

Beyond the Humanitarian Mandate: Assessing the Strategic Calculus of Türkiye's Foreign Aid Programs

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the performance of Türkiye's foreign aid programs through an analysis of its strategic objectives, implementation, and anticipated outcomes. Over the past decades, Türkiye has substantially increased its foreign aid ratio and emerged as a significant actor in international humanitarian efforts. The study examines the scope and character of Türkiye's aid across selected regions and sectors, highlighting how foreign policy interests correlate with the developmental utility of aid programs. In addition, the paper investigates how strategic goals are translated into concrete policies and programs, assessing their execution and alignment with Türkiye's broader foreign policy agenda and international positioning. Particular attention is given to the role of non-state actors in aid delivery, with an emphasis on their impact on program effectiveness. Ultimately, the study situates Türkiye's foreign aid within the wider international assistance architecture, offering insights into how its strategic objectives reinforce both national interests and global development initiatives.

Keyword: Türkiye, Foreign Policy, Development Aid, Soft Power, Humanitarian Aid, Emerging Donors

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Introduction

Foreign Aid (FA) stands as a perennial and critical component of international relations and global development, traditionally serving as a primary instrument for addressing pressing humanitarian needs and fostering global progress (UNDP, 2025). As a distinct aspect of foreign policy, FA involves the transfer of varied resources including financial assistance, goods, services, and technical expertise, from one country to another, often channeled through either bilateral or multilateral mechanisms (UNDP, 2025). Historically, the core goals of foreign aid have revolved around supporting economic development, alleviating poverty, providing essential humanitarian relief, and promoting political stability. These motivations are complex and often driven by a spectrum of factors, ranging from pure philanthropy to calculated strategic self-interest, with contemporary issues of security and related concerns increasingly shaping the foreign policy agendas of donor nations (Alesina & Dollar, 2000).

In recent decades, the landscape of foreign aid has undergone a significant transformation. Once primarily the exclusive domain of major powers, aid diplomacy is now increasingly practiced by a new group of nations often referred to as middle-powers or emerging donors (Huntington, 1971). This trend fundamentally challenges the traditional status quo, particularly the structured and often conditional model employed by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD. Emerging donors typically operate with greater flexibility, characterized by a pragmatic blend of geopolitical, commercial, and humanitarian interests, often preferring bilateral, project-based assistance. This non-traditional category provides the context for countries such as Türkiye, which can align its aid programs more directly with its own comprehensive foreign policy objectives.

Since the early 2000s, Türkiye's official development assistance (ODA) has expanded substantially. This has positioned the country among the world's leading humanitarian donors relative to its gross national income (Tüyoğlu, 2021). This study is focused on evaluating the outcomes and effectiveness of

this burgeoning Turkish foreign assistance model. This evaluation is critical for three reasons: first, to determine the extent to which Türkiye's aid programs are achieving their stated goals; second, to assess the compatibility of these programs with both Türkiye's broader foreign policy objectives and the actual developmental needs of recipient countries; and finally, by examining the role of non-state actors, particularly NGOs. From this point, this article aims to critically examine Türkiye's foreign aid programs, thereby contributing to the existing literature on the country's emergence as a formidable donor.

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on the motivations and function of foreign aid is multi-varied and robust, establishing three core theoretical lenses through which to analyse its impact. Hattori (2001), in his critical interrogation *Reconceptualizing Foreign Aid*, identifies three main theoretical perspectives derived from international relations theory: (i) Liberalism, which views aid mainly as a technical tool to promote economic cooperation and genuine development between countries, (ii) Realism, which sees aid as a strategic instrument used by states to advance their specific national interests, gaining influence and leverage, and (iii) World-Systems Theory, which considers aid as a structural mechanism used by developed nations to maintain economic and political dominance over the Global South, thereby reinforcing existing global inequalities. Rather than endorsing a single framework, Hattori critiques the respective limitations of each, calling for a more integrative approach that moves beyond narrowly political or economic interpretations to foreground the ethical and social dimensions of aid.

