

Quaderni

di Scienze Politiche
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

ISSN: 2532-5302
ISSN edizione online: 2532-5310



ORBEM PRUDENTER INVESTIGARE ET VERACITER AGNOSCERE



14
2018

Quaderni

di Scienze Politiche
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

14

2018

Anno VIII - 14/2018

Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Milano n. 355 del 27.6.2011

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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215

e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (*produzione*); librario.dsu@educatt.it (*distribuzione*)

web: www.educatt.it/libri

ISBN edizione cartacea: 978-88-9335-414-1

ISBN edizione digitale: 978-88-9335-418-9

ISSN: 2532-5302

ISSN edizione online: 2532-5310

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NGOs and Humanitarian Diplomacy: The Case of IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation)

di ALESSIA CHIRIATTI

Abstract – Osservando la politica estera turca degli ultimi decenni, è possibile notare come il Paese abbia cominciato a utilizzare gli aiuti umanitari come uno strumento per affermare la propria diplomazia a livello regionale e globale. Uno sforzo che, a partire dal 2018, ha previsto per la Turchia una spesa di 7,2 miliardi di dollari americani. L'impegno da parte di Ankara vede coinvolte non solo le istituzioni pubbliche, come la TIKA (la Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), la Turkish Red Crescent e l'AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority), ma anche le organizzazioni non governative, che si sono così viste riconoscere da parte della Turchia un ruolo importante per l'implementazione della diplomazia umanitaria. Attraverso un approccio qualitativo, questo saggio ha come focus lo studio del ruolo delle organizzazioni umanitarie internazionali nel peace building turco, con un'attenzione specifica all'IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation), grazie ad un'analisi delle azioni di quest'ultima sul caso siriano. Verrà inoltre analizzata la politica estera del Paese attraverso il ruolo e l'azione degli attori non statali come strumento di soft power. Il periodo analizzato nel paper è quello dell'ultimo decennio.

Introduction

This paper addresses the operations of the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), a Turkish faith-based humanitarian organization established in 1992, and its role of transnational governance for the measures taken in Syria after the 2011. In unveiling the role of the Islamic humanitarian sector in exercising humanitarian diplomacy for a linguistically and culturally different population, this paper poses at the center of the analysis the nexus between humanitarian diplomacy and transnational governance as a theoretical framework.

Generally, faith-based humanitarian organizations can be described as «civil society institutions or charity societies gathering people of particular Islamic ideology around a religiously oriented mission statement, generally to contribute to social welfare»¹. If we focus on the growing neoconservatism and neoliberalism as a part of the AKP's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), the leading party in Turkey since 2002, wider political project emerged in last decades, Islamic NGOs have flourished². Although these latter are institutionally located outside the State, several of them present a strong tie with State power³.

In this paper, the analysis, conducted through a qualitative method, has been chosen in order to stress the importance of non-State actors and their role in the region and in order to try to fill the gap on the topic, considering the existing International Relations literature. The case study is instrumental to reveal two different elements that the paper will investigate: firstly, the approach of Turkish foreign policy into a neighboring country affected by a conflict; and secondly interesting variations in the architecture of transnational governance, even if it could be considered peripheral to what really matters for understanding the power dynamics of world politics⁴.

The methodology for the research relies mainly on data revealed by primary sources related to the IHH and its actions in the analyzed scenarios, together with some interviews conducted with key informants from people from civil society organizations, associations, or foundations known as *vakıfs*, involved in different aspects of the Turkish humanitarian diplomacy.

Following this scheme, this paper will try to evaluate, firstly, the effects of the Turkish humanitarian assistance process on

¹ A.T. McCarthy, *Non-state actors and education as a humanitarian response: role of faith-based organizations in education for Syrian refugees in Turkey*, "Journal of International Humanitarian Action", Open access, (2017), pp. 1-9.

² L. Ünsaldi, *Between neoliberalism and morality: The Muslim conception of development in Turkey*, "International Development Policy", vol. 4 (2013), available at <https://journals.openedition.org/poldev/1847>, pp. 144-158.

³ F. Keyman – A. Icduygu, *Globalization, civil society and citizenship in Turkey: actors, boundaries and discourses*, "Citizen Study", vol. 7 (2003), n. 2, pp. 219-233.

⁴ P. Dauvergne, *The Rise of Transnational Governance as Field of Study*, "International Studies Review", vol. 18 (2016), n. 3, pp. 415-437.

Syrian people, after the explosion of the so-called Arab Springs in Damascus in 2011. Secondly, it seeks to understand the Turkish action on public diplomacy in its attempt to make its own image strong.

A new architecture of world politics and the Turkish political shift

A new interpretation of the role of non-State and transnational actors in the International Relations' literature has emerged during the last decades in order to study how and why they are able to challenge the central foreign policy organs of government and provide an alternative to the State's structures, authorities and institutions of governance⁵.

