

The Rise of Türkiye as a Foreign Aid Actor (2014-2024) Through the Lens of Complex Realism

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Abstract:

This chapter examines Türkiye's evolving role as a foreign aid actor between 2014 and 2024 through the analytical lens of Complex Realism. While Türkiye's Official Development Assistance (ODA) has drawn increasing scholarly interest, much of the existing literature treats its foreign aid strategy through isolated lenses—focusing either on soft power, domestic political motives, or regional geopolitics. What remains lacking is an integrated framework capable of accounting for how these dimensions intersect and evolve. This chapter addresses that gap by exploring how domestic political objectives, regional ambitions, and global strategic interests under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) have shaped Türkiye's ODA trajectory. The chapter employs Raymond Hinnebusch's Complex Realism framework to analyze Türkiye's foreign aid as both a humanitarian instrument and a geopolitical tool. This approach is particularly well-suited to Türkiye's context, given its transcontinental identity, shifting alliances, and concurrent pursuit of

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domestic legitimacy, regional influence, and global recognition. Four illustrative case studies—Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia, and Kyrgyzstan—demonstrate the multifaceted motivations behind aid allocation, including soft power projection, economic interests, and security considerations. Central to this analysis are the roles of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), which have enabled Türkiye to expand its influence across multiple regions. Drawing on official government documents, policy reports, and academic literature, the chapter argues that Türkiye's ODA functions as a mechanism for projecting national identity, consolidating political legitimacy, and enhancing regional and global influence.

Keywords: Türkiye; foreign policy; TİKA; AFAD; complex realism; soft power; official development assistance

Introduction

Since 2014, Türkiye has significantly elevated its role in Official Development Assistance (ODA), emerging as a key humanitarian and geopolitical actor. Under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Türkiye's ODA surged from \$2.4 billion in 2014 to \$8.6 billion in 2018, ranking it among the world's top donors relative to Gross National Income. This expansion reflects a strategic shift wherein foreign aid is used not only for humanitarian relief but also to advance domestic legitimacy, regional influence, and global diplomatic positioning.

Despite Türkiye's growing prominence in aid diplomacy, much of the existing literature treats its motives—whether soft power projection, domestic political consolidation, or strategic influence—as isolated factors. This article adopts Raymond Hinnebusch's Complex Realism to offer an integrated analysis that connects Türkiye's domestic, regional, and global imperatives. The framework is well-suited for semi-peripheral states like Türkiye, whose foreign policies are shaped by intersecting internal dynamics and external pressures.

The core research question guiding this study is: how has Türkiye's foreign aid strategy from 2014 to 2024 been influenced by domestic politics, regional security goals, and global diplomatic ambitions? To address this, the article analyzes four case studies—Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia, and Kyrgyzstan—selected for their geopolitical diversity and strategic relevance to Türkiye's evolving foreign policy.

By situating aid within a broader realist paradigm that incorporates both structure and agency, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of Türkiye's aid diplomacy. It contributes to broader debates on middle power behavior, foreign aid instrumentalization, and the strategic use of development policy in contemporary international relations.

Literature Review: Türkiye's Rise as a Foreign Aid Actor

The rise of Türkiye as a significant foreign aid actor has attracted growing scholarly attention, and existing literature on this topic can be categorized into three interrelated strands. One stream examines the broader transformation of Turkish foreign policy, focusing on the influence of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership. Another explores Türkiye's official development assistance (ODA), particularly through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), analyzing its role as an instrument of soft power. A third strand investigates the underlying determinants shaping Turkish foreign policy, considering domestic political, economic, and strategic dynamics.

The first stream of literature centers on the impact of the AKP and Erdoğan's leadership on the evolution of Turkish foreign policy. Scholars contend that under Erdoğan, Türkiye has transformed into a regional power and expanded its global influence. This transformation is attributed to Türkiye's reliance on a blend of Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism, promoting an "assertive foreign policy" through soft and hard power (Avatkov & Sbitneva, 2023). In pursuit of regional power and global status, Türkiye adopted "strategic assertiveness" in its foreign policy (Koçak, 2022).

Expanding on this transformation, the literature also emphasizes the increasing importance of soft power in Türkiye's foreign policy toolkit. Under the AKP, Türkiye developed a unique soft power model based on heritage, cultural ties, and economic engagement (Kara & Sözen, 2016). This model emphasizes regional engagement through diverse diplomatic instruments, with international aid being central (Özkan, 2017). The model includes institutions like TİKA and tools such as media and educational outreach.

Further extending this perspective, scholars conceptualize Turkish foreign policy as "multi-vector," engaging several power blocs (Vokhmintsev & Guzaerov, 2023). Türkiye's vectors include a global vector (U.S., Russia, UN), a post-Soviet vector tied to its Turkic identity, a Balkan vector, and a Middle East vector. Türkiye is notably most active in the Balkan and Middle East regions, where diplomatic focus is concentrated. While these contributions are insightful, they often focus more on describing Türkiye's geopolitical outreach than on evaluating the consistency or impact of these strategies across aid sectors.

Building on this foundation, the second major stream of literature focuses on the role of official development assistance (ODA) in Türkiye's foreign policy. This body of work examines how Türkiye strategically uses state-sponsored aid to project influence, cultivate partnerships, and pursue diplomatic goals beyond traditional foreign policy mechanisms.

Within this stream, one subset of scholarship focuses on the ODA as a Turkish foreign policy instrument. Scholars examine how institutions like TİKA and the Turkey Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) serve not only humanitarian roles but also advance nation branding and public diplomacy (Tüylog̃lu, 2021; Kocan & Arbeiter, 2019). These agencies have become “narrators” of Türkiye's “national story,” branding the country as a major donor (Ongur & Zengin, 2016). Thus, ODA is strategically employed to gain influence and deepen ties with aid recipients (Kocan & Arbeiter, 2019).

