

Challenges to Islamic Solidarity: The Case of Turkish HNGOs

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This study investigates the role of Islamic solidarity in the conceptions, motivations, and practices of Turkish HNGOs. While Islamic solidarity plays an important role in the conceptions, motivations and practices of these HNGOs, it is, at times, limited by their strong sense of affiliation with Turkey and Turkish patriotism. In this sense, Islamic solidarity can be downplayed when there is a stronger sense of national affiliation. Furthermore, the sustainability of these HNGOs, and therefore the extent to which they are able to extend Islamic solidarity, is dependent upon the convergence of their ideas and interests with Turkey's current government. In a similar vein, it remains under question whether these HNGOs would feel the same level of patriotism under a different government. As such, the support they enjoy from the government and the affiliation they feel with Turkey feed into one another. Moreover, Islamic solidarity offered by Turkish HNGOs could be challenged by their overreliance on the precarious space provided for them by the current Turkish government.

Keywords: Islamic solidarity, Turkish humanitarian non-governmental organizations, patriotism, humanitarianism, aid



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Introduction

The idea of Islamic solidarity is as old as Islam itself, which instructs its followers to care for fellow Muslims and construct a strong Islamic community, or *Umma*, based on Qur'anic texts and the teachings of Prophet Mohammed, or the *Sunna*.¹ Solidarity, in this sense, refers to 'the group liability of joint debtors,'² and is regarded necessary for group cohesion and the continuation of order. While the concept was originally used to explain solidarity within small communal groups such as villages or tribes where daily, face-to-face interactions were more common, technological advances and globalization has expanded the applicability of the concept to encompass larger groups that may be geographically scattered. As such, 'solidarity may reign in small communities, combative political movements or in entire societies, even the whole humanity.'³ In a sense, the evolution of the concept corresponds with that of group identity, which can now exceed the geographical boundaries of a person's original homeland.

One of the most common tools of solidarity is humanitarian diplomacy, which entails 'raising awareness, negotiating, and mobilizing appropriate humanitarian aid in emergencies,' by state or non-state actors.⁴ Until recently, the global scene of humanitarian diplomacy was dominated mainly by Western actors. Recent years have witnessed the rise of peripheral countries as donors, which *inter alia* enabled them to become more visible and influential in the global theatre of humanitarianism. Several countries from the Islamic world have also made the shift from recipients of aid to donors, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia or United Arab Emirates.⁵ Their new donor status corresponds with their domestic economic development and desire to open up to new geographies or become more influential in their existing areas of influence. These countries have become active in the field of

1 Mayke, K. (2008) 'Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad: Islamic Solidarity in the Age of Neo-liberalism,' *Africa Today*, 54(3), p.4.

2 Arto Laitinen and Anne Birgitta Pessi (2015) 'Solidarity: Theory and Practice. An Introduction,' in Arto Laitinen and Anne Birgitta Pessi (eds.), *Solidarity: Theory and Practice*, London: Lexington Books, p.1.

3 Laitinen and Birgitta Pessi, 'Solidarity,' p.1.

4 Regnier, P. (2011) 'The Emerging Concept of Humanitarian Diplomacy: Identification of a Community of Practice and Prospects for International Recognition,' *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(884), p.1213.

5 Development Initiatives, Arab Donors and Humanitarian Aid, July 28, 2011, <http://devinit.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Arab-donors-humanitarian-aid.pdf>

humanitarian diplomacy via both state and non-state agents.

As a consequence, humanitarian non-governmental organizations (HNGOs), alongside states, from the Islamic world have become increasingly visible as agents of transnational Islamic solidarity. However, scholarly work on Islamic HNGOs is still scarce, and the literature has so far been dominated by work on Western HNGOs.⁶ As also underlined by Kaag, one of the reasons for this may be ‘that the concepts of NGOs and ‘civil society’ are part of the neoliberal project’ which relies largely on Western conceptualizations of liberal democracy and development.⁷ From this limited perspective, peripheral countries are at best the targets of humanitarianism. As such, there is need for alternative discussions and more work on non-Western agents in the field of humanitarian diplomacy.

