

Between Human and State Security: Turkey's Syria Policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP)

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has sought to portray the country as an emerging humanitarian and peacebuilding power, mobilising the country's diplomatic and foreign policy resources to project the AKP's vision of Turkey's Islamic identity through the lens of its duty to help. An analysis of the official narratives on the state's humanitarian and peacebuilding policies as they have evolved in the Syrian conflict highlights the tensions between a human security approach aimed at projecting Turkey as a normative humanitarian power and a state security approach based on the AKP government's perceived national security needs.

Keywords: Turkish humanitarian policy, Syria, AKP

Since 2011, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government has highlighted the country's role as a humanitarian and peacebuilding power, mobilising the country's Islamic identity and duty to help. The AKP defines the 'Turkish approach' as conceptually different from traditional—understood as Western—peacebuilding approaches. This was the narrative behind Turkey's early involvement in Syria and it was initially welcomed by the conservative AKP electorate. Significantly, the Syrian crisis gave Turkey an opportunity to project itself as a humanitarian superpower, accepting over 4 million refugees (3.6 of which are from Syria) to date, in stark contrast to Europe's anti-migration policies (UNHCR 2021). However, as domestic discontent grew, the discourse of the AKP shifted from a narrative of assistance to one of national security, as evidenced in multiple interventions in Northern Syria from 2016 onwards.

This article illustrates the securitisation of humanitarian policy and examines how the AKP's humanitarian and peacebuilding agenda evolved from a normative project - branding Turkey as a humanitarian power - to a realpolitik strategy, addressing perceived threats to the state in the form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. In so doing, it argues that there has been a shift from a human security perspective, informed by the AKP's ideological roots in the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), to a state security perspective, prioritising national security. Seeking to understand the evolution in Turkey's identity as a peacebuilding and humanitarian power through the case of Syria, it argues that the tensions between the normative approach centred on engaging with the humanitarian agenda and the realpolitik approach focusing on state security needs can be attributed to the linkage of domestic politics to foreign policy.

The foreign-domestic nexus in Turkish humanitarian and peacebuilding policies

Emerging powers have increasingly entered the humanitarian and peacebuilding field. Like established powers, emerging donors recognise humanitarian engagement as a marker of global power projection illustrative of power transitions at the international level. Their motivations for engagement impact

the modalities of assistance programs' implementation. For example, the policies emerging donors pursue in their immediate neighbourhoods tend to place a greater premium on strategic and security goals, while those pursued further abroad tend to prioritise commercial and business interests (Tank 2015; Alden and Jiang 2019; Paczynska 2020). This is reflected in the two most significant cases for Turkish humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding – Syria and Somalia. Unlike traditional actors, rising humanitarian powers tend to favour bilateral over multilateral assistance in their engagements. From the perspective of foreign policy projection, this gives emerging actors several advantages, including the opportunity to take on projects best suited to their foreign policy objectives, the ability to decide the modalities of their engagement and, not least, the 'branding' of their successes (Tank 2020). In the Turkish case, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding activities provide a platform for the AKP's soft power projection through the use of identity politics.

To analyse this trend, the article is grounded in foreign policy analysis (FPA), which focuses on the domestic sources of the external conduct of states. In particular, it draws from Thomas Risse-Kappen's (1991) "Innenpolitik" (domestic) theory, which stresses the primacy of the domestic context in foreign policymaking, be that culture (identity), politics, economics or regime type. The linking of domestic politics to foreign policy in the humanitarian and peacebuilding field is particularly relevant in the Turkish context for two reasons. The first is the increased importance of domestic politics in foreign policymaking due to the changing nature of the regime in Turkey. Although gradually sliding towards authoritarian rule after the AKP consolidated its position in 2011, the attempted coup of 2016 marks a watershed in Turkey's democratic decline, after which any opposition to AKP rule is identified by the state as treasonous (Özpek and Yaşar 2018, 208). By 2020, institutes ranking global democratic development such as Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy Institute labelled Turkey respectively as "not free" and as an "electoral autocracy" (Freedom House 2020; V-Dem 2020, 26). Scholars classify Turkey's present regime under the AKP in a space between representative democracy and authoritarianism, using terms such as "majoritarian democracy" and "hybrid regime" (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016) "delegative democracy" (Taş 2015) or a "competitive authoritarian regime" (Stelgias 2016). Turkey is categorised as an illiberal populist regime defined by an inadequate separation of powers and strong centralised rule by a populist leader with unchecked powers (Draege 2017). In such regimes, domestic politics and foreign policy are a reflection of the ruler, and, by extension, failures in either domain may place autocratic populist leaders in a vulnerable position (Weeks and Crunkilton 2017). By the same token, however, foreign policy may be used to strengthen the position of the regime, particularly when reinforcing domestic politics in ways that are critical to regime survival. In the case of the AKP, the party is able to project the state's Islamic identity outwardly while reinforcing its identity inwardly, thus linking foreign policy to domestic politics.

