

Turkey as a Donor Country: Aid Allocation Patterns

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991, brought several major changes in the international system and pointed to the end of the 45-year protracted conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. In its wake, 15 newly independent states were established in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe, with several separatist conflicts emerging in these regions. Undoubtedly, with the entry of new states onto the international stage, new foreign policy requirements have emerged for each nation, freed from the previous dynamics of the Cold War. It was in this context that Turkey began to follow new strategies in the post-Cold War period. In the light of common cultural factors such as language, proactive and inclusive strategies were applied to the bilateral regional relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. After realizing the priorities of international recognition of these countries, Turkey began to increase its influence in post-Soviet Central Asia with certain developmental projects and aids. Gradual development and expansion of these projects ultimately necessitated the establishment of an institution that could serve the purpose of foreign aid allocation. Accordingly,

the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) was established in 1992. From Central Asia and the Balkans, Africa, and various other regions of the world, TİKA has consistently reflected the cultural and humanitarian values attached to the Turkish foreign policy agenda for the last three decades.

This paper seeks to examine changes and transformations of Turkish foreign policy and its repercussions on the country's foreign aid allocation patterns through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). In the post-2002 period, with the increase in political and economic stability and the initiation of a more proactive era in foreign policy, TİKA undertook more comprehensive and long-term projects and foreign aid distribution compared to the previous decade. In line with these shifts and transformations, both financial and geographical extension of Turkish foreign aid reached an unprecedented level. The 30-year trajectory of Turkish foreign aid allocation patterns has also reflected the country's remarkable commitment to humanitarian considerations, thereby allowing for a redefinition of interests and the concept of power in an age of complex interdependency.



5,000 Rohingya families in Bangladesh's refugee camps on the eve of the arrival of winter receive blankets handed out by Turkey's state aid agency in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh on November 29, 2020. (TIKA - Anadolu Agency)

Post-Cold War Changes in Turkish Foreign Policy

If one defines Turkish foreign policy as a line of continuity, one of the most important breaking points of this continuity was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The end of the Cold War not only witnessed the transition from bipolarity to an American unipolar moment but also radically influenced countries' foreign policy patterns. The traditional trend in foreign policy based on precaution and rationalism was updated and transformed into a new character called *new activism* (Sayarı, 2000). However, this new direction in foreign policy did not dismiss previous considerations of Turkey's geopolitical importance and geostrategic position in the international system. Instead, foreign policy tools and choices became more instrumental in addressing the new requirements of the post-Cold War context by becoming more assertive and active compared to the previous periods.

Newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia constituted a prospective opportunity for Turkey in the sense that Turkey could now increase her regional influence and become a model for them in the regime transition process and integration with the international community. By the same token, these countries were also eager to strengthen bilateral relations with Turkey to be integrated into the international community through Turkey's close ties with Western nations. The Middle East side of the story also proved the existence of similar activism in foreign policy. Turkey, which supported the US-led Allied Coalition in the First Gulf War during the presidency of Turgut Özal (1989-1993), started to get involved in regional conflicts, most prominently by allowing the UN air forces to fly from Turkish airbases and acting in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 665¹. It seemed contrary

to the conventional foreign policy rationale dictating non-involvement in regional conflicts. Similar activism was also seen in the Balkans where ethnic conflicts resulted in bloody massacres and persecutions in the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia. Turkey's active involvement in the peacekeeping missions in the region pointed out the country's promising role in helping the cause of stability in the former Ottoman territories with which the Turkish Republic had shared cultural heritage. Overall, the new activism in Turkish foreign policy manifested itself with new mediating roles in the peaceful solution of disputes and active support for regional conflicts as in the case of Iraq in the early 1990s.

This active trend in post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy gained momentum in the post-2000 period, particularly during the tenure of Prime Minister and then President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. By prioritizing the principle that the country should have a strong and decisive role in the international arena, Turkey entered a *proactive* period in foreign policy. With efforts such as strengthening economic and diplomatic relations with the Arab world and taking steps to improve relations with Iran, Turkey reflected her proactive foreign policy character in the Middle East. The post-2007 period of Turkish foreign policy also brought remarkably different features compared to the early years of AK Party rule. As part of this shift, Turkey began to increase her assertive characteristics in foreign policy and had a promising

economic development which made her prospective position in the global economy even stronger (Öniş, 2011). While the country was experiencing such transformations in political and economic spheres, Turkey's allocation patterns of foreign aid also began to change. In the post-2000 period, Turkish foreign aid to the countries that make up a significant proportion of former Ottoman territory rose significantly from their 1990s levels as Turkey's economic power continued to grow. Therefore, there is a combination of three main factors that mutually affected each other in the post-2000 Turkish foreign policy trajectory: political stability, economic growth, and increasing proactiveness in foreign policy. This conducive environment positively affected Turkey's aid allocation patterns through TİKA whose budget sharply increased during this period. One way to understand these changes in foreign policy in terms of development aid is to note that the amount of aid, which was \$85 million in 2002, rose to over \$8 billion by 2017. Moreover, Turkey was ranked first in terms of humanitarian aid donorship in proportion to GDP in 2017, 2018, and 2019.² It is worth noting that even in times of economic downturn, Turkey has not given up its humanitarian approach to international politics and continues to actively support receiving countries. The combination of Turkey's hard power-based military realism with humanitarian concerns regarding vulnerable populations all around the world formed a *proactive moral realism* in the post-2000 period (Keyman, 2017).