According to May, solidarity is a combination of ‘conscious group identification; bonds of sentiment; interest in the group’s well-being; shared values and beliefs; and readiness to show moral support.’⁸ In this view, people’s identification with a group and their enthusiasm to act for the group’s well-being are the main components of solidarity. As such, solidarity is, in a way, a social construct, built on how people identify themselves with a group, which may vary significantly based on their needs, interests, and values. Since identity is a socially, culturally, and historically constructed concept, people often identify with more than one group based on their age, gender, ethnicity, race or religion.⁹ In a similar vein, the value accorded to each of these groups may differ based on one’s perceptions and priorities, and the strength of each association.

6 For a few exceptions see, Aras, B. and Akpınar, P. (2015) ‘The Role of Humanitarian NGOs in Turkey’s Peacebuilding,’ *International Peacekeeping*, 22(3), pp.230-247; Tabak, H. (2015) ‘Broadening the Nongovernmental Humanitarian Mission: The IHH and Mediation,’ *Insight Turkey*, 17(3), pp.193-215; Çelik, N. and İşeri, E. (2016) ‘Islamically oriented humanitarian NGOs in Turkey: AKP foreign policy parallelism,’ *Turkish Studies*, 17(3), pp. 429-448; Mayke (2008) ‘Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad,’ pp.3-18; Kaag (2007) ‘Aid, Umma and Politics: Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad,’ in Otayek, R. and Soares, B. (eds.), *Muslim Politics in Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Petersen, M. J. (2014) *For Humanity or For the Umma? Aid and Islam in Transnational Muslim NGOs*, London: Hurst Publishers; Petersen, M. J. (2012) ‘Islamizing Aid: Transnational Muslim NGOs After 9.11,’ *Voluntas*, 23(1), pp.126–155; De Cordier, B. (2009) ‘Faith-based aid, globalisation and the humanitarian frontline: an analysis of Western-based Muslim aid organisations,’ *Disasters*, 33(4), pp.608-628.

7 Kaag, ‘Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad,’ p.4.

8 May, L. (1996) *The Socially Responsive Self: Social Theory and Professional Ethics*, Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, p.44.

9 Wendt, A. (1992) ‘Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics,’ *International Organization*, 46(2), pp.397-398.

Relying on primary data derived through field research conducted with four transnational Turkish HNGOs and secondary data collected from the websites of the HNGOs, reports, scholarly work, newspapers and the social media, this study investigates the extent to which Islamic solidarity plays a role in the conceptions and motivations of Turkish transnational humanitarian non-governmental organizations (HNGOs). The research focuses on four transnational Turkish HNGOs including IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, Doctors Worldwide, Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation and Deniz Feneri Foundation. All four of these HNGOs are fully independent, and are responsible for the largest international operations among independent, Turkish HNGOs with religious motivations.¹⁰ The study argues that while Islamic solidarity plays an important role in the conceptions and motivations of these HNGOs, this idea is at times limited by their strong group affinity with Turkey and Turkish patriotism. In order to elaborate upon this hypothesis, the paper first examines the emergence of Turkey's transnational HNGOs and the role that Islamic solidarity plays in their conceptions, motivations and activities. It then moves on to discuss the challenges to Islamic solidarity of these HNGOs.

The emergence of Turkey's transnational HNGOs

The emergence of transnational Turkish HNGOs dates back to the 1980s,¹¹ as in other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Sudan.¹² The Afghan resistance played a particularly important role in the emergence of transnational HNGOs from the Islamic world.¹³ In addition to the Afghan resistance, other conflicts such as the Chechen wars, the Bosnian and Kosovar crises, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have also been catalysts in the emergence of Turkish HNGOs. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the outbreak of various conflicts in post-Soviet countries were also significant bringing aid into

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10 TIKA (n.d.) *Turkish Development Assistance Report 2014*, p.54.

11 Özkan, M. (2012) 'Transnational Islam, Immigrant NGOs and Poverty Alleviation: The Case of the IGMG,' *Journal of International Development*, 24(4), p.469.

12 Kaag, 'Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad,' p.10.

13 Ibid., p.4.

these areas.¹⁴ Many of these countries were home to significant Muslim or Turkic populations and were former Ottoman lands, which contributed to Turkey's sense of affiliation.

