



Cem, spearheaded the “Africa Action Plan” that could be considered as a new road map for the political, commercial and cultural cooperation between Turkey and African countries.

## The African Opening in Turkish Foreign Policy\*

Türk Dış Politikasında Afrika Açılımı

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### Özet

*Bu makale Türkiye'nin Afrika kıtasında son zamanlarda yükselen siyasal ve ekonomik angajmanlarını inceler. Türkiye, geleneksel dış politikasında Batı ve yakın çevresindeki Ortadoğu, Balkanlar, Kafkaslar ve Orta Asya gibi bölgelere özel önem verirken, Türkiye'nin Afrika ilgisi görece olarak yenidir. Hali hazırda Afrika, diğer dış politika öncelikleriyle karşılaştırıldığında ikincil konumdadır. Ancak her geçen gün Türk dış politikasında Afrika önemini artırmakta, özellikle de muhafazakar Anadolu burjuvasının bel kemiği olan küçük ve orta ölçekli işletmelerin büyümesinde yadsınamaz rol oynamaktadır. Bununla birlikte Türk dış politikasının Afrika'ya yönelik söylem ve meta anlatı enstrümanları, bazı konularda Afrika gerçekleriyle örtüşmemekte, çoğu zaman da yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu durumu düzeltmek için dış politika eliti yeni söylem araçları kullanmaya başlamıştır.*

\* The earlier version of this article appeared in Turkish. See İsa Afacan, “Türk Dış Politikası'nda Afrika Açılımı”, *OrtadoğuAnaliz*, Volume 4, Issue 46, October 2012, p. 10-18.

It was designed as one of the “secondary” tools to “complement” other central foreign policy initiatives like the zero-problems with neighbors and multi-dimensional foreign policy. In the same vein, the trade opportunities in Africa turned into important sources of growth for conservative business networks called “Anatolian Tigers”, the backbone of conservative bases that AKP relied on.

### Abstract

*This article explores Turkey's recent political and economic engagement in the African continent. While Turkey traditionally pays special attention to its relations with the West and its immediate neighborhood like Middle East, Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Africa has become center of new Turkish attention. It is still considered secondary to its foreign policy priorities and to the growing commercial interests; however, Africa continues to garner more space in Turkey's new multifaceted foreign policy, and becomes especially crucial for the growth of its small to medium sized firms that had sustained the rise of new Anatolian conservative bourgeoisie. Yet, the instruments of Turkish foreign policy discourses and grand narratives proved to be inadequate, even incompatible in some instances, in Africa. Therefore, foreign policy elite tries to remedy the situation by employing new narratives.*

**Keywords:** African opening, Turkish foreign policy, discourse analysis, grand narratives, and Anatolian tigers

### Introduction

Turkey's transformation in domestic politics and international affairs has been the central theme for scholars and policy makers around the world in the last decade. Especially, Turkey's activism in the Muslim-majority Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is directly associated with the policies of ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which is in power since 2002. Ever

increasing engagement of Turkey in the region in the midst of the turbulent episodes of the Arab Spring polished the image that Turkey has become a pivotal power in the region albeit with some shortcomings. On the other hand, one should not have the perception that the Middle East is the only region that Turkey is closely eyeing on; rather there is another region, African continent, where Turkey heightened its political and economic cloud. Turkey's “African initiative”, which has become increasingly visible especially since 2005, bore its fruits. Ever increasing trade volume, newly opened embassies, cultural and political contacts and thus increasingly visible presence of Turkey in Africa denote, therefore, that there is a clear political will. At this point, it is necessary to ask following crucial questions: Why Turkey needed an African initiative in the first place? Has there been any change observed in the traditional Turkish foreign policy? What opportunities and challenges the African opening bring along?

### Historical Background and the African Initiative

Even though Turkey instantaneously recognized the newly independent African countries during the decolonization process in the late 1950s, it remained either ineffective or indifferent in terms of strengthening its relations with the continent. In the midst of Cold War, Turkey prioritized its attachment to the West, especially the United States, and committed itself to the western political and security systems so as to secure its survival. This move was arguably the most

important strategic proposition of Turkish policy makers in the republican history. Therefore, relations with other regions like Africa were deemed secondary; hence, to a certain extent, they were negligible. As Malik Mufti posited, Stalin's demands of territories from the eastern cities of Turkey, and of setting up Soviet military bases along the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits had critical impact on Turkish strategic calculations.<sup>2</sup> Swinging from neutrality in the interwar period (1923-1945) to the "Westernization" of Turkey's international relations during the Cold War, Turkish political and military elites reached the conclusion that the only alternative to counter Russian threat could be possible in the integration to the western security and political systems.

