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# Prestige Aid: The Case of Turkey

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Foreign aid[1] refers to the transfer of public funds to promote social and economic development in underdeveloped countries. However, aid's role in promoting development is highly contested. Critics of foreign aid suspiciously view aid as a foreign policy (FP) tool to achieve economic, political and strategic goals. Despite such criticism over failure to bring meaningful development through aid, emerging donors such as China, India, Brazil and Turkey continue to provide foreign aid to other developing countries. Hans Morgenthau suggests that an understanding of traditional aid motivation is the most baffling subject.[2] However, what is more baffling is to understand the motives of emerging donors since most of them are aid recipients themselves and have similar development challenges as their recipients. Plenty of studies on aid motivation suggest that traditional donors pursue economic, political, and security related interests through aid.[3] Despite the dearth of studies on emerging donors, existing literature found similar motivations for aid in emerging donors such as China and Brazil.[4] Although the existing literature emphasis on donors' materialistic motives on aid giving, the symbolic drivers of foreign aid are overlooked. This article tries to fill this gap in literature by focusing on Turkey's use of foreign aid as a foreign policy tool to garner prestige globally. In doing so, the article first analyzes the theoretical and empirical perspectives on aid motivation by giving much weight to the symbolic aspects of aid giving. Next, the article focuses on analyzing the importance of prestige related goals in the previous and current regimes in Turkey. The article concludes that as an emerging power that lacks a hard power to influence global politics, Turkey will continue to use its aid as a soft power tool to earn prestige and good-will globally.

## Motivations for Aid: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

Analysts of foreign aid associate the motivation for aid with states' material interests abroad. Among traditional IR theorists, *realists* view foreign aid as a power tool to ensure states' self-interests abroad.[5] Aid serves strategic self-interests including maintaining influence in the former colonies; buying UN votes; fighting terrorism; strengthening alliances; and building military bases in the recipient country.[6] For neo-realists, aid can serve as a tool to promote a donor's economic interests including ensuring natural resource supply, promoting trade and investment relations, and access to new market. On the other hand, *liberalism* views development assistance as a cooperation mechanism to tackle global challenges and ensure global stability, peace and prosperity.[7] The theory suggests that aid helps to promote a liberal trade regime, increase global economic interdependence, reduce poverty, and enhance economic development, which ultimately will help to reduce the risks of contagious diseases, conflict and migration that endanger global order.[8] *Constructivists* justify foreign aid in terms of norms and ideas. They view foreign aid as a moral duty of developed countries to help and improve the conditions of those living in less developed countries.[9] In favor of a constructivist interpretation, Lumsdaine argues that aid policy is shaped by the moral visions ('ethical' and 'humane' concerns) of donors.[10] Constructivists also underline that the desire for reputation (international image), promotion of national identity and values are also some of the motivations for foreign aid in developed countries.[11] This means that states which aspire to be seen as a responsible actor by the international community abide by the internationally accepted moral values and norms such as aid giving.

While it is evident that donor states pursue materialistic goals as the theories of realism and liberalism suggest, they also pursue symbolic or non-material interests such as gaining prestige, recognition, status, respect, and increasing global visibility. In this regard, prestige aid providers seek to gain reputation internationally and project a certain identity, image or values. Donors provide prestige aid if they aspire to boost or improve their image, status, and self-

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esteem. According to constructivists, ideational factors play significant role in shaping prestige related aid policies of donors.[12] State's self-perceived identity or national image, which is shaped by domestic or international norms, values, and historical and cultural elements, drive its external action such as the provision of aid.[13] In other words, a state's international actions are the mirror reflection of the domestic conception of its image. For instance, a state that aspires to project a certain identity, image or value such as a rising power or global power status engages in aid activity to reflect its image or identity. Similarly, a state that aspires to be seen as an active and responsible member of the international community is also expected to engage in international actions including the provision of aid that reflect its self-image.

