

Turkey's Mediation and Friends of Mediation Initiative

by *Bülent Aras*

This brief critically examines a new area of activism in Turkey's foreign policy agenda: Turkey's rise as a mediator in regional and international crises zones. It contextualizes Turkey's reliance on a multitude of actors to support its mediation initiatives, most notably its vibrant civil society and NGOs, as a successful case of total performance, a principle forming Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine. The brief then outlines the broad frameworks and characteristics of Turkey's approach to mediation, as laid out by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. The brief takes a closer look at the case of Turkey's involvement in the attempt to seek resolution in the Afghanistan conflict and it illustrates a good example of Turkey's new style in mediation. The brief concludes with a discussion of the Friends of Mediation Initiative, launched under the UN framework through a joint Turkish-Finnish initiative.

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The Philippines government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) reached an agreement on a road map for ending their four decades long conflict in Mindanao. Malaysia played a successful facilitator role for bringing the conflicting parties together and negotiating a deal between them. After the deal was negotiated, later at a press conference, the chairman of MILF, Al Haj Murad, thanked Turkey, noting the government's constructive role in negotiations and acknowledging the substantial humanitarian aid provided by Turkish NGOs. He offered this case of simultaneous government-NGO engagement as a model for other countries wanting to bolster peace-building in the Philippines.

Turkey has been a member of the International Contact Group, alongside Malaysia, UK, Japan and Saudi Arabia, which has observed the Philippines peace process since 2009. Dating as far back as 2007, Turkish charity organizations provided help for Muslims and others in the country. Turkish NGOs' policies of non-discrimination were welcomed by both Muslim leaders and the Philippines government. This short narrative of Turkey's contribution to the Mindanao peace process exemplifies Turkey's ambitious goal to acquire a new status within its new foreign policy framework – one that gives Turkey a role as an international mediator.

Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, is the major designer of this role in leveraging Turkey's rising profile and burgeoning NGO capabilities. Through the principle of total performance, which aims to mobilize civil

society, universities, NGOs and others behind foreign policy, he assigns a role for civil society in foreign policymaking. The notion of total performance has found its most substantial manifestation in Turkey's growing mediation efforts outside its borders.

Davutoğlu presents Turkey as possessing a number of distinctive features in international relations, which makes it an ideal mediator in its immediate neighborhood and beyond. He further offers his design of Turkish mediation as an exemplary new model for more effective mediation. In addition to carrying out mediation services in ongoing crisis areas, Turkey also pursues an ambitious project entitled 'Friends of Mediation'. In coordination with the United Nations and through support from Finland, two resolutions were passed in the General Assembly and a UN guide for effective mediation was prepared. I will touch upon Turkey's mediation style, some examples of its international mediation and the Friends of Mediation initiative to shed light on Turkey's new ambitious foreign policy role.

Turkey's International Mediation Regime

According to Davutoğlu, Turkey has the unique character as a country which has simultaneously nurtured long standing partnerships with the West while sharing common civilizational and cultural affinity with many other parts of the world.¹ With this background, Turkey's mediation role blends the ability for empathy with the conflicting sides and an ethical stance in dealings with the parties of a conflict. Turkey has material and discursive capabilities to pursue an effective mediator role in a myriad of crises worldwide. In Davutoğlu's vision, an ideal mediator brings abilities such as understanding the context and the actors, playing an insider role while being able to preserve its reliability, and controlling the role and involvement of outside actors. Turkey's projection of its mediation role relies, to a large extent, on the assumption of itself being a credible actor and on the promotion of regional ownership and inclusiveness. The uniqueness of Turkish mediators comes from a combination of their broad perspective and material capabilities which are the result of experience and access to a wide cultural and civilizational outreach.²

Turkey's international mediation is built on new capabilities of multi-dimensional and dynamic foreign policy, and the ability to coordinate this with the demands of various societal groups. This new foreign policy has raised the country's profile by way of bilateral, regional and international initiatives. It has a new and wider institutional framework, among others, with the inclusion of TIKA, the official development agency, Yunus Emre Foundation, (the Turkish version of Goethe Institute or Cervantes), the Public Diplomacy Agency and the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities, which among others carries out projects serving the

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needs of the Turkish diaspora. The activities of these organizations have been coordinated by the Foreign and Prime Ministries working in close cooperation with each other.