Institutionalization of Foreign Aid Allocation: TİKA

As developmental aid and the number of projects increased and spread to different regions, the need for an effective institution that could coordinate these projects emerged. In response to this need, the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TİKA) was established in 1992, under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with Statutory Decree No. 480. Attached to the Prime Ministry in 1999 with a Presidential Order, TİKA became an institution whose organizational structure,

tasks and responsibilities were defined under the 2001 Law No. 4668. After undergoing structural changes with Statutory Decree No. 656 in 2011, TİKA was entrusted to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and acquired the status of a legal entity with an independent budget in 2018. With these changes, TİKA gained a more effective and dynamic character in accordance with Turkey's proactive foreign policy priorities.

¹ UN SC Resolution 665 called on member states to act in accordance with maximum use of political and diplomatic measurements. See full document: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/95664>

² For further information, see: https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/page/about_us-14650 and <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkey-continues-to-be-ranked-among-top-donor-countries/2300237>



73rd Session of the UN General Assembly in New York. (Atılgan Özdil - Anadolu Agency)

The number of TİKA offices, which opened its first coordination office in Turkmenistan in 1992, also increased significantly in the post-2002 period. The number of coordination offices, which was 12 in 2002, reached 25 in 2011, 33 in 2012 and 62 today. The geographical/regional distribution of TİKA's operation areas has also expanded in the last 20 years. In addition to Central Asia, which was considered the main priority region in the period following its establishment, TİKA's institutional reach as of today corresponds to a wide global extent covering the Balkans, Africa, and Latin America.³ TİKA, whose official budget was approximately \$80 million in 2002, is developing both financially and institutionally and continuing its developmental aid projects in a way that responds to Turkey's proactive foreign policy demands.

TİKA also makes considerable efforts to integrate into the global developmental aid regime. For instance, the institution has developed a cooperative relationship with the OECD Developmental Aid Committee (DAC) by sharing information and experience and having an observer status in the DAC. Considering the global scale of development projects and foreign aid allocation, such steps constitute significant progress in the making of a coordinated international aid regime. TİKA's cooperation efforts with other aid institutions can also be a major driver for its own institutional development in the long run (Fidan and Nurdun, 2008).

³ For more information on the 62 coordination offices opened by TİKA, see <https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/sayfa/publication/2019/TIKAFaaliyet2019ENGWebKapakli.pdf>

Foreign Aid Allocation: A Turkish Model for Development Aid

Turkey's foreign aid allocation patterns show parallels with its foreign policy characteristics. Most importantly, the Turkish vision of foreign aid has become a genuine model in the sense that it takes humanitarian concerns into account in the making of foreign aid strategies. Projects were prioritized according to this wisdom and the principles of justice and responsibility became the pillars of what President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called the "Turkish-Type Developmental Aid Model" in the last 20 years. This model operates in line with a multidimensional understanding of foreign aid. What makes this strategy multidimensional is that its operations are directed both towards the population itself as well as state authorities, thereby increasing the effectiveness and sustainability of foreign aid. Accordingly, TİKA simultaneously provides for the building of schools and training institutions as well as governmental assistance in the form of mutual agreements. In this way, development becomes an active concept that is not reduced to state officials but also directly addresses the needs of the target population. This represents the realization of development in a bottom-up way that is expected to sustain itself in the future. Another important aspect of the multidimensional Turkish model is its emphasis on cultural and historical values through restoration projects. In this way, TİKA takes enormous efforts to preserve common cultural heritage.

In the post-2000 period that saw increased proactivity in foreign policymaking, foreign aid patterns also changed. For TİKA, institution-building efforts in former Ottoman territories gained priority in this period. Aid allocation through TİKA began to consider humanitarian concerns and the missions of protecting the vulnerable populations from several subsistence problems such as food insecurity and drought, as well

as social development problems such as low levels of literacy and education rates. Therefore, TİKA's priorities concentrated on humanitarian aid projects that could bring sustainable and long-term impacts to the recipient countries. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that reduces the understanding of foreign aid to bilateral or multilateral developmental aid that relies on short-term financial resource transfers through low-interest rate conditionality principles, the foreign aid model promoted by Turkey through TİKA has been shaped within the framework of principles that put humanity at the centre without necessarily expecting any material return. The peculiarity of the Turkish foreign aid allocation pattern is based on a sustainable and humanitarian rationale that plants the seeds of prospective returns in the recipient country or region, thereby robustly increasing aid effectiveness. It can be appropriate to briefly look at the recent developments of TİKA's foreign aid allocation patterns for each major sector. In that regard, cultural projects, health projects, education projects, and economic development projects have become much more efficient and innovative in recent years.