The question could be related also to «who governs and how»⁶, that focuses the attention on the growing role of non-traditional actors – rising powers, middle powers, developing State-based forms of governance including multilateral or inter-governmental institutions. Focusing on international organizations, scholars have increasingly paid attention to how rising powers and non-State actors have reshaped regional and global forms of governance⁷. Moreover, a range of different actors (in addition to States) are actively involved in ongoing dynamic transitions that are impacting on what is governed, for what reasons, how and where.

In world politics, new forms of authority structures have emerged: they could be defined not necessarily as «coterminous» with States' «territorial space»⁸. Non-State actors (together with international organizations and transnational actors) could be considered at this step for their increasing ability to shape the

⁵ F. Söderbaum, *Rethinking Region and Regionalism*, "Georgetown Journal of International Affairs", vol. 14 (2013), n. 2, pp. 9-18.

⁶ S. Breslin – H.E.S. Nesadurai, *Who governs and how, Non-State Actors and Transnational Governance in Southeast Asia*, "Journal of Contemporary Asia", vol. 48 (2018), n. 2, pp. 187-203.

⁷ A. Acharya, *Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: a new Agenda for International Studies*, "International Studies Quarterly", vol. 58 (2014), n. 4, pp. 647-659.

⁸ J. Rosenau, *Distinct proximities: Dynamics Beyond Globalization*, Princeton, 2003.

conduct of other actors. John Ruggie⁹ affirms in fact that non-State actors have now carved out non-territorial spaces and management systems in which they directly have influence on sustainability, human rights or labour standards. At the same time, transnational governance could be intended as a significant feature of world politics, where the non-State actors bridge the gap of deficits in State-based governance in a variety of issue areas. In transnational governance, non-State or private actors play important roles in the authoritative allocation of values for societies by developing, monitoring and even enforcing standards, rules and practices that regulate some aspect of social life.

In this sense, the concepts of State, regional integration and regionalism are at the center of a veritable explosion of research and policy discussion. For instance, Peter Katzenstein rejects the «purportedly stubborn persistence of the nation-State or the inevitable march of globalization», arguing that we are approaching a «world of regions»¹⁰. Similarly, Amitav Acharya examines the «emerging regional architecture of world politics», whereas Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver speak about a «global order of strong regions»¹¹. «Regions are now everywhere across the globe and are increasingly fundamental to the functioning of all aspects of world affairs from trade to conflict management and can even be said to now constitute world order»¹², Rick Fawn writes.

While not denying the pre-eminent role of the State in governance, we could affirm that there is an underestimation of transnational governance¹³. One of the most fascinating developments in post-Cold War period, in fact, is the frenzy of (regional) institution-building that began in the late 1980s¹⁴. On the

⁹ J. Ruggie, *Reconstituting the Global Public Domain – Issues, Actors and Practices*, “European Journal of International Relations”, vol. 10 (2004), n. 4, pp. 499-531.

¹⁰ J.P. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*, New York, 2005.

¹¹ B. Buzan – O. Weaver, *Regions and power: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, 2003.

¹² R. Fawn, *Regions and Their Study: Where from, What for and Where to?*, “Review of International Studies”, vol. 35 (2009), pp. 5-34.

¹³ S. Breslin – H.E.S. Nesedurai, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-203.

¹⁴ A. Acharya – A. Johnston, *Crafting Cooperation. Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, 2007.

other hand, the debate on global governance and the deeper effects of globalization is interested about the benefits of international and regional organizations, together with the non-State actors and about what they can achieve: transcending the definition of the international structure and translating this way of thinking in a social and political acceptance, international institutions possess a new, authority-generating quality which shows at every stage of the policy cycle. In this sense, the social interconnectedness can lead to quite different forms of societal interdependence, that could be intended as a «vulnerability interdependence»¹⁵, defined in terms of the opportunity costs of disrupting the relationship. In addition, transnational governance has produced a more intrusive approach of the international institutions and it is often attributed to processes of diffusion or interdependent decision-making.

A relatively recent literature about «shadow regionalism»¹⁶ and «trans-State regionalism» has gradually brought the attention on non-State-centric instances of regionalism, in order to explain the existence of parallel structures of power pursuing and managing different patterns and processes of regional interactions. It could be opposed to the classical theories¹⁷ of regional integration and cooperation, such as functionalism and neofunctionalism, appreciated liberal-pluralist assumptions, such as the need for cordial relations between States and non-State actors to promote good relationship.

Turkey is a significant example in order to understand and explain how State and non-State actors are interrelated within their Regional Security Complex (RSC), stated by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde¹⁸. The RSC was used to study the post-Cold War transformation in Europe: its traditional definition is referred to «a set of States whose major security perceptions and

¹⁵ O. Keohane – J. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, “International Organization”, vol. 41 (1987), n. 4, pp. 725-753.