Traditional donors use aid to project a favorable international image and build their reputation and respect. For instance, the Nordic donors, Denmark and Norway, aspire to project their image as humane internationalists or humanitarian powers.[14] The Nordic donors have done so by providing a generous amount of aid with a concentration on development objectives such as poverty reduction. In Japan, although its aid is a commercial oriented, policymakers are also focused on enhancing the country's international image and improving its "low post-war international political status".[15] Thus, it is argued that Japan places too much emphasis on national prestige, pride and honor which is also reflected in its constitution.[16] Similar to Japan, Germany also aspired to improve its post-war international image through aid. Self-perception as a global power is also one of the drivers of aid in former European imperial powers such as France, Italy and Britain. In France, for instance, policy makers are motivated by the vision of *besoin de rayonnement*, translated as the "need to shine," hence France spreads its language, values and culture in recipient countries to reflect its aspirations for great power status.[17] Italy's vision of the *grandezza* (grandeur) as a great power aspirant and the UK's former great power status are also in the minds of aid policymakers.[18] However, the role of prestige motivation in emerging powers' aid policy has remained unexplored in aid literature.

Very few studies on emerging donors such as China, India and Brazil imply that emerging donors use aid to pursue prestige related goals.[19] These donors contend for global great power status, view themselves as leaders of the global South and aspire to gain reputation from the Southern countries. Donors like Saudi Arabia with a self-perceived image as a natural regional leader and the leader of the Islamic world, seeks earning prestige from the regional countries and the Muslim world through aid. For donors, gaining prestige or status can be seen as both an end goal and a means to gain further benefits. Donors are able to enhance their identity and self-esteem as a powerful actor. Being a "donor" also yields positive emotions like honor or pride. Donors can also win the hearts and minds of the recipient countries or the international community. Being identified as a powerful country helps emerging powers to counter perceptions or stereotypes that they are backward and underdeveloped.[20] Donors use aid to garner soft-power and use soft-power to expand their influence in regional and global politics and ensure their economic and security interests. Some leaders in donor countries also use their foreign aid recognition as an instrument to boost their domestic legitimacy such as China.[21]

### Turkey's Quest for Foreign Aid Prestige

Similar to the traditional donors and other emerging donors, Turkish aid is predominated by prestige-seeking such as promoting a positive image abroad and self-affirmation as a responsible or "moral" actor. Prestige related motives are a given with considerations for both the former and current policymakers. Turkish elites envision positioning the country as a responsible leader and seek to depict its image in favorable light globally. Turkish decision makers and scholars alike often acknowledge the country as an emerging power/donor,[22] a status which builds the country's identity as a self-confident global actor.[23] As Baran and Lesser stress, modern Turkey views itself as a "responsible" power that is "keen to adhere to international norms".[24] Evoked by its historical grandeur, which is linked to the former Ottoman empire, Turkish leaders envisioned and sought to project an image of "greatness" or great power.[25] For instance, following its domestic economic transformation, the Turgut Özal regime aspired to be among the top 15 most-developed countries and declared the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the century of the Turks.[26] The regime also presented Turkey as "a regional leader in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Balkans".[27] In line with these self-images and aspirations, Turkey shifted from its traditional foreign policy (FP) orientation and expanded its relations with the neighborhood regions including the Middle East and the Turkic republics during his era.

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For example, Özal advocated for a new regional role for the country in the post-Cold War. In this case, Turkey took an initiative to establish the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Accord (BSECA) in 1990 to facilitate economic cooperation with the Black Sea regional countries. Müftüler et al emphasize that the FP formulation and enactment at the time was consistent with Turkey's "regional power image".[28] Hence, the formation of BSECA was aimed at promoting Turkey's regional leadership. The emergence of the newly independent countries in Central Asia, in the 90s, which it shares a similar language, history, ethnicity and culture with, became an opportunity to project its self-perceived emerging power and leadership image. Turkey created political, cultural, and economic relations with the newly independent republics. Turkey's positional leadership was intersubjectively understood by Turkish policy makers. For instance, then PM Demirel envisioned a "Turkic world" that stretches from the Adriatic to China, and policy makers at the time aspired to form a commonwealth of Turkish republics or a political and economic union under its leadership. Turkey's policy towards the republics was governed by certain principles, including: strengthening their state structure; assisting their economic and political reform; integrating the republic with the international community, especially with Western institutions; and building bilateral relations based on mutual benefit and respect for sovereignty.[29] In line with these principles, Turkey started its coordinated aid practice to assist the reconstruction of those republics, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The Turkish aid coordination agency (TIKA) was created in 1992 to coordinate and carry out development projects in those countries. TIKA has carried out various projects in social, economic and cultural areas such as education, health, agriculture development, restoration, finance and other fields in the early days of its establishment.[30]