The realist and critical perspectives are also supported by other influential scholars. For instance, Hayter (1971), argues that foreign aid serves the strategic interests of donor countries by exerting economic and political leverage over developing nations. Similarly, Malacalza (2019) views the politics of foreign aid as a mechanism shaped by structural power relations, one that reinforces global inequalities. These views align closely with Hans Morgenthau's influential idea (1962) that foreign aid is not a purely charitable act but fundamentally a strategic tool of foreign policy, used by donors to achieve political and strategic objectives.

However, as foreign aid has evolved, its practice has become more nuanced, requiring contextualization within a donor country's specific national interests and foreign policy goals (Natsios, 2020). For example, countries like the United States have explicitly used aid as a diplomatic tool, leveraging it to influence policy in recipient nations (CNN, 2019). This nuance is especially pronounced in the context of emerging donors. Unlike DAC members who adhere to a standardized, conditional framework, emerging donors operate with greater flexibility, allowing them to align aid explicitly with their geopolitical priorities.

The expansion of Türkiye's ODA since the early 2000s, reflects the emergence of a distinct Turkish model of development cooperation. This model is characterized as human-centered and demand-driven, with a strong emphasis on sharing Türkiye's own developmental experiences and tailoring assistance to the specific needs of partner countries (TİKA, 2022). The approach privileges bilateral cooperation and prioritizes visible, tangible initiatives such as technical assistance and infrastructure projects, particularly in regions of strategic importance including Central Asia, the Balkans, and Africa (OECD 2022; TİKA, 2022). Consequently, the need for this evaluation stems from the aid program's dual function: delivering conventional development outcomes and humanitarian relief, while simultaneously advancing the country's foreign policy objectives and enhancing its soft power projection.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The study critically examines Türkiye's ODA by utilizing established theories from International Relations to dissect the underlying motivations and strategic deployment of the aid program. While Liberalism and Critical Theory offer interpretations of foreign aid, a comparative analysis reveals Realism as the most robust framework for understanding the distinctive characteristics of Türkiye's aid allocation.

From a Liberal perspective, aid is undeniably strategic; technical assistance, capacity building, and promoting institutional stability are crucial tools for fostering economic interdependence and shared stability within a donor's sphere of influence (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Similarly, a Critical Theory lens views aid as strategically deployed to preserve global power imbalances, ensuring

economic access and political dominance, even if disguised as development (Woods, 2005).

Despite the strategic elements inherent in these alternative theories, the observed patterns in Türkiye's ODA are best understood through the fundamental principles of Realism. This framework interprets state action through the lens of power politics and rational self-interest, viewing foreign aid not as mere philanthropy but as a calculated instrument to advance specific political and strategic objectives (Morgenthau, 1962). This perspective offers clearer and more direct explanatory power for the specific traits of Türkiye's aid: namely, its substantial bilateral focus and its prioritization of highly visible, large-scale infrastructure projects over the sustained, low-visibility technical cooperation typically emphasized by Liberalism. This approach aligns directly with the Realist need for rapid diplomatic returns and clear demonstrations of influence in strategically vital regions.

Some argue that a Realist interpretation conflicts with the early Republic's non-interventionist policy. While this point is well-taken, the author maintains that it is insufficient to account for the complex evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy since the 2000s. This transition was defined by a deliberate strategic recalibration that actively sought proactive, multi-regional engagement and was formalized in a foreign policy doctrine emphasizing influence and depth (Davutoğlu, 2012). The discontinuities of the early period, while historically significant, therefore do not negate the explanatory power of Realism in interpreting the strategic pursuits of the contemporary era.

This contemporary policy is characterized by an active, multi-dimensional diplomacy and a competitive drive for autonomy and regional influence. This current environment provides a consistent context for interpreting ODA as a Realist instrument, strategically leveraged to enhance diplomatic presence and soft power projection in areas of historical and geopolitical importance. Ultimately, Realism provides the most compelling lens for critically assessing how Türkiye, as an emerging middle power, strategically employs development assistance to increase its diplomatic leverage and secure its national interests in a shifting global order.