¹⁶ F. Söderbaum, *Formal and Informal Regionalism*, in T.M. Shaw – J.A. Grant – S. Cornelissen (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Regionalisms Aldershot*, Farnham, 2012, pp. 51-67.

¹⁷ T.A. Borzel – T. Risse, *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford, 2016.

¹⁸ B. Buzan – O. Waever – J. de Wilde, *Security: a New Framework Analysis*, Boulder, 1997.

concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolve apart from another»¹⁹.

Security complexes address the level of analysis located between individual units and the international system as a whole. In this theory, the regional sub-system becomes the objects of security analysis, considering the security interdependence in which all the States in the system are enmeshed. Insecurity is moreover associated with proximity, especially considering the regional division of the international system, together with the distribution of power and the historical relation of amity and enmity among neighboring countries.

In this paper the approach by Buzan, Waever and de Wilde about the RSC constitutes the base for the analysis of a specific RSC, that includes Turkish role as a bridge, or as an insulator State with the capacity (and the effort) to escape from the status quo, thanks to its geopolitical position²⁰. Indeed, its recent foreign policy has signaled a desire to do this, especially during the last decades: since AKP's coming to power in 2002, Turkey has witnessed a shift in its geopolitical approach, due on the one hand to the proactive politics and to a no longer neutrality in the context of superpower competition²¹, and on the other to its position more vulnerable to proximate threats, including instability in the Caucasus and the resurgence of political Islam. The AKP has reviewed the means by which Turkey should try to achieve greater prominence in international affairs, but it has kept political Islam's vision of carving out a prominent role for Turkey internationally

¹⁹ B. Buzan, *Regional Security Complex Theory in the Post-Cold War World*, "Theories of new Regionalism", Basingtoke, 2000, pp. 140-159.

²⁰ Using traditional power measurements, Turkey is strong in the military and economic sectors. It is a member of the G20 and possesses military personnel numbering over 500,000. For more information: *Turkey: Country Studies – Federal Research Division, Library of Congress*, n.d., 25, available at: <http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/trtoc.html>.

²¹ During the preexisting period of the AKP's arrival to the power, on the surface it looked like there had been no serious setbacks for Turkish foreign policy. In this phase, especially after the USSR's collapse, Turkey accepted international capitalism, becoming economically dependent from the West. Moreover, Turkey's loss of importance after 1990 was reversed as a consequence of the conflicts that erupted in its vicinity. For more information: B. Oran, *Turkish Foreign Policy: 1919-2006. Facts and Analyses with Documents*, Salt Lake City, 2010, pp. 647-671.

by cultivating closer ties with the wider Muslim world²². For instance, it abandoned the Refah Party's search for the creation of a parallel, more Islamic international system²³. Then the arm wrestling between the former Minister of Foreign Policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, and the President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the last two years (2016-2018)²⁴ led to a radical change in Turkish foreign strategy, moving from a soft power to a hard power approach.

As an academician-cum-politician²⁵, Davutoğlu's writings became the fundamental basis for a reorientation in Turkey's foreign policy. His most influential piece, "Strategic Depth" (*Stratejik Derinlik*)²⁶, is referred also to the notion of geo-culture and of soft power as an important factor of foreign policy. In this document, Turkey's geopolitical advantages are stressed and underlined, with a specific reference to its historic and cultural ties with the near abroad.

Davutoğlu's thesis was that, in order to be a stronger country overall and more powerful in the international arena, Turkey needed to follow much more its "civilization self", which, in his opinion, is related to its Islamic and Ottoman past. Davutoğlu argued against the idea of a "clash of civilizations" – his view was that Turkey could have good relations with both the East and the West – but he believed, nevertheless, that civilizations had

²² G. Dalay – D. Friedman, *The AK Party and the Evolution of Turkish Political Islam's Foreign Policy*, "Insight Turkey", vol. 15 (2013), n. 2, pp. 123-139.

²³ K. Kirişci, *The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State*, "New Perspectives on Turkey", vol. 40 (Spring 2009), pp. 29-56.

²⁴ The divergence between the two leaders had an important impact particularly inside the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), the Islamist Justice and Development Party, ruled by the President Erdogan, its leader and founder. Moreover, Ahmet Davutoğlu (Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2009 to 2014, Turkish Prime Minister and AKP's leader from 2014 to 2016, then substituted respectively by Mevlut Cavusoğlu and Erdogan himself) and Recep Tayyip Erdogan disagreed on several policies, such as the reaction against the academicians after the coup in 2016, and the Kurdish issue. Erdogan's choices have been criticized after his intention not to become a liberal leader, affirming that «democracy is like a bus, when you arrive at your destination, you step off» (T. Arango – C. Yeginsu, *How Erdogan Moved to Solidify Power by Ousting a Pivotal Ally*, "The New York Times", 5.5.2016).