This second aspect of the domestic-foreign linkage that makes the Turkish case important is the growing role of Turkey as a humanitarian and peacebuilding actor. As a concept, humanitarianism challenges the Westphalian principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states and is increasingly seen as a "political and normative alternative" to the Westphalian system (Belloni 2007: 451-3). In a departure from traditional understandings of security, humanitarianism prioritises human security over state security. In traditional understandings of security, the state is the sole provider of security aimed at protecting its boundaries, people, institutions and values. The concept of human security shifts the referent object of security and the responsibility for providing security from the state to a broader set of actors, including regional and international organisations, local communities and

non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A key document is the United Nation's 2005 World Summit Outcome adopted by all United Nations heads of state, which endorsed for the first time the concept of human security through the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect. This recognised "the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair" and the responsibility of the state as well as the international community "to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" (UN 2005, par. 143, 138).¹ Human security was thus placed at the core of the international agenda with the recognition that "development, peace and security and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing" (Muguruza 2007:15). The protection of people or individuals is a central humanitarian value, and humanitarianism shares the merging of development and security inherent in the human security concept.

As the article will show, however, there is a continuing tension between state security and human security in the AKP's approach to humanitarianism and peacebuilding in Syria. In exploring this, it is necessary to bear in mind the complex nature of the interaction between domestic politics and foreign policy. As Lisel Hintz (2016, 335) notes, foreign policy offers "an alternative arena in which elites can politicize identity debates". Hintz argues that elites choose to take their competition over national identity abroad when "identity gambits at the domestic level are blocked" (ibid.), this article illustrates that, in a polarised society where the dominant AKP's vision of state identity remains challenged by the secular Republican vision, this contest continues to be played out through the state's humanitarian and peacebuilding policies. However, when the hierarchy of state interests prioritise security as a result of Turkey's unresolved Kurdish issue and perceptions of opposition to AKP rule, this challenges the AKP's projected identity as a humanitarian power.

The emergence of Turkey as a humanitarian and peacebuilding power

Turkey's entry into the humanitarian field as a key player began with then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision to make a much publicised trip to Somalia in 2011 accompanied by advisors, businessmen and even his own family. Visiting Somalia as the first leader from outside Africa in nearly 20 years, the trip took place at a time when the rest of the world had forgotten about the crisis in the country (BBC 2011). The Prime Minister's entourage drew significant media attention when it landed in war-torn Mogadishu – at the time considered too dangerous for the international community's assistance programs operating at a safe distance from Kenya. It was a watershed moment, not only for reviving interest in Somalia, but also, more particularly, for launching Turkey onto the global stage as a humanitarian and peacebuilding power.

The development of Turkey's humanitarian activities, in fact, had begun much earlier. The central organisation for Turkey's humanitarian efforts is TİKA, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency established in 1992, but whose growth period began in 2004 due to political stability under the AKP, a prospering economy and the transformative influence of the EU (Tank 2020). The weakening of the Turkish Armed Forces' (TAF) key political role due to Turkey's EU candidacy led to the civilianisation

¹ In a follow-up to paragraph 143 on human security of the 2005 World Summit Outcome, the UN General Assembly Resolution 66/290 from 2012 tempers concerns about state sovereignty by noting that the notion of human security is distinct for responsibility to protect (UN 2012, 66/290 paragraph (d)), stating that "Human Security does not replace State security" (paragraph (e)) and that "human security is based on national ownership" (paragraph f).

of Turkish foreign policy.² This opened up a space for new thinking and engagement. It also raised the possibility for the AKP to use foreign policy as a means to define itself in opposition to earlier secular-led governments. Initially, however, the AKP, still wary of the military's watchful eye, aligned its foreign policy with the trajectory of Turkey's traditional secular elites, aiming at closer ties to the West.

A major instigator of the shift, Ahmet Davutoğlu, chief advisor to the Prime Minister (2003-2009) and later Turkey's Foreign Minister (2009-2014), developed his policy of "Strategic Depth" reinventing Turkish foreign policy as multidimensional and activist. Turkey was promoted as a centre, not a periphery of the Middle East or Europe. The idea was further developed in the "zero problems with neighbours" policy seeking to leverage Turkey's historical and cultural heritage as well as its political, and not least economic, successes as a Muslim democracy. These were seen to form the basis for the "soft power" which would project Turkey into a regional power. The AKP's policy was grounded in the pragmatic understanding that stable relations with countries in the region would be beneficial to economic prosperity and, by extension, ensure the popularity of the party (Berk and Gumuscu 2016).