This study situates Türkiye's ODA within a critical engagement with International

Relations theory, drawing on Liberalism, Realism, and Critical Theory to frame its methodological approach. Liberalism interprets aid as a cooperative instrument embedded in institutions and norms, emphasizing humanitarian duty, shared benefits, and the strengthening of global governance. From this perspective, aid fosters interdependence, reduces conflict, and advances collective stability through institution building and normative commitments such as democracy promotion and human rights. Realism, by contrast, views aid as a strategic tool of statecraft, shaped by national interests, power asymmetries, and geopolitical calculations, treating development cooperation as a vehicle for consolidating influence and securing national objectives (Morgenthau, 1962; Alesina & Dollar, 2000). Critical Theory extends this debate by interrogating the assumptions embedded in both perspectives, highlighting how aid discourses can reproduce hierarchies, legitimize state power under the guise of humanitarianism, and obscure the voices of marginalized communities. From this vantage point, Türkiye's ODA is not only a matter of strategic calculation or institutional cooperation but also a site where competing narratives of development, modernity, and national identity are constructed and contested.

Empirically, Türkiye's aid patterns (its bilateral concentration, preference for visible infrastructure projects, and focus on regions of historical and strategic importance) suggest a closer alignment with Realist assumptions than with the multilateral, institution building orientation often associated with Liberalism. Yet, by incorporating Critical Theory, the study interrogates how these practices reproduce or challenge global power relations and how aid narratives contribute to Türkiye's self presentation as an emerging middle power. The evaluative framework therefore examines three dimensions: effectiveness, understood both as developmental outcomes and strategic utility; strategic alignment, assessed in relation to recipient needs, global agendas, and foreign policy priorities; and the role of non state actors, analyzed as either autonomous agents of humanitarianism or instruments co opted into state strategies. Taken together, this pluralist framework integrates Realist assumptions, acknowledges Liberal contributions, and incorporates Critical Theory's emancipatory critique, providing a comprehensive account of how Türkiye's aid functions simultaneously as development cooperation, foreign policy instrument, and site of contested power relations.

TİKA and the Global Turn in Türkiye's Development Diplomacy

Türkiye's foreign aid operations have evolved in tandem with the broader contours of its international relations and regional strategic interests. In the initial phase, aid distribution was primarily shaped by geographical proximity, cultural affinity, and urgent humanitarian imperatives, particularly in response to regional aggression and instability. The post-World War II and early Cold War periods presented a complex landscape for Türkiye. Following the Cold War, Türkiye encountered significant challenges, notably the management of refugee inflows from neighboring conflict zones (Gunay, 2019). This juncture proved pivotal, prompting a redefinition of Türkiye's international posture and a marked expansion of its humanitarian outreach. The regional orientation of aid during this period reflected Türkiye's broader objectives: fostering stability, promoting goodwill, and mitigating threats in its immediate neighborhoods (Gunay, 2019).

Nevertheless, Türkiye's early foreign aid interventions were more geographically targeted and less developed, frequently operating on an ad hoc basis without a clear central coordinating structure. It often occurred through an assortment of governmental bodies, NGOs, and individual forms of organization, which created a labyrinthine aid structure. This lack of a clear strategy and supervision created an ineffective and unsustainable approach to Türkiye's aid work, thus greatly hindering its potential impact. However, such preliminary attempts paved the way for Türkiye's further evolution into a networked and systematically planned international assistance framework (Gunay, 2019; Zengin & Korkmaz, 2019). This period provided the opportunity for Türkiye to utilize its history, culture, and geography for collaboration with its immediate neighbors and thus, improve its surrounding positions. Despite the incongruity and failure of centralized coordination, the approach and issues which were confronted at this stage played a crucial role in defining the further advancement of the systematic and bureaucratic foreign aid regime in subsequent years.

