

NUMBER 08

CMI BRIEF

SEPTEMBER 2019



Turkey's Humanitarian Diplomacy: The AKP Model

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Turkey has become a major global humanitarian actor. They have been widely engaged in Somalia and Syria, Pakistan and Myanmar and hosts the world's largest number of refugees with more than 3.6 million Syrians living in camps and in cities in Turkey. Turkey is the fourth largest humanitarian donor in the world (among OECD/DAC countries) in terms of provision of development aid relative to national income (TIKA 2017: 13). What norms and interests shape their humanitarian engagement? In this CMI Brief, we analyse the history, design and content of Turkey's humanitarian assistance and involvement, and argue that the AKP has appropriated the term humanitarian diplomacy (HD) to describe its foreign policy shaped and motivated by AKP's internal politics, global ambitions and religious identity.

means that states should “move beyond the realist-idealist divide on the one hand, and hard power versus soft power dichotomy on the other hand.” HD is “a critical equilibrium between conscience and power,” said Davutoğlu. As such, Turkey brands itself as an actor that “advocates justice, conscience, and fairness” (TİKA 2017). This conceptualisation, it can be argued, elevates HD beyond a foreign policy *tool* to a foreign policy *approach*. The AKP also argues that due to its “deep-rooted past” Turkey has a responsibility towards the people who live in areas once controlled by the Ottoman Empire. Turkey’s HD represents AKP’s worldview and its ambitions to reconstruct Turkey’s global identity as both a rising non-Western leader and as the leader of the Muslim world.

HD: The Turkish model

The AKP defines HD as a key component of its foreign policy. It is “humanitarianism plus”. The AKP government developed the political rhetoric of HD as the “Turkish model.” Turkish HD is mostly bilateral rather than multilateral, although in some cases it may involve cooperation with other states. It is based on the leadership of the state institutions, but in close collaboration with “religious civil society organizations and faith-based small-to-medium size enterprises” (Tank, 2013). 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. On the ground, it engages local actors, community leaders, beneficiaries as well as political actors. Yet, Turkey has invested a lot of effort in portraying themselves as an “apolitical and disinterested” donor (ICG 2012; Tank 2013; Altunisik 2014). Therefore, Turkey claims that its aid is given with no political conditions attached (ICG, 2012; Tank; 2013, Altunisik, 2014). To be sure, as HD is more than humanitarianism and requires more comprehensive and long-term engagement, the strategic political and economic interests are profound. The incentives to engage in HD can be many and Turkey’s incentives are similar to other states.

HD as a status symbol

As Barnett (2011: 220) argues, humanitarianism and compassion have become a status symbol in global politics. As such, it has been a significant policy tool for legitimacy and status quo, especially for rising powers. Turkey, like several other states who have had major economic growth, is anxious to seize the opportunity to take their place in a world of shifting global powers, and has entered a humanitarian field which was previously dominated by the US and the EU. Since their ascent to power at the end of 2002, the AKP has emphasised Turkey’s rising power status. The use of HD as a foreign policy approach reflects their new status in global politics.

HD as an interest promoter

HD has been used to promote Turkey’s political and economic interests. In this regard, HD has provided opportunities of access as well as possibilities to enhance and to consolidate relationships, to create new political ties as well as to consolidate existing relationships. Turkey is one of the most significant actors in Somalia and has been involved there since 2011. On September 30, 2017, Turkey opened its largest overseas military training academy, the Turkish Military Training Centre, in Mogadishu. In 2018, Turkey and Somalia signed an economic partnership agreement. HD also gave Turkey an edge in its competition with other regional powers. This is evident in the news report by the newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, a paper close to government sources, which argued that “Due to late rains in 2011, Somalia was on the verge of a widespread famine which killed over 260,000 people due to the fact that Arab and other countries in the region kept quiet” (*Yeni Şafak* 2018). As part of Turkey’s HD, significant economic opportunities have emerged in Somalia for groups close to the Turkish government.

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For example, Turkish companies have been involved in building and maintaining International Mogadishu Airport and Mogadishu Port (Binder and Erten 2013; Çevik et al. 2018). Companies that are very close to the AKP, such as Albayrak Group, have played a very significant role in these economic relations.² Similarly, the sheer number of Syrian refugees in Turkey makes Ankara one of the main actors in the Syrian conflict. Turkey’s HD to Arakan Muslims provides access to the conflict and ensures that Turkey, or more appropriately Erdoğan, is presented as a champion of global Muslim rights.

HD as an identity marker

HD has also been an important mechanism for promoting Turkish identity and values, and for creating an image of Turkey as an international actor. Humanitarian action is deeply embedded in the Turkish national identity, presenting Turkey as a moral actor. The title of TİKA’s 2017 annual report is *Turkey: The World’s Conscience*. This identity originates from two interrelated sources: Ottoman and Islamic compassion. Thus, the current government position is that Turkey has a responsibility to reach out first and foremost to the people with whom it has historical, cultural and geographical ties. This identity construction has been used in both international and domestic fora. For instance, recently President Erdoğan addressed

a campaign rally in the Black Sea town of Giresun in the run-up to the local elections. Here he stated that “Turkey embraces and protects millions of oppressed and wronged people.”³ The politics and rhetoric of HD helps AKP in its quest to re-build Turkey’s identity, both its international and its national identity. At the same time, it reinforces “Turkey’s Islamic social capital” at home (Çevik et al. 2018: 176) and empowers Islamic NGOs.

