

Türkiye's Helping Hand: The Turkish Red Crescent

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Introduction

In an international system where power politics predominates, the humanitarian consequences of wars and disasters have often been overlooked by its most powerful actors. The cost of conflict goes beyond the particular region in which it takes place, ultimately becoming a shared problem for the whole world. Human displacement as a result of wars, food and water scarcities, and post-war reconstruction efforts represent moments when the importance that states attach to humanitarian values is put to the test. In this context, Türkiye's growing support for the provision of humanitarian assistance to countries in need deserves attention. In parallel with the country's proactive foreign policy, Türkiye has become one of the most benevolent countries in terms of foreign aid. Since its establishment in 1868, the Turkish Red Crescent has become one of the leading aid organizations in the world, with a non-discriminatory vision based on humanitarian values in numerous areas, in addition to the core historical mission of providing

medical support it provides to wounded soldiers. The Turkish Red Crescent (TRC) has been one of the most effective organizations in terms of putting the Turkish model of foreign aid allocation patterns into practice¹, especially in alleviating large-scale humanitarian problems seen in Syria and Afghanistan. This paper seeks to examine how the TRC reflects Türkiye's humanitarian concerns in different geographies around the world, contrary to the conventional power-centric and interest-driven calculations of foreign policy behaviour. In the last 10 years, when issues related to wars and conflicts have spilt over regional borders, the TRC has become a fundamental part of the efforts to eliminate the effects of destruction and act according to the principle of sustainable reconstruction. It has reached an organizational development that can operate in many areas. Assistances provided through the TRC in the aftermath of natural disasters or conflicts have continued to make a great hit in the collective memories of the people living in countries in need, even after a long period.



Life at Gammorah refugee camp in Idlib. (Doğukan Keskinliç - Anadolu Agency)

¹ To read more on Turkish type foreign aid allocation patterns, see <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/featured/turkey-as-a-donor-country-aid-allocation-patterns/>

Historical Background

The TRC was established in 1868 under the name of "Society for Aiding the Wounded and Ailing Ottoman Soldiers" by Dr. Marko Pasha, Dr. Abdullah Bey, Dr. Kırımlı (Crimean) Aziz Bey, and Omer Pasha (Serdar-ı Ekrem). In 1935, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, gave the name KIZILAY to the organization. In 1947, the organization took the name "Turkish Red Crescent Society" and it started to be officially represented with this name. The TRC has played important roles from the Ottoman-Russian War in 1876 to the Cyprus Peace Operation in 1974, and the following decades it has continued its medical assistance

services for soldiers and prisoners of war. The TRC, which initially operated as a medical support provider in conflict zones, has expanded its fields of activity to aid and rescue operations following natural disasters, blood and health services, international services such as food and water assistance, services for migrants and asylum seekers, and education services for young people. The organization has successfully developed a comprehensive network of operations over the years, spreading all around the world during times of need.

The Turkish Red Crescent in Times of Crisis

The TRC has been one of the most influential organizations as it relates to Türkiye's humanitarian outreach. The organization not only responds in times of disaster but is also heavily involved in medium and long-term development and recovery projects. In this respect, the TRC has developed a unique humanitarian approach in line with fundamental principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It has carried out different international aid services in 137 countries since its establishment. Only in the last 10 years, it supported people in need in 78 countries suffering from natural and human-induced disasters. The organization expanded the content and scope of its supportive projects from basic food and medical assistance to more comprehensive projects such as the reconstruction of houses, schools, and hospitals. Moreover, the TRC has made some significant contributions to the development of the agricultural sector in Sub-Saharan Africa where irrigation channels are needed. In this context, we can examine some of the projects carried out by the organization in recent years.