Beginning in the 1980s and early 1990s, Türkiye's regional aid has increased in an organized and distinctive manner (Gunay, 2019). Emerging from the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of Central Asiatic and Caucasian states, new challenges and opportunities arose for Türkiye to expand

its sphere. During this period, Türkiye maintained aid programs that sustained its pan-Turkish ideology by emphasizing shared cultural roots of these newly independent states with the Turkic peoples (Haidar, 2015). These efforts included educational and cultural cooperation and exchanges, economic aid, and development of structures. The emphasis on Central Asia and the Caucasus was not only in Türkiye's wish to improve cooperation with ethnically and culturally similar countries, but also its desire to dominate a quickly changing geopolitical area (Landau, 1995). This argument is supported by Alrmizan (2022), who notes that pan-Turkism initially informed Turkish state approaches to the region, and hence, Türkiye leveraged cultural ties to expand its influence through diplomatic and aid-based programs in the Central Asian republics. In support of this, Kahveci and Kuşçu Bonnenfant (2023) argue that the post-Cold War environment offered Türkiye a new opportunity to redefine its foreign policy and assert regional leadership through cooperation and aid programs. They add that the emergence of newly independent Turkic nations gave Türkiye a strategic opening to use soft power for the first time, an experience that would later serve as a model for other regions.

Likewise, Türkiye's involvement in the Balkans is multifaceted, encompassing historical ties, cultural connections, and strategic interests. The region's significance to Türkiye is evident from its diplomatic efforts, cultural outreach, and economic engagements. Türkiye's support for Muslim communities in the Balkans aligns with its broader foreign policy objectives, which include fostering regional stability and countering the influence of other regional powers (Tabak & Bozkurt, 2022). This parallel engagement, particularly in the Balkans, where aid and cultural initiatives reinforced historical affiliations while countering rival influences, further underscores its realist orientation. These actions exemplify the realist logic of foreign aid as a vehicle for advancing national interest, consolidating regional dominance, and enhancing state power in competitive international arenas.

“...Türkiye is the top provider of humanitarian aid to (Gaza) Palestine...”¹

1 *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, at the World Islamic Scholars Consultation Summit 12.05.2024, Istanbul. Obtained at <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/152327/-turkiye-is-the-top-provider-of-humanitarian-aid-to-gaza->*

The evolution of Türkiye's foreign aid is a compelling narrative of a nation's shifting international role, moving from a regional player to a significant global humanitarian force. The story begins in 1992 with the establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), an institution created to centralize and professionalize the country's development assistance (Akilli & Çelenk, 2019). TİKA's birth was a direct response to the fragmented and uncoordinated nature of earlier aid efforts, which often lacked a unified strategy and sufficient resources to meet ambitious goals (Tomlinson, 2013). Early on, TİKA's projects were heavily concentrated on regions with strategic importance, primarily the Balkans and Central Asia, sometimes to the neglect of other areas in need (Karacasulu & Karakır, 2022).

However, these initial challenges ultimately spurred a period of refinement. Türkiye's approach became more structured, and its humanitarian efforts began to expand in both scope and ambition. This maturation was reflected in its growing financial commitment to international aid. By 2021, ODA as a percentage of Türkiye's gross national income (GNI) reached 0.95%, surpassing the UN target of 0.7% and positioning the country as one of the most generous donors in the world by this measure (OECD, 2022).

This upward trajectory continued, and by 2022, Türkiye's total ODA stood at \$7.116 billion (TİKA, 2023). This remarkable growth was largely due to a commitment to humanitarian diplomacy. In 2023, for instance, a substantial portion of the aid budget (\$6.05 billion) was allocated to official humanitarian aid (TİKA, 2024). These consistently high levels of funding have cemented Türkiye's place among the top providers of humanitarian assistance globally, often ranking second only to the United States. This demonstrates how the country's aid program has evolved from being an uncoordinated, ad hoc system into a strategic tool of foreign policy, effectively blending humanitarian compassion with the goal of projecting soft power and influence on the world stage (Atalay, 2013).

Therefore, the arguments presented suggests that the Türkiye's aid dispensation has evolved from an ad hoc system with a limited regional focus into a highly structured and globally influential tool of its foreign policy. This evolution was not merely a reaction to external events but a calculated strategic move to advance both humanitarian objectives and Türkiye's geopolitical interests on the world stage. The professionalization of aid through institutions like TİKA

and the massive increase in funding demonstrate this conscious shift toward becoming a major international actor.