Complementing these new instruments is Turkey's civil capacity that relies on charity organizations, other specialized civil society institutions and business associations. Turkish foreign policy develops in a pluralistic environment, and societal demands occupy an influential role in this process. The emerging epistemic community in the universities and a new generation of think-tanks also increase knowledge and awareness of foreign policy issues in society. Turkish civil society took the lead in several cases and directed foreign policymakers to take positions on international issues, while it itself remain engaged in several crisis spots worldwide. The most recent example of this is Turkey's involvement in finding a solution to mitigate certain Buddhist groups' violence against Arakan Muslims in Myanmar. It is important to note that while Turkey plays an official role in conflict zones requiring mediation, Turkish policymakers also benefit from NGOs' activities for humanitarian help and business involvement in infrastructural development. For example, before Turkish government involvement in the Myanmar situation, Turkish NGOs were already in the conflict zone providing humanitarian relief to victims of violence.

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Example of Turkey's mediation: Afghanistan case

Turkey's mediation efforts are visible in the Balkans, the Palestinian question, Iraq, the Iranian nuclear issue and several others. However, the case of Afghanistan exemplifies Turkey's international mediation in unique ways. Turkey's prospectus for peace in Afghanistan relies on several proposals: reconciliation and restructuring in Afghan society, bridging the gap between Afghanistan and Pakistan and enhancing regional cooperation between Afghanistan and countries in its neighbourhood. In an example that illustrates total performance, Afghanistan is at the top of Turkey's official aid list. TIKA coordinates Turkey's development assistance and operates in a wide range of areas from education of bureaucrats to building and managing hospitals. A substantial part of Turkey's scholarship program for foreign students goes to Afghan citizens who attend universities in Turkey at the graduate and post-graduate levels. Turkey is also involved in restructuring Afghanistan's military capabilities. It has led NATO operations twice since 2001 and is in control of Kabul Central Command. Two Provincial Reconstruction Teams³ in Afghanistan operate under Turkey's supervision.

Turkish NGOs are active in terms of humanitarian aid and rebuilding of different sectors from health to education in Afghanistan. A prominent contribution is provided by Turkish schools, which operate all over

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Afghanistan, even in areas with considerable security risks. Activities of Turkish Islamic groups, for example the introduction of Quran courses, help to provide a counter current to the Taliban style interpretation of Islam in the country. Turkish businessmen remain particularly active in the construction sector and contribute to infrastructural development in Afghanistan. To a considerable extent, the activities of local NGOs, are funded by the Turkish businessmen active in this geography.

As part of developing a regional approach to Afghanistan’s context, Turkey’s first step was to overcome the lack of trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghanistan-Pakistan-Turkey trilateral process, which started in 2007, serves this purpose. The idea was to create a political platform for handling the problems between the two countries and Afghanistan’s situation in general. This summit concentrated in three areas: high-level political dialogue, security cooperation and development partnership.

While Turkey is not geographically situated in Afghanistan’s neighbourhood, at the same time it is trusted in the region by both Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. In this respect, the last Turkey-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral summit in November 2011 was significant in that it took place shortly after the assassination of Burhaneddin Rabbani, the President of the High Peace Council of Afghanistan whose death was blamed by Afghan authorities on the Pakistani Taliban. Turkey established a cooperative mechanism for investigating Rabbani’s death, which was welcomed by both countries and the wider international community, thus contributing to the lessening of tensions.

Close bilateral relations based on mutual respect and understanding has enabled Turkey to undertake the role of facilitator between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Turkey’s persistence in pursuing transparent relations as well as its respect and diligence for their national interests and concerns also assisted Turkey in assuming the role of the trusted party at the inception and continuation of the trilateral process.

As an additional step towards development of a regional approach to Afghanistan’s situation, Turkey’s next move was the establishment of a regional framework to address the Afghan situation. Here, Turkey’s motivation is to develop a regional understanding of the Afghan context, enhancing political dialogue in the wider neighborhood, coordinating the activities of regional organizations and countries for Afghanistan, and contributing to confidence building at the regional level. In support of a regional framework, Turkey launched the Istanbul Process with the participation of Afghanistan and twelve regional countries. The Istanbul Process was also backed by thirteen other countries and nine international organizations. The Istanbul Process operates under the premise of Afghan leadership and regional ownership.