Activism was already apparent in the early years of AKP rule – a time of increasing peacebuilding initiatives. From 2005 to 2010, these focused on multilateralism, and Turkey was the only country co-chairing groups of friends of mediation at the United Nations (UN), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as well as the organiser of the Istanbul Mediation Conference and the OIC members mediation conferences. Beyond the Islamic world, Turkey also engaged with Spain in the UN Alliance of Civilizations' initiative (2005) and emphasised peacebuilding during its tenure in the UN Security Council in 2009-2010. During this period, Turkey also engaged as a mediator in a number of conflicts. This included the attempt to play a role in 2008 as an intermediary between Syria and Israel over the question of the Golan Heights, an effort that failed following Israel's conduct in the Gaza War (2008-2009) which then Prime Minister Erdoğan referred to as a "crime against humanity". In May 2010, Turkey and Brazil cooperated for a diplomatic solution to the crisis over Iran's nuclear enrichment program. In the ensuing "Tehran Nuclear Declaration", Iran agreed to send low-enriched uranium to Turkey in return for enriched fuel for research purposes. Turkey's engagement was based on security concerns centred on the costs of having a nuclear neighbour that is also a regional rival and fears of instability in the event of an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. The US rejection of the deal angered Turkey (and Brazil), and both voted against sanctions at the UN Security Council. Other Turkish mediation efforts included acting as an intermediary between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Turkey organised four summits between the two countries from 2007 to 2011, referred to as the Trilateral Ankara Cooperation process, to address issues of economic relations and coordination among the military and intelligence communities in the fight against terrorism, with Turkey discreetly negotiating with select members of the Taliban (Cameron-Moore 2010). In each of these early cases, Turkey was able to mobilise its cultural and historical capital to strengthen its mediator role. In this period, Turkish soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye (2004), was at its height, with Turkey's values, culture, policies and institutions making it a credible mediator with experience from the challenging security environment of the Middle East.³

² While the TAF were the primary actor in foreign policy through their role in the National Security Council that set the agenda for the most important issues to Turkey's external relations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at that time ideologically aligned with the TAF, was also key to foreign policymaking (Hale 2000).

³ Nye (2004, 31) defines the "primary currencies" of an actor's soft power as its values, culture, policies and institutions and the ability of these to attract other actors to "want what you want".

Nimet Beriker (2016, 127) describes the period from 2007 to 2011 as the 'golden era' of Turkish mediation.

By 2013, however, the "zero problems with neighbours" policy had proven a failure due to the challenges raised by the Arab Uprisings. Initially, the AKP's own history with the TAF made them sympathetic to the demonstrators in Tunisia and Egypt, supporting the rise of the MB against Hosni Mubarak's secular regime, and seeing parallels with their own struggle against military guardianship. The ideology of the MB, with its focus on solidarity with the religious *umma* rather than the state, resonated with the AKP's political ideology. President Erdoğan's ties to the Brotherhood can be traced to his formative years in the 1970s, when he was a part of former Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's *Milli Görüş* movement. (The latter had a brief period in power, removed from government in the 1997 so-called "post-modern" coup.) A network of MB branches in the Gulf sustained Erbakan and Turkey's Islamists in this era when they were repressed by the secular establishment (Tanir 2019). The military's intervention served as a lesson for Erdoğan on the limits of political Islam under a secular regime backed by Turkey's Armed Forces.

As the EU candidacy effort lost traction and the AKP turned east, there was a shift in its ideological thinking. The AKP began appealing to a new segment of its supporters, who were more conservative, with the projection of Turkey's identity as a Middle Eastern power. From the early 2000s, the MB also moved towards greater moderation, rejecting violence and embracing new concepts such as pluralism, the rule of law, equal rights and citizenship in its political vocabulary (Mejer and Bakker 2012). Despite this, there were variations in the strategies used to gain power. Although emerging from the same historical roots and sharing ideological closeness in political and religious interpretation, there are differences in how groups within national MB organisations operate, with some groups espousing more extremist strategies. As stated by political Islam scholar Lorenzo Vidino (cited in Tanir 2019), "It's no longer 1955, and there is no singular Muslim Brotherhood. There are many Muslim Brotherhoods". Although the AKP's decision to join in solidarity with Islamist parties abroad informed by MB ideology initially reinforced the AKP's ambition for a leadership role in the Arab world, it later weakened its position as the Arab Uprisings ended in instability and conflict (Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen) and the re-trenchment of autocratic regimes (Egypt). In particular, the military coup against the MB in Egypt and its replacement with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in June 2013 was significant for dismantling the AKP's ideological network in the region (Berk and Gumuscu 2016, 26).