The power vacuum created in its borders after the dissolution of the USSR was an opportunity for Turkey to legitimize its aspired image. By increasing its influence in the region through development assistance for state building and economic and political reforms, Turkey aspires to be seen as an important and responsible player in regional and global politics. Turkey used its aid to pursue its self-interests of enhancing its leadership position in the region, increasing its visibility and enhancing its reputation, in addition to achieving other foreign economic and security interests. Musa Kulaklıkaya, the former head of TIKA, asserts that the transformation in domestic economic condition since the 1980s have enabled Özal's regime to involve in the provision of development assistance to increase Turkey's global visibility.[31] Strengthening its reputation as a regional power brings several benefits to Turkey specially after the end of the Cold War. For instance, by asserting its leadership status, Turkey wanted to regain its geopolitical significance in the eyes of the West, which she has lost when the bipolar world order was over. In addition, by supporting their independence and integrating neighboring countries to historically Western institutions, Turkey aspired to gain reputation from the West and consolidate its bid for membership to Western clubs such as the EU. Turkey also aspired to undermine the influence of other regional powers like Russia and Iran, by presenting herself as a "big brother" and an alternative power.[32] In general, during the start of its aid program, aid was part of the FP of the regime to consolidate its self-perceived image as a powerful regional actor.

Yet, Turkey's aid volume and its overall involvement in the western international development regime remained limited. The dynamics started to change with the coming to power of the JDP. Similar to the previous regimes, gaining reputation and respect is at the core of the JDP's foreign and aid policy. Political elites of the JDP, similar to former elites, envision the country as a responsible rising global power. Looking at FP related documents and official discourses of political elites one can easily understand the importance of prestige in Turkish foreign aid policy. For instance, Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former Foreign Minister and former foreign policy advisor of President Erdoğan, who was an architect behind the Turkish FP during his era, underlined his vision of the country as a responsible "central" player.[33] The aim of his strategic vision, as outlined in his book "Strategic Depth", was to reposition the country as a central actor rather than a peripheral one in international affairs. This was a principled belief shared by other policy makers or elites including those in the developmental aid field. This belief shaped Turkish FP to be more multidimensional and proactive with an ambition to build relations with and play a higher role in different regions in Africa and the Middle East. In line with the proactive foreign policy, Turkey restructured its aid agency[34], redefined its aid model to adhere to the international development aid norms and regimes and increase the volume and geographic reach of its aid beyond the immediate neighborhood. Turkey echoes the development challenges of the global South in global forums and contributes to the promotion of sustainable development in regions with lesser geo-strategic significance for Turkey such as Africa.[35] Both actions, redefining its aid model and activism on the global South's development, imply its aspiration to be identified with the traditional donors as a like-minded responsible actor and gain sympathy from the Southern nations, respectively.