Friends of Mediation Initiative

In addition to the mediation attempts mentioned above, Turkey has also launched the Friends of Mediation initiative at the UN. Turkey and Finland originally proposed the idea of mediation for peace to support UN mechanisms of mediation. The concept was to assist in providing support and guidance for mediation experts. This proposal led to the establishment of the Friends of Mediation group, an entity with benefits from the participation of several countries, international organizations and the UN. Apart from eight regional organizations and the UN itself, there are currently thirty-four countries in this group. Members include a combination of traditional Western and newly emerging mediators, as well as organizations like the African Union, OSCE and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

The Friends of Mediation initiative aims to strengthen the idea that mediation is a powerful means for the peaceful solution of conflicts. It attempts to develop a new consciousness on the importance of mediation and to provide support to development of mediation capabilities at the domestic, regional and international levels. The variety of mediators and the expanding scope of domains which mediation plays a role in necessitates work on basic principles and focus on coordination and cooperation of parties. The Friends of Mediation initiative aims to address these issues, one: by creating a platform encompassing a plurality of states and international organizations; two: through mobilization of the UN network to help mobilize increasing international awareness of the initiative.

As we are witnessing in this age of global security problems, the UN role as sole international mediator is no longer sufficient. Countries like Brazil, Turkey and Malaysia are increasingly relevant as parties in international mediations. In addition, non-governmental actors play a growing role in peace processes and conflict resolution initiatives. Turkey and Finland have jointly pointed out a need for mediation as a solution for conflicts as well as for increased reflection on definitions of values, norms, principles and mechanisms for effective international mediation.

At this juncture, Minister Davutoğlu refers to the crisis of global governance and the need for an inclusive order with the widest meaning of the term “global.” This would give rise to a more legitimate and inclusive international order and put an end to ‘the West and the rest analogy,’ thereby playing a bridging role in the international community.

In this line of thought, mediation should benefit from the experiences of different cultures as well as accommodating the differences in a way to enrich the problem solving practices of international mediators. For this purpose, The Friends of Mediation initiative supported the adoption of two Resolutions on mediation in the UN General Assembly in

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2011 and 2012. The latter Resolution provided a Guide for Effective Mediation as its annex, which was distributed by the UN Secretary General in September 2012. The foreign ministers of Friends of Mediation met three times for consultation in due course. Turkey suggested the establishment of a UN mediation center in Istanbul, and officials will work on the modalities of its establishment. On the margins of this initiative, the Turkish foreign ministry organizes conferences and supports development of civil capacity in association with this international project. Again, these outreach attempts constitute yet another illustrative example of Turkey's efforts to develop new instruments to support its multidimensional foreign policy agenda.

Conclusion

Mediation has become an important component of the new Turkish foreign policy. Turkish policymakers are pursuing an ambitious policy of mediation between conflicting parties throughout the world and of contribution to the understanding of effective mediation at the international level. Turkey's mediation role and attempts for supporting mediation as a means of peace making is more visible than ever.

The sustainability of Turkey's approach will, to a large extent, depend on the success of mediation efforts on the ground and its ability to incorporate lessons learned into the existing approaches to international mediation. Turkey's mediation approach will likely continue to be included in the resolution of future conflicts. The profile of Turkey's mediation will be determined by Turkey's foreign policy performance and its ability to sustain the image of a trusted and capable actor. Turkey's civil society will continue to enhance Turkish mediation initiatives by providing support through the development of greater civil capacity.

The UN Guidelines for Effective Mediation is not in of itself sufficient in dealing with the new challenges of an era of global turmoil. There is a need for a wider plurality of perspectives. The broad international acceptance of Turkey's mediation framework and the transformation of the current mediation practices and structures of the UN will be a long and difficult process. Turkey's main challenge in this regard will be in dealing with resistance from entrenched mediation mechanisms, structures and actors. However, Turkey may benefit from the emerging roles of new State and non-State actors which support a broadening of perspectives on internal mediation. Turkey will remain an effective mediator, but more time is needed to evaluate Ankara's impact on the emergence of a new thinking on mediation in general.

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1. Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Mediation: Critical Reflections from the Field," Middle East Policy, Winter 2013, forthcoming.
2. Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Mediation..."
3. PRTs are designed for delivering the aid of international community at the provincial and district levels in Afghanistan.

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