Turkey’s Growing Influence in Africa

In recent years, reports on political and economic landscape in African countries have increasingly more often mentioned Turkey. In fact, this is true not only for Libya and other African nations located on the Mediterranean coastline but also for countries in the center of this continent and south of the equator.

Focusing on Africa has become a key foreign policy direction for the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in Turkey in 2002. As of January 1, 2009, the country had only 12 embassies in Africa, seven of which were located south of the Sahara, however, nowadays, the number of consulates in this continent exceeds forty. In view of this, the phrase “today, Turkey is a strategic partner of the African Union” has been used more and more frequently by Turkish officials in their formal speeches. In April 2020, yet another Turkey-Africa summit was set to be held in Istanbul. Representatives of more than 60 African nations were due to participate in it. Unfortunately, the event was postponed on account of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Turkey is developing relations with countries of the African continent in four main areas.

First and foremost, it is expanding its political influence in Africa, as evidenced by the growing number of Turkish diplomatic missions in the African continent as of recent, and the increasing number of official visits paid by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and accompanying officials from various Turkish agencies to 30 African nations over a period of 10 years.

According to Turkish media outlets, Ankara is clearly looking to African countries for support on various issues within the United Nations (UN), including the reform of the UN Security Council. It is also worth reminding our
Another area of focus for Turkey in Africa has, of course, to do with its aim to increase its economic influence there and trade volumes with African nations. Since in most African countries, on average, salaries are low, they are becoming increasingly more attractive for Turkish businesses that can move their manufacturing facilities to these nations, as such work does not require highly skilled labor. As a result, “Turkey and African countries’ bilateral trade rose $23.8 billion in 2018 from $5.5 billion in 2003, while Turkey’s exports jumped by 579% to $14.4 billion in the same period”. Turkey’s exports to African nations far outstrip its imports from the continent in value. Turkey primarily sells goods from metallurgical industries, vehicles, mechanical, electrical and medical equipment, spare parts, chemical and food products, fabric and clothes, tobacco, paper and materials for the construction sector to Africa. Turkey imports agricultural and food products, textiles, leather and crude minerals from the continent.

The country has also become a sizable investor in economies of African nations, which has helped Ankara consolidate its position in their markets. At present, Turkey has embassies in 42 nations and commercial counselors in 26 countries of the African continent. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) carried out nearly 2,000 projects and activities the previous year in 150 countries. And Africa is a key region for TIKA, which had 16 representative offices in the continent that carried out hundreds of projects there. In 2016, Turkey’s Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MÜSİAD) opened its Sudan Office. Turkish Airlines (THY, Turkey’s flagship air carrier) has increasingly focused its efforts on Africa and became one of the airlines flying to the most destinations in the continent. In 2019, THY flew to 51 cities in African countries.

In the given climate, the fact that there is a growing number of migrants from Africa in Turkey is viewed positively in the latter. After all, they are skilled workers and many of them are university graduates who speak English and French. In fact, Turkish immigration and naturalization laws are being amended to reflect international standards.

Another important area that Ankara has concentrated its efforts on in Africa has to do with ideology. The Turkish government aims to increase its reach in this sphere and to counter the influence of AKP’s ideological opponent, Fethullah Gülen, by having FETO (or Hizmet movement) educational institutions closed in African nations, such as Burundi, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. According to data for 2018, the Gülen movement ran 105 schools and universities with 10,000 students, in Africa. According to a number of observers, the ruling Justice and Development Party’s increased focus in this direction stems from its aim to spread its Pan-Islamist or Neo-Ottoman ideology, since Turkey’s influence in the continent waned as a result of the dissolution of the Ottoman empire.

Hence, nowadays, training workers from Africa in areas, such as governance, media and communication, tourism and commerce, plays an important role in Turkey’s efforts to increase its clout on the continent. In addition, Ankara has focused on expanding its influence in the religious sphere via its Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which has been involved in building and repairing mosques in African nations, even those where the majority of the population does not identify themselves as Muslim. In addition, Diyanet has been providing religious training to Africans via a network of schools and grant programs. And as part of the government’s neo-Ottoman policies, Turkish-non-governmental organizations have been building Islamic-Ottoman style complexes (or külliyes) comprising mosques and other buildings for various charitable services for African communities.

In recent years, it has become increasingly important for Turkey to consolidate its position in the military sphere in Africa. In 2016, Turkey established its first military base abroad in Somalia (Africa) meant to house approximately 200 Turkish servicemen and to train 10,500 Somali troops at a time. Turkey became the fifth nation from outside Africa after the United States, France, Great Britain and Japan to have its own military base in the continent.

Using Washington’s desire for its allies to become increasingly involved in ensuring security in the Persian Gulf region as an excuse, Turkey completed the construction of its second military base abroad, in Qatar (as reported by Al Jazeera in November 2019). Similarly, Britain opened a permanent military base in Bahrain while France in the United Arab Emirates. The Turkish facility is near Qatar’s Tariq Ibn Ziyad military base, located south of the capital, where first Turkish ground troops arrived in October 2015. In 2019, it was reported that there were approximately 3,000 Turkish servicemen stationed at the Tariq Ibn Ziyad base.
Ankara’s actions of this nature are a cause for concern in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. After all, Turkey, under the guise of restoring and reconstructing Ottoman-era buildings on Sudan’s Suakin Island, could establish a military base there, which would give Ankara more control over the Red Sea and its shipping routes, and the Suez Canal too. And in fact, Turkey has already established its military presence in the Arabian Peninsula with its base in Qatar, where its ground and air force troops are stationed. The aforementioned concerns are further exacerbated by increasingly frequent reports about Ankara’s aim to construct yet another military base abroad - in Libya - in collaboration with Fayez al-Sarraj-led Government of National Accord (GNA), supported by Turkey.

Recently, Western nations have increasingly begun expressing similar unease to that felt by some Persian Gulf Monarchies about Ankara’s actions in Africa. In large part, these concerns stem from the fact that during his visits to African nations, Turkey’s leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has continued to promote and promulgate the idea that policies of the Ottoman Empire differed to colonial practices of Western European nations and the US, and to criticize policies followed by Western countries in Africa. For example, at the beginning of 2013, Recep Tayyip Erdogan made the following statements at the Parliament of Gabon: “When the time comes, history will definitely ask those who take Africa’s diamonds, gold, underground riches and even their people and leave those left behind to poverty. This ancient continent Africa, where human beings were born but where humanity was slaughtered by the greedy, will sooner or later rise up once again and guide humanity with the power it has gained from its history.” “The Ottoman Empire has been the symbol of living in Africa in a friendly and brotherly respect for centuries. Never and never having acted with imperial feelings, the Ottoman State stood against exploitation in the strongest way,” he continued. “Together with Africa, Turkey passed through an eternal basin of history,” said Recep Tayyip Erdogan towards the end of his speech.

Nowadays, this “rivalry” with Turkey is particularly evident in Libya in light of recent developments there. The Northern African country has become the latest battleground of sorts where Western and Middle Eastern players can wage a more sophisticated campaign against Turkey. In fact, efforts to oppose Ankara include support shown by Persian Gulf monarchies and a number of Western nations towards Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army, as well as criticism of Turkey’s policies in Africa. In fact, in his public speeches, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman openly accused Recep Tayyip Erdogan of attempting to create a new Ottoman Caliphate.

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