

From dwarf to giant – Turkey's contemporary humanitarian assistance

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Abstract

With several rising powers emerging as new actors on the humanitarian scene, viewing all 'emerging donors' as a homogenous group inevitably undermines efforts to constructively engage with them. With Turkey's widely recognized engagement in Somalia and Syria, the country merits a nuanced analysis. What norms and interests shape its humanitarian engagement? How is it financed and organized? Thoroughly evaluating how foreign and domestic agendas shape Turkey's humanitarian engagement, the paper details what Ankara means when it talks about humanitarian assistance. The collaborative relationship between the government, faith-based businesses and the religious part of a generally deeply divided civil society in financing and implementing humanitarian assistance appears as a unique feature of Turkey's humanitarian assistance. This setup calls for an informed approach toward working with specific Turkish actors and puts into questions the sustainability and scalability of current aid levels.

1. Introduction

Turkey's speedy evolution into an influential humanitarian donor has been accompanied by admiration and awe of international policy-makers, humanitarian practitioners and journalists. The country's number one humanitarian feat is its humanitarian engagement in Somalia. Ever since Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Mogadishu in August 2011 – at a time when most international actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governments were avoiding it – Turkey's daring assistance to the east African country has been keeping the international aid community on its toes: the Turkish operate out of Somalia's capital, while most international actors are based in neighbouring Kenya. Turkey builds hospitals, while Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) saw itself forced to end its 20-years-long operation. The veteran organization in medical humanitarian assistance said that providing impartial and independent medical aid in Somalia has simply become impossible.¹ Turkey continues its aid, steadfastly, even after the loss of six Turkish embassy employees in an attack by the terrorist group Al-Shabab in July 2013.²

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¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-23697275>, last accessed 23/10/2013

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-23478001>, last accessed 19/09/2013

Truth be told, in Somalia the Turkish stay and deliver.³ Indeed, Somalia is not the only crisis country into which Turkey puts a high amount of energy and resources. In Pakistan, Syria and Myanmar Turkey also stands out. What is behind this engagement? Which are the norms and interests that inform Turkey's approach?

To answer these and additional questions about Turkey's humanitarian donorship, the paper sheds light on the country's conception, institutional structure and scope of humanitarian assistance. To comprehend the country's humanitarian practices and impact, a nuanced understanding of what drives its foreign policy is crucial, because in Turkey humanitarian assistance has "emerged as one of the major pillars of international relations" (Gül 2007: 661). Robert Putnam's assessment that foreign policy makers "strive to reconcile domestic and international imperatives simultaneously" (Putnam 1998: 460) fits the case of Turkey: unprecedented economic growth, the continuing struggle with insurgencies from Kurdish groups and the rise of political Islam drive Turkish foreign policy and humanitarian assistance as much as the action or inaction of other donors in the international arena.

2. Turkish humanitarian donorship in the context of foreign and domestic politics

2.1 Turkey in the international arena

Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey's foreign policy has undergone a massive shift. Its originally diffident stance, directed almost exclusively at Western allies, evolved into an expansionist approach. Growing confidence in the country's strategically important geographical location between Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus as well as a reemerging emphasis on Turkey's Ottoman past facilitate this development. The expansionist agenda is driven by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which holds power in Turkey since 2002. Breaking with the traditional inward-looking approach "peace at home, peace in the world" as coined by Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, the AKP's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, strives to establish Turkey as an influential regional and global player.⁴

Turkey's growing foreign policy ambitions stretch beyond its immediate neighborhood. The country's expansion into Central Asia started in the 1980s, when then-president Turgut Ozal attempted to form a "Turkic Union," the cultural and political unification of all Turkic-speaking people. While these aspirations failed, Turkey continues its involvement with the region through development assistance and conflict mediation (Ozkececi Taner 2012). In some ways, the old ethnic idea of a pan-Turkic unity found its religious equivalent in the concept of *umma* that guides the AKP's foreign policy these days. *Umma* is the Arabic word for nation and is used to describe the entire community of Muslims, bound together by their

³ „To stay and deliver“ is a slogan introduced by a UN study into the international discourse around humanitarian assistance in insecure environments. Cf. OCHA (2011). To stay and deliver. Good practice for humanitarians in complex security environments. Policy and Studies Series. OCHA Policy Development and Studies Branch. New York City, NY, United Nations.

