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Ahmet Davutoğlu

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, Turkey

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ANALYSIS OF CURRENT EVENTS

Turkey’s humanitarian diplomacy: objectives, challenges and prospects

Ahmet Davutoğlu*

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, Turkey

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Actors who endeavor to withstand the rapid stream of history need to adapt to new developments and changing environments. Turkey’s foreign policy, with its regional and international dimensions, is a reflection of such a search for adaptation to the new international climate. Turkey’s status in international relations has risen in recent years, thanks to its new foreign policy. To comprehend the multidimensional proactive foreign policy of Turkey, we need to consider new analytical approaches and concepts. Any analysis of Turkey’s foreign policy requires thinking in novel ways, through which we can move beyond the current deadlocks and vicious circles in this area of study. One of the key explanatory principles of Turkish foreign policy – probably the most significant one in this period – is “humanitarian diplomacy”.

In the flow of history new opportunities and possibilities emerge for countries that can make proper sense of such periods. Some countries make a significant difference in these periods, although it is quite difficult to make a unique difference in a static international conjuncture. In static environments, one’s location, position, power and scope are limited. In a dynamic conjuncture, in contrast, making a difference is possible, and this depends on presenting a political rationale with the potential to shape such a conjuncture.

There are three positions that can be taken vis-a-vis the accelerating pace of the flow of history. The first position is to resist the change, withdraw into domestic confines and remain stuck in the status quo, due to the fear of change. Generally, the pace of this fast-moving stream overtakes those who take this first position. The second position is to float in this flux as far as possible, believing that one lacks the power, and hence the will, to initiate change. The third position is to take an active stance, based on a sound awareness that one is a subject that affects the dynamic flow of history, rather than an ordinary and passive component of it. This implies that one can exert one’s authority in this stream as an actor who can change the course of history. In the last decade, Turkey’s preference has been for this third position.

Humanitarian diplomacy

Keeping this general framework in mind, I would like to introduce Turkey’s approach to humanitarian diplomacy, which emerges from its determination to become an active actor during this period of rapid historical change. Humanitarian diplomacy refers to something

*Email: ahmet.davutoglu@mfa.gov.tr

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more than humanitarian aid. Yet any diplomacy that does not touch human beings, does
not have a humanitarian essence and does not speak to human conscience will not last
for long. If having the most powerful armies in the world is a prized goal, connecting
with the conscience of mankind and being able to speak to this conscience are equally
valuable goals.

Turkey’s influence is felt in a wide geographical area, not only symbolizing its power
but also symbolizing its conscience. Our presence in the streets of Gaza, Myanmar and
Somali reveals our capacity for global diplomacy. Turkish foreign policy has increasingly
adopted this quality of humanitarian diplomacy. On the one hand, this new stance under-
scores our endeavors to find solutions to crises, in particular within our region. On the
other hand, it is a perspective that embraces the whole of mankind and aims to shoulder
the responsibility of dealing with the full range of issues occupying the minds and con-
sciences of mankind. Turkish foreign policy has adopted the approach of humanitarian
diplomacy to tackle both regional crises and issues and challenges in the wider framework.

Modern diplomacy started after the Thirty Years’ War, which also set forth a new
world order in 1648, called the Westphalian system. The Westphalian order was based
on nation-states’ will toward maximization of their interests and power through all diplo-
matic tools. This approach did not change with the Industrial Revolution, but rather was
reinforced. For instance, great colonial rivalries emerged. During that period, an absolute
realist approach dominated the world, in which all types of slavery and exploitation pre-
vailed and all nation-states behaved as wolves toward each other, as in “man is a wolf to
man (homo homini lupus).” For this reason, mankind has witnessed two World Wars and
countless other large wars. This was the era of the disappearance of conscience and the
victory of interests over values. The Realist theory of international relations was estab-
lished on this basis. Accordingly, justice could be ensured only if there was a balance
of power.

After experiencing the negative aspects of the Westphalian system, a new era of ideal-
ism and diplomacy in international relations emerged with the U.S. President Woodrow
Wilson. However, realism and idealism walked along with each other, as competing perspec-
tives, and neither the United Nations (UN) nor the League of Nations, representing
idealism, was able to connect with the conscience of mankind. Today, the most vivid
example of this negative situation is the structure of the UN Security Council. The veto
system that is used by the permanent members of the UN system reflects the balance of
power that emerged immediately after World War II, and does not represent the new par-
ameters and distribution of power within the current international system.