An important aspect of TİKA's work involves the restoration of Ottoman cultural heritage such as mosques, tombs, bridges, and monuments. As a product of a strategy that emphasizes the importance of common cultural denominators in foreign policy, such restorations have been an effective method of raising awareness of shared historical and cultural heritage. Considering the fact that the notion of common past is transmitted not only by language and ethnicity but also by a common historical experience, it would not be wrong to say that Turkish foreign policy after 2000 includes projects reflecting a revised understanding of common culture based on a shared past during the Ottoman Empire.



TİKA sheds light on the future with its projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (TİKA - Anadolu Agency)

Within the scope of the projects carried out by TİKA in the field of health services, the construction of hospitals and health centres, especially in Sub-Saharan African countries, is significant in the sense that 38 per cent of global child mortality is from this region due to neonatal diseases and other epidemics such as malaria and diarrhoea. TİKA's active involvement in these regions throughout the Covid-19 pandemic has made substantial contributions to the elimination of acute inequalities in access to health services. For example, within the scope of the *Erenler Sofrası* project, TİKA provided support to families in Botswana who had difficulties accessing food during the pandemic. In addition, with the mask, gloves, and disinfectant aids it sent to Lesotho, TİKA has been providing its support to Sub-Saharan African countries in the fight against the increasing Omicron variant. Apart from the humanitarian aid in the form of construction, TİKA has also provided necessary technical equipment for healthcare providers during the pandemic. For instance, ventilators and aspirators were provided by Turkey to the African countries that suffered most from the inadequate capacity in hospitals. Moreover, the recently-approved Turkish Covid-19 vaccine, Turkovac, is going to be distributed to Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions in the world and other needy regions in the world.

TİKA's education projects follow the same logic of foreign aid allocation strategies. Since the long-term prospects of a country, in the sense of economic development, is highly correlated to the amelioration of social structures through educational accessibility and quality, the Turkish model of foreign aid gives priority to projects in this area. Sustainable and effective institutions that promote education and reduce educational inequalities that are prevalent in underdeveloped countries fulfil this mission in recent years. In the last five years, for instance, TİKA carried out more than 1,000 projects in the world, ranging from primary and secondary school buildings to dormitories. For example, in Mongolia, TİKA provided necessary technical equipment for a school named Mongolian Children Palace and opened a foreign language preparatory class. This school is one of the longest-established educational institutions in Mongolia and successfully maintains childhood education. Since the lack of technical equipment and dilapidated state of facilities were making the school difficult to operate, TİKA's assistance played an important role in the solution of these problems.

Vocational training programmes organized in cooperation with NGOs are also an important part of TİKA's sustainable development projects. Since 2017, more than 600 vocational training projects have been organized. These projects aim to improve the technical knowledge of workers, thereby increasing efficiency gains for different sectors in the receiving country's economy. Additionally, TİKA makes considerable efforts to increase the participation of women in the workforce and eliminate gender inequalities prevalent in society by organizing employment programs for women. These attempts are crucial if we think of the very backwardness of underdeveloped countries in the context of gender inequality.

The sectoral distribution and examples of foreign aid provided through TİKA are numerous. [Somalia](#) provides a useful case study in that it reflects the foreign aid patterns of Turkey as a major driver of the state-building process.⁴ Turkey's active engagement in Somalia has demonstrated foreign aid and developmental assistance patterns ranging from humanitarian aid projects in the health and education services to security assistance. In 2011, Somalia faced a devastating famine. Turkey's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa began to intensify during this crisis and continued in the following years. Throughout the decade, strategies followed by TİKA have been successfully implemented, facilitating the improvement of state-building processes in Somalia. Therefore, the Turkish model did not focus on a simple logic of short-termism that sharply reduces aid effectiveness by decreasing the sustainability incentives but contributed to the country's long-term well-being.