²⁵ During his academic career, Ahmet Davutoğlu worked at Marmara University from 1996, becoming full professor in 1999.

²⁶ A. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, Istanbul, 2001.

an “essence” and an important role to play in world politics²⁷. Turkish soft power’s capacity comes from its history, culture and geography. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu had a huge impact on Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party/JDP era (2009-2014). Davutoğlu moreover advocated developing close relations with the countries surrounding Turkey and finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts in the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans. «In this respect, Turkey is not an ordinary nation-State emerging out of conjectural developments. Rather, it is the center of a civilization that struggled against the domination of Western civilization, but that chose to sever its ties with its immediate geo-cultural zone to become a peripheral country during the Cold War and an aspiring member of the West»²⁸.

The transition in Turkish foreign policy was seen by some as a «paradigm shift»²⁹ or «Middle Easternization of Turkish foreign policy»³⁰ while others regarded it as «a New Ottomanist interpretation of Turkish Eurasianism»³¹. On the other hand, Presidential Spokesman of Turkey, İbrahim Kalın, underlines that the values, historical accumulation and cultural depth helps Turkey to both influence regional dynamics and create new areas of interaction in the area it is located; hence, Kalın notes that the sole meeting point of peoples of the Balkans to Middle East and Asia, Turks, Kurds, Bosnians, Albanians, Circassians, Abkhassians, Arabs, Azeris, Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs, Uzbeks, Turkmens and other ethnic groups is the fraternity of history, that is the Ottoman legacy³². Kalın in this way underlines that this unifying notion is

²⁷ K. Dalacoura, *A New Phase in Turkish Foreign Policy: Expediency and AKP Survival*, “Future Notes”, n. 4, (February 2017), available online at: https://www.cidob.org/content/download/66206/2023820/version/3/file/MENARA_Future%20notes%204_17.pdf.

²⁸ C. Nihat – E. İseri, *Islamically oriented humanitarian NGOs in Turkey: AKP foreign policy parallelism*, “Turkish Studies”, vol. 17 (2016), n. 3, pp. 429-448.

²⁹ A. Sözen, *A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges*, “Turkish Studies”, vol. 11 (2010), n. 3, pp. 103-123.

³⁰ T. Oğuzlu, *Middle Easternization of Turkish Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?*, “Turkish Studies”, vol. 9 (2008), n. 1, pp. 3-20.

³¹ G. Tüysüzöğlu, *Strategic Depth: A Neo-Ottomanist Interpretation of Turkish Eurasianism*, “Mediterranean Quarterly”, vol. 25 (2014), n. 2, pp. 85-104.

³² İ. Kalın, *Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey*, “Perceptions”, vol. 16 (2011), n. 3, pp. 5-25.

rather the crux of a peace wave that would be enabled with the positive acceptance of histories of States³³. Over the past fifteen years, the nation branding has become an important part of the Turkish politics, together with a popular subject to study. One of the final purposes to the nation branding is to create positive feelings in people's minds toward the economic, political, social and geographical conditions of a nation.

The departure of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in May 2016 and the attempted *coup d'état* of July 2016 against the AKP government were both turning points and catalysts for a new phase in the country's foreign policy. Erdogan's catchphrase «world is bigger than five»³⁴, pronounced at the United Nations on September 2014, has already been a clear presage of his muscular and powerful approach to the foreign policy. Moreover, we need to consider which impact the Constitutional referendum held on 16 April 2017 had on the Turkish foreign policy, after the abolition of the office of Prime Minister and the affirmation of a presidential system. The referendum was proposed by the AK Party together with the Nationalist Movement Party (the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), a far-right conservative political party that adheres to Turkish ultra-nationalism and Euroscepticism. A security-driven outlook in international affairs is in this way justified by this reactionary and hyper nationalist influence, combined with an already acute level of anti-Americanism in the country³⁵.

In front of this shift, the role of non-State actors, like IHH as we will see in this paper, has consequently changed. This fact is more evident if we analyze the IHH's action in Syria: the events erupted in Syria in March 2011 have redefined Turkey's bilateral relations with this country, together with the situation of the region. The political, security and humanitarian challenges, complicated by the DAESH's threat, have emerged in the last year in a prominent way: Turkey initiated the Operation Euphrates Shield on August 24, 2016 with the air support provided by the

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *World is Bigger Than Five*, Erdogan's speech at the United Nations, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTR8xkxITcg>, retrieved 22 June 2016.

³⁵ S. Ulgen, *Get Ready for a More Aggressive Turkey*, "Foreign Policy", 2.7.2018, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/02/turkeys-foreign-policy-is-about-to-take-a-turn-to-the-right/>.

Global Coalition³⁶. Moreover, the situation at the borders between the two States has been the witness of a continuous escalations of crisis and instability.