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. There is a need to put an end to such stark distinctions,
and to develop a new language of diplomacy in policy areas related to the future of the
whole of humankind, ranging from environmental policies to energy policies and food pro-
grams, with the understanding that the dignity of each human being is equal to that of the
whole of humankind. Turkey is determined to be a leader in the establishment of such an
understanding on a global scale.

Humanitarian diplomacy is based on a critical equilibrium between conscience and
power. In this equation, if a state has conscience but no power, it shows weakness. If it
has power but no conscience, it becomes a tyranny. Our idea is for Turkey to be a com-
passionate and powerful state. One will be compassionate if one’s conscience dictates
where one should go and to whom one should reach, as can be seen from the examples
of our aid to Somalia and Syrian refugees. At the same time, one will need to have
power, so that one has the ability to reach where needed. One needs to have an airline company, such as the Turkish Airlines, in order to get to Mogadishu on a direct flight. One will have TİKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency), NGOs, Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent), and TOKİ (Housing Development Administration of Turkey), and the state apparatus will act in coordination, so that one will have the ability to give a hand to the people there. Such a stance will only be possible through a combination of power and compassion. If either of them is missing, then the result will be either cruelty or weakness. This is what is meant by humanitarian diplomacy.

Dimensions of humanitarian diplomacy

Turkish humanitarian diplomacy has three dimensions. The first dimension concerns the citizens of the Turkish Republic. The priority here is for Turkey to pay the utmost attention to the problems of its own citizens and to facilitate their lives. Turkey’s visa policy is the first component of its humanitarian diplomacy in this regard. Turkey is determined to implement the most liberal possible visa policy, as it believes that the main power of Turkey is its own people. As a country which lacks major energy reserves, Turkey naturally sees the knowledge and qualifications of its own people as the main sources of its strength. Our people will produce added value to the extent that they can move freely on a global scale. For this reason, we will open new consulates wherever they go, to serve their needs. By granting the right of free movement to the widest extent possible, Turkey will ensure smooth and fast mobility for its own people, from a regional to a global scale, and thereby pump blood to Anatolia.

Beyond its own citizens, the second dimension of the humanitarian diplomacy concerns a country’s human-oriented attitude in crisis zones. No matter where one is in the world, the attitude that one develops in crisis areas, the stand that one takes and the message that one gives to the people who seek one’s help are very important. For its part, Turkey has demonstrated that it has a human-oriented political vision extending beyond the limits set by the global system. Turkey’s approach to the Somali crisis is one of the visible examples of Turkey’s human-oriented foreign policy. While Somalia was trying to cope with its crisis, Turkey became the first country to open a full-capacity embassy there. Today one comes across signs of Turkey’s presence wherever one goes in Somalia. Furthermore, Turkey’s understanding of humanitarian diplomacy is multifaceted and multi-channeled; there have been contributions from several of Turkey’s public institutions and NGOs, ranging from Turkish Airlines to TİKA, Kızılay, TOKİ and AFAD (Emergency Disaster Management Presidency).

As we extend our humanitarian diplomacy beyond our borders, we do not confine ourselves to the psychological boundaries drawn between us and the Middle East in 1917, between us and the Balkans after the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, and between us and the Caucasus with the war of 1877–1878 and World War I. Turkey respects the official borders of other states recognized by international law. However, in the case of a humanitarian tragedy, Ankara feels obliged to extend its assistance even outside its borders, in line with its conscience-oriented understanding of diplomacy. Over 180,000 Syrian people are hosted in Turkey, due to the humanitarian tragedy in their home country. This all-encompassing approach is the most significant and distinguishing aspect of Turkey’s humanitarian diplomacy. We demonstrate our aim to make a difference through our stance in Somalia and Syria. When the “container cities” were dismantled in the city of Van, which recently experienced the tragedy of an earthquake, and moved to the Syrian refugee camps, the message given to the world was: we do not make a distinction between Van and Aleppo.
In our conduct of humanitarian diplomacy, we act on the same principle without differentiating between our citizens and the people with whom we share a common history.

