

Turkey as a humanitarian actor: the critical cases of Somalia and Syria

By Pinar Tank

■ Executive summary

The rise of new powers has made its mark on the fields of humanitarianism, mediation and peacebuilding. As an aspiring middle power, Turkey has undertaken a growing engagement with the humanitarian field over the past decade, introducing new methodologies and practices. One such concept is that of humanitarian diplomacy, which merges national interests and norms in the formulation of humanitarian policy. Turkey's humanitarian engagement first gained international interest after then-prime minister Erdoğan visited Somalia in 2011, refocusing international attention on the conflict there. Somalia remains one of Turkey's largest humanitarian commitments, where Turkey's effort is noted for its holistic approach and ability to deliver to beneficiaries on the ground. Closer to home, the Syrian crisis has been a greater challenge for its risks to Turkey's internal stability and the mass influx of refugees. In 2012 Turkey was ranked the fourth-largest humanitarian donor, and in acknowledgement of its engagement it will host the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. This report examines the dynamics behind the country's commitments as a humanitarian actor and compares the two critical cases of Somalia and Syria, observing them as proactive versus reactive instances of humanitarian policy.

Introduction

In August 2014 the U.S. convened the largest ever three-day meeting of African heads of state and government in Washington, DC – the U.S.-Africa Business Forum. It was a historic event at which 50 African leaders were present. President Barack Obama's speech on the occasion emphasised an emerging Africa. In his talk Obama noted that Africa had "some of the fastest-growing economies in the world", adding, "It is the youngest and fastest-growing continent, with young people that are full of dreams and ambition".

The picture of Africa rising has been a recurring image over the past decade. In line with other rising middle powers, Turkey has reoriented its foreign policy towards the continent, using its growing humanitarian commitment as an entry point. In 2011, the International Monetary Fund released figures indicating that seven of the world's ten fastest-growing economies were in Africa. Three years later, in an otherwise fluctuating global economy, African growth remains persistent: the World Bank noted in April 2014 that economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa was forecast at 5.2% in 2014, up from 4.7% the year before. Growth is supported by the rising investment in natural resources and infrastructure, and strong household spending (World Bank,

2014). Interest in Africa by the BRICs – Brazil, Russia, India and China – is reciprocated. As Francisco Ferreira, chief economist for the World Bank's Africa Region, explains:

Over the last decade, exports to emerging markets ... have grown robustly, primarily due to the prolonged boom in commodities demand. The BRICs received only 9 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa's exports in 2000 but accounted for 34 percent of total exports a decade later (World Bank, 2014).

This has been significant for Africa's economic development. Thus, while in 2000 *The Economist* designated Africa as the "Hopeless Continent", in 2011 it relabelled it the "Rising Continent". This metamorphosis is relevant to understanding Turkey's interest in engaging with the continent as a humanitarian actor, peacebuilder and trade partner.

Reorientation of Turkish foreign policy

The core of Turkey's Africa policy revolves around trade and investment, development assistance, health-centred non-governmental organisation (NGO) activities and charity work (Aras, 2013). The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

(MFA) has positioned Turkey as a committed regional player by symbolically emphasising a common geography: “Relations with Africa constitutes one of the prime orientations of Turkish foreign policy. Being an Afro-Eurasian state, Turkey’s policy of opening up to Africa is not just the reflection of a transient political and economic expectation” (Turkey, 2014). Starting with the African Outreach policy in 1998, Turkey has sought to cultivate and diversify its political, economic and cultural ties with the continent.

The Turkish government declared 2005 the “Year of Africa” and in the same year obtained African Union (AU) observer status. Three years later, in 2008, the AU declared Turkey as one of its Strategic Partners. Evidence of Turkey’s growing commitment to Africa is the mushrooming of Turkish embassies on the continent, growing from 12 in 2003 to 34 by mid-2014. In tandem, Turkey’s trade volume with Africa has quadrupled from \$5 billion in 2003 to \$23.4 billion in 2013 (Albayrak, 2014). Moreover, at the end of 2014, Turkey’s membership of the African Development Bank was finalised, thus paving the way for Turkish contractors, at present second only to Chinese contractors in Africa, to bid for public tenders in African countries and further boost trade.

