Turkey’s new humanitarian approach in Somalia

By Pinar Tank

Executive summary

Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey has become a prominent humanitarian power, contributing more than $1 billion in aid in 2012. This makes it the fourth-largest government donor. The top three countries receiving Turkish assistance are Syria, Pakistan and Somalia. This policy brief examines Turkey’s engagement with Somalia, a country with which Turkey has not had long-standing foreign relations such as with Pakistan, or a border refugee crisis, as it is presently experiencing with Syria. What is the motivation for Turkey’s involvement in Somalia? How does Turkey engage with the humanitarian project differently from traditional donors and what are some of the challenges it faces in so doing?

The policy brief argues that Turkey’s interest in Africa is part of the AKP’s multidimensional foreign policy agenda and its efforts to develop Turkey’s identity as a global peace mediator. However, the author also argues that focusing only on state interests risks undervaluing the importance of the normative agenda in Turkey’s humanitarian outreach to Somalia.

Turkey’s expansion into Africa, beginning in the late 1990s with the 1998 Africa Action Plan, has accelerated under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). From only 12 embassies in 2002, Turkish representation in Africa grew to 34 in 2012. The AKP designated 2005 as the “year of Africa”, and 2008 saw the inaugural Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit held in Istanbul. In the same year then-Turkish foreign minister Ali Babacan stated that Africa played an important role in Turkey’s new foreign policy (Özcan, 2010: 94). While the Turkish presence in Africa is historically rooted in the Ottoman Empire’s rule, it was North Africa, as a part of Turkey’s near abroad, rather than sub-Saharan Africa that received greater attention after the establishment of the modern Turkish state. However, Turkey’s relations with Africa south of the Sahara have gathered pace since early 2000. Somalia in particular has become one of the new arenas of Turkish soft power.

In August 2011 Turkish prime minister Erdoğan travelled with his family, his foreign minister, and an entourage of cabinet members to visit Somalia as part of a humanitarian mission to highlight the plight of 12 million Somali victims of drought. For observers of Turkish foreign policy the visit emphasised Turkey’s growing engagement with Africa as an aspect of the AKP government’s multidimensional foreign policy.

Turkey has traditionally engaged as a humanitarian and development actor in its near abroad, with a primary focus on the Middle East. In fact, however, Turkey’s growing humanitarian activities are a relatively new arena for its foreign policy. Up until the early 2000s domestic economic challenges and political concerns gave limited possibilities to focus on the humanitarian agenda. As a result, engagement with humanitarian crises was reactive and linked to...
domestic security issues. Thus, responding to a potentially destabilising humanitarian crisis on its own border, Turkey gave its support to safe havens for Kurds in northern Iraq following the Gulf War in 1991. The growing engagement with Africa is indicative of a new humanitarian approach expressly linked to its globalising foreign policy and a stronger proactive role, which includes trade and peace-building initiatives as a part of an all-emcompassing humanitarian and development agenda.

The visit to Somalia in 2011 was a symbolically significant event: Erdoğan travelled to Mogadishu, in the first visit to the Somali capital by a leader from outside Africa in 20 years. Also symbolic was the timing, coming as it did during the holy month of Ramadan, in which Turkey raised $201 million in humanitarian relief. Most importantly, though, it brought the question of Somalia back on the international agenda.

Since Erdoğan’s visit there has been a growing interest in Turkey’s humanitarian policies as a rising global actor in this regard. There are several noteworthy elements in the Turkish model for engagement with Africa in the humanitarian field. Foremost among them is the holistic approach, combining both humanitarian and educational NGO and governmental activities, transport links, business engagement, and state representation. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), established in 1992, is the channel for the majority of state aid. The organisation is under the Office of the Prime Minister and in 2011 provided development assistance to Somalia to the amount of $93.4 million. This makes Somalia by far the greatest recipient of Turkish assistance in Africa (see below) and the fourth-largest beneficiary of Turkish aid globally. Figure 1 illustrates Turkey’s assistance to various countries in Africa.

Another element of Turkey’s engagement is the preference for visible projects by Turkish humanitarian agencies – including building roads, hospitals and schools; clearing rubbish; and delivering clean water. Agencies work at the grassroots level, seemingly unhampered by the security concerns that limit Western engagement on the ground. Turkey’s self-assured stance, however, received a setback following the deadly July 27th 2013 car bomb attack by the Islamist group al-Shabaab on the Turkish Embassy compound in Mogadishu. Nonetheless, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has declared that aid to Somalia would continue, albeit with greater security precautions.

The Turkish approach gives its engagement a “human face”, which is commented on by Turkish and African diplomats alike.1 The delivery of aid is often directly to beneficiaries, frequently without conditions, and the perception is that Turkey’s engagement is “for the long

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1 Interview with African Union (AU) diplomat, Istanbul Conference on Mediation, April 12th 2013.