The non-State actors as a humanitarian response: the IHH's case and NGO's purge

The IHH (in Turkish language namely *İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı*, while in English it means The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief), is a conservative Turkish NGO, that provides humanitarian reliefs in areas of war, crises, earthquake, hunger and conflict. It was created in 1992 and officially registered in Istanbul in 1995, and it is composed predominantly by Turkish Muslims, active in more than 100 countries³⁷. The foundation reaches its humanitarian goals mainly through the delivering of foodstuffs, clothes and tents to crisis regions hit by wars, conflicts, and natural disaster to meet urgent needs of victims. Accordingly, it gives priority to several relief operations like: war-zone or war-torn countries and territories; regions struck by natural disasters; poverty-stricken countries and territories³⁸. As IHH mentions on its official website³⁹, its scope of work is related to: humanitarian relief, human rights, humanitarian diplomacy⁴⁰, emergency aid, search and rescue,

³⁶ The operation was based on the right to self-defense as outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter.

³⁷ IHH is actually included inside the list of 3,500 non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. The relationship among ECOSOC and NGOs in this situation is the principal means through which ECOSOC receives input from NGOs into its deliberations at public meetings and in its subsidiary bodies as well as in UN international conferences and their preparatory bodies. The complete list could be found at the link below: <http://undocs.org/E/2016/INF/5>.

³⁸ IHH could be mentioned as the first charity organization from Turkey that delivered aid in Kosovo and Chechnia. For more information: <https://www.ihh.org.tr/en/history>.

³⁹ <https://www.ihh.org.tr/en>.

⁴⁰ This type of soft power is witnessed, for example, also by the construction of Mosques in several countries, like (only to mention some of them) in Pankisi (Georgia), Gambia, Cameroon and Syria itself. For more information: <https://www.ihh.org.tr/public/publish/0/118/ihh-activity-report-2017.pdf>.

volunteer works and raising awareness. As volunteer work and raising awareness take very important place in IHH, volunteers can take part in any areas of our activities to support IHH. IHH volunteers contribute to many activities from fundraising to healthcare service⁴¹, to education activities, project development and execution in cooperation with professional associations.

According to the *New York Times*, «the organization is funded entirely on donations [...] money that comes from Turkey's religious merchant class, an affluent section of Turkish society that has brought the party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to power»⁴². Another *Times* report expanded on IHH's «extensive connections with Turkey's political elite» and cited a Turkish paper's editorial that referred to IHH as a «governmental-nongovernmental-organization» (GNGO)⁴³. This concept, that could be both perplexing and oxymoronic, was also used inside an editorial article by Turkish columnist Semih Idiz on the *Hürriyet Daily News*, when he asked, «how can such a large country as Turkey, with interests in four continents, and with an export-and investment-driven economy requiring extra caution all around the globe, be dragged to the brink of war by a nongovernmental organization?»⁴⁴. The idea derives from a «quasi, non-governmental organizations (QUANGOs)» in the American context that looked like more traditional voluntary associations, even if financed largely by government sources and created at the behest of the state⁴⁵. Substantially, a GONGO is an organization that is created, either directly or indirectly, by action of a government

⁴¹ For example, in 2011, IHH's four doctors and seven medics went to Duisi and Karacala regions in Georgia, offered free circumcision to 350 boys from the local families and Chechen refugees. For more information: <https://www.ihh.org.tr/en/news/ihh-and-ayder-hold-mass-circumcision-ceremony-in-georgia-963>.

⁴² S. Tavernise – M. Slackman, *Turkish Funds Help Group Test Blockade*, «The New York Times», 1.6.2010, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/world/middleeast/02activists.html?hp>.

⁴³ D. Bilefski – S. Arsu, *Sponsor of Flotilla Tied to Elite of Turkey*, «The New York Times», 15.7.2010, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/world/middleeast/16turkey.html?_r=1.

⁴⁴ D. Bilefski – S. Arsu, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ R. Hasmath – T. Hildebrandt – J.Y.J. Hsu, *Conceptualizing Governmental-Organized Non-Governmental-Organizations*, Paper Presented at «Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action Annual Conference», Washington, D.C., (2016), pp. 1-19.

or one of its agencies⁴⁶. Through this spectrum, the IHH's role could be intended as an attempt used by AK Party government to find ways to turn associational movement to its advantage, using government-sponsored NGOs to manipulate civil society at home and abroad.

Humanitarian intervention may genuinely accompany actions taken primarily for national-interests' reasons. In other cases, however, humanitarian motives are presented as a pretext used by political leaders and diplomats in an effort to justify interventions to contribute to restoration of international peace and security. This paper tries to connect the idea of a pro-active Turkish politics together with the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, which is an approach that tries to persuade decision makers and opinion leaders to act, all times, in the interest of vulnerable people and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles. It aims to mobilise public and governmental support and resources for humanitarian operations and programmes; to facilitate effective partnership for responding to the needs of vulnerable people. Moreover, it includes advocacy, negotiation, communication, formal agreements and other measures. It is a field with many players, including government, international organizations, NGOs, the private sector and individuals⁴⁷.