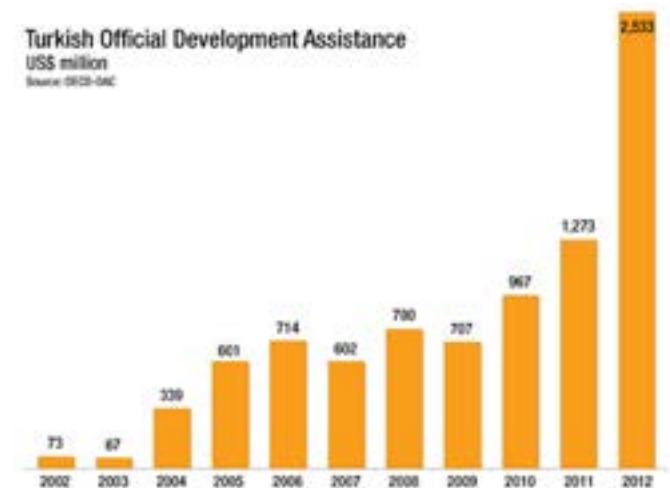
Notwithstanding the economic incentives to engage in Africa, Turkey has bolstered its trade relations with an equally active humanitarian and development profile. The field of humanitarian assistance, long dominated by donors from the Global North through the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), has in recent years become an important international arena for emerging actors such as Turkey. Although some emerging donors are hardly new to humanitarianism, their contributions have often been outside the traditional “club” of the DAC and other key forums in which the policy, principles, and practices of humanitarian donorship are discussed and debated. This is often as much by choice as by exclusion. Among new donors there is a preference for bilateral aid. In Turkey’s case only 4% of its aid assistance is multilateral (OECD, 2014a). The official response for abstaining from the DAC is the “lack of preparedness from a whole-of-government approach necessary to comply with DAC”.¹ While this may be the case, bilateral aid also has the advantage of clearly defining foreign policy commitments, as in the case of Turkey’s assistance to Somalia.² Turkish “soft power” reinforced through humanitarian projects on the ground has allowed Turkey’s MFA to follow up with peacebuilding initiatives.³

Growth of development assistance: the figures

In 2012 total development assistance provided by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) was \$3.324 billion, of which \$2.533 billion was official development assistance (ODA) and \$735 million came from the Turkish private sector and direct investment.⁴ Turkish NGOs contributed \$111.65 million. Turkish contributions have grown exponentially from 2002, when aid was only at \$73 million. In 2012 ODA was 160% higher than 2010 levels. From a comparative perspective, Turkey’s ODA in 2012 was higher than countries with larger gross domestic products such as South Korea and India (whose ODA figures are \$1.6 billion and \$1 billion, respectively). From 2011 to 2012 Turkey had the greatest increase in its aid programme among countries reporting ODA flows (Piccio, 2014). By 2013 Turkish ODA had increased by another 30% to \$3.28 billion (OECD, 2014b).

The regional contributions of Turkey’s official humanitarian assistance in 2012 included the Middle East (46.6%), Africa (31%), South and Central Asia (18%), and the Balkans and Eastern Europe (3%). After Egypt, Somalia was the second-largest recipient of Turkish humanitarian assistance in 2012.⁵ By 2013 according to OECD figures Somalia was the fifth-largest beneficiary of Turkey’s global aid after Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan and Pakistan (OECD, 2014b). Figure 1 illustrates the growth in Turkey’s development assistance budgets.

Figure 1: Growth in Turkey’s development assistance budgets, 2002-12 (\$ million)



1 Author interview with Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) official, Ankara, August 19th 2014.

2 The disadvantages of bilateral aid are the challenges of coordination with other national agencies and international organisations.

3 Worth noting here is the broad understanding of soft power adopted by Turkey. As Kurlantzick (2009: 167) points out in writing about Chinese soft power, when Joseph Nye originally formulated the concept of soft power, it was limited in definition and did not include what he considered “coercive political, military, and economic tools, including aid, formal diplomacy, investment”. Like their Chinese counterparts, Turkish officials include aid and investment in their understanding of soft power.

4 At the time of writing (November 2014), TIKA’s 2013 report was not available, but 2013 figures for Turkey’s humanitarian assistance are available through the OECD’s aid statistics.

5 While Somalia was at the top of the list in 2011, a large concessional loan given to Egypt meant that the latter climbed to first place in 2012.

The Turkish model for humanitarian assistance

The distinctive feature of the Turkish model is the close collaboration among government, religious civil society organisations, and faith-based small-to-medium-sized enterprises. However, the diversity of aid actors also makes the Turkish humanitarian assistance landscape complex. This report focuses on TIKA, the official channel of state aid coordinated centrally through the Office of the Prime Minister since 2005. Beyond official state aid there are a number of significant NGOs, including the Turkish Red Crescent, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation and Kimse Yok Mu (Is Anybody There?), who also disburse humanitarian assistance.