Complementing this view, another body of work highlights soft power projection through TİKA as a distinct diplomatic strategy. Scholars underscore the central role of TİKA in Türkiye's nation branding efforts (Akili & Celenk, 2019; Besg̃ul, 2024). Humanitarian assistance by TİKA—especially in the Middle East—enhances Türkiye's image domestically and globally (Akili & Çelenk, 2019). TİKA has thus become a conduit for a soft power strategy combining cultural and economic diplomacy (Ipek, 2015). However, a critical gap in this body of literature is the limited evaluation of aid effectiveness, sustainability, and recipient country perspectives.

Adding another layer of analysis, a third major stream of literature investigates how Türkiye's foreign aid is shaped by internal political, economic, and security considerations. This scholarship contends that Türkiye's international humanitarian assistance is primarily driven by domestic motives (Guo, 2020; Kavakli, 2018; Ardic, 2014). Aid is pragmatically allocated to serve strategic interests and strengthen political and economic ties (Kavakli, 2018). Yet, these works often analyze domestic drivers in isolation from Türkiye's broader geopolitical calculus, leaving the link between internal and external motivations underexplored.

While existing literature explores Türkiye's foreign aid as a soft power tool, a geopolitical strategy, or a domestically driven policy, few studies systematically integrate these dimensions into a single analytical framework. The Complex

Realism approach—examining the interplay between domestic politics, regional ambitions, and global diplomatic positioning—provides a more comprehensive perspective on Türkiye’s foreign aid policy that has not been explored in an integrative manner. Building on this gap, the present study employs the Complex Realism framework to synthesize these dimensions, offering a theoretically grounded interpretation of Türkiye’s foreign aid behavior across diverse contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Complex Realism

Balancing the dichotomy between agency- and structure-based analyses of foreign policy, complex realism attempts to provide an integrative framework that recognizes the diverse influences on foreign policy making. For hybrid and semi-peripheral states like Türkiye, which defy rigid regional classifications yet operate under intersecting global, regional, and domestic constraints, such an integrative framework is especially valuable. Türkiye’s unique geostrategic position, with deep entanglements in both European and Middle Eastern affairs, makes it an ideal candidate for a layered theoretical lens that accounts for both material and ideational influences across multiple levels of analysis.

Although complex realism was initially introduced to better understand the foreign policy behavior of Middle Eastern states, particularly by scholars Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2002), its analytical logic extends to other contexts where traditional realist assumptions fall short. As Korany (1984) had earlier noted, foreign policy analysis needed to evolve beyond Eurocentric models to reflect the structural and political heterogeneity of the Global South and transitional states. Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2014) built on this imperative by framing Middle Eastern policymakers as “quintessential realists” operating under conditions that challenge conventional state-centric realism. The value of complex realism lies not in its regional specificity, but in its adaptability to contexts where sovereignty is fragmented, policymaking is elite-dominated, and external dependence complicates autonomous state behavior. These characteristics, though prominent in the Middle East, also resonate strongly with Türkiye’s foreign policy environment.

Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2014) identify three mutually reinforcing “environments” that shape foreign policies in such states: global, regional, and internal. Unlike traditional realism, which tends to prioritize the international

system as the primary explanatory variable, complex realism offers a multi-layered approach that captures the interplay of global structures, regional dynamics, and domestic imperatives. The fragmentation of sovereignty, regime-centered policymaking, and the instrumental use of foreign policy for domestic legitimacy are key features that render a single-level analysis inadequate. These dynamics are particularly evident in Türkiye's foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), where soft power tools, humanitarian diplomacy, and regional activism converge with domestic consolidation.

The global environment establishes the overarching framework in which states operate, structured as a hierarchical system of core and periphery states (Galtung, 1971). Within this structure, Türkiye occupies a semi-peripheral position—neither a consolidated global power nor a purely dependent actor. This placement subjects it to systemic pressures, including external penetration by major powers, yet also affords it limited strategic agency. In this context, Türkiye may bandwagon with core powers to maintain influence, especially in a unipolar system, or maneuver strategically in a bipolar or multipolar setting to maximize autonomy. This strategic behavior aligns with Ayooob's (2002) notion of subaltern realism; wherein semi-peripheral states navigate global hierarchies through tactical engagement rather than outright resistance.

The regional environment represents the immediate geostrategic surroundings, which for Türkiye include not only the volatile Middle East but also the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean. As Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (2016) explain, such regions are often anarchic and conflict-prone, prompting states to adopt balancing strategies to ensure survival. Türkiye's regional conduct reflects both defensive and offensive realism, tailored to specific contingencies and opportunities. Factors such as resource distribution, population size, and geostrategic positioning influence the methods of regional balancing. In this context, pragmatism often overrides ideological alignment (Ramazani, 2004), with Türkiye engaging in both regional alliances and partnerships with extra-regional powers. Supra-state identities, including Pan-Islamism and Ottoman nostalgia, also play a significant role, influencing domestic legitimacy and foreign policy narratives (Hinnebusch, 2016).

The internal environment consists of domestic political dynamics, including state formation, elite interests, and role conception. The degree of internal consolidation shapes whether a state perceives its primary threats as internal

or external (Alons, 2007). In Türkiye's case, the authoritarian consolidation under the AKP has elevated the role of ruling elites in steering foreign policy, often aligning external engagements with regime survival and domestic political narratives (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 2014). Policymakers define threats and alliances based on both domestic imperatives and strategic calculations, leading to revisionist or status quo orientations depending on context (Holsti, 1970; Korany & Dessouki, 2019). Yet, internal fragmentation and civil-military dynamics can lead to inconsistency, while high executive autonomy risks irrational policy decisions. The bureaucratic politics model, as highlighted by Halperin and Clapp (2007) and Kasza (1987), underscores the influence of institutions like the military and intelligence services in shaping foreign policy at the expense of traditional diplomatic channels.