⁴ Formally, Turkey never adopted this principle; see e.g. <http://vasington.be.mfa.gov.tr/MFA.aspx>.

shared belief. Accordingly, Erdogan expresses a responsibility for Muslim peoples around the world:

*“The AKP is not just Turkey’s party, but a world party. [...] From Mogadishu to Sarajevo, from Damascus to Skopje, from Sanaa to Bishkek, from Abu Dhabi to Islamabad, from Gaza to Benghazi, from Pristina to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus - wherever there is a victim in the world, the AKP is at its side. [...] This is the kind of party we are.”*⁵

The AKP’s ideational expansionism is both reflected and sustained by Turkey’s steady economic growth. Between 2002 and 2012, the per capita income rose from \$8,630 to \$18,190⁶ and its gross domestic product (GDP) from \$232 billion to \$789 billion.⁷ This remarkable increase makes Turkey the largest economy in the Middle East in terms of total GDP, surpassing even the Gulf States.⁸ In combination, the ideational and economic expansions are the backbone of Turkey’s growing influence in regional and global affairs. Whether its rise is met with cheers or with fears depends on the historical and cultural legacy of Turkey in the respective country. After all, Turkey looks back at a long history of regional rivalry and centuries-long rule as the Ottoman Empire in Southeast Europe, West Asia and North Africa. This has left ambiguous repercussions impacting those regions’ relations to Turkey until today.⁹ Yet, Turkey has by no means become the most influential player in the various regions in which it has been active in over the past decade. Russia, for instance, maintains strong influence over the South Caucasus, while Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel are crucial powers in the political gamble in the Middle East. In Africa, different European powers and China retain important influence. Moreover, the volatile post-Arab Spring situations in Syria, Egypt and Libya are putting Turkey’s previously so promising “zero problems with neighbors”¹⁰ philosophy to a hard test. In other words, not all of Turkey’s rising prospects in increasing global influence continue through.

Overall, the AKP’s foreign policy embodies a general opening up of the country while revolving around cultural, ethnic and religious topoi. This intentional ambiguity entails to reject to give up on the West while nurturing neo-Ottoman aspirations focused on the Islamic world.¹¹ Turkey’s positioning amidst two fronts makes it difficult for partners to understand and anticipate the country’s foreign policy behavior and cooperate constructively. As shown

⁵ <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/europe/turkey-moves-ahead-with-new-constitution>, last accessed 07/08/2013.

⁶ PPP, current international dollar.

⁷ World Bank World Development Indicators August 2013
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>, last accessed 22.08.2013.

⁸ CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2001rank.html> last accessed 22.08.2013.

⁹ Most West Asian Arab states (notable exception is Saudi Arabia), were Ottoman provinces until the very end of the First World War and the consequent partition based on the Sykes-Picot agreement.

¹⁰ Davutoglu Interview http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/29/mr_zero_problems?page=0,1, last accessed 22.08.2013.

¹¹ <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-308703-davutoglu-rejects-neo-ottoman-label-using-neo-roman-analogy.html>, last accessed 22.08.2013

further below, the intentional ambiguity of Turkish foreign policy is also reflected in its humanitarian assistance.

2.2 Domestic dynamics affecting Turkey's humanitarianism

As in foreign affairs, Turkey's domestic politics are shaped by the rule of the AKP, a party with close connections to Sunni Islam. The election of the AKP in 2002 signaled a shift and new thinking in formerly strongly secular Turkish politics. For example, the above described *umma* approach would have been unthinkable in Turkey before the AKP came to power. Since its first victory in the elections, the AKP won the absolute majority in the Turkish parliament three times in a row. Even though its share of votes decreased in 2011 compared to the previous two elections, the party's overall preeminence remains unchallenged. The opposition is made up by the Kemalist center-left Republican People's Party (CHP), the nationalist center-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Kurdish nationalist left Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). The political divergence between these three parties further diminishes the influence of the opposition in the AKP-dominated legislative system.