Founded in 1992, TIKA presently has offices in 12 African countries (of a total of 40 offices worldwide).⁶ From the outset TIKA developed as an extended arm of the Turkish MFA with its focus in the early 1990s on counterbalancing the influences of Iran and Russia on the Turkic states and promoting the Turkish model: democratisation, free market economics and Westernisation (Özkan & Demirtepe, 2012). However, TIKA's significant growth period emerged after 2004 due to the political stability under the nascent Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, the transformative influence of the European Union (EU) and, most importantly, Turkey's growing economic recovery. In 2005 TIKA was made the sole institution for coordinating and reporting ODA. This led to the professionalisation of ODA reporting in line with OECD-DAC standards, and the growth of cooperation between Turkish official bodies and the OECD. Most importantly, then-foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, through his multivector foreign policy, launched Turkey as the centre of several regions (the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus) rather than being a periphery state of these regions. Disappointment with the EU membership process further spurred the search for a new geopolitical position. TIKA was a central player in Turkey's new foreign policy and its outreach through development and aid activities led the G-8 meeting in April 2006 to place the country at the top of the list of emerging donor countries (Özkan & Demirtepe, 2012).

Comparing critical humanitarian cases: Somalia and Syria

Former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu cites Somalia and Syria as the two critical cases for Turkish humanitarian policy. They illustrate two differing humanitarian approaches illustrative of the challenges inherent in Turkey's ambitious humanitarianism. For the purposes of analysis, they can be categorised as examples of reactive versus proactive

humanitarian assistance. Syria falls into the first category – it is problematic due to a number of factors. These include an earlier miscalculated Turkish policy that presumed that the AKP government had the necessary leverage over the Assad regime to mediate a peaceful resolution to the Syrian crisis prior to the outbreak of hostilities; the flow of Syrian refugees across Turkey's border, numbering 1.6 million by November 2014; and the domestic repercussions of complex regional politics, particularly in terms of Turkish-Kurdish relations.

Turkey's efforts to assume responsibility for the massive inflow of Syrian refugees have garnered praise from the international humanitarian community. The government has spent \$4.6 billion and received more than half the total refugees fleeing Syria as a result of an open-door refugee policy since October 2011 (Letsch, 2014). Due to a legal restriction on the definition of what constitutes a refugee, Syrian refugees are referred to as "guests", although the influx of these "guests" has created tensions both in border areas and elsewhere in the country.⁷ Despite state-of-the-art refugee camps, less than 300,000 Syrian refugees live in them, with 85% dispersed throughout Turkey (Letsch, 2014). Turkey's humanitarianism is complicated by the government's fears over its own restive Kurds and the consequences of Kurdish unification against a common enemy, the Islamic State (IS). Thus, the AKP was initially loathe to open its borders for the passage of Kurdish *pesmerga* into the border town of Kobane to protect local Kurds against the onslaught of IS militia. The spillover of the many conflicts in Syria and the overwhelming need on Turkey's border has had clear implications for the country's humanitarian budget: by the end of 2012 Turkey ranked as the fourth-largest global humanitarian donor.

Somalia has been an entirely different undertaking, developed through a successful proactive rather than reactive humanitarian policy.⁸ In fact, Turkey's Somalia strategy is part of a larger reorientation of its foreign policy towards Africa made explicit in the words of the Turkish ambassador to Somalia, Kani Torun: "Turkey wanted to expand its influence, as we wanted to improve our bilateral relations with not only Somalia but also with other African countries for mutual benefit. We call this a win-win situation. Somalia is a part of this strategy."⁹

Turkey's success is due first and foremost to the (relative) stability on the ground ensured by AU Mission in Somalia forces that allows for the delivery of aid and the building of infrastructure.¹⁰ Among the beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance in Somalia, there is by and large enthusiasm for

⁶ The establishment of TIKA came following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Turkic former Soviet republics of Central Asia, with whom Turkey sought a closer relationship inspired by pan-Turkic thinking.

⁷ Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, but signed the document with a "geographical limitation" that makes its mandate only applicable to refugees from Europe. Hence, Syrians are referred to as "guests".

⁸ These categorisations are not descriptive of all aspects of Turkey's humanitarian policy towards Somalia and Syria. For example, one could argue that Erdoğan's initial visit to Somalia in 2011 was a reaction to the forgotten humanitarian crisis there, while the AKP's early diplomacy towards the Assad government in Syria in the hope of averting the subsequent conflict could be defined as proactive.

⁹ Kani Torun, quoted in *Sabah* (2014).

