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Türkiye's Humanitarian Diplomacy: Global Response and Reciprocity

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SYNOPSIS

By focusing on humanitarian diplomacy in its foreign policy, Türkiye has built its reputation as an emerging humanitarian donor over the last two decades. Due to this, Türkiye has been able to build trust and strengthen its relationships with other states, including both friendly states and historical rivals. This has contributed significantly to the global response to the 2023 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes.

COMMENTARY

In the early morning of 6 February 2023, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck southern and central Türkiye and northwestern Syria, followed by another magnitude 7.5 earthquake nine hours later just 95 kilometres north of the first. These twin earthquakes caused widespread [loss of life and damage with over 53,000 casualties, more than 100,000 injured](#), millions displaced, and an [estimated US\\$34.2 billion in direct damages](#).

As an experienced 'aid-giving' country, the Turkish government was [quick to issue a "Level 4 alarm"](#). They appealed for international assistance on the same day as the extent of the damage became clear. In response, over 100 countries offered their assistance either in aid or search and rescue, with [199 international rescue teams](#) operating on the ground at its peak. This rapid international assistance — while a response to the need and scale of destruction — can also be attributed, at least in part — to [Türkiye's long-term strategy of state-led humanitarian diplomacy](#).

Humanitarian Diplomacy as Foreign Policy

Although the concept of humanitarian diplomacy may have originally been used to describe the activities of non-governmental humanitarian organisations such as the

United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and Médecins Sans Frontières, state-led humanitarian diplomacy is becoming more visible — as in the case of Türkiye.

For Türkiye, state-led humanitarian diplomacy has become a key part of its foreign policy. In fact, the concept of using diplomacy during humanitarian situations to advance foreign policy is not new. This is exemplified by “[earthquake diplomacy](#)”, a term used to describe the recorded phenomenon of aid exchanges between Türkiye and its historical rival and neighbour, Greece, as a result of earthquakes, a common regional disaster which affects both states. “Earthquake diplomacy” was first used in 1999 as a result of the Izmir and Athens earthquakes and the subsequent aid exchanges. The principle emerged to ease the strained relationship between the two states in the aftermath of the earthquakes. Similarly, in the aftermath of the 2023 earthquake for which [Greece had been one of the first to respond on site](#), relations between Türkiye and Greece are improving with the two states agreeing to “[reboot their relations](#)” and “[usher in a new era of closer ties](#)” during Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan’s landmark visit to Greece in December 2023.

It is important to note that humanitarian diplomacy — like other forms of diplomacy — is a long-term process, one in which success is not immediate or even guaranteed. This easing of hostilities and improvement in the relationship between the two states did not emerge solely as a result of the humanitarian aid offered by the other during a disaster. Instead, the disasters simply provided a window of opportunity that was acted upon by both states.

In other words, while [disaster-related activities](#) are unlikely to directly forge substantial connections between states where none had previously existed, disasters and disaster-related activities can act as a catalyst for building relationships. This can be done by building upon previous connections for which the foundation has already been laid through earlier engagements and interactions. States can therefore use the opportunity created by such disaster events to engage further with the affected state, strengthening their relationship. As such, disasters are unlikely to create *new* conflict or peace, but they can reflect, reproduce, or rearrange any such *on-going* processes.

Türkiye’s Humanitarian Diplomacy

Over the last two decades, Türkiye has invested in humanitarian diplomacy as part of its foreign policy, and emerged as a key “new donor” country in the humanitarian space. In essence, [humanitarian diplomacy](#) refers to a set of activities and/or policies taken to deliver humanitarian aid and solutions to those in need. In particular, this concept has been used to describe diplomatic overtures and government activities which are being conducted for humanitarian reasons.

This “Turkish brand” of humanitarian diplomacy can be identified by its [four main characteristics](#). First, there is a preference for bilateral relationships with Türkiye preferring to engage directly with an affected state. Second, Türkiye’s state institutions also tend to collaborate with religious organisations and enterprises as part of their donor process. Third, Türkiye tends to contribute a combination of humanitarian aid, as well as business, development, and peacebuilding projects to an affected state as part of its form of diplomacy. Lastly, there is little to no political conditions attached to

any of its aid. By centring humanitarian diplomacy in its foreign policy, Türkiye is able to expand its sphere of influence in a relatively benign manner.

Türkiye's investment in humanitarian diplomacy is also evident in its significant contributions to international humanitarian aid. For example, Türkiye's official development aid (ODA) increased from [US\\$85 million in 2002 to US\\$8.66 billion in 2019](#). Not only was Turkey the [top humanitarian donor \(including in-country assistance for refugees\) in 2017](#), it has consistently been among the top five global humanitarian donors. Even in 2023, despite a 4.5 per cent decrease — perhaps as a result of the on-going in-country earthquake response — Türkiye was still the [second biggest public donor of humanitarian assistance after the US](#). It is the state's willingness to engage internationally and facilitate humanitarian aid that allows Türkiye to build and strengthen their relationships with other countries.



Damaged buildings in Kahramanmaraş after a 7.8 magnitude earthquake in February 2023. Over 100 countries responded to Türkiye's call for assistance. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Reciprocity: A Result of Türkiye's Humanitarian Diplomacy?

During the 2023 earthquakes, Türkiye's policy of humanitarian diplomacy inspired reciprocity. Over 100 countries — most of which had pre-existing relationships with Türkiye — responded to the government's call for assistance, [pledging billions of dollars](#) and sending [thousands in personnel](#) to provide humanitarian relief including emergency medical teams, and search and rescue teams.

While it may not be possible to directly confirm the impact of Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy on the global response to the 2023 earthquakes, the assistance that poured in was notable. This was further emphasised in the aftermath of the earthquakes, such as the response by [South Korea, which explicitly referred to its long relationship with Türkiye when responding to the disaster](#). Similar statements were also made by other states with friendly relationships with Türkiye including [Japan](#), [Somalia](#), and [Burundi](#) — some of whom were also facing active domestic crises of their own at the time.

While common wisdom holds that responses should be guided by the need of affected communities and states rather than other political considerations, the pre-existing relationships between states nevertheless influence response. In the case of Türkiye, the inclusion of humanitarian diplomacy as the cornerstone of the state's foreign policy and its experience as an aid-giver have clearly borne fruit. After all, the connections and relationships that have been built with other states by helping them in their time of need have come back full circle — as seen by all the responses during Türkiye's time of need.

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