However, the Cyprus problem that erupted in the mid 60s and 70s forced Turkey to embark on new quests, and induced Turkey to develop new relations especially in the Middle East and Africa. The U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson sent a letter to Turkey in 1964, implying that Turkey might not be defended in the face of a Soviet attack if Turkey would not restrain itself in the Cyprus question. When Ankara militarily intervened in Cyprus in 1974, Washington brought the arms embargo to the table, sparking further Turkish quest for alternatives against the western policies.<sup>3</sup> The fact that Turkey did not receive the support expected from the western countries, especially the U.S., on Cyprus, and on the contrary, that they supported the arguments of Greece and Greek Cypriots was a major milestone for the Turkish foreign policy makers. The natural outcome of this realization was to diversify foreign policy options and instruments, and particularly to increase the number of countries providing support on important votes on Turkey in the United Nations. It is necessary to see the root cause of Turkish approach towards the Middle East and African countries in 60s and 70s as a maneuver to balance its relative isolation in the Western axis and to prove its relative "value" to the West. However, this strategy did not adequately work, and Turkey could not receive the support it expected from countries from the Middle East and Africa. Therefore, Africa would not be in the Turkish agenda for a long period of

time until the late 1990s due to the debilitating instability in Turkey's political and economic spheres.

Through the new multi-dimensional foreign policy vision launched by then minister of foreign affairs, İsmail Cem in 1998, Africa was included in the radar of Turkish foreign policy once again.<sup>4</sup> Cem spearheaded the "Africa Action Plan" that could be considered as a new road map for the political, commercial and cultural cooperation between Turkey and African countries. Some of the proposals of the plan like opening of new embassies, and improving political and commercial contacts later formed the basis of the "Year of Africa" policies to be launched by the AKP government in 2005. However, it is necessary to emphasize an important point: Despite the authenticity of new foreign policy vision by İsmail Cem based on the premise of developing political and commercial relations with the neighboring countries and Africa; major challenges Turkey encountered both in domestic and foreign politics in the 90s in part entailed this pursuit to find a way out to solve or at least ease the problems. In domestic politics the Islamist-secular polarization, mounting economic problems and pressing Kurdish question compelled politicians to look for openings that were helpful to diminish internal pressures. On the foreign policy front, the fact that the European Union did not mention Turkey in the list of member countries during the 1997 Luxembourg Summit was an alarm bell for Turkish policy makers to embark on new quests. It is essential to read the 1998 African opening in this context. Besides, Turkey has been ruled by fragile coalition governments for the most part in the 90s, an initiative such as the African opening in foreign affairs did not have any major cost to be reflected on domestic politics, to trigger the existing polarization or worsen the situation. Hence, the initiative had nothing but all positive connotations in the Turkish political lexicon at the time. However, due to the instability of the coalition government and the economic crisis that broke out in 2000, the Africa Action Plan could not be put in practice. Therefore it was destined to only stay on paper, as it was in the cases of Turkish openings to the





*TUSKON organized seven "Turkey-Africa Foreign Trade Bridge" summits since 2005.*

Central Asia in the early 90s and the appeals to neighboring countries in the Middle East after the Gulf War.

#### **The 2005 "Year of Africa": Trade and Politics**

AKP came to power in late 2002 after the November elections when the most of the established political actors were eliminated due to the grueling economic crisis that had profoundly shaken Turkey's political calculus. On the other hand, AKP found itself in an environment where the legitimacy of its Islamist past was questioned. Thus, despite the fact that it came to power alone breaking the long cycles of coalition governments, its political legitimacy was problematic in the eyes of secular circles. In addition, during the first two years they were in power, the party had to deal with some of the most pressing vital problems in foreign policy arena like the Iraqi War of 2003, the Cyprus problem and relations with the European Union. Therefore, Afri-

ca could not be a "priority" on the foreign policy agenda until 2005.<sup>5</sup> Even though Turkey prepared the "Development of Economic Relations Strategy with African Countries" in early 2003, there was not any major progress until 2005. By 2005, the AKP government, to a certain degree, consolidated its legitimacy both in domestic and foreign affairs, and then it took the opportunity to deal with the issues which are deemed secondary in the government's agenda like the African opening. As mentioned, unlike the Iraqi war or the Cyprus issue, the African opening is not in a position to create ideological polarizations in domestic realm but it does not mean that improving political, cultural and economic relations with Africa was prioritized. On the contrary, it was designed as one of the "secondary" tools to "complement" other central foreign policy initiatives like the zero-problems with neighbors and multi-dimensional foreign policy. In the same vein, the trade opportunities in Africa turned into important sources of growth for conserva-

tive business networks called “Anatolian Tigers”, the backbone of conservative bases that AKP relied on.