A new, equally activist vision of Turkish foreign policy emerged in 2013, labelled "humanitarian diplomacy". As defined by Davutoğlu, the new framework consisted of three dimensions: improving citizens' lives at home to enhance Turkey's domestic capacity; a pro-active and "human"-focused policy in crisis regions; and cultivating humanitarian sensibilities within the UN system. Distinct from the term as it was used by humanitarian organisations, Davutoğlu's concept emphasised the fusing together of power – capacities and resources – and "conscience" (Davutoğlu 2013). The focus on values and conscience was central to the notion of humanitarian diplomacy and was expressed somewhat ambiguously by Davutoğlu as "connecting with the conscience of mankind". He elaborated as follows: "The realities of our era require the rise of a human oriented diplomacy, which can move beyond the realist-idealist divide on the one hand and the hard-power versus soft-power dichotomy on the other" (Ibid 865). Humanitarian diplomacy was determined to be a "critical equilibrium" between conscience and power (Ibid 866). Ali Noyan Coşkun, Turkey's Consul in Somaliland, explained it thus in 2018:

“Humanitarian diplomacy is another indispensable aspect of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey has been a leading actor in humanitarian diplomacy with its focus on the human cause through its official development and humanitarian aid” (Coşkun 2018). The humanitarian agenda adopted by Turkey in these ‘golden’ years of foreign policy activism served to strengthen domestic pride in Turkey’s role as a rising global power while consolidating its Islamic identity.

The rise of the humanitarian state

Turkey’s humanitarianism needs to be understood within the framework of larger critical discussions on the liberal agenda in peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance emerging after the 1990s. Concerns over the role and practice of peacebuilding developed concurrently with shifts in the global political landscape, the end of Great Power dominance and the rise of regional powers. The liberal peacebuilding model of the 1990s – exemplified in Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s Agenda for Peace (1992) – focused on multiparty democracy, a free-market economy and the rule of law; however, rather than creating stability and peace, it became increasingly equated with Western interventionism in the name of a “new world order” (Moe and Stepputat 2018, 294). The culmination with policy failures in Afghanistan and Iraq fuelled discussions reconceptualising the humanitarian project. Criticising post-conflict reconstruction in the case of Afghanistan, Astrid Suhrke (2007, 1292) noted that the model of imported modernisation stemming from “Western experiences of liberal political development and economic growth” was intended to not only reconstruct, but rather redesign nations.

Unlike traditional actors who frame their engagement through the lens of human rights and democracy promotion, emerging humanitarian actors, concerned by perceived hegemonic aid discourses of the Global North and wary of the liberal peacebuilding agenda, frame their assistance in terms of solidarity, cooperation, mutual support and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (Pacynszka 2020). Broadly speaking, traditional actors export packages of modernisation, while for the most part, emerging donors challenge the hegemony of the liberal peacebuilding model by removing conditionalities on aid and focusing on the immediate needs of beneficiaries through visible projects and collaboration with local populations (Tank 2020). Below is a table summarising (in general terms) some of the differences between traditional and rising humanitarians.

Differences in assistance	Traditional Humanitarians	Emerging humanitarians
Models of engagement	Liberal peacebuilding model with package of modernisation	Non-interference in internal issues and no conditionalities on aid
Understandings of security	Human security prioritised	State security prioritised
Modalities of assistance	Long term capacity building projects	Visible projects based on immediate beneficiary needs
Aid flows	Preference for distribution through multilateral organisations	Preference for bilateral aid
Reporting on assistance	Members of OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC donor)	Aid given as a non-DAC donor

Turkey brands its approach in opposition to the Western model of humanitarianism, claiming an “exceptionalism” that stems from its historical, social and cultural roots in the Muslim world (Tank 2020). Writing in 2014, Fuat Keyman and Onur Sazak refer to Francis Fukuyama’s contrasting notions of state- and nation-building interventions, and identify the Turkish approach under the AKP as “state-building over nation-building”.⁴ From their perspective, Turkey does not attempt to redesign failed states in the image of itself (as a donor country), but rather reconstructs the infrastructure needed for economic development as well as supporting efficient government, exemplified by its assistance in Somalia after 2011 (Tank 2020). However, there is an unresolved tension in Turkey’s policies between the rhetoric of human security and the self-proclaimed preference for “state-building” over “nation-building” interventions. Human security is defined by norms and values within states, which implies that nation-building trumps state-building, thus weakening the principle of state sovereignty. This was particularly reflected after 2012 in the case of Syria, as illustrated below. A second tension may be found in the AKP’s support for human security, which paradoxically occurred at a time in which Turkish democracy began its decline, leading scholars such as Belhül Ozkan (2014) to argue that support for democratisation in the region was intended only to serve a pan-Islamist agenda. In short, it served the geopolitical aims of the AKP to promote Turkey’s ideological leadership in the region.

The divergence from Western models of humanitarian assistance had the added advantage of reinforcing humanitarianism as a domestic identity marker, highlighting Turkey’s Islamic values. Evolving from ideas of Ottoman and Islamic compassion, the AKP projects its understanding of the state’s identity as a global humanitarian actor with particular responsibility for those with whom it shares historical, cultural and religious affiliations (Altunışık 2019). At the rhetorical level, a moral foreign policy with a global outreach is certainly reflected in the title of TİKA’s 2017 annual report: “Turkey: The World’s Conscience”. The moral drive behind Turkey’s engagement was reiterated by Serdar Cam, the president of TİKA, in 2018: “Will we let an unmanageable humanitarian crisis in Yemen, Palestine or Africa become the problem of the next generations? [...] As a faithful nation, we're thinking about the moral and conscientious dimensions of these issues” (cited in Erbay 2018). The discourse around humanitarianism as a moral duty stemming from the AKP’s religious identity has however been challenged by the Syrian case.