TİKA sheds light on the future with its projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (TİKA - Anadolu Agency)

⁴ In this context, an informative Policy Outlook by Abdinor Hassan Dahir and Sakariye Cismaan provides a comprehensive assessment of the Somali case. The report is available at https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Turkey_Somalia_Afr.pdf

Redefining Power and Interest

Turkish foreign policy has been reflected in foreign aid behaviour since 1992. As an emerging donor country, Turkey successfully responded to the changing conditions in the international system by redefining national interests and taking humanitarian responsibilities into consideration. In this process of change, the institutionalization of foreign aid through the establishment of TİKA adequately fulfilled the country's foreign policy requirements with different developmental projects across a wide geography. From the conventional perspective, these attempts can be considered as the implementation of soft power, which involves the ability to influence other nations' behaviour without necessarily resorting to hard power mechanisms, as well as establishing a dependency relation that envisages the subordination of the receiving country by donor country (Nye, 1980). However, the post-2000 Turkish foreign aid did reveal something beyond that kind of simplistic interest calculations or any colonial desire for domination. What makes the last 20 years peculiar is the very fact that humanitarian concerns were included in the foreign aid allocation patterns of Turkey in line with its proactive character. To illustrate, Turkey's involvement in Syria is a successful manifestation of the very combination of her proactive character in the region and humanitarian concerns. Turkey, which has adopted the principle that great power brings great responsibility to her new diplomatic rationale, has thus become able to respond effectively to the solution of serious problems such as food insecurity, terrorism, illiteracy, and gender discrimination. Interestingly enough, sharp criticisms of the realist international system framework have increased in recent years. In these discussions, it is generally argued that the current global inequalities and the difficulties in accessing health services and vaccines during the pandemic period, especially in underdeveloped countries, necessitate a transformation that requires strong states to take responsibility.⁵ The asymmetry between power and relative responsibility attached to holders of power

excessively manifests itself in the contemporary world and requires concrete steps to be taken accordingly. The indifference of countries with great economic power to the current backwardness of the geographies that they once exploited for the sake of their colonial interests clearly shows both great powers' tremendous failure to confront history and their insensitivity to humanitarian values. In contrast, Turkey as a promising nation with no exploitative colonial background inherited a cultural and humanitarian legacy from the Ottoman Empire and adjusted her foreign policy perspective in line with a genuine consideration of its historical ties. This is why the Turkish model constitutes an ideal type that can help others redefine conventional understanding. This does not imply a total reversal of the concept of power but an updated version of the dominant approach, necessitated by the imperative of addressing global inequalities. If the developed world turns its back on the developing world, these problems will invariably spread and hinder the development trajectories of the great powers in a foreseeable future. The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a stark reminder in this regard, one that may, unfortunately, remain unheeded.

⁵ In academic terms, this debate reflects the contradiction between realism, liberal institutionalism, and critical theories in international relations. Realist accounts of international politics emphasize only the concept of power and do not have any reservations about humanitarian concerns. Therefore, foreign aid is ultimately an instrument of power politics and domination. Liberal institutionalism challenges this approach by giving importance to international institutions that work through cooperation and coordination without necessarily challenging the basic realist assumptions. Critical theory, on the other hand, challenges both approaches and makes a critical assessment of the concepts of power and interest by offering a redefinition of what is hitherto known and implemented. For critical theory, realism and its "neo" variants are problem-solving theories that explain the status quo. However, critical theory challenges the very assumptions promulgated by the realist school. Humanitarian considerations in foreign aid may be embodied in this line of thinking with a proper focus on a redefinition of power and interests. For further discussion, see Cox, R. W. (1981). Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. *Millennium*, 10(2), 126-155.

Concluding Remarks

The post-Cold War period produced its own dynamics and paved the way for foreign policy shifts, particularly in the Western Bloc countries. Successor Turkic republics in Central Asia constituted an important source of attention for Turkey. This radical change in the region and the world in general, required a new foreign policy par excellence for Turkey. The establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) in 1992 represents a fundamental step towards the institutionalization of foreign aid to this region. TİKA went through several legal revisions through which the institution gained relative autonomy and increased its effectiveness in the fulfilment of foreign policy demands. Turkey's foreign policy allocation patterns showed significant parallels with the foreign policy requirements that turned out to be proactive and assertive in the post-2000 period. In the 1990s, the priority was the activation of multilateral relations in the post-Soviet regions in which common cultural elements constituted a common denominator. Dramatic changes in neighbouring countries and the

developing proactive foreign policy character of Turkey led to an increasing involvement through foreign aid allocation in the post-2000 period. Accordingly, TİKA began to increase its geographical reach by opening new coordination offices in line with an increasing budget and proliferation of developmental projects. Restoration projects, provision of economic assistance, the establishment of health facilities and construction projects are some of the main activities carried by TİKA. The principle of sustainable development coupled with a long-term perspective for state-building in the receiving countries became the driving force of the institution. The Turkish model of development assistance can also be understood in the context of the redefinition of interests and the concept of power in an age of complex interdependency and increasing responsibility towards the underdeveloped parts of the world. Going beyond the simplistic assumptions of power politics can only be possible if nations recognize their increasing responsibilities in relation to their increasing power in the international system.

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