The African opening is important for the small and medium sized enterprises, which are considered to be the engine of economic growth.<sup>6</sup> It is consequential that conservative business associations like the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen’s Association (MÜSİAD) and Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON) took major steps especially in exports to Africa. These two generally comprise small and medium sized industrial and production enterprises. Considering that doing business in a continent like Africa is riskier and lesser known in Turkey in terms of trade practices as compared to “known” regions like Europe and the U.S., it shows the desire and drive of the aforementioned organizations to grow. For instance, TUSKON organized seven “Turkey-Africa Foreign Trade Bridge” summits since 2005. About 350 entrepreneurs from 54 African countries attended the seventh matchmaking trade summit and 10,000 bilateral business interviews took place.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, “they formed a basis to create a trade volume of 5 billion U.S. dollars.”<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, Turkey’s African opening is a policy that gives the opportunity to increase the export figures, improve employment opportunities at home and diversify the portfolios of “Anatolian Tigers” which are in a sustained growth since Turgut Özal first opened their paths to international markets. It is safe to say that the rise of these conservative companies in part contributed to the victory of AKP in three successive general elections. In fact, the rising Anatolian conservative bourgeoisie assumed the role of relatively balancing the traditional secular business elite represented within the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD) in political and economic terms.

Turkey’s engagement in Africa, illustrated in Table 1, was also reflected on trade figures. While the trade volume with the whole continents was 3,7 billion dollars in 2003, it reached 6,8 billion dollars in 2005 and 17 billion dollars in 2011. In a short period, the trade volume between Africa and Turkey increased 4,5 times. One of the most

important aspects that grab the attention in the table is that the trade volume which was around 11 billion dollars in 2007 increased to 14,7 billion dollars in the following year, a staggering 34 per cent increase. Although it is not seen in the table, Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) gives the figures related to the African continent by dividing it into two (North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa) like other international economic and financial institutions. Reviewing those figures separately reveals that some 60 per cent of total trade volume, in other words 10 billion dollars, was realized with the North African countries. This shows that the trade volume between Turkey and Sub-Saharan Africa is relatively smaller.

*Table 1: The figures were gathered from the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute.*

Year	Export (Dollar)	Import (Dollar)
2003	2,131,216,919	1,549,664,670
2004	2,968,147,261	2,598,417,506
2005	3,631,246,697	3,216,470,735
2006	4,565,791,789	3,910,081,662
2007	5,976,343,671	5,106,537,905
2008	9,062,603,182	5,596,475,645
2009	10,154,641,823	3,937,890,497
2010	9,283,065,729	4,824,006,944
2011	10,333,821,248	6,766,713,095

Although the African opening benefitted Turkey’s economic bottom line, one must look at trade figures from a comparative perspective to identify its proper place and context in the economy. For instance, the total trade volume of Turkey is 375 billion dollars in 2011. Given that Turkey’s trade in the same year stands 37 billion dollars with Germany, 32 billion dollars with Russia, 25 billion dollars with China, 21 billion dollars with the United States, 16 billion dollars with Iran and 8,5 billion dollars with Iraq (mostly with the Kurdistan Regional Government),<sup>9</sup> the 17 billion-dollar-trade volume with the African continent, comprising more than 50 countries, is relatively smaller. However, as indicated, trade with Africa for the small and medium sized enterprises is critical in terms of increasing their competitiveness in the global economy and hen-

ce reinforcing conservative upper-middle class in Turkey.

