (Foreign Economic Relations Board which from 2014 is a

¹³ *idem*

¹⁴ Özkan, M., & Akgün, B., *idem*

¹⁵ Donelli, Federico, The Gülen Movement in Africa: From Turkish Transnational Asset to Anti-State Lobby; Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs, 2019
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2019.1632588>. Date accessed: 14 March 2021

unit of the Ministry of Economy)¹⁶ gradually after 2014 and more abruptly after the failed coup attempt in 2016. In 2016, the Turkish government took control of the international aid program and Turkey's humanitarian aid is conducted by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)¹⁷. In Africa, TIKA is located in 20 countries and represents a serious link between Turkish actions and Africans¹⁸. Government- controlled Turkish NGOs began developing their own networks in Africa, both for humanitarian aid and for education purposes. Finally, Ankara put pressure on African leaders to shut down the schools of the Gulen network and transfer them to the control of the state-funded Turkish Maarif Foundation¹⁹.

Turkish humanitarian and development assistance became the spearhead of Turkey's presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, while Ankara has heavily invested in "humanitarian diplomacy"²⁰ as a new instrument of foreign policy. "As a form of diplomacy, it goes well beyond humanitarian aid, and is a combination of humanitarian aid, development projects, business agreements, peace building and political relations"²¹.

Turkish assistance rose by over 400% between 2005 and 2016, and the Turkish exports by over 600% in the given period. Direct Turkish investments in Somalia alone are estimated at over US\$100 million. Turkish contractors have so far undertaken over 1150 projects worth US\$55 billion on the continent²². Similarly, Turkish Airlines expanded impressively in Africa during this period. Turkish Airlines flew to 14 African cities in 2011 and now it operates in more than 50 destinations in the region.

Parallel to the Islamic NGOs, TIKA and to DEIK, the Directorate for Religious Affairs of Turkey (DIYANET) is also involved in humanitarian affairs in Africa. "Turkey used this directorate to implement its soft diplomacy through Muslim religion and culture. The goal of this action is to develop a solid bond between Turkish religious leaders and African Muslims"²³.

¹⁶ Guner, Ezgi, The Scalar Politics of Turkey's Pivot to Africa, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; <https://pomeps.org/the-scalar-politics-of-turkeys-pivot-to-africa>; Published: June 2020. Date accessed: 12 march 2021

¹⁷ Gunn, Têtê Jean-Philippe, The presence of Turkey in Africa: Results and perspectives, *Stratejik ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*; <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1204011>. Published date: 2 July 2020. Date accessed: 2 April 2021

¹⁸ *idem*

¹⁹ Federico Donelli, *idem*

²⁰ Benli Altunışık,^[1]^[2]Meliha, Turkey's Humanitarian Diplomacy: The AKP Model, Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI Brief no. 2019:08) 5 p.

²¹ Federico Donelli, *idem*

²² Senem Aydın-Düzgüt (2019): Can non-democracies support international democracy? Turkey as a case study, *Third World Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1636643

²³ Federico Donelli, *idem*

In addition to humanitarian, economic and cultural presence and actions, Turkey also has a visible military footprint as it takes part to peace and security missions of the UNO in Africa, while the Turkish government undertook the stability in the Horn of Africa and Turkey, and maintains military bases in Somalia, Sudan, and Djibouti²⁴.

Religion as a tool

Within the wider Turkish strategy in Africa, the faith-based NGOs play a crucial role on the ground and their religious perception of humanitarian aid has emerged as the cornerstone of Turkey's presence and symbol status in the continent.

Turkey's Africa policy is deeply entrenched in a religious perception of humanitarian aid and around the idea of the wider Islamic community, *ummah*, and the moral responsibility of Turkey and its Islamic community to help and assist African people. According to Atalay²⁵,

Whereas secular NGOs employ a rights-based language in their actions, faith-based NGOs routinely invoke a language of religious duty and obligation when explaining civic action. For the members of Islamic NGOs, civil society is not a liberal category framed by the language of rights, but refers to a morally loaded category framed by the duty-oriented language of religion [...] For the Turkish faith-based NGOs, the assumed moral responsibility emanating from the "imperial legacy" converges with the religious duty of serving fellow Muslims.