These three environments—global, regional, and internal—do not operate in isolation. They interact in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, pulling foreign policy in multiple directions depending on prevailing threats and opportunities (Nonneman, 2005). For Türkiye, which navigates conflicting regional affiliations and shifting global alignments, this interplay is especially pronounced. Leaders must constantly calibrate their foreign policy strategies to balance regime survival, regional ambition, and global relevance, often prioritizing pragmatic objectives over ideological consistency.

Raymond Hinnebusch's complex realism framework is particularly well-suited for analyzing Türkiye's ascent as a foreign aid actor because it acknowledges that state behavior is the result of multiple, interdependent forces. Unlike traditional realist approaches that often reduce foreign policy to power balancing among states, complex realism accounts for the intricate interplay between domestic political imperatives and external strategic interests. Türkiye's unique transcontinental identity—bridging both Western and Middle Eastern spheres—exemplifies the multifaceted pressures that shape its foreign aid policy. This approach enables a comprehensive analysis of how domestic political consolidation under the AKP, coupled with regional ambitions and global diplomatic objectives, converge to inform Türkiye's expansive foreign aid strategy. In doing so, complex realism provides the analytical depth necessary to understand how foreign aid serves not only as a tool of humanitarian diplomacy but also as a mechanism for projecting soft power and reinforcing national legitimacy.

Research Design and Analytical Framework

This study employs a qualitative, theory-driven case study approach to examine Türkiye's foreign aid strategy from 2014 to 2024 through the lens of Complex Realism. The methodology is structured to ensure analytical rigor, transparency of data sources, and clarity in case selection criteria.

The four cases—Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia, and Kyrgyzstan—were selected to reflect the diversity of sectoral focuses within Türkiye's foreign aid strategy. Each case highlights a distinct modality of aid engagement: humanitarian relief in Syria, cultural diplomacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, state-building and security cooperation in Somalia, and education and healthcare development in Kyrgyzstan. This range enables a more comprehensive exploration of how Türkiye's foreign aid strategy operates across different sectors, aligning with domestic priorities, regional ambitions, and global diplomatic goals as conceptualized in the Complex Realism framework.

The selection was guided by three criteria:

High levels of Official Development Assistance (ODA) from Türkiye; strategic importance in Türkiye's regional or global positioning; and diversity of aid motives and mechanisms (e.g., emergency aid, infrastructure, education).

To maintain a coherent analytical scope, cases such as Palestine, Pakistan, and Libya were not included. These exclusions are based on either insufficient access to comprehensive data or the potential for analytical overlaps with the selected cases, thus ensuring conceptual clarity and focus.

The study draws from both primary and secondary sources:

Primary data: Reports, annual reviews, and press releases from Turkish governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), and Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD).

Secondary data: Peer-reviewed academic studies, policy briefs, media analyses, and international reports (e.g., UNHCR, World Bank, ReliefWeb) that critically assess Türkiye's ODA.

To mitigate confirmation bias, official data were triangulated with independent and critical sources whenever available. Limitations arising from source bias are

explicitly discussed in the analysis.

The study utilizes Raymond Hinnebusch's Complex Realism framework to interpret Türkiye's ODA policy through three interrelated dimensions:

Domestic environment: Political regime dynamics, national identity narratives, and economic interests; regional environment: Security imperatives, strategic alliances, and regional power aspirations; and global environment: Diplomatic positioning, soft power projection, and international system structures.

This framework enables a layered examination of how domestic, regional, and international forces shape Türkiye's foreign aid agenda. It serves as the conceptual basis for interpreting the selected case studies, offering a structured yet adaptable lens suited to the complexities of Türkiye's semi-peripheral geopolitical status.

Results

Turkey's Strategic Use of TİKA and AFAD in Enhancing Official Development Assistance (2014–2024)

Over the past decade, Türkiye has significantly increased its foreign aid, with both the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) playing central roles. This expansion has positioned Türkiye as a major humanitarian and development actor on the global stage, with an increasing share of its official development assistance (ODA) dedicated to humanitarian relief efforts (Aydın-Düzgit & Balta, 2021). Türkiye's foreign aid approach aligns with its broader soft power strategy, blending humanitarian objectives with geopolitical ambitions, a trend that has become more evident since the AKP's rise to power (Guo, 2020).

Türkiye's humanitarian and development assistance has been shaped by multiple factors: its geopolitical ambitions, historical and cultural ties, and a desire to position itself as an alternative to Western donors. Unlike traditional donor states, Türkiye combines bilateral aid with diplomatic engagement, reinforcing its influence in recipient countries while also serving domestic economic and security interests (Guo, 2020; Ipek, 2015).

Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA)

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) is a pivotal institution in Turkey's official development assistance (ODA) strategy. Established in 1992 under the Prime Ministry (now under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism), TİKA was initially focused on providing development aid to newly independent Turkic states in Central Asia. Over time, its scope expanded significantly, with operations in over 170 countries as of 2022 (TİKA, n.d.). TİKA's mission is to promote socio-economic development, reduce poverty, and strengthen institutional capacities in recipient countries (Çevik, 2016).