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Turkey endeavors to reinforce its central power status and gain global recognition by conveying an attractive national image abroad through its development cooperation activities.[36] A positive image of Turkey boosts its soft-power which in turn, according to the Turkish policy makers' perception, helps Turkey to expand its influence in neighboring regions and "play a leading role in selective global issues".[37] The soft power also helps the country to deepen its economic, military and strategic ties with the recipients.[38] For instance, Turkey's soft power is demonstrated through an increase in trade relations in Africa. In addition, as the Former TIKA president explained, Turkey's goodwill, built through its aid activity in Africa, has enabled Turkey to garner virtually all votes from Africa in its bid to win a seat as a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) non-permanent member.[39] Such supports help Turkey to ensure its interests respected in such organizations and enhance its self-confidence and global importance. Foreign aid policy also helps the JDP regime to seek legitimacy abroad against potential domestic opposition.[40]

Turkey also stresses on its humanitarian policy to show itself as a moral and responsible actor, thus boosts its reputation as a humanitarian power. Turkish policy makers perceive that as an emerging power, Turkey is responsible for the welfare and peace of other developing countries, a notion that is mentioned vis-à-vis its development assistance. For instance, in 2011, President Erdoğan underlined that it is Turkey's "conscious responsibility" to support developing countries.[41] Turkey has proactively engaged in and supported global humanitarian, development and mediation agendas. In this regard, Turkey is applauded as the "most generous" humanitarian state, which its aid officials and policy makers consider it as a source of pride and competitive advantage over other donors.[42]

While gaining global reputation is a shared objective among the current and former policymakers, the tendency to gain prestige among the Muslim community is more evident under the pro-Islam JDP regime. Turkish aid serves as a tool to build solidarity and gain prestige among the Muslim communities (Ummah).[43] Ummah, according to Cumakov, denotes "the single universal Islamic community", in which regional actors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for the leadership position.[44] Turkish development cooperation can be seen under the context of contention with other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and UAE that provide aid to consolidate its visibility among the Islamic countries in the Middle East and Africa. Turkish policymakers associate the country's humanitarian and development aid in Muslim countries with Islamic value. Turkey sought to pursue a diplomatic 'leadership' or present an 'image of a strong Turkey reaching out to Muslims everywhere in the world' through its swift aid response to Rohingya Muslims and repeated call for the protection Muslims globally.[45] This image is well received by the majority of the Muslim community and Turkey is seen as the "champion of Muslims' rights".[46] Duran also forwards a similar argument that Turkey's "Muslim solidarity politics", its ummah-centered FP, and its advocacy to safeguard "the ummah's interests from Somalia and Rakhine to Syria" have gained popularity among the Muslim communities and reified the country's status as the "leader of the Islamic world".[47]

The pro-ummah policy has impacted the direction of Turkey's aid flow. Although Turkey claims that it provides aid "regardless of culture, religion or ethnic background",[48] the privileged beneficiaries of its aid are countries with Muslim majority and countries with shared history and culture. This helps to enhance its visibility and reputation across the ummah. In addition, Turkey's aid organization invests in both development projects, and religious and cultural activities such as the construction of mosques, renovation of Ottoman mosques and heritages, funding religious education, establishing Turkish language center, and distributing the Holy Kuran[49] in these countries or communities. These aid activities are part of Turkey's strategic approach to increase the appreciation and esteem of Turkish values and culture and increase its soft power internationally and within the ummah.

### **Conclusion**

Turkey's aid is far from being exclusively development oriented. This does not mean that Turkish aid is not partly influenced by altruistic ethos as its policy makers stress, but development is a secondary objective. Turkish aid is aligned with its foreign policy objectives and it is not purely altruistic. Few indicators support this fact. For instance, Turkey mostly funds small social projects, which have had small impacts in achieving long-term or sustainable development in the recipients. This can be interpreted in the light of its economic level, that is, being a middle-income country itself, Turkey cannot afford to offer aid for the development of others while having the challenges of developments internally. In addition, Turkey lacks country specific strategy or policy that focuses on development.

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Instead, Turkey diversifies the geographic reach of its aid with no clear policies for the development of the recipients. This indicates its aspiration to gain prestige and visibility across the globe through aid which further help the country to ensure other FP objectives.