In parallel with the surge in trade, political developments have also accelerated. In line with its “Year of Africa” policy, Turkey gained the status of “observer country” in 2005 within the African Union (AU), and during the summit held in 2008, the AU declared Turkey as a “strategic partner”.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, the 1<sup>st</sup> Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit was organized in Istanbul, and the road map for cooperation was determined with the participation of 49 African countries and 11 regional and international organizations in order to improve relations in economic, political and cultural fields. Turkey increased the number of its embassies especially in Sub-Saharan Africa in order to formally reinforce its political presence. During the period between 2009-2012, Turkey opened embassies in Tanzania, Cote d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, Uganda, Angola, Madagascar, Zambia, Mozambique, Mauritania, and Zimbabwe as demonstrated in Table 2; and the Foreign Ministry declared that official representative offices would be opened in Guinea, Chad, and Gambia in coming years.<sup>11</sup>

*Table 2: Turkey’s newly opened embassies in Sub-Saharan Africa*

Year	Country
2009	Tanzania
2009	Ivory Coast
2010	Cameroon
2010	Ghana
2010	Uganda
2010	Mali
2010	Angola
2010	Madagascar
2011	Zambia
2011	Mozambique
2011	Mauritania
2011	Zimbabwe
2011	Somalia
2011	Gambia
2011	Niger
2011	South Sudan
2012	Namibia
2012	Gabon
2012	Burkina Faso

The relations that Turkey strived to improve with African countries through the initiatives launched in 1998 and 2005, started to bring results also in international relations besides the trade. In an important vote at the United Nations General Assembly in 2008, Turkey was elected as a non-permanent member of the Security Council for the years 2009 and 2010. Turkey attained the opportunity to take part in the most important decision-making body of the United Nations by receiving the votes of 151 member countries. This vote signified that Turkey received the biggest support in its republican history at the United Nations. It is obvious that Turkey’s membership at the Security Council could be possible through the votes of the African countries. As a matter of fact, while relating Turkey’s non-permanent membership to the Security Council and its relations with African countries, Turkish Ambassador to the United Nations Ertuğrul Apakan argued:

“We approached to the problems of Africa as if we are an African country. We became a Security Council member that tried to understand and solve the problems of the member countries from a wider perspective. We endeavored to become a country that strived to form a consensus as well. We acted in line with the idea of contributing to stability, peace and strengthening of the UN. We developed significant dialogues through the activities we carried out in Sub-Saharan countries. What makes us different is the fact that we can talk to anyone, that we address the problems of the members in a wider framework, and that we adopt an independent approach. Turkey’s efficient and active foreign policy increased the attention towards Turkey.”<sup>12</sup>

The African opening in 2005 did not stem from a concern of increasing the alternatives in foreign policy or an obligation like in 1970s and 1998. Isolation in the international arena was the main reason for African initiatives in 1970s and 1998. The 2005 African opening, on the other hand, is a complementary element of the multi-dimensional foreign policy strategy of the AKP government. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the action plans prepared in 1998 and in 2005 are



Turkey's changing approaches at the beginning to the Arab Spring in North Africa (Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt) generated the question of consistency in foreign policy. All in all, as Turkey advances its relations with Africa, it will be very difficult for the country to exclude itself out of Africa's internal conflicts and political problems.

different in scope. In a sense, the 2005 "Year of Africa" functioned as activating the action plan that could not have been put in practice in 1998, as well as contributing to develop strategies in line with the material capabilities and competence of Turkey. For example, in the 1998 action plan, the necessity of increasing the number of embassies in Africa was highlighted, but the economic conditions were not suitable to do so. The objective of opening new embassies to a large extent was realized in the forthcoming years (see Table 2).

Even though Turkey exclusively focused on mutual economic growth in Africa, the positions that Turkey already took or will assume in intra-African conflicts or clashes in the future might put the existing gains at risk. The AKP government invited Sudan's President Omar Al Bashir, for whom the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for carrying out alleged crime of genocide, to a meeting in Turkey and even supported him. This move increased the suspicions about the direction and future of Turkey's Africa policy.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Turkey's changing approaches at the beginning to the Arab Spring in North Africa (Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt) generated the question of consistency in foreign policy. All in all, as Turkey advances its relations with Africa, it will be very difficult for the country to exclude itself out of Africa's internal conflicts and political problems. It is inevitable that some of Turkey's trade and political relations in the continent will be harmed when Turkey starts to take sides. Moreover, other countries that have been carrying out their commercial and political presence in Africa for many decades are obvio-

usly the elements of competition for Turkey. In addition to European countries that have been present in Africa for centuries, China is the other significant player that had an established African strategy working almost impeccably since 1960s.