The rapid expansion of the number of humanitarian actors in recent years in Turkey⁴⁸, working for or with governments at all levels and often in complex situations, driven by Turkey's economic boom and further integration with Europe, makes humanitarian diplomacy increasingly important. Beside goodwill, humanitarian assistance is related to the cultural, political and economic influence that a country could exert. Specifically, humanitarian diplomacy, considered part of public diplomacy, is connected to the effort to solve conflict with a political approach.

⁴⁶ H.K. Anheier – S. Toepler, *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, Berlin, 2010.

⁴⁷ N. Çelik – E. İseri, *Islamically oriented humanitarian NGOs in Turkey: AKP foreign policy parallelism*, "Turkish Studies", vol. 17 (2016), n. 3, pp. 429-448.

⁴⁸ Accordingly, it is important also to consider that over the roughly two decades from 1983 to 2004, the number of NGOs in Turkey tripled. For more information: S. Simsek, *The transformation of civil society in Turkey: from quantity to quality*, "Turkish Studies", vol. 5 (2004), n. 3, pp. 46-74.

This specific approach to the foreign policy is based on a critical equilibrium between conscience and power, refers to something more to the humanitarian aid. Considering our case study, «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»⁴⁹. This approach to the foreign policy has been taken by Turkey firstly in order to find solutions to the crises, especially in its region, and secondly to tackle challenges in a wider framework. Ankara has tried to put an end to a stark distinction among the hard and soft power, and to develop and apply a new language of diplomacy. Moreover, Turkish final aim is to reach a leadership in the establishment of such an understanding on regional, or eventually on global, scale.

In Davutoğlu's intent⁵⁰, Turkish humanitarian diplomacy has been developed on three different dimensions: firstly, it concerns with the citizens of the Turkish Republic. This approach is related to facilitate the problems of Turkish people and their lives. The second dimension concerns a country's human-oriented attitude in crisis zones. Turkey's understanding of humanitarian diplomacy is multifaceted and multi-channelled; there have been contributions from several of Turkey's public institutions and NGOs, ranging for example from Turkish Airlines to TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), Kızılay, TOKİ (*Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı*, literally Public Housing Development Administration), İHH and AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority). 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. Many of Turkey's civil society organizations (CSOs) are registered under the Associations Law

⁴⁹ A. Davutoğlu, *Turkey's Humanitarian Diplomacy: objectives, Challenges and Prospects*, "The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity, vol. 41 (2013), n. 6, pp. 865-870.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

and the Foundations Law⁵¹, the primary pieces of legislation most directly affecting civil society organizations⁵².

However, after the July 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish response was expressed by shutting down independent newspapers and imposing ever steeper restrictions on local and international non-profits. Experiences from aid workers and diplomats across the region reveal a structured crackdown on NGOs, especially American ones and particularly in Syria⁵³. The governing party has used the coup to justify a sweeping purge in which 1,500 civil society organizations have been closed⁵⁴. Although this shuttering approach, that has no interested the IHH's organization, there is still tremendous diversity, complexity, and capacity among Turkish civil society, that acts on the four pillars of humanitarian response: education, food, health, and shelter.

“Open the Road to Aleppo”.

IHH in Syria, philanthropy or religious nationalism?

Starting with Tunisia, the so-called Arab Spring had a domino effect, reaching Syria on 15 March 2011, when protesters wrote anti-regime slogans on walls in Dara. When Syrian police immediately

⁵¹ When it was enacted in 2004, the new Associations Law was viewed positively by both civil society and the EU. It lifted some of the limitations on civil society. Subsequently, in 2008, Turkey adopted a Foundations Law, which further improved the legal environment. Nonetheless, today, Turkish civil society organizations (CSOs) are more aware of the deficiencies in the laws that restrict their activities. In fact, the legal framework still contains numerous incompatibilities with international standards. For more information: *Civic Freedom Monitor: Turkey*, The International Centre for Not-for-Profit-Law, available at <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/turkey.html>.

⁵² *Trends in Turkish Civil Society*, Center for American Progress, Istanbul Policy Center and Istituto Affari Internazionali, July 2017, available at: <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/turkishcivilsociety.pdf>.

⁵³ R. Mellen – C. Lynch, *Inside Turkey's NGO Purge*, “Foreign Policy”, 3.8.2017, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/03/inside-turkeys-ngo-purge/>.