Most recently, the AKP's stunning political stronghold, however, has become stained. When Erdogan's government met the peaceful sit-in in Istanbul's Gezi Park against an urban development plan in May and June 2013 with police violence, a growing public disapproval of the AKP's single majority rule came to the fore. The police crackdown on the protestors with thousands of civilians injured and arrested drew harsh international criticism. The EU, for instance, condemned the government's "excessive and disproportionate use of force."¹² The most problematic consequence of the unapologetic government response, however, is the widening rifts in Turkey's society. It now further aligns along two camps: first, a liberal, laic, mostly urban elite and second, a nationalist, religious-conservative elite, whose stronghold is in rural areas.

This division is reflected in business organizations, which play a big role in Turkish civil society and politics and also started to influence Turkish humanitarian assistance. The oldest and most prominent of these groups is the laic Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD). With the growing influence of Islam in Turkish society and politics, the Association of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen (MUSIAD) has arisen as an alternative representation of Turkish business interests. MUSIAD supports and lobbies the AKP government in foreign economic policy and humanitarian assistance. The third central player in official Turkish humanitarian assistance alongside the conservative business community and the AKP is the Fethullah Gülen movement. Its goals, means and structure are hard to understand for outsiders. It is known, however, that the organization runs over 100 charter schools worldwide and finances humanitarian aid organizations. The following chapter describes all three key actors as well as the more marginal humanitarian non-governmental organizations in more detail.

¹² http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/council_europe/press_corner/all_news/news/2013/20130602_en.htm, last accessed 26.07.2013

3. Actors and institutions of Turkish humanitarian assistance

3.1 The government

Within the Turkish government, responsibility of humanitarian assistance is located at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Prime Ministry's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). The MFA is concerned with the political aspects of incoming and outgoing humanitarian assistance such as funding decisions or the political coordination with affected governments, other donor governments and international organizations. For this purpose, the MFA has a small department with two full-time equivalent staff that coordinates all incoming and outgoing external humanitarian assistance on the political level.¹³ This department delegates external humanitarian assistance to be implemented directly by the government's line ministries (agriculture, health, public works, etc.) and *Türk Kızılayı*, the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC). The embassies initiate a humanitarian response by Turkey, giving recommendations on where, how and when Turkey should become active. They act only on the basis of appeals by the governments of the affected states or international organizations. AFAD is mainly concerned with internal disaster response but coordinates external humanitarian assistance on the operational level and in close coordination with the MFA.¹⁴ AFAD is a rather young organization. It was established in 2009 when three different departments were merged under the responsibility of three different ministries. This effort is likely the result of both efficiency considerations and the AKP's vision of changing the Turkish political system from parliamentary to presidential rule, which is also reflected in the party's position on the current constitutional renegotiation process. This setup is prone to power politics. The Turkish MFA, traditionally and legally a strong political player,¹⁵ might be wary of the growing influence of the Prime Ministry. This could hamper the coordination between the MFA and AFAD. However, since the AKP holds the absolute majority, the minister of foreign affairs and the prime minister belong to the same party and coordination appears to be smooth. But this arrangement could change quickly under a coalition government.

To a limited degree, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) also implements humanitarian projects, although its primary mandate is development assistance. Similar to AFAD, TIKA was moved to the prime minister's office in 1999 to resolve the lack of institutional coherence in the aftermath of two major earthquakes that year.

3.2 The Turkish Red Crescent

The Turkish Red Crescent is the largest operational humanitarian organization in the country. The organization is closely linked to the Turkish government and shadows its

¹³ Effective October 2012, interview of one of the authors with government official, Ankara, October 2012.