With respect to domestic triggers, while the 1980 military coup put pressure on civil society organizations, the post-coup period witnessed the acceleration in terms of civilian mobilization.¹⁵ The Turkish society's proactive response to the massive 1999 earthquake in Turkey also played a significant role in the emergence of several new HNGOs. A number of HNGOs were established as a response to the earthquake.¹⁶ As also underlined by Özerdem and Jacoby, the earthquake significantly expanded the maneuvering space for civilian actors.¹⁷ In this view, the earthquake was indeed perceived as a challenge to the state's top-down approach towards disaster management. Traditionally, the Turkish state has followed a top-down approach to disaster management, which overlooks the empowerment of the local and fails to encourage local agencies to resolve existing problems.

During the earthquake, the relief activities of HNGOs or other NGOs in general were perceived as a threat to state authority and an indication of its inability to cope with the consequences of the earthquake. Furthermore, the government of Bülent Ecevit feared that increasing civil society activity could 'allow other political organizations – particularly the broadly Islamist Fazilet Party – to secure electoral gains.'¹⁸ The fact that the earthquake happened only two years after the so-called 'post-modern military coup' of 1997 against the government of Necmettin Erbakan - with its Islamic roots - helped cultivate these fears. However, despite certain restrictions upon NGOs, the state eventually had to permit more NGO involvement, though still on a limited scale, due to its own inability to cope with the worsening situation caused by the earthquake. This also triggered a change in public perceptions of the state. The earthquake, *inter alia*, gave rise to a strong sense of agency among Turkish people and created an

14 Aras and Akpınar, 'The Role of Humanitarian NGOs in Turkey's Peacebuilding,' pp.230-247.

15 İcduygu, A. (2011) 'Interacting Actors: The EU and Civil Society in Turkey,' *South European Society and Politics*, 16(3), pp.382-383; Toprak, B. (1995) 'Civil Society in Turkey,' in Norton, A. R. (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Leiden: EJ Brill.

16 Bianet (2002) 27 *Sivil Toplum Kuruluşunun Deprem Çağrısı*. August 15, Available at: <http://bianet.org/kadin/cevre--3/12468-27-sivil-toplum-kurulusunun-deprem-cagrisi> (Accessed: 2 November 2017)

17 Özerdem, A. and Jacoby, T. (2006) *Disaster Management and Civil Society: Earthquake Relief in Japan, Turkey and India*, London; New York: I.B. Tauris, p.59.

18 Ibid., p.66.

environment conducive to the emergence of several new NGOs.

The year 1999 marked another significant milestone for the expansion of NGO activity, due to the beginning of Turkey's EU candidacy process.¹⁹ In 2002, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power with promises to improve Turkey's democratic credentials and expand civic space. The following years witnessed an upsurge in the number of NGOs operating in several fields, including the humanitarian sector. The increasing level of prosperity in Turkey as a result of its growing economy also resulted in a rise in charitable activities. Globalization also played an important role, expanding people's perception of *umma* and Islamic solidarity. Factors such as increasing access to the Internet, social media, and international travel led to a growing awareness among Turkish people regarding problems in distant geographies. While in the past, people used to look to their immediate neighborhoods or cities, today, they reach out to the needy in distant geographies with one click, and are even able to make donations online.²⁰

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with Turkey's foreign policy activism and rise as a donor country. The AK Party government's vision entailed a multi-dimensional and multi-track foreign policy aiming to be active in multiple geographies in various fields. This was only possible with the expansion of the space for non-state actors such as businesses or NGOs. Turkish humanitarian NGOs now operate in a number of regions, stretching from Turkey's immediate neighborhood to

Africa and East Asia. They pursue a range of activities including emergency assistance and medical relief, and mid-to-short term development projects such as building infrastructure and investing in social and human capital.²¹ In addition to relief, Turkish HNGOs also pursue advocacy work and, recently, there have been mediation initiatives by the IHH in a few cases.²²

19 Kadioğlu, A. (2005) 'Civil Society, Islam and Democracy in Turkey: A Study of Three Islamic NGOs,' *The Muslim World*, 95(1), pp. 23-43.