Development as Peacebuilding⁵

Presently, Turkey’s official discourse on peacebuilding is understood within the context of development and reconstruction (Woods and Sazak 2016). This is reflected in the predominant role given to the work of the TİKA within Turkish foreign policy. Former deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag (2012) described the aid activism in Turkish foreign policy as such: “Turkey has left behind the old introverted, wait and see approach. All the activities by our public entities, achievements in and outside the country are institutional outcomes of such a new approach to foreign policy” TİKA 2012,

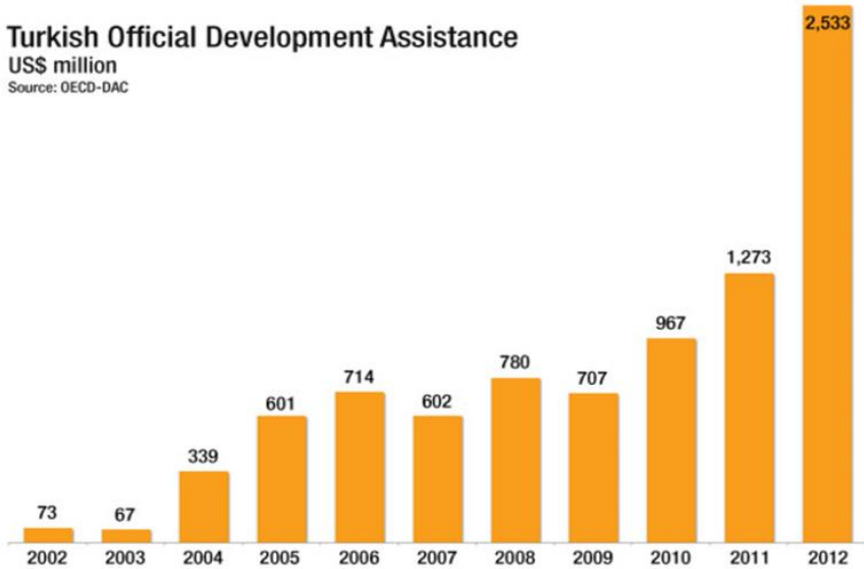
⁴ Fukuyama’s article focuses on the failures of US nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq. He cites critics who maintain that “outsiders can never build nations, if that means creating or repairing all the cultural, social and historical ties that bind people together as a nation” but maintains that US “interests dictate that we learn how better to teach other people to govern themselves” (Fukuyama, 2004)

⁵ This section builds on an earlier chapter: Pinar Tank, Turkey: New Humanitarianism and Geostrategic Ambitions. In Agnieszka Paczynska, ed. *The New Politics of Aid: Emerging Donors and Conflict-Affected States*: 121-40. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2020.

Forward). By 2011, humanitarian policy had become a tool to profile Turkey as a rising regional and global power (Tank 2020). Implicit in the Turkish state understanding of humanitarianism is the nexus between peacebuilding and development.

Although Turkish development assistance programs began in the early 1990s, there was a sharp rise in the state’s financial contributions in 2011, as illustrated in Figure 1. The sharp rise in TİKA’s activities reflected Turkey’s commitment to engaging with humanitarian assistance following its entry onto the stage in Somalia. Although outdated, the figures illustrate the commitments preceding the Syria refugee crisis and are, therefore, a more accurate reflection of an offensive policy of humanitarian assistance, rather than a response to the crisis at Turkey’s border. The largest recipients of assistance in 2012 was Somalia with 30.46% followed by Palestine with 19.35% (TİKA 2012, 24). However, by 2013, according to OECD figures, the largest beneficiary of Turkey’s global aid was Syria, followed by Egypt, Afghanistan and Pakistan (OECD 2014). The share of Turkey’s total ODA allocated to Syria alone increased from 52% in 2013 to 70% in 2015 (OECD homepage).