Indonesian Earthquake and Tsunami

In the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and subsequent tsunami, a worldwide aid campaign was launched in the wake of the natural disaster in which approximately

230,000 people lost their lives. TRC undertook search and rescue efforts and provided support for the reconstruction of public buildings, mosques, and homes in Indonesia. For instance, the renovation of one mosque in the Lhoknga district in 2006 was undertaken with assistance from Türkiye through TRC. In addition, 700 houses were built around the mosque. The name of the district was changed to "Turkish Village" by the authorities.²

Kashmir Earthquake

In 2005, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake resulted in the death of an estimated 100,000 people and caused serious material losses. TRC became the first organization to reach the region with search and rescue teams. It also provided necessary food aid and shelter facilities for those whose houses were severely damaged or destroyed during the earthquake. After that, TRC made great efforts in the construction of the hospital, school, and destroyed buildings in the city of Muzaffarabad. Despite the 17 years that have passed, the organization has been engraved in the collective memory of the Pakistani people thanks to these efforts.³

² For further information about Turkey's help and reconstruction efforts in Indonesia Earthquake, see <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/culture/indonesia-turkish-mosque-stands-after-2004-tsunami/1635260>

³ For further information about the 13th anniversary of the Kashmir Earthquake and Turkey's assistance, see <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-marks-13th-anniversary-of-2005-earthquake/1275965>

Lebanon

Playing a proactive role in the ceasefire attempts in the July-August 2006 War between Lebanon and Israel, Türkiye delivered 84 aid trucks containing food and medicine to the region through TRC. Considering the fact that the international community paid little attention to the violations of human rights in the war at that time, Türkiye's aid efforts through TRC were significant.⁴ The food and medical supplies provided by TRC to Lebanon were the most regular aid sent to the region. On August 4, 2020, an explosion occurred in the Port of Beirut. After the explosion, in which 207 people died and 15,000 people were injured, the TRC sent volunteer medical teams and search and rescue equipment to the country.⁵

The Turkish Red Crescent in Somalia

Increasing impacts of climate change and internal conflicts within the country have intensified existing problems such as food scarcity, drought, famine, and lack of water supply. In response to these problems, projects have been initiated by the TRC in Somalia. Campaigns have been launched for the Eid al-Adha (Qurban Feast) and the distribution of meat to those in need. Apart from this, the TRC has carried out many projects in Somalia. For instance, the last team went to Somalia delivered food package support to 4701 families.⁶



Turkish Red Crescent distribute food aid in Somali. (Sadak Mohamed - Anadolu Agency)

⁴ For a detailed version of the news, see <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/turkish-red-crescent-sends-aid-lebanon> and <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/reasons-between-turkey-and-lebanon.en.mfa>

⁵ To read the news, see <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-red-crescent-to-send-aid-to-blast-hit-lebanon/1932655>

⁶ To read the news, see <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkish-aid-group-distributes-meat-to-needy-families-in-somalia/2485402>

A Test of Humanity: Syria

The Syrian Civil War, one of the most protracted conflicts of the last two decades, has been going on for more than 10 years with hundreds of thousands of lives lost and severe material destruction. In addition to the carnage wrought on the Syrian people, from 2015 onwards, civilian casualties and material losses significantly increased as a result of the destructive activities of Daesh. Throughout the last 10 years, Türkiye experienced several waves of migration from Syria and today hosts more than 4 million Syrians.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), the TRC initiated the Syrian Crisis Humanitarian Relief Operation in 2011. It includes comprehensive projects such as border relief activities, a TRC Card, and child protection programmes. Border relief activities are carried out at 12 border aid points and involve the provision of food aid and material assistance programmes for Syrian refugees who live in container cities. TRC Card services provide monthly cash assistance to families in the border camps. The Child protection programmes act in cooperation with UNICEF and enhance psychosocial adaptation and orga-

nize skill-building projects for displaced Syrian children. The TRC has also provided humanitarian logistics support to other national and international aid organizations. Since 2011, the project has included both official and non-governmental assistance programmes and has seen the delivery of 61,263 trucks worth of humanitarian assistance (Turkish Red Crescent, 2021). The TRC, which treats refugees as a community rather than at the individual level, established Community-Based Migration Programmes in 2016. By doing so, the TRC has demonstrated a commitment to bringing long-term solutions to the table, instead of temporary solutions that lack continuity. We can examine the content of this comprehensive programme, which has reached approximately 2 million Syrian refugees through 18 community centres that offer health, educational and food services under 4 sub-programmes: Protection, Socioeconomic Empowerment Child & Youth, Social and Cultural Harmonization, Psychosocial Support and Health. Each programme has a distinctive quality in terms of planning and operation, thereby making Syrian refugees feel that they are part of a larger community with a shared set of values. Psychosocial adaptation programmes, therefore, constitute something more than providing particular goods and services for Syrian refugees.