20 Akpınar, P. (2017) 'Turkey and India as Global Development and Humanitarian Actors,' Conference Report, Istanbul Policy Center, October, p.11.

21 Aras and Akpınar, 'The Role of Humanitarian NGOs in Turkey's Peacebuilding,' pp.230-247.

22 Akpınar, P. (2016) 'The limits of mediation in the Arab Spring: the case of Syria,' *Third World Quarterly*, 37(12), p.2290; Tabak, H (2015) 'Broadening the Nongovernmental Humanitarian Mission: The IHH and Mediation,' *Insight Turkey*, 17(3), pp.193-215.

Although Turkey's rise as a donor country had begun before the Arab Spring, the Syrian crisis has played a particularly important role in this process. The crisis erupted unexpectedly on Turkey's doorstep. Turkey was faced with a great humanitarian catastrophe, and has so far absorbed more than 3.3 million²³ refugees and spent more than 12.1 billion USD. It is now hosting the largest number of refugees in the world and was named as the 'most generous' donor in 2016 by the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report.²⁴ The need for burden-sharing in the Syrian crisis has also shaped the state's position towards Turkish HNGO involvement. According to 2015 statistics from Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, Turkey spent about 5.1 billion USD on aid in 2015, of which about 475 million USD was contributed by HNGOs.²⁵

Islamic solidarity and Turkish HNGOs

The idea of Islamic solidarity is important for Turkish HNGOs in their work. For instance, although they do not discriminate among the recipients during the actual distribution of the aid, they do tend to lean towards communities with Muslim, Turkish or Ottoman affiliations during the planning stage. This is not to say that they do not ever deliver aid to other communities. However, the majority of Turkish aid targets communities that have relation to Turkey. As an example, in 2013, Palestine, Tunisia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan were the top recipient countries of Turkish aid.²⁶ As such, the idea of *umma* and a self-imposed responsibility to reach out to fellow Muslims are significant motivating factors for Turkish HNGOs. When interviewed, a number of Turkish NGOs underlined Islamic solidarity as an important motive. Many HNGOs also refer to Turkey as the heir of the Islamic caliphate, according to which it has a responsibility to protect and, when necessary, to speak out for the *umma*. For instance, according to a representative of IHH, the organization extends aid 'worthily representing the Ottoman

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23 'UNHCR (2017) *Turkey Statistics*, Last update: 30 June. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/tr/unhcr-turkiye-istatistikleri> (Accessed 18 August 2017)

24 AFAD (2017) *The Most Generous Country in the World: Turkey*, June 21. Available at: <https://www.afad.gov.tr/en/19320/The-Most-Generous-Country-in-the-World-Turkey> (Accessed 24 October 2017).

25 TİKA (n.d.) Turkish Development Assistance Report 2015.

26 TİKA (n.d.) Turkish Development Assistance Report 2013, p.20.

Empire and Turkey.²⁷

The responsibility to stand up for fellow Muslims is manifested in advocacy work, which is seen as complementary to aid. One of the most popular examples of advocacy by Turkish HNGOs is that of IHH during the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, when the flotilla tried to violate the embargo on Gaza.²⁸ Another recent example is the advocacy activities pursued for the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. For instance, several Turkish HNGOs used social media to advocate for the rights of Rohingya Muslims, and collected donations to deliver to the Rohingyas in Myanmar and Bangladesh during the crisis.²⁹ In their rhetoric, these HNGO often emphasize the importance of supporting the ‘oppressed’ and the ‘most disadvantaged’ communities. These two criteria are often used when referring to Muslim communities. According to the HNGOs, this is ‘natural’ given that Muslims are often the most oppressed and disadvantaged communities. Advocacy, in this regard, is seen as an important instrument of Islamic solidarity. Referring to their advocacy work a representative of IHH explains:

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‘When the Prophet Mohammed advised his followers, ‘Help the oppressed and the oppressor,’ his followers asked in surprise,

‘We already help the oppressed but how can we help the oppressor?’ he answered, ‘By stopping his cruelty.’ This is why we promote human rights alongside delivering humanitarian aid. The manmade disasters can be much worse than the natural ones.’³⁰

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27 Interviewee II (2016), IHH, Personal interview, Istanbul, 30 May.