TİKA plays a crucial role in Turkey's soft power diplomacy by providing technical assistance, humanitarian aid, and development projects in education, health, agriculture, and infrastructure. It partners with Turkish ministries, universities, NGOs, and private-sector actors to implement sustainable development initiatives. Türkiye's ODA reached approximately \$8.6 billion by 2018, with humanitarian aid constituting about 85% of the total, reflecting a sharp increase from \$2.4 billion in 2014, when humanitarian aid accounted for 67% of Türkiye's overall ODA (Aydın-Düzgit & Balta, 2021). Through TİKA, Türkiye has positioned itself as a reliable development partner, particularly in regions with historical and cultural ties to the country (Ipek, 2015).

Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD)

While TİKA focuses on long-term development aid, the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) serves as Turkey's main agency for disaster response and emergency humanitarian assistance. Founded in 2009 under the Ministry of Interior, AFAD coordinates disaster risk management, search-and-rescue operations, and international humanitarian aid efforts (AFAD, n.d.). The agency transformed Turkey's disaster response framework by introducing an Integrated Disaster Management System, shifting the focus from crisis response to risk mitigation.

AFAD's role extends beyond Turkey's borders, providing humanitarian aid to disaster-stricken regions worldwide. It has also conducted humanitarian missions in over 50 countries across five continents providing refugee aid, establishing temporary shelters, and delivering medical supplies. AFAD collaborates with

international organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the Red Crescent, reinforcing Turkey's reputation as a global humanitarian actor (Guo, 2020). Its emergency aid programs complement TİKA's long-term development projects, forming a comprehensive foreign aid strategy that blends humanitarian assistance with sustainable development.

Türkiye's Official Development Assistance (ODA) Projects (2014–2024)

Türkiye's ODA administered by TİKA and AFAD has been significantly amplified under the rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Balancing its humanitarian commitments with its geopolitical objectives, Türkiye has demonstrated its ability to expand its ODA between 2014 and 2024 and position itself as a global development actor. Over the years, its engagement in development aid has been defined by both short-term emergency relief efforts and long-term sustainable projects, covering various sectors such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, agriculture, and cultural heritage restoration. Türkiye's commitment to humanitarian aid has continued to grow over the years.

According to the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, Türkiye was the largest humanitarian donor in the world in 2018, contributing \$8.399 billion in official humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, Türkiye was recognized as the "most generous country" in terms of humanitarian aid relative to its Gross National Income, allocating 0.79% of its GNI in 2018 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). Accordingly, this section provides an exploration of Türkiye's major ODA initiatives in Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia, and Kyrgyzstan, tracing the evolution of its aid strategy, financial commitments, and the tangible impact of its development efforts in each region.

Syria

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye has played a crucial role in providing humanitarian relief and reconstructing war-torn regions. The conflict in Syria led to one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history, displacing millions and creating severe shortages of essential resources such as food, clean water, and medical supplies. As a neighboring country, Türkiye has

borne a significant portion of the responsibility of addressing this crisis through its humanitarian agencies, particularly TİKA and AFAD, both of which have been instrumental in delivering aid and rebuilding infrastructure (TİKA, 2018; AFAD, 2021).

One of the most notable humanitarian interventions was the establishment of food supply chains to support internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Syria. Among these efforts, the Aleppo Bakery Project, initiated in 2017, was particularly significant. The project established several bakeries in Aleppo, producing and distributing thousands of loaves of bread daily to food-insecure populations (TİKA, 2019). These bakeries ensured a stable food supply to vulnerable communities, reducing reliance on sporadic aid deliveries and allowing for a more consistent approach to addressing food shortages. In addition to food security initiatives, TİKA coordinated large-scale medical aid programs, supplying hospitals and clinics with necessary equipment and medicines. Throughout the conflict, Turkish-supported field hospitals and mobile clinics played an essential role in treating war victims, with thousands of patients benefiting from free healthcare services (AFAD, 2020).

Apart from immediate humanitarian relief, Türkiye has invested heavily in rebuilding Syria's social infrastructure. Recognizing the importance of vocational education in reconstructing post-conflict societies, TİKA launched several vocational training centers across northern Syria. These centers focused on skill development in fields such as carpentry, metalwork, and textile production, helping Syrians regain economic independence (TİKA, 2020; Tüylüoğlu, 2021). The goal was not only to provide temporary aid but also to equip individuals with the skills necessary for rebuilding their communities, thereby fostering long-term economic resilience. Similarly, AFAD has played a crucial role in managing large-scale refugee aid operations, facilitating cross-border aid deliveries and ensuring that essential supplies reach vulnerable populations in northern Syria. By 2017, Türkiye had allocated over \$8 billion in humanitarian assistance to Syria, a figure that included direct aid as well as support for refugee integration within Türkiye's own borders (AFAD, 2018).

Cross-border humanitarian aid remains a pivotal component of Türkiye's strategy in supporting Syria. The primary border crossings at Öncüpınar and Cilvegözü have facilitated approximately 80% of the total cross-border humanitarian aid deliveries into Syria, constituting nearly 31% of all international humanitarian

assistance sent to the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). Türkiye's humanitarian assistance to Syria has been substantial, with aid reaching \$6 billion by 2016, up from \$3.2 billion in 2015, positioning Türkiye as the second-largest humanitarian donor globally and the most generous relative to its Gross National Income (GNI), allocating 0.75% of its GNI to humanitarian causes (AFAD, 2016). As of December 31, 2021, Türkiye hosted 3,736,799 Syrians under temporary protection, representing the largest Syrian refugee population worldwide (UNHCR, 2021). In the same year, 76% of Türkiye's total foreign aid activities were directed toward Syria, underscoring the centrality of the Syrian crisis in Türkiye's foreign aid agenda (TİKA, 2021). The scale of these operations demonstrates Türkiye's pivotal role in ensuring aid reaches those most in need despite persistent security and logistical challenges.

