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The direction of travel for Turkish policy towards Sudan

Turkey is likely to continue increasing economic and military links with Sudan, but high-profile political engagement with Sudanese officials will remain difficult for Ankara.

Turkey has been actively stepping up its cooperation with Sudan since 2006 when Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan visited the country. President Omar al-Bashir was twice hosted in Ankara before being indicted by the International Criminal Court on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Although Erdoğan has defended Bashir over these charges, Turkey has since then somewhat unwillingly decided to temporarily discontinue high-profile contact with Bashir and concentrate on dialogue with other Sudanese political figures, including Vice President Ali Osman Taha.

Both countries still appear eager to develop political and commercial cooperation.

Sudan occupies an important place at the intersection of Turkey's Islamic, African and development strategies. It is one of Turkey's most important partners beyond its immediate neighbourhood and will play a significant role in the realisation of Ankara's ambition to become a global actor. For its part, Khartoum positively views Ankara's efforts to mediate the border disputes with its southern neighbour. Also Turkey is one of the few channels, along with Qatar and, to a less extent, Saudi Arabia, that Sudanese leaders use in attempts to establish dialogue with the United States. It is possible that the White House to some degree values Turkey as an important intermediary in this regard.

Of particular significance are bilateral military contacts, where Turkey is likely to consider playing a role in the modernisation of the Sudanese army and security forces.

The fact that in March 2013 President Abdullah Gül ratified a 2011 framework agreement with Sudan on military cooperation suggests that Ankara probably seeks to reduce Khartoum's reliance on other players, primarily Iran. The negative reaction of Sudanese Foreign Minister Ali Karti to the docking of Iranian warships in Port Sudan in October 2012 was apparently a carefully articulated attempt to demonstrate the limited influence of Iran and Sudan's openness to alternative options.



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Given the economic slowdown in Europe, the Syrian crisis and growing competition in their traditional markets in the Middle East, Turkish exporters and investors are eyeing possible niches in Sudan. Given the modest volume of bilateral trade in comparison with other Sudanese economic partners (Gulf States, China, Egypt and India), Ankara is not in a position to directly compete with them. However, there is still room for Turkey to invest in agriculture, food, textile industries and mining (especially in gold production), and to secure contracts in construction and infrastructure sectors. It is also probable that Turkey will attempt to re-introduce its initiative to host a Sudan investment conference.

The efforts of the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) and NGOs are considered by the government as an important element of a well-coordinated and centralised strategy to win over hearts ordinary Sudanese and strengthen the visibility of Turkey in the country. The humanitarian campaign in Sudan is likely to strengthen Turkish capacity to provide aid for development and elaborate an alternative to the traditional Western humanitarian policies.

Although Sudan is less noticeable in national media in comparison to other international players, opinion polls show that the Turkish public strongly believes that Turkey's combination of moderate Islam, democracy and entrepreneurship offers a model for Sudan. This view is further reinforced by deep rooted sentiments of the two countries common Ottoman past.

There is certainly a consensus among the public and political parties in Turkey on the need for stronger economic ties with Sudan and humanitarian assistance, particularly to Darfur. As discussed, the government also appears keen to build military links with Khartoum. However, when it comes to political contacts, the picture is more complex. The ruling party has been criticised for having gone too far in courting Bashir and other senior officials despite their history of human rights abuses. Critics also argue that in reality Turkey lacks the capacity to successfully mediate the dispute between Sudan and South Sudan and the country should adopt a more reserved stance given its limited ability to influence the situation on the ground.

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