¹⁴ <https://www.afad.gov.tr/EN/Index.aspx>, last accessed 24.10.2012; interview of one of the authors with representative of AFAD, Ankara, October 2012

¹⁵ Law No. 4749 on Public Finances and Debt Management (OG No. 24721, dated 09.04.2002)

policies. An interviewee who wanted to remain anonymous noted: “if the international community were to give financial support to the TRC’s efforts in the Syrian crisis, it would be no different than providing this money directly to the Turkish government.”¹⁶ Besides its extensive domestic mandate, the Red Crescent conducts several humanitarian aid operations abroad. Recently, the largest operations were in Gaza, Somalia, Syria, Myanmar, Iran and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷ The organization’s global reach has been steadily expanding in the past years. Between 2007 and 2012, the Turkish Red Crescent provided humanitarian aid to 70 countries.¹⁸ In 2012, the organization delivered \$2.5 billion of humanitarian aid, according to its chairman.¹⁹

3.3 Non-governmental organizations

The majority of Turkish humanitarian NGOs are faith-based organizations, meaning they are “formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operates on a nonprofit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level” (Berger 2003: 1).²⁰ Starting in the mid-1990s and increasing their scope during the AKP rule, pro-Islamic civil society organizations are on the rise in Turkey. Especially since 2002, Turkish faith-based organizations and religious communities have been adopting globally-oriented policies, increasing their influence domestically and beyond (Atalay 2013: 165). The faith-based humanitarian organizations are often funded by donations from Muslim business organizations.

The internationally most well-known among them is the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH). The IHH’s reputation is ambiguous due to its perceivably extremist views, and this makes it difficult to grasp its true normative basis. For example, the IHH was at the same time responsible for the Gaza Flotilla incident and in charge of developing a code of conduct for Islamic humanitarian organizations on behalf of the international Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The OIC Code of Conduct is informed by religious principles, but they are comparable to and compatible with the principles of the ICRC Code of Conduct. Several other faith-based humanitarian NGOs, such as Kimse Yok Mu and Deniz Feneri, have close ties to the Gülen movement. The Gülen movement is an independent, domestic and internationally active group named after its founder, the Islamic spiritual leader Fethullah Gülen. Born in 1941, the writer, preacher, former imam and member of Turkey’s wealthy elite, founded this movement to promote the idea of *hizmet*, social service. The movement focuses on education and development assistance, but also finances humanitarian organizations. The structure of the massive network has not been formalized, or at least

¹⁶ Interview of one of the authors, Ankara, August 2013

¹⁷ Turkish Red Crescent reports, <http://www.kizilay.org.tr/kurumsal/sayfa.php?t=6> last accessed 26.08.2013

¹⁸ <http://www.trt-world.com/trtworld/en/newsdetail.aspx?haberkodu=b7e3be22-1a29-4e5a-8656-92433a81bb60> last accessed 26.08.2013

¹⁹ <http://www.trt-world.com/trtworld/en/newsdetail.aspx?haberkodu=b7e3be22-1a29-4e5a-8656-92433a81bb60> last accessed 26.08.2013

remains unknown to the public. Kimse Yok Mu has a consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The German-based charity Deniz Feneri, on the other hand, had a scandal in 2008 ending with the Frankfurt High Court's ruling that large sums of money the group had collected were used for purposes outside charity. In Germany, the responsible officials are in jail, but in Turkey the organization retains its NGO status. These events cast a shadow over faith-based Turkish humanitarian NGOs, but there is no solid evidence of a link between faith-based Turkish NGOs and extremist Islamic groupings.

The two camps of Turkish civil society described above are also reflected in the humanitarian realm. Besides the faith-based NGOs that are close to the circles of the AKP, the Muslim business associations and the Gülen movement, there are also laic humanitarian organizations that resemble many secular humanitarian NGOs in the West. An example is Support to Life (STL). STL focuses on emergency relief and is closely tied to the humanitarian principles and the ICRC Code of Conduct.²¹