In addition to direct assistance within Syria, Türkiye has taken on the immense responsibility of hosting Syrian refugees. The World Bank has highlighted that Türkiye now accommodates the largest refugee population globally, with over 2.2 million Syrians registered under Temporary Protection (World Bank Group, n.d.). Unlike many other host countries that rely on refugee camps, Türkiye has adopted a unique approach that integrates refugees into urban and rural communities while providing government-financed support. This policy ensures that displaced individuals have access to essential services, including education and healthcare, reducing dependency on external humanitarian agencies (World Bank Group, n.d.).

Additionally, Türkiye faced significant challenges following the devastating earthquakes that struck southern Türkiye and northern Syria on February 6, 2023. These earthquakes, among the most violent to hit the region in over a century, resulted in nearly 60,000 fatalities and left millions displaced, compounding the existing humanitarian crisis in the area. The disaster's impact was particularly severe due to the pre-existing vulnerabilities in the region, including the ongoing conflict and displacement (ReliefWeb, 2024). In response to the earthquakes, Türkiye, through agencies like AFAD and TİKA, intensified its relief efforts to address the compounded humanitarian needs. These efforts included providing emergency shelter, medical assistance, and facilitating the delivery of international aid to the affected regions (ReliefWeb, 2024).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

TİKA has been at the forefront of Türkiye's development assistance in the Western Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Türkiye has long-standing historical and cultural ties with the region, dating back to the Ottoman period, which has influenced its approach to development aid. In Bosnia, TİKA has concentrated on infrastructure development, cultural heritage restoration, education, and healthcare (TİKA, 2016). One of the most significant projects undertaken was the restoration of key Ottoman-era architectural landmarks. The Mostar Bridge Renovation Project was a landmark initiative aimed at restoring the UNESCO World Heritage Site, a structure that symbolizes the multicultural heritage of the Balkans. This restoration project was critical not only for preserving cultural history but also for revitalizing tourism in the region, which plays a significant role in Bosnia's economy (TİKA, 2017).

Türkiye has also provided extensive humanitarian assistance in times of crisis. Following the devastating floods that struck Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, Türkiye, through AFAD and TİKA, delivered immediate humanitarian aid. Emergency relief included food supplies, clean water, temporary shelters, and medical assistance. Türkiye also provided financial support for infrastructure repair in affected regions, ensuring that flood-damaged roads, schools, and public buildings were quickly rehabilitated (Andalou Agency, 2024; TRTWorld, 2024; TİKA, 2024).

Another key focus of TİKA's engagement in Bosnia has been the restoration of Islamic cultural heritage sites. The Aladža Mosque, originally constructed in 1550, was destroyed during the Bosnian War. In 2019, TİKA completed the reconstruction of the mosque, ensuring that this historic and religious landmark was restored to its former state (TİKA, 2019). Similarly, the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka, another significant Ottoman-era monument, was restored in 2016 with support from TİKA. Accordingly, it is evident that such projects served both as cultural preservation efforts and as symbols of reconciliation in post-war Bosnia (TİKA, 2016).

Education and healthcare have also been central to Türkiye's aid strategy in Bosnia. Recognizing the importance of bilateral educational exchanges, TİKA has established Turkish-Bosnian schools and introduced scholarship programs that allow Bosnian students to pursue higher education in Türkiye (TİKA, 2018).

Türkiye has funded numerous school renovation projects, ensuring access to modernized learning environments. Additionally, Türkiye has invested in vocational education, supporting training programs in areas such as agriculture, mechanics, and IT skills to equip young Bosnians with employment opportunities (Mujadizevic, 2017).

Additionally, investments in the healthcare sector have included the construction of clinics in rural areas and the provision of modern medical equipment to existing hospitals (TİKA, 2020). TİKA has supplied critical medical aid, including neonatal care units, ambulances, and surgical equipment, enhancing Bosnia's healthcare infrastructure. Türkiye has also sent teams of medical professionals to provide training and direct care in understaffed hospitals (Mujadizevic, 2017).

Rather than solely providing short-term assistance, Türkiye's deployment of ODA in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects a broader vision of fostering long-term development in the region. With over 700 completed projects, Türkiye has demonstrated a sustained commitment to aiding Bosnia's reconstruction, economic development, and disaster response (MFA Türkiye, 2024).

Somalia

Türkiye's engagement with Africa has expanded significantly under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), with Somalia emerging as a primary beneficiary of its Official Development Assistance (ODA). Between 2010 and 2014, Türkiye's aid to Africa increased by 67%, from \$30.9 million to \$71 million, reflecting a strategic commitment to the continent's development (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

One of the most notable infrastructure investments is the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Hospital, inaugurated in 2015 in Mogadishu. As the largest hospital in Somalia, it provides critical healthcare services and functions as a medical training center for Somali doctors and nurses, thereby strengthening local capacity in the health sector (TİKA, 2018). Additionally, the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay) and TİKA have established four field hospitals in Mogadishu and deployed numerous medical professionals to deliver essential healthcare services (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2016). However, some analysts argue that these health initiatives, while impactful, may not be

sustainable without long-term capacity-building strategies and local ownership (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2015).

In the agricultural sector, the Somalia Agricultural Development Project, initiated in 2018, aimed to address food insecurity by providing local farmers with access to modern agricultural machinery, improved irrigation systems, and training programs (TİKA, 2019). These efforts have contributed to enhancing local food production and reducing reliance on external aid. Nevertheless, critics point out that such projects often lack comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, making it challenging to assess their long-term effectiveness (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2015).