As the history of Turkish aid shows, gaining prestige has been the centerpiece of Turkish aid policy since the start of its coordinated aid program in the 1990s. Foreign aid is a tool that helps Turkey to elevate and maintain its newly acquired position as a regional and international player. Although the sustainability of Turkish aid can be debated since it depends on its economic growth, Turkey has clearly accentuated its commitment to assist the development of Least Developed Countries and the continuation of its aid activities. This suggests that foreign aid will remain as an integral part of its foreign policy for the foreseeable future. Therefore, as a country that is lacking the hard-power capabilities to shape the direction of regional and international affairs in its favor, foreign aid serves Turkey as a soft-power tool to increase its prestige, visibility, reputation and ultimately its regional and global influence. In this regard, countries with shared history, culture and religion, such as those in its neighboring regions, remain to be the targets of Turkish aid.

## End Notes

[1] The term “foreign aid” in this article denotes official development assistance (ODA) and it is interchangeably used with other terms such as development assistance, development aid, development cooperation and aid.

[2] Morgenthau Hans, “A Political Theory of Foreign Aid,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (1962), pp. 301-309.

[3] Carol Lancaster, *Foreign aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Schraeder, Peter J, Bruce Taylor, and Steven W. Hook. “Clarifying the Foreign Aid Puzzle: A Comparison of American, Japanese, French, and Swedish Aid Flows,” *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (1998): 294-323. Maurits Van der Veen, *Ideas and interests in foreign policy: The politics of official development assistance*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[4] Carmen Robledo-Lopez, “New Donors, Same Old Practices? Development Cooperation Policies of Middle-Income Countries,” Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University, 2018.

[5] Steven W. Hook, *National Interest and Foreign Aid*, (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1995).

[6] Clair Apodaca, “Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy Tool,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Apr 26, 2017), retrieved Oct 07, 2021, from <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-332>. Alberto Alesina and David Dollar, “Who Gives Foreign Aid to Whom and Why?,” *Journal of Economic Growth*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2000), pp. 33-63.

[7] Lancaster, op. cit, 2007.

[8] Susan M. Roberts, “From Recipients to Donors: Emerging Powers and the Changing Development Landscape,” By Emma Mawdsley, *Economic Geography*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (2013), pp. 429-430.

[9] Lancaster, op. cit, 2007.

[10] David H Lumsdaine, *Moral Vision in International Politics: The Foreign Aid Regime, 1949-1989*, (Princeton University Press, 1993).

[11] Van der Veen, op. cit, 2011.

[12] Lancaster, op, cit, 2007; Van der Veen, op. cit, 2011.

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- [13] Hisahiro Kondoh et al., "Diversity and Transformation of Aid Patterns in Asia's 'Emerging Donors'," Working Paper series 21, *JICA Research Institute*, 2010.
- [14] Dan Banik and Nikolai Hegertun, "Why do nations invest in international aid? Ask Norway and China," *Washington Post* (October 27, 2017).
- [15] Robledo, op. cit, 2018.
- [16] The Japanese constitution stipulates its desire to gain prestige: "We desire to occupy an honored place in international society" (Lancaster, op. cit. 2007, p.135).
- [17] Schraeder et al, 1998.
- [18] Robledo, 2018; Van der Veen, 2000
- [19] Robledo, op. cit, 2018.
- [20] ibid
- [21] Yong Deng, *China's Struggle for Status. The Realignment of International Relations*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- [22] Mehmet Özkan, "Does 'rising power' mean 'rising donor'? Turkey's development aid", *Africa. Africa Review* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2013), pp. 139-147.
- [23] Andrea Binder, "The Shape and Sustainability of Turkey's Booming Humanitarian Assistance," *Open Edition Journals*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (2014).
- [24] Zeyno Baran and Ian O. Lesser, "Turkey's Identity and Strategy: A Game of Three-Dimensional Chess," in Michael Schiffer and David Shorr (eds.), *Powers and Principles International Leadership in a Shrinking World*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), p. 197.
- [25] Ahmet Insel, "Becoming a world economic power, The neo- nationalism of the AKP," in Riva Kastoryano (ed.), *Turkey between Nationalism and Globalization*, (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013), pp.187-198.
- [26] Riva Kastoryano (ed.), *Turkey between Nationalism and Globalization*, (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013).
- [27] Dimitris Keridis, "The foreign policy of Turkey," in McKercher, BJC (ed) *Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 157.
- [28] Meltem Müftüler, et al, "Turkey: A middle power in the new world order," in Andrew F Cooper, *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), p. 192.
- [29] Ahmed Raza, "Turkey's Foreign Aid Programmes and its Foreign Policy Activism in Africa," in Mujib Alam, *Perspectives on Turkey's Multi-Regional Role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. (New Delhi, KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2015). pp. 322-338.
- [30] See TIKA official webpage.
- [31] Musa Kulaklıkaya and Rahman Nurdun, "Turkey as a New Player in Development Cooperation," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2010, pp. 131-145.
- [32] Oktay F. Tanrisever, "Turkey's Policy towards the Caspian Sea Region: Widening Gap between Ankara's