4. The Turkish conception of humanitarian assistance

4.1 Definition

The Turkish conception of humanitarian assistance is much broader than what most international actors would see as the confines of humanitarianism: saving lives and alleviating suffering of crisis-affected populations.²² The Turkish, rather, conceptualize all internal and external aid that is motivated by a sense of human sympathy as “humanitarian assistance.” Humanitarian assistance and development assistance are therefore often discussed in conjunction. Even peace-building is often seen as part of the humanitarian “portfolio” (cf. Amar 2012; Atalay 2013). In public discourse these activities are typically merged. Nonetheless, the Turkish elite that designs and executes official humanitarian assistance is aware of the difference between the domestic and the international mainstream definition of humanitarian assistance. For example, the government duly reports development and humanitarian aid flows separately to OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC).²³ It seems that the Turkish government is not interested in introducing the differentiation between humanitarian and development aid into the public debate. Rather, it attempts to advocate for its broader concept internationally. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) calls for a “sustainable and collective strategy” to address humanitarian crises.²⁴

For the Turkish government, humanitarian assistance is a means to strengthen bilateral relations with governments of affected states. For example, it considers humanitarian aid to Pakistan a “natural manifestation of [Turkey's] excellent bilateral relations with friendly and

²¹ Telephone interview with one of the authors with representative of STL, November 2012

²² Cf. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182

<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/46/a46r182.htm>, dated 19.12.1991.

²³ Interview of one of the authors with TIKa staff responsible for OECD/DAC reporting, Ankara, October 2012.

²⁴ <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/humanitarian-assistance-by-turkey.en.mfa>, last accessed 04.09.2013.

brotherly Pakistan.”²⁵ Humanitarian action is also used as a way to live up to expectations of international solidarity and problem solving initiatives that come with the status of being a “rising power.” The Turkish government welcomes being called an “emerging donor,” a term that other rising powers, such as India, reject as dismissive (cf. Meier and Murthy 2011: 25). The status of being emerging, and thus increasingly significant and influential, plays a decisive role in Turkey’s identity as a self-confident international actor (Gül 2008; Binder, Meier et al. 2010).²⁶

4.2 The humanitarian principles

The Turkish government does not have an official policy outlining priorities and principles for humanitarian assistance. Nonetheless, various official sources emphasize that Turkish humanitarian assistance is impartial, needs-driven and internationally coordinated.²⁷ In the words of vice prime minister Bekir Bozdag:

“Turkey’s efforts [in Somalia] are thoroughly humanitarian. [...]. I am concerned with humanitarian concerns of Somalis as much as with those of the people of my hometown Yozgat. This attention is not at all political. We are neither close to, nor far from any sides in Somalia. While holding equal distance to all, we deal with Somalia’s hunger, health, education issues as a humanitarian duty and a responsibility driven by our conscience.”²⁸

Despite this kind of rhetoric, the AKP government avoids formally supporting the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. “No one will tell you this officially, but our skepticism towards the humanitarian principles is primarily influenced by the conflict with the Kurds,” a Turkish employee of the MFA confined to one of the authors in an off-the record conversation.²⁹ Ankara refuses to confer “impartial” assistance to Kurdish belligerents and is in a longstanding conflict with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) over the issue. All the while, the Turkish Red Crescent denied in an interview any skepticism of the government towards impartiality.³⁰ In any case, bar the ascription to the General Assembly Resolution 46/182 – the United Nation’s (UN) humanitarian founding document – the AKP consciously avoids any further international commitment to the humanitarian principles.³¹ Typically, the AKP government handles the humanitarian principles by alluding to them in public statements while avoiding direct reference in any official document. This attitude reflects the intentional ambiguity that characterizes the country’s foreign policy (see Section 2.1).

²⁵ <http://houston.cg.mfa.gov.tr/ShowAnnouncement.aspx?ID=116363>, last accessed 23.10.2013.

