

TURKEY AND SOUTH AFRICA: TOWARDS THE SECOND DECADE

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[This article is an attempt to provide some information and assess the present state of relations between Turkey and South Africa. It reflects the personal views of its author and not necessarily those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.]

Although diplomatic relations between Turkey and South Africa were formally established only about a decade ago, contacts between the Turks as Ottomans and South Africa go back as far as the second half of the 19th century. The presence of a Muslim population and the discovery of rich gold and diamond resources in South Africa probably prompted the Ottomans to have a closer look at the region. Some scholars have even speculated that the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the 14th century might have contributed indirectly to the discovery of the southern part of Africa and the Cape of Good Hope. It has been suggested that the Ottomans, by occupying the Black Sea and the Mediterranean regions which used to be the main road of spices from the East to Europe, forced the Europeans to seek other ways to get access again to the East, thereby leading to the discovery of this part of the world.

Formal relations between the Ottoman Empire and South Africa opened with the appointment of Mr. de Roubaix, a local resident, as Honorary Consul of the Ottoman government in Cape Town. Historic records indicate that Mr. de Roubaix, a judge by profession, was appointed Honorary Consul on 18 February 1861. Subsequently, in 1889, the Ottomans sent Mr. Bettelheim, a Christian Ottoman subject, as Consul of the Empire to South Africa. Mr. Bettelheim remained in his post in Cape Town until 4 January 1896. The Ottoman government also maintained Honorary Consulates in Johannesburg and Durban at the time.

When the first Ottoman Consul assumed his duties in Cape Town in 1889, only a handful of nations which now have missions in Pretoria were represented in the British colony of South Africa. At a later stage, in April 1914, Mehmet Remzi Bey, another Ottoman subject, was assigned as Consul General of the Ottoman Empire to Johannesburg. Upon the outbreak of the First World War, as the Ottomans entered into war with Germany against the British Empire and its allies, he was interned by the British. Mehmet Remzi Bey died in 1916 and was buried in Johannesburg where his grave can still be found. In the context of Ottoman relations with South Africa it should also be noted that, at the request of the members of the sizeable Muslim community who were living in the Cape Colony, the Ottoman government, with the knowledge and approval of the British authorities, sent Ebubekir Efendi, a Muslim alim, to Cape Town to teach and preach Islam and help settle religious matters among Muslims. Ebubekir Efendi, whose salary was paid by the Ottoman government, arrived in Cape Town on 13 January 1863. He married a British woman in Cape Town, and continued his functions until his death in 1880. His descendants still live in various parts of South Africa.

THE TURKISH STANCE TOWARDS APARTHEID

During the apartheid regime of white minority governments, no official contact was established between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of South Africa. Turkey has always been actively engaged in the works of the UN for the elimination of any kind of racism and racial discrimination. It strongly opposed the apartheid regime, consistently voting for all relevant UN resolutions condemning it. While many other countries maintained formal relations with successive apartheid governments, Turkey shied away from establishing any ties, diplomatic, economic, cultural or otherwise, with the regime in Pretoria. Its principled position lasted until the very end when it had become clear that the evil system of apartheid was going to be abandoned and replaced by a democratic government based on majority rule. Turkey also acted as an active member of the UN Council for Namibia and supported every international action against apartheid and colonialism. The government in Ankara also contributed regularly to the UN Trust Fund for South Africa and the UN Fund for Namibia, of which it was one of the trustees. Turkish governments, joining all efforts that the international community had taken against apartheid, also provided humanitarian assistance to its victims. Supporting the fight against apartheid in South Africa from the beginning and joining hands with anti-apartheid forces of the international community, Turkey demonstrated its solidarity on every occasion with the anti-apartheid campaigners and the oppressed masses of South Africa in the UN and other international fora. Numerous statements made by the Turkish ministers of foreign affairs and other high ranking officials to this effect are matters of public record.