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Expectations and Capabilities,” in Carlo Frappi and Azad Garibov (eds), *The Caspian Sea Chessboard. Geopolitical, Geo-Strategic, and Geo-economic analysis. Azerbaijan*: (Center for Strategic Studies, 2014), pp. 221-237.

[33] Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Strategik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari. 2001). In addition, the former foreign minister Ali Babacan refers the country as a “global player” (Baran and Lesser, 2009). Similar view is shared by earlier foreign minister Ismail Cem (see <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/en/turkey-a-global-player-5396132>).

[34] Until the recently, TİKA was restructured under the PM office as a public legal entity with a separate budget. However, following the presidential system, TİKA is restricted under the ministry of tourism.

[35] Turkey has hosted the fourth UN Conference on LDCs in 2011 and committed to contribute 200 million annually for LDC's development. Between 2012 and 2015, Turkey contributed more than USD 500 million, exceeding its pledges.

[36] Jeannine Hausman and Erik Lundsgaarde, “Turkey's Role in Development Cooperation,” (Tokyo: *UNU-CPR*, 2015).

[37] Bülent Aras, Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy Revisited. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2014, pp. 404-418.

[38] Yavuz Tüyoğlu, “Turkish Development Assistance as a Foreign Policy Tool and Its Discordant Locations,” CATS WP No. 2, 2021.

[39] TİKA, “Faaliyet Raporu,” *Ankara: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency*, 2008.

[40] Senem B. Çevik, “Turkey's State-Based Foreign Aid: Narrating ‘Turkey's Story’,” *Rising Power Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2016, pp. 55-67.

[41] TİKA, “Faaliyet Raporu,” *Ankara: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency*, 2011, p.13

[42] Asli Aydıntaşbaş, “From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey's role in the Western Balkans,” *ECFR.EU Policy Brief*, 280, March 13, 2019.

[43] It is worth noting that the Turkish Islamist politics does not have a Universalist tendency or ideology like the Saudi or Iran. With regards to aid, Turkey wants to portray itself as a guardian of the Muslim population specially the minorities in Balkans and in weak states like Somalia. Hence, it should not be seen as a propagator of certain Islamic ideology in the recipient country.

[44] Chumakov Alexander, *Global Studies Encyclopedic Dictionary*, (USA/Canda: Rodopi, p.470).

[45] Simon P. Watmough, “Turkey, the Rohingya crisis and Erdoğan's ambitions to be a global Muslim leader,” *The Conversation*, (September 13, 2017).

[46] *ibid*

[47] Burhanettin Duran, “Understanding the AK Party's Identity Politics: A Civilizational Discourse and its Limitations,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 1, 2013), pp. 91-109.

[48] TİKA, “Faaliyet Raporu,” *Ankara: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency*, 2015, p.7.

[49] For instance, TİKA distributes a million copy of Quran in Africa (see <https://www.dailysabah.com/religion/2015/07/12/tika-to-distribute-1-million-copies-of-the-quran-in-africa>).

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