Somalia has faced recurrent food crises due to drought, displacement, and economic instability. In response, Türkiye has intensified its humanitarian relief efforts, providing emergency food supplies, water distribution programs, and nutritional support for vulnerable populations (MFA Türkiye, 2016; TRT World Research Centre, 2021). In 2017, Türkiye dispatched over 3,000 tons of humanitarian aid to Somalia, including food, medicine, and hygiene products, to combat severe drought conditions (TC-America, 2024). While these interventions have been crucial, some observers highlight the need for more coordinated efforts with other international donors to avoid duplication and ensure comprehensive coverage (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2015).

Beyond immediate relief, Türkiye has focused on infrastructure projects to support long-term recovery. Turkish NGOs and state agencies have been instrumental in reconstructing roads, schools, and public facilities in Mogadishu and other regions. These projects aim to foster stability and economic resilience by ensuring essential services remain operational. Additionally, Türkiye has facilitated the rehabilitation of key government institutions, aiding Somalia in rebuilding its administrative capacity to sustain aid projects (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2024). However, some critiques suggest that the concentration of aid projects in Mogadishu may neglect other regions, potentially exacerbating regional disparities (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2015).

Türkiye's investments in education and vocational training have also been significant. Multiple schools, universities, and a medical vocational school have been established in Mogadishu, providing Somali students with access to

quality education (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2016). Furthermore, Türkiye has offered numerous scholarships for Somali students to study in Turkish universities, fostering long-term human capital development. Despite these efforts, challenges remain in ensuring the alignment of educational programs with local labor market needs and in preventing brain drain (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2015).

Security assistance constitutes a crucial component of Türkiye's aid strategy in Somalia. Through Camp TURKSOM, Türkiye has provided military and police training for Somali security forces, contributing to stabilization efforts in the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2016). Additionally, Türkiye has donated military equipment, uniforms, and vehicles to Somali forces to strengthen their counterterrorism and national security capabilities (TRT World Research Centre, 2021). However, concerns have been raised regarding the potential for such military assistance to inadvertently fuel local conflicts or be perceived as favoring certain factions over others (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2015).

Türkiye's aid efforts in Somalia reflect a comprehensive approach encompassing humanitarian relief, infrastructure development, healthcare, education, and security. While these initiatives have yielded tangible benefits, it is imperative to address the highlighted shortcomings to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of aid programs. Ensuring inclusive development, fostering local ownership, and implementing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks will be essential in realizing long-term stability and prosperity in Somalia.

Kyrgyzstan

Türkiye's aid initiatives in Kyrgyzstan have been focused primarily on education and healthcare, reinforcing Türkiye's historical ties with the region. In 2015, TİKA implemented the Kyrgyzstan School Refurbishment Project, which involved renovating the Mustafa Kemal Atatürk School, modernizing classrooms, and improving overall educational facilities to enhance learning conditions for students (TİKA, 2015). Since then, Türkiye has expanded its support for the education sector by funding multiple educational institutions and offering scholarships for Kyrgyz students to study in Türkiye (TRT World, 2018). Türkiye has implemented over 760 development projects in Kyrgyzstan, many of which

focus on expanding access to quality education (TRT World, 2018).

In addition to education, Türkiye has played a crucial role in strengthening the Kyrgyz healthcare sector. TİKA has implemented large-scale medical training programs, equipping hundreds of Kyrgyz medical professionals with the skills needed to combat infant mortality and improve maternal health services. Furthermore, Türkiye has supported hospitals with modern medical equipment, ensuring better healthcare accessibility in both urban and rural areas (TİKA, 2017). In 2021, Türkiye inaugurated the Kyrgyz-Turkish Friendship Hospital in Bishkek, a state-of-the-art facility offering advanced medical services and providing specialized training to Kyrgyz doctors. Türkiye has committed \$32 million to the hospital's operational budget and medical training programs (Tokoeva, 2025).

Beyond healthcare and education, Türkiye has provided substantial economic and humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan. Since its independence, Kyrgyzstan has received approximately \$1 billion in Turkish aid, including grants and technical assistance for infrastructure, agriculture, and social programs (Turksam, 2018). Türkiye has also been involved in food assistance efforts; in 2022, TİKA distributed 3,000 food parcels to vulnerable families across Kyrgyzstan during Ramadan, ensuring food security for those in need (ReliefWeb, 2022).

Türkiye has further strengthened its bilateral cooperation with Kyrgyzstan through diplomatic agreements. In 2021, Türkiye and Kyrgyzstan signed 19 new agreements in key sectors, including energy, education, and health, solidifying their long-term partnership and facilitating continued development aid efforts (Anadolu Agency, 2021). In 2024, Türkiye played a key role in establishing a joint humanitarian aid network among Red Crescent societies in the region, expanding coordinated disaster response and relief efforts in Central Asia (Daily Sabah, 2024).

Through targeting investment in key sectors in Kyrgyzstan, such initiatives reflect Türkiye's broader strategy of fostering sustainable social and economic development in Central Asia.

Discussion

Analysis of Türkiye's Official Development Assistance (ODA) through Complex Realism (2014-2025)

Domestic Environment: Political and Economic Motivations for Aid Expansion

Türkiye's increasing deployment of Official Development Assistance (ODA) from 2014 to 2024 must first be understood within the domestic environment outlined in Complex Realism, which posits that foreign policy is shaped significantly by internal political structures, leadership interests, and national identity considerations. Under the AKP government, foreign aid has functioned as a mechanism for political consolidation, economic expansion, and the reinforcement of Türkiye's national identity.