⁵⁴ P. Kinglsey, *Erdogan Says He Will Extend His Sweeping Rule Over Turkey*, “The New York Times”, 21.5.2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/21/world/europe/turkey-erdogan-stateof-emergency.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Furope&_r=0.

arrested them, their families protested and demanded the release of their sons. After they were harshly treated by the police, the protests spread, igniting the Arab Spring in Syria⁵⁵. Opposition parties organized and carried out their first action on March 17, 2011, the «The Day of Rage»⁵⁶, which spread protests across the country. Meanwhile, in Dara, demonstrators were attacked by the security forces with three being killed⁵⁷. Having been sparked by these protests, Syria's civil war continues, causing hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, and forcing millions of people, mostly from Syria's provinces bordering Turkey, to leave their homes and became refugees. Half of the refugees from the Syria are children⁵⁸.

Turkey was the first of Syria's neighbors to formally respond to the influx of Syrian refugees when the government of Turkey declared an open border policy in line with its political interest in Syria⁵⁹. Since then, Turkey has maintained an emergency response of a consistently high standard and declared a temporary protection regime, ensuring non-refoulment and assistance in 25 camps⁶⁰,

⁵⁵ A. Shadid, *In Syria, Reports of Arrests Proliferate*, "The New York Times", 3.5.2011.

⁵⁶ Agence Press, *Syrian protesters plan day of rage*, "The Independent", 1.2.2011.

⁵⁷ Agence Press, *Middle East unrest: Three killed at protest in Syria*, "BBC News", 18.3.2011.

⁵⁸ United Nations Refugee Agency, *2018 UNHCR country operations profile – Turkey*, August 2018, available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/67065>.

⁵⁹ Turkey maintains the geographic limits for defining the refugees' conditions, according to a traditional interpretation of the Geneva Convention (1951). For this reason, Ankara affirms that Turkey is not obliged to recognize the refugees' status to Syrian people. Starting from October 2011, Turkey granted the status of "temporary protection", making reference to the 2001 European Council legislation, and adopting its own regulation in 2014. For more information: G. Özerim – E. Çetin, *Conseguenze della "crisi dei rifugiati" per la Turchia: nuove sfide in politica estera ed interna?*, in V. De Cesaris – E. Diodato (a cura di), *Il Confine Mediterraneo. L'Europa di fronte agli sbarchi dei migranti*, Roma, 2018, pp. 71-84.

⁶⁰ For a complete analysis, we need to consider the EU's role in managing the refugees' fluxes in Turkey. The European Union has in fact stated the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey, that is the answer to the EU Member States' call for significant additional funding to support refugees in the country. This plan is structured through a total of €6 billion (€3 billion for 2016-2017 and €3 billion for 2018-2019). The main focus areas are humanitarian assistance, education, migration management, health, municipal infrastructure, and socio-economic

where an estimated 240,000 people are staying⁶¹. Turkey's open-door policy rises on three pillars: temporary protection, non-refoulment and humanitarian diplomacy⁶².

IHH doing activities in Syria from 2012 to 2018 by having 10 coordination offices, 800 voluntary workers, 92 partner institutions, approximately \$360 million delivered as aid to Syrians (as 13 orphanage, 6 container city, 27 tent city, 61 bakeries for free bread, 30 kitchens for free food, 35 stores for free clothes, 14 health facilities)⁶³. One of the most important humanitarian operations conducted by IHH after the explosion of the Syrian conflict is represented by the so-called "Open the Road to Aleppo"⁶⁴. It started on 14 December 2016, with hundreds more vehicles ferrying humanitarian supplies to Hatay on the Syrian border. During the same period, in Turkey's southern province of Kilis, various aid organizations – including the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency and Turkey's Red Crescent – sent humanitarian supplies to Syria via the Oncupinar Border Gate.

However, Syrian refugee crisis has shown that acts of Islamic humanitarianism in Turkey are not limited to distributing aid. Education provision has become an essential element of faith-based humanitarianism in Turkey. Faith-based humanitarian NGOs, like IHH, tend to base their motives «in education provision for Syrians on Islamic brother/sisterhood and the danger of assimilation by secular Western ideas»⁶⁵. In the refugees' camps, educational activities are organized for children who have no school to go and health services, especially psychotherapy services are provided in

support. For more information: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/frit_factsheet.pdf.

⁶¹ *Turkey is taking care of refugees, but failing to integrate them*, "The Economist", 29.6.2017, available at <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/06/29/turkey-is-taking-care-of-refugees-but-failing-to-integrate-them>.

⁶² K. Long, *In Search of Sanctuary: Border Closures, 'Safe' Zones and Refugee Protection*, "Journal of Refugee Studies", vol. 26 (2012), n. 3, pp. 458-476.

⁶³ IHH, *Syria Activity Report 2012-2018*, July 2018, available at: <https://www.ihh.org.tr/public/publish/0/123/ihh-syria-activity-report-2012-2018.pdf>.