Following the latest conflict which erupted in Myanmar, the initial response to the crisis came from Turkey, which was also the first country to visit Myanmar at the foreign minister level; the president of Myanmar was consulted and humanitarian aid was provided to the people in Arakan. As the UN General Assembly debated the draft resolution on Myanmar, Myanmar appealed for Turkey’s assistance as well as for a joint draft resolution. The resolution was adopted by consensus, thanks in large part to Turkey’s intense efforts. Our reason for doing all this is not to intervene in the internal affairs of a country, but rather to uphold universal humanitarian values by clearly presenting Turkey’s humanitarian diplomacy perspective. Another example of this is the Istanbul Process, which Turkey co-chaired with Afghanistan, in accordance with which all neighboring countries convened in Kabul in January 2011 and worked toward the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Although withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 is on NATO’s agenda, Turkey’s Afghanistan-oriented humanitarian diplomacy will continue.

The third dimension of humanitarian diplomacy concerns an inclusive humanitarian perspective at the global level, most importantly in the UN system. This sphere of humanitarian diplomacy and global ownership aims at providing an inclusive structure for the UN system to more accurately reflect the will of all participants. The voting of the UN on Syria reflects the distortion in the existing order. In 2012, 132 countries voted in favor of the joint draft resolution on Syria proposed by Turkey and the Arab League, while a smaller number of countries voted against it and the rest abstained. The resolution, despite such major support in the General Assembly, was not adopted, due to the veto of two countries.

The fundamental question here is: who represents the international community; the UN Security Council or the General Assembly? The General Assembly is composed of all of the countries, but the Security Council has only five permanent seats, and ultimately these five countries’ decisions determine resolutions. If an equitable order of the UN were desired, it would be possible, by acknowledging the UN General Assembly as the institution that represents the universal conscience of all. It should be noted that Turkey acts in the General Assembly in accordance with the same principles. As a matter of fact, during the voting at the UN on granting Palestine “non-member observer state” status, Turkey’s stance was principled, and supported Palestine, due to its inclusive humanitarian perspective.

Another UN initiative that we highly value is also one of the most significant components of the third dimension of Turkey’s humanitarian diplomacy. The UN Friends of Mediation Initiative, jointly launched by Turkey and Finland, has been adopted as a process of the UN by consensus at the UN General Assembly in March 2012. In the same draft resolution a series of action plans were accepted, including the establishment of a UN Mediation Center in Istanbul. As a requirement for humanitarian diplomacy, Turkey would make Istanbul, one of the most ancient cities of humanity, the center of Turkey’s humanitarian diplomacy. Thus, Turkey will continue to contribute to all peace processes in the most effective manner.

**Humanitarian diplomacy in practice: overcoming the challenges**

In the upcoming period, the primary challenge for humanitarian diplomacy will be to deal with the political “earthquake” in the Middle East and in the wider Mediterranean Basin, the effects of which will hardly be over soon. The explicit attitude that we adopted in this regard is a reflection of our humanitarian diplomacy. The Arab people have been
demanding in the streets rights which are essential to human dignity. Turkey will continue
to side with human dignity, as it did at the outset and, no matter what, will not support
those who ignore these legitimate demands. In doing so, we will work through all
means to facilitate the transition process with the least possible damage. Our humanitarian
diplomacy is the best tool we have, and we will use it to the greatest extent possible.

The political and social earthquake in the Mediterranean Basin reveals four different
sub-challenges, in particular in the Middle East. The first sub-challenge relates to the area
from Egypt to Morocco, in North Africa. Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco had elected
their governments in respective elections. A military coup in Egypt put an end to elected
government in this country. Despite some problems, Algeria held elections, and there is
an ongoing political process. There have been conjectures about Libya in circulation, and
today similar speculations are being applied to Syria. The speculations about the division
of Libya into three parts, or about Libya falling under the control of extremists, are over.
There are two reasons for these speculations: an effort to disseminate fear and an Orientalist
perspective, which does not consider the peoples of the Middle East worthy of democracy.

Why should the people of the Middle East not experience democracy? Why should the
regimes have to be doomed to choose between authoritarian regimes and al-Qaeda? The
different experiences in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Morocco proved that these prejudices
are false assumptions. Turkey stood alongside those states and their people when they were
facing tough times. The High Level Strategic Cooperation Council meetings with Egypt
and Tunisia were held within this framework. The same process continues with Libya. Our
endeavors continue to initiate a similar process with Morocco. Over time, the North
African region will enter into integration processes of its own, and we will establish a profound
relationship with each country. Turkey is an integral component of this region, due both to its
geographic continuity as part of the Mediterranean Basin and to the historical dynamics. The
changing geopolitical situation will bring new actors to the fore, and Turkey will not be in a
competitive relationship with any of those actors. For example, Egypt’s success is seen as
Turkey’s success. We worked together toward the Gaza ceasefire in 2012; however, we
were aware that the process itself should be handled by Egypt. The more successful Egypt
becomes, the faster the region gains stability. Turkey’s expectation is Egypt’s normalization
and continuation of the mutually beneficial and constructive relations between two countries.