Strategic Goals and Alignment with Foreign Policy Objectives

Türkiye's foreign aid programs are a key instrument of its foreign policy, strategically designed to enhance its geopolitical influence and diplomatic relationships (Akilli & Çelenk, 2019). This alignment is clearly seen in its aid distribution, which is not merely a response to humanitarian crises but a calculated move to advance specific national interests. One of the primary objectives of this approach is the promotion of regional stability and security. By providing aid to its neighbours, partner countries conflict-affected regions, Türkiye aims to foster a stable environment and mitigate the potential for conflict to spill over its borders (Karacasulu & Karakır, 2022). This strategy not only addresses immediate humanitarian needs but also works to reduce long-term security threats, creating a more cooperative and secured environment.

“...Türkiye is ready to collaborate with other nations to defend our shared values and fulfil our shared responsibilities in establishing an inclusive and effective international system that places high priority on human welfare, tackles economic disparities, and promotes global peace, security, stability, and prosperity...”²

Another critical objective is the expansion of Türkiye's influence in the international arena. Through its substantial development and humanitarian aid, Türkiye presents itself as a major, humanitarian player in global efforts, a strategy often termed “humanitarian diplomacy” (Altunışık, 2019). This strategic function is especially pronounced in regions of historical and strategic importance where Türkiye seeks to increase its geopolitical presence, such as

2 Fidan, H. Turkish Foreign Policy at the Turn of the 'Century of Türkiye': Challenges, Vision, Objectives, and Transformation." *Insight Türkiye 2023* Vol. 25 / No. 3 / pp. 11-25 pdf, [turkish-foreign-policy-at-the-turn-of-the-century-of-turkiye-challenges-vision-objectives-and-transformation \(insightTürkiye.com\)](https://insightturkiye.com).

Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Fidan & Nurdun, 2008; Tüylüoğlu, 2021). Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which emphasizes attraction over coercion, is particularly relevant to humanitarian diplomacy, a phenomenon framed as not just "winning hearts and minds, but saving lives" (as cited in Delaney, 2025). Therefore, this strategic deployment strengthens alliances, secures political support in global forums, and advances Türkiye's specific interests on the world stage.

Furthermore, foreign aid is a crucial tool for economic diplomacy. Aid programs frequently include components that foster economic ties, such as infrastructure development and technical assistance. These initiatives help open new markets for Turkish businesses, promote trade, and create economic interdependencies that benefit both Türkiye and the recipient countries (TİKA, 2022). TİKA-funded projects often involve Turkish companies, which provides economic opportunities for Türkiye while contributing to the recipient nation's development (TİKA, 2022). Although specific names of Turkish companies are often not publicly disclosed (due to various governmental and bureaucratic policies), TİKA's projects frequently involve the procurement of Turkish goods and services. For example, the Palestine-Türkiye Friendship Hospital in Gaza was equipped with modern medical technology by a Turkish company, while a significant portion of the furniture for the Bishkek Kyrgyz-Türkiye Friendship Hospital in Kyrgyzstan was also sourced from Türkiye (TİKA, 2020). Similar procurement practices were used for the Niger-Türkiye Friendship School. These examples demonstrate how TİKA's projects form a broader strategy to expand Türkiye's geopolitical presence and foster economic opportunities for its private sector, thereby fulfilling both humanitarian and strategic objectives (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Therefore, Türkiye's foreign aid is a complex instrument that is synchronized with the country's strategy for external policy. As a result, realistic considerations that include addressing regional security challenges, increasing Türkiye's geopolitical presence, advancing economic diplomacy, and establishing cultural connections are some of the instrumental objectives to which Türkiye relies on its aid programs. Such correlation guarantees that Türkiye's foreign aid does not only meets present humanitarian and development objectives, but also furthers Türkiye's strategic goals toward being a key global player (Fidan & Nurdun, 2008).

From realism perspective, Türkiye's foreign aid functions as a deliberate extension of state power, interwoven with its foreign policy objectives. Rather than serving purely humanitarian ends, aid is strategically deployed to secure national interests enhancing regional stability, expanding geopolitical influence, and deepening economic interdependencies. By leveraging development aid as a tool of soft power, Türkiye reinforces its role as a proactive regional actor and an emerging global player. The use of aid in this manner, reflects realist emphasis on state-centric strategies, where foreign policy instruments are mobilized to maximize national advantage in an anarchic international system.