⁶⁴ According to the World Bulletin, since mid-November, more than 775 civilians have been killed and 2,500 injured in regime attacks on opposition-held parts of Aleppo, according to local civil defense officials. For more information: <https://www.worldbulletin.net/general/turkish-roads-full-of-aid-convoys-for-syria-h181823.html>.

⁶⁵ A. Maccarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-9.

coordination of IHH. The connection with the Syrian refugees, intended as Turkish “brothers in faith”, encounters education programs through *zakat* funds (i.e. Islamic donations). This action could be read as an instrument to face one of the greatest problems for Syrians immigrating to Turkey or to Europe via Turkey, that is represented by the refugees’ inability to retain their cultural identities, languages and beliefs. The increasing concern spread among Turkish faith-based NGOs is that Christian missionary institutions would utilize the education gap to estrange Syrian children and youth from their original values and convince them to be attracted by a better life and career opportunities in the West. For the Humanitarian Relief Foundation education sector manager «unless the Syrian schools in Turkey and Syria are supported, brain drain to Europe will continue by means of missionary organizations and Syrian youth will be assimilated»⁶⁶. The stance of the faith-based NGOs remembers the religious nationalism promoted by AKP associating social justice with Islamic identity. In that context, including education as a pillar of humanitarian response, faith-based NGOs cover an Islamist-humanist mission, that could be intended as a civil version of the AKP’s religious nationalism, or as a religious welfare project.

Conclusion

This paper has been motivated by the interest in exploring a supposed transnational turn in regional studies and to what extent State and non-State actors converge or rather diverge in their patterns or regional interactions. In the background there is a question about the maintenance by the State of a role of regionalism’s gatekeeper. The emerging literature about shadow regionalism and trans-State regionalism, along with the tentative introduction of the concept of diffuse regionhood, has been employed to spell out two main sets of research questions.

Considering the analyzed case study, however, the controversy about the role of humanitarian diplomacy is still opened: in the regional puzzle composed by the relations between Turkey and Syria, even in front of the operation of humanitarian NGOs and of the civil society, there is no an adherence and a complete

⁶⁶ *Ibi*, pp. 1-9.

integration among refugees and the people of surrounding villages. Fearing sectarian tensions and the loss of grazing land for their livestock, the villagers protested against the camp's construction during the last years. Opinion polls show attitudes towards refugees hardening⁶⁷. Moreover, even if an informal integration process is naturally taking place already and Syrians are trying to build new lives, education, however, remains a major challenge, and burden-sharing with the international community will be important in this area. As of December 2017, close to half of Syrian children did not have access to public schools, due to child labor, along with bureaucratic, linguistic, and cultural factors. Child weddings constitute yet another disturbing challenge, often motivated by economic hardships that families face⁶⁸.

Moreover, even if the protests occurred in Turkey during the last years, together with the Turkish political movements and the Kurdish issues are not the main topics of this paper, it is important to underline how much the legal environment for civil society activists further deteriorated after Gezi Park and after large 2014 protests in the mainly Kurdish southeast, prompted by anger over the government's response to the Islamic State assault on Kobane in northern Syria. Furtherly, the striding crisis in Turkish economy is likely to aggravate this picture, as government resources dry up and public resentment against Syrians increases.

Beside this situation, various faith-based humanitarian NGOs, like IHH, found themselves a place in the humanitarian response. This has led to a situation of temporary substitution, with faith-based humanitarian NGOs among other non-State actors acting as subsidiaries to fill the service gap in refugees' humanitarian relief until the State develops the capacity to deal with the issue by itself. In this sense, NGOs contribute to influence regional dynamics, even clustering among themselves and so constituting a prompt action of trans-national governance. Moreover, conducting the IHH's role to the GNGO's acceptance, like mentioned before, these organizations could not only represent the extension of the

⁶⁷ M. Murat Erdoğan, *Suriyeliler Barometresi: Suriyelilerle Uyum İçinde Yaşamın Çerçevesi*, İstanbul, 2018.

⁶⁸ Relief Web, *The Widening Educational Gap for Syrian Refugee Children*, 27.3.2018, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/widening-educational-gap-syrian-refugee-children>.

State power, but they also could overlap this latter, strengthen their interests and impact.

In conclusion, considering also that these organizations' aim is to prevent a possible assimilation of Syrian refugees and conserve their religious identities as Sunni-Muslims, the findings of this paper would underline an Islamisation of discourse prevalent in State-civil society relations as a humanitarian response in Turkey.

finito di stampare
nel mese di dicembre 2018
presso la LITOGRAFIA SOLARI
Peschiera Borromeo (MI)

EDUCatt - Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario dell'Università Cattolica
Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione); librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)
web: www.educatt.it/libri
ISBN: 978-88-9335-414-1 / ISSN: 2532-5302 / ISSN edizione online: 2532-5310

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