28 Booth, R. (2010) ‘Israeli attack on Gaza flotilla sparks international outrage,’ *The Guardian*, May 31.

29 Deniz Feneri Derneği (2017) ‘#Arakan’da çocuk olmak acıyı küçük yaşta tatmak demektir. Açlığın, yokluğun ve acının yaşandığı bir ülkede kardeşine umut olmak ister misin?’ 30 October, 16:51, Tweet; IHH Bağcılar Kadın (2017) ‘Dünya #arakan a sessiz kalsa da! Yüreği ile emeği ile sessiz kalmayan hanım gönüllülerimize ve destek veren herkese yürekten teşekkür ederiz,’ 28 October, 23:09, Tweet.

30 IHH representative (2013) Comments made at the meeting on the Role of NGOs in Turkey’s Peacebuilding, Istanbul Policy Centre, Istanbul, 3 December.

channels with African countries.³¹ In a similar vein, this was the reason Turkey was invited to take part in the mediation initiatives between the Filipino government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).³² Islamic solidarity also plays an important role in fundraising, given that charitable activities rise significantly in Turkey during religious holidays such as *Ramadan* or *Eid-al-Adha*. These are important months for pious Muslims to fulfill the religious obligation for charity; Islam requires the donation of a certain portion of annual income to people in need in the forms of ‘*zakat* ‘obligatory almsgiving’ and *sadaqa* ‘voluntary almsgiving’.³³ Some religious humanitarian activities of Turkish HNGOs include the distribution of food and meat parcels during religious holidays, distribution of copies of the Qur’an, refurbishing and opening mosques, Qur’an courses and orphanages, and providing free circumcision surgeries. As underlined by the HNGOs, these activities generate the majority of the funding since there is high demand from the donors for such deeds. For instance, helping orphans is regarded a good deed according to Islam. As such, it is often a central charitable activity among religiously sensitive circles.

Contributing to the development of poor and disadvantaged Islamic communities is another important tool of Islamic solidarity. In this view, lack of development brings poverty, which is seen as the root of all evil, and is a barrier to peace and prosperity in the Islamic world. Thus development aid with a main focus on building infrastructure is a significant part of the activities of the majority of Turkish HNGOs. This is also in line with Turkey’s domestic policy of development, which relies heavily on the construction sector. In this respect it should also be noted that Turkey’s main international markets for construction sector largely correspond with the recipient countries of its humanitarian aid. Furthermore, a closer look also reveals that the regions and countries where the NGOs operate are also the primary recipients of Turkey’s development aid. This may be due to the fact that the state and the HNGOs open up the way for one another, or motivate one another to reach out to certain areas. For instance, there is always pressure from Turkish civil society to support the Palestinian

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31 Interviewee II (2016), IHH, Personal interview, Istanbul, 30 May.

32 Interviewee I (2015), IHH, Personal interview, The Philippines, 28 May.

33 Kaag ‘Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad,’ p.5.

cause and Palestine was the largest recipient of assistance by spending volume of Turkish aid in 2013.³⁴

Challenges to Islamic solidarity

As argued earlier in the text, solidarity is a concept that refers to the effort people put in for the welfare of a group with which they identify. More often than not, people identify themselves with more than one group. Similarly, how they rank these groups may differ based on their perceptions and priorities, and how strongly they associate themselves with a given group. As such, group identity, and thus solidarity, is a highly subjective concept based upon the needs, interests, and values of a given subject. In the case of Turkish HNGOs, the existence of Islamic solidarity in their conceptions, motivations and practices is clearly identifiable. However, there are also certain challenges in regard to their understanding and practice of Islamic solidarity.

One of these challenges is that their understanding of Islamic solidarity can be limited by their strong sense of Turkish patriotism. As such, ‘Turkishness’ as a group identity at times

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overshadows their ‘Muslimness,’ and thus may pose a challenge to Islamic solidarity. For instance, for many of the HNGOs, ‘representing’ and ‘promoting’ Turkey abroad is of critical significance, underpinning the importance of ‘carrying the Turkish flag abroad’ and building positive associations with Turks and Turkey.