Bridging Global Education, Development and Role of Türkiye Scholarships

Türkiye's foreign aid strategy places a strong emphasis on education, with programs designed to expand school enrolment, construct educational facilities, and develop human resources. These initiatives are primarily managed through the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). The YTB's flagship Türkiye Scholarships program, for instance, provides comprehensive scholarships for students from various developing nations to study at Turkish universities (YTB, 2022). This initiative not only supports academic pursuits but also fosters cultural exchange and future diplomatic ties (YTB, 2022). In addition to scholarship programs, TİKA has a long history of constructing educational facilities. Specific examples include the renovation and equipping of schools in Afghanistan, the construction of the Niger-Türkiye Friendship School, and the modernization of educational infrastructure in Moldova (TİKA, 2022). TİKA also supports vocational training to help individuals gain the skills needed to overcome poverty and contribute to their countries' socio-economic development (TİKA, 2022). These multifaceted efforts are aimed at helping individuals and recipient societies enhance their development and escape the poverty trap.

The Türkiye Scholarships Programs, a prestigious initiative by YTB has emerged as a significant force in international higher education. As of 2024, the program has demonstrated remarkable growth and influence, drawing a diverse and substantial pool of applicants from across the globe. The YTB's strategic goal is to build a network of future leaders who can strengthen global cooperation

and foster mutual understanding (YTB). This objective is supported by the comprehensive nature of the scholarship, which not only offers financial aid but also provides university placement, accommodation, and cultural enrichment opportunities.

According to YTB's record, over the years, the Scholarships Scheme's reach increasingly expands with significant margin. In 2023-2024, the Scholarship Programs received 121,830 applications from 170 different countries (YTB, 2024). This volume of applications highlights the programs' global appeal and the intense competition for a limited number of spots. While the YTB gives out approximately 5,000 scholarships each year, there are roughly 15,000 scholars currently continuing their education under the programs (YTB, 2024). Although specific data on the exact number of departments for scholarship students is not centrally published in a single, accessible report, however, YTB's programs places students in a wide array of fields across Turkish universities. These fields span from health sciences and engineering to social sciences and humanities. The objective is to provide students with a broad range of academic choices while contributing to both the personal development of the scholars and the academic prestige of Türkiye's universities. The program's success is a testament to Türkiye's commitment to becoming a hub for international student mobility (Türkiye Scholarships, 2024).

As Kavakli, (2018) remarked, Türkiye's foreign aid policy is founded on a multifaceted approach that extends beyond traditional development assistance, encompassing strategic, humanitarian, and developmental goals. This comprehensive strategy positions Türkiye as a significant and responsible actor within the international community, capable of providing both emergency relief and long-term developmental support. As such, health initiatives are a particularly visible component of this aid policy. Through bilateral relations, Türkiye has made substantial contributions to global healthcare by assisting in the construction and rehabilitation of hospitals, supplying health facilities with essential equipment, and providing training for health personnel in numerous countries (TİKA, 2020). These projects are designed to strengthen local healthcare systems, expand access to facilities, and address critical health needs. Türkiye's healthcare projects have focused on combating diseases like malaria and tuberculosis, decreasing maternal and infant mortality rates, and

enhancing overall health infrastructure. One clear example of these projects in Africa is the construction of the Somalia-Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Training and Research Hospital in Mogadishu (TİKA, 2015). This project is a cornerstone of Türkiye's health aid, and it serves as a modern medical facility for the region. It directly contributes to enhancing health infrastructure and addresses critical issues by providing advanced medical services that can help combat diseases and reduce maternal and infant mortality rates.

Another example is Maternal Health and Rehabilitation Center in Niger Republic established to specifically address the high rates of infant and maternal mortality. These projects, along with the donation of incubators and other medical equipment to countries like Guinea-Bissau, directly support the goals of improving health outcomes for women and children in Africa (TİKA, 2022).

Moreover, Türkiye's aid policy also prioritizes economic and infrastructure development. The nation provides assistance for projects such as roads, bridges, and water supply systems, which establish a foundation for sustained growth in recipient countries (Karacasulu & Karakır, 2022). These infrastructure projects not only improve physical access to essential goods and services but also stimulate local economies by creating employment opportunities. This focus on institutional and economic development is further complemented by technical cooperation activities that support governance and promote sustainable development principles.