RESUMPTION OF RELATIONS

Towards the end of the 1980s, commercial contacts were established between private business firms in both Turkey and South Africa. The creation of these kind of relations can be attributed to two facts. First, Turkey was trying to establish its newly adopted export-oriented foreign trade policy, in which opening up to fresh markets had been encouraged as much as possible. Second, there was an urgent demand for cleaner coal from South Africa to combat the heavy air pollution prevailing in Turkey's major urban population centres, most notably Ankara (a precious metal – gold -- was also imported from South Africa). Parallel to the developments leading towards the collapse of the apartheid system in South Africa, the two countries decided to establish formal relations on 7 June 1991. The South African trade office that had been opened in 1989 in Istanbul was transformed into a Consulate General, and Turkey opened a Consulate General of its own in Johannesburg the same year. Relations were subsequently upgraded to the diplomatic level in October 1992, with embassies being set up in the respective capitals in 1994.

Successive Turkish governments have maintained that post-apartheid South Africa, with its outstanding industrial, natural and human resources, is a model and a source of inspiration of ethnic and national reconciliation as well as economic and social stability, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights for the countries in and beyond its region. In the post apartheid period, while the new South African government has pursued a policy of expanding and strengthening its foreign relations with all countries, it has chosen to give priority to those which had hosted, funded and supported the ANC and its leadership during the struggle

against the old regime. In the early 1990s, at the height of the transition period in South Africa from apartheid to democracy, some members of the terror organization PKK, using their contacts with several ANC representatives in Europe, attempted to influence leading figures of the ANC. Having held several meetings and talks with members of the ANC, these extremists managed to make some impact. As a result of pressures by these elements, the new government led by the ANC decided to impose a self-styled arms embargo on Turkey in May 1995. This was largely academic, as South Africa had never been among the principal suppliers to Turkey's large weapons market and it was obviously aimed at pandering to South Africa's own domestic political exigencies. In retaliation, Turkey felt it appropriate to place certain restrictions on the import of defence articles from South Africa. Earlier, Mr. Mandela's decline of the Atatürk Peace Prize in 1992 had already cast an unfortunate shadow on bilateral relations.

Although the official position of the South African government with regard to the "Kurdish problem" has remained close to the official Turkish approach in general, some groups in South Africa tried to draw analogies in one way or other between the ANC and the PKK. Such a comparison between the ANC's just struggle against the apartheid regime and the undisputed terrorist nature of the PKK was not only irrelevant but did a great injustice to the reputation of the ANC. It is also known that some elements in the Greek and Greek Cypriot community in South Africa also deemed it expedient to attempt to influence the attitude of South Africa towards Turkey. On the other hand, the fact that the ANC did not have an office or a permanent representative in Turkey during its struggle against apartheid may have also played a role in the initial approach of the new black majority government in South Africa towards Turkey when it assumed power in 1994.

BILATERAL TRADE EXCHANGES

In spite of the relatively reserved political atmosphere, bilateral relations in the fields of trade, investment and tourism have grown from strength to strength during the last decade. Over the past few years, the bilateral trade volume has stood annually between around US\$250 million and US\$300 million. Turkey is South Africa's largest trading partner in a region which stretches from Eastern Europe to Central Asia and from Russia to the Middle East. Similarly, South Africa is Turkey's largest trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa. There is presently more than US\$60 million worth of Turkish direct investment in South Africa. These are entirely fixed capital investments, manufacturing locally consumer goods which were previously exported to South Africa from Turkey. These businesses employ some 500 people, contributing to both the Turkish and the South African economies.

Most of the Turkish investment in South Africa belong to the companies which initially entered the South African market as exporters. Now they produce goods in South Africa not only for the local market but also for neighbouring countries. This may well serve as a good model for South African firms which are willing to open up to new and rapidly developing markets around Turkey. By setting up production lines in Turkey, on their own or as joint ventures, they can easily gain access to the Turkish and the adjoining markets. It is noteworthy in this relationship that economic and trade relations have developed during recent years basically on the strength of their own dynamics. There is a lot to be done in this area, as both countries stand to benefit tremendously from increased cooperation. Tourism is a newly discovered area of interaction between the peoples of South Africa and Turkey. The number of tourists traveling between the two countries is increasing every year. In 2001 and 2002, more than 33,000 South African nationals chose Turkey as their holiday destination. It

is also noted that the number of Turkish visitors to South Africa has been on the rise in recent years.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Cooperation in the political sphere