The second sub-challenge in the region consists of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. This part of
the Middle Eastern region faces its challenges in a more painful manner. Syria is the most
critical country in this region. Turkey demonstrated its critical stance toward President Ben
Ali in Tunisia within a day, toward President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt over two to three
weeks and warned President Muammar Gaddafi over three to four months to take necessary
steps. This process took much longer in Syria: Turkey advised President Bashar al-Assad for
nine months to make reforms, and spent a great deal of energy to persuade him to abandon
violence against his people. However, the Assad administration did not take the necessary
steps, and Turkey has chosen to stand by the people against the Assad regime.

I do not share the idea of an inevitable threat that would unfold through a Sunni—
Shiite division, akin to a Cold-War mentality, in an area encompassing Lebanon, Syria
and Iraq. Such an understanding and political division does not exist in the humanitarian
diplomacy perspective of Turkey. The sectarian theses of disintegration are concentrated
on Syria, and Turkey’s policy has been accused by some circles of sectarianism. If the
ruler were a Muslim who oppressed Christians in Syria, we would equally be against
him/her. As a matter of fact, there is no discrimination made in either the refugee
policy that we implement or the humanitarian aid that we provide. Turkey allowed,
without any hesitation, the flight of an Armenian airplane carrying humanitarian aid to
Aleppo. The Armenian population in Aleppo are also our friends and neighbors, with whom we share a common history. Christians, Druzes, Nusayris and others are also the same for Turkey. Turkey approaches all different ethnic and religious groups based on the principle of conscience, i.e. the most fundamental principle of its humanitarian diplomacy. Turkey’s Syria policy is to employ all necessary diplomatic skills to stabilize the country in the shortest period of time.

The third sub-challenge is in the Gulf region. The Gulf has a unique structure, with relatively limited social mobilization, while it possesses more natural resources than the rest of the region. In recent years Turkey has taken significant steps with the Gulf Cooperation Council in areas of strategic cooperation. During the last two years, it has also given support to democratization and reform efforts in Kuwait and Bahrain. Thus, on the one hand, Turkey continues developing its relationships with the Gulf; on the other hand, it acts on the same humanitarian diplomacy principles, without making any distinctions.

Last but not least, the fourth sub-challenge covers the region of Yemen and Aden, namely the Horn of Africa. Turkey approaches this region with the same integral strategy, offering diplomatic services to reduce the tension between Ethiopia—Eritrea and Sudan—South Sudan. Turkey, as part of its humanitarian diplomacy, will in a short period of time be the only country with an embassy in every country in the Horn of Africa, to support conflict resolution and reconstruction in these countries. Turkey’s link with this region is a historical one that dates back to the sixteenth century.

**Conclusion**

We are in a period in which the pace of the flow of history has accelerated. Only those countries which are consciously pursuing an active role in this challenging time will have a decisive impact on the course of developments. The current understanding of diplomacy responds to the challenges with the ideational frameworks of realist—idealist and soft-power versus hard-power dilemmas. It is high time to put an end to these stark distinctions and start thinking about a human-centered diplomacy. Turkey’s difference stems from the humanitarian diplomacy that it has adopted in foreign policy. Turkey’s approach toward its citizens, its human-oriented attitude in crisis areas and its human-oriented and comprehensive perspective in the UN are the areas in which humanitarian diplomacy is being put into practice. The political earthquake at Turkey’s doorstep that has spread into North Africa and the Middle East points to the necessity of humanitarian diplomacy.

To activate this foreign policy vision along the humanitarian diplomacy axis, we have four sources of power. First, our ministry is our major source of power. The experience and knowledge of the ministerial staff, combined with the qualitative and quantitative regeneration brought about by the change in the law of organizational structures, improved the performance of Turkey’s foreign policy. The sustainability of this performance is important, and our work carried out in recent years aims at this. Durability of political authority, strength of political will and a commitment to the service of humanitarian diplomacy as a whole are other significant forces behind our foreign policy during the recent term. The third significant source of power is our capability of interagency coordination between the ministries and related institutions. Finally, in addition to all this, our genuine source of power is the support of our people and their faith in our vision.

**Note**