Turkish Red Crescent resettles Syrian families in briquette houses in Idlib. (Muhammed Said - Anadolu Agency)



Turkish Red Crescent resettles Syrian families in briquette houses in Idlib. (Muhammed Said - Anadolu Agency)

The presence of the TRC has played an important role in building container cities on the Turkish side of the border.⁷ The TRC has also built several container cities in Syrian provinces. The TRC also carries out different assistance projects providing Syrian families in these cities with food supplies. For instance, the TRC team operating in Idlib supplies bread to 33,000 families every day. Apart from this, monthly food support and hygiene assistance for 17,000 families in Idlib is also provided by the TRC.⁸ In addition to Idlib, 1300 briquette houses were built in the town of Sarmada, 6 km from the Turkish border, including basic facilities and infrastructure.⁹

Water Scarcity in Africa

According to the World Health Organisation (2019), 2 billion people around the world do not have access to clean water resources while 785 million people are deprived of the most basic drinking water services due largely to inadequate infrastructure systems that provide clean water. For this reason, diseases such as cholera and dysentery can easily spread. In an effort to address specific instances of this problem, the TRC has begun to drill water wells in Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years, wells drilled in Chad, Uganda, Niger, and Somalia have provided people in the region with access to clean water. In addition, agriculture and animal husbandry activities in the districts where the wells are located have also found the opportunity to benefit from clean water resources, thereby making a positive impact on the maintenance of livelihoods.

⁷ Container cities were first started to be built on the Turkish side of the border by the Turkish Red Crescent under the Border Relief Action program. Thanks to this project, Syrian refugees became able to live comfortably in harsh weather conditions. Each container house with a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and toilet is given to Syrian refugee families free of charge.

⁸ To read the full content, see <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-red-crescent-continues-to-provide-aid-to-war-torn-families-in-syria-s-idlib/245113>

⁹ To read news and watch the video from constructed housing units in Idlib, see <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkish-red-crescent-delivers-homes-to-displaced-syrians-in-idlib/news>

Yemen

As of today, two-thirds of the population in Yemen requires humanitarian aid, and 14.3 million people need urgent aid (OCHA, 2022) as a result of the ongoing conflict. TRC played an important role in the organization of aid projects that reflect Türkiye's commitment to humanitarian values. Accordingly, the TRC has provided 15,000 tons of food aid and approximately 1,000 truckloads of aid supplies.¹⁰ Apart from the protracted civil war, during the flood disaster in August 2020, the TRC provided aid containing beds, blankets, kitchen appliances, water tanks, and food parcels to 4,537 families (Turkish Red Crescent, 2020).

Afghanistan

In August 2021, with the Taliban's seizure of Kabul, the country experienced a deep economic crisis as a result of internal turmoil. In this geography, where drought has also increased its impact, serious problems have been experienced in terms of Afghan people's access to basic foods, water, and services. In Afghanistan, half of the population

is currently in need of some form of humanitarian assistance. Moreover, 40% of this vulnerable population consist of children from 0-5 years of age.¹¹

The TRC's humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan dates back to 1995. The organization, which carried out its projects in contact with Afghan authorities and in partnership with Afghanistan Red Crescent until 2017, has provided nutrition, shelter, health, and hygiene assistance to nearly 2 million people through its permanent delegation opened in 2018. In 2018, the TRC launched the Voluntary Repatriation Support Program, ensuring that Afghans who returned to their country receive employment and shelter support. Thus, the TRC aimed to aid on the basis of continuity, as opposed to the simplistic logic of transferring certain products and services from one country to another. This strategy is also shared by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in that the existing international regime for refugees also embraces the principle that the most important pillar of the solution for the refugee issue is the preparation of conducive grounds for permanent repatriation.