For instance, referring to the cataract operations they conduct abroad, a representative of the IHH emphasizes, ‘it’s terrific that the first thing the patients see when they open their eyes is the Turkish flag near you.’³⁵ In a similar vein, a representative of Deniz Feneri commented that when they bring disadvantaged children to Turkey as part of the ‘1001 Wishes of 1001 Children Project,’ those children return home ‘imprinting the Turkish flag onto their hearts.’³⁶ Likewise, a representative of Doctors Worldwide said, ‘We build a bridge of brotherhood in the name

34 TIKA (n.d.), Turkish Development Assistance Report 2014, p.20.

35 IHH representative (2013) Comments made at the meeting on the Role of NGOs in Turkey’s Peacebuilding, Istanbul Policy Center, Istanbul, 3 December.

36 Deniz Feneri Association representative, Comments made at the meeting on the Role of NGOs in Turkey’s Peacebuilding, Istanbul Policy Center, Istanbul, 3 December.

of our country and flag.’³⁷

The same interviewee from Doctors Worldwide also contended that they have to be careful, since any success or failure they may have in a target country could also be attributed to Turkey.³⁸ Thus, they feel a responsibility to represent Turkey abroad in the best possible manner.³⁹ A representative of an HNGO also underlined that if necessary, their extensive international network could allow them to mobilize people on any issue important to Turkey. As such, when it comes to ‘representing’ Turkey abroad, the line between state and non-state actors is blurred. The strength of national feeling among Turkish HNGOs is also noted by their counterparts; for instance, according to an Islamic HNGO representative from India, ‘Turkish understanding of Islam is very nationalist.’⁴⁰

The patriotic tendencies of these HNGOs also come to the fore in domestic politics. For instance, all of the HNGOs examined in this study either made patriotic statements, joined protests, or provided aid to the victims in the wake of the failed coup in 15 July 2017 in Turkey.⁴¹ The Deniz Feneri Foundation even started a project to build a school in Thailand to be named ‘July 15 Martyrs.’⁴²

Another challenge to the Islamic solidarity of these HNGOs might be their over-dependence on the approval of the current government. Turkey's model of humanitarianism, which was largely constructed under the current government, is supportive of HNGO

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37 Doctors Worldwide representative, Comments made at the meeting on the Role of NGOs in Turkey's Peacebuilding, Istanbul Policy Center, Istanbul, 3 December.

38 Ibid.

39 Aras and Akpınar 'The Role of Humanitarian NGOs in Turkey's Peacebuilding,' p.240.

40 Indian Islamic HNGO representative (2015), Personal interview, Bangalore, 10 October.

41 Aziz Mahmud Hüdayî Foundation (n.d.) *15 Temmuz Darbe Girişiminin Yıl Dönümü Mevdanlarıdır.*. Available at: https://www.google.com.tr/search?ei=F_wPWRGnOCHcAgBcmrYDw&q=howto+cite+no+date&oq=howto+cite+no+date&gs_l=psy-ab.3...2579.3769.0.4145.7.7.0.0.0.0.0.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..7.0.0....0.GYjTEWPRRyE (Accessed 16 November 2017); Star (2016) *Toplumsal Travmalarla, Yeryüzü doktorlarından destek*, 2 August. Available at: <http://www.star.com.tr/yasam/toplumsal-travmalarla-yeryuzu-doktorlarindan-destek-haber-1130451/> (Accessed 16 November); Yıldırım, B. (2016) 15 Temmuz Direnişi. Video recording, 29 July. Available at: <https://www.ihh.org.tr/video/15-temmuz-direnisi-bulent-yildirim> (Accessed 17 November 2017).

42 Deniz Feneri Foundation (n.d.) *Tayland Patani'de 15 Temmuz Şehitleri Okulu*. Available at: http://www.denizfeneri.org.tr/proje/tayland-patani-de-15-temmuz-sehitleri-okulu_664/ (Accessed 17 November 2017).

involvement.⁴³ This is even more evident when one compares Turkey with other emerging powers such as India or China, whose international aid is channeled primarily through government bodies at the bilateral level, and HNGO operations are limited. In a similar vein, although several HNGOs from Gulf countries operate abroad, they are established either by their respective states or state elites.⁴⁴ Interestingly, the activities of many Western HNGOs are heavily dependent on government grants and funds. As such, the independence and ‘non-governmental’ characteristics of these HNGOs are highly contentious. By contrast, most Turkish HNGOs rely on private funds and operate independently from the state.