South Africa occupies an important place in Turkey's policy of opening up to the continent of Africa, not only as a gateway to southern African region, but also as one of the most developed countries in the whole of Africa. As such, Turkey is keen to learn as much as possible from the experience and the expertise of South Africa in its efforts to strengthen ties across the continent. In return, Turkey is well positioned to provide guidance for South Africa, especially in economic and commercial enterprises in regions such as the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia. The physical distance between the two countries should not be viewed as an impediment to bilateral cooperation. However, there has not been a sufficient number of bilateral high-level visits between the two countries and this should be addressed. Similarly, it would be fruitful if some kind of contacts between parliaments of the two countries could be established. The members of parliament should be encouraged to get acquainted with and have better understanding of each other's countries. As a matter of fact, in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, a Turkish-South African Parliamentary Friendship Group has already been set up. It appears there are some technical problems for establishing such groups on the part of the South African parliament. In the meantime, other ways and means should be found for establishing contacts and cooperation between the parliaments of the two countries. The conclusion of bilateral agreements which have been under discussion for some time would also give a new impetus to the relations.

The exploitation of economic and commercial potential

Both Turkey and South Africa are among the larger emerging economies of our times. Both are members of the G-20; the size of their GNP's is comparable; they have more or less the same volume of foreign trade; they have the same main trading partner (the European Union-EU) and they have similar policies of export-led growth. The goods that they traditionally export are different in nature, making the economies of the two countries complementary, rather than competitive. Their locations in their respective geographical regions allow access to nearby markets as well. There are obviously sufficient grounds for both countries to build up a sound economic and commercial partnership. Both sides can make use of the existing potential in a more productive and efficient manner.

The establishment of an appropriate and favorable legal framework for bilateral economic relations is of crucial importance. In fact, both sides are in an advanced stage of concluding agreements on the prevention of double taxation as well as on economic and technical cooperation. These are the instruments which in general have proved their usefulness in creating a better environment for economic operators. Their early conclusion will certainly be very useful. The organization of mutual trade exhibitions could contribute to increasing the bilateral trade volume. Similarly, the encouragement of businessmen to participate in fairs both in Turkey and South Africa would serve this purpose. Exchange of visits at the level of ministers of trade and industry, agriculture, health would also be useful. A Turkish South African Business Council was established in 1999. The work of this Council will contribute substantially to promoting and supporting the contacts and mutual visits of business people.

There is no better way to gain an understanding of each other's capabilities than by direct contacts.

It is also worthwhile to look at the current or forthcoming links of Turkey and South Africa with the EU, which is the largest and the most important trading partner for both countries, in terms of possibilities that these could create at bilateral level. A free trade agreement can undoubtedly be very instrumental in boosting the bilateral trade. With the free trade agreement between South Africa and the EU signed in 2000 and the fact that Turkey has been in Customs Union with the EU since 1996, it is now possible to conclude a similar agreement between Turkey and South Africa. Following its obligation under the Customs Union to implement the EU's Common Commercial Policy, Turkey forwarded a draft agreement to South Africa in 2000 aiming at gradually establishing a free trade area between the two countries. Although Turkey has expressed, on various occasions, its strong will to start negotiations on the said draft, it has not received a favourable response yet.

CONCLUSION

Turkey and South Africa are two important role players with the largest economies, based on free competition and democratically functioning governments, in their respective regions. Although the history of the relationship is new and many aspects of this relationship are still at an early stage, a lot of ground has already been covered. Luckily, there is currently no significant political issues standing in the way of closer cooperation. What is lacking, perhaps, is that there is not much recognition, as yet, in the two countries as regards the other's existence and the potential that is there to seize. As outlined above, both countries have significantly large economies, but only a fraction of their huge foreign trade involves bilateral trade. Despite the recent difficulties that the Turkish economy has had, Turkey and South Africa have managed to maintain a healthy level of two way trade which in itself is an indication of the already robust nature of the economic and commercial relationship.

There are all the ingredients for a closer and mutually beneficial partnership between the two countries not only in trade, but all other areas possible. It is incumbent upon the decision-makers of both countries to pay closer attention. A closer and more fruitful chapter in the history of Turkish-South African relations should not be seen as a distant dream. Both sides would do well to look to the future with renewed vigor and dynamism.

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