Turkish Red Crescent is first to help flood victims in Afghanistan. (Sayed Khodaiberdi Sadat - Anadolu Agency)

¹⁰ To read the relevant news in detail, see <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkish-red-crescent-hosts-global-meet-for-humanitarian-aid-23122>

¹¹ To access the full WHO report on Afghanistan, see https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/health-emergency-information-risk-assessment/afgnemergplan2021v3.1.pdf?sfvrsn=3db0559d_7&download=true



"Goodness Train" carrying humanitarian aid reaches Afghanistan. (AFAD - Anadolu Agency)

At first glance, some projects may seem less beneficial than others in terms of the number of people they reach, however, this situation can be better understood if one views it from a different perspective. It can be useful to explain this point by making use of an important point from the literature on ethnographic studies. In some cases, macro-level understandings or broad generalizations prevent us from understanding how crises such as war actually impact the individual. Understanding the impact of crises on the individual may help us better understand the severity of the problem at hand. A closer examination of the individual success stories demonstrates how important the TRC's role is in changing individual lives. For instance, Mohammad Salim (23) who returned to Afghanistan with the beforementioned project of repatriation, had a small enterprise provided by the TRC and started to earn a living for himself and his family by selling food products. Salim commented on this situation by saying that his dreams came true and conveyed his thanks to Turkish authorities. Another life story that is worth mentioning is about Sayid Omar Mohammad (23) who came to Türkiye illegally and went back to Afghanistan in a short time. After being unemployed for 9 months, the TRC opened a grocery for him, and Mohammad became a popular person in his neighbourhood.¹²

Undoubtedly, one of the groups most affected by the instability and political crisis is children. Those who have to emigrate together with their displaced families to a city or country they have never seen before are deprived of their

fundamental right to receive an education. In this context, the TRC provided school bags and stationery support to 350 children from families living in camps near Pakistan's capital, Islamabad.¹³

The TRC, which maintained its presence following the Taliban takeover of the country, has followed the same humanitarian vision that it followed in the pre-Taliban era in Afghanistan and implemented new projects in line with new needs. The "Goodness Train", which arrived on February 7th, 2022, under the auspices of the Presidency, carried approximately 750 tons of essential humanitarian aid to Afghanistan's Herat province to be distributed to 34 regions.¹⁴ The aid, prepared with the support of 11 official and non-governmental organizations, has become a genuine manifestation of Türkiye's humanitarian outreach in the country.¹⁵

Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has witnessed widespread damage to urban centres, civilian infrastructure, and has caused severe hardship on Ukraine's civilian population to date. In response to Ukraine's call for emergency support, the TRC launched a nationwide aid campaign called "For Ukraine now!" On February 28, 2022, five trucks including food, blankets, and hygiene materials were sent by the organization. The TRC is in the process of preparing new convoys in coordination with its international counterparts.¹⁶

¹² To read more about the life stories, see <https://www.kizilay.org.tr/Haber/HaberDetay/4554>

¹³ See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkish-red-crescent-gives-school-supplies-to-afghan-refugee-kids-in-pakistan/2397577>

¹⁴ <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkiye-sends-750-tonnes-of-aid-to-afghanistan-on-charity-train-54157>

¹⁵ <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/afghan-taliban-hails-turkiye-for-sending-humanitarian-aid-54533>

¹⁶ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-crisis/turkish-red-crescent-launches-aid-campaign-for-ukraine/2518848>

Discussion: Revitalising Humanitarianism

In the cases above, the points touched upon were primarily related to natural disasters and human-induced crises to which the TRC provided humanitarian aid. What makes the TRC unique in the actualization of projects is twofold. The first is the fact that humanitarian aid projects are carried out in line with a long-term vision that prioritizes post-disaster reconstruction. Accordingly, for the TRC, it is not sufficient to provide basic emergency aid per se. It is also important for the organization to provide support to provide long-term support to increase the resilience of communities. TRC efforts are based on a logic of selflessness that prioritizes the needs of people regardless of any other consideration such as race, religion, and gender. In this sense, the TRC is an illustrative case that demonstrates humanitarian values without pursuing a prospective regional economic interest based on exploitation. The geographical reach of the organization has expanded considerably in the last 20 years through the opening of new offices and the development of cooperative networks with the receiving countries. Such developments have reinforced the TRC's capacity to bring Turkish assistance to distant geographies. In short, the TRC, which continues its long-term humanitarian aid vision, has become an organization that reconciles the proactive character of Turkish aid model with sustainability.