²⁶ <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/synopsis-of-the-turkish-foreign-policy.en.mfa>, last accessed 23.10.2013

²⁷ <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/humanitarian-assistance-by-turkey.en.mfa>, last accessed 04.09.2013

²⁸ Interview of Deputy Prime Minister Bozdag on August 2nd, 2013 with *Milliyet* newspaper, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/-yozgat-a-gider-gibi-somali-ye/siyaset/ydetay/1744839/default.htm>, last accessed 23.10.2013

²⁹ Interview of one of the authors, Ankara, September 2012

³⁰ Interview of one of the authors, Ankara, September, 2013

³¹ Interview of one of the authors with Turkish government official, Ankara, October 2012

4.3 Scope and aid modalities

The most significant activity of any humanitarian donor is to provide resources. The volume and modalities – cash or in-kind; unilateral, bilateral or multilateral; non-earmarked or earmarked – of these resources say a great deal about the nature of a donor. Yet, financial data on humanitarian assistance is chronically unreliable. The following discussion of official Turkish humanitarian assistance therefore focuses only on the grand trends.

It is a widely published story that Turkey increased its humanitarian assistance for years so that it advanced to the fourth largest humanitarian donors in 2012 (Malerba, Jump et al. 2013: 36). This development is impressive and keeps the humanitarian world in suspense. Yet, a closer look at the data suggests that it would be premature to extrapolate continuous growth for three reasons. First, Turkish aid developed in an erratic rather than in a linear way (see Figure 4.3.1). It peaked with the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, the 2010 Pakistan floods, the ongoing crisis in Somalia and, since 2012, the Syrian refugee crisis. The fluctuation reflects that there is no dedicated government budget line³² for humanitarian assistance and that “limited humanitarian capacities necessitate the focus on one, maximum two, international crises per year.”³³ Second, Turkey’s massive assistance to Syrian refugees on its own territory drives up the numbers for 2012 and 2013. According to OECD/DAC criteria, however, countries receiving refugees may only report assistance to refugees as humanitarian assistance during the first 12 months of the refugees’ stay.³⁴ Depending on the development of the Syrian refugee crisis over the years to come, Turkey’s reported humanitarian assistance volume might thus drop again.

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
Contribution in million USD	45	179	116	46	31	50	148	264	1039	1918

Figure 4.3.1: Turkey’s humanitarian assistance 2004-2012 (Source: OECD/DAC Aid Statistics³⁵)

Third, the government’s own resources are regularly supplemented with private cash contributions. That is, the Turkish public donates money to the government for humanitarian purposes. The private contributions are collected through government-organized TV shows, so called telethons, and public announcements prompting donations, both of which are

³² This is in contrast to internal humanitarian assistance and development aid, which both have dedicated budget lines.

³³ Interview of one of the authors with Turkish government official, Ankara, October, 2012.

³⁴ OECD/DAC, *Is It ODA? Factsheet – November 2008*; see: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/34086975.pdf>, last accessed 23.10.2013.

³⁵ <http://www.aidflows.org>, last accessed 23.10.2013

always remarkably successful.³⁶ While it may appear odd to tax payers in the West that the citizens of Turkey contribute cash donations to state-led humanitarian assistance, telethons are a common practice not only in Turkey, but all over the Middle East (cf. Al-Yahya and Fustier 2011: 15). The latest campaign, launched in December 2012, aimed to support Syrian refugees in Turkey. As Figure 4.3.2 shows, the share of humanitarian resources generated through telethons regularly surpasses the allocations from the government budget. Therefore, whether the Turkish government can sustain or further increase its current aid levels depends to a significant degree on the willingness of the Turkish people to donate.

Year assistance provided	Crisis	Budgetary allocation	Telethons	Total
2005	Indian Ocean tsunami	\$7 million	\$44 million	\$51 million
2005	Kashmir earthquake	\$100 million	\$75 million	\$175 million
2010	Pakistan floods	\$31 million	\$130 million	\$161 million
2011	Somalia	\$49 million	\$360 million	\$409 million
2012	Syrian refugee crisis*	n/a	n/a	\$550 million

Figure 4.3.2 Share of government budget and telethons 2005-2012 (Source: Own compilation, current USD (MFA/TIKA/AFAD annual reports, FTS, official statements, open source articles)