The 2014 presidential elections, which marked Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's transition from Prime Minister to Türkiye's first directly elected president, reshaped Türkiye's foreign policy apparatus. With the AKP's strengthened executive control, foreign aid became increasingly tied to presidential diplomacy, enhancing Türkiye's global visibility and bolstering domestic support for the ruling party. The 2017 constitutional referendum, which granted Erdoğan expansive powers, further cemented the use of the ODA as a tool for political consolidation and legitimacy enhancement (Özcan, 2017).

The ODA has also served as an instrument of political leverage to maintain public support for Türkiye's proactive foreign policy. Within Türkiye, foreign aid, particularly to Muslim-majority regions such as Syria, Somalia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, has been framed as an extension of Türkiye's historical and cultural legacy, appealing to nationalist and religious sentiments (Yenokyan, 2023). This period saw Türkiye amplifying its humanitarian efforts in Syria, not only to address the refugee crisis but also to bolster domestic support by portraying itself as a protector of oppressed Muslim communities (Chatham House, 2024). This narrative has been actively reinforced through state media and public discourse, where aid operations are portrayed as a moral and civilizational responsibility rather than mere diplomacy.

Economically, Türkiye's increasing foreign aid investments have aligned with its ambition to expand its economic footprint in recipient states. The anticipated

\$400 billion cost of Syrian reconstruction presents lucrative opportunities for Turkish companies, positioning aid as a precursor to economic engagement (Chatham House, 2024). In Kyrgyzstan, large-scale infrastructure investments and vocational training initiatives have been closely linked to Turkish business interests, with aid creating favorable conditions for Turkish companies (Turksam, 2018). Similarly, in Somalia, Türkiye's aid has facilitated the establishment of trade routes and investment zones, solidifying Türkiye's role as a major external economic player in the Horn of Africa (Haşimi, 2014). Aid thus serves a dual function: projecting Türkiye's influence while also creating new economic opportunities for domestic industries.

National identity and historical legacy also play pivotal roles in shaping Türkiye's aid policies. The AKP government has leveraged Ottoman-era connections to foster a neo-Ottoman identity, resonating with domestic audiences and reinforcing support for aid initiatives in former Ottoman territories, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. This cultural diplomacy serves to strengthen national pride and project soft power abroad.

However, critical literature highlights the risks of relying predominantly on official Turkish sources such as TİKA, AFAD, and the MFA. These sources often lack independent verification and may reflect confirmation bias aligned with political narratives (Guo, 2020; Kavaklı, 2018). While they offer detailed accounts of aid activities, their limitations in terms of transparency and accountability raise concerns about the objectivity of data used to evaluate Türkiye's foreign aid strategy. To enhance methodological robustness, this study triangulates these sources with independent reports and academic critiques wherever available, while recognizing the broader challenge of accessing recipient-side perspectives in authoritarian or fragile contexts.

Regional Environment: Security, Influence, and Strategic Depth

Türkiye's ODA strategy is deeply intertwined with its regional security concerns and ambitions for strategic depth. The protracted Syrian Civil War posed direct threats to Türkiye's border security, prompting Ankara to support opposition forces and establish a buffer zone in northern Syria. This intervention aimed to curtail Kurdish separatist movements and mitigate refugee influxes, thereby stabilizing its southern frontier (Chatham House, 2024). Accordingly, Turkish efforts in Syria not only mitigate potential refugee spillovers but also

strengthen Türkiye's long-term influence in post-war Syria, positioning it as a dominant regional player. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime further altered regional dynamics, with Türkiye emerging as a significant power broker in the Levant.

The regional environment, as defined by Complex Realism, plays a central role in Türkiye's ODA expansion by shaping its security concerns, cultural engagements, and geopolitical alignments. Türkiye has leveraged foreign aid as a tool to stabilize neighboring regions, counterbalance regional rivals, and deepen its strategic reach.

Cultural, religious, and historical ties have facilitated Türkiye's influence in the Balkans. Through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Türkiye has undertaken numerous restoration and development projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reinforcing its presence in the region and countering rival influences. Aid to the Balkans has also been instrumental in promoting a shared Ottoman-Islamic heritage, aligning Türkiye with Muslim communities across Southeastern Europe (TİKA, 2016; Mujadžević, 2017). Critics, however, warn that this selective focus on religious or cultural affinity may reinforce identity politics and hinder long-term institutional development in recipient countries (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2015).

In Somalia, Türkiye's aid has been strategically oriented towards state-building and counterterrorism efforts. The establishment of military training academies and security cooperation agreements highlights Türkiye's attempt to ensure stability in the Horn of Africa, a region of increasing importance due to maritime trade routes and regional rivalries (Haşimi, 2014). Türkiye's role in security sector reform in Somalia aligns with defensive realism, wherein states act preemptively to neutralize potential threats in their spheres of influence (Göle, 2014). While these initiatives have enhanced Türkiye's visibility and strategic influence, scholars have pointed to the risks of bilateralism and the lack of coordination with other donors, which may result in fragmented aid delivery and duplication of efforts (Saferworld & Istanbul Policy Center, 2015; TRT World Research Centre, 2021).

Additionally, Türkiye's regional aid distribution exhibits strategic selectivity. Regions with higher geopolitical value—such as the Levant, Balkans, and Horn of Africa—receive sustained investment, whereas other crisis-affected areas

(e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa or Central Latin America) are less prioritized. This uneven engagement pattern suggests that ODA allocation is informed as much by geopolitical calculus as by humanitarian criteria, reflecting Türkiye's efforts to assert regional leadership within its extended neighborhood.

In summary, Türkiye's regional ODA practices underscore a pragmatic blend of humanitarian concern and *realpolitik*, consistent with the regional logic of Complex Realism. However, the long-term sustainability of such engagements depends on whether they foster inclusive development or deepen asymmetric dependencies rooted in strategic alignment.