The second point has to do with the redefinition of the dominant understandings in the international regime for foreign aid and humanitarian assistance. In an era of globalization, countries focus more on macro-level values or indicators when describing certain concepts related to economic growth or trade volume. However, this quantitative mode of thinking has arguably penetrated other dimensions of daily life. One reflection of this, for instance, is that the assistance provided to a country sometimes can only be interpreted in terms of dollar amounts. One of the biggest problems with such a 'numerical understanding' is that one cannot think properly of the individual-level successes of humanitarian assistance. In other words, defining humanitarian assistance or foreign aid only in terms of the amount of money does not tell us anything about its effectiveness. However, when we look at the stories of the people mentioned in the Afghanistan case above,

it can help us rethink the concept of aid effectiveness in terms of whether aid is able to bring a long-term change to individual lives. Providing shelter and employment support in the scope of a project based on a refugee's repatriation means lifelong support for that person. Similarly, hosting a Syrian refugee family in briquette houses as the TRC is doing rather than tents is indicative of the organization's focus on revitalizing difficult to quantify feelings of family togetherness and stability. It can be also seen as a source of psychological motivation to the families. As we see in the case of Afghanistan, individual success stories are one of the most important criteria for measuring aid effectiveness in a country. If we take the level of individual instead of macro-scale understandings, it can be easier to understand how important the human-centred approach in foreign aid allocation. Such an understanding is also against the approach that considers foreign aid to be a manifestation of the symbolic power hierarchy between a donor country and a recipient country. The assistance provided through the TRC has been given in line with a particular vision that combines power with human values. In other words, Türkiye's economic power that makes her financially capable of carrying out these projects is combined with its humanitarian considerations based on the non-discrimination principle. It is another way of acting in accordance with the principle that with great power comes great responsibility. Also, Turkish assistance to countries in need aims to build a conducive environment in which people can find economic and social opportunities to continue their lives in the aftermath of a crisis. The Turkish model of foreign aid, therefore, implies sharing power with vulnerable people, not building a hegemony that puts them into another cycle of desperation and exploitation.

Concluding Remarks

Over a century and a half, the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC) has performed well in responding to natural or human-induced disasters. The organization aims to alleviate material losses with reconstruction projects in times of crisis. The very peculiarity of the TRC lies primarily in two characteristics: long-termism and redefinition of dominant understandings of humanitarian aid in the sense of its ability to secure long-term achievements such as economic empowerment to people in need. The TRC focuses on the revitalization of regions that have been severely impacted by natural disasters and human-induced crises through its reconstruction efforts with the aid of its broad organizational network. Public facilities and houses are rebuilt with the aid of the TRC's efforts. Moreover, the organization makes us rethink how humanitarian considerations attached to aid provision can have a great impact on individual life stories. While the amount of aid is seen as the main measurement criteria, the aid effectiveness aspect of the issue can be better understood if one examines how an individual life has changed as a result of the aid provided. The degree to which the aid touches upon individual lives constitutes a quintessential part of the aid effectiveness. This feature, therefore,

makes it possible to rethink and redefine the dominant conceptualizations and understandings of aid that have been hitherto predominantly affected by macrolevel or numerical considerations such as the amount of aid in terms of dollars. Humanitarian aid is something that goes beyond numerical expressions. Understanding how it impacts the lives of individuals allows for a more holistic understanding of its impacts. Overall, the TRC as a humanitarian organization is one of the main manifestations of the Turkish model of foreign aid, which has strengthened in the last two decades as a model for other organizations in the international system to emulate. It has successfully adopted new strategies and projects that can mitigate some of the negative impacts of the ongoing civil war in Syria and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, showing the organization's dynamic character of adaptation in the face of changing conditions. Both crises in Syria and Afghanistan have been effectively included by the organization's large scale operation plans in recent years. As long as it continues acting in accordance with its responsive character, it will be more likely to become a global model for its other counterparts in the world.

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