Figure 1. A decade of Turkish official development assistance (2002-12, US million)



Source Piccio 2014 based on OECD-DAC data

The growth in Turkish development assistance continued – reaching USD 8.1 billion in 2017, a 25 per cent increase over the previous year. TİKA noted that “Turkey has become the sixth highest ranking country in official development assistance, overtaking many developed countries like the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany” (cited in Erbay 2018). By 2018, Turkey’s official Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) was at USD 8.6 billion, and Turkey was ranked as the largest state humanitarian donor (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). Despite a global drop in

humanitarian assistance in 2019, the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report (2020) places Turkey's contribution as the largest donor by volume at USD 7.6 billion.⁶

Significantly, aid was institutionalised through linking the official infrastructure to Turkey's Foreign Ministry and, by 2005, TİKA was coordinated through the Office of the Prime Minister, illustrating its central role in Turkish soft power projection during this formative period. Early on, TİKA proclaimed "development assistance as a significant foreign policy instrument" (TİKA 2014, 15). It is worth noting that the establishment of TİKA in 1992 was motivated by a desire to counterbalance the influence of Iran and Russia on the Turkic states and promote the Turkish model: democratisation, free-market economy and Westernisation (Özkan and Demirtepe 2012). As AKP rule has become more personalised, the "patronage...material and morale support" given by President Erdoğan have determined its direction, as TİKA's President Serdar Cam explained in an interview in 2018, noting that the targets and priorities of TİKA overlap with Turkish foreign policy as determined by the President (Erbay 2018). This reflects the personally driven agenda of Turkey's foreign policy activism.⁷ By 2018, TİKA had 61 program coordination offices in 59 countries on five continents and worked actively in 150 countries (ibid.).

Under the AKP, Turkey has moved away from a position of non-intervention, illustrated by founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's dictum, "Peace at home, peace in the world". A dictum that was intended as a warning against intervening in the turbulent politics of the region has been reinterpreted as a call to activism. This reinterpretation is labelled by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs as "Turkey's Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy" (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). TİKA (2020) explains Turkey's outreach thus: "With the establishment of the concept of active politics in our foreign policies, TİKA became an implementing intermediary of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in the countries with whom we have shared values." As a consequence, mediation in Syria following the start of the conflict in 2011 began as a conflict prevention effort, but the trajectory of Turkey's activism then moved from a human security to a state security perspective.

The Syrian case: the securitisation of humanitarianism

The Syrian case exemplifies the shift in Turkey's understanding of humanitarianism over a period from the late 1990s to the present day. Turkish foreign policy approaches to Syria can roughly be divided into three stages, fluctuating between an emphasis on state security in the 1990s when relations between the two countries were normalised, then sliding towards human security when democratisation through regime change and intervention guided Turkish policy at the start of the Syrian civil war, to finally return to the present focus on state security as the risks of the regime change strategy proved too high and new actors entered the conflict. These changes illustrate to what extent the AKP's Islamic values and moral duty to assist take a secondary place when national interests are perceived as threatened.

⁶ However, the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020 notes that Turkey's commitments are not directly comparable to other donors' humanitarian assistance because the aid it voluntarily reports to the OECD DAC (Development Assistance Committee) is "largely made up of spending on hosting Syrian refugees within Turkey" and is therefore not "strictly comparable with the international humanitarian assistance totals from other donors".

⁷ Seventy-two per cent of the respondents to a survey conducted in July 2019 on foreign policy perceptions stated that President Erdoğan has the primary responsibility for Turkey's foreign policy (Aydin *et al.* 2019, 23).

Turkey's interest in Syria has historically centred on concerns over Kurdish separatism. Raymond Hinnebusch (2013, 3) describes the relationship as stretching in a continuum from a high level of hostility to a high level of cooperation, then returning to enmity. Hasan Kösebalaban (2020, 340) rightfully defines it as "one of the most unstable bilateral relationships in the history of Turkish foreign policy". The Kurdish issue has historically been 'securitised' in Turkey, named an existential threat to the integrity of the Turkish republic. Securitisation theory notes that challenges that are regarded as threatening the survival of a state are defined as security problems, and in "naming a certain development a security problem, the 'state' can claim a special right, one that will [...] always be defined by the state and its elites" (Wæver 1995, 55). Securitisation thus becomes a means whereby elites obtain control over an issue by defining it as an existential threat. Kurdish attempts at autonomy in Syria are securitised for fear that they may inspire Turkey's Kurds to make similar claims for independence.

The volatility of the Turkish-Syrian relationship has often been a result of the respective Kurdish policies of the two states and, not least, their willingness to use the Kurdish issue to gain leverage over one another. Syrian support for the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) throughout the 1980s and 1990s made cooperation impossible. A rapprochement between Turkey and Syria only materialised in 1998 as a result of the Syrian government's decision to expel the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, from Syria following Turkish military pressure. This also began a process of normalisation of relations between the two. Domestically, it provided the Turkish state with an opportunity to move the Kurdish issue from the security to the political arena, raising hopes for a Kurdish peace process. Relations with Syria improved considerably after the rise to power of the AKP in 2002, opening new markets in the Middle East for a core constituency of the AKP, entrepreneurs of small and medium size enterprises often called the "Anatolian tigers" (New Europe 2017). Regional trade relations normalised foreign policy interactions and saw the rise of what Kemal Kirişçi referred to as the "trading state" (Kirişçi 2009). During the period between 2008 and 2011, Turkey's relations with its Arab neighbours (and Iran) as well as the Gulf States went through a period of desecuritisation (Coşkun 2015). This gave the AKP a platform to profile itself as a regional peacebuilder. As noted above, Turkey was given the role of intermediary in the 2008 discussions between Syria and Israel. Syria recognised the possibility for Turkey to act as a bridge to the West and draw the country out of isolation. The focus of the AKP at this stage (when the TAF were still a key actor in foreign policy) was on state security as a means to counter the Kemalist state's existential fear of Kurdish irredentism.