Similarly, Türkiye's foreign aid addresses environmental sustainability by funding projects that align with global Sustainable Development Goals. For example, the TİKA has implemented a climate change proof agricultural project in Laos (TİKA, 2023). This initiative supports sustainable agricultural practices by distributing climate-resilient rice seeds to farmers affected by floods, thereby helping them adapt to the effects of climate change. By doing so, Türkiye actively contributes to the global fight against climate change, resource conservation, and the creation of resilient development processes, underscoring its commitment to a more sustainable and prosperous future for all.

Strategic Patterns and NGO Roles in Türkiye's Foreign Aid Architecture

Türkiye's official development assistance is characterized by a flexible and regionally targeted strategy that prioritizes bilateral aid to areas with historical, cultural, and geopolitical significance. This is a deliberate approach, distinct from traditional donor models (Ekşi, 2019). Türkiye's total ODA reached approximately \$7.75 billion in 2023, with 99.5% of disbursements allocated bilaterally, primarily focusing on the Middle East, Central Asia, the Balkans, and Africa (OECD, 2025; TİKA, 2024). In these regions, aid is directed toward key sectors such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare. For example, in the Balkans, TİKA has supported the development of healthcare infrastructure by providing a modern ultrasound device to a health center in Serbia, and in Central Asia, it has engaged in projects like the renovation of the Faculty of Turkic Studies in Uzbekistan, strengthening educational and cultural ties (TİKA, 2025). Furthermore, this approach emphasizes a "kinship" dimension, which prioritizes countries with shared Islamic heritage or Ottoman-era ties. This is often expressed through cultural restoration projects that reinforce soft power and cultural diplomacy (Altunışık, 2019). TİKA's restoration of the Mausoleum of Hoca Ahmet Yesevi in Kazakhstan, a site of spiritual importance, and the rebuilding of the Ferhadija Mosque in Bosnia and Herzegovina serve as powerful examples of this strategy in action.

Türkiye's responsiveness during crises also demonstrates its operational agility and commitment to global solidarity. The country's swift mobilization of resources has been evident in its responses to health emergencies. During the Ebola crisis, Türkiye donated \$1 million to the African Union to help combat the disease (Getachew, 2015). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, TİKA provided medical equipment and food aid to over 160 countries, including to locations like Georgia, where a TİKA-renovated hospital became a key center for pandemic response (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022; TİKA, 2020). Multilateral contributions, while a smaller portion of the total ODA, are also vital. Through active participation in the UN, the OIC, and the OECD, Türkiye extends its development footprint and aligns its efforts with international norms (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

A key distinction between Türkiye's model and the traditional approach of the OECD's DAC is its non-conditional and people-centered philosophy. Unlike the often-criticized conditionality of DAC donors, Türkiye's aid is often delivered with an emphasis on mutual respect and local needs. This comprehensive and adaptive model enables Türkiye to pursue both developmental and strategic objectives, positioning it as a rising donor and a model that is responsive to recipient needs and flexible in its implementation, thereby earning Türkiye a reputation as a trusted partner in global development paradigm (Kavakli, 2018).

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are a vital component of Türkiye's foreign aid program, acting as key partners to state agencies and helping to define the "Turkish model" of development cooperation. This model is characterized by its collaborative structure, which effectively integrates both public and non-state actors (TİKA, 2017). This synergy allows for a flexible, responsive, and people-centered approach that complements official, government-led initiatives by reaching remote or crisis-affected areas with greater speed and agility.

A prominent example of this collaboration is the work of the Turkish Red Crescent (Türk Kızılay). As the largest humanitarian organization in Türkiye, it plays an indispensable role in emergency and disaster relief. The Turkish Red Crescent has provided assistance in numerous countries, often working in coordination with state bodies like the TİKA and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). Its humanitarian operations, ranging from providing food and shelter to delivering emergency medical aid, are critical for the immediate post-crisis phase. Others such as Doctors Worldwide Türkiye (Yeryüzü Doktorları Türkiye) specializes in medical assistance and capacity-building in underserved regions, focusing on healthcare infrastructure and professional training, while the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (TDV), a faith-based organization, undertakes culturally and religiously oriented projects, including mosque construction, religious education, and humanitarian aid distribution during Islamic festivities. Similarly, the İHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, provide critical on-the-ground support in conflict zones and disaster-affected areas (İHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, 2019).