The larger part of official Turkish humanitarian assistance is unilateral and in-kind. The Turkish government implements most of its humanitarian projects through its own employees that it sends directly to the respective crises and through the TRC. This approach has advantages and disadvantages. The most significant benefit is that Turkey has experts on the ground and thus holds first-hand information about developments and operational challenges in the respective crises. At a time where humanitarian assistance is marked by ever longer supply chains, the direct exposure of Turkish experts to field realities is a comparative advantage. On the downside, these government experts are usually not trained in international humanitarian law (IHL) and the Code of Conduct, which sets guiding principles for humanitarian activities internationally. Where Turkish humanitarian assistance is implemented by the TRC, this is less of a problem, since the TRC, as all national societies of the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, is trained in IHL and the Code of Conduct. NGOs play a small role in Turkish humanitarian assistance due to their weak setup and a deep distrust towards civil society organizations. This distrust is shared by the general public and relates to recent corruption scandals. Also, the Turkish socio-political culture historically favors a large public sector over an extended sector of independent NGOs.³⁷ Despite a strong focus on unilateral aid, Turkey also gives multilaterally. The main share of multilateral aid

³⁶ See Law of Fund Collection no. 2860, section 6; see: <http://www.dernekler.gov.tr/tr/ebulten/duyurular/5253-sayili-yardim-toplama-kanunu-degisiklik.aspx>, last accessed 23.10.2013.

³⁷ Interviews of one the authors, Ankara, October, 2012.

goes to the World Food Program (WFP), the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). WFP and UNHCR have a long-time presence in Turkey. WFP also purchases five percent of its food products in Turkey.³⁸

4.4 Needs-based humanitarian assistance

When it comes to needs-based humanitarian assistance, Turkey is frank about the influence of foreign policy considerations on resource allocation: “Turkey helps where need arises, but need is not enough to determine an allocation, the donation must also further Turkey’s relation with the specific country in line with our foreign policy interests.”³⁹ While this statement shows that Turkey might privilege one country over another because of foreign policy considerations, it says little about a potential discrimination against certain population groups within a given crisis. Incidentally, recipient countries of Turkish humanitarian aid are predominantly Muslim. The central Turkish humanitarian actors – the AKP, the Muslim business community, the Gülen movement and faith-based humanitarian organizations – feel strongly connected to Islam. Does this lead to a partiality towards Muslim victims within a given crisis? There is no evidence that would support such a suspicion and the Turkish government clearly states that it does not provide aid on the basis of religious affiliation. However, it is worth noting that the key crises that coin Turkish humanitarian assistance – Bosnia, the Kashmir earthquake, the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, Somalia and Syria – all are crisis situations that were and are marked by limited Western efforts to find effective political solutions or sufficient humanitarian assistance to predominantly Muslim populations. The lacking Western attention thus provides a credible justification for the Turkish government to fill the gap and focus on Muslim populations affected by war and disaster.⁴⁰

4.5 Coordination

With regards to coordination, the dominant leitmotif of Turkish foreign policy and humanitarian assistance – intended ambiguity – comes to the fore again. On the one hand, the Turkish government repeatedly commits to humanitarian coordination. It values coordination in terms of efficiency and the avoidance of duplications. In interviews, government officials emphasized that established donors and UN organizations have a lot of experience for Turkey to learn from. They also said they “never came across arrogant behavior of the West” which might have tempered their motivation for coordination.⁴¹ Coordination with Turkey works most smoothly when Turkish diplomats are in key positions of international organizations. For example, coordination was successful in

³⁸ Interview of one of the authors with Turkish academic, Ankara, October, 2012

³⁹ Interview of one of the authors with Turkish government official, Ankara, October, 2012. See also <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-international-aid-reaches-vanuatu.aspx?pageID=238&nID=47266&NewsCatID=359>, last accessed 16/09/2013.

⁴⁰ Interview of one of the authors with representative of the Turkish Red Crescent, Ankara, August 2013

⁴¹ Interview of one of the authors with government official, Ankara, October, 2012.