Supporting many freedom movements in Africa during the decolonization process, China prioritized its strategy on Africa, still continues to do so, as a global economic power that needs raw materials to maintain its economic growth.<sup>14</sup> Even though China adopted an ideological approach towards Africa based on Maoism in earlier years, then the country left the ideology and developed a new discourse for Africa highlighting mutual cooperation and economic growth that can be described as "apolitical."<sup>15</sup> Consequently, Chinese leaders have been constantly emphasizing their intentions on Africa on the basis of friendship and mutual respect, providing development aid to many African countries, and affirming their solid support for cooperation on the issues of importance to Africa in the United Nations. Some analysts in Turkey recommended Turkish foreign policy makers to follow the same path.<sup>16</sup> Compared to European countries, this policy shows that China's African policy is more successful.<sup>17</sup>

### **Foreign Policy Discourse and the African Initiative**

Although the opening to Africa provides many opportunities for Turkey both in commercial and political arenas, as indicated, it also produced major challenges and problems while determining foreign policy priorities and parameters.

Maybe the most important of all is the challenge that what kind of discourse(s) will be developed in a country where political and commercial relations are being established for the first time. For example, what kind of discourse(s) a Turkish ambassador, who will go to Gambia or Namibia for the first time, should develop that it would be possible to promote Turkey's interests in these countries. Building a new discourse is not as easy and smooth as constructing new embassies in relatively "unknown" countries.

There are several "grand narratives" to be used in the regions like Europe, Balkans, Middle East and Central Asia where they are the traditional areas of the Turkish foreign policy and considered "known" regions. These "grand narratives" could be identified as "Turkey is a part of the western security system provided by NATO, "dialogue between various religious and ethnic zones," Westernism, Islam, and Ottomanism. For instance, a Turkish ambassador who will go to Germany or Saudi Arabia might use a discourse based on Turkey's NATO membership and its westernization quest for her mission in Germany. For Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, ambassador might bring forward Islam, NATO membership and the discourse that Turkey is a bridge between the West and East. However, these narratives would not mean anything and may not resonate in the continent, especially in the Sub-Saharan African countries. Then, Turkey is compelled to develop new discourses towards Africa that defines Turkey's intentions and interests clearly for the region.<sup>18</sup> Turkish foreign policy makers have had to generate new discourses in African countries where new embassies are opened especially since 2009. In the same vein, Turkish senior officials or business people paying visits to Africa feel the need to adapt their discourses into local and regional sensitivities with each passing day. For example, while the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan says "Africa is the center of our common future,"<sup>19</sup> President Abdullah Gül states "Turkey has always felt unrequited love for Africa."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, President Gül posits in another speech that: "We have never run after only our own interests. We know that the states, which only looked after their own interests

in the past, engendered major damage to Africa. The international community should know that we could only be equal partners with Africa."<sup>21</sup> In a meeting held in Ghana, President Gül claims that: "We are different from Europeans. We do not take away your raw materials. We invest and also bring along technology and qualified work force. We have done so in other African countries. We already began to do so in Ghana as well."<sup>22</sup> Evidently, Turkey has not been talking about Westernism or NATO-based security discourses, and even it has been implicitly criticizing the Western practices in Africa during the colonial period. This situation points out to a new practice in Turkish foreign policy. The declaration that Turkey could only be an "equal partner" with Africa gives the early impression that new discourses are in the process of being developed. Besides these examples, both political leaders and senior bureaucrats have recently adopted sterile, apolitical and technocratic styles in their African discourses. It is interesting to note that China has also been using the same discourse patterns for decades. In this respect, it is meaningful that Turkey is following the Chinese example, not the Western bloc of which Turkey has been a part for decades. Economic interdependence, development, expansion of trade volume, and technology and know-how transfer to Africa have become the most important discourse examples of the Turkish foreign policy makers. However, as the relations advance, Turkey has to develop more sophisticated discourses and new foreign policy instruments. When being late in this process or using failed instruments, there is a potential that the current bilateral trade and political relations in Africa could slow down or even regress.

## **Conclusion**

Even though the 2005 African opening is an extension of the 1998 "African Action Plan," it made the greatest progress compared to earlier periods in terms of boosting trade figures, opening new embassies and promoting political relations. As much as the African opening supports and will continue to support the ever strengthening dynamism of Turkish economy, it



also brings obstacles to Turkey. In order to overcome these difficulties, the action plan applied for the whole African continent should be customized to each country, and the national or regional differences should be taken into consideration. Otherwise, the foreign policy instruments, which work seamlessly for South Africa, might not work for Algeria, Cote d'Ivoire or Uganda. Besides, when facing current or potential prob-

lems, it is necessary to make necessary strategies and contingency plans. Last but not the least, it would be appropriate to prepare national programs to change the pejorative and often stereotypical African perceptions in Turkey, and to improve prejudiced perspectives of not only the citizens but also political and business elite towards Africa through education.

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