However, despite the fact that Turkish HNGOs enjoy a certain level of independence from the state, this study argues that the Turkish state’s *laissez faire* policy is largely due to the broad convergence of ideas and interests between the government and majority of the HNGOs. In this view, the extent to which states welcome the involvement of HNGOs corresponds with their perceived foreign policy interests. With a few exceptions, the majority of Turkish HNGOs operating abroad have similar ideational backgrounds, built upon an understanding of Islamic solidarity and a strong sense of duty to promote Turkey abroad. In this regard, their motivations, choice of target areas and activities tend to correspond with the position of the Turkish government. Consequently, their activities, in a way, feed into the interests of the latter.⁴⁵ As such, there is a general convergence of ideas and interests between the Turkish government and the majority of Turkish HNGOs.

There is also an overlap in their advocacy work. The Turkish government often claims to advocate for the rights of the oppressed as part of its humanitarian diplomacy efforts. Clear examples of this include Turkey’s advocacy for Somalia, Palestine, and Bosnia, which overlap with the work of Turkish HNGOs. As such, the activities of Turkish NGOs abroad, in a way, complement the government’s aim to present itself as

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43 Davutoğlu, A. (2013) ‘Turkey’s Humanitarian Diplomacy: Objectives, Challenges and Prospects,’ *Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 41(6), pp.865–870; Akpınar, P. (2013) ‘Turkey’s Peacebuilding in Somalia: The Limits of Humanitarian Diplomacy,’ *Turkish Studies*, 14(4), pp.735–757.

44 Kaag ‘Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad,’ p.10.

45 Aras and Akpınar ‘The Role of Humanitarian NGOs in Turkey’s Peacebuilding,’ p.242.

a responsible actor on the international platform. Accordingly, one could argue that the level of freedom these HNGOs enjoy is significantly dependent on the convergence of their ideas and interests with those of the Turkish government. For instance, in contrast to the freedom provided for the Turkish HNGOs, recently there have been allegations of a government crackdown on foreign HNGOs operating in Turkey.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of Islamic solidarity in the perceptions and motivations of Turkish HNGOs. Islamic solidarity played an important role in the emergence of these HNGOs, which took place largely in response to the ongoing suffering in the Muslim world, such as in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Palestine. The Islamic obligation to extend aid to fellow Muslims and the idea of *umma* that extends beyond one's immediate homeland is one of their main motivations. The idea of Islamic solidarity is also instrumental in collecting donations, since majority of the donors are pious Muslim. Furthermore, many of their activities - such as distributing food during religious holidays, distributing copies of the Qur'an, refurbishing and opening mosques, Qur'an courses and orphanages, and providing free circumcision surgeries - serve the well-being of fellow Muslims, and thus constitute acts of Islamic solidarity.

However, the study also proposes that while the sense of Islamic solidarity plays an important role in the perceptions and motivations of Turkish HNGOs, this is sometimes limited by their strong sense of affiliation with Turkey and Turkish patriotism. As such, the affiliation they feel with Turkey may eclipse their sense of belonging to *umma*. In this regard, the idea of Islamic solidarity can be downplayed in favor of national affiliation. Furthermore, the sustainability of their work, and therefore the extent to which they are able to extend solidarity to the Islamic world, is dependent upon the convergence of their ideas and interests with those of Turkey's current government. In a similar vein, it remains under question mark whether these HNGOs would feel the

46 Ruby Mellen and Colum Lynch (2017), 'Inside Turkey's NGO Purge,' *Foreign Policy*, August 3.

same level of patriotism under a different government with different ideas and interests. As such, one could argue that the government support they currently enjoy and the affiliation they feel with Turkey feed into one another. Moreover, the level of solidarity they are able to extend to the Islamic is vulnerable to their reliance on the precarious space provided for them by the current Turkish government.