When conflict erupted in Syria in 2011, the AKP was still pursuing the "zero conflicts with neighbours" policy, which prioritised respect for state sovereignty. However, Turkey's active support for democratisation efforts in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria at the start of the Arab Uprisings illustrated a shift away from prioritising state security towards focusing on human security.⁸ In the early days of the uprising in Syria, Erdoğan, imbued with the self-confidence of Turkey's rising regional role and his own personal relationship with Bashar al-Assad, urged the latter to enact political reforms. The unwillingness of the Syrian regime to consider such options, and its repressive response, was seen as a personal, as well as a diplomatic, humiliation. With animosity growing in Turkey towards the Syrian

⁸ In this context, Libya presents a contrasting case, in which Turkey's initially resisted supporting UN resolution 1973 based on concerns over the spillover of any Western intervention as was experienced after the Iraq war as well as Turkey's significant economic interests in the country. (Ennis and Momani 2013).

regime, Turkey opened the border for refugees fleeing the conflict. Due to the particularities of Turkish refugee law, those coming to Turkey from Syria were considered “guests”, raising perceptions that their stay was temporary (Skribeland *et al.* 2018). Concerns over the escalating conflict resulted in calls by Erdoğan for regime change in Syria, backing the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) politically and, more controversially, providing military support to groups fighting the regime, from the FSA to *Jabhat al-Nusra* – a Sunni extremist group with connections to al-Qaida (Butler 2015). The Turkish state was accused of shipping arms across the border in January 2014, when Turkish security forces intercepted a convoy of trucks on its way to Syria discovering weapons and ammunition directed to rebels fighting against the Syrian regime.⁹ A particularly egregious example was a Turkish “humanitarian aid” convoy which was bombed in 2015 and discovered to contain a shipment of arms.¹⁰ The 900 km long border between Turkey and Syria became a crossing point for weapons and foreign fighters in one direction and refugees in the other.

The most recent stage in Turkish foreign policy towards Syria is defined by a return to traditional state security concerns, in particular the existential fear of Kurdish separatism. Early on, Kurdish groups in Syria refrained from confrontation with the Assad regime and, by 2012, Kurdish political parties in the northeast living in the political vacuum brought on by the conflict had assumed state functions – providing security, food distribution and operating the bureaucracy (*Wall Street Journal* 2012). The organic links between the dominant Kurdish party in northeast Syria – the PYD (Democratic Union of Kurdistan) –and the Turkey-based PKK fuelled threat perceptions, particularly since the Kurdish issue in Turkey remained unresolved. Kurdish successes at defending the symbolically important town of Kobane in 2014 raised fears in Turkey of the development of a contiguous Kurdish zone on its border (connecting the Kobane and Afrin cantons) from which to conduct operations into Turkey. The Kurdish victory at Kobane in 2014 was a key moment in Daesh’s decline, increasing public recognition of the role of the PYD and strengthening the relationship between the United States, Turkey’s NATO ally, and the Syrian Kurdish PYD. In 2015, as the Syrian regime was on its final legs, Russia entered the conflict in support of Assad. Turkish President Erdoğan, recognising the pivotal role played by Russia, partnered with President Putin in the hopes that he could secure Turkey’s national interests and reverse the movement towards Kurdish autonomy. This entailed an acceptance of the preservation of the Assad regime to protect Turkish national interests.

The AKP’s securitisation of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria was reinforced by the re-securitisation of the Kurdish issue within Turkey, thus aligning foreign and domestic policy. In particular, the loss of the AKP’s parliamentary majority in the 2015 election was a red flag to the party about its weakening position. The loss of the Kurdish vote (and liberal voters over time) led to the AKP’s first election setback in thirteen years, forcing them to turn to the right-wing nationalist National Action Party (MHP) as a coalition partner (Letsch and Traynor 2015). With the support of the MHP, Erdogan was able to pass a constitutional referendum moving Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017 and expanding the executive power of the Presidency, to which he rose. In return, the nationalists demanded a more hard-line policy towards the Kurds, successfully mobilising anti-Kurdish sentiment based on concerns over Kurdish autonomy in Syria spilling across the border into Turkey. As a

⁹ The report in the opposition newspaper *Cumhuriyet* resulted in charges of espionage against its editor-in-chief Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, the paper’s Ankara bureau chief (*The Guardian* 2015).