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HD government institutions and NGOs: the total performance principle

Turkey’s activism in humanitarian and development aid has led to the emergence of a plethora of state institutions. The AKP government transformed TİKA and turned it into a powerful player. TİKA was originally founded in 1992 to provide aid to the so-called Turkic republics, which became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their geographical reach and activities expanded considerably (Altunisik 2014: 334-335). With the latest restructuring in July 2018, TİKA became a public legal entity with its own budget. The Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) was established in 2009 and became a very active player, especially in all forms of humanitarian aid. In addition, several ministries including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of Health and Education have begun to take an active role in HD. The Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKİ), which was established in 1982 to address Turkey’s public housing issues and later became a very important tool and a huge political success, also got involved in HD in different countries. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) became another foreign policy institution linked to Turkey’s humanitarian and development aid.

The Turkish state institutions involved in HD work very closely with NGOs. The Red Crescent (Kızılay) is one of the most important NGOs in Turkey’s HD and has become a very important instrument of Turkey’s foreign policy. Kızılay operates in a grey area between state and non-state realms has been very active in working with Syrian refugees, as well as in humanitarian crises in different countries. The head of Kızılay recently announced that in line with President Erdoğan’s order, they are in the process of creating a network of Red Crescent and Red Cross

organisations in Islamic countries. Finally, the AKP government works very closely with several NGOs in the humanitarian field both in Turkey and abroad. The government is very selective, however, and works only with Islamic NGOs. Humanitarian Aid Foundation (İHH) has become one of the leading and most active NGOs in Turkey due to its close collaboration with state institutions during the AKP period. The AKP also worked with Gülenist NGOs and business associations (TUSCON), especially in Africa, until a row between the AKP and the Gülenists ended the collaboration. These organisations were banned after the attempted coup of 2016. This model of inter-agency coordination between state institutions and non-state actors has been termed by Davutoğlu as the “total performance principle,” and is praised as part of the Turkish model of HD (Donelli 2015: 38-39).

HD – an AKP success story?

Overall, I believe HD has been a useful political and economic tool for the AKP government both internationally and domestically. However, there have also been major pitfalls in this policy. The embedded tension in HD, namely combining humanitarianism with diplomacy, has had its limitations. The case of Somalia is a good example. Turkey entered the scene after the drought and famine during Ramadan in 2011 when Prime Minister Erdoğan and his entourage visited the country. Since then, Turkey has invested heavily in Somalia and security, political and economic ties have developed. As part of its HD, Turkey has also been involved in peace making and mediation in Somalia and has held two conferences in Istanbul. The first one, in May 2010, aimed to put together a roadmap and was co-organised with the UN within the framework of the Djibouti Agreement. The Second Istanbul Conference on Somalia was hosted in 2012 with the participation of all organised Somali political groups, as well as business leaders, civil society organisations and traditional elders (ICG 2012: 2-3; Akpınar 2013: 745-746). These efforts revealed crucial HD limitations. First of all, there were limitations originating from political complexities on the ground in Somalia, which made it difficult to sustain the argument of impartiality for Turkey. But more significantly, Turkey’s increasing strategic, political and economic involvement made it more difficult to reconcile the humanitarian interests of the recipients with the interests of Turkey (Akpınar 2013: 746-751).

Difficulties have emerged with Syrians living in Turkey too. The refugee flow has been of such magnitude and duration that it has begun to create problems, augmented by government mismanagement. The AKP’s response has deepened the polarisation in Turkey. The core constituency of the AKP continues to support the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey within the understanding

of the Islamic terms *ummah* (Islamic community) and *ensar* (citizens of Medinah who helped Prophet Muhammad and his disciples when they had to migrate -*Hijrah*- from Mecca). Opposition parties of the AKP have been critical of both their Syrian policy in general and of their uncontrolled migration policy towards the Syrians. To make matters more complicated for the AKP, some in the party also began to see this policy as one of the reasons for the AKP losing almost all major cities in Turkey during the last local elections, including Istanbul and Ankara, which they have ruled for 25 years. Furthermore, AKP's coalition partner, the nationalist MHP, also began to openly express their unease with the Syrians living in Turkey. All this seems to have forced the AKP to take some new measures against the Syrians, such as forcing unregistered Syrians in Istanbul to go back to the cities where they were originally registered.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: HD in need of calibration

HD in Turkey's foreign policy is a dynamic process that needs to be constantly evaluated and calibrated. HD politics have overall been useful for the AKP government, yet they have to deal with growing challenges, especially the ones at home. Turkey has its specific assets and has already built experience in resolving humanitarian crises, conflict resolution, institution building and development aid. Merging foreign policy objectives with long-term humanitarian work has deep historical roots and has also characterised the work of more traditional state humanitarian actors. In fact, it is embedded in the term HD itself. Acknowledging this, Turkey has to be clear about this relationship and yet, however difficult, strive to be impartial in its dealings with internal politics in the countries where they are involved. Not doing so would endanger both its humanitarian work and foreign policy interests. In the case of Syrians living in Turkey, there are more significant challenges. The issue has to move beyond the realm of benevolence and demands more comprehensive planning. In terms of academic studies and NGO work, Turkey has the knowledge to effectively deal with this situation. The AKP government should be ready to work with actors beyond the Islamic charity network. The government should be ready to discuss HD policies with these groups but also with other political parties in order to come up with a unified national plan. Failing to

do so and sweeping the problems under the carpet, will create significant social, economic and political problems that would affect everybody involved.

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Endnotes

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- 2 "Somalia's Economy thrives with Turkey's support," *Yeni Şafak*, 2 January 2018, available at <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/economy/somalias-economy-thrives-with-turkeys-support-2931781>
- 3 <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/102170/-turkey-ranks-1st-in-the-world-in-humanitarian-aid-in-proportion-to-national-income->