Global Environment: Türkiye's ODA as a Diplomatic and Strategic Tool

Türkiye's foreign aid is also influenced by the global environment, where its policies align with a broader ambition to diversify alliances, enhance diplomatic reach, and potentially challenge Western aid dominance. Unlike traditional donors who operate within the OECD-DAC framework, Türkiye has positioned its ODA model as a distinct alternative, emphasizing South-South cooperation and a non-interventionist development philosophy (Nurdun, 2024). This differentiation enhances Türkiye's soft power appeal, particularly among postcolonial states seeking alternatives to Western-centric models of development.

On the global stage, Türkiye's ODA serves as a vehicle to diversify alliances and enhance its diplomatic clout. By actively participating in Syrian reconstruction efforts, Türkiye positions itself as an indispensable player in Middle Eastern geopolitics, thereby strengthening its bargaining power with the European Union and NATO (Chatham House, 2024). This foreign aid diplomacy has also enabled Türkiye to broker influence in multilateral forums, including the UN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, by presenting itself as a humanitarian power with unique geopolitical credibility.

Türkiye's ambition to become an energy hub has gained momentum following Assad's fall, with Turkish companies poised to secure major contracts in Syria's reconstruction (Chatham House, 2024). This economic engagement not only bolsters Türkiye's economy but also elevates its strategic importance in global energy markets. However, critics argue that such strategic use of aid may blur the line between development and transactional diplomacy, raising questions about ethical consistency and long-term development outcomes (Akilli &

Çelenk, 2019; Saferworld & IPC, 2015).

Furthermore, Türkiye's foreign aid diplomacy has been critiqued for its selective globalism. While championing a multipolar order and south-south solidarity, Türkiye has often avoided cooperation with DAC-aligned institutions and has only partially engaged in global aid transparency initiatives like IATI (International Aid Transparency Initiative). This selective approach, though reinforcing national sovereignty, also limits Türkiye's integration into established aid governance mechanisms and complicates comparative impact assessment.

From a Complex Realism perspective, Türkiye's global aid strategy illustrates the intersection between national identity formation and system-level positioning. As a semi-peripheral state, Türkiye navigates between core and periphery through tactical alliances, value-based messaging, and economic leverage—often recalibrating its aid posture in response to shifting global power configurations. Yet, the long-term efficacy of this approach will depend on its ability to align strategic goals with development legitimacy and policy coherence.

Türkiye's ODA through the Lens of Complex Realism

Navigating the interplay between domestic, regional, and global environments, Erdoğan has pragmatically balanced challenges and opportunities to advance Türkiye's ODA strategy. His leadership has leveraged aid not only as a humanitarian instrument but also as a tool for diplomatic negotiation, regional influence, and economic expansion. This approach, as outlined by Complex Realism, reflects Türkiye's ability to adapt to shifting geopolitical realities while solidifying its status as a key global aid actor.

Unlike classical realism, which privileges state-centric competition and security dilemmas, Complex Realism captures the multi-level incentives that drive Türkiye's aid policy. Domestically, ODA functions to legitimize political authority and promote identity narratives. Regionally, aid is deployed to manage conflict spillovers, deepen influence in culturally proximate zones, and counter rival actors. Globally, Türkiye uses aid to reposition itself as a credible actor outside the traditional West-led donor system, promoting a South-South model of cooperation.

This inter-level interaction is not linear but mutually constitutive. For example, Türkiye's aid in Syria exemplifies how domestic political imperatives (refugee

management, electoral narratives) intersect with regional security goals (buffer zones) and global visibility (humanitarian diplomacy). Similarly, investments in Somalia fuse economic strategy, Islamic solidarity, and geopolitical signaling toward Gulf and Western partners.

Nonetheless, the application of Complex Realism also exposes tensions in Türkiye's aid narrative. Humanitarian aims are often entangled with strategic calculations, raising ethical questions about instrumentalization. Aid policies tailored to short-term political or economic gains may undermine longer-term development effectiveness, especially where coordination with multilateral actors is weak.

By viewing Türkiye's foreign aid expansion through Complex Realism, this study demonstrates that Türkiye's ODA is not reducible to singular motives but rather emerges from the complex, dynamic interaction of layered geopolitical forces.

Conclusion

Türkiye's foreign aid expansion from 2014 to 2024 reflects the strategic interplay between domestic political priorities, regional ambitions, and global positioning, as conceptualized through Complex Realism. Far from being purely humanitarian, the ODA has functioned as a multifaceted policy instrument—reinforcing domestic legitimacy, extending regional influence, and reshaping Türkiye's global diplomatic posture.

Domestically, foreign aid has bolstered national identity narratives and political consolidation under the AKP. Regionally, it has served both soft power and security functions in zones of strategic interest such as Syria, Somalia, and the Balkans. Globally, Türkiye has sought to differentiate itself from traditional Western donors by advancing a South-South cooperation model grounded in religious solidarity and postcolonial critique.

However, this study also recognizes several limitations. The analysis is based on a limited number of case studies, which may not capture the full diversity of Türkiye's ODA engagements. The study relies heavily on Turkish institutional sources, which, while detailed, often lack independent verification and transparency. Furthermore, the perspectives of aid recipients remain underrepresented due to access and language constraints. These limitations

underscore the need for future research to incorporate the recipient countries' voices, cross-validate state-reported data, and explore comparative frameworks involving other emerging donors.

Nonetheless, by applying Complex Realism, this article offers a comprehensive lens to understand the political rationality behind Türkiye's development diplomacy. It highlights how aid, while outwardly altruistic, operates at the nexus of domestic governance, regional competition, and global ambition—constituting a central pillar of Türkiye's evolving international identity.

Ethics Statement

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

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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