¹⁰ Author interview with AU diplomat, Istanbul Conference on Mediation, April 12th 2013.

the Turkish approach, which is holistic and diverse, combining business, education, development, and aid with peacebuilding and politics (Tank, 2013). It is regarded as different from traditional humanitarian engagement by its closeness to beneficiaries' immediate needs and its perceived apolitical commitment. Where traditional donors are regarded as having vested political interests, Turkey's commitment to Somalia, framed through a common understanding of Islamic values, is presented as a "more pure" humanitarianism – undertaken for the "love of God and with no hidden agenda".¹¹ Thus, the focus on Islamic values is seen as an alternative normative framework to the Western liberal peacebuilding engagement.

On the ground, beneficiaries of the Turkish approach commend it for its efficiency, its delivery methods – Turkish humanitarian workers work closely with the local population – and its visible results. Somali president Hassan Sheikh Mahamud describes the Turkish approach in a 2013 speech:

The Turkish model in Somalia is very, very clear They said we want to do this thing in Somalia, and they do it. They don't have the restrictions that many of the Western world has got. They are there. They come there, starting from their top leadership, the prime minister of the country with his family They are building or implementing projects that are really tangible ones (Mahamud, 2013).

Against the background of humanitarian and development aid, Turkish foreign policy elites have engaged in peacebuilding initiatives. As an example, in May 2012 the Turkish MFA invited 300 influential Somalis to Istanbul to determine agenda issues to be discussed at the Istanbul II Conference on Somalia a month later. The delegates included 135 clan elders, as well as politicians and civil society activists. This was a departure from the earlier London Conference on Somalia from the perspective of inclusivity, leading to the perception that Turkey sought only to act as the facilitator for a locally owned process. It also contrasted with perceptions of "Western actors who engage only with those whom they believe will be the victors of the political end-game".¹²

As presented above, the dual drivers of national interests and humanitarian commitments suggest a tension between realist and idealist agendas. However, these two elements form the Turkish approach, branded by former foreign minister Davutoğlu as "humanitarian diplomacy". In his definition of this concept, Davutoğlu points out that it is more than humanitarian aid: it is a welding together of power – capacities and resources – and "conscience" (Davutoğlu, 2013). The latter is an analytically challenging concept: central to the idea of humanitarian diplomacy in Davutoğlu's words is "connecting with the conscience of mankind". He elaborates as follows: "The realities of our era require the rise of a hu-

man oriented diplomacy, which can move beyond the realist-idealist divide on the one hand and the hard-power versus soft-power dichotomy on the other" (Davutoğlu, 2013). In TIKA's 2012 report then-deputy prime minister Bekir Bozdağ describes the role of aid in Turkish foreign policy: "Turkey has left behind the old introverted, wait and see approach. All the activities by our public entities, achievements in and outside the country are institutional outcomes of such a new approach to foreign policy." Furthermore, he contends that this is driven by a normative commitment to fulfilling Turkey's destined role: "It is our major responsibility, as mandated by our age-long history, to accurately interpret the events we have recently been witnessing in our geography, and take necessary action."¹³ As described by government elites, Turkey's influence in the world is a consequence of its power and, equally importantly, its novel approach that emphasises conscience and values. While the Turkish approach may bring it prestige internationally, the shift from humanitarian donor to peacebuilder politicises Turkey's role, with ensuing risks for its humanitarian presence.

Conclusion

Turkey's humanitarian engagement is an indication of the country's desire to play a greater role globally. From 2009 to 2014 Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's policy of multiregionalism and strategic depth reconfigured Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu sought to make Turkey a key international player, aspiring to the much-coveted title of "emerging power". Developing its reputation as a humanitarian donor in Africa strengthened this perception of a Turkey on the rise. Furthermore, engaging more actively with Africa proved crucial in garnering the African vote for Turkey's non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council for 2009-10.¹³ Not least, Turkey's role as an emerging donor was of particular interest at a time when the humanitarian field felt the impact of the financial downturn experienced by traditional donors after the global financial crisis.

In conclusion, the ability of the Turkish state to build a stronger development and humanitarian profile has been dependent on the financial and political stability provided by a majority-led government and a growing economy. The central role played by important agencies such as TIKA, as well as Turkish NGOs and the private sector, under the AKP government has transformed humanitarian assistance into an important pillar of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's success as an emerging humanitarian actor has gained international recognition: the first ever World Humanitarian Summit will be held in Istanbul in 2016. However, the link between politics and aid not only raises principled questions about the neutrality and impartiality tenets central to humanitarianism, but may also risk the sustainability of Turkey's humanitarian commitment over time.

11 Author interview with senior Turkish aid official, Ankara, August 19th 2014.

12 Author interview with AU diplomat, Istanbul Conference on Mediation, April 12th 2013.

13 Bekir Bozdağ, cited in "Foreword" to TIKA (2012).

14 A later bid for a non-permanent seat for 2015-16 failed.

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