¹⁰ Although the convoy was said to belong to the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), a charity close to the AKP at the time, the IHH claimed they did not own it (*RT News* 2015).

consequence, many Kurdish politicians working for legal political parties, in opposition to the government, have been imprisoned.¹¹ The coup attempt in July 2016 has made political opposition increasingly difficult, while the TAF have been purged of officers accused of having links to the alleged coup-makers, and replaced with regime loyalists (Rodríguez 2020).

From 2016 to 2019, the TAF conducted three operations in Syria in an effort to retake enclaves governed by the Syrian Kurdish PYD.¹² The Turkish military's cross-border operation in October 2019 was termed a "humanitarian intervention". Significantly, this operation was not conducted expressly to weaken the Assad regime (although it did so by breaching state sovereignty) but to secure Turkey's own interests. A statement issued by Turkey's National Security Council ahead of the intervention, while noting Turkey's respect for "Syria's territorial integrity and political unity", conflated the country's security interests with its humanitarian goals. It stated that Turkey would take action towards "the implementation of the safe zone project that will enable Syrian refugees to return home as soon as possible, which Ankara considers to be a humanitarian issue, and that Turkey will not hesitate to take action in order to ensure its own national security" (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2019). This illustrates the full circle in Turkey's policy, prioritising those state security concerns that had historically defined its approach to Syria.

The link between domestic politics and foreign policy that had earlier served to strengthen the AKP's position domestically by reinforcing its Islamic identity globally, is now a challenge to the AKP due to the unpopularity of its Syria policy. Ideas of regional Islamic solidarity and compassion resulted in an 'open door' policy for asylum-seeking Syrians with the consequence that, by 2020, Turkey was host to some 3.6 million Syrian refugees and an additional 1.4 million migrants from other parts of the world (UNHCR 2020). Refugees are concentrated in urban areas (95 per cent), and in some urban centres such as Kilis, on the border with Syria, there are more Syrian refugees living in the city limits than Turkish residents. Their different ethnicity and cultural practices have heightened perceptions of the Syrians as a societal threat to Turkish identity, a discourse significantly mobilised by nationalist groups (Kirişci *et al.* 2018). Hostile rhetoric from all political parties feeds into popular discontent, and 80 per cent of Turks are presently opposed to the settlement of Syrian refugees in Turkey. According to a 2019 survey, 42 per cent of the population believe that Turkey should have remained neutral in the Syrian conflict (Aydin *et al.* 2019). Figures like these impact on the popularity of the government in the lead-up to the 2023 elections.

These domestic factors are now drivers of Turkey's policies in Syria, once again reflecting the prioritisation of state over human security. This is clearly expressed in an official publication from 2020 stating: "The direct connection between the developments in Syria and various issues concerning the national security of Turkey has defined the framework of the measures taken by Turkey" (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Interior 2020, 51) Linking humanitarian policy to domestic agendas, the Syrian case illustrates that the Turkish state under the AKP fluctuates between the normative human security approach and the state security approach depending on the possibility to gain domestic political advantages.

¹¹ These include the co-chairpersons of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, both incarcerated in April 2016

¹² This follows a more general trend of assertive and militarised Turkish foreign policy with confrontational engagements in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean in addition to Syria.

Conclusion

In sum, in an illiberal populist regime such as Turkey, foreign policy and domestic politics are intertwined and seen as expressions of the leader's successes or failures. Humanitarian policy, therefore, as a part of foreign policy, becomes the projection of the AKP's understanding of state identity, economic and security needs, and domestic politics onto the global stage. As this article illustrates, these aims can compete with one another and fluctuate over time. In the period prior to the Arab Uprisings and the early days of the regional upheavals, Turkey's domestic and foreign policies served to reinforce one another to the advantage of the AKP given its ideological proximity to the MB. The period from 2013 was spearheaded by the notion of "humanitarian diplomacy". However, internal anti-democratic developments challenged this policy. The Davutoğlu doctrine mentioned as its first "dimension" of humanitarian diplomacy the commitment to "improving citizens' lives at home so as to enhance Turkey's domestic capacity". Instead, the last decade has seen the deterioration of Turkish democracy due to failures in key areas such as separation of powers and freedom of expression. Credibility as a humanitarian power with a "human-centred" approach is difficult to claim when the democratic rights of civilians in Turkey are under pressure through increasing authoritarianism. In short, the rhetoric of promoting human security internationally rings hollow if state security, as defined by the regime, is prioritised domestically.

Since 2016, the AKP's regional humanitarian policy has faced the pressures of domestic discontent and the prioritisation of state security over human security. The regime's securitisation of domestic opposition and re-securitisation of the Kurdish issue both in Turkey and Syria weaken the earlier notion of human security. The AKP's engagement in Syria is presently narrowly defined by the protection of state security. Thus, the linkages between domestic politics and foreign policy that reinforced the AKP's identity of Islamic solidarity until 2011, presently weaken the identity it is trying to project on the global stage as an emerging Muslim humanitarian power.

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