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Figure 1: States receiving the most Turkish aid in Africa ($ millions)
The commitment of humanitarian workers on the ground is reinforced officially at the state level, firstly, with rhetorical skill: Turkish officials speak in an emotive language framed around common values and mutual respect. As an example, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s normative and heartfelt closing remarks at the 2013 Istanbul Conference on Mediation were well received by the African delegates for whom they were intended.\(^3\)

Secondly, the Turkish government links humanitarian activities with peacebuilding initiatives. Through its humanitarian assistance to Somalia – together with its emphasis on business development – Turkey has established networks (and, by extension, good will) that allow the Turkish MFA to follow up with peacebuilding initiatives. This, in turn, strengthens Turkey’s international image as a global peace actor. The engagement of the Turkish state in efforts to mediate among various conflict actors primarily by extending its good offices emphasises its respect for local partners in finding home-grown solutions to their problems. As an example, the Turkish MFA invited 300 influential Somalis – including 135 clan elders – to Istanbul in May 2012 to define the agenda for the issues they wished to discuss prior to the Istanbul II Conference on Somalia in June 2012. In keeping with the principle of representation, the Istanbul II Conference, unlike the previous London Conference on Somalia, included both civil society representatives and politicians. Turkey’s inclusive approach is in contrast to that of “Western actors, who engage only with those whom they believe will be the victors of the political end game”.\(^3\)

This does not imply that the Turkish approach is without self-interest. As in the Middle East, small and medium-sized Turkish companies are eager to develop projects in Somalia.\(^4\) This resulted in the launch in May 2013 of the first Turkish-Somali Business Forum focusing on commercial opportunities in both countries. Part of the business strategy includes providing occupational training for locals, who then qualify for employment in Turkish companies.\(^5\)

Education also plays an important role in cementing relations: the Gülen movement – a controversial Islamic charity – is active in opening schools for the local community. The quality of the education makes these schools highly sought after. Graduate students receive scholarships for study in Turkey, and as of 2013 there were 1,500 Somali students studying in Turkey (Özerdem, 2013).\(^6\)

When examining this tapestry of activities, what is more difficult to understand is how Turkey’s engagement is coordinated centrally (leaving aside the larger question of coordination with other international agencies). Turkish diplomats and policymakers suggest that this is in fact one of the challenges they face, but that the emphasis is on flexibility rather than centralised control, with an attitude that when the need is so great, duplication is not an issue.\(^6\) However, this does at times create tensions with regional actors, both organisations and states.\(^7\) As an example, Turkey’s initiative to train the Somali military was met with resistance from both the U.S. and Ethiopia (ICG: 2012). The African Union Mission in Somalia, AMISOM, is mandated by the United Nations Security Council to coordinate security sector support.

In discussing Turkey’s role in Africa, analysts often approach it from the realpolitik perspective of state interests: what does Turkey hope to gain by presenting an alternative to traditional Western means of engaging with Africa, particularly in the humanitarian field? While humanitarian assistance is a tool of foreign policy more broadly, to focus the analysis solely at the level of Turkish state interests risks ignoring the importance of a normative agenda. The political vision behind the Turkish alternative is value based, and interests play a role in strengthening a common ideological understanding. To be sure, Turkish small and medium-sized companies have benefitted from Turkey’s soft power in Africa, and thus there is a clear economic and strategic aspect to the AKP’s engagement with Somalia. Beyond Somalia, trade relations with countries like South Africa, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia have all improved since 2002 (Özcan, 2010: 104). However, according to Turkish policymakers, the guiding vision is one of establishing Turkey as an emerging centre of power with an alternative global vision of how to conduct international affairs.

**References**


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\(^3\) Interview with AU diplomat, Istanbul Conference on Mediation, April 12th 2013.

\(^4\) According to Turkish MFA figures, trade volumes with sub-Saharan Africa rose from $742 million in 2000 to $7.5 billion in 2011 (speech delivered by MFA Deputy Undersecretary Birnur Fertekligil at a lunch for African ambassadors, December 18th 2012).

\(^5\) Interview with Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists representative, April 10th 2013.

\(^6\) Interview with Turkish MFA officials, April 2013.

\(^7\) Interview with AU diplomat and senior South African diplomat, Istanbul Conference on Mediation, April 12th 2013.
Pinar Tank is a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, where she has worked since 1998 in the area of security, with a particular focus on foreign and security policy issues related to Turkey and, more generally, civil-military relations. Her research currently focuses on Turkish foreign policy within a rising-powers framework, as well as the impact of new donors in the humanitarian field.

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