Highlighting the impact of these organizations, Turhan and Bahçecik (2021) underscore the pivotal role of faith-based NGOs in shaping Türkiye's foreign aid

landscape, which offers a compelling illustration of Joseph Nye's (2008) notion of soft power. They argued that rather than serving merely as instruments of state policy, these organizations operate as autonomous yet strategically aligned actors. Their humanitarian missions resonate with global audiences and local communities alike, enabling Türkiye to cultivate attraction and legitimacy core elements of Joseph Nye's soft power through culturally embedded, people-centered diplomacy. In this way, these NGOs function as conduits of public diplomacy, translating state interests into socially meaningful engagement that enhances Türkiye's international image and influence.

Turkish NGOs possess wide-ranging expertise in dealing with emergencies, as well as in healthcare, education, and capacity development, positioning them to effectively tackle multifaceted challenges in both humanitarian crises and long-term development programs (Özkan, 2013). Their operational agility and local engagement enable Türkiye to respond swiftly to humanitarian emergencies while implementing sustainable, community-driven development programs. Thus, this integrated engagement between governmental and non-governmental actors not only optimizes the operational reach and responsiveness of Türkiye's aid delivery but also consolidates its humanitarian diplomacy and reinforces its strategic presence in global development arenas.

This perfectly align with realism perspective. Türkiye's involvement of NGOs in its foreign aid programs is a strategic manoeuvre to extend state influence under the umbrella of humanitarianism. These organisations act as instruments of national power, enabling Türkiye to penetrate crisis zones, shape local perceptions, and reinforce its geopolitical presence all while maintaining the appearance of benevolent assistance. The collaboration between state and non-state actors thus serves the realist imperative that is, securing national interests in a competitive international system.

“Turkish aid is human-centric. If a project does not touch the lives of ordinary people, it is unlikely to get financed.”³

3 Mehmet Ozkan former Director, TİKA, Colombia/Latin America. DEVEX Report: Emerging Donors 2.0 (Türkiye). Accessed 7 February, 2024, at Devex (2020). *emerging donors report*. <https://pages.devex.com/rs/685-KBL-765/images/Devex-Emerging-Donors-Report.pdf>.

Conclusion

Türkiye's foreign aid strategy reflects a dynamic and increasingly institutionalized model of development cooperation, evolving from a sub-regional focus to a globally engaged framework. The establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency has been pivotal in structuring aid delivery, enabling a responsive and organized system. Complementing this state-led architecture, Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a critical role in extending the reach, adaptability, and societal embeddedness of Türkiye's aid efforts.

These NGOs such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), Doctors Worldwide and Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs have contributed significantly to humanitarian assistance, post-conflict reconstruction, and capacity-building initiatives. Their grassroots networks, cultural affinity with recipient communities, and operational flexibility have allowed them to deliver aid in complex environments where state actors may face limitations. In sectors like education and healthcare, NGO-led projects have complemented governmental efforts by constructing schools, distributing educational materials, providing scholarships, and delivering mobile health services and emergency medical aid.

The findings thus highlight the dual nature of Türkiye's aid as both a strategic instrument of foreign policy and a genuine expression of humanitarian solidarity. Its success lies in a hybrid model anchored in institutional coordination and enriched by civil society engagement that enables rapid crisis response and fosters long-term development partnerships. Continued investment in human capital and enhanced synergy between state and non-state actors will be essential to amplifying Türkiye's global development impact in the years ahead. Lastly, Türkiye's foreign aid strategy is not merely a humanitarian gesture but a dynamic and institutionalized instrument of foreign policy designed to advance national interests, which aligns with the realist perspective of foreign aid as an instrument of statecraft.

Ethics Statement

This study did not include human participants and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Use of Generative AI

Generative AI tools were used for language refinement and clarity during the drafting process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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