Somalia with the OIC, which is headed by Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and in Pakistan with the UN Special Envoy for Assistance to Pakistan, Rauf Engin Soysal.⁴² Without a Turkish diplomat in a key position, coordination practice is problematic. Two examples stand out. In Somalia, Turkey shrugs the shoulders when it comes to coordination: “We would love to coordinate, but the international community is coordinating in Kenya and we are in Mogadishu. So we cannot attend the meetings.”⁴³ In the Syrian refugee camps in Turkey, coordination means: “We are doing everything that is necessary and where there are gaps we ask international actors to step in.”⁴⁴ From the perspective of a representative of an established donor country the same approach is described quite differently: “The Turkish government and *Türk Kızılayı* want to run the show alone.”⁴⁵

In interviews, Turkish officials usually give three explanations for Turkey’s limited coordination practice. First, the government lacks the capacity to simultaneously deliver and deliberate aid. “Here at the MFA, we can either respond to the Syrian refugee crisis or discuss with other donors on how to engage more closely.”⁴⁶ Second, Turkey insists on a clear cost-benefit analysis when it comes to coordination—it only coordinates if this means that it does not cost additional money (e.g. annual contributions) or that coordination increases Turkey’s ability to shape international policies. For example, Turkey does not intend to become full member of OECD/DAC although it meets all necessary criteria. As a full member, the country would lose its status as beneficiary country and thereby lose access to concessional loans, which are granted at lower cost than market alternatives. Third, many Turkish humanitarian actors on the ground do not speak English, which is the language of most international coordination meetings.

5. Conclusion

Turkey has become increasingly active in the humanitarian realm and is likely to stay so for the next couple of years. Recently, Istanbul was announced as host of the first-ever UN World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.⁴⁷ More established humanitarian actors – the United Nations, international humanitarian NGOs and other donors – are therefore well advised to start understanding the intricacies of Turkish domestic and foreign politics. Without an intimate knowledge of the country, it will be difficult to engage. Yet, in many ways this knowledge is not simply out there. Particularly two areas are in need for further research. First, the knowledge about Turkey actual operations on the ground – whether in Somalia and Syria or the less visible activities in Pakistan and some other places – remains anecdotal. Yet, the operational realities determine good cooperation and coordination between different humanitarian actors. Second, there is little differentiated knowledge out there about the

⁴² Interview of the author, Ankara, October, 2012

⁴³ Private conversation of one of the authors with government official, Istanbul, October 2013

⁴⁴ Private conversation of one of the authors with government official, Istanbul, October 2013

⁴⁵ Interview of one of the authors with representative of established donor, Ankara, September, 2013

⁴⁶ Interview of the author, Ankara, October, 2012

⁴⁷ <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/un-general-assembly-turkey-announced-host-2016-world-humanitarian-summit>, last accessed 24.10.2013

nature of Turkish faith-based organizations. There is a tendency among the mainstream humanitarian system to regard them with suspicion, but there is little evidence about which organizations might be more or less controversial than faith-based organizations from any other religious community.

No doubt, the Turkish humanitarian engagement in the past five years has been impressive. The size and weight of Turkish humanitarian assistance, however, is more foreshadowing than reflecting the country's global role. Although joining the ranks of the United States, Europe and the United Kingdom in humanitarian donorship, Turkey is more a regional middle power than a global player. The discrepancy between Turkish humanitarian engagement and actual international weight questions the sustainability and scalability of its current engagement in the long view. This is not to belittle what Turkey has achieved, but to put expectations towards Turkey and its aspirations into perspective. Currently, Turkey's humanitarian assistance depends on three factors which are not entirely within the control of the government: First, the willingness of the Turkish public and businesses to continue to financially support the government's humanitarian efforts. Second, the continuous majority rule of the AKP and third, its close relations with the Muslim business community and religious-conservative civil society. It is this triangle that carries Turkish humanitarian assistance. Finally, the current level and setup of humanitarian assistance can only be sustained, if the growing rift in Turkish civil society will not erupt in social conflicts as witnessed during the Gezi-Park protests.

The drive and enthusiasm toward an active humanitarian engagement is palpable in Turkey's government and civil society. This is a great chance to diversify international humanitarian assistance to move towards a truly universal system. Established actors and Turkey can seize this opportunity, if they engage constructively.

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