However, the importance of religion in Turkey's Africa policy should not be overestimated. Religion appears as a tool – as a legitimization basis for Turkey's involvement – rather than the driving force in most Turkish initiatives²⁶. Turkey's humanitarian and development activities in Africa are part of a wider and deep perception of the role of Turkey in global politics amongst the decision-makers in Ankara, and while religion and Islamic based NGOs play a crucial role as an instrument and facilitator, Turkey's foreign policy in Africa core lies in a larger reading of the world in which Turkey has a global role to play.

Contrary to the image of a country assisting mainly Muslim countries in Africa, Turkey's policy and activities include non-Muslim African countries, thus giving to its Africa policy a more international dimension.²⁷ Turkey wants to take advantage of its non-colonizer past in Africa, while Ankara's adherence to the

²⁴ *idem*

²⁵ Atalay, Zeynep, "Civil Society as Soft Power: Islamic NGOs and Turkish Foreign Policy" in R. Kastoryano" (ed.), *Turkey between Nationalism and Globalization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013

²⁶ Federico Donelli, *idem*

²⁷ Ipek, Volkan. Personal interview, 20 April 2021

principle of non-conditionality, by refraining from imposing political conditions to its support for African countries, portrays the image of a country that is able to engage with recipient governments in a spirit of solidarity²⁸.

Parallel to this global/international policy in order to emerge as a middle power, Ankara is also engaged in a counter-balancing strategy against its regional rivals in the Greater Middle East, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Since 2011 is also shifted its attention to the Horn of Africa. Therefore, Turkey's Africa policy appears to be a well-designed strategic effort of the state, where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays the central role. The MFA takes advantage of the Islamic dimensions of its faith-based civil society in order to emerge as a middle Sunni power in the wider region, and to counterbalance the power of its regional and global rivals.

Moreover, and contrary to all the other fields of Turkish foreign policy, Ankara's Africa policy seems impermeable to emotional nationalism and to an open confrontation with the "West", thus allowing its designers and decision-makers to operate with coherence, professionalism and long-term vision.

Conclusion: Future challenges

Turkey's Africa policy seems to be a very harmonious and efficient combination of soft power/public diplomacy and visionary strategic pragmatism, emerging as a new paradigm in the Turkish foreign policy.

The main characteristics of this paradigm are pragmatism, continuity, adaptability to local needs and dynamics, and efficiency, infused with a humanitarian dimension that permits to Turkey to engage directly with populations, in addition to the state-to-state engagement. Using this potential, Turkey has managed to portray a positive image in Africa. It has also, however, managed to advance its strategic interests within the wider frame of global and regional rivalries.

Traditionally speaking, countries like France, the UK, the United States, and more recently China and Russia, have had a large, growing presence in Africa. For one thing, Turkish foreign and economic policies in Africa have shown a growing interest in the continent as well. Turkey, however, is not the only emerging power that has shifted its focus on Africa. Alongside India, Brazil, and South Korea, Turkey competes for an increasing role and presence²⁹.

²⁸ Federico Donelli, *idem*

²⁹ LSE Ideas, Emerging Powers in Africa. Emerging powers are playing an increasingly consequential role in Africa, London School of Economics;
<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-Emerging-Powers-in-Africa.pdf>; Published: June 2013. Date accessed: 30 March 2021

However, many challenges remain. The first challenge would be financial since the overall negative outlook of the Turkish economy is likely to have an impact both on state development activities, on the coordination efficiency, and on the on the ground impact of the Turkish NGOs.

The second challenge could spring from the Turkish “over-engagement” in local politics, since, even though its Africa policy is successfully implemented since 2005, it seems that Ankara’s expertise in African developments is not yet as strong as it should be in order to permit a deeper engagement.

The third challenge would come from the overall engagement of Turkey with its regional rivals and with countries like France that are traditionally present in Africa and tend to see Turkey as a competitor.

The fourth challenge would come from a change of regime in Turkey and the emergence of a new government that does not the same affinities and links with the Islamic based NGOs and networks and that could eventually seriously jeopardize Ankara’s modus operandi in Africa.

As a result, one can say that while Turkey’s Africa policy emerges as a well-designed and long-term strategy and a genuinely pragmatic perception of its foreign policy, its continuity seems today more than ever to depend on domestic dynamics and challenges that could potentially change its future.